

# ASEAN: The EU's strategic partner in Asia

## SUMMARY

Founded in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is often compared with the EU. Both organisations brought together former adversaries and successfully resolved tensions through cooperation, helping to bring peace and prosperity to their regions. However, the EU and ASEAN operate in very different ways. ASEAN is a strictly intergovernmental organisation in which decisions are based on consensus. While this approach has made it difficult for south-east Asian countries to achieve the same level of integration as the EU, it has also enabled ASEAN to accommodate huge disparities among its 10 member states.

ASEAN's impact has been uneven. The organisation is an effective platform for cooperation between its member states and the wider Indo-Pacific region, but its goal of promoting peaceful cooperation is undermined by growing geopolitical tensions, especially in the South China Sea and with regard to Myanmar. While there has been significant economic integration, the goal of an EU-style single market is still a long way off – something that partially explains why intra-regional trade remains relatively weak.

EU-ASEAN relations span more than four decades and have steadily deepened, building on common values as well as booming trade and investment. In 2020, the two sides upgraded to a strategic partnership. In the current environment of huge geopolitical challenges, both sides seem determined to take their bilateral cooperation to a higher level, as exemplified by the new plan of action (2023-2027), the first bilateral summit at leaders' level and the ongoing and intensifying cooperation between the European Parliament and the ASEAN member states' parliaments.

*This briefing updates a previous one published in November 2021.*



### IN THIS BRIEFING

- Background
- ASEAN institutions
- Towards an ASEAN Community?
- EU-ASEAN relations



## Background

Table 1 – ASEAN member states

Country	Year of joining ASEAN	Population (millions)	Per capita GDP (US\$)
 Brunei	1984	0.5	27 500
 Cambodia	1999	16.5	1 500
 Indonesia	1967	270.6	3 900
 Laos	1997	7.2	2 600
 Malaysia	1997	31.9	10 400
 Myanmar	1997	54.0	1 400
 Philippines	1967	108.1	3 300
 Singapore	1967	5.7	59 800
 Thailand	1967	69.6	7 200
 Vietnam	1995	96.4	2 800

Data source: Population and GDP data: World Bank, 2020.

In the 1960s, at the height of the Cold War, south-east Asia was an unstable region. Most countries had only recently achieved independence from colonial rule and were still struggling to find their place in the world. A [bloody war](#) was ongoing in

Vietnam, and there was a real fear of communist insurgencies spreading to other countries in the region (in 1965, Indonesian armed forces [massacred](#) up to one million suspected communists). A territorial dispute in Borneo between Indonesia and Malaysia led to the *Konfrontasi*, an undeclared war that dragged on from 1963 to 1966. In this tense [context](#), in 1967 five south-east Asian countries (Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore) decided to put aside their differences. With the [Bangkok Declaration](#), they established ASEAN and pledged to build peace and prosperity together.

## ASEAN institutions

Just two pages long, the Bangkok Declaration sets vague and general goals of cooperation in fields such as trade, education, agriculture and industry. The only mechanisms envisaged to achieve cooperation are regular, mostly unspecified meetings of government ministers, officials and experts. The 2007 [ASEAN Charter](#) put cooperation on a somewhat more formal basis, with more detailed

Figure 1 – ASEAN countries and their neighbours



Source: EPRS.

goals and mechanisms. Although they are partially modelled on the EU, all of the institutions outlined in the charter are intergovernmental, and all decisions are taken by consensus:

Resembling the European Council, the **ASEAN Summit** comprises the heads of state or government. It meets at least twice a year and is the organisation's supreme policy-making body. More detailed oversight of ASEAN activities is exercised by the **ASEAN Coordinating Council**, which comprises ASEAN foreign ministers and also meets at least twice a year. There are also various sectoral ministerial-level bodies such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting, the ASEAN Economic

Ministers Meeting and the ASEAN Transport Ministers Meeting. Furthermore, ASEAN has three ministerial/senior official-level **Community Councils**, coordinating activities in each of the pillars of the ASEAN Community (see below): political-security, economic and socio-cultural.

