

EU-ASEAN Relations: The Importance of Values, Norms and Culture

Abstract

This working paper investigates the various factors underpinning relations between the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). As the EU and ASEAN have a long-standing relationship, which dates back to the 1970s, and EU-ASEAN cooperation has been very successful in the area of trade, it seems strange that political relations between the two regions have been comparatively indifferent. This working paper shows that important reasons for the low-key character of EU-ASEAN relations can be found in the differences in values, norms and culture between Europe and Asia. These differences have become most obvious over the inclusion of human rights and democracy clauses in their cooperation and with regard to the question of how to treat Burma/Myanmar. Paying particular attention to these two issues and the importance of values, norms and culture, this working paper re-assesses the current state of EU-ASEAN relations.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This working paper examines the relations between the European Union (EU) and Asia and puts a focus on the relations between the EU and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The relations between the two regional groupings are a particularly interesting field for examination, as the first ministerial conference between the then European Community (EC) and ASEAN in 1978 has often been referred to as the date of birth of the concept of a group-to-group dialogue as well as a new model for both a consistent European foreign policy and the future of the international system (Alec de Flers/Regelsberger 2005: 322). As far as trade and economic relations are concerned, while at first the ASEAN countries were seen very much as recipients of EC donations, from the late 1980s onwards, the EC/EU has been strongly attracted by ASEAN's growing market and nowadays the two sides enjoy very strong commercial ties.

Against this background, it seems strange that despite their long-standing dialogue and successful economic and trade cooperation, political relations between the two regions have been comparatively indifferent. This working paper shows that important reasons for the low-key character of EU-ASEAN/Asia relations can be found in differences in values, norms and culture between Europe and Asia and that there have been considerable disagreements between the two regions over core political principles. Particularly differences over how to treat Burma/Myanmar¹ in view of the violent suppressions of pro-democracy movements in the country have repeatedly caused tensions in EU-ASEAN relations. In addition, while from the 1990s onwards, the EU demanded to

include human rights and democracy clauses in EU-ASEAN cooperation agreements, ASEAN stressed its own norms of regional conduct and cooperation, especially the principles of respect for national sovereignty and of non-interference. Moreover, some ASEAN countries began to propagate so-called 'Asian values', arguing that human rights are enmeshed in cultures, social structures and traditions.

Paying particular attention to these issues, this working paper will trace the evolution of EC/EU-ASEAN relations since the 1970s and analyse the importance of culture and of different conceptions of values and norms for EU-Asia relations. The central argument is that in order to evaluate the EU's relations with Asia in a meaningful way, it is necessary not only to focus on the abstract validity of certain norms and their zealous propagation, but also to consider that there may be culturally specific values and conceptions of what is good and that different normative priorities may collide when it comes to practical policy.

II. RELATIONS BETWEEN THE EU AND ASEAN IN PRACTICE

II.1 The Beginnings: EC-ASEAN Relations as a Bulwark against Communism

A mere six years after ASEAN was founded with the Bangkok Declaration of 1967 by Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia, the Association entered into cooperation and relations with the then EC. The initial aim behind the creation of ASEAN had been to contain intra-regional conflicts and to enable its members to cooperate for an acceleration of economic growth, social progress and political stability. Very importantly, as all its member states feared communism, ASEAN was also established as a bulwark against it.

On the EC side, cooperation with ASEAN was motivated by both economic and political

¹ Since the name of the country has been the subject of controversy, this working paper uses the designation Burma/Myanmar. However, no political statement is thereby intended.

interests. In addition to being a way to secure access to the prospering Asian economies, the European states perceived cooperation with ASEAN as a means to improve the EC's foreign policy profile. Furthermore, the EC member states were eager to support intra-regional tendencies in Asia, not least as a means to reduce Soviet and US influence in the region (Rüland 2001: 9ff.).

In the late 1970s, Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan provided further stimuli for the EC and ASEAN to work closely together. Both regions condemned the invasions and supported each other's positions in international fora, particularly in the United Nations (Yeo 2007: 178; Camroux 2008: 16f.). Nevertheless, differences in the approaches of the two regional groupings slowly started to become visible. Whereas especially against the background of Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, it became clear that the defence of the norm of non-interference was the basis for ASEAN's formation (Jones, L: 2008: 272), European integration was based on a different approach, which particularly involved the pooling of the sovereignty of its member states in some areas.

