

# EU's Resilience Building in Southeast Asia: Challenges and Implications for ASEAN

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## ABSTRACT

Resilience has lately become popular in international relations discourse and the EU's foreign policy. Asia, particularly Southeast Asia, was identified in the Global Strategy as one of the focus regions where the EU would like to promote a resilient government and society through its normative power and developmental aids. However, although the EU has been trying to assert its values the most in Southeast Asia, the challenges for this Union, compared to other targeted regions like the MENA region or Eastern Neighborhood. Therefore, the article will examine challenges Brussels faces when engaging in various issues to promote resilience communities such as conflict resolution, climate change, democracy, rules of law and trade, and deliver a comparative analysis with other regions that the EU has also been enhancing this strategy. From that, implications for ASEAN in building its own resilience and multilateral cooperation will be analyzed. As the ASEAN-EU relationship is the crucial element of multilateral global governance, and the pioneer in resilience constructing, the notion "cooperation beyond aid" is not only fostering cooperation in promoting resilient communities in Southeast Asia but also lessons for this Associate to sustain the livelihoods of the population of its 10 member states.

**Keywords:** *Resilience, ASEAN, EU, comparative analysis, multilateralism.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Resilience is one of the key terms in the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) as it appears around 30 times in this document. Resilience building operations are mainly executing in the EU's neighboring countries, as efforts to leverage states' capacity in withstanding and recovering from the crisis. However, considering the new determination of the European Commission in promoting resilience beyond the EU's neighborhood, Southeast Asia is one of the potential targets for the EU. It is because democracy and human rights in 11 Southeast Asian countries are eroding, so the EU as the final guard of the rules-based order system is expected to extend the resilient building to the global North. Furthermore, there is a redirection in the understanding of this concept, as the EU also applies it to strengthen the rules-based order in which ASEAN is one of a few proponents for this system left in the world. In this paper, the author will analyze challenges the EU has been facing when trying to build resilient state-society in Southeast Asia, particularly democracy and human rights protection through trade and normative measures. From that, the implications to ASEAN as the regional body in promoting the concept of resilience and

cooperating with the EU to maintain the multilateral order will be discussed.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature about "resilience" often reflected through research in European Union, as the EU has been executing the resilience-building within its Member states and across its surrounding regions, including the Balkans, Middle-East and North Africa (MENA), or Central Asia, Central Africa, and Afghanistan. Since 2016, the research on resilience in EU governance has been growing. However, only few studies deliver a comprehensive concept of what state or societal resilience. Resilience contains multiple layers of meanings [1] as Bourbeau in his "A Genealogy of Resilience in the World Politics" concluded that resilience should be understood in a more inclusive, non-linear, and non-restrictive way. Among various explanations in scholarship about resilience, Joseph's argument was quoted many times in different papers. He pointed out that resilience is about understanding "the other" for what they are [2]. Another famous scholar, Foucault, believes that resilience should include both external governing strategy and "self-governance" strengthening [3]. In general, there are various ways to

interpret the term “resilience” and the majority of them are related to the European Union.

However, looking at the literature about the EU's resilient building, it can be witnessed that outstanding research projects and journals mainly focus on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Silvia Colombo and Vassilis in their article “Framing Resilience: A New Path for EU-MENA Relations” [4] is one of the earliest in-depth analyses on the scholarship of EU-MENA resilience strategy. Another geographical focus is Western Balkans, with the release of Resilience in Western Balkans (2017) of Sabina Lange and Zoran Nechev after the EU Global Strategy was announced in 2016. However, the research about promoting resilience in Southeast Asia has not been developed, primarily because actions taken by the EU in this region are fragmented and the EU leaders have not focused on this region until the newest European Commission identified it as the “Geopolitical Commission”. It reflected the changes in the way the EU views the world and respectively redirect their efforts in resilience building in other regions in the world, including Southeast Asia. This article will summarize and analyze the EU's resilience strengthening in this region, particularly in the democracy, human rights, and environmental aspects.