**Rotating presidency:** Each member state chairs the above decision-making bodies in turn for one year, in alphabetical order (Cambodia in 2022, followed by Indonesia in 2023). As with the EU Council presidency, acting as ASEAN chair gives member states an opportunity to set the agenda. For example, an unusually strong statement on the South China Sea after the June 2020 ASEAN summit probably [reflects](#) Vietnamese concerns about maritime disputes with China.

The **ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly** is a [platform](#) where south-east Asian parliamentarians meet and exchange information. However, it cannot be compared with the European Parliament: it is not directly elected, has no legislative powers or other decision-making powers, and is ranked by the charter merely as an 'entity associated with ASEAN', rather than a fully fledged institution.

Administrative support for over 1 000 meetings a year is provided by the **ASEAN Secretariat**, based in Jakarta and headed by a secretary-general (currently, Lim Jock Hoi from Brunei). In 2016, the secretariat had a budget of just [US\\$20 million](#) and 300 staff. Given its small size and limited capacity, some of the organisational work is done by member state governments, each of which has set up its own national secretariat for dealing with ASEAN matters. ASEAN's **working language** is English.

## Towards an ASEAN Community?

### Obstacles to ASEAN integration

At their October 2003 summit, ASEAN leaders [decided](#) to take their previously loose cooperation to another level and to create an ASEAN Community by 2020 (in 2007, the deadline was brought forward to 2015). In line with this goal, ASEAN adopted a charter in 2007, together with its motto of 'One Vision, One Identity, One Community'. In 2009, the organisation followed up with a [roadmap](#) comprising blueprints for specific measures in each of the community's three pillars. The roadmap was [updated](#) in 2015 and now covers the period up to 2025.

In practice, however, there is much less integration among ASEAN countries than among the EU Member States. There are several obstacles to a closely-knit ASEAN Community. Above all, south-east Asia is **much more disparate** than Europe. Singapore's per capita GDP is [50 times](#) higher than that of Myanmar and Cambodia, whereas the equivalent gap between the EU's wealthiest and

### ASEAN enlargement to Timor-Leste

According to the ASEAN Charter, membership is open to all south-east Asian states that agree to abide by the charter and are accepted by all other member states. The most recent country to join was Cambodia, in 1999. The one remaining south-east Asian non-member is Timor-Leste, which applied to join in 2011. Geographically, historically and culturally, the country is part of the region and already [participates](#) in many ASEAN activities. At the 2022 ASEAN summit in Cambodia, ASEAN leaders on 11 November agreed to 'in-principle admit Timor-Leste to be the 11th member of ASEAN', to give observer status to the country and 'to allow its participation in all ASEAN meetings including at the summit plenaries'. ASEAN leaders furthermore agreed 'to formalise an objective criteria-based roadmap' for the country's full membership.

poorest countries is much smaller (about 10 times). Political systems range from absolute monarchy (Brunei) to multiparty democracy (Indonesia). The Philippines has a mutual defence treaty with the United States (US), whereas Cambodia and Laos are more closely aligned with China. Such differences make it difficult for ASEAN countries to find common ground on many issues.

Although the 2007 ASEAN Charter sets ambitious goals, it does not provide the means of achieving them. The organisation has **neither legal powers nor a significant budget**. In contrast to the European Commission, the ASEAN Secretariat is not a supranational institution that represents the interests of the community vis-à-vis the member states; it merely provides administrative support for intergovernmental cooperation. Unlike the EU, ASEAN does not adopt laws that are binding on its member states; the latter implement and enforce joint decisions – or not – as they see fit.

### The ASEAN way

ASEAN's insistence on non-interference and consensus-based decision-making has become known as the '[ASEAN Way](#)', which is also the title of the organisation's official anthem. On the one hand, this approach makes it often difficult for ASEAN to progress beyond rhetoric on contentious issues. On the other, it enables the region's highly diverse countries to find at least some common ground.

In view of these constraints, ASEAN has made uneven progress. The following sections summarise the organisation's impact under each of the three main headings defined in the ASEAN roadmaps.

