“It’s Not *All* Bad News: The EU’s Increasing Importance as a Trading Partner and Security Actor in Southeast Asia”

Katja Weber

Georgia Institute of Technology

katja.weber@inta.gatech.edu

**Abstract**:

There is much talk these days about the EU’s “poly-crisis” and many people are predicting the EU’s steady demise. Undeniably, the EU is experiencing tough times with the refugee crisis, Brexit, serious challenges to the Schengen agreement and the survival of the Eurozone. But the EU has weathered storms before and not all news is bad. Despite the multifaceted crises, not everyone is a Euroskeptic. In fact, the EU, increasingly, is viewed as an important actor in many regions of the world, including Southeast Asia. This paper takes a closer look at the EU’s evolving and increasingly complex relationship with the ASEAN countries, highlighting areas of significant cooperation between the two regions over the past years and suggesting areas for further improvements.

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Even though the EU, since its inception, has accomplished a lot and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its role as peacemaker, it has hit a rough patch as of late, prompting many people to predict its steady demise. However, the EU has experienced crises before which it managed to transcend successfully, thereby reassuring less pessimistic people that the EU will continue to play an important role in world politics in the future. Taking a closer look at the EU’s evolving and increasingly complex relationship with the ten Southeast Asian countries that comprise the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the paper scrutinizes areas of significant inter-regional cooperation over the past years and concludes with suggestions for further improvements.

**Argument in a Nutshell**

Relations between Europe and Southeast Asia have been and continue to be complex. In the past century alone, Southeast Asians experienced colonialism, then saw decolonization and, toward the latter part of the century, significant economic aid from the European Community as well as enhanced commercial ties with Europe (Petersson, 2006). Cognizant of the history of the region, the EU, for many years, has settled for supporting economic development and aiding in capacity-building.

As a strong proponent of human rights and the rule of law, the EU, at times, has criticized Southeast Asian countries for allowing sovereignty-related norms to get in the way of the protection of human rights, but it has refrained from assuming the role of norm exporter, understanding that it would be counter-productive to exert pressure on reluctant ASEAN members to modify the non-interference norm. And yet, as can be seen in the case of Myanmar, the EU has made its opinions heard and, when necessary, has taken unilateral steps not supported by other regional actors (mainly China and ASEAN) like sanctions. Since any uncontrolled crisis or conflict in Southeast Asia (such as the worsening of territorial disputes in the South China Sea, prolonged ethnic unrest in Myanmar, terrorist activities in Indonesia, etc.) would have profound repercussions for the EU as one of ASEAN’s major trading partners, in the last few years,the EU has broadened its toolset to be in a better position to promote peace in the region. Via a scaled-up partnership with ASEAN, substantially increasing its financial support to the region, and introducing new initiatives to tackle non-traditional security (NTS) challenges (see European Commission 2015), this paper argues, the EU has become much more than an important economic actor in the region, namely a valued political/security actor as well. In the following, I sketch the EU’s relations with Southeast Asia from the founding of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994 to the present. I discuss how the EU, as a result of political instability in several Southeast Asian countries as well as along its major trading routes in the South China Sea, in the last few years, has not only promoted economic development in the region, but outlined an ambitious political partnership with the ASEAN countries that has allowed it to play a more active role in addressing regional challenges. I end with some suggestions for further improvements in the EU/ASEAN relationship.

