



The Normative Dimension of EU-ASEAN Relations: A Historical Perspective

by

Giovanni Finizio*

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Abstract

This article provides a historical reconstruction of the normative dimension (principles, norms, values) of EU-ASEAN relations, with particular reference to the EU's inclination and attempts to make them an instrument for the diffusion of democracy, human rights and the European model of regional integration in Southeast Asia. Taking into consideration the normative interaction between the two organizations, fueled by particular breaches of democratic principles in Southeast Asia such as the Myanmar case, we focus on the dynamics of construction and de-construction of the EU's and ASEAN's political identity, in the framework of the evolution of the interregional relations. The evolution of asymmetry of power relations between the EU and ASEAN is particularly important in this analysis. The gradual rebalancing of power asymmetries between the two organizations, associated with the rising relevance of Southeast Asia and ASEAN on the world stage, has affected the cohesion among member states on normative issues and restricted the EU's ideational influence on the partner organization. Moreover, this process has induced the EU to adjust its policy towards ASEAN and to rethink the role of European norms in its relations with Southeast Asia.

Keywords

interregionalism; EU-ASEAN relations; democracy; human rights; regionalism promotion



1. Introduction

The promotion of liberal values such as democracy, human rights, rule of law, on the one hand, and of regional integration on the other, have become in the 1990s two pillars of the European Union's external identity.

With the Maastricht Treaty (1992), the EU explicitly included for the first time the promotion of democracy and human rights into the fundamental objectives of its foreign policy, something that no other international actor had done before (TEU, art. 11; Balfour 2006; Smith 2014). Democracy is also at the heart of the very European integration project, which was supported by the US after WWII as an instrument to ensure a 'democratic' peace on the continent. EU's member states and supranational institutions share a democratic identity, from which the EU believes to derive its legitimacy and effectiveness in promoting democracy elsewhereⁱ. At the same time, the Maastricht Treaty launched the EU on the world scene as a new economic, political and even monetary actor in the making, which relaunched regionalism promotion as one of the pillars of its foreign policy (Finizio 2015b: 132)ⁱⁱ.

While the EU is not the only actor which promotes liberal values beyond its borders, the promotion of regionalism and its inclination to build interregional relations makes it unique in international relations. No other actor considers regional organizations which it promotes and supports as its privileged partners, or no other actor does it to the same extent (Smith 2014: 67). On the one hand, through its interregional relations the EU promotes the development of regional integration experiences on other continents, in some way, trying to export its own model, which has been described by some authors a laboratory of international (or cosmopolitan) democracy (Levi 2014: 16-17; Archibugi 2008: 109-112), and which the Union itself considers 'the only successful example of regional integration so far' (European Commission 1995: 8)ⁱⁱⁱ. In the EU's vision, the promotion of 'regionalism through interregionalism' (Doidge 2011: 50) help create the conditions for development and stability in other regions, and can pave the way to the construction of a post-Westphalian order based on the overcoming of the anarchical structure of international relations (Telò 2006: 227-228). On the other hand, interregional relations are used by the EU as an instrument to influence the political identity of partner organizations, bringing them closer to liberal values on which the very European integration process is based. Through these objectives, the EU attempts to legitimize its role as a civilian power and an international actor (Söderbaum, Stålgren, Van



Langenhove, 2005; Vasconcelos 2007: 179). Ian Manners and other authors after him, focusing on processes of ideational diffusion promoted by the EU and trying to theorize the EU's actorness in world politics, have described it as a 'normative power', which refers to the EU's ability to shape conceptions of the 'normal' in international relations (Manners 2002: 239), and to its predisposition to put a particular set of norms (understood here as 'shared – thus social – standards of behaviour' (Klotz 1995: 14)), principles and values at the centre of its relations with other parts of the world (Manners 2002: 252; Tereszkievicz 2020: 97)^{iv}.

