



## Report on the Asia-Europe Conference 2017 “Is it time for Europe to play a broader role in Asia?”

The Asia-Europe Conference 2017 was organised by the University of Malaya's Asia-Europe Institute in collaboration with the EU Centre in Singapore and the European Union Delegation to Malaysia. It was held under the title “*Is it time for Europe to play a broader role in Asia?*” The conference featured prominent policy-makers and brought together experts in the field of Asia-Europe studies and EU-ASEAN relations, to examine global and regional developments with potential impact on the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and their engagement with each other. This conference was timely in light of the 60 years of the Rome Treaties, the ASEAN's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ASEAN-EU relations.

The conference covered four broad areas: 1. the current state of Asia-Europe relations, 2. comparative examination of ASEAN and European regionalism, 3. challenges to the EU and ASEAN brought about by migration, economic nationalism and identity politics, and 4. evaluation of needs and opportunities to intensify the Asia-Europe relationship.

### Day 1

In her opening remarks, Prof. Azirah Hashim of the University of Malaya, highlighted the aims of this conference. The EU Ambassador to Malaysia, Her Excellency Maria Castillo Fernandez, pointed out that the EU and ASEAN are natural partners, and, in pursuing regional integration, set an example on how consensus can be found to address regional and global challenges. She further spoke about the importance of

regionalism and multilateralism in today's fragmented world and reiterated that the EU will continue to be a close ally of ASEAN.

The first keynote speaker after the opening remarks was Dr. Marty Natalegawa, the former Foreign Minister of Indonesia. Touching on the “Geo-strategic Dynamics of Asia”, Dr Natalegawa gave an eloquent account of the broad changes taking place and how ASEAN and EU should respond to these dynamics. He cautioned that leadership of ASEAN and the EU must not be on “autopilot mode”. Both regional organisations must continue their efforts to be of transformative influence in their respective regions. He added that both regions faced problems that defy national and regional approaches, but instead require inter-regional and global solutions. ASEAN-EU ties thus must be reciprocal in nature and both must work closely together to address these problems. He said that new practices and action plans need to be established, and while there is a risk of failure, the cost and risk of inaction is even bigger.

H.E. Karsten Warnecke, Executive Director of the Asia-Europe Foundation responded to Dr. Natalegawa's remarks talking about the strategic withdrawal of the US from the region and his belief that the current geopolitics would bring the EU and Asia closer together. In fact, he recalled that the Asia-Europe Meeting was conceived in response to the geopolitical realities then of a world being dominated by the US, Asia and Europe.

The panel on “Asia-European Regionalism in Comparative Perspective” took a closer look at challenges faced by the EU and ASEAN in their respective regional projects. Dr. David Camroux, a senior researcher at Science Po, said that ASEAN needs to expand its regional integration in order to catch up with the EU in economic terms, but also in the areas of human rights and finance. However, he also cautioned that Brexit has shown the destructive forces of nationalism and how regional integration cannot be taken for granted. Dr. Lay Hwee Yeo, Director of the EU Centre in Singapore, reminded the audience that integration was not the original objective of ASEAN. ASEAN was an instrument for member states to manage the mistrust and tensions amongst them and navigate the geopolitics of its region. ASEAN's cooperation was more about achieving a balance of power in an anarchical system through informal and soft institutions. However, in the post-Cold war period, faced with increasing economic competition ASEAN began to focus on deeper economic cooperation so as to remain an attractive region for investors. Prof. Thomas Christiansen of Maastricht University expressed fears that the rule of law that underpins global and regional governance in Europe is being eroded. The EU is built on institutions and values. However, the rise of protectionism and unilateralism challenges regional projects and also impact other multilateral and global institutions such as the G20 and the UN.

The second keynote speaker was Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, the former Foreign Minister of Thailand and former ASEAN Secretary-General. He talked about the importance of exchange of scholars and students and the transfer of technology in order to familiarise the two regions with each other. He said that "regional organisations such as the EU and ASEAN must work together to support multilateralism" He also spoke about the challenges ahead, including the tensions on the Korean peninsula, the safety of Malacca Straits, the South China Sea disputes and the possible religious divisiveness in Southeast Asia. He closed his speech with a warning that ASEAN member states "cannot continue responding in different ways and expect that ASEAN will still retain its centrality in the Asia-Pacific."

H.E. Maria Castillo Fernandez, the Ambassador and Head of the EU Delegation to Malaysia, echoed the previous remarks of H.E. Dr. Surin Pitsuwan and said that those geopolitical changes required a stronger presence of Europe in Asia. "Asia and Europe have done a lot of things together in many sectors and we are going to intensify these efforts," she said. She further highlighted that "Europe is now more solid. But solving issues such as migration, climate change and global trade would require close cooperation with our Asian counterparts." She added that Europe has plans to increase its presence in Asia by deepening defence cooperation and becoming a global security provider. H.E. Castillo Fernandez also elaborated on the EU's Erasmus programme, focusing on enhancing the connectivity between people. She pointed out that Europe had been successful in fostering greater connections between the people through the Erasmus programme and hope that more people in ASEAN would also benefit from the Erasmus programme. ..

