

# THE EUROPEAN UNION (EU)'S CHANGING FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS ASEAN: UNDERSTANDING FROM A COMBINED LENS OF HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONALISM AND POLITICAL LEARNING

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## ABSTRACT

*The EU approach to its foreign policy towards ASEAN has changed since 2014. This article aims to offer insights into the dynamics of the EU-ASEAN relations, particularly focusing on the EU's foreign policy. It employs an analytical framework based on historical institutionalism and political learning to explore why and how the EU has changed its normative foreign policy to a strategic one concerning ASEAN. The analysis is initiated by examining the intensified dispute in the South China Sea demonstrating China's more ambitious maritime policy as a pivotal moment for the EU's perceptions towards ASEAN. The aspects of the EU's prior experiences and internal divergence will be included to weigh into analysis. Consequently, the EU has undergone a measured shift in its political beliefs towards ASEAN but still engages with normative aspects in a subtle way. The EU has recognised ASEAN as a partner in upholding peace and stability and has started establishing connectivity through a strategic partnership.*

**Keywords:** ASEAN, EU, China, strategic partnership, South China Sea

## INTRODUCTION

After the Cold War's end, human rights and democracy promotion became integral to Western global priorities. In 1991, the European Union (EU) formally incorporated human rights and democracy into its foreign policy, creating cumulative rules based on the EU's normative values (Finizio, 2015; Risse, 2016). The EU employed a compliance-based approach towards neighbouring and regional countries, requiring adoption of its normative values to advance economic partnerships. This approach extended to EU's external relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The establishment of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) by ASEAN in 1996 paved the way for EU-Southeast Asia relations, providing a strategic platform for advancing free trade agreements with Europe. The EU was optimistic about utilising this inter-regional forum to incorporate democracy and human rights principles as mandatory conditions within economic cooperation agreements with Southeast Asian countries. However, ASEAN maintained that democratic governance and human rights

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promotion had to acknowledge relativism and conform to the ASEAN Way approach (Wiessala 2002; Finizio, 2015).

The 1998 Myanmar political crisis exposed critical limitations in the EU's normative strategy when ASEAN's diplomatic interventions proved insufficient by European standards. The EU's demands for sanctions against Myanmar revealed fundamental incompatibilities between European governance expectations and established Southeast Asian institutional practices. However, EU-ASEAN partnership was institutionally upgraded when ASEAN was incorporated into the EU's Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy through the Partnership in Strategic Purpose, formally codified in May 2015.

This progress has drawn substantial scholarly attention. De Prado (2014) observes that EU-ASEAN relations demonstrated substantive enhancement, characterised by expanded diplomatic, political, and economic cooperation. The change in EU's engagement with ASEAN moderated its normative advocacy whilst maintaining selective defence partnerships with Southeast Asian nations. Müller (2016) argues that the change serves as a policy instrument to establish European visibility as a global actor whilst supporting ASEAN's integration coherence.

Xuechen's (2018) study provides insights into the historical context and evolution. Throughout 1970 and 1990, both ASEAN and the EU aimed to tackle economic and developmental concerns arising from the Cold War. The EU employed a top-down approach urging ASEAN to advance commitment to human rights and democracy, acting as a norm entrepreneur during internal crises in Cambodia and Myanmar during 1991-2011. Xuechen (2018) cited Xavier Nuttin (2017), a former European Commission official, who said, "it was in 2012 that the EU shifted to a different gear and placed ASEAN firmly on its radar screen." Xuechen also referenced a statement from EU noting that "ASEAN now plays a central role in efforts to establish a more resilient regional security framework in the Asia-Pacific" (European Commission, 2015).

The EU-ASEAN Strategic Partnership, as analysed by Páldi (2020), stemmed from both endogenous and exogenous environmental factors. This partnership was motivated by internal pressures between 2014 and 2016, including rising Euroscepticism and Brexit, necessitating strengthened external partnerships to bolster the EU's global position. Simultaneously, this partnership emerged as a direct response to ASEAN's economic ascendance and enhanced political significance within the Asia-Pacific region.

Sok (2020) characterises the strategic partnership as a collaborative response to pressing regional and global challenges, identifying the 2014 ASEAN-European Ministerial Meeting (AEMM) as the pivotal moment when ASEAN proactively offered enhanced partnership terms to the EU. Di Floristella's (2020) analysis examines the partnership through pragmatism, arguing that it constitutes a calculated response to evolving geopolitical uncertainties, particularly the escalating China-U.S. rivalry that has reshaped regional security dynamics.