This article provides a historical reconstruction of the normative dimension (principles, norms, values) of EU-ASEAN relations, with particular reference to the EU's inclination and attempts to make them an instrument for the diffusion of democracy, human rights and the European model of regional integration in Southeast Asia. Taking into consideration the normative interaction between the two organizations, fueled by particular breaches of democratic principles in Southeast Asia such as the Myanmar case, we focus on the dynamics of construction and de-construction of the EU's and ASEAN's normative identity, in the framework of the evolution of interregional relations. The evolution of asymmetry of power relations between the EU and ASEAN is particularly important in this analysis. As it will be shown in this article, the gradual rebalancing of power asymmetries between the two organizations, associated with the rising relevance of Southeast Asia and ASEAN on the world stage, has affected the cohesion among member states on normative issues and restricted the EU's normative influence on the partner organization. Moreover, this process has induced the EU to adjust its policy towards ASEAN and to rethink the role of European norms in its relations with Southeast Asia.

2. The EU and the ASEAN's Normative Identity

ASEAN was established in 1967 by Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines with the aim to oppose the expansion of communism, to limit the military influence of external actors (such as China, Japan, USSR, and the West) in the region and the hostility among member states (Migani, 2018: 126), and to promote socio-economic development in an atmosphere of mutual suspicion, low-intensity conflicts as well as persistent domestic threat to state authority (Kraft 2014: 331). Not surprisingly, ASEAN



normative approach, known as ‘ASEAN Way’, is very different from the European Union one. In fact, ‘ASEAN Way’ is based on the one hand on regulatory principles such as the absolute centrality of state sovereignty, non-use of force, non-interference, peaceful settlement of disputes (ASEAN 1976: art. 2); on the other hand, it includes a set of procedural rules in collective decision-making, such as the systematic search for consensus, pragmatism, informality, non-confrontational negotiation style (Haacke, 2003, 8). Moreover, as widely acquired in the literature, ASEAN’s development has explicitly avoided replicating the EU model of regionalism, based on sovereignty pooling, formal and bureaucratic institutions, legalistic decision-making, and majority voting in most decisions (Haacke, 2003; Garnaut and Drysdale 1994). This tendency, resembling in some way the African experience (Finizio 2020: 38-41), is rooted in history (Beeson and Stone 2013: 169-170). Southeast Asian states, products of a relatively recent decolonization from European imperialism, ‘were born in a fraught geopolitical environment and have had to create nation-states, identities and functioning economies in an international system dominated by extant European powers and, more recently, the US’ (Beeson and Stone 2013: 170). As a consequence, these states remain concerned with protecting domestic sovereignty, and are consequently preternaturally sensitive to possible infringements on domestic autonomy, which the ASEAN Way is designed to protect. While European integration was launched to transcend state sovereignty overcoming nationalisms in Europe, Southeast Asian regionalism was conceived to promote security and development in the region preserving and defending national sovereignty.

Not surprisingly, the promotion of democracy and human rights were not among ASEAN’s objectives, and even today, democracy is not part of the organization’s identity, especially as it is still far from being the shared method of government in the region and is still considered a possible cause of instability for member states’ regimes (Finizio 2015a: 145).

The EU’s bi-regional relationship with ASEAN dates back to 1978, with the main stimulus coming from Hans-Dietrich Genscher, German Foreign Affairs Minister holding the rotating Presidency of the Council, in order to increase relations with an area of the world which was of strategic importance for raw materials and economic growth (Migani 2018: 127)^v. However, democracy and human rights became part of the political dialogue between the two organizations only after the end of the Cold War. In fact, in the 1970s and 1980s human rights issues occasionally had come up on the agenda of the European Political Co-



operation (EPC), but had been usually addressed, in passing, only in common declarations (Nuttall 1992); moreover, for the Community, using trade agreements to punish human rights abuses was unacceptable, and it maintained a ‘neutral’ stance vis-à-vis the human rights records of third countries (Smith 2014: 100). In the 1990s, because of the end of the Cold War, Western governments no longer had to support authoritarian governments in developing countries. Moreover, findings by the World Bank that the failure of reforms in Sub-saharian Africa was partly the result of bad governance (World Bank 1989), and the need to raise public support for foreign assistance programs, encouraged the EC/EU to follow the international consensus on aid conditionality, and to attempt to produce normative changes within ASEAN and its member states by promoting an identity based on democracy, rule of law, human rights, and good governance.