### 3. METHODS

In this paper, the primary method used is single case study method. In this research, the challenges from Southeast Asia and EU itself are the independent variables, and the dependent variable is the resilience building operations in Southeast Asia. EU Study's strategy in Southeast Asia allows the author to produce rich description only and to contribute to the theories of resilience building. Within-case analysis in qualitative research, I used the process tracing techniques in which I examine diagnostic evidence in light of my research question. Evidence from a temporal sequence of events, official documents, and discourses from political leaders and diplomats in bilateral and multilateral dialogues will be analyzed.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### *4.1. Resilience: An overview from the EU's perspective*

Not only in the field of political science and development studies but the concept of resilience has also been used in different studies, ranging from psychology, sociology, archaeology to biology since the late 20th century. Among them, Henrik Thoren's understanding of “Resilience as a Unifying Concept” was cited several times in different research as he promoted the multidisciplinary approach, including the social, ecological, economic, and political fields. Actors of resilience research can be a nation-state,

community, household, family, and individuals. Resilience does not refer to the ability to adapt and bounce back to the status quo before a crisis, but to redirect actors to avoid negative factors without changing the baseline functioning.

Resilience in EU's discourses is not new, as it first appeared in European Commission's “The EU Approach to Resilience: Learning from Food Security” in 2012, and then European Council Conclusions on the EU's approach to Resilience in 2013 and European Commission's Action Plan for Resilience in Crisis Prone Countries”. The scope of resilience-building was restricted in humanitarian issues. However, it was promoted as one of the key priorities to leverage the role of this union in the world order, thereby expanding the scope to cross-sectoral policy areas. Security, as such, becomes dominant in the research of resilience building, especially when it is applied in the EU Global Strategy. In this strategy, resilience is interpreted as the ability of states to deal and recover from security threats, including terrorism, fake news, and hybrid warfare. Later in 2017, the EU declared the 2017 Joint Communication in which there are several aspects of resilience-building are listed, including the abilities of states, societies, communities, and individuals to adapt to different kinds of shocks, to build, maintain and rebuild its cores, and to manage risks and opportunities by sustainable and non-violent methods. However, there is no one-size-fits-all solution, as the High Representative noted that “there are many ways to build inclusive, prosperous and secure societies” [5].

As such, the EU has been enacting and deploying several policies, instruments, and mechanisms in different regions across the world, notably in 2019 following the rising influence of China in EU neighborhoods and the withdrawal of the U.S. from the international stage, demonstrating in the budget allocation. In the Multiannual Financial Framework meetings, the European Commission proposed to raise the budget for strengthening the role of the EU in the international order to 30 billion Euros. In general, the resilience enhancing strategy of this Union composed of two major components: internal resilience and external resilience. In 2019, the High Representative stepped further the previous concept of resilience, as Brussels will foster the resilient multilateral system to protect the rules-based order facing several threats from within and outside the EU. Hence, the efforts of the EU in resilience building are a part of promoting global governance and normative powers. This means the EU is willing to include multilateral cooperation in several dialogues, particularly with similar regional countries like the African Union or ASEAN. Unlike the AU where the EU has invested much money and effort in improving capacities of member countries to recover from systemic shock, Brussels only deployed ad hoc and fragmented programs in ASEAN Member countries, while there is huge room for resilience building in this region. In the next part, the author will analyze the current situations in Southeast Asian countries and evaluate the challenges that the EU has been facing when trying to apply its normative power and concept of resilience.

#### **4.2. The current situation in Southeast Asia**

Eleven Southeast Asian countries embrace different features and characteristics, ranging from their political regimes, economic operations to cultural practices. Yet, they share a common thing, which is the very low rate of democracy and human rights protections [6]. Previously, some countries in this region did not oppose the idea of democracy, notably Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines, in the official documents, namely the ASEAN Charter, ASEAN Concord II, and the ASEAN Political and Security Community Blueprint. However, after the Rohingya crisis and the ineffectiveness of The ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (ACHIR) in dealing with this, Southeast Asia seems increasingly vulnerable to democracy erosion and human rights violation.