## Political–security pillar

### Preserving peace and stability in south-east Asia

ASEAN resembles the EU in that one of its main achievements has been to promote peaceful cooperation, thus bringing stability to a formerly turbulent region. The significance of this should not be underestimated: just two years before signing the Bangkok Declaration, Indonesia and Malaysia were still waging an undeclared war in Borneo. Though not all territorial and maritime disputes between south-east Asian states have been resolved, ASEAN has helped to defuse tensions. For example, under Indonesian leadership, ASEAN played a key role in [mediating](#) between Thailand and Cambodia after a 2008 border skirmish. Malaysia has overlapping claims with [Singapore](#) and the [Philippines](#), but these have not caused more than occasional spats. ASEAN countries' commitment to peace is enshrined in the 1976 [Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia](#), and the 1995 [Bangkok Treaty](#), which declares the region a nuclear weapon-free zone.

ASEAN is not a military alliance, and most south-east Asian security cooperation is either sub-regional (an example being the joint Malaysian-Singaporean-Thai [patrols](#) to combat piracy in the Malacca Straits) or with external partners such as the US, rather than on a regional basis. However, annual **ASEAN Defence Ministers Meetings** ([ADMM](#)) promote regional dialogue.

### Leading peaceful cooperation in the wider Indo-Pacific region

ASEAN's 11 '[dialogue partners](#)' are Australia, Canada, China, the EU, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, the US, and (since August 2021) the United Kingdom (UK). Together with numerous other countries from around the world, all are committed to peace as signatories of ASEAN's [Treaty of Amity and Cooperation](#). ASEAN engages with its dialogue partners through various regional formats. These include **ASEAN Plus Three** (with China, Japan and South Korea, since [1997](#)) and the annual [18-member East Asia Summit](#) (since 2005). The importance of the latter as a forum for strategic dialogue on the Indo-Pacific region is reflected in the [eagerness](#) of partners from outside the immediate south-east Asian neighbourhood, including the US and Russia, to participate (while President Putin had attended in 2021, in 2022 Russia was represented online by Foreign Minister Lavrov). The **ASEAN Regional Forum**, which mostly meets at foreign minister level, is even larger (27 countries), although with so many members it is argued that it risks becoming a mere [talking shop](#). **ADMM+** brings together ASEAN defence ministers with counterparts from [eight](#)

[dialogue partners](#) (not the EU, Canada or the UK); apart from ministerial meetings, its activities include expert working groups and field exercises in areas such as maritime security, disaster management and counter-terrorism.

Such ASEAN-led formats aim to [mitigate](#) tensions by bringing together the main regional players, including China and the US. They also consolidate [ASEAN centrality](#), the idea that ASEAN should play a leading role in the Indo-Pacific region.

## ASEAN's vision of the Indo-Pacific challenged by geopolitical tensions

Beijing's expansive claims in the [strategically important South China Sea](#), overlapping with those of five south-east Asian countries (the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia) are the main challenge to peaceful cooperation. China has built military infrastructure on disputed islands, harassed south-east Asian trawlers, and disrupted offshore oil and gas prospecting.

As each ASEAN country struggles to hold onto sovereignty without upsetting their powerful neighbour, they have adopted widely divergent positions. While Vietnam and the Philippines have been more assertive [in the past](#), Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia downplay their differences with Beijing, and Cambodia and Laos block any direct criticism of China at ASEAN level. In 2012, disagreements on this issue [blocked](#) the ASEAN summit from issuing a joint statement. By contrast, the [declaration](#) adopted at the June 2020 summit expressed concerns about tensions in the South China Sea, but still did not name China.

With no prospect of reconciling maritime claims, in 2002 China and the ASEAN countries [agreed](#) on the more modest objective of managing their differences through a code of conduct for the South China Sea. However, final agreement on this is still a [long way](#) off, with no consensus yet on crucial questions about the geographical scope of the code of conduct, its binding or non-binding nature, and the applicability of international law (e.g. the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea).

US-China rivalry intensified with the 2017 [relaunch](#) of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ('Quad') between the United States, Japan, India and Australia, and Washington's outright rejection of Beijing's 'preposterous' maritime claims in its November 2019 [Indo-Pacific strategy](#) which was [updated](#) in February 2022. In September 2021, the US, the UK and Australia announced a trilateral defence cooperation pact ('AUKUS'), which among other things would allow Australia to acquire a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines.