ASEAN’s stance regarding democracy and human rights became clear very soon, however. On the one hand, the Joint Declaration of the 9th ASEAN-EC Ministerial Meeting of May 1991 stated that ‘The Ministers were of the view that international cooperation to promote and encourage respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction of race, sex and religion should be enhanced’ (ASEAN-EC 1991). On the other hand, the communication of the 24th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting of July of the same year stated that ‘when the issue of human rights is linked to trade, investments and finance, ASEAN cannot but view it as added conditionalities and protectionism by other means’ (ASEAN 1991: para 7), and that ‘while human rights is universal in character, implementation in the national context should remain within the competence and responsibility of each country, having regard for the complex variety of economic, social and cultural realities’ (para. 15).

In the aftermath of the 1993 UN Vienna Conference on Human Rights, ASEAN’s position was made even clearer:

Human rights are interrelated and indivisible comprising civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. These rights should be addressed in a balanced and integrated manner and protected and promoted with due regards for specific cultural, social, economic and political circumstances. [...] The promotion and protection of human rights should not be politicized [and should] take recognizance of the principle of respect for national sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in the international affairs of the states (ASEAN 1993: paras. 16-17).



The very Conference of Vienna became the theatre of the clash between the positions in favour of and against universalism of human rights (Boyle 1995: 86-88), and as a result the normative gap between Europe and Southeast Asia grew more and more evident. The ‘Consensus’ on universality reached in Vienna must be viewed against the background of the preparatory statements issued by the African group (Tunis Declaration, December 1991), the Group of Latin America and the Caribbean (San José Declaration, January 1993), and the Asian group (Bangkok Declaration, April 1993). The most forceful in arguing its divergence from Western doctrine was the Bangkok Declaration, which stated that ‘While human rights are universal in nature, they must be considered in the context of a dynamic and evolving process of international norm-setting, bearing in mind the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds’^{vi}. Countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia had placed themselves as bastions of relativism, arguing that ‘human rights are culturally defined, and every country should promote human rights as its culture prescribes, free from interference by outside agencies’ (Puchala, Laatikainen, Coate 2007: 76)^{vii}.

Thus, ASEAN, in line with its normative identity, was willing to engage Europe on democracy and human rights, but without been subject to any kind of imposition or interference. However, the very construction of ASEAN’s normative identity was deeply influenced by the interaction with the EU (and the West in general) and was sustained by a relative increase in the economic significance of Southeast Asian countries, which strengthened self-confidence at the political level. Furthermore, it revolved around the so-called ‘Asian values debate’, in relations to which the Myanmar Affaire played a key role.

3. EU-ASEAN Normative Interactions and Its Impact on Bi-Regional Relations: The Myanmar Case

In the early years of ASEAN’s existence, the EU had conferred this organization a low profile in its external relations, and was reluctant to view it as an important actor in regional and global governance. Suffice to say that Southeast Asia lied at the bottom of the EU priorities, below Africa, South Pacific, Latin American countries (Yeo 2008: 61).

In the 1990s, the European integration project was revitalized by the Maastricht Treaty, which proposed to the world the EU as a rather new economic, political – with the new



Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) – and even monetary actor in the making (Dedman 2010). The EU started to be celebrated, and also to celebrate itself, as the best supporter of global governance, as well as the champion of liberal values and of regional integration (Kupchan 2003; Rifkin 2005; Leonard 2005). As a consequence, the EU saw itself (implicitly or explicitly) as an actor entitled and able to transform and unify the world along regionalist and liberal lines (European Commission 1995). As underlined by Vasconcelos (2007: 179), '[t]his may be a utopian vision; but it is the only vision of the world that can make sense of the common foreign and security policy of the civil power that is the European Union'. In this framework, in the 1990s the EU globalized its foreign policy, developing specific approaches and policies towards many regions of the world, including Asia (Keukeleire, Delreux 2014)^{viii}.

The idea to transform the normative identity of the ASEAN region was very ambitious, especially considering the wide gap between the two organizations (much wider than that between the EU and Latin America or even Africa) in terms of norms, principles and values, and the ongoing and increasingly evident rebalancing of interregional asymmetries. The opportunity for this exercise was offered by the breach of democratic principles in Myanmar, which has drawn the attention of the international community, leading to strong pressure from the West in particular.