The second panel on "Assessing Soft Power: Which Initiatives Shape Values and Forge Relationships?" had Dr. Roy Anthony Rogers from the University of Malaya, Dr. Paul Gillespie from the University College Dublin, Prof. Tamio Nakamura from Waseda University, Tokyo, and Assoc. Prof. Kuik Cheng Chwee from the National University of Malaysia and University of Malaya, as speakers. The four experts debated about the different regional definitions of "soft power", and discussed whether China's "Belt and Road Initiative" should be labelled as a tool of "soft power". Further, it was discussed whether the term "soft footprint" would be more appropriate since it would also add an element of examining the impact of the actions of these actors.

The last panel of the first day focused on "What Should Be the Real Priority for Both Regions and for Inter-Regional Cooperation?" and consisted of H.E. Raja Nushirwan Zainal Abidin, the Deputy Secretary-General from the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, H.E. Francisco Fontan Pardo, the Ambassador of the EU to ASEAN and Mr. Tan Sri Dato' Seri Mohamed Jawhar Hassan from the Institute of Strategic & International Studies Malaysia. During this panel issues around terrorism as a common

problem for both regions, concerns over the Korean peninsula and the disputes regarding the South China Sea were discussed.

## Day 2

The second day of the conference started with a keynote on “The current geo-strategic case for closer Asia-Europe engagement” by Prof. Kishore Mahbubani, Dean at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. He spoke of the “return of Asia” which according to him would also mean the end of the “western domination”. He added that Europe seemed unable to adjust to this transformation of the global order and warned that the only way for Europe to stay meaningful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be through engagement with Asia. He further added that the EU should learn from ASEAN in managing diversities and promoting tolerance. Turning to the migration crisis that Europe faces, he said that should learn from ASEAN. Engaging ASEAN and using it as the vehicle to transform North Africa is your passport to long-term security and stability,” he stated. However, Prof. Mahbubani also said that ASEAN could also learn from the EU: “Inter-state war does not exist in this region [the EU] today but ASEAN should declare it as a goal that it wants to copy EU in having zero prospect of war. (...) ASEAN is a very much a government-to-government project and the people lack a sense of ownership of this regional organisation.”

In responding to this keynote, Dr. Paul Gillespie from University College Dublin, concurred with Prof Mahbubani that “Two hundred years of dominance by European and American states of world politics, economics and security are coming to an end.” He further added that Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the Paris climate accord was a key moment in this process of ongoing change in global politics. He then quoted French Ambassador to the United Nations, Francois Delattre, who characterised this process as the birth of a multipolar world”.

The panel on “Regional Institutions Handling Current Challenges: Learning From One Another” discussed primarily issues on migration and multiculturalism, Prof. Jens Allwood, from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, asked whether multiculturalism was socially sustainable. He opined that all communities need some form of social cohesion, whether by way of human universals, man-made formal laws or informal practices. Tolerance must be reciprocal. He underlined this by stating that “dominant groups must tolerate and accept cultural differences of non-dominant groups and vice versa.” Prof. Christian Joppke from the University of Bern, Switzerland, said placing migrants in the labour market is key for successful integration. However, since Europe faces a lot of family and asylum migration, with the majority being low skilled and from rural origins, unable to adapt to the modern economy, the integration process is thus challenged.

The last panel was on “Economic Regionalism: Economic Nationalism and Other Challenges”. Four panelists Prof. Sebastian Bersick, Jean-Monnet Chair from the Ruhr University, Germany, Prof. Park Sung-Hoon, Jean-Monnet Chair from Korea University, Prof. Tham Siew Yean, from the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Prof. Zha Daojiong, from Peking University, discussed issues ranging from rise of protectionist sentiments to more specific free trade agreements and negotiations. While the political symbolism of FTAs is important, the actual impact of trade deals on the different sectors of the economies and the livelihood of people have to be analysed too. An inclusive and consultative approach towards free trade deals is needed to overcome the increasing impediments to trade and free trade agreements.

During the closing discussions Dr. Yeo Lay Hwee, from the EU Centre Singapore said it was imperative for ASEAN not only to have its own script but also “getting the script right” when dealing with issues affecting both ASEAN and external powers. If nothing else, ASEAN is the second most successful regional organisation after EU. She further highlighted that institutions matter and the EU’s resilience in the midst of so many crises was in part because of the strong institutions. While institutions matter, leadership and political will are even more important for regional integration and cooperation to succeed.” Dr. David Camroux, from Science Po, voiced concern over the crises in Southern Thailand and Myanmar and suggested as a concrete proposal, a joint effort by the EU and ASEAN to come together to address these conflicts. Dr. Roy Anthony Rogers, from the University of Malaya emphasised ASEAN's “unity in diversity”, an aspect the EU could emulate. He continued, saying that “critics have said that ASEAN is a mere talk shop, but compared to other regional organisations, it has survived the past 50 years and withstood the Cold War and post-Cold War era and successfully maintained relations between people of different religions and ethnicities.” However, Bern University sociology Prof. Christian Joppke said that a diverse society can only be sustainably managed with a strong liberal infrastructure. He opined it was essential for ASEAN to have a human rights framework that can address many of its challenges in integration.