

Building ASEAN-EU Strategic Partnership amidst Global Uncertainties



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AF: How do you assess the evolution of ASEAN-EU dialogue relations over the past 40 years?

FM: Over these forty years opportunities and threats have gone global. Europe and Southeast Asia are closer than ever; what happens on our side of the world matters to you, and vice versa. Trade routes are global, and a security issue in Asia-Pacific can affect the whole world: just think of the situation in the Korean peninsula. Against these great changes, we are also moving fast. Cooperation between the European Union and ASEAN has never been closer – both bilaterally and in the international institutions. The European Union has, since August 2015, a dedicated Ambassador to ASEAN – currently Francisco Fontan. Our common work spans from trade to counter-terrorism, from protecting our environment to defence issues. It is time to move to the next stage, working on a strategic partnership between our organisations.

AF: Will the EU have any new initiatives to mark the 40th anniversary of ASEAN-EU dialogue relations this year?

FM: I was delighted to be in Manila, at the beginning of August, for the EU-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting and the ASEAN Regional Forum. We have organised several events and initiatives this year, jointly with the ASEAN Secretariat, with Thailand as our current Country Coordinator, and with the Philippines as ASEAN Chair. We have launched several new projects under the EU’s €200 million-strong cooperation

with the ASEAN Secretariat, and organised a whole host of events for public participation such as the first ever EU-ASEAN Run, and the first EU-ASEAN music concert. Events to move forward on our sustainable development agenda and to increase our interconnections through improved transport links, for example, will also be organised. I am also pleased that at this occasion the EU has been invited to join the East Asia Summit in November as a guest of the ASEAN Chair.

We don’t want just to celebrate 40 years of cooperation, but also build a stronger relationship in the future. A good example of this is increased trade between our regions, where we hope to move forward in negotiating a comprehensive and ambitious trade agreement, to bring down barriers and open new doors for business people and investors. This year we also celebrate 60 years since the European Union took its first steps: the celebrations were an opportunity to recommit to our Union and relaunch the process of European integration. Likewise, this EU-ASEAN anniversary can be an opportunity to bring our partnership to the next level.

AF: What are the immediate priorities of the EU’s External Action Service (EEAS) for partnership with ASEAN for 2018?

FM: I mentioned already our common aspiration to define a

framework for a trade and investment agreement. We also want to advance on our on-going negotiations for a Civil Aviation Agreement. It is clear that increased economic ties and connections between our populations will have significant benefits for us all. But if we want to reach the full potential of our partnership, we also need to continue deepening our cooperation on security. Europe and Southeast Asia face some common threats: cyber-crime and terrorism, for example. We could and should have much closer and more operational cooperation between our respective agencies and processes. I hope that we can make this happen very soon.

AF: What are the fundamentals for a strong and robust ASEAN-EU partnership going forward?

FM: At the moment, interactions and connections between our populations, as well as economic and trade links are the fabric of our partnership. Common work to increase our collective security should be next.

AF: The EU is ASEAN's largest foreign direct investor (FDI) but this influence is not felt in the political-security domain. What can the EU do more to improve its political-security presence in the region to be commensurate with its substantive economic strength?

FM: The EU has already become a global security provider. Our diplomatic engagement on the situation in the Korean peninsula is constant and intense. The EU is already applying real pressure on the DPRK to comply with its UN Security Council-based obligations through sanctions, and we are also ready to support a process to reduce tensions and enable steps to be taken towards the complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. We signed the national ceasefire agreement in Myanmar as an international observer. And last year, for the first time, the EU took part in an "ASEAN plus" multilateral naval exercise. I believe most countries in Asia, today, recognise our EU as a global security provider. This is a role we are ready and willing to take over.

Also for this reason, we are working to strengthen the EU as a Union of security and defence. We have, for example, improved our command structures for our military missions, launched a European Defence Fund which aims at supporting our EU Member States in investing more efficiently on defence, and have increased our joint work with NATO significantly. As I said before, we need to bring our EU and ASEAN defence structures closer together. We

need to invest more to ensure that common threats receive common answers; make our critical infrastructure resilient and resistant to cyber-attacks; disrupt and break up extremist networks so as to prevent terrorism. I think this is something on which we should work closer together.

AF: With the US appearing to lose its strategic ground in Asia, does the EU have the political will to up its game in the region, and if yes, through what means?