To be specific, after the wave of democratization in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the democratic elections collapsed in the late 1950s until the 1980s. The 2 last decades of the last century witnessed the rise of democracy in some ASEAN member countries, before seeing the rise of authoritarianism in the past few years. Roughly one-third of the member states are still dominated by single-party like Vietnam, Laos; Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore are categorized as “electoral authoritarianism” [7]; Cambodia is under one-man rule, and Brunei is still a sultanate. Thailand and Myanmar are the worst cases as these two countries fall under the control of the military coup [8]. Facing this situation, how can the EU contribute to the resilience building in Southeast Asian states?

#### **4.3. EU resilience strengthening in Southeast Asia**

The first bilateral cooperation between ASEAN and the EU was under the framework of the European Economic in 1972, which later led to the establishment of the ASEAN-EEC Joint Study Group in 1975. An official relationship between the two parties was formalized in 1997, followed by ministerial meetings from 1978 until now. Brussels and Jakarta agreed on the center of relations, which are economic, development, and technical cooperation, and political issues, particularly democracy, were absent from the dialogues. Starting from the late 1990s, the EU had shown its increasing interest in engaging with ASEAN and national governments, with several new mechanisms such as Eminent Persons Group, Nuremberg Declaration on EU-ASEAN Enhanced Partnership, ASEAN-EU Summit. Nevertheless, no mechanisms allow the EU to contribute to the political resilience building, particularly democratization and human rights protections, and as such this has been the main conflicting point in the relations [9].

First, in the Global Strategy, the EU diversifies its participation in the South China Sea conflicts, including building resilience in its partners; in this case it equals the capacity building for ASEAN member states, and at the

same time support regional integration, security protection, and contributes to the maritime issues [10].

Second, the EU uses its economic powers as a bargain for ASEAN countries. Cambodia and Myanmar have been suffering from economic sanctions because of the transgressions in human rights, as for the case of Cambodia, the tension between Everything but Arms (EBA) and the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP). Regarding the Myanmar case, it is the violations of human rights in Arakan and Rakhine state, widely known as the Rohingya crisis. In 2018, the EU also withdrew its funding for Cambodia's elections due to the crackdown on the Cambodia National Rescue Party.

However, how long will these tactics sustain is the big question. Furthermore, in terms of resilience building, the EU previously tended to focus more on the environment and labor problems, leading to the nature of short-term policy rather than long-term engagement and strategic interference. The EU has set the conditions for access to the EU market, as Cecilia Malmstrom, the EU Commissioner for Trade emphasized that “trade policy must be led by our values” [11]. Stepping further from rhetoric speeches and documents, the European Commission started to increase the economic pressure on non-democracy. For instance, it is considering suspending the Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP). It means that Myanmar will not receive the privilege to be exempted from import duties to the EU. Similarly, Brussels also planned to remove the GSP condition towards Cambodia, and on 12 February, the Commission decided to partially withdraw the right to access of Cambodia to the market of EU [12]. Regarding this decision, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell explained that it is the result of Phnom Penh's violations of political participation. It can only regain the right by reopening political space within the country and reestablishing the opposition in the political spectrum. On the contrary, EC gave the GSP+ scheme to one Southeast Asian country, the Philippines [13]. Brussels also signed with Duterte's administration the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which aims to confirm the commitment to human rights protection, principles of democracy, and the rules-based order. However, normally the economic sanctions from Brussels often do not have enough effectiveness as they need to be coordinated by the regional economic hegemon and participation of many countries. Nevertheless, the economic tool is the only option and channel of influence that this Union has, given the fact that until 2019, it had imposed more than 40 sanctions [14].