The EU had started to be very critical of Myanmar's dictatorship as early as 1988, when the military forces, led by General Saw Maung, took control of the government and harshly repressed the protests for democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi. The strategy to promote democracy in Myanmar was twofold. On the one hand, the EU struck Yangon first with a military embargo in 1990, then with the suspension of cooperation on defence and non-humanitarian bilateral aid the following year. Although constructive engagement is normally the EU's preferred approach, few other countries have been targeted so much (Smith 2006: 155), and sanctions against the military junta were later tightened and increased in 1996 and in 1999. On the other hand, the Union used the political dialogue with ASEAN as a means of condemnation of Yangon's policies and of debate and criticism of Asian values, first and foremost the principle of non-interference (Loewen 2008). In other words, the EU used political dialogue to engage a normative interaction to transform the political identity of ASEAN and induce it to pressurize Yangon towards democratization. The EU tried, for instance, to prevent Myanmar from joining ASEAN by dissuading its member countries



from accepting the country. Furthermore, when in 1997, Yangon acceded to ASEAN, the EU reacted with its refusal to extend the 1980 EC-ASEAN Cooperation Agreement to Myanmar, excluding the country from development assistance programs and refusing to sit at the same table with the representatives of Yangon. As early as July 1993, post-Vienna, in a EU-ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference, President of the Council and Belgian Foreign Minister Willy Claes argued, on the subject of Myanmar, that ‘an approach other than that of the EC was possible [...], but ASEAN countries [needed] to show their “critical dialogue” with Burma had led to progress in this country as far as the protection of human rights is concerned’ (quoted in European Parliament 1993: 8). However, the EU saw ‘no reason to change [its] approach’ (ibid.).

As underlined by the then foreign minister of Singapore S. Jayakumar in his *memoires* (2015, 77-78), the EU’s approach and decisions were rejected by ASEAN countries, causing a stalemate in interregional ministerial meetings, as they were considered as an arrogant divide-and-rule approach. Moreover, ASEAN’s resistance toward EU’s pressures was encouraged by the changing balance between the two actors and regions. After the end of the cold war, ASEAN had been relaunched as an economic and political actor, as a consequence of the uncertainty linked to the evolution of the US military presence in the region and the new role of China. In 1992 ASEAN reformed its institutional structure, formalizing summit meetings and increasing the duties and rank of the ASEAN Secretary-General. In the same year (28 January 1992), its countries signed an agreement to create a Free Trade Area by 2003 (AFTA). In 1994, ASEAN held the first meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)^{ix} to discuss questions of security and conflict resolution (Narine 2008: 418). The adhesion of Vietnam in 1995, which in 1967 had denounced ASEAN as an imperialist plot, coupled with a growth rate of 7-8% until 1996, contributed to making ASEAN more assertive at an international level. The EU, on the other hand, in its first Asia Policy released in 1994 acknowledged, with some delay, the increasing relevance of South-East Asia and the imperative necessity for Europe to gain presence in the region, to balance the Japanese and the American influence as well as the organizations supported by Tokyo and Washington (such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, APEC), and to show that the EU was not focusing only on the transition in Eastern Europe and the preparation of the East-enlargement (Migani 2018: 136). Moreover, it recognized in the Strategy that



ASEAN countries, as a consequence of these developments, ‘no longer hesitate to question our moral values and our social systems’ (European Commission 1994: 8).

Nevertheless, as noted by some Southeast Asian scholars and diplomats, the document and EU policies still reflected its Eurocentric, transformational, top-down, and to some extent arrogant approach of that time, considering South-East Asia as a norm-recipient, which should learn from EU values and comply with EU-promoted norms, even in terms of models of regional integration (Mahbubani and Sng 2017: 115).

ASEAN’s stance on Myanmar has always been consistent with the ASEAN Way, which called for avoiding direct criticism of Yangon’s regime and for rejecting economic and military sanctions in favour of quiet dialogue. In fact, although over time the lack of political reforms gave rise to a growing restlessness in the group (Acharya 2014: 225), European and Western pressures prevented the Association from openly criticizing the country (Arendshorst 2009). This position reflected the weak inclination towards liberal democracy of most ASEAN’s countries, and their effort to avoid the isolation of Myanmar, which would facilitate Beijing’s influence in the country and its hegemonic ambitions in the region (Rüland 2001: 143). Furthermore, direct and growing pressure based on sanctions and strong statements did not trigger any accommodating reaction in Myanmar or in ASEAN as a whole. In fact, although the positions within the region on Myanmar’s accession to ASEAN were not unanimous, the EU and US opposition led the other members to join together in favour of accession (finally occurred on 23 July 1997; Doidge 2011: 102). Additionally, EU economic sanctions were actually neutralized by other ASEAN countries, which provided economic aid to Yangon (Portela 2011: 86). More generally, the EU and US uncompromising policy brought about a sense of group solidarity within ASEAN around the alleged shared ‘Asian values’ and around a concept of human rights based on the primacy of the economic and social dimension, to which civil and political rights were considered entirely subordinated. In other words, ‘the way ASEAN defined itself founded upon the normative position of Asian values, was a product in many respects of its interaction with the European Union’ (Doidge 2011: 109).

