Towards a New EU Asia Strategy

Panel Discussion Report by Jason Ji Xianbai
Visiting Fellow, EU Centre in Singapore
PhD Candidate, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

The EU Centre in Singapore organised a Panel Discussion on “Towards a New EU Asia Strategy” on 7 June 2016.

The event kicked off with short introductory remarks by EU Centre Director Dr Yeo Lay Hwee on the background of the discussion. Dr Yeo recalled the EU’s very first Asia Strategy released in 1994 which stated that “[t]he rise of Asia is dramatically changing the world balance of economic power…The Union needs as a matter of urgency to strengthen its economic presence in Asia in order to maintain its leading role in the world economy.” In 2001, the Asian strategy was updated to take into account the developments in the intervening years. Entitled “Europe and Asia: A Strategic framework for enhanced partnerships,” it called for a comprehensive partnership between the EU and Asia, going beyond the realm of economics. It is now timely, fifteen years after this updated communication was released, to review the EU’s strategy towards Asia and what the EU-Asia relations will look like in the near future.
Dr Yeo added that the Panel Discussion was inspired by the LSE Special Report “Changing Waters – Towards a new EU Asia Strategy”. The Panel Discussion featured three contributors to this Special Report: Dr Michael Reiterer (Adjunct Professor for International Politics, University of Innsbruck & Principal Advisor, European External Action Service), Associate Professor Reuben Wong (Jean Monnet Professor, Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore) and Dr Yeo Lay Hwee (Director, European Union Centre in Singapore).

Asia as part of the EU’s Global Security Strategy: Reflections on a more strategic approach

Dr Michael Reiterer began his presentation by admitting that the EU failed to transform its economic power into a larger political role. Although the Lisbon Treaty created the post of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European External Action Service (EEAS), there is still much to do for the EU to shoulder greater global political responsibilities. Hence the EU's approach to foreign and security policy has to change from ad-hoc-reactions to strategic planning and Dr Reiterer proposed a multi-pronged approach to this end.

The first is a functional approach to deal with security, climate change and other global issues. On security, Dr Reiterer made it clear that the EU welcomes a more integrated Asia where the ASEAN centred framework and institutions can evolve into a comprehensive eco-system jointly managed by the US and China in tandem with other Asia Pacific partners of the East Asia Summit (EAS) and drawing on the Helsinki/OSCE experience in Europe. He affirmed that the EU is willing to work with ASEAN in strengthening regional security architectures such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Minister’s Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus. But Dr Reiterer also expressed concerns that strict adherence to the non-interventionist “ASEAN Way” might need to be loosened if tangible results are to be achieved.

In areas of climate change, the EU will join hands with Asian partners, including civil societies and non-governmental organisations, to exercise peer pressure for implementing the agreement made in Paris Climate Conference 2015. In addition, the EU recognises that there are a number of issues such as cyber security and space security which can only be solved globally. The second approach is based on the Union’s series of bilateral relationships. After all, Asia is home to four out of ten EU’s strategic partners (i.e., China, Republic of Korea, Japan and India) and the EU holds regular summits and high-level consultations with them to solve problems in Asia and beyond.

The last approach is a networked, multilateral one. A case in point is the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), which will celebrate its 20th anniversary in Mongolia on 15-16 July 2016. ASEM was set up in 1996 at the request of Singapore and France, as the connector of the missing link between Europe and Asia in the Europe-America-Asia triangle. ASEM ensures connectivity on the back of three pillars: politics, economics and people-to-people.

Dr Reiterer concluded by urging the EU to scale back its ambition and to be selective and prioritise its interests and policies. It has to focus on doing a few things well. There is a need to translate some of these clearly defined targets into actionable global strategy, and to do less, but
with more impact and visibility.

EU Strategy towards Southeast Asia and ASEAN

Dr Yeo Lay Hwee in her presentation shed light on the evolving EU-ASEAN/Southeast Asia relations. She started by highlighting the key message she wanted to deliver: EU should adopt a nuanced and differentiated approach in engaging ASEAN and has to understand and recognise ASEAN for what it is, not what it wishes ASEAN to be.

