



Edited by Francesca Manenti

June 2022

# ASEAN MOMENTUM

THE RELAUNCH OF EU'S AND ITALY'S RELATIONS WITH  
SOUTHEAST ASIA

# ASEAN MOMENTUM: the relaunch of EU's and Italy's relations with Southeast Asia

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## | **Methodological remarks**

This paper intends to investigate the possible ways of improving the EU-ASEAN and Italy-ASEAN relations, in the context of the new centrality that Southeast Asia has gained in the last couple of years. In order to achieve this goal, the paper collects different perspectives from regional, European and Italian stakeholders as well as experts, who were involved in the project “ASEAN Momentum” that underlaid to the realization of this report. The project has been carried out in collaboration with the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.

It contains two sections. The first part analyzes the role of ASEAN in the Asian region, how it evolved according to the evolution of regional balances and which is the state of the heart of the relations with the Association with EU and Italy. This section has been integrated with the results of the webinar ASEAN Momentum: the relaunch of EU's and Italy's relations with Southeast Asia, that was held on 22th of June. The discussants invited to participate were:

- Lukas Gajdos, Deputy Head of Mission - Delegation of the EU to ASEAN.
- Alessandra Schiavo, Deputy Director General/Principal Director for the Countries of Asia and Oceania, Directorate General for Global Affairs - Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.
- Alizan Mahadi, Director of Research - Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.
- Rommanee Kananurak, M. me Ambassador of Thailand to Italy and Chair of ASEAN Committee in Rome.

CeSI really thanks the guest speakers for their participation and their contribution. The suggestions shared during the event have been crucial for completing the analysis presented in the following pages.

The second section provides the analysis of selected experts on four issues that represent strategic fields for ASEAN, EU and Italy to work on for shaping their partnership: security, digitalization, smart cities and sustainable development. The analysis collected in this paper have been validated in peer-to-peer closed-door workshops.

## | Introduction

ASEAN's journey started on August 8, 1967, when the five founding countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) formally set up the organization. The remaining five countries, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia, joined it in 1984, 1995, 1997 and 1999 respectively. The original aim of integration in the late 1960s was to enhance security cooperation in the region, which has remained a key part of the ASEAN agenda along its history. The objectives of the organization are based on three pillars: "to promote peace and regional stability"; "to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region"; "to stimulate active cooperation and mutual assistance in areas of common interest in the economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific and administrative fields". To understand why it became necessary, let us briefly analyse the historical context of those years. In the 1960s, Southeast Asia was composed of embryonic states in which the process of nation-building was weak or totally absent. The founding states of ASEAN also experienced a paradoxical situation: internationally recognised as states, they lacked domestic political legitimacy.

The advance of communism and the victory of the Vietcong in South Vietnam make the leaders of these countries fear further revolts and the expansion of subversive forces. It became clear to each of the founding countries of ASEAN that in order to resist and survive the turmoil of the time it was necessary to be able to count on additional allies, in addition to the Western countries most involved in the policy of

containment. In addition to protecting and fostering nation-building within the countries concerned, ASEAN was also the product of various reconciliation mechanisms that emerged around the 1960s. It should not be forgotten that the founding countries themselves were not on good terms with each other. Just think of the conflict between Malaysia and the Philippines over the territory of Sabah, on the island of Borneo, annexed to the federation of Malaysia in 1963 as a state and claimed by the Philippines as its former possession. Another factor that favoured the emergence of Asian regionalism was economic: in 1967, Asian economies were essentially agricultural and not very industrialized, still subject to unbalanced power relations with the Western powers. The construction of an Asian regionalism therefore also had, among its main objectives, that of fostering and accelerating economic growth. Lastly, a political factor must also be mentioned, namely the desire to break away from the logic of power dictated by the West and to present a united front in order to avoid being manipulated or exploited by the former colonizing countries. It was thus that the different reconciliation mechanisms and the will to protect their national construction led to the birth of ASEAN in 1967 with the Bangkok Declaration.

The economic crisis of 1997-1998 made it necessary to change and deepen relations between ASEAN members and their neighbors, leading to the birth of ASEAN+3, i.e. a political and economic dialogue between ASEAN, China, Japan and South Korea. The main goal of this new forum was to strengthen macroeconomic surveillance mechanisms, through the implementation of the ASEAN Surveillance Process (ASP) in 1998, and to create regional financial assistance mechanisms within ASEAN+3 such as the FMA, i.e.

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a monetary fund for the Asia region, which was supposed to prevent the emergence of further financial crises. Moreover, in 1997, heads of each member state adopted the ASEAN Vision 2020 as a means for the realization of a single ASEAN community providing peace and stability, closer economic integration, human and sustainable development, cultural heritage and the environment, among other goals. Formalized in 2003, the ASEAN Vision 2020 established three pillars of a single ASEAN community: Political-Security Community (APSC), Economic Community (AEC) and Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). The bloc has since developed two blueprints under each of the three pillars that outline the goals and principles, institutional bodies and mechanisms and initiatives for the completion of each one.

The organization's areas of intervention and membership have expanded considerably over the years. Through more than 50 years of economic, political, security and social integration initiatives, ASEAN has developed a complex and multifaceted institutional and governance framework to carry out its activities. With the adoption of the “ASEAN Charter” (15 December 2008), the association has taken an important step towards becoming a true community and transformed it into a legal entity. The charter is a legally binding document that codified norms, rules and values while setting clear targets for ASEAN and creating accountability and compliance mechanisms. The Charter stated ASEAN's purposes and principles, outlined different ASEAN organs and their functions, set decision-making procedures and processes, created a dispute settlement system, and described its relationship with external and multilateral dialogue partners. It is important to note that under the Charter, ASEAN maintained the principles of non-

interference in the internal affairs of member states and consensus-based decision-making: a deliberate decision from ASEAN leaders to avoid creating a strong supranational body. ASEAN's increasingly complex organizational structure and principles create a unique set of trade-offs in the development and implementation of initiatives. The institutional flexibilities, monetary limitations and ASEAN's principle of non-interference and consensus decision-making establish a norm for a unique decision-making style which is oftentimes termed as the "ASEAN Way". Under this principle, ASEAN has had to constantly balance its commitment to national sovereignty and non-interference with the power and influence of a supranational body. Since its foundation, ASEAN has always played an important stabilizing role in Southeast Asia and East Asia in general. Today ASEAN has acquired a new centrality in the global geopolitical context. However, ASEAN's capacity to offer a collective diplomatic response to the new geopolitics is now under scrutiny. Membership expansion from the group's original five states has made reconciling national positions difficult. Security threats have expanded from territorial conflicts and domestic rebellions to pandemics, climate crises, and terrorism, imposing new burdens on ASEAN's limited resources.

## The new centrality of Southeast Asia

Today, the global landscape is characterized by the confrontation between the US great power and the emerging Chinese giant. Commercial and geopolitical tensions are rising between Washington and Beijing, not least because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The US wants to maintain its role as a hegemonic commercial, strategic, and military power, while China, which has been expanding economically over the past two decades, wants to increase its strategic influence and weight globally. The commercial and geopolitical dimensions are increasingly intertwined and the international context is now increasingly characterized by the rift between the US and China.

The Southeast Asian region is now at the center of this clash for various geographical, geopolitical and economic reasons. Geographically, the ASEAN countries are China's neighbours, overlooking the Indo-Pacific, a key transit area for global trade and in particular for Chinese trade. Suffice it to say that about 80% of Beijing's maritime trade passes through the Straits of Malacca between Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. ASEAN is at the heart of Asia's Pacific coast and thus represents a crucial strategic outpost for both China's ambitions and the US strategy in the Indo-Pacific. With its geographical relevance, ASEAN therefore also plays a crucial geopolitical role. Beijing wants to maintain good relations with the countries in the region to increase its influence in the Pacific and the world. The US, on the other hand, wants to contain China's expansion and strengthen its position in

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Asia, and is therefore banking on ASEAN countries to counterbalance Beijing. The Southeast Asian nations are thus in a very delicate position, but by maintaining a neutral approach they have so far managed to balance the interests of the two giants and also strengthen their geopolitical status. On the side of the economic and trade confrontation between the US and China, then, ASEAN is in a peculiar situation. In recent years, in order to circumvent Washington and Beijing's tariffs, many companies have transferred production capacity to Southeast Asia (Vietnam in particular) with the aim of diversifying production and reducing dependence on Chinese supply chains in Asia. This trend was then accelerated by the pandemic, which prompted many governments and companies to focus on production diversification to minimize the impact of global shocks. Economically, therefore, ASEAN also found itself at the center of the clash between the two giants, but with its dynamism and openness it was able to strike a balance between the two sides and even benefit from the skirmishes between the two powers. Aware of the importance of the ASEAN countries, both Washington and Beijing have invested heavily in strengthening ties with the region. After the tensions of the Cold War, China focused strongly on Southeast Asia, soon becoming a strategic partner of ASEAN and finalizing an ambitious free trade agreement in the early 2000s. Since 2013 then, with its Belt & Road Initiative, China has directed billions of dollars to strengthening regional infrastructure in East Asia, also significantly increasing trade flows with countries in the region. Confirming this growing relationship, in early 2020 ASEAN became China's largest trading partner, bypassing the European Union and the United States. Moreover, Chinese citizens are the largest group of tourists visiting Southeast Asia each year,

contributing significantly to the economies of some countries that rely heavily on this sector, such as Thailand.

On the other hand, the US was the main partner of the ASEAN countries during the Cold War period, but has struggled to recalibrate its role over the past two decades. With his 'Pivot to Asia' Obama had tried to maintain US influence in the region and balance China by focusing on free markets and multilateralism with initiatives such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Instead, Trump opted for a completely different, confrontational and unilateral approach, withdrawing the US from the TPP and pursuing a power politics in the Asian continent, demonstrating his administration's lack of attention to that part of the world. Nevertheless, the US government apparatus continues to place great emphasis on the Indo-Pacific region, cultivating commercial, strategic, and military relations with many countries in the region. Biden will try to recover Obama's strategy and revive the US role in the Pacific, but much has changed since 2016 and it will not be an easy challenge for the new government in office from January 2021. In the clash between the two great powers, the Southeast Asian nations are pursuing a neutral approach, aimed at cultivating relations with both the US and China with the aim of not getting crushed in their bipolar dispute. With Beijing, the ASEAN countries are open to dialogue and cooperation, but remain, albeit with some differences in approach, united on the geopolitical side, as in the case of the South China Sea, where several Southeast Asian nations are grappling with long-standing territorial disputes. Indeed, many Southeast Asian countries face a huge test for their peace and security in the form of the South China Sea dispute, which might be one of the most complicated issues ASEAN has faced. This is a

critical region because it serves the economic interests of the countries competing for claims.

As pointed out by Alizan Mahadi the Ukraine war is creating new challenges for ASEAN to matter as Association. In fact, it is affecting economies, food security, the efforts to eradicate poverty as well as disrupting the supply chains, thus extending the uncertainty created by two years of pandemic. Despite that, ASEAN is still the fifth largest economy in the world and there is a lot of optimism for increasing productivity and innovation. Even during the years of the pandemic, investments continue to rise in the region, from 11.9% in 2019 to 13.7% in 2020. The region is already making some plans for recovery and this includes the ASEAN comprehensive recovery framework. The focus is not only on immediate recovery, but it has also a forward-looking approach that includes focus areas such as digital transformation and transition to sustainable development and resilience to drive the economy moving forward. So this is again in line with this cautious optimism on the region that there is a promise for the region despite these hard times. Progress has been made toward the Asian economic Community Blueprint 2025 and the region also faces a challenge of the need for further integration in a time where there is a global trend of globalization occurring across the world.