Another economic tool is the FTA deal. Previously there were negotiations between Thailand and the EU, yet it was suspended due to the rise of the military coup in Thailand. Brussels has spoken about Bangkok's non-democratic elections on several occasions. It enhances the engagement in the latest Thailand's elections by constantly working on the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement to force Thailand to follow the requirements on human rights and democratic pluralism, and at the same time emphasizing that there will be no FTA if the situation in

this country continues [15]. However, this is also a blunt sword as Prayut Chan-o-cha's government did not follow any suggestion of Brussels and the democracy in Thailand has been becoming worse year after year. A similar situation happens regarding the EUVFTA since the EU still ratified the agreement with Vietnam despite the human rights conditions in this country. Although a number of human rights organizations and political parties call for suspending this agreement, such as the Identity and Democracy, the Greens, or the Left-GUE, economic benefits still gain victory in this battle [16]. This FTA reveals the weaknesses and impotent of the EU in keeping up with its own efforts in sustaining the liberal world order and promoting the concept of resilience in Southeast Asia.

Furthermore, EU-ASEAN relations have been the crucial factor in the multilateral engagement strategy of the EU towards Asia. ASEAN has been *not* only the priority of the third tier in foreign policy, but also the number one partner in the Asia-Europe Meeting, a dialogue that aims to strengthen multilateralism and international cooperation across Asia and Europe. As ASEAN is also a regional organization, EU leaders usually consider ASEAN as a co-supporter and advocate for the liberal and rules-based world order. As such, Brussels desires to engage ASEAN in official dialogues so that both parties are able to foster discussions about democracy and human rights. For example, the EU wanted to finalize the strategic partnership at the 2019 ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting, yet the two parties did not reach a consensus due to the disagreement on palm oil issues in Malaysia, Indonesia, and more importantly, human rights. Therefore, the Union at the same time concentrates on bilateral relations with each country, demonstrating in the free trade agreements with Singapore and Vietnam [17], and the ongoing negotiations with the Philippines and Indonesia.

Fourthly, the EU promotes resilience building in Southeast Asia through humanitarian aid. To solve the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, the European Commission has donated millions of **Euros** as well as shelters, healthcare, water and sanitation assistance, and educational opportunities to assist refugees and communities in the conflicted zone. Janez Lenarčič, the Commissioner for Crisis Management stated that "the EU continues to work to secure the conditions for the safe, dignified and sustainable return of the Rohingya to Myanmar" [18]. **EU leaders, besides, assist** Naypyidaw in reintegrating in global politics and technical training under the "Everything but Arms" framework as well as supervising the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. Starting from 2010, EC has delivered nearly €80 million to support underprivileged people affected by this crisis [19]. It shows the determination of Brussels in terms of increasing the capability to rebuild the community and remove the weaknesses after the crisis.

In general, it can be concluded that resilience-building efforts of the EU in Southeast Asia are not effective as nothing significant has changed in this region, and their Global Strategy faced several challenges from

both within the Union and external factors coming from Southeast Asian states.

#### ***4.4. Reasons behind the ineffectiveness of EU's resilience construction in Southeast Asia***

##### *4.4.1. Internal factors*

ASEAN and Southeast Asia are not in the first and second priorities of Brussels like Western Balkans, MENA, and post-Soviet areas; hence the budget and efforts this Union has invested in this region are far less than countries in the first and second top tier. Even within the European Union, there are several debates about the EU Global Strategy and the resilience-building activities outside the border of 27 member states. The rise of populism and radical right parties in Europe are the main barriers in leveraging the role of the EU in addressing human rights issues and sustaining the liberal world system. Most importantly, unlike other great powers in the world, EU can only count on its normative power, including trade and cultural impacts, while other global players like the U.S., China, Russia have military power and political influences on small and middle powers.

##### *4.4.2. Southeast Asian factors*

Despite some domestic factors, the main reasons behind the struggles of the EU stem from Southeast Asia countries themselves. Firstly and the foremost, the majority of ASEAN member states are afraid of Western interference in their internal affairs as a consequence of being colonized in the last century. Except for Thailand, all Southeast Asian states were colonized by Western countries in the past, such as France, the U.K, the Netherlands, or Spain, so the norm of non-interference and non-intervention have been the key concept in regional cooperation and foreign policy of all member states. In the past, several democratic transitions had been deployed, such as the Philippines in 1986, Thailand in 1992, Cambodia in 1993, and Indonesia in 1998, but authoritarianism once again became a dominant trend in Southeast Asia in the second decade of the 21st century [20]. Hence, any efforts that EU has taken to help improve the resilience capacity are easily interpreted as interference in domestic issues.