Recent scholarship examines the reasons of the evolving EU-ASEAN relations through diverse analytical lenses. While Páldi (2020) attributes the shift to internal EU

pressures (Brexit, Euroscepticism) and ASEAN's growing regional importance, Xuechen (2018) emphasises the EU's strategic self-assessment, and Sok (2020) frames the partnership as a collaborative response to regional and global challenges. Research by Xuechen (2018), Müller (2016), and De Prado (2014) reveals the EU's moderated normative approach, while Di Floristella (2020) highlights pragmatic strategic considerations for the progress of the EU-ASEAN relations. Despite documenting significant changes in EU-ASEAN relations, these studies inadequately address the comprehensive rationale and processes underlying the EU's strategic partnership with ASEAN. Moreover, existing studies fail to explain whether the EU has entirely abandoned its normative promotion role or continues to pursue normative objectives within the strategic partnership framework. This analytical gap necessitates further investigation into the motivations and mechanisms driving the EU's change from a predominantly normative foreign policy approach to a strategic partnership with ASEAN. This article therefore examines the underlying factors and processes that precipitated this policy change, while elucidating the extent to which the EU maintains its normative engagement with ASEAN within the strategic partnership architecture.

This article contends that intensifying South China Sea (SCS) disputes and China's maritime assertiveness in May 2014 constituted a critical event prompting change in EU's relations with ASEAN, ultimately resulting in the EU-ASEAN strategic partnership. The EU employed a learning process for evaluating adjustment requirements and recalibrating its approach towards ASEAN. Through this comprehensive learning process, the EU modified its political orientation and conduct towards ASEAN, implementing strategic partnership to maintain the EU's normative and economic relevance to Asia and Southeast Asia amid evolving SCS dynamics.

This article utilises the theory of historical institutionalism linked to political learning to offer insights into both change and continuity related to the EU's interactions with ASEAN. According to Neuman (2021), historical institutionalism serves as a precise analytical framework that examines changes within the EU's foreign policy while simultaneously elucidating how the EU establishes constraints to mitigate excessive radical modifications. Nevertheless, Reynolds (2005) contends that while historical institutionalism incorporates the concept of critical junctures to analyse the EU's foreign policy change, this concept merely encompasses sequential events that facilitate changes. This concept fails to provide comprehensive explanations regarding the mechanisms through which change materialises or how the EU processes critical junctures prior to implementing foreign policy changes. Consequently, historical institutionalism is more effectively integrated with political learning theory to address these analytical limitations. This theoretical synthesis enables comprehensive examination of the EU's perceptions regarding pre-existing foreign policy and elucidates what the EU learns its experiences with pre-existing foreign policy when a critical juncture occurs, and how the EU recognises the advantages of implementing incremental foreign policy change (Reynolds, 2005; Steinmo, 2008).

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative explanatory design, evaluating data and clarifying reasoning behind causal inferences to answer the research question and to elucidate the

process of change and the continuity (Strydom, 2014; Willig, 2017; Aspers & Corte, 2019).

The study utilises both primary and secondary data sources to examine inter-regional cooperation dynamics between the EU and ASEAN. Primary data comprises official documentation from the EU and governments, including policy statements, declarations, press releases, and joint communiqués addressing EU-ASEAN relations, SCS tensions, China's foreign policy assertiveness, maritime issues, and human rights and democracy in Southeast Asia.

Secondary sources encompass scholarly literature, policy briefs, think tank organisations' reports, discussion papers, and media reports, supplementing primary materials with historical context and additional perspectives on EU-ASEAN relations, regional security dynamics, including SCS disputes, U.S.-China rivalry, and developments in Southeast Asia during pre- and post-Cold War periods.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Historical Institutionalism: Critical Juncture**

Historical institutionalism defines institutions into two distinct domains: formal institutions pertaining to organisational structures, and informal institutions encompassing norms, rules, routines, practices, procedures, behaviours, interactions, and conventions (Newton and van Deth, 2010; Steinmo, 2015; Cairney, 2019). Most aspects of institutions tend to be stable, but they can undergo moderate or incremental changes (Immergut, 2006; Koning, 2016).

Within historical institutionalism, when confronting crises, institutions typically operate with previously established policy decisions, conceptualised as path dependency. However, this does not necessitate institutional stagnation. Institutions must maintain equilibrium between stability and changes to navigate evolving environments. Institutional transformation rarely occurs through sudden, dramatic changes. Instead, policy modifications typically follow incremental patterns. Nevertheless, substantial institutional change may emerge during critical junctures, creating opportunities for changes from established rules, policies, or procedures (Thelen, 2002; Immergut, 2006; Fioretos, 2011).