### **EU- ASEAN relations**

Although the incisiveness and effectiveness of its action is inhibited by various limitations, ASEAN is currently one of the most dynamic Asian associations. First of all, it has acted as a driving force for the implementation of other forms of

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regional cooperation, such as the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and the East Asia Community. In addition, ASEAN also plays a key role as a privileged interlocutor of the region's two major economic powers, China and Japan. The Indo-Pacific is rapidly evolving and becoming the center of gravity in terms of trade, economic interaction, demographics and security challenges. Southeast Asia, represents a market of utmost interest: the 10 ASEAN countries are home to more than 650 million people, 70% of whom are of working age and 65% of whom will be part of the middle class in 2030 (they were 29% in 2010); their economy has reached a total value of almost 3. trillion dollars in 2018, should become the 4th world economy by 2030, with a population planned to reach almost 700 million people, as a result of a major push to urbanization (+ 14%) and digital transition in the field of production, in both consumptions and services. moreover, these numbers are destined to grow further and rapidly, since the OECD estimates speak for ASEAN of an average growth of more than 5% in the coming years. The growing geopolitical and geo-economic importance of ASEAN is therefore not surprising.

ASEAN is gaining an increasingly central role also for European Union's interest. The trade war between the US and China, together with the severe consequences of the pandemic, are helping to reshape the global trade and geopolitical landscape. In Europe as well as in Asia, political elites are looking for new trade partnerships in order to cope with the upheavals in the economic balance of recent years. In this regard, Italy and Europe are looking with increasing interest at the Indo-Pacific region, which is considered a young, dynamic and opportunity-rich area. The EU is forging closer ties with Southeast Asian countries and is promoting

regional integration being a strong economic player in Southeast Asia and an important development aid donor, working to foster institution-building, democracy, good governance and human rights. The EU and ASEAN are partners who share the same belief in rules-based multilateralism in a challenging geopolitical context. Over the course of four decades, ASEAN and the EU have established a strong relationship, mainly in trade and economic relations. The EU is ASEAN's second-largest partner, with a 13% share of ASEAN's total trade with the world. ASEAN is the EU's third largest external partner, after the USA and China. The EU-ASEAN partnership, which celebrates its 45th anniversary this year and was upgraded to a strategic partnership in 2020, is based on shared values and interests and gives voice to the EU's commitments to contribute to the stability, security, prosperity and sustainable development of the region, in line with the principles of democracy, rule of law, human rights and international law.

Relations between the EU and ASEAN officially started in 1972. Since the creation of ASEAN in 1967, the evolution of these relations can be divided into three main phases. A first phase from 1967 to 1972, during which there is a lack of real formal relations between the two organizations, but there are bilateral relations between the various member states. During this decade, Europe preferred to focus on its own regional construction and internal stability, turning its interest and attention to important partners such as the United States, Japan or the Far East. ASEAN, on the other hand, was still considered a hot zone, made up of countries with an unstable political situation and an economy that is not yet fully developed and consequently of little interest to

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Europe. During this first phase, ASEAN also concentrated all its energies on conflict resolution and reconciliation policy. Moreover, the latter has not yet developed a specific policy towards Brussels. The second phase, from 1972 to 1980, saw relations between the EU and ASEAN formalize. ASEAN set up a Special Coordination Committee (SCCAN) with the aim of making contact with the EU and trying to conclude economic agreements with the latter, which was increasingly seen as an important partner for the export of goods. It is precisely the birth of this Committee that allows for the institutionalization and formalization of strategic, political and economic relations between the two entities. The third phase that begins in 1980 and reaches the present day is characterized by numerous events, first and foremost the end of the Cold War, which, by redefining the global arena, influenced the shaping of the relations between Europe and Southeast Asia. The 2000s are characterized by the intensification of cooperation relations between ASEAN and Europe. In 2012, the EU signed the ASEAN Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, and in 2014, the two sides held ministerial meetings with the aim of further strengthening their relations and strategic partnerships. Also in the same year, to underline their diplomatic as well as strategic and commercial rapprochement, the position of EU Ambassador to ASEAN was formalized and he took office in Jakarta a year later. In 2015, the EU's High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy and the European Commission issued a joint statement on the subject of the EU and ASEAN, thanks to which relations between these two bodies were taken to the next level, calling for closer cooperation especially on issues of diplomacy and policy. These partnership relations are increasingly important. From trade to human rights via environmental protection to internal

security, the EU wants to actively participate in the ASEAN regional integration process. Several bodies have so far been set up by ASEAN and the EU: the Cooperation Committee, the ASEAN Committee in Brussels and the EU-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, to name but a few.

The ASEAN-EU Blue Book, published annually illustrates the activities and major results of ASEAN-EU cooperation programs under all three ASEAN Community Pillars, demonstrating how the strategic partnership forged by ASEAN and the EU remains “relevant, timely, and meaningful.” ASEAN and EU launched the ASEAN-EU Blue Book 2022, and the highlights include: a focus on the infrastructural, digital and human connectivity with the launch of the Smart Green ASEAN cities program to support and complement ongoing initiatives to find green and smart solutions for ASEAN cities; a focus on the sustainable development with a series of development cooperation projects that aim to ensure a green and sustainable recovery; a focus to economic growth with the introduction of two new tools, the ASEAN Trade Repository and ASEAN Solution for Investment, Services and Trade to support stronger intra-ASEAN trade; finally a focus on the security and a joint cooperation against COVID-19.

The upgrading of EU-ASEAN relations from a dialogue partnership to a strategic partnership in December 2020 marked a turning point in their diplomatic relations, signifying not only that the previous donor-recipient dynamics have disappeared, but that both sides now seem to need each other more than ever. Facing the intensifying major-power rivalry, ASEAN needs to expand its strategic space by diversifying its external partners. The EU is

perceived differently from US because the EU approach are not treaty-based, threat-driven and security-oriented in the region as US is. With the changing geopolitical dynamics and redefinition of US influence worldwide, the EU faces multiple challenges and opportunities in Southeast Asia. The impact of China's economic and political growth in Asia and the continuation of American strategic interests also have important consequences for Europe, which finds itself looking for its own room in Southeast Asia, where the two superpowers are now focusing their attention.

EU is an important economic partner for ASEAN and Asia in general, but it also has various dialogues and cooperation with them in the security sphere. Unlike the United States, Europe has not, since decolonization, imposed a continuous and significant military presence and cannot currently compete with the American military presence in Asia. It is precisely this element that allows Europe to exert a form of soft power over Asia and the ASEAN members, playing an important role from a diplomatic point of view, especially in conflict resolution and peace management. Europe's presence in Asia as a soft power actor allows it to act as a mediator in the event of diplomatic tensions or security crises. It is also important to emphasize that Europe is not perceived by Asian states as a threat comparable to the United States or China, a factor that allows the latter to have less tense diplomatic dialogues.

As pointed out by Lukas Gajdos, being the two most successful integration projects, ASEAN and EU can be considered natural partners for cooperation. For assessing the strength of the current relation, one particular methodology is to look at our economic ties, which are very

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robust. The European Union is the third largest trading partner of ASEAN as of 2020, behind China and the US, and also the third largest source of foreign direct investment for the region, yet again behind the US and China. However, it's not only economic cooperation, because the EU has much more experience with its own integration process and a lot of know how to share. While respecting the fact that ASEAN has its own history and its own processes, EU can set up mutually beneficial exchanges in a number of policy areas. This is what makes EU-ASEAN such unique partners, there are as many as 20 active policy dialogues. These dialogues include environment and climate change, circular economy, sustainable development, green technology as one package. They also engage on gender equality, safe migration, and labor rights, human rights, trade and business, digital economy and society, road transport, fisheries, energy, maritime transport, science and research, COVID-19, transnational crime and security, maritime security and security and defense. On top of these policy dialogues, there are an high number of dedicated regional initiatives aimed at supporting ASEAN to attain its Sustainable Development Goals. All of this translates into some 250 million euro of funding, that makes EU the ASEAN dialogue partner that contributes the most in this direction to ASEAN comprehensive development.

However, despite the positive framework, security ties are less robust compared to the cooperation in the development and economic field. Stability is crucial for ASEAN for growing. In a context like the Indo-Pacific, where the geopolitical rivalry among regional and international powers has grown over the past few years, these geostrategic developments are bringing very complex challenges for

Southeast Asia. The center of gravity of the world is shifting closer and closer to Southeast Asia. The geopolitical competition, intensifying territorial and maritime disputes, unprecedented increases in military spending and all the reverberations and ramifications of this intensified rivalry are being felt well beyond the region.

ASEAN needs to continue to evolve and continue to work with strategic and development partners to achieve the potential and promise of the region that we mentioned. In this context the European Union has established a relationship with ASEAN on economic, trade and political levels for more than four decades. as strategic Partners to focus on achieving a green and inclusive sustainable development and sustainable connectivity that is very much in line with the ASEAN vision that he highlighted earlier and is also in line the Comprehensive Recovery Framework. In this context, he said, it's always looking for concrete mechanisms for cooperation. More specifically, functional economic and development cooperation to support economic recovery provides a constructive opportunity for strategic engagement in the region. Indeed, it is essential to continue to build regional blocks with shared goals to deeper meaningful inter-regional cooperation.

### **Italy - ASEAN relations**

After Germany, Italy (and France) became ASEAN Development Partners, highlighting our country's intention to focus on Southeast Asia. Since President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella's first visit to the ASEAN Secretariat in 2015, Italy has been committed to strengthening relations with the region. Through the organization of meetings and

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events, representatives of Italian and ASEAN institutions have worked to foster dialogue and trade between the two sides. In 2015, Italy established the ‘Italy-ASEAN Association’ as a platform to provide greater awareness, particularly for Italian private sector and businesses, on trade and investment opportunities in ASEAN, as well as a platform for Italy to understand and work with ASEAN and its Member States. Also from a commercial point of view, relations between Italy and ASEAN have grown in recent years. According to data from the ASEAN General Secretariat, from 2009 to 2019, Italian exports to ASEAN countries increased from \$7.14 billion to \$13.29 billion, while imports increased from \$5.27 billion to \$9.65 billion. The main Italian goods exported included machinery, equipment and chemical products, while ASEAN countries exported mainly computers, electronic products and foodstuffs to Italy. However, it is worth noting that the volume of trade between Italy and ASEAN is still quite low, especially in relation to other European countries. The ASEAN bloc is Italy's 14th trading partner in terms of exports, imports and foreign direct investments, while Italy is over 20th among ASEAN partners, far behind Germany, France, the UK and even the Netherlands and Switzerland. As regard the socio-cultural cooperation, in the last few years, Italy has funded projects over EUR 3 million for scientific cooperation, scholarships and traineeships for ASEAN Member States. Italy has also committed financial support for archaeological cooperation in Indonesia, Viet Nam, Myanmar and Thailand. In supporting capacity building for officials of ASEAN Member States and ASEAN Secretariat, Italy has been providing several training courses on various topics, including disaster risk reduction and management, diplomacy, environmental protection in peace operations as well as protection and

preservation of cultural heritage. In March to April 2021, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, in collaboration with the ASEAN Committee in Rome (ACR), the Italy-ASEAN Association, and other stakeholders, organised the 1st Youth Conference on ASEAN and Italy, which offered high-level trainings on diplomacy and international relations for young delegates from ASEAN and Italy virtually. Italy, through its development agency, the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), has been assisting several AMS, namely Myanmar, the Philippines, and Viet Nam, in peacebuilding, conflict prevention and resolution, agriculture, as well as statistical capacity building. In November 2020, AICS' office in Myanmar has been extended to cover cooperation activities in neighboring Viet Nam, Lao , and Cambodia. As we said, in September 2020, Italy was awarded the role of “ASEAN Development Partner”, crowning a process of rapprochement successfully pursued in recent years. This prestigious title implies greater proximity between the parties on various areas: connectivity, combating climate change and sustainable development, natural disaster management, protection of the cultural heritage, strengthening the role of women, maintaining peace and limiting the spread of Covid-19. The ASEAN-Italy Development Partnership was institutionalized through the convening of the First ASEAN-Italy Development Partnership Committee (AI-DPC) Meeting on 19 April 2021 via videoconference. The Meeting exchanged views on the potential areas of ASEAN-Italy cooperation, including projects/activities to support ASEAN's priorities across the three pillars of the ASEAN Community and the implementation of ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework. Furthermore, Italy announced its intention to

contribute EUR 2.5 million to the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund to support ASEAN's efforts in this regard. Italy has excellent political and economic relations with the 10 countries of the bloc. Italy also recognizes the merit of ASEAN as a positive example of multilateralism based on respect for international law, and aims to deepen relations with the region also in the security field. Just after accepting his candidacy as Development Partner, a meeting was held between the parties' representatives to discuss cross-border security issues. On this occasion, Italy undertook to work with ASEAN countries on capacity-building operations against terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking and cybercrime. Among the most important events of this year, there is the High-Level Dialogue on ASEAN-Italy Economic Relations. This is the reference event in the ASEAN region for the strengthening of economic and strategic ties between the ASEAN countries and Italy. The first five editions (Jakarta (2017), Singapore (2018), Hanoi (2019) and the 2020-2021 digital editions) brought together over 2,000 Presidents and CEOs of companies, ministers and institutional leaders from ASEAN and Italy. In 2022, it will be held on 5 and 6 July in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, with a hybrid physical-digital event, where the most cutting-edge themes will be addressed, including:

- ASEAN's macroeconomic outlook in the post-pandemic scenario
- Green technologies for a sustainable future
- E-economy, smart technologies and value chains 4.0
- Aerospace and Security for Resilience
- Investment opportunities and cooperation instruments between Italy and ASEAN countries.