**EU Relations With Southeast Asia From the Founding of the ARF** Starting in July 1994, the EU codified its Asia policy in a series of Commission documents (see Weber, 2013) which it periodically modified until it came up with a master plan for 2007–2012. In a nutshell, these documents recommend that the EU play a proactive role in regional cooperation via the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and inter-regional dialogues via the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) (European Commission, 2001: 3). A Plan of Action, moreover, proposes to ‘deepen security cooperation’, especially when it comes to ‘crisis management, conflict prevention, and capacity building’ (European Commission, 2007: 1–2). Taken together, these documents suggest that the EU understands that it is more likely to make meaningful contributions to Asian security by continuing to support economic development, sharing its experiences with regional cooperative efforts, providing tools and independent monitors, and aiding in capacity-building. Or, put differently, the EU realizes that insisting on improved human rights and democracy promotion in Southeast Asia would lead to opposition and thus make it more difficult to achieve the EU’s goal of enhancing security in the region. However, given differences in values, norms and culture between Europe and Asia, and the fact that ‘the issue of fundamental human rights, the promotion of democracy and good governance constitute core objectives in [the EU’s] external relations ... with third countries’ (Petersson, 2006: 564), the EU does not always manage to steer clear of incorporating human rights clauses in cooperation agreements with ASEAN countries.According to De Flers (2010: 3), human rights played ‘a marginal role at best in official EC-ASEAN relations until the late 1980s’. Also, by the early 1990s, ASEAN-EU trade was growing more rapidly than ASEAN’s trade with its largest partner – Japan (Petersson, 2006: 573). Then, political relations between Europe and Southeast Asia began to become strained.As a result of the phenomenal changes in Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s – the fall of the Berlin Wall, the disintegration of the Soviet empire, and the move toward democratic governments and free market economies by many Central and East European countries – the EU not only began to include human rights and democracy clauses in its relations with its new neighbors to the East and South (Weber et al., 2007), but also insisted on including such clauses in its cooperation agreements with ASEAN (De Flers, 2010: 2). Trade and economic aid became linked to human rights and democratization issues, that is, the EU began to pursue a policy of ‘conditionality’ (De Flers, 2010: 3).Not surprisingly, the Southeast Asian countries regarded these demands by the EC/EU as interference in their domestic affairs, and thus, unacceptable. This prompted a group of ASEAN states to begin what became known as the ‘Asian values’ debate, in which they outlined their own position toward human rights. More specifically these countries argue that ‘human rights are enmeshed in cultures, social structures and traditions’, and thus outright reject ‘Western universalism with regard to human rights standards’ (De Flers 2010: 4; Clifford 2011). Interestingly, in addition to respect for the individual, many Asians include ‘the obligation by that individual to the society and the state’ as a fundamental component of human rights (Petersson, 2006: 577). To lend greater emphasis to their position, many Asian countries, additionally, make use of every opportunity to remind ‘Western democracies [that they] themselves showed little concern for human rights before they became political[ly] stable (Petersson, 2006: 577–579), thus accusing them of double standards.