Although the US is supportive of south-east Asian countries' claims in the South China Sea and its Indo-Pacific strategy emphasises ASEAN's centrality in the region, some ASEAN countries are [uncomfortable](#) with the prospect of being forced to choose between China and the US. [Indonesia](#) and [Malaysia](#) have both warned that AUKUS could trigger an arms race in the region. Competition between great powers and new military alliances contradict ASEAN's inclusive vision and threaten to [marginalise](#) the bloc as a centre of regional cooperation.

## Economic pillar of the ASEAN Community

South-east Asia has huge economic potential. The ASEAN countries have a combined GDP of US\$3 trillion, making them the world's [fifth biggest](#) economy if considered as a single entity, growing at an annual average rate of close to [5%](#) (before the pandemic). To fully unlock this potential, ASEAN's 2009 roadmap set the goal of creating an ASEAN economic community (AEC). Like the EU's single market, this is to be based on free – or at least freer – movement of goods, services, capital and persons. Although the 2015 deadline has long passed, the AEC remains a work in progress.

Some of the biggest progress has been on **tariffs**. Already in 1992, the [ASEAN free trade area](#) eliminated or reduced most tariffs between ASEAN countries, and under the AEC all but a handful of the remainder were phased out by 2018. ASEAN has also liberalised trade with the wider region, having concluded free trade agreements with China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New

Zealand. Moreover, the [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership](#), which took effect on 1 January 2020, has become the world's largest free trade area and will ultimately include all ASEAN member states and five of its FTA partners (India decided not to participate for now). By contrast, although ASEAN countries are aligning their technical standards and customs procedures, the number of intra-ASEAN **non-tariff trade barriers** remains stubbornly high and may even be [rising](#).

**Free movement of people** is not a realistic prospect for south-east Asia, given the huge income disparities in the region. Even with strict migration controls, richer countries such as Singapore and Malaysia already have huge numbers of migrants from their poorer neighbours. Only limited steps have been taken to facilitate skilled labour migration, for example, through [mutual recognition](#) of professional qualifications.

South-east Asian countries also lack transport and other connecting **infrastructure**. According to an estimate by the Asian Development Bank, ASEAN countries [require](#) a collective US\$2.76 trillion – or 5.7 of their GDP – in infrastructure spending between 2016 and 2030; with actual spending only about 2.3 % of GDP on infrastructure, needs remain immense. Through its Belt and Road Initiative, since 2013 China has invested [US\\$200 billion](#) in east Asia, mostly in ASEAN countries; however, even this is not nearly enough to bridge the immense [gap](#).

ASEAN countries trade much less with one another than with the rest of the world. In 2021, intra-ASEAN trade represented just [22 %](#) of the region's total international trade – little changed since 1993 ([19 %](#)) and very low compared to the EU, where around two-thirds of trade is within the bloc. To some extent, this reflects the types of goods exported by ASEAN countries. For example, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam are all major textiles exporters; their main export markets are in Europe and North America rather than other south-east Asian countries. However, this low level of trade also highlights the lack of real economic integration. A 2020 [survey](#) of EU companies operating in the region points to a similar conclusion: while 30 % of respondents felt they had benefited from the ASEAN Economic Community, just 9 % felt that ASEAN had achieved its goal of a single market and production base, while only 2 % were satisfied with the pace of integration. The survey identified harmonisation of standards, intra-ASEAN customs procedures and market access restrictions as the three main areas where more progress is needed.

## Socio-cultural pillar of the ASEAN Community

### Adding a human dimension to ASEAN?

The third pillar of the ASEAN Community covers policy areas such as environmental protection, education, culture and human rights, to complement the emphasis on security and the economy in the first two pillars. However, ASEAN's achievements in these areas are unimpressive, with a lack of specific targets, binding measures and funding. One of ASEAN's few **environmental instruments** is the 2002 [Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution](#), aimed at curbing the recurrent problem of smoke from Indonesian forest fires, which cause economic disruption and premature deaths in Indonesia and neighbouring countries. The agreement has led to no more than a few isolated [actions](#) and not many measurable improvements; 2015 was one of the [worst years](#) ever. The originally proclaimed aim of a '[haze-free ASEAN](#) by 2020' has definitely [failed](#). On climate change too, the region's response is almost entirely driven by national efforts.

