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Sustaining Europe's Pivot to Asia: ASEAN-EU Dimension

By Prashanth Parameswaran

Synopsis

While Europe's recent pivot to Asia is welcome, the European Union (EU) and ASEAN need to capitalise on this momentum and take bold steps to advance their relationship.

Commentary

DURING his visit to Singapore recently German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle made a convincing case for deeper European Union engagement in Asia and more specifically with ASEAN. Germany is hardly alone in recognising this. Indeed, 2012 seemed to be the year of Europe's pivot to Asia. Leading officials attended key Asian summits, and the EU made advances in its relationship with ASEAN by suspending sanctions on Myanmar, acceding to the ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and completing a successful ministerial meeting in April.

But while ASEAN-EU ties have certainly warmed recently due to Europe's increasing interest in the region, "upgrading" the relationship between the world's two major regional integration initiatives will require sustained and significant progress by both sides across several areas in the coming years.

Money talks

Prospects for ASEAN-EU cooperation are clearest in the economic sphere where relations were first focused at the start of formal ties in 1977. Both already have a combined market of over a billion people and over US\$18 trillion in GDP, with their trade volume reaching \$268 billion in 2011. Moreover, crisis-ridden Europe is looking to dynamic Southeast Asia for growth, while ASEAN needs help to achieve regional connectivity and economic integration by 2015.

The EU has already begun strengthening economic ties by negotiating free trade agreements with individual ASEAN countries with an eye on an eventual region-to-region FTA. The first was concluded with Singapore in December 2012. Keeping up the momentum on trade will be essential for the EU as it not part of the two main arrangements in Asia today – the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

But more can be done with respect to economic relations. In particular, while the EU has already supported various aspects of ASEAN community building over the years, European countries and companies need to put

more money into funding individual infrastructure projects under the Master Plan for ASEAN Connectivity. Both sides can devote attention to the topic at the annual ASEAN-EU Business Summit to be held in Hanoi on 9 March 2013.

Even if financing is an issue, ASEAN can leverage on the EU's expertise to assist lesser developed states with economic integration. For instance, in February ASEAN and the EU helped Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam devise a work plan as part of an effort to achieve a harmonised regulatory regime in the region for cosmetics – the first collaborative project of its kind.

Of war and peace

Though the EU does not have a Seventh Fleet, it is still a key partner for ASEAN in non-traditional security areas such as maritime security, peacekeeping, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Europe provided vital assistance to Asian countries after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, and the EU partnered with ASEAN countries in the Aceh monitoring mission in 2005.

Both sides can boost collaboration in the security realm in several ways. On maritime security, the EU can provide legal and technical assistance to ASEAN on maritime questions based on its own experience in the Baltic and Mediterranean. It can also help finance regional arrangements like the Aids to Navigation Fund to provide safety for vessels traversing the Straits of Malacca.

On conflict resolution, ASEAN can enlist the EU's help in building up the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation in Indonesia launched just last November. While the regional contexts are distinct, the EU has much to contribute in this field given its role in transforming a war-torn continent for which it was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last year.

Even with these advances, however, the EU's role in security cooperation will continue to be limited unless its political role expands in Asia. Although the EU is a seasoned ASEAN Dialogue Partner and participates in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the biennial Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM), its engagement record has been checkered and it remains outside the East Asia Summit (EAS).

Some say EU membership in the EAS is unlikely in the near future because the grouping needs to consolidate after admitting the United States and Russia last year. Even so, some ASEAN officials have noted that the EAS does have a system to allow non-members like the EU to attend some parts of its summit meetings, which is an option worth pursuing.

For the EU's part, it needs to strengthen its commitment to multilateralism to eventually gain EAS membership. Regular attendance at forums is a must, and EU High Representative Catherine Ashton cannot miss ARF meetings like she did in 2010 and 2011. Brussels should also appoint an ambassador resident in Jakarta and accredited only to ASEAN, whose full-time job will be managing ASEAN-EU relations.

Bridging divides

People-to-people and cultural ties are an important dimension of ASEAN-EU ties. The EU was tied with China as the biggest source of tourists to ASEAN in 2012, and both sides continue to cooperate in areas ranging from preservation of cultural sites to student and academic exchanges.

The cultural divide can be bridged in several ways. One is expanding not just the number, but the reach and distribution of exchanges. For instance, while ASEAN-EU exchanges have soared in the field of science and technology, 2012 data suggests almost all ASEAN participants come from just Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam. Furthermore, 130 ASEAN scientists went to the EU while just one went from the EU to ASEAN.

The easing of visa restrictions would also help. The EU should address discrepancies that exist in its policies under the Schengen visa for different ASEAN member states. Meanwhile, ASEAN could speed up implementation of a Schengen-like single visa policy to streamline tourist travel which the Philippines broached in 2009.

ASEAN and the EU have come a long way since the start of their formal relationship nearly four decades ago. But though they may be "natural partners" as Catherine Ashton suggested last year, both sides will have to work hard to sustain Europe's pivot to Asia and strengthen the various aspects of EU-ASEAN relations for the future.

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