**Moving Toward a More Comprehensive Partnership With Southeast Asia** Given that ASEAN is the EU’s third largest trading partner outside Europe, and that the EU is the largest foreign investor in the ASEAN countries (Muxfeldt 2013: 2), the two regions clearly have a big incentive to sustain a high level of engagement with each other. To that purpose, in 2012 the EU acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), hoping that this step will lead to an invitation to join the East Asia Summit (ASEAN, Japan, China, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, India, US and Russia) in the not too distant future. In 2013, moreover, several EU leaders visited Southeast Asia, including the EU’s then High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, who attended the ARF meeting in Brunei, participated in the ASEM Foreign Ministers Meeting in India, and visited Myanmar in November to launch the EU-Myanmar Task Force (Yeo 2013: 1). “As a major trading partner, aspiring security actor and proponent of international law,” the EU, as Pejsova (2016: 2) explains, has “economic, political and moral stakes” in the region. Drawing on its experience of trust and confidence building, it seeks to defend its own interests by taking a “comprehensive approach” to foreign policy making (Reiterer 2014: 1-2). Not surprisingly, this approach to tackling non-traditional security threats via “soft” power is especially appealing when other partners are stressing hard power solutions for the region. According to Reiterer (2014: 12-13) this allows the EU to “promot[e] peace and security through development assistance…and non-military assets in [the] form of know-how about regional reconciliation through integration and institution building, confidence building measures for conflict prevention and management, [and] post-conflict management... .” A good example of the EU’s enhanced role in the region is the Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM) which was led by the EU to support the peace process in this Indonesian province (for more detail see http://www.eeas.europa.eu/archives/csdp/missions-and-operations/aceh-amm/pdf/15122006\_factsheet\_aceh-amm\_en.pdf). Following the signing of a peace agreement by the Government of Indonesia (GoI) and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) on 15 August 2005 in Helsinki, the EU, together with five ASEAN countries (Thailand, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines and Singapore), as well as Norway and Switzerland, beginning on 15 September 2005, provided monitors for the peace process in Aceh. Based on an official invitation from the Indonesian Government and with the support of the GAM leadership, the AMM decommissioned GAM armaments, relocated non-organic military and police forces, and oversaw the disbanding of GAM’s military wing. At the same time, the GoI fulfilled its commitments by relocating its non-organic military and police, while the AMM monitored human rights, legislative changes and the reintegration of GAM members. As required, monitors carried out investigations and inspections, patrolled the area and communicated with both parties until, on 11 December 2006, direct local elections were held in which former GAM combatants were allowed to run for office, thereby completing the first EU-led mission in Asia. Similarly, since 2007, the European Union has supported the conclusion of a political settlement of the conflict in Southern Mindanao. Following the signing of a Framework Agreement in October 2012 by the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the EU has aided the parties in implementing and monitoring the Agreement. Furthermore, recognizing that poverty is a significant factor contributing to conflict in the region, since the 1990s, the EU has provided development aid to Mindanao and more than € 150 million has gone towards the rehabilitation of internally displaced persons and institution-building (see <http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/philippines/eu_in_mindano/index_en.htm>). Moreover, the EU provides grants under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) to civil society organizations in Mindanao. To give but one further example of the EU’s upgraded involvement in the region one can trace its policies vis-à-vis Burma/Myanmar. Having gained independence from the British Empire in 1947, on 4 January 1948, Sao Shwe Thaik became the first president of the independent Union of Burma. Multi-party elections were held on three separate occasions (1951–1952, 1956 and 1960) and, on 2 March 1962 ‘the military took power in a political coup ... under the Ne Win regime’ (Petersson, 2006: 568), and ruled until general elections in 2010 brought a civilian government to power. ‘From the 1960s to the late 1980s Burma was one of the most closed societies in the world’ (Bunyanunda, 2002: 118–120). For decades it has also been known for having one of the most horrendous human rights records in the world (Petersson, 2006: 568). By the end of the 1980s the country confronted economic ruin and, Aung San Suu Kyi, gave rise to a new political movement to improve living conditions and promote democracy and civil rights (Petersson, 2006: 568). ‘From March through September of 1988, Burmese pro-democracy protesters took to the streets in several cities around the country’ (Bunyanunda, 2002: 118), and more than 3000 protesters were killed in what became known as the 8-8-88 Uprising. The Burmese military not only crushed the protests, but ‘usher[ed] in a new era of repression under the State Law and Order Restoration Council or SLORC – a junta’ (Bunyanunda, 2002: 118), and changed the country’s name to the Union of Myanmar. In the free elections that SLORC had promised for May 1990, Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) badly defeated the military junta at the polls, resulting in her being placed under house. SLORC continued to exist until 1997 when it was replaced by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Fast forwarding to October 2010, to what were to be the first [Burmese general election](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burmese_general_election,_2010)s in nearly 20 years, the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won the election, and Aung San Suu Kyi finally regained her freedom. In January 2012, she became a contestant in special parliamentary elections and, on 1 April 2012, won a seat in Parliament. Since then the country has ‘witnessed a liberalization of the press, the release of political prisoners and the initiation of a political dialogue between the regime on the one hand and the opposition and ethnic groups on the other’ (Buente and Portela, 2012: 1). Moreover, an independent National Human Rights Commission has been formed, new legislation has granted the right to strike, and the president has ‘signed peace agreements with most of the ethnic groups that have been fighting the central government for decades’ (Buente and Portela, 2012: 2). And, on 8 November 2015 general elections were held wherein the NLD achieved an overwhelming victory. So how did the EU respond to these developments? As a direct response to Burma’s admittance into ASEAN in 1997, ‘the EU temporarily suspended its formal dialogue with the Association’ (Bunyanunda, 2002: 131). Upset with this new development, the EU ‘expanded its existing visa ban on Burmese government officials in October 1998, ... suspended the Generalized Scheme of Preferences ... for Burma, [and] initiated an arms embargo’ (Bunyanunda, 2002: 131). Without a doubt, the Burmese military junta’s human rights abuses have ‘soured the relations between the two regions’ (Petersson, 2006: 564) and contributed to the failure of an EU-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement that was being negotiated at the time (see EU Center Singapore, 2012). Rather than trying to engage Burmese military leaders, as several ASEAN members of the ARF have done – maintaining that Burma’s human rights record and political instability were internal matters not subject to regional interference (De Flers, 2010: 5) – the EU decided to ignore ASEAN members’ wishes and impose sanctions. This action was not without risk since it could have had positive as well as negative consequences. Clearly, the EU hoped that sanctions would bring the Burmese government to its knees, but they could have also caused Burmese citizens to ‘rally around the flag’ (see Bunyanunda, 2002: 134). And, there was the possibility that other countries, like China, might fill the void. It took the EU and ASEAN to come up with ‘an implicit bargain’, as De Flers (2010: 6) explains, which involved a promise by Burma/Myanmar to ‘lift restrictions on the National League for Democracy (NLD) and accept a visit by the EU Troika’ (Jones, 2008: 277), to resolve the impasse in EU-ASEAN relations and, in 2000, resume ministerial meetings. What one finds, however, is that each time there were particularly serious human rights violations in Burma/Myanmar, the EU renewed its sanctions and thought of additional restrictive measures to punish the junta. To acknowledge recent progress made and encourage further reform the EU took several steps to strengthen its relations with Myanmar. On 5 March 2013, via the “EU-Myanmar Partnership”, the EU pledged help with “preparedness, response and resilience to emergencies” (Buente and Portela, 2012: 4). On 22 April 2013 it lifted all sanctions (with the exception of the arms embargo), and, on 22 July 2013, the EU’s Foreign Affairs Council adopted a Comprehensive Framework emphasizing four main areas of cooperation: peace, democracy, development, and trade (see Dosch and Sidhu 2015: 100). Specifically, the EU pledged support to develop a responsible police force in Myanmar, rebuild state institutions, reform the civil service, and “lay foundations for inclusive economic development…” (102). Having “gained a solid understanding of the situation in the country through its long-term field presence in humanitarian and development programmes in conflict-affected areas”, as Banin (2014: 2) points out, the EU also is well situated to engage in preventive diplomacy. Through the Myanmar Peace Center it seeks to employ best practices in peace building and promote democratic reform (Reiterer 2014: 19). To preempt the outbreak of renewed violence, the EU, simultaneously, seeks to “[build] structures that can withstand the inevitable setbacks of a complex political transition” (Banin 2014: 4). The EU also continues its financial assistance programs. On 8 December 2014 it announced $900 million to support Myanmar’s transition for the period 2014-2020 (see Dorsch and Sidhu 2015: 104). Among the areas to be targeted are rural development, agriculture, security, and peace-building, to name but a few. To sum up, although the EU makes its opinions heard, ultimately, it prefers an approach that consists of a mix of carrots and sticks (International Crisis Group, 2008: 16). By also concentrating on economic development, capacity building and cooperation with respect to non-traditional security threats – that is, providing positive incentives – the EU seeks to prevent its normative priorities and sticks in the form of sanctions from undermining its security goals. It understands that by strengthening Southeast Asia it will help to provide a balance against an increasingly powerful and assertive China, thereby leaving both partners better off. And while the EU seeks to play a more active role in the area of conflict prevention, it also tries to instill respect for international law. Aside from expanding cooperation with respect to early warning, disaster relief, border management, and maritime matters such as piracy, it now also voices its opinion with respect to territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Here the EU insists on upholding the rule of law, encouraging the parties subject to disputes to abide by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). As Raine (2016: 5) points out, however, as a “non-claimant but interested party” this is an area where the EU clearly could do more, such as engage in a “name and shame” [strategy] designed to impose a reputational cost on states that violate the declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.”