FM: Engaging with Asia and in Asia is a strategic priority for the EU, whatever other powers may do. The EU will continue to be a strong and reliable partner for our friends in Asia and around the world. Our level of engagement does not depend on the engagement of others, and it is clearly there to stay. We want to increase our cooperation and ties with ASEAN because we see a mutual interest in doing so; our cooperation is win-win. There is a clear will from our side and I believe also from the ASEAN side.

AF: How is the EU going to contribute to the rules-based order in Asia-Pacific?

FM: The respect of international norms is not only one of our driving principles: we also have a strong interest in protecting a rules-based order in a crucial region for international trade and global peace. Different challenges and situations require different approaches, but our commitment to international law, for example the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or fundamental freedoms such as of expression and of assembly, will always remain, for us, the essential part of any solution. Some see international rules as a constraint: we consider them a guarantee for all.

AF: In light of the US' withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) in deep freeze, what do you think of the future of inter-regional multilateral trade deals? Would the EU see a greater urgency for an ASEAN-EU Free Trade Agreement?

FM: Yes, there is an urgency: not because of others, but because of the benefits that freer and fairer trade can bring to our citizens. We want to move forward on our agreement with ASEAN quickly and are working to do so.

AF: How does the EU manage what appears to be "external interferences" from major powers in making decisions that require consensus?

FM: The EU is big enough and strong enough to take

Did You Know?

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decisions by itself, just as our citizens are wise enough to choose with their own minds - and have demonstrated this time and again, even in recent months. There are always different points of view among the Member States - I often see this when I am chairing the monthly meeting of Foreign Ministers - but this is our richness: that we are diverse. It is a point of strength, not a weakness, as out of diversity we always manage to agree on what our common interest is and to take decisions together

- in particular when it comes to foreign policy, we always take decisions by unanimity. This provides us with a strong common ground. One year ago we have agreed all together on a Global Strategy for our foreign and security policy, and its implementation is moving on smoothly and fast. We share the same interests and values, and my daily experience tells me that we are much more united than it is sometimes perceived.

AF: There are concerns that the EU will be too distracted by Brexit negotiations to focus on other fronts of its external relations. How is the EU going to address these concerns?

FM: I have no worries at all about this. Since the United Kingdom voted to leave the EU over a year ago, we have taken bigger steps in our common security and defence policy, for example, than ever before. And we have done so all together, with all 28 Member States, by unanimity. Let me tell you that, after the British referendum and the beginning of the Brexit negotiations, our common work has not changed: we are still engaged in the global arena, as a global power. Even when the UK leaves the Union, we will continue to be the number one donor of development and humanitarian aid in the world, the largest global market and foreign investor, and we will continue to lead the implementation of the Paris Agreement on climate change, supporting other countries to do the same. We are a more confident, more agile, more reliable Union than in the past, and we will continue to invest in our global role.



AF: What would be the EU's strategy in dealing with the rise of nationalism and scepticism towards multilateral institutions?

FM: The best way to defend and strengthen our multilateral institutions is to make them deliver on our citizens' needs. Our citizens today need protection and need better opportunities: protection from today's security threats and from the imbalances generated by globalisation. But globalisation also has an immense economic potential, which we can only fulfil if we

engage together, cooperatively. The only effective answer to our citizens' needs is international cooperation: we need to work together against common threats and to grasp opportunities, and we need better rules for our international economy. Isolation is not the answer to any of the challenges of our times. But through cooperation - both within our continents and on a global scale - in the EU, within ASEAN and in the United Nations' framework - we can provide our citizens with better opportunities, we can foster peace, security, and stability, at home and internationally.

AF: What is your most memorable moment in your many interactions with ASEAN and its Leaders?

FM: I met regularly with ASEAN leaders, in Asia, in Europe and on the occasions of our joint participation in international events, and I have many excellent memories with them. But I also have other important moments in my heart: whenever I travel to Asia I really enjoy the opportunity to meet citizens, religious leaders, young students, and civil society organisations. If I have to choose one moment, I have great memories of a meeting last year with leaders of religious communities in Jakarta. We discussed diversity in Indonesia, and the various paths for civil engagement of people with different religious backgrounds. Europe and Southeast Asia are a world apart, but many of the challenges we face are similar. We all want to create new channels for engagement for all sectors of our societies. We all want to make sure that all of our citizens preserve their diversity and enjoy the same opportunities, making our societies prosper. ■