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The partnership, therefore, does not represent a point of arrival, but a starting point to improve and deepen political, economic and cultural relations between Italy and the Southeast Asian countries.

As Alessandra Schiavo underlined, there is an ever growing attention that Italy devotes to ASEAN. The spillovers of the Ukrainian war, make it even more essential that Italy strengthen and use all possible regional fora, such as ASEAN, as tools to enhance peace, security and protect dialogue. Italy, indeed, attached a very profound importance to the development of its relationships with ASEAN, both as a whole organization and with its single components. And there is no doubt that ASEAN has become a key partner in the Indo Pacific, a vast, very diversified, strategic micro area regroup in countries which represent a considerable quarter of the world's population, and where there are some of the largest and fastest-growing economies of our planet. Despite having been severely hit by the pandemic, ASEAN is expected to recover and grow faster than the world's average. Before the war, GDP of the region was forecasted to expand by around 5% every year, even in 2020, which was the most critical year in terms of economic performance for the whole planet, at least in the most recent years. ASEAN countries had the second least negative impact in exports at the global level, following only China. Not only that, among the European Big Five (Italy, France, UK, Germany, Spain) Italy is the country that shows to have suffered the smallest impact from the COVID-19 crisis in its relationships with ASEAN. And despite the enormous challenges that the pandemic is exerted, in 2020, our exports from ASEAN countries decreased by 11.4% while those of the other big four shrank by a minimum of almost 13% to a maximum of over 22%. Our

imports decreased by about 7.5% The resilience of the bilateral trade that Italy have with ASEAN countries is yet another confirmation that the relationships are getting deeper and stronger. Last June tense in Jakarta, Italian Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Manuel Stefano, and the ASEAN Deputy Secretary General, Mr. Singh, co-chaired the second joint committee on Italy-ASEAN development partnership, and agreed upon the new steps forwards. They adopted a very concrete and substantial document outlining 62 practical cooperation areas, the so called PCAs for the period 2020 to 2026. PCAs reaffirm the endeavors to cooperate with ASEAN allies and friends in a wide range of fields such as peace and security, good governance and human rights, trade, investment and private sector development, science, technology and innovation, information communications technology, people to people exchanges, disaster manager, management and humanitarian assistance, health, environment and climate change, culture connectivity and sustainable development. As Ms. Schiavo said, the approach of working hand in hand with ASEAN allies and counterparts as already allowed Italy to put in place many important projects with the development partnership, and to tailor-make many others related to cyber security, counterterrorism, and police cooperation. This cooperation is moving in the direction of the green energy transition, connectivity, and digitalization, where Italy has concrete a profound knowledge that would like to share with ASEAN partners. Secondly, Italy intends to contribute, also within the EU, to build lasting and human-centric connectivity to give further impulse to the multiplication of people-to-people projects. Thirdly, cultural cooperation plays a very important role in the development partnership. Last year, the ASEAN countries benefitted from

a training initiative on the protection of cultural heritage against illicit trafficking. As for development cooperation, Ms. Schiavo also stress the engagement in the fight against COVID-19 in Southeast Asia, which was also one of the most affected areas in the words in the framework of G 20. In this regard, Italy donated 10 million vaccines dose to ASEAN countries, Indonesia, and Cambodia. To conclude, she highlighted the important role that civil societies and think tanks brought from Italy and ASEAN countries, not only for the implementation, but also for the future of continuous progress for the developments, partnership.

## **Digitalizing to harness the potential of ASEAN cities**

By Carlo Palleschi<sup>1</sup>

Urbanization is a key trend when it comes to explore the future of ASEAN countries, in terms of both socio-economic development and well-being of the populations, as well as when assessing the environmental impact of cities and their contribution to technological progress. Indeed, out of ASEAN's over 630 million population, nearly 300 million people live in urban areas and more than 25 percent live in cities with over one million inhabitants. An additional 70 million people are expected to live in urban areas in ASEAN by 2025. By 2050, six out of 10 people in the region will be urban dwellers, according to the UN Environment Program. Comparing the urban share of country's population in 2015 and the prevision for 2025, Brunei, the most urbanized country after Singapore, will move from 77 percent to 80 percent, Malaysia from 74 percent to 80 percent, Indonesia from 53 percent to 60 percent, Thailand from 48 to 55, Vietnam from 34 percent to 41 percent, Lao PDR from 33 percent to 40 percent, Myanmar from 30 percent to 33 percent and Cambodia, the less urbanized country, from 22 percent to 27 percent. These projections clearly show that urbanization is a process which affects and will continue affecting all ASEAN countries regardless their size, impacting both on largest countries, such as Indonesia, and smallest ones, such as Lao PDR or Cambodia. Urban growth has gone hand in hand in ASEAN countries with a growing population

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**Urban growth is also driven by the growing importance and development of satellite regions to ASEAN's mega-cities, which represents another factor attractiveness for rural residents**

density: cities like Manila, Bangkok, and Jakarta are also some of the world's most densely populated urban agglomerations. ASEAN urbanization is primarily driven by the migration of agricultural workers to industrial and services. Indeed, the ongoing industrialization process encourages locals to migrate from the countryside to cities, resulting in a steady increase in urban dwellers. Furthermore, urban growth is also driven by the growing importance and development of satellite regions to ASEAN's mega-cities, which represents another factor attractiveness for rural residents.

This significant shift has the potential to dramatically change the economic structure of ASEAN countries, generating additional challenges as well as new opportunities to be harnessed. On the one hand, urban agglomerations can increase productivity and trade, and thus trigger economic growth: when firms and workers are clustered in cities, costs of production may decline due to positive spillover effects, economies of scale and a higher degree of connectivity between workers and firms. This can lead to the formation of economic clusters, especially in the light of the fact that ASEAN cities are usually strategically located, benefitting from the increase of cross-border trade and logistics. This results in a positive effect on trade: ASEAN cities can play a key role in increasing intra-industry and intra-sector trade, boosting value addition, enhancing industrial competitiveness and fostering regional value chains. It is estimated that by 2025, ASEAN primary cities, such as Jakarta, Manila, Yangon, Ho Chi Minh City, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore will host 10 percent of the population but will produce 35 percent of the GDP. On the other hand, urbanization can turn out to be an obstacle

rather than an opportunity: if unmanaged, such rapid growth can occur at detrimental of energy efficiency, overburdened public utility systems -including water and sanitation- and chronic traffic congestion, not to mention growing social and economic inequalities. Furthermore, from an environmental perspective, urbanization in ASEAN is equally worrisome: on the mitigation side, while ASEAN's urban population has grown by around 3 percent annually, the rate of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions has increased by 6.1 percent annually, and by 2025, the amount of waste volume in ASEAN will increase by 150 percent from 1995 levels. Many ASEAN cities are also among the world's cities most exposed to natural disasters and environmental concerns, particularly from rising sea levels as a result of climate change.

Indeed, rapid urbanization would place increasing pressures on most of ASEAN cities, that may not be adequately equipped to deal with a growing range of potential threats. This unprecedented growth urges local and international policymakers to look at urbanization in ASEAN countries not only as a local issue, but rather as a priority which ultimately hinges upon the need to turn these cities into habitable, sustainable, and resilient urban environments. Indeed, ASEAN cities play a critical role in the realization of the ASEAN Economic Community, and connectivity in ASEAN countries can be really improved only if cities are able to respond effectively to the negative effects of urbanization, by overcoming, for instance, the problems related to traffic congestion which is essential to supporting connectivity of people, goods, and services, as well as by reducing the pressure on urban waste management systems. Against this backdrop, given the importance that ASEAN cities can play as drivers of trade, and -consequently- of growth and

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development, it is crucial for ASEAN countries to undertake a deep, strategic process of urban restructuring, to manage and anticipate urbanization in sustainable, inclusive and forward-looking fashion.

To achieve such ambitious aim, ASEAN countries can use technology as an enabler to build functional cities and thus spur positive changes in terms of socio-economic development and wellbeing for the whole society. The Covid-19 pandemic has further accelerated the need for ASEAN cities to adopt smart solutions to address main urban challenges and lay the foundations for long-term sound urban planning. In this regard, a caveat should be always borne in mind: urban technologies are neither the only solution nor the perfect solution, are though a powerful tool capable, if properly combined with sound policies and wide partnership, to generate positive and cost-effective transformations. Several technological innovations have been widely adopted by ASEAN cities but there is still large room to further foster the application of technology to urban challenges. In fact, it is estimated that disruptive technologies including cloud computing, the Internet of Things (IoT), open data and big data, have the potential to generate between US\$220-US\$625 billion in annual economic impact in ASEAN by 2030, while potentially displacing 12-17 million non-farm jobs in ASEAN from 2015 to 2030. Smart cities, as defined by the OECD, are initiatives or approaches that effectively leverage digitalization to boost citizen well-being and deliver more efficient, sustainable and inclusive urban services and environments as part of a collaborative, multi-stakeholder process.

Embarking on this path, ASEAN can build effective smart

cities, where traditional networks and services are made more efficient thanks to the use of digital solutions. Investing in smart city solutions means creating smarter urban transport networks, upgraded water supply and waste disposal facilities and more efficient ways to light and heat buildings. It also means a more interactive and responsive city administration, safer public spaces and meeting the needs of an ageing population. ASEAN Member States (AMS) are well aware of the potential of smart solutions to steer urbanization towards a sustainable path, as demonstrated by the wide range of initiatives that they have undertaken so far. For instance, Singapore, a pioneer city in the region in the smart urban solutions, launched in 2014 the Smart Nation initiative, a program aimed at exploring digital technologies to empower the economy and improve public services. Singapore was lauded in the Roland Berger's Digital Inclusion Index for its inclusive smart measures such as free public WiFi and financial assistance schemes for digital skills training, which have been credited with supporting wider digital adoption, and narrowing the digital divide. Other countries in the region, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, have also mobilized smart city strategies as a national plan. In 2017, Indonesia launched the 100 Smart Cities Movement to address urbanization issues and improve the quality of life of urban citizens, with the aim of creating 100 smart cities within the country by 2045, focusing on pillars such as information, infrastructure, and implementation. Similarly, Malaysia's government recently spearheaded the Malaysia Smart City Framework (MSCF) to present a national document to uphold Malaysia's innovative city development, building on 6 main pillars: smart economy, smart living, smart environment, smart people, smart government, smart mobility and smart digital infrastructure. Thailand has also

been looking at smart urban planning as a key element to boost investment and connectivity especially along the Eastern Economic Corridor.

