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THE ROLE OF EU EXTERNAL ACTION IN THE WATERS OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

HOW TO UPGRADE MARITIME SECURITY COOPERATION WITH ASEAN UNDER VIETNAM'S 2020 CHAIRMANSHIP?

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SUMMARY

The European Union's Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS) declares the EU's aims to become a 'global security provider' under the principles of 'maritime multilateralism' and 'rules-based good governance at sea'. Here the EU foresees to upgrade its maritime security cooperation with other regional institutions, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

But why has the EU so far failed to become integrated into important ASEAN-led maritime security governance mechanisms? How can the EU upgrade its maritime security cooperation with ASEAN?

This brief argues that a unique opportunity presents itself for the EU to upgrade maritime security cooperation with ASEAN under Vietnam's 2020 Chairmanship to: (1) secure a seat at the ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meeting Plus; (2) act in line with EU external action principles and provide a stronger common EU position on the dispute in the South China Sea; (3) multiply exchanges between EU officials, think tank representatives and academics through the ASEAN-ISIS network.



The Royal Malaysian Navy corvette KD Kelantan at the annual Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training exercise. 2014

INTRODUCTION

The waters of Southeast Asia present a key interest to the EU. Here strategic value arises from commercial interest. It is key for the EU to maintain the network of seaborne logistic supply chains that connect Europe with Asia. EU-based ship owners manage 30% of the vessels operating worldwide and 42% of seaborne trade's value.

It follows that the interregional relationship between ASEAN and the EU on maritime security cooperation is significant. For example, ASEAN is the EU's third largest trading partner after the United States of America and China. In turn, the EU is ASEAN's second largest trading partner after the People's Republic of China. For ASEAN and the EU to pursue growth and development, both regional organisations rely on the oceans and seas. An escalation in the disputed waters of the South China Sea alone would affect approximately 4.65 trillion Euro worth of global maritime trade.

The 2014 European Union Maritime Security Strategy states the EU's aim to upgrade maritime security cooperation with ASEAN. However, why has the EU so far failed to reach this goal? Why the EU is not integrated into the most important ASEAN-led maritime security governance mechanisms ADMM+ and the EAS? How can the EU upgrade its maritime security cooperation with ASEAN?

Field research conducted by your correspondent in Singapore, Hanoi and Jakarta, which studied Southeast Asian maritime politics by speaking to ASEAN member state officials and regional security experts, reveals insights as to what EU officials can do for the EU to be recognised a more credible and trusted partner for ASEAN.

KEY FINDINGS

The political interests of some of the world's most powerful and influential states condition maritime politics in Southeast Asia. Among these are the China, the United States, Japan, Australia and India. European states, notably the Netherlands, France and the United Kingdom also have a maritime history with stakes in the region. Operating under the security regionalism of ASEAN, important regional mechanisms govern the relation between these great powers and the small to medium powers of Southeast Asia. Within these forums, the EU is only part of the ASEAN Regional Forum, which annually convenes foreign ministers and senior officials from ASEAN's partner countries. Here the EU currently co-chairs the Intersessional Meeting on Maritime Security, together with Australia and Vietnam.

However, the EU is not part of the more important forums dealing with maritime security, such as the leaders' level East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meeting Plus. The former provides opportunities for strategic dialogue, whereas the latter also organises training at the operational level.

Why is the EU not part of the most significant ASEAN-led maritime security governance mechanisms?

Views towards the EU and EU engagement in Southeast Asia vary between positive and negative perceptions. On the one hand, Asian member state policy-elites and regional experts perceive the EU as a viable partner for economic development and capacity building initiatives,

such as human resources training, science and technology transfer, and the sharing of practices. Several commentators also perceive the EU as a 'beacon' for political values that some ASEAN states defend in order to defend their political positions in regional maritime security conflicts. These include international law (notably the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea), the peaceful resolution of disputes, and, to a much lesser extent, democracy and human rights.

On the other hand, the EU is not yet trusted as a credible partner for advanced political cooperation. First, the EU is criticised to regional economic development unevenly. EU bilateral trade agreements create deeper economic gaps in ASEAN, since the majority of EU foreign direct investment benefits Singapore, but not the developing economies of Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam. Second, ASEAN member states perceive the EU to lack a unified response towards the most important regional maritime security issue, the disputed territories in the South China Sea. Instead, the UK and France, and sometimes Germany, are mentioned as important European security providers for Southeast Asia. Third, commentators complained about the lack of local cultural knowledge among EU diplomats and officials. This sometimes leads EU officials to propose high-level meetings on important national holidays comparable to Christmas in Europe.

How can the EU upgrade its maritime security cooperation with ASEAN?

For the year 2020, Vietnam takes over the Chairmanship of ASEAN. Vietnam has a key interest in further engaging the EU in Southeast Asia's maritime security governance forums. Like the EU, Vietnam grounds its foreign policy on international law and UNCLOS. Its primary foreign policy aim is to internationalise ASEAN member states' territorial dispute in the South China Sea (or the East Sea from the perspective of Vietnam). In past and present, Vietnam vocally counters China's expansive policy of island building, resource exploitation and fishing in the Exclusive Economic Zones of ASEAN states.

Although ASEAN as an institution has limited capacities to act beyond unanimous consensus, the ASEAN Chair traditionally guides ASEAN-10 foreign policy on the region. Officials and experts mentioned that Vietnam is ready to support the EU's application for a seat at the ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meeting Plus. This may allow the EU to upgrade its self-defined role as a 'global security provider'

and to actualise the political principle of 'maritime multilateralism' in the waters of Southeast Asia. It will also allow European navies to be integrated into important maritime security exercises.

Furthermore, the network of ASEAN Institutes for Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) that includes university departments, think tanks and policy institutes, have strong links to national governments. Track 2 diplomacy is much more important in Southeast Asia than it is in Europe. For example, these institutions host former and active diplomats and will act as intermediaries between EU officials and ASEAN member states. Within

Vietnam, these include the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, as well as the Centre for Strategic Studies and International Development.

Moreover, in the long-term, the EU, as part of its Erasmus or Marie-Curie programmes, should provide more opportunities for ASEAN-EU people exchanges, particularly for ASEAN students and young professionals to visit Europe. As one commentator summarised, "with people understanding each other, cooperation will improve".

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A unique opportunity presents itself for the EU to upgrade maritime security cooperation with ASEAN under Vietnam's 2020 Chairmanship:

- Work closely with representatives of Vietnam, who are favourable to support and present a case in favour of the EU to get a seat at the ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meeting Plus under its 2020 Chairmanship. Although ASEAN reaches decisions by consensus, the ASEAN Chair guides regional foreign policy and retains procedural power.
- Act in line with EU external action principles and provide a stronger common EU position on the dispute in the South China Sea. Besides cooperation in trade and technology development, ASEAN member states rely on the EU's ardent and principled defence of international law and UNCLOS.
- Multiply exchanges between EU officials, think tank representatives and academics through the ASEAN-ISIS network to build more trust, intercultural knowledge and to get more involved in the Track 2 diplomacy ASEAN policy-making process.

SUGGESTED READING

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