

**The ASEAN-European Union (EU) Dialogue
Relations towards a Strategic Partnership:
Rationales and Benefits**

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Abstract

Working towards ASEAN-EU strategic partnership would mean going beyond the current cooperation and aiming for greater engagements on key regional and global issues. The ASEAN and the EU has strengthened and deepened cooperation in the fields of political-security, economic, socio-cultural, connectivity, narrowing the development gap and other development cooperation. The EU remains keen to be member of East Asia Summit and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus. Even though the EU is one of the long-standing partners with the ASEAN and have been engaged in all ASEAN pillars, decision on conferment status of strategic partnership is based on case by case basis within the consensus of all ASEAN Member States.

Key words: ASEAN-EU relations, Strategic Partnership and Guidelines for ASEAN's External Relations

I. Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was officially formed on August 8, 1967, in Bangkok, Thailand, by its five-member states, with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration or Bangkok Declaration (Marty, 2018). Given a recognition on the importance to external relations, in the Bangkok Declaration, ASEAN expressed their desire to build up a strong foundation for common accomplishment with external partners to promote regional cooperation in the spirit of equality and partnership and thereby contribute towards peace, progress and prosperity in the region (ASEAN Declaration, 1967). This clearly shows that ASEAN has adopted outward-looking approach as the principle towards external relations since its inception.

As one of the most significant developments in this bloc in order to build closer economic relations for mutual benefits, the ASEAN agreed to provide status of formal Dialogue Partners to six external parties, such as Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, the European Economic Community (EEC) as the predecessor of the EU, and U.S. on August 5, 1977 (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 1977). Afterward, the interests and desire in establishing formal

relations and other forms of engagement with ASEAN has been significantly increased after the entry into force of the ASEAN Charter on December 15, 2008.

For more than six decades from the efforts to promote its regional integration, ASEAN has been actively engaged various state actors and regional organization throughout the globe. Most importantly, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting (AMM) adopted the Guidelines for ASEAN's External Relations in 2014, in order to guide ASEAN in responding to requests by external parties for formal engagement with ASEAN. Thus far, ASEAN granted status of Dialogue Partners to ten external parties such as Australia, Canada, China, the EU, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia, and the U.S. Among the ASEAN's ten Dialogue Partners, eight have strategic partnerships with ASEAN, except Canada and the EU. For further engagements with ASEAN, the EU had put forward its proposal to upgrade the ASEAN-EU Dialogue Relations to a strategic partnership at the 20th ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting (AEMM) and 21st AEMM in 2014 and 2016, respectively (ASEAN, 2014; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand, 2016).

Although, there is no written definition for terms of “strategic partnership”, “comprehensive partnership” or “enhanced partnership” in the Guidelines for ASEAN's External Relations (ASEAN, 2014). However, ASEAN has used these nomenclatures and granted to external parties over the years without considering to the hierarchy. Therefore, one of other objectives of the study is to explore on why nomenclature of strategic partnership has been used while it is not existed in the Guidelines above.

ASEAN's external relations is not about the quantity of partnerships granted, but on how these partnerships contribute to ASEAN Community-building process, and to regional and global stability. ASEAN can make decision on which external party to elevate tie with ASEAN based on key points such as intensity and substance of interactions and cooperation, as well as contribution of potential external party to ASEAN's objectives (Merced, 2017). By the way, ASEAN has managed its external relations and formal engagement with others on a case-by-case basis (Yeap, 2018). Given the limited scholarly attention on rationales and benefits of the EU's proposal to elevate from ASEAN-EU relations to a strategic partnership since there has been

devoted to the change in ASEAN-EU relations and lacking an explanation of recent developments, other objectives of the paper are to find out what the EU really want to enlarge and deepen its cooperation with ASEAN with regard to elevation of the ASEAN-EU relations to a strategic partnership and what are the benefits for ASEAN if a strategic partnership is granted.

The study intends to contribute to find out gap between the existing Guidelines for ASEAN's External Relations and the previous practice which have been implemented by ASEAN over the year regarding utilize the nomenclature on strategic partnership with the external parties. Furthermore, the study will also provide better understanding on significant rationales and benefits from the EU's request to upgrade relations to a strategic level to publics and all concerned stakeholders.

II. Backgrounds

The EU started informal relations with ASEAN in 1972 and become ASEAN's Dialogue Partner in July 1977. It was then formally institutionalized following the signing of the ASEAN-ECC Cooperation Agreement on March 7, 1980 (ASEAN, 2017). ASEAN and the EU have convened ministerial meeting in November 1978 (Moeller & Meoller,

2007). The relationship of both sides reached a significant milestone with the adoption of the Nuremberg Declaration on an EU-ASEAN Enhanced Partnership, and followed by the adoption of the Bandar Seri Begawan Plan of Action to Strengthen the ASEAN-EU Enhanced Partnership (2013-2017). More importantly, the EU marked its 40th anniversary of the dialogue relations on November 14, 2017, in Manila, the Philippines. At that important event, the ASEAN-EU Plan of Action (2018-2022), one of the other important documents to provide more strategic direction for a wide range of cooperation fields, was adopted (ASEAN, 2017).

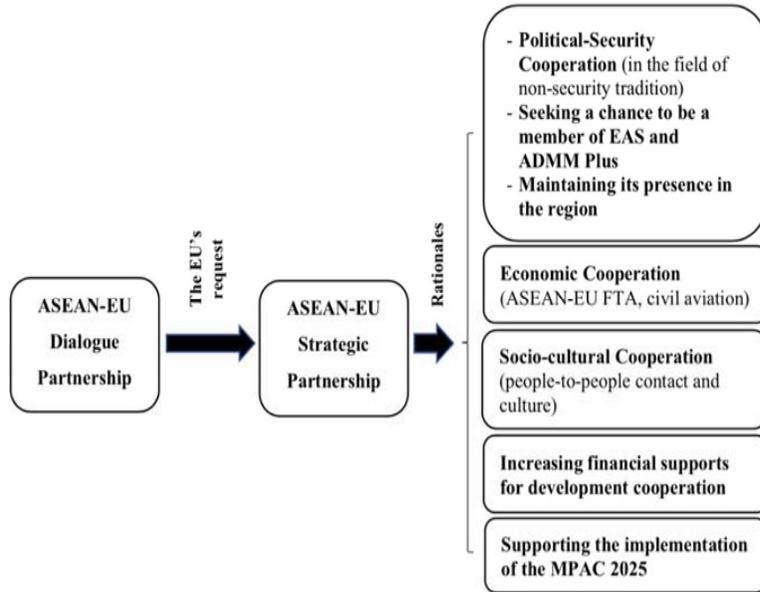
While looking at its longest relationship with ASEAN, the EU had formally requested to upgrade the ASEAN-EU relations to a strategic level at the 20th AEMM and 21st AEMM in 2014 and 2016, respectively. The ties between both blocs have been comprehensive while commercial cooperation is the most significant among others. With rising influence of China and the U.S in Asia, it is important for the EU to take part its engagement in the region. In addition, an upgrade in ASEAN-EU relations is needed to reinforce changing dynamic in an ever challenging geopolitical and economic environment (Khandekar, ASEAN-EU, 2013).

As indicated by the EU side, it stands ready to play its part and expresses commitment to further deepen on economic cooperation (region-to-region Free Trade Agreement – FTA negotiation and civil aviation agreement); socio-cultural such as environment and sustainable development and strengthening on research and innovation, as well as migration and mobility issues); increasing its financial support for regional cooperation; political and security such as new initiatives in the area of non-traditional security; and appointing a dedicate resident Ambassador of EU to ASEAN. In addition, the EU is interested in engaging the EAS (European Commission, 2015). Aside from further deepen cooperation in the three pillars of ASEAN – political and security; economic and socio-cultural, the EU also wanted to engage deeper more specifically with ASEAN and to sustain Europe’s pivot to Asia (Parameswaran, 2013).

Based on findings made by previous scholars or researchers above, the EU proposed to elevate its relations with ASEAN to a strategic partnership as the EU wishes to further strengthen and deeper cooperation with ASEAN on particularly economic field through a successful negotiation of a region-to-region FTA and civil aviation agreement;

political and security; socio-cultural through increasing people-to-people contact and culture; increasing EU’s financial supports for development cooperation and work towards support the implementation of the MPAC. The EU remains seek its chance for candidate at the EAS or ADMM Plus. More importantly, since the growing influences of China and U.S, the EU wanted to maintain its presence in the region.