Against this backdrop of growing importance of smart cities, at the 32nd ASEAN Summit on 28 April 2018, ASEAN leaders established the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN), a collaborative platform where cities from the ten AMS can work together towards the common goal of building smart and sustainable urban development. This network involves 26 ASCN Pilot Cities, including Bandar Seri Begawan (Brunei), Phnom Penh (Cambodia), Jakarta (Indonesia), Vientiane (Laos), Johor Bahru (Malesia), Kuala Lumpur (Malesia), Yangon (Myanmar), Manila (Philippines), Singapore (Singapore), Bangkok (Thailand), Hanoi (Vietnam), and Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam). In particular, the ASCN aims to facilitate cooperation on smart cities development, exploring potential complementarities, sharing best practices, and developing action plans for smart city development from 2018 to 2025, in line with to with the ASEAN Community Vision 2025. Another important area where ASEAN countries have aimed to step up cooperation through this platform is the enhancement of connections with the private sectors. Indeed, capitalizing on ASCN connections, pilot cities will be linked up with private sector solution providers to kick-start practical and commercially viable projects with tangible outcomes. Thirdly, ASCN has the potential to pair up AMS with specific external partners on a voluntary basis, and form mutually beneficial partnerships to drive smart cities development, while promoting better understanding between ASEAN and its external partners at the cities level. The role of technology for urban development is also significantly stressed in the ASEAN Sustainable

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**ASEAN cities could highly benefit, for instance, from developing traffic command and control centers, public transit information and management, digital public transit payment or smart parking systems**

Urbanization Strategy (ASUS), which focuses on promoting actions enabling urban areas to capture the benefits of agglomerations, while building resilience to the associated challenges and aligning with ASCN in terms of smart solutions. The ASCN, as well as the ASUS, are extremely important as they represent a collective regional response to boost technological development across the entire area, coordinating strategies and avoiding scattered projects. More specifically, smart solutions can radically improve human mobility and connectivity in ASEAN cities, even without necessarily waiting for next-generation technologies but relying on the current 4G or broadband. ASEAN cities could highly benefit, for instance, from developing traffic command and control centers, public transit information and management, digital public transit payment or smart parking systems, which could provide real-time data and local turn-by-turn guidance, reducing search traffic and vehicle emissions. Furthermore, mobility would be positively impacted by installing intelligent traffic lights and real-time road navigation or by improving car and bike sharing, electric and eventually autonomous vehicles as well as e-hailing systems. The application of technologies to mobility is clearly stated in many ASEAN cities' action plans. For instance, the city of Mandalay (Myanmar) aims to develop an Intelligent Traffic System to reduce city traffic congestion and conduct traffic data analysis for future planning and install smart traffic light controls and Radio Frequency Identification tag on all vehicles to facilitate central control, payment, log and big data analysis. The Ho Chi Minh City's vision by 2025 consists, in the field of mobility, in developing an intelligent transportation system, a traffic forecast model as well as an electronic payment system. Another good example is Davao city (Philippines),

which aims to efficiently address current traffic conditions with the aid of the modern technology by reducing travel time by 50 percent within city limits by the year 2025.

Smart solutions are also crucial to address the environmental issues linked to urbanization, as they have the potential to trigger positive changes for local populations as well as significant improvements in terms of sustainable development. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges for ASEAN cities consists in building urban centers capable of meeting the needs of its population while mitigating the impact they might have on the environment. In fact, the growing number urban dwellers has raised the demand for housing and infrastructures, while increasing the pressure on solid waste and wastewater systems, putting additional pressure on the environment. Smart packages can thus help municipalities build green cities, using modern construction approaches, tools, and methods for higher productivity and sustainability. These tools might include distribution automation systems, waste collection route optimization, leakage detection and control as well as the adoption of smart drainage and smart grids. In terms of housing, opportunities for ASEAN cities might arise from incentivizing the use of solar panels and innovative materials for more eco-friendly buildings, as well as from adopting home energy automation systems and energy consumption tracking.

Health is another key area in which the use of technologies would be crucial, especially in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, the pandemic has underlined the importance of upscaling innovation and use online tools and digital solutions through proven and new technologies, such

as artificial intelligence for contact tracing and identifying potential COVID-19 cases, mobile applications for citizens' awareness, teleworking and distance learning systems. For instance, the Malaysian government launched MySejahtera, a centralized portal on the website of the Ministry of Health which allows residents to have access to a COVID-19 hotspot map, statistics of COVID-19 cases, and information on health facilities. Similarly, Indonesia launched PeduliLindungi in late March 2020 to curb the spread of the coronavirus and detect case of potential infection. Considering that ASEAN urban density is expected to further increase, having an organized health digitalized system will be crucial in the near future. Indeed, technological tools, such as GPS-enabled technology, trackers and app, are key to ensure secure collection and dissemination of large volumes of healthcare data, and control future epidemic diseases, leveraging on lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the application of smart solutions to disease and pandemic control has remarkable implications and concerns in terms of personal data infringement, an issue which deserves to be wisely assessed, with the understanding that the use of technologies in the hands of health officials to act promptly cannot go at detrimental of other key values.

Against this backdrop, it is thus clear that technology is a fundamental tool for ASEAN countries to harness the potential which lies at the heart of the urbanization process, in order to address main urban challenges and convert them into opportunities. Smart solutions, as argued above, cannot be seen as the panacea for all the problems, but can provide significant cross-sectoral opportunities for change. In order to really unlock the transformative power of smart solutions, it is crucial for ASEAN cities to develop sound public-private

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**When it comes to smart urbanization in ASEAN member states consists in acknowledging that smart cities are not just top-down initiatives**

partnerships, as well as partnerships with universities and non-governmental organizations. Indeed, smart city projects can only be successful if they engage a variety of stakeholders, such as technology developers, service providers, city administrators, residents and local companies. To close the technological gap, a government-led approach would not be sufficient: the private sector has the potential to facilitate the uptake of smart solutions, playing a significant role as advocate and investor in the use of technologies to address a wide range of city-related problems. Furthermore, involving the private sector in building smart city solutions would be beneficial also in terms of growth, generating spillover effects across various industries, including telecommunications, energy, digital health, and agriculture. To make private sector involvement really impactful for ASEAN cities, it would be crucial to bear in mind that investments in urban technology under these public-private partnerships have to be based on preliminary spatial planning policies, aimed at identifying those strategic areas and sectors where smart solutions can have a higher impact. Therefore, private sector's engagement needs to be combined with a corresponding effort by local and national policymakers to develop clear guidelines and urban planning strategies, to design and create functioning, resilient and sustainable cities, promote urban smart growth and counteract the urban sprawl. Another important caveat when it comes to smart urbanization in ASEAN member states consists in acknowledging that smart cities are not just top-down initiatives: smart solutions, to be effective, need to come directly from those who live (in) the city, so as to implement strategies cable of meeting residents' needs and expectations. Actively engaging corporations and residents is crucial to make the overall ecosystem more efficient, as they

can help policymakers identify and prioritize public issues and come up with digitally enabled solutions. A last key point to be considered is that investments in smart cities have to be carried out in a complementary way across ASEAN countries, leveraging each city's comparative advantages and experiences to overcome the challenges of urbanization as a whole. ASEAN, as a regional intergovernmental association, is the most entitled actor to foster these synergies, coordinate cities' efforts and develop their own customized urbanization strategies, as demonstrated by the ASCN. Acknowledging the transformative power of technology for urbanization in ASEAN member states, on 19 October 2021, the European Commission's Executive Vice President for the Green Deal, Frans Timmermans, announced the start of the Smart Green ASEAN Cities program (SGAC). This is a new EU-funded program that will support up to 10 ASEAN cities to exchange best practices, both among the ASEAN cities and with European cities as part of a stronger EU-ASEAN green partnership. With €5.1 million support from the EU from 2021 to 2024, the SGAC program will assist ASEAN member states in anticipating the substantial pressure from high urbanization rates by focusing on green and smart solutions through digitalization and the use of technologies. As Vice President Timmermans pointed it out during the launch of the initiative, the sustainability of ASEAN cities is based on the possibility to change, through technology, the energy mix and the way public transport is organized, as well as to improve rapidly waste treatment and waste management. Beyond the engagement through EU funds and activities, Italy can play a key role in helping both the ASEAN and bilaterally its member states build smart cities, by sharing technology as well as knowledge and expertise in the matter of urban planning in order to address common priorities and

develop green, safe and resilient smart cities. The aforementioned importance of the multi-stakeholder approach in scaling up smart solutions is an element which should be clearly outlined in Italy's strategy towards ASEAN countries: indeed, cooperation on urban matters should be achieved not only at intergovernmental level but also and above all by developing a network of sister cities between Italy and ASEAN states, as well as by improving university exchanges and fostering private sector complementarities and investments. Boosting city-to-city cooperation would be a successful solution to encourage exchange of urban experts, best practices and technologies. Focusing on public-private partnerships would be extremely beneficial from a twofold perspective: on the one hand, it would provide ASEAN cities with the possibility to complement public investments with sound and effective private-public partnerships; on the other hand, it would represent a huge opportunity for Italian firms, as they could use smart urban projects as a key entry point to enhance their footprint in ASEAN markets, which are expanding fast and becoming economically and financially more and more pivotal. In this regard, it would be crucial for Italy to uphold this fresh urban focus by leveraging the financial and economic tools it has at its disposal improving, especially through its embassies across ASEAN countries, technical support, capacity building and technology sharing.

## **EU Role in Improving ASEAN Digital Connectivity**

By Catherine Setiawan<sup>2</sup>

As one of ASEAN's strategic partners, the European Union (EU) continues to promote connectivity within and between the two blocs. ASEAN and EU aim to strengthen further practical cooperation in the connectivity area, including through exploring a possible connectivity partnership, with main consideration to the EU Strategy Connecting Europe and Asia (2018); the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025<sup>3</sup>; and also in line with their joint commitments (2020) towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, namely to recognise the unique experience of connectivity and regional integration of ASEAN and the EU. This paper aim to analyse the suitable role of EU in improving ASEAN Connectivity, especially in digital realm. But before we go further in analysing the EU role, we need to know, what are EU strategies in digital connectivity, especially with ASEAN; and what are the priorities in ASEAN Digital Connectivity.

### **1. EU Strategy for Digital Connectivity with ASEAN**

In terms of digital connectivity, I conclude five strategies that would be the EU focus in enhancing its digital connectivity with the ASEAN:

- The EU focus on digitally enable people for inclusive growth and sustainable development through cooperation in many aspects of digital areas.

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<sup>2</sup> Ms. Catherine Setiawan is Project Coordinator, International Telecommunication Union (ITU)

<sup>3</sup> Para 3, ASEAN-EU Joint Statement on Connectivity 2020

- Recognizing the consistency of data protection and cybersecurity law between domestic and applicable international standard.
- Facilitating the digital economy, especially in continuing the work under the ASEAN-EU Dialogue on ASEAN Digital Index (ADIX) as a policy tool to measure the progress and impacts of digitalization to the society and economy.
- Promoting a peaceful, secure, and open ICT environment, while addressing cybersecurity threats and protecting human rights and freedoms online.
- Regulatory coherence to i) support private and public investment in the digital infrastructure as well as ii) policies and incentives to bridge the digital divide.

Details on the EU strategy for EU-ASEAN Digital Connectivity can be seen in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. EU Strategy on EU-ASEAN Digital Connectivity**

Source	Digital Connectivity Strategy
<b>ASEAN-EU Joint Ministerial Statement on Connectivity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital connectivity with a <b>focus on the people</b> as a key enabler to inclusive growth and sustainable development through cooperation in the areas of: digital innovation, digital infrastructure and logistics, digitalisation of manufacturing and services, ICT security, the adoption of technology by MSMEs, and increasing access to digital services, ensuring protection of personal and consumers' data and privacy.</li> <li>• The importance of due <b>recognition of data protection and cybersecurity, consistent with applicable international and domestic laws</b>, at the core of digital connectivity.</li> <li>• The facilitation of the digital economy, to <b>continuing the work under the ASEAN-EU Dialogue on ASEAN Digital Index (ADIX)</b> as a policy tool to measure the progress and impacts of digitalisation to the society and economy, and to work together on consumer and personal data protection to address challenges related to digital transformation as well as privacy, regulations, cybersecurity, cross-border data flows, and other issues.</li> </ul>
<b>EU Strategy Connecting Europe and Asia</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In its relations with Asian countries, the EU should <b>promote a peaceful, secure and open ICT environment, while addressing cybersecurity threats and protecting human rights and freedoms online, including personal data protection.</b></li> <li>• A coherent regulatory approach is needed to <b>support private and public investment in the 'digital' infrastructure as well as policies and incentives to bridge the digital divide, particularly in remote regions or landlocked countries.</b> To this end, the Union will pursue, as appropriate, its <b>Digital4Development strategy in Asia promoting digital technologies and services to foster socio-economic development.</b></li> </ul>

Source: ASEAN-EU Joint Ministerial Statement on Connectivity, 2020; EU Strategy Connecting Europe and Asia, 2018.