In 1980, the EC and the member countries of ASEAN signed a Cooperation Agreement, which still forms the basis for cooperation between the EU and many ASEAN countries (Alecu de Flers/ Regelsberger 2005: 331). The agreement encompasses enhanced cooperation in areas concerning community development, commerce, economic and cultural developments and exchanges. It is important to note, however, that in the period until the late 1980s, the economic relationship between the EC and ASEAN was significantly unequal. Although economic growth could be observed in some Southeast Asian states in the late 1980s, the ASEAN countries were seen very much as recipients of EC donations (Rüland 1996: 16f.). This also meant that the ASEAN countries were inevitably in a weaker

bargaining position than the EC as far as the basic principles of EC-ASEAN cooperation were concerned.

Yet, principles and norms, such as democracy and human rights, played only a marginal role at best in official EC-ASEAN relations until the late 1980s, as the EC's relations with Asia during this period were first and foremost motivated by traditional foreign policy interests and material benefits. In addition to European concerns with insecurity in Southeast Asia as a threat to a peaceful world order (Camroux 2008: 16f.), the fact that the EC states felt Cold War necessities of courting authoritarian but pro-Western countries has been mentioned as an influential factor for this prioritization (Yeo 2007: 179).

II.2 After the End of the Cold War: Political Frictions

The political relations between the EC and ASEAN took a turn for the worse in the early 1990s, when causes of friction came to the surface. After the end of the Cold War, the break-up of the Soviet Union and Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia, the EC and ASEAN did not have a shared adversary any more (Camroux 2008: 16f.). Against this background, from 1990 onwards the EC/EU has demanded that human rights and democracy clauses be included in EC/EU-ASEAN cooperation and introduced a policy of conditionalities, linking trade and aid particularly to issues of human rights and democratisation (Rüland 2001: 18).²

However, these demands of the EC/EU were perceived by the Southeast Asian countries as an unacceptable interference in their domestic affairs and thus sparked controversies. Whereas the EC/EU seemed to feel an

² This approach was especially also reflected in the EU's decision in 1995 to include a clause stipulating human rights as an essential element in the relations between the EU and the respective third country/countries in all association agreements as well as partnership and cooperation agreements with third countries.

obligation to promote human rights and – if necessary – to interfere in the domestic politics of other countries (Oerstroem Moeller 2007: 474), the ASEAN countries showed themselves unwilling to discuss human rights and democratisation issues and stressed ASEAN's norms of regional conduct and cooperation. Especially the principles of non-interference and of respect for national sovereignty were pointed out as having been imperative to safeguard regional stability since the creation of ASEAN. As new-born nation-states, for many ASEAN countries domestic and regional stability has been extremely important.³ The following statement, which the former Prime Minister of Singapore Goh Chok Tong made in 1992, illustrates the importance accorded to the principle of non-interference in ASEAN: "We don't set out to change the world and our neighbours. We don't believe in it. The culture of ASEAN is that we do not interfere" (quoted after Jones, L 2008: 271).

From around 1993 onwards, some ASEAN countries began to propagate the so-called 'Asian values' hypothesis and the debate soon spilled over onto international and interregional levels. In the 'Asian values' discourse a number of values have been referred to, such as work, frugality, valuing a national consensus and a holism rather than individualism, which Asian societies are supposed to have in common (Manea 2008: 383).⁴ These 'Asian values' have often been claimed as accounting for the economic development in many Asian countries – an argument which had considerable weight in the early 1990s, when ASEAN countries entered a period of dynamic growth (Manea 2008: 376). A group of ASEAN states further

formulated a regional Asian position towards human rights and argued that human rights are enmeshed in cultures, social structures and traditions, thus countering Western universalism with regard to human rights standards.⁵ In line with their emphasis on national sovereignty, Southeast Asian states took the position that protection should be provided by the states themselves, in accordance with their own cultural norms (Eysink 2006: 8). This may also be explained by the historical experiences of many Southeast Asian states where the nation-state functioned as a defender of the rights of minorities – whereas in Europe, minorities have actually often been suppressed by nation-states.⁶

As a consequence, EC/EU-ASEAN relations faced the problem of mutually incompatible approaches and goals, as far as the political sphere was concerned. This was also illustrated by the fact that after it had been decided in 1991 to sign a more wide-ranging agreement than the Cooperation Agreement of 1980 (see above), this has not occurred due to the two regional partners' divergent interests.