Thus, EU’s direct pressure failed to move the ASEAN normative identity away from the principle of non-interference and was unsuccessful in causing the group to abandon the constructive engagement towards Myanmar. Moreover, the group, annoyed by the persistent and aggressive European rhetoric in favour of democratization and human rights, was



instead willing to block interregional relations with the EU in order to protect regional solidarity (Boisseau du Rocher 2013: 208).

Not surprisingly, the observers did not attribute the democratic developments that followed the announcement of the Myanmar's prime Minister of 7-step roadmap towards a 'disciplined democracy' - which finally led to general elections and to the rise to power of Aung San Suu Kyi, in 2015-, to the European pressure^x, but to calculations and factors internal to the country (Acharya 2014: 225), or to the constructive engagement pursued by ASEAN and criticized by the EU: 'Clearly the ASEAN policy of engaging the military regime in Myanmar succeeded. [...] Perhaps the EU should offer ASEAN an apology for criticizing and maligning its engagement with Myanmar' (Mahbubani and Sng 2017: 115).

4. The EU as a Model of 'Democratic' Regional Governance in Southeast Asia? The Debate after the Asian Financial Crisis

For decades the EU has represented the benchmark against which all other regional integration experiences were assessed. As already mentioned, however, although ASEAN has carefully looked at the European model as a point of reference, it has intentionally avoided to replicate its features.

Nevertheless, some room for debate whether to import elements of the EU model materialized after the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis, which exposed the weakness of existing regional economic arrangements. To some extent, the crisis undermined confidence in ASEAN's soft institutionalism, which was described by many as inadequate to address the growing transnational issues and as the cause of a huge deficit in the implementation of commitments undertaken by governments. Furthermore, civil society in particular criticized ASEAN for being too elite-driven and state-centric (Clark and Pietsch 2012: 50-51). Initiatives aimed to move the region away from the ASEAN Way and to democratize the organization were in some way backed up, at the time, by post-Suharto Indonesia. The new elites tried to project Indonesia's experience of democratization onto the region (Sukma 2008) and to regain leadership in Southeast Asia (Rüland 2014: 194, 196). Therefore, in the aftermath of the crisis, different sources in Indonesia identified the EU as a model of democratic and effective regionalism (Clark and Pietsch, 2012: 54; Fitriani 2020). Under this



pressure, ASEAN itself started, at least rhetorically, to partially accept principles such as openness to civil society, democracy, and human rights promotion and protection. The Declaration of ASEAN Concord, also known as the Bali Concord II, launched the objective to make ASEAN a ‘community of caring and sharing societies’ through the establishment of an ASEAN Community consisting of three pillars: the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the ASEAN Security Community (ASC; then the ASEAN Political-Security Community, APSC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). The ASC, in particular, strongly sponsored by Indonesia, was aimed at ensuring peaceful relations in the region in a ‘just, *democratic* and harmonious environment’ (ASEAN 2006).