## **2. Digital Connectivity in ASEAN**

Following the adoption of Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 back in 2016, ASEAN has progressed its commitment on connectivity, as can be seen under Table 2 below. For Digital Connectivity, it specifically falls under the second strategic area on digital innovation.

**Table 2. MPAC 2025 Initiatives**

<b>Strategic Areas</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
<b>First Sustainable Infrastructure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishing a rolling infrastructure pipeline could generate up to USD35.9 billion in investment based on the identified projects to date</li> <li>• Increasing infrastructure productivity could reduce the need for new infrastructure by USD44 –74 billion annually.</li> <li>• Sustainable urbanisation actions could result in savings for 13 major ASEAN cities of up to USD50 billion in total.</li> </ul>
<b>Second Digital Innovation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital trade (enabled by strong digital data governance frameworks) could create exports of over USD100 billion and support technology adoption benefits of USD281 billion by 2030.</li> <li>• Digital transactions have been shown to support remittance, of which 60% of recipients are women</li> <li>• Digital financial services could lead to USD295 billion in new credit, USD368 billion in new deposits and a leakage reduction of USD10 billion per annum for governments</li> </ul>
<b>Third Seamless Logistic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving supply chain efficiency could significantly reduce the average time and cost to export and import.</li> <li>• Better border facilitation resulting in an assumed 50 percent reduction in the time and costs of transiting across 34 ASEAN borders from 2015 onwards, could add a 0.05% improvement in ASEAN GDP by 2025</li> </ul>
<b>Fourth Regulatory Excellence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harmonisation of standards and the removal of non-tariff barriers are a priority for ASEAN economic integration according to 19% and 34% of Australian and 33% and 51% of American businesses in the region respectively</li> <li>• Regulatory convergence on NTMs could reduce the regional average price of agricultural products by 2.5 –4% and the price of industrial products by 0.5 –1.5%.</li> </ul>
<b>Fifth People Mobility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If growth of intra-ASEAN travellers could be increased to match even half the growth experienced in extra-ASEAN travellers, this could result in an additional 15.5 million annual visitor arrivals by 2025 compared to a business as usual scenario</li> <li>• Allowing skilled labour to freely move within ASEAN based on real wage differences has been simulated to lift AMS GDP by 0.08% on average</li> </ul>

Source: ASEAN Secretariat, 2016

This paper will focus on the second strategic areas of connectivity, namely digital innovation. However, due to the limitation in the MPAC 2025 explanation on digital connectivity, this paper will also analyse another digital plan in ASEAN, such as the ASEAN Digital Masterplan (ADM) 2025. ADM 2025 was successfully launched last year in 2021 by the first ASEAN Digital Minister's Meeting (ADGMIN1). The ADM 2025 has four visions for a wide range of digitally enabling economic activities that still related to digital innovation: (1) how ASEAN people can use digital services to enhance their daily lives, (2) how digitalization can increase productivity quickly and effectively with partners in their value chains, (3) making a more prosperous ASEAN region as digital services improve trade between ASEAN member states (AMS), and (4) creating a greener and more sustainable ASEAN economy in the long-term to recover more quickly from the COVID-19 pandemic over the next few years. Further, the ADM 2025 comprises of eight desired outcomes and thirty-seven enabling outcomes as mentioned in Table 3 below.

**Table 3. ADM 2025: Summary of Desired Outcome and Enabling Outcome**

<b>Desired Outcome</b>	<b>Enabling Outcome</b>
1) To speed [up] ASEAN's recovery from COVID-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make the economic case for prioritising ADM 2025 actions</li> <li>• Assess the economic case for facilitating use of digital services that would help recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic</li> </ul>
2) Increase the quality and coverage of fixed and mobile broadband infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage inward investment in digital and ICT</li> <li>• Move towards best practice permission and access rights for local and national infrastructure including submarine cable repair</li> <li>• Facilitate adoption of region wide telecommunications regulation best practices by market players to provide regulatory certainty</li> <li>• Ensure adequate international Internet connectivity.</li> <li>• Reduce the carbon footprint of telecommunications operators in ASEAN</li> <li>• Ensure increased and harmonised spectrum allocation across the region</li> <li>• Adopt regional policy to deliver best practice guidance on AI governance and ethics, IoT spectrum and technology.</li> <li>• Develop regional mechanisms to encourage skills in integrated and end-to-end services</li> <li>• Establish a centre of excellence for best practice rural connectivity.</li> </ul>
3) The delivery of trusted digital services and prevention of consumer harm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enable trust through greater and broader use of online security technologies</li> <li>• Build trust through enhanced security for finance, healthcare, education, and government</li> <li>• Identify improvements in legal and regulatory measures on the management of protection of data and other data-related activities that could be harmful.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve coordination and cooperation for regional computer incident response teams</li> <li>• Promote consumer protection and rights in relation to e-commerce</li> </ul>
4) A sustainable competitive market for the supply of digital services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to identify opportunities to harmonise digital regulation to facilitate cross-border data flows</li> <li>• Deepen collaboration between ICT and competition regulatory authorities across ASEAN on the ICT sector and digital economy</li> <li>• Monitor developments in regulation of digital platforms in other jurisdictions</li> </ul>
5) Increase in the quality and use of e-government services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish ASEAN wide reporting on the level of use of e-government services in line with ITU requirements</li> <li>• Help make key government departments more productive through their internal use of ICT and e-services</li> <li>• Explore how to introduce digital identities in each AMS in a way which safeguards civil liberties</li> <li>• Help developing AMS improve the quality of their e-government e-services</li> <li>• Improve the cohesion of AMS by making key government e-services interoperable across the ASEAN region</li> </ul>
6) Digital services to connect businesses and facilitate cross-border trade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate compliance and secure the benefits of telecommunications services and electronic commerce in line with relevant ASEAN trade agreements</li> <li>• Support trade digitalisation through seamless and efficient flow of electronic trade documents (e.g., invoices) and goods within ASEAN</li> <li>• Assess the net benefits of including IR 4.0 technologies in trade facilitation processes</li> <li>• Reduce regional business travel costs, by lowering roaming rates for mobile data services across ASEAN</li> <li>• Promote e-commerce trade in ASEAN, enhance last-mile fulfilment cooperation, and improve competitiveness in the digital economy</li> </ul>

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7) Increased capacity of businesses and people to participate in the digital economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Continue to support the advancement and harmonisation of ICT qualifications across ASEAN</li><li>• Promote development of advanced digital skills, such as coding, hackathons, innovative challenges</li><li>• Develop a framework that encourages the development and growth of digital start-ups in ASEAN</li><li>• Progress the work on smart cities begun in AIM 2020</li></ul>
8) A digitally inclusive society in ASEAN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensure citizens and businesses have the skills and motivation to use digital services</li><li>• Reduce affordability barriers to getting online</li><li>• Reduce accessibility barriers to getting online</li><li>• Encourage deeper adoption and use of 'vertical' digital services</li></ul>

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*Source: ASEAN Secretariat, 2021.*

As we can see above, the ADM 2025 outcomes are pretty much consistent with EU strategy for connectivity as it consist with people, regulatory/ policy coherence, safe ICT environment among others. Detail can be seen in Table 4 below.

**Table 4. Consistencies' in EU-ASEAN Digital Connectivity  
Strategies**

EU	ASEAN	Analysis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The EU focus on digitally enable people for inclusive growth and sustainable development through cooperation in many aspects of digital areas.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Outcome 7: Increased capacity of businesses and people to participate in the digital economy.</li> <li>Outcome 8: A digitally inclusive society in ASEAN.</li> </ul>	<p>The focus is to enhance the digital knowledge and skill sets to their people, in many aspect of digital areas.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognizing the consistency of data protection and cybersecurity law between domestic and applicable international standard.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Outcome 4: A sustainable competitive market for the supply of digital services</li> <li>Outcome 5: Increase in the quality and use of e-government services</li> <li>Outcome 6: Digital services to connect businesses and facilitate cross-border trade</li> </ul>	<p>Harmonizing national policy to international standard, especially for data protection and cybersecurity law will indirectly related to a sustained competitive market, quality enhancement of public services, as well as trust in facilitating cross border businesses.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitating the digital economy, especially in continuing the work under the ASEAN-EU Dialogue on ASEAN Digital Index (ADIX) as a policy tool to measure the progress and impacts of digitalization to the society and economy.</li> </ul>	<p>Outcome 1: To speed [up] ASEAN's recovery from COVID-19</p>	<p>ADM's outcome 2 did not really talk about the measurement for digitalization impact and progress, but does focus on prioritisation of economic case.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promoting a peaceful, secure, and open ICT</li> </ul>	<p>Outcome 3: The delivery of trusted digital services and prevention of consumer harm</p>	<p>In ensuring a trusted digital services that will prevent consumer harm (especially</p>

environment, while addressing cybersecurity threats and protecting human rights and freedoms online.		in addressing cyber security, and protecting human rights and freedoms online), it could also promote a peaceful, secure, and open ICT environment.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regulatory coherence to i) support private and public investment in the digital infrastructure</li> <li>ii) policies and incentives to bridge the digital divide.</li> </ul>	Outcome 2: Increase the quality and coverage of fixed and mobile broadband infrastructure	ADM 2025 enabling outcome, focusing on inward investment especially in rural connectivity, among others via improving its standard.

Source: Author's analysis

### 3. Conclusion & Recommendation

- EU and ASEAN have consistent strategies and focus to enhance its digital connectivity strategies, namely focusing on people, regulations, investment especially to bridge the digital divide, as well measuring digitalization impact to economy and promoting a safe ICT environment.
- Consistent with EU digital connectivity strategy, EU can take some roles in also supporting ASEAN in implementing its digital connectivity agenda:

o EU could assist ASEAN in increasing the people digital capacity to participate in the digital economy, such as:

- Continue to support the advancement and harmonisation of ASEAN ICT qualifications, regionally and globally.

- Promote development of advanced digital skills, such as coding, hackathons, innovative challenges. EU could provide some experts to train ASEAN people.
- EU could assist ASEAN in developing a digital curriculum and framework that encourages the development and growth of digital enable people and start-ups in ASEAN.

O Assist ASEAN in developing and harmonizing its regional and national policy to be consistent with international standard, especially for data protection and cybersecurity law. This is considering the fact the EU GDPR has been using as guideline to draft data protection and cybersecurity laws within ASEAN.

O Encouraged the usage of ASEAN-EU Dialogue on ASEAN Digital Index (ADIX) as a policy tool to measure the progress and impacts of digitalization to the society and economy. This could ensure ASEAN is able to measure its own digital success.

O Encouraged EU investment to come to ASEAN, especially related to digital infrastructure in ASEAN rural areas to bridge the digital divide.

## Examining Major Security Concerns in Southeast Asia

By Jefferson Ng and Jeslyn Tan

Southeast Asia is a diverse region and the threat environment of each country differs based on geography, demographics, state capacity and even their levels of economic development. In general, while a more uncertain external security environment is of great concern, security and operational challenges arising from domestic and non-traditional security issues remain of primary concern. With reference to the table below, domestic security challenges rank highly on the radars of governments—all ten ASEAN countries highlighted terrorist activity as a security concern, and half included transnational crimes such as drug and human trafficking.

