

Authors' contribution/  
Wkład autorów:  
A. Study design/  
Zaplanowanie badań  
B. Data collection/  
Zebranie danych  
C. Statistical analysis/  
Analiza statystyczna  
D. Data interpretation/  
Interpretacja danych  
E. Manuscript preparation/  
Przygotowanie tekstu  
F. Literature search/  
Opracowanie  
piśmiennictwa  
G. Funds collection/  
Pozyskanie funduszy

OTHERS

JEL code: F50, F02  
Submitted:  
August 2024  
Accepted:  
February 2025

Tables: 0  
Figures: 0  
References: 18

INNE

Klasyfikacja JEL: F50, F02  
Zgłoszony:  
sierpień 2024  
Zaakceptowany:  
luty 2025

Tabele: 0  
Rysunki: 0  
Literatura: 18

IMPACTS OF THE 2020 EU-ASEAN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP  
– AN ANALYSIS

WPŁYW STRATEGICZNEGO PARTNERSTWA UE-ASEAN  
W 2020 ROKU – ANALIZA

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**Citation:** Goulard, S. (2025). Impacts of the 2020 EU-ASEAN Strategic Partnership – an analysis / Wpływ strategicznego partnerstwa UE-ASEAN w 2020 r. – analiza. *Economic and Regional Studies*, 18(1), 120-125, <https://doi.org/10.2478/ers-2025-0010>

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Abstract

**Subject and purpose of work:** This article aims to assess the evolution of relations between the European Union (EU) and ASEAN following their elevation to the rank of strategic partnership in 2020 and to measure the impact of this partnership on relations between the EU and Southeast Asia, both generally and sectorally.

**Materials and methods:** In this article, we compare the intentions and objectives defined in the EU-ASEAN strategic partnership and other official documents adopted since 2020 with the actions taken and their results. The goal is to analyze the relationship between the two most integrated regional organizations in the world and to see if the implementation of a strategic partnership strengthens this relationship.

**Results:** Our analysis shows that while this strategic partnership has given new impetus to relations between the two regions.

**Conclusions:** Several issues persist that prevent greater integration. On the ASEAN side, issues with the EU are addressed bilaterally.

**Keywords:** European Union, ASEAN, strategic partnership, diplomacy

Streszczenie

**Przedmiot i cel pracy:** Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu ocenę ewolucji stosunków między Unią Europejską (UE) a ASEAN po podniesieniu ich do rangi partnerstwa strategicznego w 2020 r. oraz zmierzenie wpływu tego partnerstwa na stosunki między UE a Azją Południowo-Wschodnią, zarówno ogólnie, jak i sektorowo.

**Materiały i metody:** W tym artykule porównujemy intencje i cele określone w strategicznym partnerstwie UE-ASEAN i innych oficjalnych dokumentach przyjętych od 2020 r. z podjętymi działaniami i ich wynikami. Celem jest analiza relacji między dwiema najbardziej zintegrowanymi organizacjami regionalnymi na świecie i sprawdzenie, czy wdrożenie strategicznego partnerstwa wzmacnia te relacje.

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**Journal included in:** AgEcon Search; AGRO; Arianta; Baidu Scholar; BazEkon; Cabell's Journalytics; CABI; CNKI Scholar; CNPIEC – cnpLINKer; Dimensions; DOAJ; EBSCO; ERIH PLUS; ExLibris; Google Scholar; Index Copernicus International; J-Gate; JournalTOCs; KESLI-NDL; MIAR; MyScienceWork; Naver Academic; Naviga (Softweco); Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education; QOAM; ReadCube, Research Papers in Economics (RePEc); SCILIT; Scite; Semantic Scholar; Sherpa/RoMEO; TDNet; Ulrich's Periodicals Directory/ulrichsweb; WanFang Data; WorldCat (OCLC); X-MOL.

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**Wyniki:** Nasza analiza pokazuje, że strategiczne partnerstwo nadało nowy impuls relacjom między dwoma regionami.

**Wnioski:** Nadal istnieje kilka kwestii, które uniemożliwiają większą integrację. Po stronie ASEAN kwestie związane z UE są rozwiązywane dwustronnie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Unia Europejska, ASEAN, partnerstwo strategiczne, dyplomacja

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## Introduction

In December 2020, during the Covid crisis, the European Union and ASEAN elevated their relations to the level of a strategic partnership at the 23rd ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting. An initial partnership had already been established between the two regional organizations in 1972, and by 1977, the European Union became a dialogue partner of ASEAN. This cooperation has strengthened since then, despite some obstacles, notably related to the human rights violations in Myanmar and the Asian financial crisis of 2008. However, as China grew stronger in Asia and on the international stage, the European Union and ASEAN sought to deepen their commitments. The Covid crisis in 2020 thus allowed both the European Union and ASEAN to rethink new logistics chains.