Diagram.I. Key rationales on the EU’s Request to Upgrade the ASEAN-EU Dialogue Relations to a Strategic Partnership



III. Nomenclature of “Strategic Partnership” in the Guidelines of the ASEAN’s External Relations

Wilkins (2012) argues that strategic partnerships are still mostly understood as forms of “alignment,” which he gives definition as a “relations between two or more states that get involvement in common expectation of some kinds of policy coordination on security issues specifically under the certain

condition for the future. Other scholars recognized that strategic partnership had happened in the Asia Pacific region in mid-1990s and afterwards have become a ‘new security practice’ which was adopted by states as a strategy in managing national and regional security. To Parasweran (2014), strategic partnerships are appealing to many countries in the Asia Pacific because these counties are perceived as “new form of alignment”. Most of the scholars provide definition of “strategic partnership” as forms of “alignment” engaging between two or more states that have common expectation on policy coordination in the field of security issues under certain condition for the future.

Furthermore, qualifying a strategic partnership must be based on external and internal conditions. First, upgrading relations to a strategic partnership is considered by some years of trust and confidence among partners. Second, strategic partnership must be multidimensional in substance, ranging from several aspects including bilateral relations such as politics, security, economics, finance, trade, and people-to-people contact (Reiter, 2013). Envall & Hall (2016) also stresses that strategic partnerships are created not only for mutual benefit of partners but are formalized by rival nations for mutual

management, driven by purpose to help manage rivalry over values or interests or both. The previous studies found that granting status of strategic partnership must be based on trust and confidence among partners, as well as having substantial cooperation for the mutual benefits including political-security, economic and socio-cultural cooperation.

The Guidelines for ASEAN's External Relations which was adopted in 2014 pointed out that the categories of engagement with external partners consists of Dialogue Partnership, Sectoral Dialogue Partner, Development Partner, Special Observer and Guest while there is no written definition for terms of "strategic partnership", "comprehensive partnership" or "enhanced partnership". However, ASEAN has used these nomenclatures and granted to external parties over the years and before the existence of the Guidelines above (ASEAN, 2014). For instance, China was given the first ASEAN's strategic partnership in 2003 (ASEAN, 2012). The assumption of "strategic partnership" is highest form of engagement between ASEAN and an external party.

At the time of writing, among ASEAN's ten Dialogue Partners, seven have strategic partnership/comprehensive partnership with ASEAN, except Canada and the EU.

Table.1. Status of ASEAN's Strategic Partnership

External partners	Status of partnership	Year
Australia	Strategic partnership	2014
Canada	Dialogue relations	1977
China	Strategic Partnership	2003
European Union	Dialogue/enhanced partnership	1977
India	Strategic Partnership	2012
Japan	Strategic Partnership	2011
Republic of Korea	Strategic Partnership	2010
New Zealand	Strategic Partnership	2015
Russia	Strategic Partnership	2018
United States	Strategic Partnership	2015

Source: Author's compilation from the ASEAN website (www.aseansec.org)

To receive status of engagement with ASEAN, the ASEAN Charter indicates that the AMM may confer on formal status

to external party that may be established henceforth, in accordance with the rules of procedure (ASEAN, 2017). Based on previous practices by ASEAN, upgrading the relations to a strategic level may follow the recommendations given by the respective ASEAN-Dialogue Partner Eminent Persons Group (EPG) or following ASEAN's decision at the Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) and Foreign Ministers level and announced through the issuance of a Joint Statement or Joint Declaration (ASEAN, 2018). For the case of Australia, the Joint ASEAN-Australia Leaders' Statement on the 40th Anniversary of ASEAN-Australia Dialogue Relations Towards a Strategic Partnership for Mutual Benefit was issued while the Joint Declaration of the Heads of States/Government of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the People's Republic of China on Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity was also issued for elevation of the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership.

There are common criteria across all of ASEAN's strategic partners including having acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC); having been a full Dialogue Partner of ASEAN; having substantive cooperation; and ASEAN and most strategic partners, except

New Zealand, agreed to convene a regular annual/biennial basis summit (ASEAN, 2018). However, ASEAN has practically granted status to external party on case-by-case basis but based on the consensus of all AMSs (Yeap, 2018).

