

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

ASEAN–EU Partnership: How “Strategic” is Europe’s Approach?

By Frederick Kliem

SYNOPSIS

It is a cliché that the EU and ASEAN are natural partners. With their “Strategic Partnership” on hold, however, the EU must question its approach to Southeast Asia and treat it as a partnership of equals.

COMMENTARY

ASEAN AND the European Union (EU) decided in-principle to upgrade relations to a “Strategic Partnership” on 21 January 2019. Becoming ASEAN’s strategic partner, for the EU, was supposed to be the next great step in a relationship of over four decades of “Dialogue Relations”.

However, ASEAN has thus far refused to make it official and put the process on hold. The most immediate reason for this moratorium is the EU’s assault on the Southeast Asian palm oil industry with its eventual decision to ban its use in biofuels by 2030.

Not a Partnership of Equals

This is, however, merely a symptom of a broader sentiment among ASEAN representatives – at both track one and two levels – that the EU still displays residues of a condescending, somewhat moralistic attitude towards ASEAN; whether in trade, good governance, or human rights.

And this is essentially a correct observation. The European attitude towards ASEAN and its members is still more akin to a donor-recipient relationship than to a multilateral partnership on eye level.

No doubt, European financial and capacity building support of ASEAN integration is very welcomed in the region; indeed, it is even necessary to keep the ASEAN project in its current form operational. With broad support for ASEAN regional integration [exceeding EUR200 million \(USD 225 million\)](#) from 2014-2020, including support for economic integration and capacity building at the ASEAN Secretariat, the EU is ASEAN's largest donor.

Unfortunately, this asymmetric donor-recipient relationship translates into a EU-ASEAN agenda that is too often overloaded with how the EU can assist ASEAN, although there is just as much ASEAN can teach the EU – resulting in a sense of EU condescension in many ASEAN capitals.

Simultaneously Strategic and Normative

Adding to this are the consequences of the substantial dilemma of all EU foreign policy: The EU's attempt to be a strategic as well as a normative actor. Its main [foreign policy document](#) seeks simultaneously strategic relevance, and defines the global promotion of EU norms and values as a core interest.

Two examples demonstrate that prioritising norm projection is not conducive to establishing the EU as a strategic actor.

Everything But Arms

First, the review – and possible revocation – of preferential market access under the Everything But Arms (EBA) scheme with Cambodia and Myanmar is the result of Brussels' diagnosis of a democratic regress and human rights violation respectively in these countries.

The Cambodian economy especially depends on exports to the EU, though. Threatening an entire economy on normative grounds, and alongside it the socio-economic development of a Least Developed Country, is a harsh reaction. Particularly after the EU completed a free-trade agreement (FTA) and defence cooperation with Vietnam.

There are of course legal differences between EBA and FTAs; an FTA is not subject to the same normative preconditions as EBA, but such legalistic nuance is mostly lost in Southeast Asia, and from this perspective, Brussels' decision looks hypocritical.

Palm Oil Ban

Likewise, Brussels' unfortunate and very public and vocal decision to phase out the use of palm oil in biofuels by 2030 set up a clash with producers Malaysia and Indonesia. In both countries, palm oil export is a sizable share of their trade, and now an issue of heightened domestic tensions.

Both examples were articulated rather obnoxiously and publically and contribute to the sense of a proselytising and moralising attitude towards ASEAN, not worthy of a partnership on eye level.

Those two examples alone immediately alienate four out of ten member countries, comprising more than half of the entire population of ASEAN; an organisation that operates on consensus.

So, while projecting values and acting strategically may not necessarily be mutually exclusive, the former is certainly not conducive to the latter if not decoupled wisely.

Domestic – Regional Nexus of ASEAN

The fundamental problem is that EU officials fail to grasp the importance of ASEAN's national-regional nexus. When all talk and grand declarations are done, it is the senior official, ministers, and leaders of national governments who decide where the association is headed. And despite having some regional perspective, they all come with their national baggage.

Granted, the EU is a normative power and promotion of its own values, norms, and standards is in its very DNA. However, there are ways and means to quietly work towards mutually acceptable compromises.

It is unfortunate that EU stakeholders, most of all the EU Parliament, tend to go very public when announcing and implementing such measures.

Expectation Management and Humility

There is significant value in functional EU-ASEAN cooperation for both regions. Both can learn from each other and both can benefit. Both have a substantial interest in the survival and strengthening of multilateralism.

However, multilateralism requires understanding of, and mutual respect for each other's differences, interests, and most of all, constraints and sensitivities. The EU more often than not displays precisely the lack thereof vis-à-vis ASEAN.

EU officials in Brussels and Asia must pay more attention to local sensitivities and the psychological consequences of colonial history, and should display appropriate humility.

It is time to step back from grand declarations of strategic relationships and return to substantial dialogue on the basic expectations. Such dialogue must take place on eye level and should not be hijacked by individual stakeholders' PR campaigns.

A roaming ambassador or working group, representing ASEAN as a whole, could engage EU bureaucrats to clarify the important nexus of domestic and regional politics in ASEAN and the ASEAN way of quiet diplomacy.

Appreciating both and acting accordingly would go a long way in realising the enormous potential of closer cooperation between the two partners.

Dr. Frederick Kliem is a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS) of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg