

Section 2 – Multilateral Security and Strategy

Chapter 7

EU-ASEAN Security Cooperation

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Abstract:

EU-ASEAN security cooperation has progressed primarily in aspects of non-military security, such as cyber security, climate change and energy security. Whilst the EU has strengthened its naval presence in the Indo-Pacific, it has not been translated into meaningful maritime security cooperation with ASEAN. The assertion in the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific of the centrality of cooperation with ASEAN in the evolving security architecture in the region amid rising geostrategic tensions has therefore not been fully realised. The limitations in EU-ASEAN maritime security cooperation, and to regional security cooperation generally, largely relate to the China factor. China has been able, largely due to the creation of economic dependency, to practice a 'divide and rule' tactic over both the EU and ASEAN, but given historical and cultural affinity, and geographic proximity, China's economic and political influence affects ASEAN still more. Although both partners seek further collaboration, considerable work remains for the EU and ASEAN to make EU-ASEAN security cooperation more viable.

Keywords: ASEAN, EU, security cooperation, geopolitics, maritime security, naval operations, China, Sino-American rivalry, Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

Introduction

The EU's 2021 Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (EUSCIP) highlights the centrality of ASEAN in the evolving security architecture in the region (Council of the EU 2021). It reiterates EU support for increasing EU-ASEAN security partnerships and cooperation, to respond to the intense geopolitical competition in that region, which is increasingly threatening the stability and security of the region and beyond, directly impacting on the EU's interests. These concerns and threats are also perceived by ASEAN. But it is one thing to face similar threats such as those emanating from China's aggressive

maritime behaviour in the East and South China Sea, its continued pressure on Taiwan, and its imperilling of the safe passage of seaborne trade in the Pacific and Indian Ocean; it is quite another to translate common security concerns into specific policies and instruments, or for that matter, to transform ASEAN into a more integrated security and defence entity. These challenges are not helped by the absence of a uniform and majority-oriented decision-making EU security and defence process, nor by the recognition on the part of many ASEAN states that their military security depends on the United States. To improve on its image as a reliable security actor, the EUSCIP seeks to support the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) principles for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific through a strengthening of its maritime presence in that region. Although limited in comparison to the United States military strength in the region, EU maritime and security partnership efforts can be seen as strengthening the three-way sharing of security interests between ASEAN, the EU and the United States in the Indo-Pacific region.

While these contextual factors remain constant, at least for the time being, the notion of security itself is changing the growing importance of aspects of non-military security (Caballero-Anthony & Gong 2020) and, in particular, the practice by powerful states such as China and Russia of weaponizing trade and economic factors, especially critical raw material supply chains, for geopolitical purposes. These developments affect both ASEAN and European states alike (Di Floristella & Chen 2022) but enable

the EU to have greater leeway to respond given the size of its internal market and existing and planned instruments aimed at either protecting critical infrastructure establishments or strategic assets from falling into the control of foreign powers or reacting to coercive economic and political measures by third states.

The aim of this article is to explore in greater detail specific measures the EU is proposing for security cooperation with ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific region and how these may be affected by developments in the wider geopolitical landscape – specifically, the rise of China, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and Sino-American rivalry. After exploring the challenges and opportunities facing EU-ASEAN security cooperation we will turn our attention to EU attempts to advance connectivity and security partnerships and naval activities with ASEAN countries in the Indo-Pacific. The article will conclude with an assessment of the direction of EU-ASEAN security cooperation. In all these endeavours the emphasis will be on the EU perspective to EU-ASEAN security cooperation.

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Challenges and Opportunities in EU-ASEAN Security Cooperation

The prospects for EU-ASEAN security cooperation face both challenges and opportunities. The main challenges relate to how to build up cooperation from what

remains a relatively low level. Given long-standing relations, strong institutional ties and extensive economic interactions between the EU and ASEAN, it is surprising that in areas such as terrorism, regional security cooperation and environmental concerns ‘the relationship between the EU and ASEAN has not markedly progressed beyond perfunctory meetings and rhetoric’ (Heiduk & Wong 2021). Several factors account for this seeming under-performance. Among these are differences in perception between European and ASEAN countries: ASEAN countries perceive terrorism as a lesser threat than EU states do, or assign a lower priority to environmental issues, seeing them as a trade-off with economic