III. Rationales and Benefits of Elevation of ASEAN-EU Dialogue Relations to a Strategic Partnership

After getting status of formal Dialogue Partnership with ASEAN in 1977, ASEAN and the EU Relations have reached a significant milestone with the adoption of the Nuernberg Declaration on an EU-ASEAN Enhanced Partnership in 2007, and the adoption of the ASEAN-EU Plan of Action (PoA) (2018-2022) in 2017, which is one of the three important guiding documents to enhance and deepen long-term ASEAN-EU cooperation (MFA.IC, 2018).

Political-Security Cooperation

The EU demonstrated its commitment towards ASEAN and ASEAN-EU relations to promote peace, security and stability in the region through the accession to the TAC in 2012 (Wu, 2013). In addition, the EU continues to engage ASEAN through its participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the Post Ministerial Conferences and through

ASEAN-EU mechanisms such as the AEMM, the ASEAN-EU SOM, and ASEAN-EU Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC). The EU also participates in the ASEAN Plus EU Senior Officials' Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC+EU) Consultation (ASEAN, 2018). The EU also supported Human Rights through ASEAN-EU Policy Dialogue to address trafficking in persons, business and human rights, women's rights, child protection and the safety of migrant workers (Mission of the EU to ASEAN, 2018).

In order to continue to support the regional dialogue process the EU underlined its strong will to participate in the EAS in 2009 (ASEAN Chairman's Statement, 2009). Furthermore, the EU expressed that its future relations with ASEAN should be include its engagement with the region through all ASEAN-led processes, including the EAS and the ADMM Plus (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kingdom of Thailand, 2016). Within the EU's intention, Mr. Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, was invited as the Guest of ASEAN Chair (the Philippines) for the first time in the ASEAN-EU Commemorative Summit and the EAS luncheon in November 2017. If ASEAN would review the future membership of EAS, the EU is in good position to contribute

to the work of the EAS in order to maintain the EU's presence at the region's strategic table (European Commission, 2015). However, some AMSs expressed that further expansion in membership of the EAS would make the decision-making process more complicate and reopen on the path of the regional architecture (Emmers, 2017). Others argued that the expansion of EAS membership has been closed because the EAS members should pay much attention to its internal mechanism to enhance the effectiveness of implementation of the various documents approved by the Leaders (MFA.IC, 2018). However, ASEAN welcomed the EU's interest in furthering engagement with the region through all ASEAN-led processes, including its ambition to join the EAS in the future and preparing appropriate applications for observership in accordance with ADMM-Plus processes (ASEAN and the EU, 2019).

In addition, to demonstrate the EU's commitment to deepen its engagement with ASEAN, the EU accredited its Ambassador to ASEAN as well as the establishment of the Mission of EU to ASEAN in Jakarta in 2016 (ASEAN, 2018). At the 22nd AEMM held in 2019, ASEAN and the EU also agreed to enhance political and security dialogue cooperation

in the fields of maritime security, cybersecurity, counter-terrorism, counter-radicalisation, foreign fighters and transnational crimes and border management (ASEAN and the EU, 2019).

Economic Cooperation

This cooperation stands ahead among other areas of cooperation between two regions as the EU remains an important trading partner of ASEAN. In 2017, the total two-way trade reached US\$ 257.4 billion and became the second largest trading partner of ASEAN. In addition, among Dialogue Partners, the EU is the largest source of FDI with total amount to US\$ 25.4 billion (ASEAN, 2018). By 2050, grouped together, it would be the world's seventh largest economy and become the fourth largest economy (European Commission, 2015).

During the ASEAN-EU Leaders' Meeting held in 2018, both sides also reaffirm their commitment to a future EU-ASEAN FTA. With regard to air transport, ASEAN and the EU also encouraged the expeditious conclusion of an ambitious and forward-looking EU-ASEAN Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement. In addition, both sides expressed strong support for strengthening an open, fair, non-discriminatory,

transparent, rule-based multilateral trading system with the WTO (ASEAN and the EU, 2019). In addition, ASEAN and the EU also enhanced economic cooperation, including on standard, quality and conformity assessment, MSMEs and science technology.

