



Panel Discussion: EU-ASEAN Partnership – 40 Years And More 6 December 2017

In 2017, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) commemorates 50 years since its founding. This year also marks 40 years of partnership between ASEAN and the European Union (EU). The EU Centre in Singapore, with the support from EU Delegation to Singapore, ASEAN Studies Centre of ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute and Australian National University Centre for European Studies (ANUCES), organised a panel discussion on 6 December to take stock of these 40 years of EU-ASEAN collaboration and brainstorm new ways to deepen the partnership. The panel discussion featured Tommy Koh, Ambassador-at-Large of Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, EU Ambassador Barbara Plinkert and Philippine Ambassador to Singapore Antonio A. Morales, and was moderated by EU Centre director Yeo Lay Hwee.

In her opening welcome remarks, Dr Yeo emphasised the importance of partnership for ASEAN to stay relevant and central in an inter-connected world. Of ASEAN's ten dialogue partners, the EU is special. The EU is ASEAN's second largest external trading partner (and the top investor), and was the first regional organisation to accede to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). Evolving from a partnership which ranked low in priority, the EU-ASEAN relations have gone from strength to strength with the EU launching various programmes to support ASEAN integration in recent years. As geopolitical tensions heighten in the Asia-Pacific, Dr Yeo believed that the EU has a strategic interest in the peace, stability and prosperity of Southeast Asia.

The first speaker was Ambassador Morales who firstly enumerated various development-oriented cooperative programmes sponsored by the EU, such as the EU Support to Higher Education in ASEAN Region (EU-SHARE). He then added that economic/development cooperation only represents one aspect of the multi-dimensional relationship between the EU and ASEAN. Over the years since the adoption of the 2007 Nuremberg Declaration, the EU-ASEAN partnership has expanded from technical cooperation to incorporate institutional linkages and dialogues on political, security, economic, climate change and socio-cultural issues. To elevate the relationship further to a strategic level, conclusion of a region-to-region FTA between the EU and ASEAN that can set a new standard for global trade is essential. Intensified cooperation through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) mechanism should also be welcomed.

Ambassador Morales then touched upon connectivity in terms of strengthened physical infrastructure as well as people-to-people exchanges as areas on which the EU and ASEAN should focus. In this regard, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) play an important role. Ambassador Morales at the end of his speech noted that although the EU and ASEAN are different entities – with the former being a Union and the latter an Association – they are both committed to regionalism, multilateralism and international cooperation. Responding to Dr Yeo's quick follow-up question on the EU's potential admission to the East Asia Summit (EAS), Ambassador Morales said ASEAN as whole is positive towards the possibility of accepting the EU as a full member but that more study and reflection is clearly needed before formal process can begin.

Ambassador Plinkert started by reiterating Dr Yeo's welcome remarks that forging stronger EU-ASEAN partnership is imperative in an inter-connected world. The two organisations have stepped up their cooperation in recent years in the realm of defence and security. Initiatives such as the EU-ASEAN High Level Dialogue (HLD) on Maritime Security Cooperation, the EU-ASEAN Migration and Border Management Programme and intelligence sharing channels are put in place. Notably, in Ambassador Plinkert's assessment, the EU and ASEAN in the last few years have achieved more progress on security cooperation than in the previous decade, and cooperation with ASEAN has enabled the EU to emerge quickly as a more serious security actor in this part of the world.

Ambassador Plinkert then turned to economic issues. She revealed that behind-the-scene work is going on at the moment to relaunch the suspended negotiation for the EU-ASEAN FTA. Hopes are high that the process can be revived under Singapore's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2018. After briefly discussing EU-ASEAN sectoral cooperation in aviation, transport and higher education, Ambassador Plinkert ended by calling on the EU and ASEAN to jointly tackle shared global challenges including environment and climate change.

Noting that while the EU has been actively engaged with the region, it suffers from low visibility, Dr Yeo asked how the EU can further promote its visibility in Southeast Asia. Ambassador Plinkert admitted that there is a communication problem as the EU is still not well understood in ASEAN and in Singapore itself. Therefore, fostering people-to-people exchange through mobility schemes is highly important. Ambassador Plinkert also saw further integration in the EU as a necessary condition for the EU to be better known globally.

Last but not least, Professor Tommy Koh began his speech by speaking optimistically about why he believes that the EU will overcome current crises and emerge stronger. Because of the EU, Europe miraculously transformed itself from the killing fields of the world embroiled in cycles of conflict to a continent of peace and prosperity. And history has shown that the EU is extremely resilient in the face of difficulties and crises.

The second point made by Professor Koh was that the EU has to realise that the relationship between the EU and ASEAN is no longer one between donors and donees. ASEAN as a whole is the world's seventh largest economy and is on a trajectory to be the fourth largest by 2030. The EU should therefore treat Southeast Asian countries as sovereign equals, and it is only logical for the two blocs to have a high-level region-to-region free trade agreement. An EU-ASEAN FTA is much needed against the backdrop that the virtues of free trade, open economy, globalisation and multilateral institutions are being challenged in many parts of the Western world. Professor Koh's last point concerned specifically ASEM. He made the case that European and Asian countries should inject new dynamism and political capital to ASEM to fulfil its potential to be the institutional connection of strategic significance to the whole world.

Dr Yeo then asked Professor Koh – the founding Executive Director of ASEF – if an ASEM free trade area is still possible. Professor Koh felt that the sheer diversity of ASEM members makes it difficult to negotiate an ASEM-wide FTA. A good starting point, therefore, is to bring about an EU-ASEAN FTA as part of the process to reinvigorate ASEM, just when the world is in need of leadership to defend the value of openness and multilateralism.

The panellists then answered a few interesting questions raised by the audience. ASEF's Executive Director Ambassador Karsten Warnecke shared his opinion that the EU and ASEAN have come to see each other as "natural partners" to play joint roles in global affairs. Ambassador Plinkert agreed that the two regions as equal partners have to develop joint solutions to shared challenges, be it climate change or other security issues. Ambassador Morales said many issues facing the two regions cannot be sufficiently addressed by any one alone and that regional cooperation efforts should not be derailed by narrower, parochial national interest considerations.

British High Commissioner Scott Wightman asked about what the EU and ASEAN can achieve beyond trade cooperation and how “ambitious” the prospective EU-ASEAN FTA can be considering the fact that some ASEAN countries are still relatively protectionist in its outlook. On the first part of the question, Professor Koh identified enforcing the Paris Agreement and tacking radicalism and terrorism as two possible areas in which the EU and ASEAN can work together. On the second part of the question, Professor Koh cited ASEAN’s existing high-standard agreements with China, Australia and Japan as evidence that ASEAN countries have a track record of striking high quality trade deals with external partners.

On whether the EU can play a leadership role as a security player in Southeast Asia given the policies of the Trump administration, Ambassador Plinkert stressed that the EU is not vying for a leadership role in the region; rather, the EU aspires to be a partner for ASEAN, particularly in non-traditional security areas such as cyber security.

Dr Imelda Deinla from the Australian National University asked Professor Koh about the fundamental challenges facing ASEAN today. Professor Koh saw humanitarian crisis in Rakhine state in Myanmar and maintaining ASEAN centrality and neutrality in the face of intensified competition for influence between great powers as two great challenges. In addition, he raised the issue of the fourth industrial revolution that is going on. He referred to a newspaper article which suggested that Singapore could lose a quarter of jobs to robots and automation. It would be good if ASEAN and the EU could understand better the socio-economic implications of the risks and opportunities brought about by this revolution.

