



Panel Discussion and Book Launch on “EU Security Strategies” 1 August 2018

On 1 Aug 2018, the European Union (EU) Centre in Singapore and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) co-organised a panel discussion and book launch on “EU Security Strategies”. Dr. Spyros Economides explained the key arguments in his new book, before he was joined by Dr. Yeo Lay Hwee, Dr. Reuben Wong and H.E. Ms. Barbara Plinkert in a discussion moderated by Professor Ralf Emmers.

In his opening remarks, Dr. Economides acknowledged that the language used to describe what kind of actor or power the EU is changing. Formerly seen as a civilian power and subsequently a normative power, the EU is now seen perhaps more as an enabling power rather than a transformative power - one that assists countries in building domestic resilience. The 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS) reflects a more pragmatic approach taken by the EU in its engagement of the outside world and its portrayal of itself as a security actor. However, debates continue with regards to whether the EU is a strategic actor in the sense of having a common identity, vision and coherence in its foreign and security policy.

Dr Economides remarked that whilst member states have varying interests and discrete security strategies – of which some are overlapped and shared – there has recently

been the emergence of a common set of European interests that can be represented in EU external relations. This growing reconciliation between national and common interests allows the EU to use their shared resources to pursue common goals. He hence argued that the conflation of national interests has been crucial in strengthening the EU as a strategic actor. It must be noted that although there has been sotto voce acceptance that the EU is a global actor, the EU consciously places priority in security in its immediate neighbourhood and might thus be seen more as a regional security actor.

EU Ambassador to Singapore, H.E. Ms. Barbara Plinkert acknowledged that there has been a growing realisation of the need to cooperate on security. She noted that the extent of deep integration within Europe made it impossible for any member state to provide security to its own citizens independently. Furthermore, the unprecedented proliferation of conflicts and series of traumatising terrorist attacks reminded the EU of its vulnerability, spurring member states to respond to their citizens security needs collectively. She further acknowledges that while the priority lies in the immediate neighbourhood of the EU, the EU has recently been strategising to deepen security engagement in Asia. For instance, the European Council in May issued a conclusion to enhance security cooperation in Asia. H.E. Ms. Plinkert expressed keenness for the EU to engage with ASEAN both as a bloc and with individual member states to deepen security cooperation, in areas such as cyber security, counter-terrorism, the proliferation of Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear weapons, and a host of other common concerns. She further cited the possibility for the EU to organise training programmes and capacity building programmes in the region, and even joint exercises when appropriate. She noted that it would be in the interest of the EU to further coordinate and synergise bilaterally across Asia to further operationalise the EUGS.

Dr. Yeo Lay Hwee in her presentation started with highlighting some of the key difference between the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) and 2016 EUGS, and traced the changes in engagement between the EU and ASEAN on security issues. The ESS opened the door to the EU becoming more active in the area of non-traditional security challenges. This came at a time when ASEAN was trying to reinvent itself in the aftermath of the Asian Financial crisis and also had to deal with the serious challenges of terrorism in the wake of 9/11 and the Bali bombing. All these created opportunities for the EU to deepen cooperation in counter-terrorism and transnational crimes. The Dec 2004 tsunami also created the opportunity for the EU to be involved in the peace process in Aceh resulting in the deployment of the EU first ESDP mission in Aceh.

However, despite the increasing dialogue and cooperation on political and various non-traditional security issues, the EU continued to be viewed primarily as an economic and development actor. This is part is due to the fact that ASEAN tends to conceive security in the traditional sense of defence and deterrence. Hence there continued to be doubts

as to whether the EU can make a meaningful contribution to security and defence where traditional security threats such as territorial disputes remain paramount. On the EU side, the ESS also did not paid much attention to ASEAN as an important actor in the Asia-Pacific region. It was only in 2011/2012 with the US pivot to Asia and the increasing desire for the EU to join the East Asia Summit that the EU increased its rhetoric on its security interests in the region, and acknowledged ASEAN's centrality in the region.

The 2015 EU Communication calling for a EU-ASEAN partnership with a strategic purpose and the 2016 EUGS reflected a better understanding of how ASEAN works, and articulated a more pragmatic view of EU's interests in the region, which is still primarily economics, but at the same time, also drawing the close connection between economics and security. As such, Dr. Yeo recommended that the EU continue to play to its comparative advantage as an economic actor in the region, and hence should further deepen ties with ASEAN and defend the rules-based multilateral order.

Dr. Reuben Wong opened his remarks by clarifying how the EU views itself may differ from how others view the EU. He argued that while the EU saw itself as a normative power, others did not share the same perspective in many cases. He agreed with Dr. Economides that the conflation of national interests eased the decision-making process of working towards common European interests. He argued that this increased coherence helps the EU in becoming a more serious security actor but acknowledged that this coherence would be negatively affected with Brexit. Furthermore, he argued that progress towards greater cohesiveness has been slowed down recently as decisions are made in consideration of a looming Brexit. He further questioned how European citizens view the EU and wondered if there had been a perceptible shift in viewing the EU as a security partner. He acknowledged that despite being an actor comprising of discrete sub-actors, the EU has successfully impacted international norms and regional organisations and has the capacity to impact regions like ASEAN. However, Dr. Wong concurred with Dr. Yeo that most Southeast Asians still predominantly view the EU as a commercial partner and not a security partner; of course, there are exceptions, such as the aforementioned Aceh mission, but these examples are few and far between.