development, as is the case, for example, with Indonesian and Malaysian palm oil. On regional security, additional factors impede cooperation. First, ASEAN countries differ on the EU concept of 'shared sovereignty' and are reluctant to pursue regional security cooperation in their own right. Second, ASEAN countries differ on how to respond to China's aggressive maritime activities in the East and South China Sea, with some preferring Chinese investments to a more confrontational stance, hence restricting ASEAN's role in the management of the maritime dispute. Third, the EU also has found it difficult hitherto to develop a clear policy on China, being unable to strike a sufficient balance between maintaining trade and economic benefits and pursuing a tough stance on Chinese human rights violations and assertive maritime behaviour in the East and South China Sea. Fourth, in comparison to the United States, ASEAN countries have hitherto perceived EU military capabilities as weak and unable to have a major impact on ASEAN regional security. Moreover, the EU has failed so far – despite signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, a precondition for membership, in 2012 – to gain access to the East Asia Summit or the ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). However, the EU is a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum, which also includes Russia and the United States, and aims to foster constructive dialogue on political security issues of common interest and concern, albeit mostly on aspects of non-military security, in the Asia Pacific.

Yet another challenge to EU-ASEAN security cooperation is posed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has had two distinct effects. First, it has adversely affected EU relations with ASEAN states more generally, with several abstaining from UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia. This also prevented the 2022 EU-ASEAN summit from reaching a joint condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with Laos, Thailand and Vietnam blocking the attempt (Gutschker 2022). Second, it has strengthened China-Russia cooperation through, for example, President Xi's declaration that there are no limits to Sino-Russian cooperation. In addition, as argued by Bond et al., far from being a distant country, China 'has become an important factor in Europe's political and security landscape' and they further assert that 'systemic rivalry is now at the core of Europe's interactions with China' (Bond et al. 2022).

While these challenges remain, they have to be revisited in the light of at least two factors. One is the growing disruption to supply chains of either critical raw materials or technology components by powerful states such as China and Russia; currently, China dominates almost all rare earth metal markets. Of particular concern is the high dependency on Chinese semiconductor manufacturing, which is a strategic asset for key industrial value chains. Should a Chinese takeover of Taiwan happen, the dependency on 'chips' would increase still further, as Taiwan is one of the leading global semiconductor producers. In response to this challenge, the European Chips Act was established, which seeks to boost the EU's share of global production capacity to 20 per cent by 2030 (European Commission 2022). In a related way, the EU has introduced a screening mechanism for foreign direct investment to protect strategic sectors of the economy and is proposing an anti-coercive instrument to counteract coercive actions, including sanctions, by third states. However, EU unilateral actions, though important, are insufficient on their own, and need to be augmented through bilateral collaborations, including those with ASEAN.

Second, given assertive Chinese maritime actions in the East and South China Sea, and the growing Sino-American rivalry, there is a need for joint EU-ASEAN action to either counteract or moderate these developments. Such an opportunity is enhanced through the 2021 EUSCIP, and can also build on the ASEAN-EU Plan for Action (2018-2022), which proposed projects for security cooperation with a focus on aspects of non-traditional security such as climate change, terrorism, and cyber security (EEAS & ASEAN 2017). The following will briefly summarise the main actions and instruments the EU has put forward.

a) **Non-traditional Security and Security Partnerships**

There has already been some security cooperation in aspects of non-military security between the EU and individual ASEAN countries, involving, for example, EU preventive diplomacy and peace-making measures in Myanmar and the Philippines (Banin & Pejsova 2017) and the mounting of a Monitoring Mission to the settlement of the protracted conflict in the Province of Aceh in 2005. In addition, the EU and ASEAN

maintain a regular, high-level, cooperative dialogue on issues such as cybersecurity and violent extremism (EEAS 2019).

Since 2022, under the policy on Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia (ESIWA), the EU has started security and defence dialogues with six pilot countries in Asia, including Vietnam, through professional exchanges and capacity building, particularly in the areas of counter-terrorism/terrorism prevention, cybersecurity, and crisis management. These dialogues are to be extended to other Asian countries, including members of ASEAN, through the work of a French and German partner (Expertise France 2021).