II.3 In the Late 1990s: Impasse over the Participation of Burma/Myanmar in the Dialogue

The European countries were nevertheless impressed by the rapid economic development of the 'Asian Tigers' and attracted by ASEAN's growing market.⁷ As key decision-makers, especially in the UK, Germany, France and Italy, did not want to be left out of the region, the EU decided to take a pragmatic course, which would focus on

³ Interview conducted with Joergen Oerstroem Moeller on 22 February 2010.

⁴ In an article in the *International Herald Tribune* of 11/12 December 1993, Professor Tommy Koh listed ten values which he had drawn from the statements of scholars and politicians and which he claimed would underpin East Asian success (Manea 2008: 383f.).

⁵ However, there were also some governments of ASEAN member states which did not take part in the Asian values discourse but took the position that democracy and human rights were 'Asian values', too (Manea 2008: 384f.).

⁶ Interview conducted with Joergen Oerstroem Moeller on 22 February 2010.

⁷ Also see the interview conducted with Joergen Oerstroem Moeller on 22 February 2010.

economics while putting aside sensitive political issues (Yeo 2007: 180). This was reflected at the 11th ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting (AEMM) in Karlsruhe, Germany in September 1994 as well as in the EC Communication 'Towards a New Asia Strategy' from July 1994. Although the Indonesian annexation of East Timor and particularly the Dili deaths in East Timor in 1991⁸ as well as differences over how to treat Burma/Myanmar in view of the ruling junta's violent suppressions of pro-democracy movements caused tensions in EC/EU-ASEAN relations, these issues were softened in the official discussions of the foreign ministers (Manea 2008: 377f.). Overall, value-related issues were toned down and controversial political themes were bracketed, while discussions concentrated on areas of common economic interest (Rüland 2001: 19).

However, when ASEAN accepted Burma/Myanmar as a member in 1997, EU-ASEAN relations reached an impasse over the participation of Burma/Myanmar in the dialogue.⁹ As the EU member states criticised Burma/Myanmar's democratisation and human rights record, they viewed having any relations with the government of Burma/Myanmar as unacceptable.¹⁰

Therefore, when Burma/Myanmar was admitted to ASEAN, the EU fully suspended dialogue with the country and decided on a package of sanctions, which on several occasions have prevented Burma/Myanmar's

representatives from taking part in EU-ASEAN meetings, at least in Europe.¹¹ This also has to be seen against the background of the fact that during the 1990s fundamental human rights had become one of the cornerstones for the EU's foreign policy and the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 puts an emphasis on the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Petersson 2006: 567).

In contrast, most ASEAN states took the position that Burma/Myanmar's political instability and human rights record were an internal matter and insisted on their practice of refraining from regional interference. Rather, they preferred a policy of 'constructive engagement' and silent diplomacy (Eysink 2006: 8). Besides, denying Burma/Myanmar entry into ASEAN would have gone against the Bangkok Declaration, by which ASEAN was established in 1967 and which had stated that the Association is open for participation to all nation-states in the region (Petersson 2006: 565).¹²

As both the EU and the ASEAN side were unwilling to compromise on the issue, meetings were put on hold for more than two years and the ministerial meetings for nearly three years. Nevertheless, some EU member states did not want to be left out from ASEAN's rapidly growing market and the EU and ASEAN were still able to pragmatically communicate on areas of common economic interest.

⁸ In the Dili incident on 12 November 1991, unarmed East Timorese demonstrators who protested against Indonesian rule were shot by Indonesian security forces in the Santa Cruz cemetery in the East Timorese capital Dili.

⁹ In addition, Brunei had become a member of ASEAN in 1984 and Vietnam in 1995.

¹⁰ In October 1996, the Council of the EU agreed on a Common Position on Burma/Myanmar (1996/635/CFSP), which particularly reaffirmed the EU's arms embargo on Burma/Myanmar and which has been extended (and amended) in several Common Positions until it was replaced by another Common Position on Burma/Myanmar in April 2003 (2003/297/CFSP).

¹¹ In October 1998, the Council of the EU agreed on a Common Position (1996/612/CFSP) which – amongst other things – provided for visa bans to senior members of the SPDC, Burmese authorities in the tourism sector, and senior members of the military or the security forces.

