

China's rise means the EU must look for new areas of cooperation with ASEAN.

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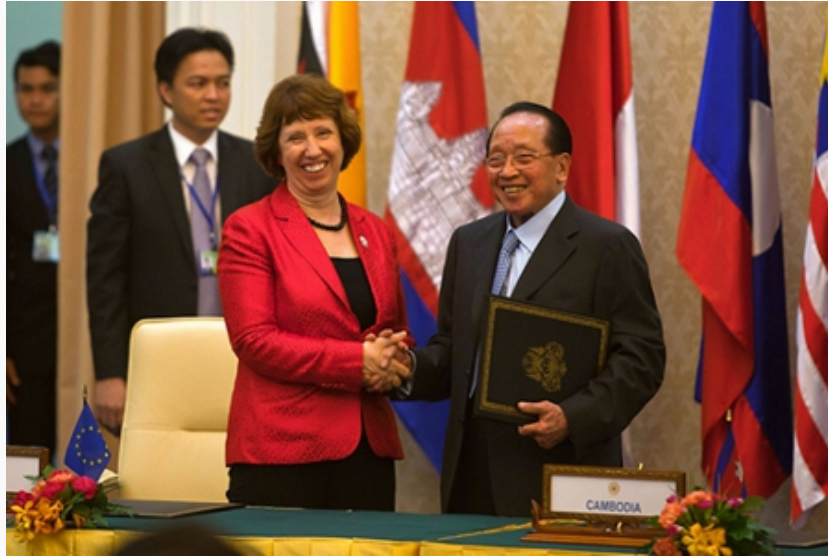
The EU has long supported greater regional integration in Southeast Asia, but its influence is now in decline due to China's growing economic importance. [Anja Jetschke](#) and [Clara Portela](#) argue that in order to continue in its promotion of regional integration, the EU now needs to do more to engage the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the fields of human rights and non-traditional security.



Since the mid-1990s, EU priorities regarding the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have remained largely unaltered. However, Asia's growing economic and political importance requires the EU to change its strategy towards this region. The EU has long distinguished itself in its relations to ASEAN through its enthusiastic support for regional integration. However, this sort of co-operation is no longer the EU's 'flagship' in Southeast Asia as other actors such as the Asian Development Bank or Australia have reinforced their programmes in this field, promoting their own concepts of regional integration. China's growing economic importance to ASEAN is diminishing the EU's significance in the region. In this new context, the EU should develop a strategy for increasing its relevance to Southeast Asia. The EU should continue to assist regional integration, but it also must communicate itself better in the region. And even if its regional integration assistance was to decrease in importance, the EU should identify and boost new issue areas which can serve as new flagships for co-operation with Southeast Asia. Human rights protection and non-traditional security, areas where the EU already has a considerable track-record, are likely candidates.



According to the EU treaty, the EU's foreign-policy goals include the protection of human rights. The increasingly powerful European Parliament is an advocate of human rights promotion in foreign policy. Yet, in the context of EU-ASEAN relations, human rights abuses have traditionally constituted an impediment, first in East Timor and then in Myanmar. In particular, Myanmar's 1997 admission into ASEAN sorely strained relations between the organisations, leading a crisis in interregional relations and causing meetings to be cancelled. However, current prospects are more favourable. This regional policy is reinforced by developments in Myanmar. Since entering office in 2011, President Thein Sein's gradual introduction of reforms (including legalising opposition parties, relaxing censorship and releasing political prisoners) has been hailed by the EU: Sanctions were suspended, development aid increased and prominent EU politicians have made official visits. With Myanmar no longer an issue for dispute, cooperation can be expanded.



Catherine Ashton, signing the Instrument of Accession of the European Union to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) Credit: European External Action Service – EEAS (Creative Commons BY NC ND)

Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand are seeking to lock in their domestic reforms at a regional level. On their initiative, ASEAN has developed its own human rights agenda. By encouraging human rights reforms, the EU is helping ASEAN member states cement domestic reforms. This also helps ASEAN develop its identity as a rule-based community.

The EU can build on the human rights declaration that was agreed at ASEAN's 2012 summit in Phnom Penh, which followed the establishment of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) in 2009. Regrettably, the declaration does not provide any mechanisms for regional implementation. In fact, its human rights instruments actually affirm the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention, which led the much-vaunted new declaration to be criticised by regional human rights organisations for the lack of transparency of its negotiating process. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navanethem Pillay, called on ASEAN governments to suspend adoption of the draft declaration because it was not in line with universal standards and the public had not been consulted. Furthermore, 62 human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch criticised the draft declaration on the grounds that it “creates a sub-standard level of human rights protection in the region”. However, the recognition of the need to protect human rights in a part of the world that had questioned their universality 15 years earlier carries major symbolic value. The declaration will help orient civil society groups in the region, but also governments that henceforth will be measured against the newly – established standards.

On the hard-security side, China's emergence in the region and its rise to the rank of a world power will continue to pose a challenge for the Southeast Asian states and to affect ASEAN–EU relations. Territorial disputes in the South China Sea remain a source of tension that has been insufficiently addressed by regional organisations, with the ASEAN Regional Forum refusing any discussion of the subject. The EU has limited scope to help resolve the conflict, not least because ASEAN states do not consider the EU to be a relevant security actor. In an encouraging first step to engaging in the security landscape, the EU signed the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation (TAC) on 12 July 2012, a legally binding agreement first signed in 1976 and regarded as a code of conduct by countries in the region. The TAC commits its partners to the principles of independence, equality, territorial integrity, non-interference and the renunciation of force. Altogether 18 non-ASEAN countries have signed the treaty, including Australia, China, India, Japan and the US. In order for the EU to enter the treaty as a regional organisation, ASEAN had to adopt a special protocol, which demonstrates ASEAN's special interest in the EU. Yet, fearful of losing their centrality in the East Asian Summit (EAS) should it be enlarged again, ASEAN countries have rejected the EU's bid for membership. The EU still needs to convince ASEAN of the potential benefits of its membership in the EAS.

Yet, the EU does have a profile in the field of non-traditional security. Building up on its record, the EU should better publicise its contribution to non-traditional security. The notion of “non-traditional” security has allowed the EU to present itself as a security actor. The EU has financially committed itself in areas such as food security, disaster prevention, counter-terrorism, environmental protection and climate change, and will continue its cooperation as indicated at the last ASEAN–EU ministerial meeting in Brunei in April 2012. Despite its considerable commitment, the EU is mostly perceived as a humanitarian actor or aid donor in the region, rather than as a security actor. If the EU promotes its current activities as security-relevant, it could increase its chances of being admitted to the East Asian Summit.

This article is a shorter version of the GIGA Focus International 3/13 article, which can be found [here](#).

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