Dr Yeo then gave the audience an overview of EU-ASEAN relations which have gone through different stages. EU-ASEAN relations started off low-key in the 1970s, and then went into an acrimonious phase over democracy and human rights issues in the 1990s. It was not until Myanmar’s election in 2011 and the US Pivot to Asia which changed the geopolitical dynamics in the region that the EU re-examined its relationship with ASEAN. In the latest May 2015 Joint Communication, the EU acknowledged that it “has a strategic interest in strengthening its relationship with [ASEAN]”, because “ASEAN is at the heart of the efforts to build a more robust regional security order in the wider Asia-Pacific”.

Dr Yeo went on to argue that, if the EU indeed wants to engage ASEAN to forge a partnership with strategic purpose, it must first do away with the conviction that all regional processes should become more institutionalised, and that the EU model ought to serve as an inspiration for other regional entities. Secondly, the EU needs to focus on its core interest in the region and prioritise. Thirdly, the EU should have a clear assessment and appreciation of ASEAN’s role in the broader Asia-Pacific region, and then decide if and how it can work with and support ASEAN to strengthen regional stability.

Trade and investment and climate change agenda were identified by Dr Yeo as the EU’s core interests in Southeast Asia. ASEAN is the EU’s third largest trading partner, and the EU is ASEAN’s second largest trade partner. Hence, the EU needs to focus its attention on engagement with ASEAN that can lead to the realisation of mutual benefits of increased trade and investments. Beyond trade and economics, the EU has been pushing the climate change agenda – an increasingly important issue for ASEAN as the region continued to face recurring haze year after year.

Dr Yeo believed that only a more coherent ASEAN can play an important convening role to bring the China and the US to the same table and contribute to the management of their strategic competition. But ASEAN is now caught in the midst of rising Sino-American tensions and increased shrillness in the bilateral relations between China and some of the South China Sea claimant states. It is therefore in the EU’s best interest to take steps to support the building of a stable, strong, cohesive and self-confident ASEAN.

To do so, the EU needs to build up the national capacities of the different ASEAN member states. This should be done with the understanding that strong national institutions are necessary to complement region-building. Beyond this broad remit, an area that offers great potential for EU-ASEAN partnership according to Dr Yeo is the sharing of experiences in conflict
Dr Yeo concluded on a positive note by stating that Southeast Asia and ASEAN deserve attention from the EU. Overall, she remained very optimistic and believed that EU-ASEAN relations will go from strength to strength in the future.

**Stepping up EU-ASEAN Cooperation in Non-Traditional Security**

The last to speak was Dr Rueben Wong, who opened his presentation by suggesting that the EU is largely seen as a one-dimensional, economic actor in Southeast Asia because it does not enter regional countries’ strategic calculations to the same degree as the US or China does.

A rare highlight of the EU’s engagement beyond the realm of economics is the Aceh peace process starting in 2004. The EU’s constructive role in conflict resolution, elections monitoring and state re-building after the 2004 tsunami was widely applauded in the region. After that, however, Dr Wong lamented that the EU is not very visible in this part of the world, perhaps due to the crises that were closer to its shores.

To subvert the perception that “the EU is not a security actor”, Dr Wong pointed out that the EU needs to demonstrate political interest and solid engagement in Southeast Asia through high-profile, security-related activities. He particularly stressed the symbolic value of, and weight carried by, uniformed representatives in related regional forums and security exercises, and warned that the EU may not be taken seriously unless the European participants are in the appropriate (military) attire. Dr Wong praised France’s proposal floated in the Shangri-La Dialogue 2016 to make European navies’ presence felt in the South China Sea as a welcome step in this regards.

Dr Wong went on to suggest that an impactful and mutually beneficial way to enhance EU-ASEAN relations is to strengthen inter-regional cooperation on non-traditional security issues such as counter-terrorism and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). Both have been listed as key priorities in the ARF and are areas where the EU and ASEAN have much to learn from each other.

Touching on HADR, Dr Wong argued that the EU is in an excellent position to make disaster relief one of its specialist strengths. It already participates in the ARF which draws in a larger number of actors including China and Russia to discuss security, and has provided participating nations with some confidence-building measures and a platform for exchange of ideas and values.

Switching to the potential of EU-ASEAN cooperation in counter-terrorism, Dr Wong insisted that ASEAN has much to share with Europe. This can be ascribed to the fact that Southeast Asia breeds a number of indigenous terrorist organisations and ASEAN states have well-developed counter-terrorist strategies and experiences, including anti-Islamic radicalisation/extremism.