

From the RSIS Event Page: Abstract The concept of strategic autonomy, defined as “capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible”, is taking a growing importance in the European Union’s strategic thought. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has long emphasised the notions of resilience and centrality and is insisting that it does not want to be caught in the midst of great power competition amidst an increasingly polarised world. This workshop explores the relevance and convergence of these policies in the current strategic outlook and how they can be implemented practically in different realms such as maritime security, cyberspace and economic sovereignty. This workshop is co-organised by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) and the Center for Analysis, Planning and Strategy (CAPS), Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, France.

ASEAN Resilience and European Strategic Autonomy: Converging Operational Concepts?

Opening Remarks by Iwona Piórko, EU Ambassador to Singapore

Good Afternoon Ladies and Gentleman,

Distinguished Guests

My thanks to the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies for this timely event that brings together speakers from Europe and Asia.

I have only been in Singapore for two months. And in this short time there are already so many facets of the deep connections between Europe, Singapore and ASEAN that speak to/resonate with me.

[Allow me to recount just one of many. This weekend, my family and I visited Tiong Bahru. I was struck by the rich heritage as well as the history of this iconic neighbourhood. Nestled between Art Deco buildings is the Tiong Bahru Hawker Centre. The blend of an emblematic part of Singaporean life, the hawker culture, and an architectural style that first appeared in Europe creates an atmosphere that is truly unique and dynamic.]

Cooperation between the European Union and ASEAN makes us natural partners. Both of us believe in an open, inclusive and rules-based order. In December 2020, our relationship was elevated to a strategic partnership under Singapore's stewardship, which over the past three years was the coordinator of EU-ASEAN relations. This strategic partnership covers political, security, economic, environmental, climate and socio-cultural issues as well as connectivity.

If we look at the complex realities of our world today, the centre of gravity is moving towards the Indo-Pacific region in both geo-economic and geo-political terms. The EU recognises this. This is why we published just recently an EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific as did some of the EU Member States, notably Germany, France and The Netherlands.

This is the first time the EU presents an overall, regional strategy on how to engage different partners in such a wide economic and geographic, and political space as the Indo-Pacific. For the EU, this region stretches from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island States where the EU is already the top investor. We are also the leading development cooperation partner and one of the biggest trading partners in the Indo-Pacific region.

Together, we account for over 70% of the global trade in goods and services, and over 60% of foreign direct investment flows. Trade exchanges between our regions are the highest in the world, reaching EUR 1.5 trillion in 2019.

At the same time, geopolitical competition is intensifying in this region, creating significant strains on maritime routes, trade and supply chains and worsening the overall regional security landscape. Regional stability is increasingly challenged.

These developments have a direct impact on the EU's interests. Our more prominent presence seeks to bring about a further deepening and diversification of trade and investment ties and collaboration to help accelerate the green and digital transitions, and spur innovation and connectivity.

To become a geopolitical actor, the EU needs to be perceived as a political and security actor. The EU will seek to promote an open and rules-based regional security architecture, including secure sea lines of communication, capacity-building and enhanced naval presence in the Indo-Pacific. We will also support the capacity of partners to ensure maritime security and to tackle cybercrime.

The EU's Strategy on the Indo-Pacific is an invitation to our partners in the region to address together common challenges and uphold international law and defend values and principles to which we are committed. It is broad-based and inclusive.

We have identified seven priority areas where we would like to work together with our partners in the region: 1) Sustainable and inclusive prosperity; 2) Green transition; 3) Ocean governance; 4) Digital governance and partnerships; 5) Connectivity; 6) Security and defence; and 7) Human security.

The EU is a staunch supporter of ASEAN, its regional architecture and its centrality in the Indo-Pacific is reaffirmed in our strategy. We cooperate on maritime security, cybersecurity, counterterrorism, counterpiracy and freedom of navigation exercises, while reinforcing EU naval diplomacy in the region. Our approach is very close to ASEAN's own Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

On the economic front, the EU has long been ASEAN's number one development partner, but we are also its third trade partner, and third investor. Our exports to ASEAN countries grew from €54 billion in 2010 to €85 billion in 2019 and imports from ASEAN countries increased even more, from €72 billion in 2019 to €125 billion. But probably what many people may not know is that the EU is the largest global investor, with a total stock of €11.6 trillion, compared to the US with €6.8 trillion, China €1.9 trillion and €1.5 trillion for Japan.

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown to us both the strengths and weaknesses of inter-dependence, and exposed our vulnerabilities. A changing world is daunting, but also an opportunity to shape global systems through collaboration.

The pandemic has accelerated our digital future and the EU has stressed that we want to strengthen our digital partnerships, including with Singapore, and work together with regional partners on standards that will shape our digital environment. Science, technology, trade, data, investments are becoming sources and instruments of force in international politics. This is a very important shift which allows us to strengthen fields beyond security and defence.

The idea of **strategic autonomy** may have originated from the field of defence, but it applies to a wide range of issues from trade to climate to data. These are key not just for ASEAN but the wider Indo-Pacific region. Which is why it is crucial we collaborate for our collective benefit.

To conclude, the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy is our proactive outreach to our partners to address the global challenges we all face, from the climate emergency and biodiversity loss to regional as well as national challenges in transforming economies. Its implementation calls for concrete dialogue so we do not just stay in the realm of ambitions but work towards making this strategy real.

The EU's answer to these global challenges is: **Cooperation, not Confrontation.**

Thank you.