Set up in 1997, the [ASEAN Foundation](#) promotes **people-to-people contacts** in the fields of education, culture and media. However, it operates on a much smaller scale than EU programmes such as Erasmus+; between 2014 and 2020, ASEAN Foundation projects reached just 74 500 young people, compared to [940 000](#) Erasmus+ participants in 2019 alone (and [640 000](#) in the pandemic year of 2020).

Although respect for **human rights** and democracy is enshrined in the ASEAN Charter, this is an area of particular weakness for ASEAN; no ASEAN countries are classified as 'free' by Freedom House's 2021 [ranking](#), and only Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore are 'partly free'. The

organisation lacks mechanisms to enforce human rights. Its Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights is a [weak](#) institution that has no mandate to investigate individual human rights cases.

Comprising 10 members nominated by member state governments and acting by consensus, the commission even failed to speak out on the [alleged genocide](#) of Myanmar's Rohingya. The [resolutions](#) of ASEAN's Interparliamentary Assembly also avoid contentious human rights issues. In line with ASEAN's principle of non-interference in internal affairs, south-east Asian governments mostly [avoid](#) public criticisms even of gross human rights abuses in each other's countries.

## ASEAN discussions following the putsch in Myanmar

The main exception to this rule is Myanmar, whose February 2021 [military coup](#) forced ASEAN leaders to act; in April 2021 they agreed on a [five-point consensus](#) (FPC) including a halt to violence, and an ASEAN-mediated dialogue. Despite failing to resolve the crisis in the following months, ASEAN did at least manage to adopt an unexpectedly strong [stance](#) by excluding junta leader Min Aung Hlaing from its October 2021 summit. ASEAN's Special Envoy on Myanmar Prak Sokhonn visited Myanmar in [March 2022](#) and [again](#) in the end of June/early July.

When ASEAN leaders met in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, from 8 to 13 November 2022, they published a [separate statement](#) – an 'ASEAN leaders' review and decision on the implementation of the five-point consensus' regarding Myanmar. This document underlines that – while little progress has been achieved in the implementation of the FPC – the FPC will remain ASEAN's valid reference and should be implemented in its entirety. It also confirms that for the time being, Myanmar will only be allowed to 'send non-political representation' to the ASEAN summits and the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting. It is highly likely that the issue of how to deal with Myanmar's military junta will also figure highly on the agenda of ASEAN's 2023 presidency, to be held by Indonesia.

## EU-ASEAN relations

### Fundamental differences and similarities

ASEAN and the EU are very different organisations. ASEAN's insistence on intergovernmental, consensus-based decision-making and non-interference contrasts with the EU countries' significant transfers of sovereignty to supranational institutions. South-east Asian countries cooperate through ASEAN but have not achieved deep integration. Whereas human rights and democracy are part of the EU's DNA, they are an area of weakness for ASEAN.

In spite of these differences, EU-ASEAN relations have deepened over time, building on the two regional blocs' shared commitment to rules-based multilateralism. [Informal contacts](#) began in **1972**, leading to the launch of formal relations in **1977** when the EU became an ASEAN dialogue partner, and a [cooperation agreement](#) in **1980**. Since **2015**, the EU has had a [dedicated mission](#) and an ambassador to ASEAN, based in Jakarta. The EU's September 2021 Indo-Pacific [strategy](#) acknowledges ASEAN's centrality and sees it as a key partner in an increasingly contested region. The EU's [Strategic Compass](#) approved by the Council on 21 March 2022 also urges the European Union to strengthen cooperation with strategic partners such as NATO, the UN and **regional partners**, including the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the African Union (AU) and **ASEAN**.

### Areas of cooperation

Relations are largely dominated by economic aspects. Taken as a whole, ASEAN is the EU's third-largest non-European trade partner after the US and China, while the EU is ASEAN's second-largest trade partner after China. EU-ASEAN [trade](#) in goods has almost tripled over the past two decades, reaching more than €215.9 billion in 2021, while their trade in services reached €93.5 billion (2019). The EU is by far the largest investor in ASEAN countries: In 2019, the foreign direct

investment (FDI) stocks into ASEAN reached €313.6 billion. ASEAN's investment in Europe also grew impressively to a total stock of over €144 billion in 2019. The EU's main exports to ASEAN are chemical products, machinery and transport equipment. The main imports from ASEAN to the EU are machinery and transport equipment, agricultural products as well as textiles and clothing.