From the European side, the strategic partnership with ASEAN is part of a broader strategy to strengthen its presence in Asia, which can be seen as a response to China's "Belt and Road Initiative". In 2018, the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy announced the launch of the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy, which aimed to develop new connections, particularly in energy and transport with Asia. This desire of the European Union to strengthen its position in Asia accelerated in 2021 with the inauguration of a cooperation strategy in the Indo-Pacific and the launch of the "Global Gateway" program following the G7 summit in Carbis Bay, United Kingdom. The European Union was only following some of its members: France, Germany, and the Netherlands, which had previously published their own strategy for the Indo-Pacific in which ASEAN was identified as a major partner.

This new EU-ASEAN partnership also raises the question of the usefulness or effectiveness of strategic partnerships. How do they work? How do they translate into action on the ground? ASEAN is not the only actor with whom the European Union has forged a strategic partnership. Similar agreements have been launched with China, Canada, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and these strategic partnerships are varied and respond to the priorities set by the European Union in different regions of the world – to this end there is no standard model. For its part, ASEAN also has other strategic partners such as the United States, China, Japan, India, South Korea, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Russia.

Both regional organizations also participate in the Asia Europe Meeting, which has been held every two years since 1996, but which is regularly criticized for its lack of concrete results (Rüppell, 2020). So, what do we need to evaluate in relation to the EU-ASEAN strategic partnership? This document addresses four aspects of EU-ASEAN relations: economic cooperation, security cooperation, sustainable connectivity, and sustainable development.

Four years after the announcement of this strategic partnership, have the relations between ASEAN and the European Union evolved, and have the objectives defined by this partnership been achieved? Does this strategic partnership allow us to assess the current relations between ASEAN and the EU?

## Literature review

The relationship between the EU and ASEAN has been extensively studied (Novotny & Portela, 2012). European integration, currently at the most advanced stage when compared to other regional organizations in the world, has seemed to be a source of inspiration for ASEAN (Allison-Reuman & Murray, 2017). However, Brexit and the rise of Europhobic parties have shown certain limits to European integration, particularly in the sector of diplomacy and international relations. Even though the European Union has had a High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy since the Treaty of Lisbon (2007), EU member states retain significant prerogatives in this area. Do the strategic partnerships established at the European level have a real impact?

There are also numerous articles that have studied the various strategic partnerships formed by the European Union. According to Müftüler-Baç and Uzun-Teker (2024), while the strategic partnerships the European Union has established have structured dialogue channels with other powers, their tangible impacts remain uncertain. These partnerships take different forms and are established with different actors.

Furthermore, these partnerships are not irrevocable. They can be questioned or even annulled, as in the case of the partnership between the European Union and Russia. Established in 2011 after numerous efforts by both parties to strengthen their cooperation in several sectors such as finance, environment, and justice, it did not survive the invasion and subsequent annexation of Crimea by Moscow in 2014. The European Parliament voted to annul it in June 2015. Since February 2022, the European Union is even on Russia's list of "unfriendly countries". Another example is China; in 2003, the European Union and China announced a strategic partnership. However, in 2019, in its "EU-China Strategic Outlook" document, the European Commission described China as a partner but also as a competitor and systemic rival, which significantly cooled relations between the two regions, even though their economic exchanges remain consistently high.

While institutional exchanges between the two regions have accelerated, is there an EU-ASEAN partnership on the ground? According to Hwee (2020), although relations between the two blocks have strengthened since the establishment of the first partnership in 1972, they have not reached their potential, notably due to different approaches on human rights, sustainable development, and a mutual misunderstanding of each organization's functioning and priorities. However, according to Hsieh (2022), due to the changing Sino-European relations, ASEAN has emerged as the European Union's priority in Asia.