The EUSCIP proposes engaging with Indo-Pacific partners to build more resilient and sustainable global value chains by diversifying trade and economic relations, and by developing technological standards and regulations that are in line with EU values and principles (Council of the EU 2021). Connectivity and security partnerships with Asian countries are seen as instrumental in achieving these objectives. As such, they can build on the 2018 EU Connectivity Strategy to Asia, which aims to establish stronger networks and strengthen partnerships for sustainable connectivity across all sectors based on respect for common rules. Already ASEAN is a 'Connectivity Partner', but the budget of €60 billion for the 2021-2027 budgetary period, from EU and other public and private sources combined, seems rather meagre when compared with the trillions planned by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, a strengthening of EU partnerships will be advanced through its Global Gateway, with €300 billion of spending on infrastructure and other projects for the period 2022-2027. It could be used to invest in securing critical raw material supply chains in some third countries, including ASEAN states, and to renew and enhance cooperation on technology to provide global telecommunication networks and norms to third countries in a more interoperable and competitive way (Ekman 2022), and help prevent a decoupling between the free and open cyberspace and closed or semi-closed cyberspace which could affect global supply chains (Vosse 2022). Overall, it is the cumulative aspect of these connectivity and security

partnerships that helps to consolidate the EU's presence in Asia and to advance security alignment and cooperation with Asian counterparts, like ASEAN (Kirchner 2022). In addition, the United States' Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, which has been launched within the G7, and the United States Alliance of Democracies represent important geostrategic initiatives in an era of strategic competition and are efforts to counterbalance China's BRI and its New Global Security Initiative.

b) Maritime and Naval Cooperation

In February 2022, the EU adopted the concept of Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) in response to geo-strategic rivalries in the Indo-Pacific, which threaten the freedom of navigation and the security of maritime routes and undermine international law, in particular UNCLOS (Council of the EU 2022). Under CMP auspices, the remit of the Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific (CRIMARIO I) was geographically extended under CRIMARIO II into the North-West Indian Ocean (NWIO). CRIMARIO II is to run from 2020 to 2024 and aims to secure maritime routes and to support the coastal countries in the establishment of maritime situational awareness.

The concept of CMP is also supported by the EU naval presence in the Gulf of Aden – known under the dual name Operation Atalanta and EUNAVFOR – which is to deter acts of piracy, armed robbery and illicit trade financing criminal and terrorist networks off the coast of Somalia, and to protect the UN World Food programme and other vulnerable vessels. In late 2022, EUNAVFOR Operation Atalanta was extended to December 2024 with a new mandate to cover the expanded geographic area of the NWIO (EUNAVFOR 2023). It is to improve synergies with relevant EU instruments and programmes in the region to promote cooperation with partners, including by conducting joint maritime exercises and port calls, and to facilitate the exchange of information. The goal is to turn EUNAVFOR into a reference in the whole NWIO as a maritime security provider, which will contribute, inter alia, to a safer navigational environment, freedom of navigation and de-escalation. Engagement will take place voluntarily, with naval and air assets remaining under the national chains of command of EU member states.

The EU is not formally endorsing the US notion of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, which stems from European calls for preserving a rules-based order while also staying within the widely recognised interpretations of UNCLOS. In this context, the EU has backed the ruling of the arbitration tribunal in The Hague in 2015 which firmly rejected the People's Republic of China's expansive South China Sea maritime claims as having no basis in international law. However, individual EU member states have taken a more extended view on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific principles. This is particularly the case of France, which has a relatively strong presence in the Indo-Pacific. French naval ships have sailed through the South China Sea including the Taiwan Straits and France also hosts and regularly participates in other bilateral and multilateral exercises in the Indo-Pacific. Strengthened by a pledge in the EUSCIP for an enhanced naval presence in the Indo-Pacific, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Portugal are all expected to take part in planned French naval operations in the Indo-Pacific. France also has a defence dialogue with Vietnam, which involves maritime security cooperation. In addition, Germany sent a frigate to the area in 2021 but carefully avoided provoking China by skipping the Taiwan Strait and focusing its core activities on monitoring compliance with UN sanctions against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea via United States-led maritime engagement in the East China Sea (Pugliese 2023). Several European states have also contributed to the ASEAN International Fleet Review maritime exercises. In addition, the EU-ASEAN High-Level Dialogue on maritime cooperation provides a platform for EU member states to take action on issues of common concern, such as freedom of navigation and the rule of law in the East and South China Sea.