**Conclusion**

This paper has sketched some of the main developments in the EU’s decades-spanning involvement with Southeast Asia. It shows how the European Union, gradually, broadened its toolset and, in addition to being a major financial contributor to and economic developer of the region, now also has become an important political and security actor. Drawing on its own experiences of trust and confidence-building in the European setting, the EU is well situated to engage in preventive diplomacy in Asia Pacific and to make use of its “soft power” to promote stability in the region. As Dosch and Sidhu (2015: 106) rightly stress, however, the EU will need to set clear benchmarks for its policies in Southeast Asia to reduce the likelihood of several countries sliding back and adopting their old ways. Even though the EU’s efforts to introduce confidence building measures in the South of the Philippines, aid community building in Aceh, and promote peace between different ethnic groups in Rakhine state are highly commendable, none of these processes is irreversible. So what else might be done to enhance EU/Southeast Asian relations? As Raine (2016: 20-22) makes clear, while waiting to see whether it will be allowed to join the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), the EU can seek to strengthen ARF where it presently does have a voice, in particular the ARF Secretariat which is stretched far too thin. Moreover, along the lines of what NATO has done since the end of the Cold War, the EU can build onto existing partnerships, conducting joint military exercises, military exchange programs, and provide military equipment to ASEAN members who would benefit from it. But the implementation of such steps will not be easy, given that not all EU members are keen on aiding Southeast Asia. As long as the EU lacks a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), as could be seen time and again in cases like Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, etc., and some members prefer to concentrate on geographic regions nearer to home, it will be close to impossible to obtain unanimity on policies vis-à-vis Southeast Asia. Thus, a subset of EU members may continue to pursue bilateral cooperative efforts with several ASEAN countries in the short-term, hoping that these will eventually culminate in multilateral cooperation (Raine 2016: 23), giving them added protection for their investments. Finally, it is conceivable that the recent US pivot toward Asia may lead to a division of labor among the transatlantic allies where the US will concentrate on “hard” power security issues in Asia Pacific whereas the Europeans will deal with the soft power NTS challenges that they have specialized in.

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