Secondly, the differences in political regimes of eleven Southeast Asian states, which lead to difficulties in designing a unified and synchronized approach to this region. In order to facilitate the democracy-building in Southeast Asia, the EU needs a thorough understanding of various stages of democracy, and finds an appropriate way to engage each country. However, instead of doing so, the EU hopes to find solutions primarily through ASEAN. However, ASEAN itself has proved that it has little capacity in human rights protections and democratization. The ASEAN Security allows a very small number of entry points in which cooperation for democracy can be strengthened [21].

#### **4.5. Implications for EU-ASEAN cooperation**

As the second-most successful regional organization in the world after the EU, ASEAN is expected to be the major partner of Brussels in Asia regarding the resilience of the multilateral system. Besides the failure to achieve the targets for intra-regional trade and tariffs, the current economic sanctions affect the EU-ASEAN FTA discussions. Democracy and human right related issues have caused tensions between the two parties. To meet the expectations of the EU, ASEAN must have the legally binding or actual influence on Cambodia or Myanmar like the EU has on its member countries, but in fact, ASEAN has very limited impact due to the ASEAN Way. Although ASEAN criticized and condemned Myanmar for the human rights violations, and provided humanitarian assistance, no institutional remit has been executed. However, the EU cannot force ASEAN to follow the same structure and rules, as each regional body has its unique features and way of functioning. That is why Brussels' trade policy is facing a great dilemma. On the one hand, suspending economic benefits is the only way the EU can do to achieve the goal of resilience building in ASEAN. On the other hand, if freezing all the trade negotiations with Jakarta, the EU will not achieve any target and at the same time undermine its long-term goal of facilitating the regional integration in ASEAN [22].

Nevertheless, ten ASEAN country members have been aimed at greater integrations in every aspect, which can be clearly seen through the establishment of the ASEAN Community, and EU as the role model has many lessons to offer ASEAN in terms of resilience building. EU should ensure that the normative values of the union, such as human rights, democracy, and rules of law will not be removed because of economic benefits. Secondly, any policy of the union should be vocal as a result of collective actions, in which any partnership with ASEAN and its member states should be unified and committed to multilateralism.

Furthermore, the ASEAN has noticed the ineffectiveness of its largest human rights organization, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) in many crises, and thereby trying to improve

the mechanism and collaboration between member states. Brussels is able to help ASEAN countries through the track two dialogues, which means that sensitive issues can be discussed in the less formal agenda, and continue to support the role of civil society in 10 ASEAN members [23]

## **5. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, resilience building is a key pillar in the EU Global Strategy, and Southeast Asia is one of the potential regions that Brussels is trying to implement this strategy. Although resilience is still a controversial term, under the lens of EU leaders, it can be interpreted as the ability of the states to adapt to the crisis, recover from shocks and create a sustainable state-society. In the case of Southeast Asia, the resilience construction of the EU mainly reflected through the efforts to facilitate democratization and protect human rights. The EU has been trying to enhance its participation in the regional crises and conflicts, use both economic sanctions and economic benefits, put pressure through multilateral platforms as well as provide humanitarian aid. However, most of them are ineffective due to both internal and external factors, such as the rise of populism in both Europe and Southeast Asia, the non-interference principle, or the differences in political regimes in Southeast Asia. Lastly, implications to EU-ASEAN cooperation are suggested, including a more unified EU and a more integrated ASEAN. However, given the current COVID19 pandemic, the EU has faced one of the greatest challenges ever, and the reallocation in its budget will affect the resilience-building efforts in Southeast Asia and many other regions. It will also threaten the resilience of the multilateral system for which ASEAN and the EU have been actively advocating for. There is a huge room for research in the scholarship of the EU's resilience and resilience in general in the future, namely the changes in EU's resilience promotion strategy, ASEAN-EU cooperation in facilitating the resilient society-state, and the effects on multilateral world order.

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