Assessment

As these various economic, connectivity, security and naval activities in the Indo-Pacific indicate, European diplomacy draws on soft- and hard-power instruments in regions where, until the mid-2010s, it had a negligible footprint (Odgaard 2019). These efforts have also strengthened EU-ASEAN security cooperation on aspects of non-military security, such as cyber security and climate change, but have had scant impact on maritime cooperation, where – apart from Operation Atalanta – measures have not moved much beyond dialogue forums such as seminars and

workshops, and exchange of best practice on maritime safety and search and rescue. As Southeast Asia is often held up as the most promising example of a relatively unified nascent security community, these limitations, as argued by Beeson and Biscop, 'do not augur well for the prospects of security within East Asia, never mind between East Asia and anywhere else' (Beeson and Biscop 2021:37).

The limitations in EU-ASEAN maritime security cooperation, and to regional security cooperation generally, largely relate to the China factor. China has been able, largely due to the creation of economic dependency, to practice a 'divide and rule' tactic over both the EU and ASEAN, but given historical and cultural affinity, and geographic proximity, China's economic and political influence affects ASEAN still more. The tension in how to approach China also adds to pressure on ASEAN states to choose between China, their main trading partner, and America, the principal guarantor of regional security (Lee 2020). For the time being, as suggested by Shambaugh, 'no single country in the region is completely under Chinese or American influence' and these countries 'find it more advantageous to stay safely in the middle and navigate between the giants' (Shambaugh 2021:179). This position chimes with the EU stance on Sino-American rivalry, aiming to pursue a mediating role between the two.

While the EU shares with the United States concerns over China's military ambitions and assertiveness in the East and South China Sea, and while accepting that joint US-EU actions are necessary for dealing with the rise of China, the EU differs with the United States on the extent to which it should support the United States calls for containing China economically, politically and militarily. Given the key position China holds as an economic partner, the EU is keen to reduce dependence on China, but not to cut trade drastically. As Ursula von der Leyen pronounced in a speech in Beijing in April 2023, the EU policy is 'not to decouple from China but to engage in a practice of de-risking some important and sensitive parts of our relationship with China' (Von der Leyen 2023). This also means that, in contrast to calls for the West to

abandon efforts to integrate a hostile and revisionist China (Friedberg 2022), the EU recognises China's important contribution to such issues as global stability and climate change. However, there are also other, and to some extent countervailing, considerations which might affect transatlantic cooperation. Among these are potential linkages between the United States' contributions to the Ukraine war effort and the United States' demands for greater European support in its efforts to contain China. Moreover, it would appear politically unrealistic for Europe to maintain business as usual if China invaded Taiwan. As Europe's security guarantor, the United States could force the EU to choose sides. Of course, a Trumpian revival, either with Donald Trump, or a variant like Don DeSantis, would in the meantime raise renewed questions about the United States' security commitments to Europe and may reinforce its pivot to Asia.

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Conclusion

EU-ASEAN security cooperation has progressed primarily in aspects of non-military security, such as cyber security, climate change and energy security. Whilst the EU has strengthened its naval presence in the Indo-Pacific, it has not been translated into meaningful maritime security cooperation with ASEAN. The assertion in the EUSCIP of the centrality of cooperation

with ASEAN in the evolving security architecture in the region amid rising geostrategic tensions has therefore not been fully realised. For the EU, the question remains how to counteract a China which seeks to wield its economy as a weapon, to dominate or replace the global order, to weaken, divide, and isolate the advanced democracies, and to pose a systemic challenge to our values and interests. In practice, the advice given by scholars is for the EU to 'cooperate when you can, push back when you must' (Beeson and Biscop 2021:42). But pushing back requires political unity which, however, has so far been in short supply on many

issues of principle, such as freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, human rights, freedom of speech in Hong Kong, or relations with Taiwan, sometimes weakened by Chinese pressure on individual member states (Smith and Taussig 2019). Lack of political unity is not helped either by some EU leaders presenting either national or personal rather than EU views, such as when President Macron on his visit to Beijing in April 2023 declared that in the name of 'strategic autonomy' Europe should not be 'followers' of America on a crisis like Taiwan, and that Taiwan was not Europe's problem. Improving EU actorness also requires higher defence spending by member states, which will help respond to Russia's threat to European security, and is happening to some extent (Howorth 2023) but not yet sufficiently to significantly reduce United States defence commitments to Europe and/or markedly enhance its role as a security actor in Asia. Despite these deficits, the EU has made some strides in security partnerships with ASEAN countries, and in enhancing its naval presence in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Yet considerable work remains for the EU and ASEAN to enhance their respective security and defence capabilities and to make EU-ASEAN security cooperation more viable.