Contemporary scholarship suggests that external environmental dynamics, particularly characterised by conflicting actor interests or unstable interactional patterns disrupting established orders, create conditions whereby institutional actors are compelled to initiate changes (Conran & Thelen, 2016; Koning, 2016). Changes often happen gradually through layering (Mahoney and Thelen, 2009). Layering refers to integrating new rules, policies, or procedures into old ones, therefore modifying the structure and behaviour of the original institution. According to Fioretos (2011), institutional layering represents incremental change frequently manifesting within complex multilateral contexts characterised by high levels of interdependence.

Suddaby et al. (2013) conceptualise institutional layering as an outcome of institution's learning processes, suggesting that institutions develop layering through accumulated experience and adaptive responses to their external environment. Learning encompasses ideational processes whereby policymakers conceptualise critical junctures through problem identification and solution formulation.

### **Political Learning**

Institutions employ political learning to assess necessity for moderate adaptations. Such learning processes may reinforce path-dependent trajectories whilst preserving core elements of existing policy rather than necessitating comprehensive dismantling (Fleckstein, 2011; Broscheck, 2013).

Political learning extends beyond basic acquisition of knowledge. Its scope includes an international actor's acknowledgement of internal divergences and values, in addition to modification of their objectives or approaches for adapting to external challenges.

The process of political learning can be divided into stages:

(1) The initial stage incorporates critical assessment of external and/or internal environments into evaluation and interpretation of prior experiences of pre-existing policy to enhance the actor's understanding of the need for change. The significant external event has potential to bring attention to previously overlooked problems and encourage feedback, enabling development of new practices and solutions. Moreover, in the context of regional organisations, political learning also recognises and evaluates internal limitations, divergences of interests, and input, as well as the internal resources accessible to address such limitations and/or mitigate such divergences (Ziegler, 1993; Levy, 1994; Mahoney & Thalen, 2009; Vagionaki & Trein, 2020).

Following assessment of external conditions and internal capacities, institutions must calibrate their responses by evaluating either historical success or failure of existing policy in goal attainment and determining whether rigid adherence to such policy will yield desired outcomes under altered environmental circumstances (Goldsmith, 2005; Reynolds, 2005; Steinmo, 2008)

(2) Stage one leads to changed beliefs and increased confidence on them and the way problems are perceived, which influences actors' behaviours and leads to modifications, such as layering, in objectives and strategies (Ziegler, 1993; Levy, 1994; Mahoney & Thalen, 2009).

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The EU-ASEAN Relations: 1971-2010**

In 1971, ASEAN sought to counterbalance American economic dominance and Japanese assertive trade in the Asia Pacific region by establishing relations with the EU, particularly in economic sectors. The EU granted ASEAN the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP), allowing ASEAN's products to enter the European market with

fewer obstacles (Rüland, 2001). Despite economic linkages, the EU assessed and criticised ASEAN as an inferior regional organisation owing to inadequate enforcement of human rights and democratic principles.

ASEM was established by ASEAN in 1996 to leverage negotiations and sign free trade agreements with Europe. Through this inter-regional forum, the EU strategically mainstreamed democratic governance and human rights principles into its external relations by incorporating these provisions as obligatory conditions within economic cooperation agreements with developing countries in Southeast Asia. This conditionality approach served dual purposes: advancing governance reforms through contractual mechanisms whilst reflecting post-Cold War liberal triumphalism seeking to institutionalise European normative standards worldwide.

Specifically, regarding Myanmar, between 1998 and 2003, the EU explicitly sought that ASEAN enforce more stringent sanctions against Myanmar. The EU threatened to suspend negotiations and cooperation with the ASEAN Summit unless ASEAN confronted the Myanmar military junta's human rights abuses. However, this idealistic ultimatum only prompted ASEAN to advocate for Aung San Suu Kyi's release and dispatch a diplomatic mission to evaluate Myanmar's conditions. These less stringent ASEAN measures failed to satisfy the EU. Subsequently, in 2009, the EU halted the Ministerial Meeting and discussions for the ASEAN-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) (Nguyen, 2016).

Following 9/11, the Asia-Pacific region experienced emerging non-traditional security (NTS) threats encompassing terrorism, irregular migration, and illicit trafficking. North Korea's unresolved Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD) issues further heightened EU concerns. Consequently, the EU reconfigured its external relations by emphasising enhanced multilateralism (Cihelková et al., 2020). The EU expanded efforts to diversify strategic partnerships with regional actors beyond Europe, prioritising bilateral strategic arrangements with India and key East Asian states—Japan, China, and South Korea.