Non-traditional security issues are also a major source of concern, including natural disasters and humanitarian assistance, cybersecurity, and maritime security challenges. Finally, external security issues include concerns about the future of the regional order and stability in an era of protracted superpower competition, military competition, maritime security and fears of nuclear proliferation.

**Figure 1: ASEAN Countries' Security Concerns**

Security Concerns	Countries
Terrorism	Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam (10)
Regional Order/Stability	Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam (9)
Maritime Security	Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam (8)
Military competition	Cambodia, Myanmar (2)
Transnational Crime	Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand (5)
Natural Disasters and HADR	Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam (8)
Cybersecurity	Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam (4)
Arms Control (especially but not only nuclear)	Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam (8)
ASEAN Centrality	Thailand, Singapore (2)

*Author's analysis of the ASEAN Regional Forum Annual Security Outlook 2021 document.*

The rest of the brief will provide additional details of three selected security challenges and offer a brief assessment.

### **1) Domestic Security Challenges**

As a region with porous and open borders, Southeast Asia had historically been influenced by foreign ideas and cultural exports. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, as well as Christianity and Westernisation, asserted tremendous influence on Southeast Asian peoples at various historical junctures. More recently, the spread of Middle Eastern and pan-Arabian Islamic ideas, in particular Salafism and Wahhabism to Southeast Asia, as well as returning foreign fighters from the Islamic State to their home countries, created significant security headaches for domestic security agencies for the first two decades of the 21st century.

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**As a region with porous and open borders, Southeast Asia had historically been influenced by foreign ideas and cultural exports**

First, austere and literalist interpretations of Islam from the Middle East, are largely incompatible with the Southeast Asian context. Local populations are highly heterogeneous and Islamic teachings in Southeast Asia generally emphasise on syncretism, tolerance, and co-existence with local cultural practices. While Salafism and Wahhabism are not security problems per se, terrorist groups using violent means to form a caliphate in Southeast Asia have the potential to disrupt religious harmony and undermine the political consensus which underpin modern multi-religious Southeast Asian states. In 2018, coordinated suicide bombings targeted three churches in Surabaya, killing and injuring dozens. The attackers were found to be linked to the Jamaah Ansharut Daulah, a group that had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.

Second, foreign terrorist fighters returning to Southeast Asia after participating in foreign conflicts are another security challenge for governments. The region had so far experienced three major waves of returning foreign fighters, the Soviet Afghan conflict, the civil war in Iraq with the Islamic State, and the events leading up to the Marawi siege in the Philippines. Each time, governments struggle to balance the citizenship rights of returning foreign fighters with national security concerns. The possibility that returning foreign fighters would disseminate extremist ideology or launch terror attacks at home have led Southeast Asian states to invest in both preventive detention and rehabilitative approaches.

Third, after a spike in terrorist incidents in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shuttering of global travel have pushed terrorist activity towards a new phase in

Southeast Asia. The recent arrests in late 2021 of Jemaah Islamiyah members (a group responsible for the 2002 Bali bombings) who are both prominent intellectuals in society and support the JI's network of charities, reflect efforts by terrorist groups to infiltrate Indonesian society (Sebastian and Alkaff, 2021). This change of emphasis is best characterised by the term *i'dad* (preparation for jihad), suggesting that terrorist groups are now seeking to rebuild operational capability and influence in society for future operations (Yeo, 2022).

Thus, while there has been a lull in terrorist activity because of both a shift in terrorist tactics and COVID-19 travel restrictions, governments remain on high alert. The threat of terrorism remains a domestic security concern in many Southeast Asian states.

## **2) Maritime Security Challenges**

As every single Southeast Asian country except for Laos has a sea border, developments in the maritime domain are key to the national interests of most SEA countries. The geography of Southeast Asia resembles a fragmented landmass separating the Indian and Pacific Ocean, creating long and winding coastlines that are difficult to patrol and forcing maritime commerce and navies to be funneled through several narrow chokepoints. To add to the challenge, the world's most important sea lines of communication (SLOCs) go through the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, Lombok-Makassar Straits, Sulu-Sulawesi Seas, and the South China Sea. The region also consists of three of the world's largest container ports according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)'s Review of Maritime Transport 2021, which are the Port of Singapore along with

Port Klang and Port Tanjung Pelepas in Malaysia (UNCTAD, 2021).

This section focuses on two main maritime security challenges—non-traditional maritime security issues and maritime territorial issues. First, most Southeast Asian countries remain ill-prepared for the operational and capacity challenges related to the management of their expansive maritime waters. Non-traditional maritime security challenges run the gamut of issues such as piracy and armed robbery, maritime terrorism, arms and narcotics trafficking; human smuggling and trafficking, maritime cybersecurity, exploitation of marine resources including illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, marine pollution, as well as natural disasters. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated maritime non-traditional security challenges. The Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia Information Sharing Centre (ReCAAP ISC) reported a 17 percent increase in piracy and armed robbery in Asia in 2020 compared to the previous year, most notably in the South China Sea and Singapore Strait, due to the pandemic induced economic crisis (ReCAAP, 2020 and Nicoloso, 2021). Piracy and armed robbery acts are also rampant in the Tri-Border Sea Area (TBSA) in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas where Islamic separatist organisations such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) carry out ship hijackings or kidnappings for ransom. The ASG's operation bases are in Jolo, Basilan, and Tawi-Tawi in the Sulu Archipelago in southern Philippines, whereas JI is based in Indonesia.

To overcome these transnational maritime non-traditional threats, regional cooperation is important. The Malacca

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**Today, parties  
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Straits Patrol (MSP) is a cooperative arrangement consisting of Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand to tackle piracy and armed robbery in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore through coordinated sea and air patrols as well as information sharing. On the other hand, the three littoral states of the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas - Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines also organised Trilateral Maritime Patrols (TMP) modelled after the MSP. The TMP permits these three littoral states to carry out coordinated naval patrols and maintain safe passage of commercial ships in the transit corridors within the Area of Maritime Interest, as well as enhances information sharing between these states. In order to address the issue of IUU fishing within the Malaysian waters in the South China Sea also claimed by Vietnam, both countries have agreed to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to improve their maritime cooperation and information sharing.

Longstanding maritime territorial and boundary disputes continue to plague SEA countries. For instance, Indonesia is conducting border negotiations with Malaysia, Philippines and Vietnam to delineate territorial waters, continental shelf and EEZ boundaries, in a bid to resolve overlapping claims under the 1982 UNCLOS. Many of these disputes have been resolved peacefully, usually through international arbitration, such as the dispute over Pedra Branca between Singapore and Malaysia. However, there had been previous instances of maritime disputes leading to armed standoffs, such as that between Indonesia and Malaysia in the Ambalat area.

Today, parties to maritime territorial disputes resolve their issues through peaceful negotiations. Minilateral non-

traditional maritime cooperation has also helped to lower the temperature on some of these disputes. Article 111 of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) states that hot pursuit ceases when the ship pursued enters the territorial sea of its own jurisdiction or of a third State. Nevertheless, under the MSP and TMP, littoral states are allowed to conduct hot pursuit across the borders into the waters of other states in specific circumstances. The complementary agreement on hot pursuit among littoral states of the TMP and MSP indicate that maritime non-traditional security can become an inducement for cooperation. States are willing to temporarily set aside high sovereignty concerns to address issues of common interest such as maritime non-traditional threats. Another example is the Malaysia-Vietnam MoU, although both states have overlapping maritime claims, they have nonetheless been able to work together on issues related to the encroachment of Vietnamese fishing vessels into Malaysian waters through an MoU.

Due to the importance of the South China Sea to global maritime trade, food security, and energy security, the waterway is the site of multiple competing maritime and territorial claims, which have been the source of conflict and tension in the region. China claims a vast area of the South China Sea based on its historical 'nine-dash line', and the rising great power is also becoming more assertive against other ASEAN claimant states in the disputed waters. Malaysia alone has recorded 23 encroachments by Chinese vessels in 2021. Military tensions have also heightened in recent years. Freedom of navigation operations pursued by extra-regional powers such as the United States, United Kingdom, and European Union (EU) members such as France and Germany

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**ASEAN member states are mainly concerned with the fact that changes in the regional order and stability will create a more hostile environment for their foreign policymaking**

have provoked China's ire. To maintain regional peace and stability, ASEAN-led multilateral mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) has a key role to play in engaging the major powers and reducing regional tensions.

### **3) External Security Challenges**

The ASEAN Regional Forum Strategic Outlook 2021 highlighted that potential threats to regional order and stability were more salient to the security concerns of ASEAN countries compared to the threat of military competition between the United States and China. This signals that countries in the region continue to place a relatively low emphasis on the possibility of a direct kinetic confrontation between the two superpowers. Instead, ASEAN member states are mainly concerned with the fact that changes in the regional order and stability will create a more hostile environment for their foreign policymaking, as well as the importance of developing measures promoting regional stability through peaceful resolution of disputes and enhanced multilateral cooperation.

Within the context of burgeoning US-China competition, the worry is that ASEAN's regional footprint is likely to diminish due to a combination of internal and external factors. Internally, ASEAN's effectiveness is hobbled by the fact that Myanmar is in the throes of a civil war and unable to play a constructive role in the organisation. Furthermore, the Ukraine crisis revealed the fragility of the regional grouping's consensus on the importance of upholding

international law and respect for the sovereignty of all nations. Most ASEAN countries avoided directly condemning Russia and preferred to remain neutral in this issue, underscoring the region's diverse set of relationships with Russia. Nonetheless, the recent US-ASEAN summit statement emphasised “respect for sovereignty, political independence, and the territorial integrity” of Ukraine, which constituted stronger language compared to its previous ASEAN statements.

ASEAN's difficulty in finding consensus on the Ukraine crisis is a harbinger that ASEAN could experience even greater difficulty in fostering consensus on a regional position vis-à-vis China, as regional economic ties with China are much stronger. Externally, the robust Chinese economic assistance to ASEAN states is extremely compelling for developing countries in Southeast Asia, many of which require financing for critical infrastructure and the post-pandemic economic recovery. In late 2021, President Xi Jinping pledged US\$1.5 billion to ASEAN to that effect, and that many regional countries will formally accede to RCEP this year will further strengthen ASEAN's economic ties with China.

In contrast, the United States is determined to set itself on a collision course with China. Its economic influence in Southeast Asia looks less robust because of the underwhelming Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (described as “all pain no gain” by some) and its refusal to offer market access to the American economy. Nonetheless, the IPEF offers ASEAN countries an opportunity to explore new avenues of cooperation with the US, potentially leading to regional institution building. The US has also developed a network of “5-4-3-2” alliances against China, namely the

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**ASEAN's role as a neutral convenor of regional dialogues such as the ASEAN +3, ARF, East Asia Summit (EAS), will likely continue**

Five Eyes initiative, the Quad, AUKUS, and bilateral alliances, and has articulated a concept of “integrated deterrence”, which strengthens China’s concerns about encirclement. Worried about triggering Beijing’s sensitivities, there are signs that ASEAN member states will tread even more cautiously about joining any American initiative perceived to be “containing” China. Therefore, when Singapore and Indonesia announced their participation in the IPEF, Singapore simultaneously stressed its support for China’s entry into the CPTPP, while Indonesia called for early rollout of the RCEP (Loh, 2022 and Nikkei Asia Editors, 2022).

ASEAN’s role as a neutral convenor of regional dialogues such as the ASEAN +3, ARF, East Asia Summit (EAS), will likely continue. While these regional fora will continue to have a place in the regional order, US-China competition will stymie concrete regional cooperation and deliverables unless ASEAN becomes more proactive. Furthermore, ASEAN’s role is diminishing in the region despite talk about ASEAN centrality – the launch of IPEF in Japan, speaks volumes about how central ASEAN really is. To address this, the region needs to assert itself as a credible regional player in working to resolve the Myanmar crisis and to figure out what it is prepared to do to engage the United States and keep it active in the region. Otherwise, ASEAN runs the risk of losing its relevance (Kausikan, 2022).