In 2007, the EU and ASEAN launched talks on a **free trade agreement** but failed to make any progress. The EU has therefore opted for a [bilateral approach](#), though a region-to-region deal is still the long-term goal. So far, the EU has trade and investment agreements with two countries ([Singapore](#) and [Vietnam](#)), and is negotiating with [Indonesia](#) (talks with Thailand, Malaysia and the [Philippines](#) are currently on hold).

In the framework of the EU's 2021-2027 [multiannual financial framework](#) (MFF), EU support is foreseen both to ASEAN as such and to individual ASEAN member states: EU support to ASEAN as a regional organisation (including [support](#) to EU-ASEAN policy dialogue) will reach around €180 million during the current MFF; allocations to ASEAN member states are planned to reach €1.406 billion over the same period. The aim of this latter support is to promote the new Strategic Partnership with ASEAN, with a [focus](#) on green and inclusive sustainable development, decent work, sustainable development, good governance, human rights, security and resilience, the fight against sexual exploitation and cybercrime.

As these priorities suggest, the EU is now seeking to broaden its engagement with ASEAN beyond trade and traditional forms of aid. Its 2018 Connecting Europe and Asia [strategy](#) identifies **connectivity** as an area of cooperation. In June 2021, the two sides concluded [negotiations](#) on a comprehensive air transport agreement (ASEAN-EU CATA), the world's first-ever region-to-region **aviation agreement**. This agreement – which replaces more than 140 bilateral air services agreements – was [signed](#) on 17 October 2022 and once ratified will give EU airlines and ASEAN countries' access to each other's markets, as well as aligning safety and other standards. The EU's new [Global Gateway](#) plan could open the door to further initiatives in this field.

The EU's 2021 Indo-Pacific strategy lists several other priorities for the region, including **security and defence**, and the **green transition**. While there has been some progress on the latter area – the two sides have held [three dialogues](#) on sustainable development since 2017 – the EU (unlike China, Japan and the US) is not yet a significant security player in the region.

The EU, Canada and the UK are the only three of ASEAN's 11 official [dialogue partners](#) excluded from the East Asia Summit and the ADMM+. To date, the EU has only participated twice at the East Asia Summit (in [2017](#) and [2022](#)) and once at an ADMM+ ([2020](#)) as guest of the chair. However, a joint EU-German [project](#) aims to build security cooperation with six Indo-Pacific countries, including three ASEAN member states (Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam).

**The EU's [Strategic Compass](#)** stresses that 'with the Indo-Pacific becoming an increasingly important region, we will work with... ASEAN to enhance shared awareness and information exchange on violent extremism, Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear threats, cybersecurity, maritime security, transnational crime, humanitarian and disaster relief and crisis management'. Further down, the compass also proposes to cooperate on conflict prevention and resilience. It then goes on to say that 'with a view to full membership in ASEAN's Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus setting, we will seize every opportunity to engage in shared awareness activities with ASEAN and contribute to its effort to build pan Asian security arrangements. Working notably through the ASEAN Regional Forum, we will further enhance our security contribution and presence in the Indo-Pacific region'.

## EU-ASEAN strategic partnership

For several years, the EU had [aspired](#) to upgrade its status from ASEAN dialogue partner to ASEAN strategic partner. In 2019, Malaysia [identified](#) the EU's plans to restrict imports of palm oil-based biofuels as an obstacle, but in December 2020 the two sides finally [launched](#) a strategic partnership, while agreeing to deal with the palm oil issue separately through a joint working group, whose

[second meeting](#) took place on 28 June 2022. Apart from its [symbolic importance](#), the main practical effect of this upgrade has been that it has opened the door to full EU-ASEAN summits, the first of which is taking place on 14 December 2022 in Brussels, marking the 45th anniversary of formal relations. Given that all of ASEAN's other strategic partners participate in the East Asia Summit and ADMM+, the new partnership should also help the EU's bid to join these two bodies (one of the goals of the Indo-Pacific strategy), but this cannot be taken for granted given likely opposition from other participants.