## Methods

To assess the impact of this first strategic partnership that has linked the European Union and ASEAN since 2020, our study will analyze the various events and documents produced either jointly or separately by the EU and ASEAN since inception. This is not an exhaustive work, but rather an analysis of the main milestones in their relations, such as the various EU-ASEAN Blue Books, as well as the "Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-EU Strategic Partnership (2023-2027)" which replaces the "ASEAN-EU Plan of Action (2018-2022)". The results of this partnership will also be analyzed in the four key sectors that appear in the 2020 joint declaration (economic exchanges, defense and security, connectivity, and environment). Finally, some limitations to this strategic partnership will be identified by analyzing the various points of tension between the two regions.

This study aims to analyze the progress made by the EU and ASEAN concerning the ambitions defined in their strategic partnership. The various declarations and official documents jointly produced by the EU and ASEAN since the elevation of their partnership to the rank of a strategic partnership will be analyzed.

## Research and findings

While there has been some acceleration in the implementation of the EU-ASEAN partnership, notably through the various strategies adopted by the European Union to strengthen its presence in Asia and the resumption of negotiations with several ASEAN countries to establish free trade agreements (FTAs), it is noted that the EU-ASEAN Blue Books, which structure the dialogue between the two blocs, are published less frequently. No Blue Book was published in 2023, and the current edition covers 2024 and 2025, whereas previous publications were annual.

## Economic cooperation

In terms of trade, exchanges between the two blocs have intensified, and economic cooperation is at the heart of EU-ASEAN relations, as indicated by the various EU-ASEAN Blue Books. ASEAN remains the EU's third-largest trading partner (outside Europe), and the EU is ASEAN's third-largest partner. Within

ASEAN, Vietnam remains the most important trading partner for goods. However, the European Union suffers from a structural trade deficit with ASEAN, importing agricultural products as well as, increasingly, manufactured goods from Southeast Asia.

Nevertheless, the strategic partnership between the European Union and ASEAN has not yet advanced negotiations for a free trade agreement between the two blocs. Initiated in 2007, these negotiations were halted in 2009 due to significant differences, particularly on human rights issues, leading to a preference for bilateral negotiations between the EU and individual ASEAN members. The first bilateral FTA was signed with Singapore in November 2019, after nine years of negotiation, and with Vietnam in August 2020. New negotiations between the two regional organizations resumed in 2017 without major results, mainly due to differences in agricultural standards (Lin, 2022).

Since the launch of this strategic partnership, there has been a push to restart negotiations with several ASEAN states. Since 2023, Malaysia and the European Union have been considering opening a new negotiation round after pausing in 2012. Similarly, an FTA between the EU and the Philippines could materialize in the coming years, as negotiations resumed this year after a seven-year hiatus, partly due to European concerns about potential authoritarianism under former President Rodrigo Duterte (2016-2022). In Thailand, the withdrawal of the junta in 2019 prompted the EU to revisit its relations with Bangkok, leading to renewed negotiations for a free trade agreement. The first negotiation round occurred in September 2023, and an agreement could be signed as early as 2025 (Strangio, 2024).

Negotiations with Indonesia began in 2016 and are ongoing without significant results. According to Hidayat (2024), to break the deadlock, problematic issues like the EU's recognition of Indonesia's Sustainable Palm Oil standard should be removed from the negotiations and addressed separately. Additionally, relations between Indonesia and the EU are impacted by their dispute over nickel trade. The EU challenged Jakarta's decision to ban nickel exports in 2019 at the World Trade Organization in 2020 (Murfi, 2024). However, Sauvignon (2024) argues that, given the EU's goal to secure its supply chains, this dispute is unnecessary and undermines efforts by both parties to strengthen their partnership.

Currently, bilateral negotiations between the EU and individual ASEAN members are favored over a bloc-to-bloc approach, which cannot be adopted in Europe mainly due to the political situation in Myanmar.

## **Environment**

Another component of the EU-ASEAN strategic partnership covers environmental and green growth issues. In 2019, the European Union unveiled its Green Deal and has since aimed to promote its principles in its cooperation with the rest of the world, including ASEAN. While the two regions collaborate under the EU-ASEAN Green Initiative, notably by funding green finance projects and sharing experiences between European and Southeast Asian green cities, environmental issues remain a point of tension. The EU's ambitious policy on deforestation and natural resource traceability can be seen as a threat to certain agricultural activities, such as palm oil production, in some ASEAN states. Since 2018 and the adoption of Directive 2018/2001 by the European Parliament, which promotes the use of energy from renewable sources, the EU decided to exclude palm oil-based biofuels from the list of renewable energies, phasing out palm oil in biofuels by 2030. This move has been criticized by ASEAN palm oil producers. Indonesia brought this matter to the World Trade Organization, citing it as a discriminatory measure. This dispute hinders the deepening of EU-ASEAN relations on environmental issues. However, to resolve this disagreement, a task force was launched in August 2023 by the EU, Indonesia, and Malaysia. It is noteworthy that ASEAN is not directly involved in these negotiations.