### **Reccomendations**

Given ASEAN’s internal divisions and sensitivities about the US-China rivalry, the EU can play an important role as a trusted and reliable security partner. Cooperation with ASEAN should be primarily calibrated through a covert balancing approach. This means that the EU should seek to

promote technical cooperation and capacity building to support regional institutions and ASEAN states, with a goal towards strengthening regional autonomy (therefore reducing dependence on China). The EU can help ASEAN to diversify its security partners and cultivate goodwill as a result.

### **1. Maritime Security Cooperation**

There is significant scope for the EU to engage maritime states in ASEAN through more robust maritime security cooperation. The EU Naval Force Somalia, more widely known as Operation Atalanta is the bloc's first naval operation. It has contributed substantially to combat piracy, weapons and drug trafficking, and IUU fishing off the Horn of Africa and Western Indian Ocean. Operation Atalanta also conducts joint naval exercises with other Indo-Pacific partners such as Japan, India, and South Korea to enhance information sharing and operational capability. The EU can invite Southeast Asian states as observers and participants of the operation, and share its experience and best practices on organising a regional bloc maritime initiative.

The EU also launched the EU Critical Maritime Route Wider Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO) I project (2015-2019) to protect the safety and security of the sea routes in the Indian Ocean through improving the Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) of the littoral states through capacity building and information sharing. In 2020, CRIMARIO II was launched with a wider geographical scope encompassing South and Southeast Asia and will continue until April 2024. CRIMARIO II seeks to 1) enhance cooperation and coordination between

law enforcement agencies and other national, regional, and global agencies involved in maritime security; 2) supporting the compliance of states with international law and regulations. The EU should invite ASEAN member states to work with the EU on co-creating and developing new partnerships on this meaningful regional initiative.

ASEAN and EU should deepen their maritime security cooperation via the ARF, as it involves all the major powers in the Indo-Pacific region which is needed to build confidence and trust through multilateral cooperation and dialogues. The EU should push for regional cooperation in the field of maritime fisheries and maritime plastic waste, which affects the food and health security of the region. Southeast Asian fisheries are threatened by overfishing, pollution, and plastic waste, requiring a concerted regional response to manage an issue that affects the livelihoods and diets of millions of people. Across Southeast Asia, 64% of the region's resource base is at medium to high risk from overfishing and destructive fishing practices (DeRidder and Nindang, 2018). The EU can work to support the capabilities of ASEAN states to deal with illegal fishing activities and share best practices on reducing the amount of plastic waste/microplastics entering the ocean.

Most importantly, both ASEAN and the EU endorse a regional maritime order based on the rule of law, especially the 1982 UNCLOS. Further engagement efforts between the EU and ASEAN in addressing maritime security challenges and marine environmental issues, can pave the way for more robust inter-regional cooperation. CRIMARIO II can be the starting point for such collaboration.

## **2. Cybersecurity and Technology Cooperation**

There has been limited efforts to develop cybersecurity and digital cooperation between the EU and ASEAN. In 2019, an ASEAN-EU Statement on Cybersecurity Cooperation was signed underscoring the need for more capacity and confidence building measures to develop norms of responsible state behaviour in cyberspace. The EU also supported ASEAN's efforts to build an ASEAN Digital Index to measure digital integration and progress. Given the technological disparity between EU and ASEAN, the EU can support the strengthening of law enforcement capabilities to fight cybercrime and bolster state resilience from cyberattacks through cybersecurity training programmes.

Furthermore, the digital gap remains very significant in many ASEAN member states. The ASEAN's Consolidated Strategy on the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) published in 2021 highlights that ASEAN's goals remain very modest: 1) technological governance and cybersecurity, 2) digital economy, 3) digital transformation of society. Certainly, this is a reflection of the technological disparity in the region between more advanced and less advanced ASEAN member states. The EU needs to recognise the disparity in technological levels when pitching regional cooperation initiatives related to technology.

The EU is the world leader in terms of developing regulatory frameworks to anticipate new security challenges arising from emerging new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and the IoT. The EU has already developed a Cybersecurity Strategy for the Digital Decade as well as a draft Artificial Intelligence Act that regulates AI technologies

based on a risk-weighted approach. Therefore, the EU can play a key role in helping ASEAN member states understand the pertinent issue areas and offer its knowledge base and experiences to facilitate discussions at the ASEAN level on these emerging technologies.

### **Conclusion**

As the geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic centre of gravity shifts to the Indo-Pacific region, Southeast Asia confronts new security challenges. The security threats most salient to ASEAN states are mostly transnational and non-traditional security issues; issues which demand multilateral cooperation. There is a great deal of complementarity between the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy in upholding a rules based regional order that respects international law, UN Charter, and other relevant treaties and conventions. Cooperation between the two regional blocs should be anchored on multilateralism and inclusivity. Any regional initiative likely to exclude one or more powers in the Indo-Pacific would most likely fail.

# Sustainable Development in ASEAN: Prospects and challenges for ASEAN

By Alizan Mahadi<sup>4</sup>

## Introduction

When ASEAN was established in 1967, sustainable development was not on the agenda. The focus was on economic growth, social progress and cultural development (The ASEAN Secretariat 2005). As environment became featured prominently in multilateral, intergovernmental and international fora, environment became enshrined within the ASEAN architecture. As one of the most megabiodiverse regions in the world, the balance between economic growth and environmental conservation became both a key concept as well as a challenge for the region's development moving forward. On the one hand, some depicted Southeast Asia as a region that exploited the environment, in particular forests, for economic gain (Rush 1991). On the other hand, despite the fast paced development occurring in the region, ASEAN Member States (AMS) 43.8% of total land area are natural forests compared to 39% in the European Union (The ASEAN Secretariat 2020).

As sustainable development has become mainstreamed in the international arena, this paper looks into the prospects and challenges of ASEAN in progressing towards sustainable

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development. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by all countries in 2015, acts as a barometer of progress in the region. Specifically, this paper reviews both the institutional mechanisms in place for sustainable development as well as provides the critique of its effectiveness moving forward.

Towards this aim, this paper is organised as follows. The next section focuses on the institutional mechanisms for sustainable development in the region, evolving from environmental cooperation to sustainable development. The following section assesses the progress of the region towards achieving the SDGs. Finally, the last section looks at the prospects and challenges for sustainable development moving forward.

### **Institutional mechanisms: From environmental cooperation to sustainable development**

The proliferation of sustainable development in the international political arena is relatively new. Only in 1992, at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Earth Summit, was sustainable development brought to the fore in the multilateral setting. Preceding the Earth Summit was the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 which was considered by many to be the first world conference to make environment a major issue. Arguably, it was not until the SDGs was adopted that environment and sustainable development was mainstreamed as a priority international development agenda.

Mirroring the developments at the international level, it was not until post 1972 that environment became a major issue for ASEAN. The focus of environment from a multilateral and bilateral point of view started from the need for environmental cooperation. This can be traced back to the 1st ASEAN Environmental Program (ASEP) in 1977 where the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Regional Advisory visited all of the (at that time) five ASEAN countries with the aim to developing areas of collaboration (Takahashi 1999). The priority areas recommended were marine environment; environmental management, including environmental impact assessment; nature conservation and terrestrial ecosystems; industry and the environment; environmental education and training; and environmental information.

Following on from the first ASEP various institutional mechanisms were established for environmental cooperation. The ASEAN Expert Group on Environment (AEGE) was established in 1978 focusing on technical matters as well as identification of priority areas. The ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Environment (AMME) was also established with the first meeting held in 1981. This enabled high level participation and decision-making including the publishing of declarations.

From the late 1980s until the late 1990s, the comprehensive nature of institutional mechanisms established was focused to address environmental issues from a largely technical perspective. With a consensus that there is a need to prioritise and enhance relevance, the focus turned to addressing transnational issues. In particular, the Regional Haze Action Plan was formulated. Along with the upgrading

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Blueprint 2025  
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with a focus on  
conservation,  
climate change  
and  
sustainable  
cities**

of the status of AEGE to the level of ASEAN Senior officials on the Environment (ASOEN), this phase demonstrated that an increased focus on prioritising areas of cooperation (i.e. transnational issues) as well as institutionalising environment as a priority area (Andreas Pramudianto 2018). Following from a focus on environment, the shift towards sustainable development began with a focus on sustainable development as a priority for community building. Following on from the ASEAN Strategic Plan of Action on the Environment, the focus turned to sustainability as an important component in the ASEAN Community. The ASEAN Social-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint 2025 highlights sustainability as one of the key characteristics with a focus on conservation, climate change and sustainable cities. The ASCC 2025 aims “to strive for an ASEAN Community with equitable access to sustainable environment that can support its social development and its capacity to work towards sustainable development”. At the higher level, the 2015 ASEAN Charter aims for “sustainable development for the benefit of the present and future generations and to place the well-being, livelihood and welfare of the peoples at the centre of ASEAN community building process”. These efforts have proliferated since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development with the SDGs integrated as a key pillar to achieve community building.

Specific institutional mechanisms to improve implementation of SDGs were also in place including the ASEAN Community Statistical System (ACSS), which set up a working for SDGs Indicators Baseline as a form of regional monitoring to achieve the SDGs. Dialogue partners have been

utilised to focus on SDGs including with the European Union as well as China.

The review of institutional mechanisms highlights a few important points. Firstly, there are three phases for sustainable development in the ASEAN region, namely, environmental cooperation; transnational; and sustainable development community building. This evolution is driven both by international agenda setting, as well as regional aspirations for community building. Secondly, as the starting point was focused on environmental cooperation, multilateral organisations as well as dialogue partners was, and remain, and important part of sustainable development in the region. Third and finally, institutional mechanisms are well established to address both environment and sustainability in the region. The question of whether these institutional mechanisms have translated to desirable outcomes are explored in the next section.

### **Progress towards the SDGs**

This section of the paper reviews the progress of SDGs within the region. It assesses the progress in terms of the outcomes across the “5 Ps” of the SDGs, namely, people, prosperity, planet, peace and partnership. These are based on the ASEAN Sustainable development Goals Indicators Baseline Report 2020 as well as the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress report 2022 (ESCAP 2022). Secondly, it looks into the progress in terms of policies in achieving the SDGs.

The “people” goals generally saw progress made although it must be noted that many of the data available is pre-pandemic. All relevant SDGs (SDGs1,2,3,4 and 5) saw

progress since 2015. Poverty (SDG1) has reduced from 14.8% in 2016 to 13% in 2018. Progress was also generally made in terms ending hunger (SDG2) with prevalence of malnutrition reducing. However, prevalence of stunting has 4 increased from 2016 to 2018 (from 27% to 27.5%). Progress was also generally made in the health (SDG3) including reduction of maternal mortality rate. In terms of education (SDG4), participation rate in organised learning overall increased from 2016 (75.4%) to 78.8% in 2018, though this was down from 79.1% in 2017. Achieving gender equality (SDG5) had modest progress with, amongst others proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments increasing from 19% in 2016 to 19.6% in 2018. The progress made under people goals show that while gains have been made, the progress is largely modest. The UNESCAP 2022 study also highlighted that to achieve the goals by 2030, progress would need to be accelerated with only maternal mortality and child mortality targets projected to be achieved (both SDG3). Goals that are interlinked with environment, including resilience to disasters, food security and genetic resources for agriculture are regressing and are projected to regress further.

Under the “prosperity” goals, most of the goals have also seen progress. This includes for access to energy with population with access to electricity increasing from 81.2% to 83.8%, with 5 out of 9 reporting in countries in ASEAN having attained almost 100% electrification (SDG7). Overall GDP per capita (SDG8) in the region grew by 4.5% (from 2016 to 2018) and inequality is reported to be on a decreasing trend. However, these data are largely pre-pandemic with the economy being hit hard with the region suffering from 4% contraction in 2020 (ADB 2020).