¹² The aim of the Bangkok Declaration was finalised and all Southeast Asian nations were under the ASEAN umbrella, when Cambodia became a member of ASEAN in 1999, after a military coup had postponed its membership. Papua-New Guinea and East Timor have observer status.

II.4 Since 2000: Changing Dynamics in EU-ASEAN relations?

The balance in EU-Asia relations significantly changed when the Asian financial crisis gripped much of Asia beginning in July 1997. The crisis seriously undermined ASEAN's internal cohesion and external clout (Rüland 2001: 20) and further had the effect that the 'Asian values' discourse increasingly came under attack. In the wake of the Asian crisis, the tone in EU-ASEAN cooperation with regard to issues of human rights and democracy thus became somewhat more "accommodating" (Manea 2008: 381). Moreover, after the EU and ASEAN were able to agree on an implicit bargain, which involved Burma/Myanmar pledging to lift restrictions on the National League for Democracy (NLD) and accept a visit by the EU Troika (Jones, L 2008: 277), the deadlock in EU-ASEAN relations could be resolved and ministerial meetings were resumed in 2000.

In addition, in order to respond to the challenges posed by the external environment and to countervail the claim that ASEAN is a "sunset organization", ASEAN began to re-examine its 'ASEAN way' and to build new regional capacities (Yeo 2007: 183). In doing so, ASEAN has made efforts to understand better the European integration process which has been studied in order to draw lessons that can also be useful for the further development of ASEAN (Yeo 2007: 184).

At the ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur in 2005, ASEAN governments declared their intention to create a charter for the association, which was signed at the ASEAN Summit in Singapore in November 2007. The ASEAN Charter, which was launched on 15 December 2008 in Jakarta, seeks to create legally binding rules for ASEAN for the first time and to establish the association as a legal entity modelled on the EU. The influence of the EU model becomes apparent with regard to the fact that members of the Eminent Persons Group and the High Level Task Force

in charge of drafting the document visited Brussels, Berlin and Nuremberg at the invitation of Germany¹³ and the EU provided assistance for the drafting of the ASEAN Charter in 2006 and 2007 (Gaens/Jokela 2007: 17).

In many regards, the Charter simply affirmed what ASEAN had already become (Jones, D.M. 2008: 736). Respect for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states, the peaceful settlement of disputes, non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, and the right to national existence free from external interference are mentioned among ASEAN's principles once again.¹⁴ Nevertheless, in some regards the Charter goes beyond a mere reassertion of traditional practice. According to the Charter, one of the purposes of ASEAN is "to ensure that the peoples and Member States of ASEAN live in peace with the world at large in a just, democratic and harmonious environment"¹⁵ and the Charter obliges the grouping to "strengthen democracy, enhance good governance and the rule of law, and to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms, with due regard to the rights and responsibilities of the Member States of ASEAN".¹⁶

In addition, besides attempts to introduce voting systems to replace decision-making by consensus,¹⁷ there were discussions and recommendations to mention sanctions for non-compliance. Although this latter point faced strong opposition, such that the ASEAN member states could not agree on a sanctions mechanism – a decision which caused controversy and was especially heavily

¹³ See the Joint Statement of the 16th EU-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Nuremberg on 15 March 2007.

¹⁴ See Article 2, Section 2 (a), (d), (e) and (f) of the ASEAN Charter.

¹⁵ See Article 1, Section 4 of the ASEAN Charter.

¹⁶ See Article 1, Section 7 of the ASEAN Charter.

¹⁷ The ASEAN Charter eventually granted only the ASEAN Summit the power to bypass consensus (see Article 20, Section 2 of the ASEAN Charter).

criticized with view to the situation in Burma/Myanmar¹⁸ – the Charter does state that “a serious breach of the Charter”, or even mere “non-compliance”, “shall be referred to the ASEAN Summit for decision”.¹⁹

The most contentious issue in the drafting of the Charter has been the inclusion of a provision that calls for the establishment of a human rights body. An ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) was formally launched during the ASEAN summit in Cha-am Hua Hin, Thailand in October 2009. Despite weaknesses, the decision to create a human rights body has been viewed as an indication that human rights are becoming increasingly central to ASEAN’s collective identity-building (Manea 2008: 390f.; Gaens/Jokela 2007: 17).²⁰

II.5 The Situation in Burma/Myanmar: Towards an Alignment of the EU’s and ASEAN’s outlooks?

