

ASEAN-EU Relations: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

Setelah berdiri selama 38 tahun, Asosiasi Negara-negara Asia Tenggara (ASEAN) telah mendorong upaya integrasi ekonomi dan pencapaian visi bersama untuk mewujudkan masyarakat yang lebih baik bagi negara-negara anggotanya. Bidang-bidang kerjasama yang menjadi perhatian ASEAN antara lain; bidang sosial, budaya, dan penanggulangan kejahatan transnasional. Dalam membina hubungan dengan Uni Eropa (EU), ASEAN telah menempatkan integrasi ekonomi sebagai hal yang paling utama. Meskipun EU dan ASEAN memiliki karakteristik yang berbeda, kerjasama antara dua organisasi regional ini mampu berkembang sehingga meliputi berbagai bidang lain di luar ekonomi.

Keywords: economic integration, regional cooperation, ASEAN, EU

Introduction

After 38 years of its existence, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) comprising Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam, is now visible and active. ASEAN is committed to work toward an ASEAN Community by 2020 and this will consist of three pillars, namely, the ASEAN Security Community (ASC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC).

The ASEAN Community is not a community like what is in Europe.

Political union is not contemplated. The glue is economic integration and a common vision of better society for all ASEAN citizens. The ASEAN Community has given ASEAN a greater sense of purpose. It serves as a definition of what ASEAN wants. The year 2020 is the target date because it is the year when many of the ASEAN economic agreements should be realised.

ASEAN and the EU: Developments and Lessons Learned

The ASEAN-EU relations started as early as 1972 when the then European Economic Community established informal relations with

ASEAN through the Special Coordinating Committee of ASEAN. Relations were elevated to a higher level with the convening of the first ASEAN-ECC Ministerial Meeting in 1978, and institutionalised in 1980 with the signing of the EC-ASEAN Cooperation Agreement as the first formal agreement between the two regional organisations.

The historical, cultural and ideological foundations that impelled the EU's formation and shaped its character are different from ASEAN's own situation. From European Coal and Steel Union, to European Common Market, European Economic Community and European Community, and finally the European Union, the path progressed for half century. It is a gradual and steady institutional designing and building which made Europe the way it is now.

Unlike the EU which embarked on the route of institutional building, ASEAN favours functional cooperation first. ASEAN has proceeded even without the required institutions. Political commitments, rather than legal obligation, has characterised ASEAN's development. It subscribes to the fundamental principle of non-interference, with consensus decision-making playing an important part. This is necessary to promote trust and confidence for rooting ten diverse countries together.

As more and more economic

agreements and other formal documents are signed among ASEAN Member Countries and between ASEAN and external parties, rules-making has become more prominent. Over time, it is expected that ASEAN's decision-making will be more rules-based and this could transform the grouping. The establishment of an Eminent Persons Group (EPG) to examine and provide recommendations on the establishment of an ASEAN Charter is a significant step toward that direction. The EU's experience in forming the EU's legal framework and coping with community rules over national laws can be instructive.

The significance of European regionalism is that all European countries have been gradually absorbed into a united and highly integrated "Grand Europe", by a single market, a single currency, as well as a single political system. In this respect, ASEAN still has a long way to go.

Looking at the progressive changes in both regions, there is a strong desire on the part of the EU to share its experiences on forging regionalism and on the part of ASEAN to adopt the best practices of the EU and to modify them to fit the ASEAN context. This would certainly provide ASEAN and the EU a common platform to launch policy dialogues in a number of important sectors where ASEAN regional integration efforts have been

intensified such as in trade and investment.

Potential Areas for Enhancing ASEAN -EU Relations

Economics

With a population of 540 million growing at more than 2% a year and the combined GDP exceeding USD1 trillion by 2010, ASEAN could be a key market for the EU. Although the EU remains as one of ASEAN's major trading partners, third largest after Japan and the United States, there is more scope for improvement in trade and investment between ASEAN and the EU.

In this regard, the annual ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM)-EU Trade Commissioner Consultation, which was initiated in 2000, has become the highest-level forum where trade policies and initiatives supportive of closer ASEAN-EU partnership are discussed. ASEAN Senior Economic Officials (SEOM) also meet regularly with their counterparts from the European Commission.