Socio-cultural Cooperation

ASEAN and the EU agreed to enhance cooperation in the areas of climate change, post-2015 sustainable development goals, circular economy, clean energy, health pandemics, biodiversity and regional and global environmental challenges (ASEAN and the EU, 2019). Furthermore, closer people-to-people contacts, including building livelihoods, individual well-being and social welfare, are the core component of ASEAN-EU partnership (Mission of the EU to ASEAN, 2018). The EU also supported for the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) (Mission of the European Union to ASEAN, 2018).

Connectivity and Narrowing the Development Gap

The EU confirmed mutual interest in supporting ASEAN in regional integration process including connectivity and

narrowing the development gap in ASEAN. Both sides reiterated the important of and support efforts in strengthening connectivity through creating synergies between the EU Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia with sustainable, comprehensive and rule-based connectivity, which was announced on September 19, 2018, and MPAC (ASEAN, 2018).

Development Cooperation

The EU expressed its commitment to deepening relationship with ASEAN. From 2014 to 2020, more than 170 million Euro to support ASEAN regional integration (Mission of the EU to ASEAN, 2018). The EU also informed its intention to increase financial support for regional cooperation with ASEAN and for development cooperation with less developed countries such as Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Vietnam and the Philippines) (European Commission, 2015).

IV. Discussion and Conclusion

The assumption of “strategic partnership” is the highest form of engagement between ASEAN and the external party. However, there is no written definition for the terms “strategic partnership” or “comprehensive partnership” or

“enhanced partnership” in the Guidelines for ASEAN’s External Relations. China is the first ASEAN’s Dialogue Partnership that received status of strategic partnership in 2003. This means that this term has been offered to external party before the adoption of the Guidelines but later on the terms “strategic partnership” has yet mentioned or included in the Guidelines above. Furthermore, so far, ASEAN has yet developed certain criteria to make an assessment how to provide status of strategic partnership to external party.

Having some points similar to Reiter 2013’s views, there are common features for giving status of ASEAN’s strategic partnership, including (i) having acceded to the TAC, (ii) having been a full Dialogue Partner of ASEAN, (iii) having substantive cooperation, and (iv) ASEAN and most strategic partners have agreed to convene a regular summit on an annual/ biennial basis (ASEAN, 2018). Nevertheless, as per practiced ASEAN granted status to external party on case-by-case basis and the decision is based on the consensus of all AMSs. Given the importance of the Guidelines to provide status to external party within the clear criteria, ASEAN shall consider revising the 2014 Guidelines by including the terms

of “strategic partnership” and certain criteria to assess the external party’s request.

For case of the EU, the formal request for the elevation of ASEA-EU relations to a strategic level was firstly made at the 20th AEMM in 2014. Working towards a strategic partnership would mean going beyond the current cooperation and aiming for greater engagement on key regional and global issues. Due to recent development of the cooperation, the study found that deepening ASEAN-EU cooperation in various sectors will strengthen its rationales to moving up to a strategic partnership beyond what the previous scholars or studies made, including (i) political-security, (ii) economic, (iii) socio-cultural, (iv) connectivity and narrowing the development gap, and (v) increasing financial supports through development cooperation. In the political-security front, the EU remains keep its intention to engage with the region through all ASEAN-led processes, including the EAS and the ADMM Plus. If ASEAN would review the future membership of the EAS and willingness to elevate the ASEAN-EU relations to a strategic level, the EU can maintain its presence at the region’s strategic table.

As mentioned earlier, being given status of ASEAN’s strategic partnership the external party must be followed some certain criteria and decision is based on case by case basis within the consensus of all AMSs. Furthermore, based on approval process, of course, before the conferment on those interested application each AMS State is firstly to take into account the priority of national interest that they would have with the particular applicant. It is observed that there have been some issues related to bilateral concerns between the EU with some AMSs, which include palm oil, human rights and democracy and the EU’s intention to withdrawal Everything But Arms (EBA) from some AMSs. Based on arising of these bilateral issues with some AMSs, even though the EU is the long-standing partner with ASEAN among other external parties, ASEAN has considered offer status of strategic partnership to the EU at the later stage. As witness, ASEAN agreed in principle to elevate ASEAN-EU relations to a strategic partnership, subject to details and timing to be worked out (Press Statement of ASEAN Foreign Minister Retreat, 2019). For further discussion, both sides welcomed the setting up of a joint working group between the EU and relevant AMSs to solve matter relating to palm oil (ASEAN and the EU, 2019).

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