The changing dynamics in EU-Asian relations in the wake of the Asian financial crisis have also become visible with regard to the situation in Burma/Myanmar. The normative shield from which Burma/Myanmar had benefitted in earlier years was no longer available because ASEAN changed its policy from a strict defence of the principle of non-interference to appealing for a less ‘confrontational’ and ‘cooperative’ approach to facilitate improvements within the country (Jones, L

2008: 276). In particular, Ali Alatas, the former foreign minister of Indonesia, had introduced an approach of ‘enhanced interactions’, which could include peer pressure or friendly advice and which were considered as being legitimate if a domestic situation could reasonably be expected to involve deleterious ramifications for the wider region (Haacke 2010: 159f.). This approach was endorsed by the ASEAN members in 1998, whereby it was made explicit that unfavourable collective diplomatic commentary would also be allowed for.

Particularly after the violent incident at Depayin in May 2003, when Aung San Suu Kyi was confined first to ‘protective custody’ and then to renewed house arrest, ASEAN members, on an individual and collective basis, have criticised the government of Burma/Myanmar more openly and the relationship between Burma/Myanmar and other ASEAN members has increasingly been characterized by admonitions and underlying differences (Haacke 2010: 160).²¹ In November 2004, ASEAN governments agreed on establishing an ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Caucus on Burma/Myanmar (AIPMC), which added to the pressure on Burma/Myanmar.²² The AIPMC particularly opposed

¹⁸ Although especially the Philippines had declared at first that it would not ratify the charter as long as Burma/Myanmar would not restore democracy and free Aung San Suu Kyi, the Charter was finally ratified by all ASEAN member states.

¹⁹ See Article 20, Section 4 of the ASEAN Charter.

²⁰ In comparison, in the economic sphere EU-ASEAN relations have intensified significantly. In 2007, the European Commission launched negotiations on an EU-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with ASEAN countries – which in March 2009 have been paused, however, as progress had been slow. Instead, it has been decided to pursue negotiations towards FTAs with individual ASEAN countries, which could become building blocks towards a future region-to-region FTA.

²¹ Following this criticism from its fellow ASEAN States, a new Prime Minister, General Khin Nyunt, was introduced in Burma/Myanmar in August 2003, who launched a seven step road map for democratic transition. However, after the purge of Military Intelligence sections within the Burma/Myanmar armed forces, General Khin Nyunt was replaced by General Soe Win in October 2004, upon whose death the current Prime Minister General Thein Sein took over on 2 October 2007. As far as the EU was concerned, in view of the further deterioration in the political situation there and the continuing serious violations of human rights, the EU had already adopted in April 2003 a further Common Position (2003/297/CFSP) extending and strengthening the measures taken against the military regime in Burma/Myanmar. On 20 June 2003, the Council adopted a Decision (2003/461/CFSP) implementing the strengthened sanctions provided for in this Common Position (2003/297/CFSP).

²² At the same time, small caucuses were formed in the parliaments of Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Cambodia.

Burma/Myanmar's ASEAN chairmanship which was scheduled for 2006/07, and was finally successful in effectively stripping Burma/Myanmar of the ASEAN chair, on the basis of a face-saving declaration, which thanked Burma/Myanmar for deciding to focus on domestic affairs (Jones, L 2008: 281f.).

Having supported Burma/Myanmar's inclusion in multilateral forums for a decade, ASEAN members increasingly expressed frustration over the slow pace of reform in Burma/Myanmar, which became especially visible in July 2006, when ASEAN ministers issued a call for "tangible progress that would lead to peaceful transition to democracy in the near future".²³ Although the UN Secretary-General's good offices process is still seen as the most promising vehicle to foster a peaceful transition to democracy, ASEAN countries have become more active in supporting these efforts (Haacke 2010: 161). After the so-called 'Saffron Revolution' in 2007, particularly Singapore as ASEAN chair took an active approach in this regard, and when Burma/Myanmar's junta initially refused access to foreign aid workers in the immediate aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and urgent humanitarian assistance was delayed, ASEAN opted to mediate between the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and the UN and at least partially alleviated the regime's suspicion of assistance from the West, which led to the establishment of a tripartite core group tasked with coordinating the distribution of international assistance to storm victims.