The EU believed that prioritising bilateral strategic partnerships with these major Asian powers was cornerstone for expanding its presence in the Asia-Pacific region. In contrast, the EU maintained ASEAN merely as a dialogue partner and avoided inter-regional strategic engagement. This asymmetric approach stemmed from EU assessments that ASEAN's diplomatic practice was inherently slow, informal, and institutionally weak.

ASEAN, facing escalating transnational terrorism threats, also questioned the EU's capacity as a security actor. While acknowledging the EU's ability to manage complex diplomatic relations with the U.S. and East Asian nations in economic ties, ASEAN perceived limitations in the EU's contribution to fostering consolidated inter-regional partnerships for counterterrorism and other security issues in Southeast Asia (Hwee, 2017).

### **The EU-ASEAN Relations after U.S.'s Pivot in Asia-Pacific**

The U.S. initiated pivot policy in the Asia-Pacific region in 2011. The EU underscored its strategic partnership, notably with China, to complement the U.S.' pivot. Whilst the

U.S. emphasised hard power deployment, the EU sought to supplement through soft power approaches.

After the 14th EU-China Summit in early 2012, the EU's Council initiated discussions on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) in 2013 (European Parliament, 2019). Under this initiative, the EU asserted that economic-oriented EU-China relations encompassed broader political and security dimensions. To fulfil its core roles as guarantor of European prosperity and multilateral actor counterbalancing China, the EU pursued economic relations with China and refrained from adopting numerous unilateral actions carried out by the U.S.

These EU measures conveyed to ASEAN that the EU maintained a rigid and excessively idealistic position. Until 2013, ASEAN's reluctance to institutionalise and implement the EU-promoted regionalism model indicated that ASEAN regarded the EU as a reference point rather than a template for replication (Stacey, 2023). Since ASEAN's principles, including peaceful disputes settlement and non-intervention in member states' domestic affairs, were rooted in distinctive historical and cultural experiences, ASEAN perceived that the EU appeared incapable of accommodating ASEAN's inherent differences. Additionally, the EU showed unwillingness to accommodate ASEAN's aspiration for inter-regional free trade agreements.

These situations gradually produced strained ASEAN intention of pursuing further partnership with the EU and negatively impacted the EU's global actorness in Southeast Asia (He, 2016). Meoller (2007) asserts that the EU lacked strategic thinking regarding cultivation of enduring interests in ASEAN relations.

### **A Critical Juncture: Intensified South China Sea Dispute in 2014**

In March 2013, the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party, under Xi Jinping's leadership, expressed China's ambitions to become a maritime power and to strengthen the capability of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). China even used its nine-dash line to more vocally claim sovereignty over almost 90 per cent of the 3,500,000-square-kilometre SCS (Yoon, 2015; Jennings, 2021).

The tensions in the SCS involved Beijing and Washington in November 2013 when the PLAN trespassed into international waters in the SCS, directly targeting a U.S. missile cruiser conducting military operations. In late April 2014, the U.S and the Philippines entered into a decade-long Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement, granting the U.S. operational rights to access and utilise Philippines's military installations (Eilperin, 2014; Duchâtel et al., 2015; Burgess, 2020; Sacks, 2022)

An intensified territorial dispute in the SCS in May 2014 marked a critical juncture in the EU's evolving perspective on ASEAN. Throughout May 2014, tensions escalated persistently due to Beijing's enforcement of fishing restrictions in the vicinity of the Spratly Islands, provoking considerable discontent amongst rival claimant states. China deployed the Hai Yang Shi You 981 oil rig to the Paracel Islands in close proximity to Vietnam's exclusive economic zone. This resulted in confrontations whereby China's naval vessels forcefully rammed Vietnamese naval vessels trying to impede oil exploration operations. This incident became known as Hai Yang Shi You

981 standoff and was regarded as a breach of Vietnam's sovereignty (UK Government Website, 2014; York, 2015).

The escalating SCS conflict in 2014 greatly diverged from similar conflict in 1990-1997. Between 1990 and 1997, China was also involved in maritime conflicts with several Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia, Philippines, and Vietnam. China enacted the Law of the Republic of China on Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone and established a naval base in Mischief Reef. This situation motivated the Philippine government to deploy military presence in the Spratly Islands. Amid the SCS conflict in 1990-1997, rather than showcasing further unilateral ambitions, the Chinese government proposed joint oil and natural gas exploration in the SCS. During talks to ASEAN in 1997, China expressed its commitment to preserving peace and stability. More importantly, the U.S. avoided taking direct action or implementing deterrent policies against China at that time, which kept the conflict limited to Asian nations (Koga, 2022).

