

EU-ASIA INTERREGIONAL COOPERATION: NEW AGE DAWNING

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Political rhetoric about interregionalism often presupposes that international organisations like the European Union (EU) and ASEAN are natural and like-minded partners. Of course, this overly simplistic interpretation must not eclipse the fundamental differences that characterise both patterns of regional integration. But recent geopolitical and –economic dynamics are breaking new ground for interregional cooperation between the EU and Asia.

The EU actively promotes deep institutionalisation through robust governance structures and complex legal frameworks. Brexit has raised the question whether the European integration process has gone too far. Answering affirmatively, the populist and nativist leaders of the Visegrad Four countries, Austria, and Italy favour a more intergovernmental union, one with less supranational oversight. Conversely, liberal democrats would point to the fact that there has been no domino effect of other member states wishing to check out of the EU. This, they argue, is not just the result of the cost of Brexit, which is apparent to all except the government of Theresa May, who still speaks of a ‘Brexit dividend’ in terms of EU membership fees that would be better spent on the National Health Service. Indeed, if the proliferation of initiatives in the area of European security and defence is anything to go by, then one would be inclined to rather speak about an ‘integration dividend’ among the remaining 27 member states. European integration has not gone in reverse but its future may develop along more differentiated lines. This observation not only pertains to the EU’s internal policies and law. As the political map of Europe changes as a result of Brexit, the codification of autocracy in Turkey (which dampens its EU accession prospect) and blurring socio-economic boundaries between the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership states, the EU will get less hung

up by its existing external policy frameworks. Instead, it will work to tighten the fabric of socio-economic cooperation and regulatory alignment across Eurasia.

For its part, ASEAN is concerned with loose and non-constraining community-building. The over-emphasis on national representation, underpinned by the sacrosanct principles of respect of national sovereignty, non-interference and equality inter pares, has blurred the boundaries between the cyclical stages of the policy process, as the exercise of the prerogatives of policy-shaping and -making takes place within the confines of a small and privileged circle of politicians. The persistence of the ASEAN Way as the Association's modus operandi expands far beyond its borders and the realm of political integration. In the 1990s, the relative absence of major threats in the neighbourhood prompted ASEAN to take the lead on the creation of new patterns and frameworks of cooperation. The externalisation of the ASEAN Way has facilitated the creation of a regional framework of forums, dialogues (with, inter alia, Australia, Canada, China, the EU, India, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Russia, and the US) and accepted diplomatic norms and practices. ASEAN's first initiative towards greater regional stability materialised in the creation of a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality in 1994, rapidly followed by a Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone, the first working session of the Asian Regional Forum (ARF) in 1995, and the more recent ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (incl. Australia, China, India, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Russia, and the US), the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum and the East Asia Summit, to mention a few.

Desirous of improving economic relations between the EU and East Asia as a whole, ASEAN launched the first Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in 1996 along with the China, Japan and Korea. ASEM was set up as an informal dialogue based on intergovernmentalism. Korea hosted the ASEM meeting in 2000 chaired by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Kim Dae Jung. Unfortunately, the violations of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea have illustrated the weakness of pragmatic and interest-based frameworks like ASEM and ASEAN in providing more than just partial solutions to the vast array of security issues in the region.

But the rising importance of non-traditional security issues (combating trafficking in illegal drugs, people smuggling including trafficking in women and children, sea piracy, terrorism, arms smuggling, money laundering, international economic crime and cybercrime) and their cross-border character have made it increasingly difficult for countries to maintain a strict separation between domestic affairs and regional problems, thereby opening the path to second-generation regionalism, complementing the role of the United Nations. Stretching the mandate of fora like ASEM and ASEAN to encompass new governance responsibilities shows the willingness to redefine regional priorities and to pay more attention to new issues such as human development and security, without abandoning the principle of non-interference.

Acknowledging the fundamental political, socio-economic and cultural differences between the EU and Asian countries, interregional cooperation does make a lot of sense when considering recent geopolitical and –economic developments.

Partially as a result of the assault of Putin’ s Russia, Brexit and Trump’ s US on global governance systems, the EU is slowly warming up to China’ s Belt and Road Initiative while doubling down on new non-tariff trade agreements, both of an interregional kind (the EU-CARIFORUM and EU-Central America agreements have recently entered into force) and a bilateral character: after signing deep and comprehensive free trade agreements with Korea, Canada and Japan, the EU has recently turned to Australia and New Zealand.

This convergence with other dynamics across Asia and the Pacific might lead one to even consider including the EU in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Arguably, a TPP-11 would no longer be exclusively ‘Pacific’ in the geographical sense but emphasising the peaceful nature of the initiative, one could add the largest single market of the world while maintaining the name of this interregional collaborative effort at modernising trade rules for the world in the absence of an increasingly protectionist US.

A new age of interregionalism between the EU and Asia may well be dawning



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