ASEAN perceives the EU as a strong supporter of ASEAN economic integration. This is evidenced by ASEAN-EU cooperation in a number of areas, namely, Standards, Quality and Conformity Assessment, Intellectual Property Rights, Energy, Statistics, Environment, Higher Education, and poverty alleviation. The agreed the Trans-Regional EU-ASEAN Trade

Initiative or TREATI is a flexible dialogue mechanism on trade related issues through which both sides hope to expand the existing trade and investment flows. A number of joint activities in the areas of mutual economic interest are currently being implemented.

The TREATI would pave the way for a deeper and broader ASEAN-EU Economic Partnership which does not preclude a potential ASEAN-EU free trade arrangement. As the EU has its own concerns, ASEAN's efforts to launch a free trade area (FTA) agreement have not been successful to date. Nevertheless, the AEM and the EU Trade Commissioner have agreed to do a joint feasibility study. Officials from both sides have already met three times to discuss a potential future ASEAN-EU FTA.

Like the EU, ASEAN Member Countries play an active role in the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Discussion on the developments in the WTO is one of the regular features in the agenda of the ASEAN-EU consultations, whether it is at the level of the Ministers or the Senior Officials. Both sides take such opportunities to share each other's expectations and to understand each other's positions.

Politics and Security

On the political and security front, ASEAN remains a main conduit for the EU to engage Asia.

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) continues to feature prominently in the EU's strategy for engaging the region as it provides a window for the EU to extend its political presence in the region. Besides, the ARF is the most important and successful political and security forum in the Asia-Pacific participated by all major powers. Currently, the ARF consists of 25 participating countries, including the EU.

Transnational crime has been identified as an area for cooperation. Given the global campaign against international terrorism and crime related to it, fighting transnational crime and adopting common approaches in international fora is of mutual benefit. An increasingly important aspect in counter terrorism is inter-faith dialogue and understanding. Europe's long history and civilisational interactions with the different religions are useful for ASEAN's own processes for inter-faith accommodation and co-existence.

Social and Culture

On the social and cultural front, education, environment and poverty alleviation would be the areas to move forward in the short to medium term. The EU has undertaken a number of innovative changes in the field of education such as introducing the concept of lifelong learning to keep up with the rapid changes of today and

integrating protection of the environment as a key ingredient in its economic policies. ASEAN too is making efforts to improve its human resources through education and to safeguard the environment while pursuing economic development. The key element is sustainability. The EU's policy-making in these areas, particularly the application to and conformance by new members of the EU would be instructive to ASEAN.

The EU has successfully developed strategies to minimise poverty through the harmonisation of social protection policies. The inclusion of the poverty eradication as priority area of cooperation with ASEAN in the EC's Communication on a New Partnership toward Southeast Asia is another strong point for ASEAN-EU collaboration. ASEAN's own initiatives to narrow the development gap among Member Countries and to develop the rural areas are priority issues which would benefit from the EU's experience.

Conclusion

The existing cooperation illustrated in the preceding paragraphs has brought significant goodwill and benefits to both ASEAN and the EU. The base is broad and the foundation deep. This is the strength of the partnership. However, in the New Economy where technology and speed count for everything, primordial mindset

has to change. The relationship must be based on the spirit of partnership and leveraging on each other's strengths with respect for the diversity of cultures and traditions. New innovative processes must be applied to the ASEAN-EU partnership to take it to a more enduring and endearing level.

A greater mutual understanding through enhanced interactions in the areas of youth, media and culture and arts is essential. There are perception gaps which hamper a closer relationship at the government-to-government as well as people-to-people levels. More exchanges of the next generation

and more tolerance of each other's diversity are necessary in narrowing the mental gap.

In conclusion, the EU has been part of the Southeast Asian landscape for many years. The question now is how the EU wishes to play its role: a traditional west-and-east approach or an innovative global citizen stance. The health of ASEAN-EU relations would rest on positive dialogue, a focus on the big picture and sustainable development of opportunities while strengthening bilateral ties between the EU and individual Member Countries of ASEAN. ■