As far as the side of the EU was concerned, while renewing the sanctions against the regime in April 2004,²⁴ the EU's position was

also relaxed to some degree. This became visible as – despite its initial opposition to any involvement by Burma/Myanmar unless preceded by the release of political prisoners and democratic reforms – the EU agreed to let a delegation from Burma/Myanmar join ASEM summits, arguing that Burma/Myanmar's participation could promote its human rights and democracy.²⁵ However, in view of the seriousness of the situation in the country, in April 2006, the Council adopted a Common Position renewing restrictive measures against Burma/Myanmar.²⁶ When on 11 August 2009, following conviction on charges of violating the terms of her previous incarceration, Aung San Suu Kyi was sentenced to an additional 18 months of house arrest, the Council of the EU adopted a Common Position with additional restrictive measures against Burma/Myanmar.²⁷ This incident also induced ASEAN to set aside its usual line of non-interference and issue a statement saying that the "honour and credibility" of the government of Burma/Myanmar was at stake and urging "humane treatment" for her.²⁸

While ASEAN's increasingly critical approach over the last few years can at least partly be ascribed to the influence of international expectations that ASEAN take action, it also

²⁵ In the Common Position 2004/423/CFSP it was stated: "Member States may grant exemptions from the measures [...] where travel is justified [...] on grounds of attending intergovernmental meetings, including those promoted by the European Union, where a political dialogue is conducted that directly promotes democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Burma/Myanmar."

²⁶ See the Common Position 2006/318/CFSP of 27 April 2006 renewing restrictive measures against Burma/Myanmar. Additional restrictive measures against Burma/Myanmar were introduced by a Common Position adopted in 2007 (2007/750/CFSP).

²⁷ See the Common Position 2009/615/CFSP of 13 August 2009. This Common Position involved the imposition of travel bans and the freezing of assets to judges participating in the sentencing as well as to Burma/Myanmar state media organizations.

²⁸ See the ASEAN chairman's statement on Myanmar, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, Bangkok, 18 May 2009.

²³ See the Joint Communique of the 39th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in Kuala Lumpur, 25 July 2006. Accessed: <http://www.aseansec.org/18782.htm>.

²⁴ See the Common Position 2004/423/CFSP of 26 April 2004 renewing restrictive measures against Burma/Myanmar.

seems important that several ASEAN governments have come to see in Burma/Myanmar's continued intransigence a threat to ASEAN's collective interests in projecting an image of renewal as well as to their own developmental projects (Jones, L 2008: 281). This is illustrated by the fact that an ASEAN statement of 18 May 2009 already contained an explicit warning that if Burma/Myanmar failed to demonstrate responsibility in protecting the rights of citizens ASEAN's credibility would be jeopardised and its integration process obstructed (Haacke 2010: 170).²⁹

Overall, although, not least because of the interests of illiberal elites in some of its member states, ASEAN has faced increasing difficulties in achieving meaningful consensus, there are significant indications that the EU's and ASEAN's outlooks have increasingly aligned with each other. Although the two sides do not always agree on the concrete approaches towards the situation in Burma/Myanmar, there seems to be more or less agreement that in principle democracy should be promoted in Burma/Myanmar and the constitutional process there should become inclusive and transparent (Friberg 2004: 1).

III. CONCLUSIONS: THE NEED TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT CULTURE AND SPECIFIC VALUES AND NORMS WHEN MOVING FROM ABSTRACT PRINCIPLES TO PRACTICAL POLICY

This paper has analysed the development of EC/EU-ASEAN relations and examined the underlying reasons for the fact that despite their long-standing dialogue and successful economic and trade cooperation, political relations between the two regions have been comparatively indifferent. Although at the beginning, EC-ASEAN relations were seen as a bulwark against Communism and cooperation in the political sphere was rather harmonious in the 1970s and 1980s, this changed when after the end of the Cold War, the EU began to state the aims that key values and basic principles governing the EU's own integration are circulated also with regard to EU-ASEAN relations and that the transferability of European values should be highlighted.

While the EU's strong stance on these values and principles has certainly not least been a consequence of its shared historical experience, the EU's demands and its uncompromising stance caused offence on the side of the ASEAN countries.