### **The EU's Political Learning: Belief Change in the Needs of ASEAN**

Although the EU did not issue a unified condemnation of China's forceful moves in the SCS in 2014, the EU paid more attention to maritime security that previously had been overlooked. The EU, most notably its Council, Commission, and European External Actions Services (EEAS) as well as some key member states, started more serious assessment of the issue salience of China's ambition and South China Sea dispute and examined the extent of ASEAN's influences in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region (Duchâtel, 2016).

Certain member states, like Germany, placed greater emphasis on commercial affairs with China. Germany maintained expectation that extensive collaboration between the EU and China would serve as a fundamental asset for advancement of the EU's global position. Simultaneously, 17+1 initiative between China and Central and Eastern European countries encouraged them to maintain a cautious approach in their criticism of Chinese foreign policy (Ferreira-Pereira & Viera, 2016; Furhmann & Herold, 2022).

Conversely, France and the UK proposed that the EU had to perceive China's activities as a potential threat. French leadership urged the EU to shift away from Sino-centrism and accord greater priority to security issues in the Asia-Pacific region, with particular emphasis on the SCS conflict and reconsider possible strategic partnerships with regional institutions in this area (Richey et al., 2019). From the EEAS's standpoint, Beijing's continued assertive unilateral conduct in the SCS jeopardised the freedom of shipping, navigation, and overflight, as well as regional and global peace and stability (Horta, 2021). High Representative stated:

We are concerned about recent incidents involving China and Vietnam relating to the movements of the Chinese oil rig HD981. In particular, the EU is concerned that unilateral actions could affect the security environment in the region, as evidenced by reports about the recent collision of Vietnamese and Chinese vessel. We urge all parties concerned to seek peaceful and cooperative solutions in accordance

with international law, in particular the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and to continue ensuring safety and freedom of navigation. We also call on the parties to undertake de-escalating measures and refrain from any unilateral action which would be detrimental to peace and stability in the region. The EU will keep following these developments closely (EEAS, 2014).

Between 30 per cent and 50 per cent of Europe's world shipping actually traversed the SCS. Moreover, EU-Asia economic interdependence had deepened following the 2008 eurozone crisis. China, Japan, and South Korea collectively were amongst EU's ten principal trading partners. Therefore, the SCS had been a critically important maritime route for energy supplies, raw materials, and goods transportation from Asia to Europe as well as for cars, machinery, and luxury goods from Europe to Asia (Chenard & Arne Westad, 2014; Mishra & Kurup, 2023).

China's increased ambition over the SCS beginning in 2014 automatically challenged European supply chains across Asia and the EU's commercial interests in the region. The SCS territorial disputes, characterised by China's extensive maritime claims also raised the EU's doubt regarding Beijing's future adherence to freedom of navigation principles and rules-based international order. Meanwhile, such commitments, alongside multilateralism, constituted essential prerequisites for EU collaboration with Asian states and ASEAN member states in bilateral maritime security operations, ensuring preservation of critical European commercial shipping lanes (Korteweg 2015; Kim 2016).

Therefore, despite the EU's partnership with China, its concern over China's maritime policy and the escalating SCS conflict became more serious. It led the EU to run its process of learning towards ASEAN's roles due to this critical juncture. The EU's Council's learning towards ASEAN was pinpointed by Herman van Rompuy: "of course, ASEAN will determine its own path, but clearly we can learn from each other's experiences of how to make regional integration work." The Council also regarded ASEAN as a strategic partner in sub-region of Asia-Pacific, which could be engaged to collectively maintain security and defend rules-based global order. Van Rompuy added: "The EU welcomes a more ambitious, more political and more substantial partnership with ASEAN. We agree with the objective of establishing a Strategic Partnership" (European Council, 2014).

In June 2014, the EU released the EU Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS), articulating its commitment to working towards a coordinated approach on maritime security issues in international fora, regional bodies, including ASEAN, to enhance the visibility of the EU in the global maritime domain (Council of EU, 2014).

The EU also recognised that ASEAN encountered divergences amongst its member states. Following the failure to produce a joint communiqué at the 2014 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting regarding the SCS disputes, the organisation encountered significant difficulties in formulating a cohesive institutional response to Beijing's heightened assertiveness. Similar to the EU, most ASEAN member states exhibited tendency to refrain from excessively antagonising China. Notwithstanding this internal constraint, ASEAN showed strong interest in enhancing its maritime capacity building.