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**ASEAN is  
unlikely to  
achieve the  
SDGs by 2030**

Under the “planet” goals, most of the goals has seen a regression. This includes regressions in all goals including clean water and sanitation (SDG6), responsible consumption and production (SDG12), climate action (SDG13), life below water (SDG14) and life on land (SDG15). As a megabiodiverse country, with three of the seventeen megabiodiverse countries in the world (Indonesia, Malaysia and Philippines), these trends show the challenges in balancing development and environmental conservation in the region. Nonetheless, the natural forests in the AMS have remained stable over 2016–2018, covering 43.8% of the land area in the region. Looking ahead, UNESCAP projects that most of the goals are likely to require accelerated progress to achieve SDGs in 2030 or will likely regress.

There is a lack of data available to measure progress on SDG16 (peace) which highlights at data availability challenges in the region. In terms of partnership, modest gains are also made including all AMS having national statistical plans and conducting population and housing census.

The outcomes above demonstrate a few important findings. The main finding is that although modest progress has been on some goals, the projection shows that ASEAN is unlikely to achieve the SDGs by 2030. This challenge has been exacerbated, and in some areas, reversed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This shows that the region is not on track to achieve the SDGs. The next section looks at some of the future challenges as well as prospects for accelerating action towards the SDGs.

### **Future challenges and prospects for ASEAN Centrality in sustainable development cooperation**

The previous section highlights the current status of ASEAN in achieving the SDGs. With almost all goals requiring an accelerated rate of change to achieve the goals, or even suffering from regression, looking ahead, both regionally and within each country, there is an urgent need to enhance collaboration, partnerships and assess the means of implementation. This section reviews some of these challenges as well as the prospects and opportunities for accelerating towards the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development.

With population expected to grow to a projected 798 million in 2050 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2017), and therefore, ecological footprint also expected to increase, balancing economic growth and environmental preservation and at the same time achieving the desirable social goals will be increasingly challenging. Furthermore, Southeast Asia is one of the most vulnerable regions to climate change with rising climate related hazards occurring. These megatrends can serve to reverse and attenuate development gains, requiring a significant acceleration, policy change and institutional reform at both the national and regional levels.

Against this backdrop, challenges remain for ASEAN to move forward collectively to achieve the SDGs. While ASEAN Centrality asserts that ASEAN should be the predominant platform to address shared development challenges, increasing geopolitical competition and rise of protectionism

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serve are some of the factors that challenge the future of development cooperation in the region. Geopolitical competition have resulted in efforts to integrate the economies of Southeast Asia with donor countries. These include China's Belt and Road Initiative as well as the various Indo Pacific countries by United States of America, the European Union and Japan. While AMS embrace development assistance, recipient countries are also wary of the risks involved including overdependence, sovereign debt management as well as maintaining trading relations with major power rivals.

The rise of protectionism, in particular, during and post pandemic, as well as due to the impacts of the war in Ukraine, has also highlighted the challenges of economic integration. Although efforts are being made to reduce tariffs, non tariff barriers are increasing within the region. The value chains to provide for key development goals such as food security has regressed from a regional standpoint.

In terms of the means of implementation, ASEAN in general, and environmental cooperation and sustainable development specifically, have long suffered from the lack of finances to implement the aspirations and visions laid out in the ASCC blueprint and others. Mobilising finance, both from domestic public and private sources as well as from international public finance are required for the region to achieve the SDGs.

Moving forward, a few areas offer prospects for ASEAN to accelerate its progress towards SDGs. Firstly, the increased geopolitical competition in the region can acts as both a risk and opportunity. As a global agenda, the SDGs can be utilised

by donor countries and partners to support ASEAN's SDGs achievement in a tangible manner (Asia Foundation 2018). Previously, many of the geopolitical rivalry have focused on the security and political issues within the region, but the SDGs provide a platform to extend the regional architecture to development cooperation. Strategies such as the EU Global Gateway that is fully aligned to the 2030 Development Agenda and includes tangible assistance in the form of investments and finance.

Secondly, ASEAN needs to broaden its engagement with development actors, including multilateral organisations, NGOs and the private sector. This is in line with ASEAN utilising development cooperation as a platform for community building and leverage on the skills and capacity of non-government stakeholders as partners in development. This includes engagement with international development agencies and transnational NGOs.

Thirdly, the concept of ASEAN Centrality will be crucial towards development cooperation within the region. However, this would require transformation of ASEAN itself. Regime transformation requires an articulation of the direction of transformational resources, both financial and human capacities and coordination across members. Institutionally, the ASCC has played a role in articulating the visions of sustainable development, which has resulted in various plans and programmes conducted under its pillar. Nonetheless, its effectiveness has been curtailed as the instruments utilised are functionalist and structuralist oriented. It requires more focus on the process and the regional context of its members. In this context, the role of ASEAN to play a coordinating role is important as it still

retains a convening power within the region. Learning from experiences from other supranational bodies in convening for the purpose of development cooperation would provide lessons for the region to enhance its effectiveness in mobilising action within the region.

### **Conclusion**

ASEAN is at a crossroads. Amidst the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ukraine-Russia war, resulting in disrupted global supply chains and the political challenges in the region, in particular, the Myanmar crisis, the relevance of ASEAN Centrality is currently being questioned. While the concept is often focused towards the political security context, as well as for economic integration, this paper provides the prospects for ASEAN Centrality to be a major driver for development cooperation. As the region is not currently on track towards achieving the SDGs, there is a need to reinforce ASEAN Centrality as a coordinating platform for both internal and external cooperation on sustainable development. This would provide opportunities for development actors from both within the region and external development actors to play a role for ASEAN to transition towards sustainable development.

## | Conclusions

The contemporary redefinition of international balances has put Southeast Asia at the center of the global stage. The increasing competition between US and China, the economic and political spillover of the war in Ukraine, the impact of the long tail of the pandemic on the region are just the most recent examples of the different factors that are challenging the stability in the area. In such a scenario, ASEAN is called upon to find a way for keeping its dream alive and to carry on the integration process even further.

This path can offer an occasion for ASEAN, the EU and Italy to frame their partnership in a new comprehensive light. If the global standby forced by the pandemic in the last two years has risked jeopardizing the connection between the two regions, the new era that followed the disruption of the globalization as it has been known in the last thirty years is urging ASEAN and the European States to bring their cooperation at a new level. The awareness of the potentiality of this relationship is crucial for the two actors to overcome the two weaknesses that could split them apart: institutional peculiarity, which sometimes can affect the level of understanding, and geography, that affects the setting up of daily concerns and can blur the importance of the bilateral cooperation. In order to achieve this goal, the existence of common interests and shared priorities must be identified and put at the center of the collaboration. The first example of this trend is the EU and ASEAN interest in reaching their own strategic autonomy inside the new global environment. By setting their own agenda, EU and ASEAN can work on

their collaboration without being tackled by external factors. In this way, EU could reinforce its role as a credible partner for ASEAN. Indeed, it could contribute to preserving ASEAN centrality and, at the same time, could foster the perception among ASEAN public opinion and governments of the crucial role that the European partner can play for the region. In a moment when regional events (the war in Ukraine or the conflict in Myanmar) could affect the attention paid by both sides to the bilateral partnership in the short term, the strengthening of exchanges can play a crucial role in keeping the importance of relaunching the relation high in the government's agenda.

In this sense, the ties at the level of civil society, business community and think tanks become a strategic tool at EU and ASEAN disposal for multiplying the occasions of connection and reciprocal knowledge. The reinforcement of people-to-people links can contribute positively to the resilience of the relations, by raising the attention to challenges and opportunities each with a bottom-up approach, while supporting policymakers and institutional stakeholders in understanding where and in which direction to work. This sort of track 2 channels could help in highlighting the areas that need to be developed in all the sectors envisioned by the partnership, such as sustainable development, green transition as well as peace and security.

Among European member States, Italy is at the forefront of developing relations with ASEAN. The status as a Development partner attested the importance that the country pay to the relaunch of the partnership with Southeast Asia in recent years. Indeed, Italy considers the region a pillar of its new season of engagement in the Indo-

Pacific. Thanks to the expertise and the quality of know-how, Italian stakeholders can become a point of reference for Asian partners in those strategic fields that are envisioned as crucial by the partnership, such as innovation technology, green development, human-centric connectivity, traditional and non-traditional security. Through a country-system approach, Italian institutions, stakeholders, business community and think tanks can become a positive driver for bringing Italian and European experiences closer to ASEAN partners. Indeed, it can allow Italy to provide stakeholders in Southeast Asia with capacity-building training in critical sectors (i.e maritime security, border control, cyber-security, counter-terrorism) as well as sharing of knowledge in a wide range of fields that are intended to lead the development of the region in the future. By reinforcing the cooperation with ASEAN partners in these areas, Italy not only can support the relaunch of its role strategic interlocutor with one of the most vivid regions at the international level but also contribute to the EU's effort in bringing the partnership with ASEAN at a next stage.

## | Bios

### **Alizan Mahadi**

Mr Alizan Mahadi is a Director of Research at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.

Previously, he served as the Special Officer to the Science Advisor to the Prime Minister of Malaysia and the Chair of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

Alizan has led and participated in various significant policy research projects related to sustainable development and governance. Recently, he was appointed as the lead researcher for the All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia on the Sustainable Development Goals (APPGM-SDG), where he led a network of experts to undertake micro studies on SDGs in ten parliamentary constituencies. He is also the Project Director for drafting the Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) Blueprint for Malaysia and was previously the lead author for the National Readiness study to implement the SDGs for the Economic Planning Unit (EPU). Internationally, Alizan is a member of Future Earth's Knowledge Action Network on SDGs (SDGs KAN), a selected international network of leading researchers on SDGs. Domestically, he also has extensive experience in network building, including being a founding member of the Malaysian CSO SDG Alliance and the founding principal officer of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Malaysia Chapter. Alizan has been invited as a speaker in numerous international, regional and local forums and his newspaper columns, op-eds and interviews are available in various media outlets. He has a MSc in Sustainable Development from University of Uppsala,

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### **Jefferson Ng**

Jefferson is a Senior Analyst at the Indonesia Programme. His research mainly covers Indonesia's parliamentary politics, regional elections, and foreign policy. Prior to joining the Indonesia Programme in September 2019, he obtained an M.Sc degree in Asian Studies at the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) and graduated with first class honours in History at the National University of Singapore. His undergraduate thesis was on Singapore's early foreign policy entitled "Riding the Israeli Tiger: The Singapore-Israel Relationship (1965-1974)". He has published articles in various outlets, including New Mandala, The Diplomat, and The Jakarta Post.

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Carlo Palleschi is Junior Fellow in charge of the Geoeconomics Desk, where he deals with globalization, digitalization, energy security and urbanization.

Carlo previously worked as a research assistant at the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) and was part of the EUISS African Futures 2030 Task Force as coordinator of the working group on urbanization in Africa. He collaborated with the Center for Economic and International Studies of the University of Tor Vergata for a project of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) on agricultural and trade policies in Ethiopia.

Carlo is a PhD student in International Economics, Globalization and Development at the University of Rome La Sapienza. He received his master's degree in Political Economy from the same university and spent periods of study at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and the Paris School of International Affairs of Sciences Po.

### **Catherine Setiawan**

Catherine Setiawan is working as a Project Coordinator at International Telecommunication Union (ITU). ITU is the United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies – ICTs. Previously, she was working as a Regulatory Reform adviser at Cardno International Development, and as a Technical Officer at the ASEAN Secretariat. For her educational background, Catherine obtained her Master of Public Administration Degree from Cornell University, USA with a full scholarship from USAID Prestasi. She was the Commencement speaker in Cornell Public Affairs Graduation Ceremony in 2016. For her first degree, she received her Bachelor of Law from University of Pelita Harapan (UPH), Indonesia. She also took short-courses (E-government and Big Data) in Maastricht University, Netherlands, with a full scholarship from StuNed. Catherine has obtained several awards namely 2020 Southeast Asian Women Leader from Young Southeast Asia Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) Women's Network; 2019 Young Leader from Taiwan-Asian Young Leaders Engagement (TAYLE); 2019 Young Leader from the Pacific Forum. She also published some publications related to Future of Work in Indonesia, Trade Agreement and Digital Economy related policy and issues. When she has a free time, she enjoys traveling, reading books, and thinking about nice things.

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