This working paper has shown that there may be culturally specific values and conceptions of what is good and that a meaningful evaluation of EU-Asia relations thus needs to take into account the importance of values, norms and culture. While the EU's emphasis on democracy and human rights undoubtedly forms an important part of the political identity of the EU today, it seems that "the EU may never have really grasped how important non-interference in domestic politics was for the ASEAN countries" (Oerstroem Moeller 2007: 475). In many ASEAN countries, scrupulous respect for the principle of non-interference has been considered imperative to safeguard regional as well as domestic stability, which for many of these countries as

²⁹ According to Lee Jones (2008: 282ff.), already after the Depayin incident of 2003, ASEAN's policy position regarding Burma/Myanmar could be described as "critical disengagement", which involved the following components: "criticism of Burma's internal affairs in violation of non-interference, coupled with resignation as to ASEAN's inability to influence Burma and a desire to transfer responsibility to the UN to 'decouple' the SPDC's behaviour from ASEAN's standing".

new-born nation-states has been extremely important. There have been serious concerns in several ASEAN countries that their societies would be destabilised if the EU's principles and values are simply transferred to these countries.

Moreover, some ASEAN governments viewed the EU's demands as an attempt of imposing the EU's specific values and norms on others and rejected what were seen as Eurocentric perspectives on human rights and democracy. The 'Asian values' discourse, which became the dominant discourse on the side of ASEAN, thus proposed an alternative – and at times antagonistic – view on human rights (Manea 2008: 383). Although the cultural distinctiveness of the so-called Asian values may have been exaggerated to some extent for ideological effect or even to mask authoritarian practices in some countries, it has become apparent that – despite differences amongst themselves – Asian countries may have different priorities from the EU member states.

This does not necessarily mean that non-interference is the only acceptable corollary for the EU and that the EU is not doing a good job by basing itself on principles and saying that the EU has something to offer in this regard. Yet, the detailed examination of EU-ASEAN relations has illustrated that when moving from abstract principles to practical policy, different normative priorities may collide and moral ambiguity may arise so that it might not be necessarily self-evident what the right action in a given situation is (also see Sjursen 2006: 241). Therefore, a policy that focuses exclusively on the abstract validity of norms and their zealous propagation is problematic.

While there can be no doubt that the protection of human rights in some Asian countries still and urgently needs to be improved, it has become clear that the practice of democracy and norms which are

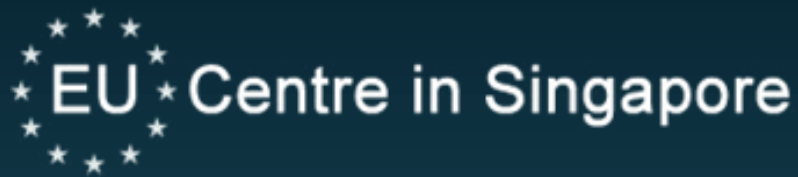
particular to the EU cannot simply be transplanted to Asia. Rather, it seems important to acknowledge that traditional understandings and conditions in Asia may differ significantly from the ones in Europe and that sustainable and effective changes need to be based on dynamics within the region itself. And indeed, there have been indications that the ASEAN states are moving in the direction of a consensus on an acceptable human rights standard.

Although ASEAN's normative terrain has traditionally been incompatible with the idea of adopting punitive measures against members, in recent years, the situation in Burma/Myanmar has been dealt with in a comparatively frank way and many Asian leaders have joined European governments in urging Burma/Myanmar's military rulers to implement an all inclusive political reform. These developments can be acknowledged and supported by the EU and there have also been indications in recent years as far as the side of the EU is concerned, that the EU has gradually realised that its criticism of Burma/Myanmar has to find other outlets. After all, as far as the situation in Burma/Myanmar is concerned, it must not be forgotten that a key problem that ASEAN – just like the EU and the international community as a whole – faces is a distinct lack of options and it seems reasonable to ask whether "a more robust ASEAN charter and mechanism of enforcement (would) transform the politics of what is evidently a failed and delusional regime" (Jones, D M 2008: 752).

On the whole, although the way ahead will still be intricate and rapprochement over difficult issues may happen rather gradually, the differences in approach between the EU and ASEAN do certainly not seem as disheartening today as they once did, particularly if the importance of values, norms and culture in EU-Asia relations is taken into account.

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