ASEAN required a partner such as the EU to support its economic resilience, enhance its maritime legal provision, coordination and protection, and address transnational crimes (Mantong & Blockmans, 2023).

High Representative Federica Mogherini expressed that the EU was an "interested" party in a dispute pitting China against Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei and Malaysia over control of a crucial seaway (Tempest, 2015). She also warned the EU required to be both economic power and security actor in Asia. In tune with France and U.K, she reminded that if the supply and provision of global goods met new challenges (in maritime domains), the EU's concrete actions responding to any territorial and maritime disputes and fostering greater engagements with other Asian partners remained inadequate and needed enhancing (in ECFR, 2016).

Moreover, during fiscal year 2013-2014, ASEAN emerged as the EU's third largest trading partner, following the U.S and China. Reciprocally, the EU attained the second largest trading partner status for ASEAN, with trade volume surpassing US\$ 240,000,000,000 (EurActive; 2014). Foreign direct investments from the EU's member states constituted one-third of the total inflows to ASEAN (Gilson, 2016). Given positive experiences in its economic relations with ASEAN, the EU then seized the opportunity to establish a strategic partnership with ASEAN.

The EU increasingly believed that fewer normative emphasis in its relations with ASEAN could advance it towards more strategic dimensions. Through prioritising strategic partnership, the EU could foster coordination and dialogue with ASEAN to collectively address maritime security challenges whilst maintaining adherence to their respective foundational principles. Generally, the EU's political learning resulted in the necessity to adopt a proactive strategy towards ASEAN to build stronger EU-ASEAN relations and reciprocal trust. The EU's multilateralism expanded beyond bilateral governmental relations with Asian states to reach inter-regional institution engagement.

As said by Herman van Rompuy, "ASEAN and the EU move to new areas of concrete cooperation: improving aviation connectivity, crisis response and disaster management, preventing transnational crime and improving maritime cooperation" (European Council, 2014). The EU-ASEAN strategic partnership would also facilitate wider maritime operation and collaboration and ensure maritime situational awareness and defence against potential major instabilities and conflicts in Asian maritime domains, particularly in the SCS (European Commission, 2015). Steven Everts, the EU's adviser for ASEAN noted that

the EU rejected the use of force and intimidation and we support the use of legal mechanisms to resolve the dispute in South China Sea. The EU and ASEAN must work on maritime environment that keeps the states secure, the people free, and the companies willing to invest. And in the senior level, there is political ambition to scale up this partnership (in Calleja, 2015).

## **The EU-ASEAN's Strategic Partnership: Focus on Maritime Security and NTS**

As a result of the EU's political learning, its understanding of ASEAN's strategic positions underwent change, rendering modification in its policy instruments towards ASEAN. ASEAN was included in the Partnership in Strategic Purpose as an integral component of the EU's Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy. This policy initiative was formalised through the official Joint Communication of EU-ASEAN in May 2015. The EU committed to building connectivity and assisting ASEAN's regional integration process, sustainable development, and political-security needs in dealing with broader global and regional challenges. Both institutions manifested the Bangkok Declaration on Promoting an ASEAN-EU Global Partnership for Shared Strategic Goals during the AEMM in October 2016 (Hwee, 2017).

In contrast to the preceding decade, the EU commenced in 2015 the strengthening of its diplomatic missions and representative dialogues with ASEAN leaders to address security issues within the maritime domain. The EU formally applied to observer participation in the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting with Expert's Working Groups. The EU participated in discussions with ASEAN about maritime defence and security, inter-agency coordination, and port security through the EU-ASEAN High Level Dialogue on Maritime Cooperation and the ASEAN Regional Forum on Inter Sessional Meeting (ISM) on Maritime Law Enforcement.

The EU broadened territorial coverage of its Critical Maritime Routes (CRIMARO) initiative from the Indian Ocean to Southeast Asia. This project seeks to enhance maritime safety and security through assistance to littoral nations in improving their maritime awareness. This project encompasses creation of web-based platforms for information sharing, establishment of regional Automatic Identification System (AIS) networks, capacity building training programmes, and supports for formulating information-sharing policy frameworks (Comoros, 2020; EEAS, 2021).

Throughout 2018-2022, the EU operationalised a Plan Action to strengthen collaboration with ASEAN for building mutual trust and addressing NTS threats. The primary focal areas consisted of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), terrorism, and transnational criminal activities in the Asia-Pacific and Southeast Asia regions. The EU provided financial support for collaborative training programmes, coordination mechanisms, and information-sharing initiatives between the International Criminal Police Organisation (INTERPOL) and ASEAN.