## **Security and defense**

The security aspect of the partnership covers maritime security, counter-terrorism, and transnational crime, with cybersecurity added to this list in the EU-ASEAN Blue Book 2021. For the first time in December 2020, the EU was represented at the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus. Amid tensions between China and Southeast Asian states over territorial claims in the South China Sea, the EU has made ocean governance one of its seven priorities in the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

On the ground, this has translated into the expansion of the European CRIMARIO I and II (Critical Maritime Routes Indian Ocean) programs to all of Asia and the Pacific, with increased cooperation with states like the Philippines. Additionally, other collaborations with ASEAN states on infectious diseases or nuclear risks have been funded by the European Union.

Both blocks are now seeking to develop new, highly operational cooperations to gain autonomy. However, as noted by Dinopit (2024), the EU and ASEAN are not at the same stage of integration on security and defense issues, making cooperation more limited. Without a common diplomacy within ASEAN, these are more accurately bilateral cooperations between the EU and certain ASEAN states.

Moreover, the EU's ambitions in Southeast Asia have been revised downwards following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, leading the EU to concentrate its efforts on its eastern flank. ASEAN states, despite condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine (except for Vietnam and Laos), remain divided on this issue. At Ukraine Peace Summit in June 2024, only four ASEAN members (Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) sent delegations (Padmanabhan, 2024). Saha (2023) notes that only Singapore has imposed sanctions against Russia, while the others have adopted a more neutral stance. This disinterest in a conflict central to Europe could prompt some EU states, particularly those in Central Europe, to reconsider European funding to ASEAN.

## Connectivity

Finally, connectivity, present in cross-pillar cooperation with smart cities and the circular economy in the first Blue Books, has become more prominent after the adoption of the European Strategy for the Indo-Pacific and features heavily in the EU-ASEAN Blue Book 2024-2025. The European Union cooperates with ASEAN in implementing its Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025, defined in 2017, which aims to build new infrastructure, digital innovation, more efficient logistics, regulatory harmonization, and better mobility of people within ASEAN. These objectives align with those formulated by the EU in its Indo-Pacific strategy. Brussels has thus decided to increase its support for ASEAN in implementing its vision through several programs. A major initiative under this pillar was the "ARISE Plus Civil Aviation" program (2018-2023), which significantly strengthened cooperation between the European Union and ASEAN in civil aviation with mutual recognition of certificates and licenses. This theme of connectivity also covers people-to-people exchanges, including tourism, as well as university exchanges and research through the "Horizon Europe" program. In July 2024, the EU and ASEAN unveiled a new program called the Sustainable Connectivity Package (SCOPE) worth 9.3 million euros to increase the mobility of researchers and students between the two regions by 2028. However, despite these initiatives, EU universities remain less attractive to ASEAN students compared to Asian, Australian, or American institutions. Examining the two ASEAN countries sending the most students abroad, Vietnam and Indonesia, it is evident that no EU destination ranks among their top choices. In 2022, Vietnamese students prioritized Japanese, South Korean, American, and Australian universities. Only Germany rivals Canada in sixth place. Similarly, Indonesian students prefer studying in Anglo-Saxon or Asian countries (Japan), with the UK preferred over Germany in Europe (UNESCO, 2023).

## Conclusions

The strategic partnership established between the EU and ASEAN in 2020 signifies the strengthening of relations between the two regions. This commitment is evident in various documents, particularly the EU-ASEAN Blue Books published since 2020, as well as on the ground with numerous cooperation programs between the regions. However, due to differing levels of integration between the regions, ASEAN states tend to favor bilateral approaches with the European Union over bloc-to-bloc diplomacy, especially during crises such as those involving nickel or palm oil between the EU and Indonesia. The EU-ASEAN partnership remains a work in progress. While there has been a European desire to be more present in Southeast Asia, partly due to changing relations with China, the crisis in Ukraine may render the partnership with ASEAN less of a priority for the EU.

Nonetheless, there is a noticeable acceleration in exchanges and initiatives between the two blocs, demonstrating a mutual desire to deepen their strategic partnership.

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