

# Enhancing ASEAN-EU cooperation in non-traditional security

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## Enhancing ASEAN-EU Cooperation in Non-Traditional Security

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On 14 December 2022, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU) commemorated the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their diplomatic relations, marking a significant milestone in multilateralism. Accordingly, national leaders and senior officials representing member states of both regional organisations congregated in Brussels to participate in the ASEAN-EU Commemorative Summit and related events. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen co-chaired the Summit with the President of the European Council, Charles Michel. The co-chairmanship was a diplomatic achievement for both leaders in concluding a year where both regions face unprecedented challenges.

### Extraordinarily Challenging Year in Europe and Southeast Asia

Europe is still grappling with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has raised the spectre of nuclear war and caused food and energy supply challenges. ASEAN is still grappling with an intractable Myanmar crisis and is now increasingly caught between the rising China-US rivalry and the possibility of a Taiwan crisis spilling over into Southeast Asia. Although Europe and Southeast Asia are geographically far apart, one region's problems could impact another. Both regions depend on each other through global trade and have benefitted from a rules-based international order that aims to maintain peace and prosperity.

Amid these tectonic shifts to the international order, the Summit provided both regional organisations with the opportunity to emphasise EU strategic autonomy and ASEAN centrality. Both ASEAN and the EU reiterated their commitment to addressing challenges within their respective regions and cooperating to alleviate those that are common across both regions. Economic cooperation (for e.g., free trade agreement) and geopolitical security (for e.g., Ukraine and Taiwan) issues are top issues on the minds of national leaders and are likely to feature extensively in relations after the Summit.

Indeed, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen at the Summit reportedly said that ASEAN prefers a trade agreement instead of only economic assistance from the EU. Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jnr reportedly said that ASEAN is concerned with being caught in geopolitical tensions. Some EU leaders prefer ASEAN to take a stronger stance on the Russia-Ukraine war and that "EU-ASEAN economic cooperation could not occur in a geopolitical vacuum."

However, these top issues should not distract the leaders from having substantive discussions on non-traditional security issues.

### Inter-Regional Cooperation in Non-Traditional Security

Besides geopolitical security (preventing inter-state conflict and territorial disputes, nuclear weapons free zone), non-traditional security is necessary for any country's and region's peace, prosperity, and sustainable development. Unlike geopolitical security, which primarily tends to be the preoccupation of policy elites, the lack of non-traditional security could directly affect people's lives and livelihoods. But geopolitics could undermine multilateral cooperation in non-

traditional security. Both regions have faced non-traditional security issues in the past and today, and this reality will continue.

Several examples of ASEAN-EU non-traditional security issues of common interest and cooperation are worthy of mention.

On global terrorism, both regions shared similar security (e.g., suicide bombers) and social challenges (e.g., radicalisation) that arose from *Daesh* and *Al-Qaeda* extremism. Extremism as a challenge will never vanish and will continue to evolve. On transnational crimes, ASEANAPOL and EUROPOL inked a Letter of Intent in 2016 to facilitate the exchange of best practices and expertise in transnational crimes such as migrant smuggling and human trafficking. In 2018, ASEANAPOL and EUROPOL met in Hanoi to strengthen cooperation under the EURASEAN Investigative Network on Payment Card Fraud, which aims to counter organised cyber fraud criminal groups from Europe that set up cells in Asia.

On maritime security, the EU, Australia and Vietnam, from 2018 to 2022, co-chaired the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) workshops. On information and cybersecurity, ASEAN and the EU adopted the Statement on Cybersecurity Cooperation in 2019. This Statement was timely as information and cyberspace are a strategic domain where conflict, coercion, crimes, and online harms increasingly happen. In recognition of existing cooperation in these non-traditional security themes, the 23<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting (AEMM) in December 2020 noted that the EU has actively engaged ASEAN in addressing transnational crimes, maritime security, terrorism, and cybersecurity.

It is quite assuring that the Joint Leaders' Statement for the EU-ASEAN Commemorative Summit includes the commitment to grow engagement on “a broad range of traditional and non-traditional security and defence-related issues.”

### **Opportunity in ASEAN-EU Strategic Partnership**

The elevation of ASEAN-EU relations to a Strategic Partnership in December 2020 was a major milestone in the momentum of inter-regional cooperation. Complementing the partnership is the “Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-EU Strategic Partnership (2023-2027)”, which is an important guiding document. It outlines the themes that both regional organisations should aspire towards deepening cooperation to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes in the next five years. The themes include terrorism, transnational crimes, other non-traditional security issues, and misinformation and disinformation.

From 2023 to 2027, it is crucial for ASEAN and EU leaders to not only reaffirm their commitment to the ASEAN-EU strategic partnership but also discuss how to translate the Plan of Action and the Summit's Joint Leaders' Statement from aspiration to implementation.

First, national leaders and senior officials could exchange views on non-traditional security issues reflected in their respective strategic documents, such as the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint 2025 and the EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence. For example, the EU Strategic Compass states that the EU should work with ASEAN to “enhance shared awareness and information exchange on violent extremism; chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats; cybersecurity, maritime security, transnational crime, humanitarian and disaster relief and crisis management.” These interests are common to ASEAN and could promise more mutually beneficial practical cooperation activities.

Second, relations should evolve beyond the old donor-recipient dynamic. This evolution requires ASEAN to do some soul-searching on how it can support the EU more like how the EU has been supporting ASEAN. For example, certain ASEAN and EU member states could take the lead in running programmes to share good practices in promoting critical thinking,

digital literacy, journalism, and cyber hygiene. Such programmes would be helpful for youths, educators and stakeholders from their respective regions' information and media sectors. Such efforts are strategic as they amount to digital defence, addressing various issues: online radicalisation, cyber scams, social polarisation, and cognitive warfare.

As in any partnership, there would be challenges, especially when there are differences in how regional organisations are organised, their policy stances on specific global issues, and their capacity to respond to them. Nevertheless, ASEAN and the EU share the common purpose of providing their member states security to ensure peace and prosperity. Leaders should not allow differences over economic and geopolitical security issues to impede progress in cooperation in non-traditional security. Differences are not insurmountable if both sides exercise the political will and creativity to circumvent them.

Amid the current trends of anti-globalisation, great power competition, and the crisis of confidence in multilateralism, the ASEAN-EU partnership may be more pertinent than ever to ensure these trends do not undermine multilateral efforts to address non-traditional security issues.

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