Specifically, regarding terrorism, the EU and ASEAN jointly endorsed the Comprehensive Action Plan of Counter Terrorism, promoting best practice exchange between the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (EUROPOL) and the ASEAN Association of Chiefs of Police (ASEANAPOL) in their collaborative efforts to combat terrorism and deter violent extremists (Wibisono & Kusumasomantri, 2020).

To eliminate illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing practices in Southeast Asia, the EU contributed its technical expertise in marine resources management and bolstered discussions and operational-legal undertakings in partnership with ASEAN (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kingdom of Thailand, 2022; EEAS, 2024a).

Both the EU and ASEAN adopt the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and consistently advocated for maritime security-based international orders. The EU-ASEAN maritime cooperation also functions as a practical signal to China regarding adherence to international maritime law, respect for other states' maritime sovereignty and rights, and completion of Code of Conduct (CoC) negotiations (Mishra & Kurup, 2023; EEAS, 2024b).

### **The EU's Continuity as Promoter of Norms: Reduced Over-idealism towards ASEAN**

The EU's recognition of the importance of fostering connectivity with ASEAN has been implemented in the strategic partnership. This partnership incorporates diverse instruments, including economics, diplomacy, and inter-regional epistemic networks. The Co-Chairman of ASEAN-EU has noted that this partnership does not overtly oblige specific provisions dedicated to democracy or human rights (Reumman, 2021).

However, the EU is identical to "a pool of norms" based on Westphalia Peace Accords, emphasising defence of human rights, democracy and rule of law domestically and internationally. The EU-ASEAN strategic partnership implicitly maintains the promotion of the EU's normative ideas in ASEAN (Utama, 2022). This illustrates the EU's inability to totally abandon normative principles in its external policies, given their foundational significance. Nevertheless, the EU adopts a nuanced layering approach by integrating normative with strategic considerations when re-engaging ASEAN.

The EU's political learning on ASEAN has enabled it to acknowledge ASEAN's distinctive character and progress and to constrain the EU's over-idealism. The EU's building connectivity with ASEAN integrates diplomatic efforts amongst political elites to facilitate the exchange of functional experience with ASEAN in various fields. This EU's strategy also involves networks of experts, youth, and leaders from Europe and Asia, participating not only in business forums but also in discussions on social-cultural and NTS issues, including ethnic discrimination, maritime governance, humanitarian assistance, fair trade, environmental concerns, natural disaster mitigation, and crisis management. These inter-regional discussions often coincide with issues of democracy, human rights protection, rule of law, and sovereignty (Bae, 2018; EEAS, 2018).

Regarding economic cooperation, increasing numbers of Southeast Asian enterprises are adopting European standards, including labour rights, green bonds, and fair-trade practices to enhance competitiveness in European and global markets. This cooperation also constitutes anticipated burden-sharing encompassing economic, diplomatic, moral and technological responses from political elites and epistemic communities to any global and regional challenges affecting population (Mishra & Kurup, 2023).

Meanwhile, through capacity-building programs targeting ASEAN and its constituent states, the EU promotes the enhancement of democratic structures, governance systems, and legal-judicial institutions via knowledge transfer and expertise sharing. This form of engagement demonstrates the EU's tacit ambition to

influence ASEAN's trajectory toward European-style regional integration (Bomassi, 2023).

The EU's normative agenda remains particularly evident in Myanmar's situations. Since the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, the EU's concerns have intensified, particularly due to the lack of condemnatory statements from China. Despite ASEAN's five-point consensus implementation, the EU has persisted with its sanctions policy against Myanmar.

The EU basically acknowledged and respected ASEAN's non-intervention and avoidance of sanctions in response to the coup d'état of Myanmar's military junta. In April 2021, ASEAN issued a five-point consensus demanding the prompt cessation of violence in Myanmar, which the High Representative, Josep Borrell, endorsed as well (Kunnamas & Venturi, 2024).

However, despite this initial respect for ASEAN's approach, the EU subsequently expanded its sanctions targeting Myanmar's oil and gas sectors instead of fully utilising its strategic partnership with ASEAN. As a democratic principle defender, the EU seemingly had to oppose Myanmar's military dictatorship as a norm violator, by demonstrating asymmetric power dynamics wherein EU sanctions position it as a norm promoter superior to Myanmar's regime.