## New plan of action and first EU-ASEAN summit at leaders' level

A new [plan of action](#) to implement the ASEAN-EU strategic partnership was adopted at the latest ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference (PMC) +1 with the EU. It replaces the previous ASEAN-EU plan of action (2018-2022). This new plan gives a comprehensive overview of all the bilateral activities that are already taking place or are envisaged for the period up to 2027.

Areas of activity are grouped in five sections: political and security cooperation, economic cooperation, socio-cultural cooperation, cross-pillar cooperation and 'follow up of this plan of action'. Matters that figure prominently under the first section are in particular the commitments to 'enhance ASEAN-EU cooperation in the ASEAN-led security architecture', to 'enhance maritime security cooperation' and to 'promote cooperation on human rights'.

Within the section on economic cooperation, facilitation of cross-border trade in the region, cooperation on supply chains and the strengthening of 'sustainable trade and investment relations taking into account the important role of raw materials' are featured prominently. Other matters in this section include cooperation on energy resilience, transport and digital economy (including cybersecurity) and food security.

The third section on socio-economic cooperation mentions in particular the cooperation on 'health, public health emergencies and pandemics', on gender equality, on disaster management and on global environmental challenges. The fourth section especially mentions the cooperation on connectivity, the narrowing of the development gap inside ASEAN and the promotion of safe cross-border travel.

The summit will also take up this last matter, underlining the importance of the recently signed Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement between the EU and ASEAN, which – as outlined above – will replace 140 existing bilateral agreements between the 27 EU Member States and the 10 ASEAN member states and is currently the biggest inter-regional air agreement concluded ever. It is expected that leaders will also officially endorse the new plan of action (2023-2027) and that a joint leaders' statement will be published; in line with the priorities of this new action plan, the statement will emphasise the need to intensify in particular the bilateral cooperation on security issues, trade and connectivity.

## The European Parliament and ASEAN

Parliament's October 2017 [resolution](#) on EU political relations with ASEAN supports efforts to achieve south-east Asian regional integration and calls for an EU-ASEAN strategic partnership. The European Parliament has observer status at the annual meetings of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA), where it is represented by its Delegation for relations with the countries of Southeast Asia and ASEAN ([DASE](#)). In February 2019, Parliament decided to appoint staff to represent it officially in Jakarta and manage EU-ASEAN parliamentary relations on the ground. In June 2021, the European Parliament and AIPA [held](#) their first Inter-Regional Parliamentary Dialogue, with discussions focusing on trade relations and actions to overcome the effects of the pandemic. In the margins of the 43th AIPA, the second European Parliament-ASEAN Interparliamentary Assembly dialogue took place in Phnom Penh on 23 November 2022.

The (new) plan of action, under its [point 1.9](#): 'Strengthen Institutional Relationships', aims to 'encourage linkages between the ASEAN Member States' Parliaments and the European Parliament (EP), as well as between the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA) and the EP'. In line with this plan, Parliament's DASE delegation also holds bilateral interparliamentary meetings (IPM) with parliaments from many ASEAN member states. Most recently, DASE [has held IPMs](#) with the Philippines and Singapore; IPMs with Thailand and Vietnam are planned for early December 2022.

Regarding the developments in Myanmar in particular, Parliament has adopted four resolutions since the military coup of 11 February 2021: [on the situation in Myanmar](#) on the day of the coup; on the [human rights situation](#) ... in Myanmar on 7 October 2021; on 10 March 2022 a resolution on Myanmar, [one year after the coup](#); and on 6 October 2022 on the [media crackdown](#) in Myanmar.

Vice-President Hautala is Chair of the [International Parliamentary Inquiry](#) (IPI), which on 2 November 2022 published a [report](#) on Time is not on our side – the failed international response to the Myanmar coup'.

## DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

© European Union, 2022.

Photo credits: © sakda2527 / Adobe Stock.

[eprs@ep.europa.eu](mailto:eprs@ep.europa.eu) (contact)

[www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu](http://www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu) (intranet)

[www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank) (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)