### **(In)Effectiveness of the EU's Strategic Partnership**

The EU's strategic partnership with ASEAN shows its adjustment with more dynamics in ASEAN, Southeast Asia, and Asia-Pacific. However, current foreign policy of the EU is not fully effective yet.

According to Xuechen (2018; 2024), the EU has not yet been able to formulate a comprehensive approach towards ASEAN. The proposal submitted by the EU to ASEAN exhibited several disconnected components, most notably regarding Joint Communication. One of the EU officials asserted that the absence of a comprehensive road map for ASEAN-EU engagement contributed to some miscommunication between EU delegates and their ASEAN diplomatic counterparts.

The EU's evolving foreign policy encompasses its acknowledgement and understanding of ASEAN's institutional values and normative standards, derived from distinctive historical and social contexts of each member state. Nevertheless, the UK's more proactive defence and security posture towards ASEAN after Brexit has overshadowed the EU's efforts in establishing comprehensive connectivity with ASEAN. In conjunction with Australia and the U.S, UK declared a trilateral agreement in 2020, designed to counterbalance China's provocative policies in the Asia-Pacific and Southeast Asian regions (Southgate, 2023).

In contrast, the strategic partnership between the EU and ASEAN has been practically dominated by maritime-focused thematic areas relating to ASEAN's capacity in surveillance, port management, and law enforcement designed to address NTS threats. Consequently, it produces the persistent ambiguity regarding the precise categories of power-support mechanisms the EU would furnish to ASEAN and the joint actions both institutions could pursue in addressing potential escalating SCS tensions.

Many ASEAN nations, then remain sceptical of the EU's military capacity to contribute meaningfully to regional security (Pesjova, 2022).

On the other hand, according to Bilahari Kausikan, a Singapore diplomat,

The term "strategic" would be an "adjective" and a descriptive qualifier that ASEAN member states would employ with notable inconsistency, attributed to the absence of precise definitional parameters and standardised classification in ASEAN (in Thia, 2019).

All these conditions may hinder the flow of the reconstruction of common interests inside ASEAN and those with the EU in further negotiations and cooperation. This dynamic may be further exacerbated in circumstances where bilateral tensions exist between ASEAN state(s) and the EU, exemplified by the disputes over the EU's restriction on palm oil import that disappoints Indonesia and Malaysia.

As a consequence, doubt persists about the EU's ability to preserve continuity of this partnership with ASEAN in forthcoming period.

## **CONCLUSION**

From 1996 to 2013, the EU employed a top-down approach to promote human rights and democracy in ASEAN, particularly targeting Myanmar through sanctions and diplomatic pressure. However, ASEAN rejected the EU's confrontational methods, instead favouring peaceful dispute resolution and maintaining its principle of non-interference in member states' internal affairs. Frustrated by ASEAN's resistance, the EU suspended multiple negotiations, including the Inter-Regional Free Trade Agreement talks, as a diplomatic protest.

The EU's reoriented policy towards ASEAN has represented a paradigmatic shift driven by critical juncture and political learning. China's maritime assertiveness in the SCS in May 2014 constituted a pivotal moment that compelled the EU to reassess its regional engagement with ASEAN. Through comprehensive political learning, the EU evaluated how China's aggressive policies threatened maritime freedoms and navigation rights, liberal international order and European economic interests, whilst also drawing upon its successful trade and investment experiences with ASEAN between 2013 and 2014.

This learning process fundamentally transformed the EU's perception of ASEAN from a peripheral dialogue partner to a strategic ally of regional significance, thereby culminated in the establishment of the EU-ASEAN Global Strategic Partnership in May 2015. Notably, this partnership deliberately excluded explicit normative conditionalities regarding human rights and democracy, reflecting the EU's pragmatic adaptation to regional realities and ASEAN's non-interference principles. The EU has subsequently prioritised ASEAN within its inter-regional connectivity scheme, focusing on maritime security and NTS concerns across Southeast Asia.

Whilst this strategic partnership enhances the EU's security interests in Southeast Asia, it remains constrained by ASEAN's internal inconsistencies in defining the term "strategic", thereby influencing its application of strategic partnerships with the EU. It is also overshadowed by ASEAN's concerns over the EU's hidden agenda for normative promotion and the extent of the durability of the EU's commitment to security collaboration that offers mutual benefits to ASEAN.

The article acknowledges temporal limitations and does not delve into the full (in)effectiveness of the EU-ASEAN strategic partnership. These limitations create opportunities for future research to explore this aspect through different theoretical lenses, such as policy enactment, thereby advancing comprehension of EU foreign policy vis-à-vis ASEAN.

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