The commitment to establishing an ASEAN Community was formalized through the adoption of the ASEAN Charter in November 2007 (entered into force in December 2008). The Eminent Persons Group (EPG) entrusted with the task of submitting to member states structured proposals for the drafting of ASEAN Charter, produced a report which moved the organization away from the ‘ASEAN Way’, in some respects bringing it closer to the European model. The EPG visited many times EU institutions and officials to seek inspiration. These visits resulted in the proposal to establish an ASEAN Council as the main decision-making body as well as a Committee of Permanent Representatives, to strengthen the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, to turn ASEAN into a ‘people-oriented’ organization, and to create an ASEAN human rights body. However, the European model, apart from a few vague references in terms of institutions and terminology, was not incorporated in the Charter. Most of the EPG’s proposals, such as the overcoming of unanimity principle in decision-making or the creation of a strong Secretariat, were diluted or rejected (Finizio 2015a: 154). Most countries in the region resisted these attempts to change the ‘ASEAN Way’, which they have interpreted as initiatives influenced by the West to further its agenda of human rights and democracy promotion (Acharya 2009: 133). Furthermore, this was partially caused by the weak leadership of Jakarta, whose elites clearly exploited the support of regionalism for nationalistic purposes, and showed to be ready to opt for extra-ASEAN bilateral relations when it better served the interests of the country (Rüland 2014: 198).



5. The EU's Policy Adjustment towards ASEAN and Its Impact on EU-ASEAN Normative Relations

Over the last decade, the EU's normative approach towards ASEAN has changed rather dramatically, as a consequence of several factors. The most important factor is the gradual rebalancing of asymmetries between Europe and Southeast Asia. Whereas the EU has long been criticized for being too narrow, expedient, and ad hoc in its approach to Asia, the Eurozone crisis has had the positive effect of finally prompting the EU to correct its relative neglect of the continent (Youngs 2014, 73). As early as 2012, the European Commission predicted that in the best conceivable scenario (called 'EU Renaissance'), the EU share of world GDP would fall from 29% in 2010 to 17 per cent in 2050 (European Commission 2012: 62, 100). Moreover, it is likely that no EU country will figure in the world's top ten economies (Youngs 2010: 8). While the financial crisis has accelerated these trends, ASEAN's average growth in the period 2012-2016 was 5,1% (OECD 2019: 1). This has paved the way to belated European efforts to catch up with Asia's ascendance.

2012 marked a turning point in this respect, to a large extent as a consequence of the impact of the Eurozone crisis on the EU and the European economies, of the continuous rise of Asia's star, and of the Obama Administration 'Pivot to Asia' Policy. In fact, 2012 was declared by the EU 'the year of Asia', as 'developing our relations with Asia across the board is a major strategic objective' (Van Rompuy 2012). A first EU-ASEAN Business summit was held in 2011, and April 2012 witnessed a revival of EU-ASEAN relations, with an action plan sealing deeper relations of cooperation between the two organizations (ASEAN-EU 2012). In addition, the EU was the first regional organization to accede, in the same year, the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which opened the possibility for the EU to being included in the East Asia Summit (EAS; Youngs 2014: 75).

ASEAN itself, far from collapsing as a consequence of the 1997-1998 Asian crisis, succeeded in starting a common anti-crisis program and in relaunching cooperation with Japan and China (Koldunova 2012). Moreover, ASEAN is deepening its own way to regional cooperation while relaunching itself as the pivot of 'a concentric circles regional architecture in the making' (Telò 2016: 27), with the consolidation of ASEAN + Three (including China, South Korea, and Japan), the EAS and the ARF.



In a context of growing global competition, the EU has increasingly injected pragmatism into its foreign policy and into EU-ASEAN bi-regional relations. Firstly, the EU looks to be moving forward beyond old asymmetrical patterns, seeking cooperation with ASEAN on an equal basis and showing more respect for its distinctive norms and approach to regionalism (Koh and Yeo 2020). In the most recent official documents EU and ASEAN are described as ‘natural partners’, which share the same goals of promoting peace, stability and prosperity for their citizens (EEAS 2013), all the while maintaining ‘integration processes [that] each follow their own logic’ (European Parliament 2017: 6). ASEAN is now recognized by the EU as one of the most ambitious regional organizations; therefore, both organizations have ‘a lot to share and learn from each others’ experiences and approaches’ (EEAS 2017). As stated by the European Global Strategy, ‘[w]e will not strive to export our model, but rather seek reciprocal inspiration from different regional experiences’ (EEAS 2016: 32).

Secondly, the EU intends to expand ASEAN-EU cooperation as the basis of a strategic partnership, moving beyond traditional areas of cooperation such as economy and trade to other spheres, notably security and development-aid issues. In addition, the EU now hopes to forge closer ties with ASEAN in non-traditional security cooperation in order to establish its role as a security and political actor in Asia. In general terms, given its awareness of ASEAN’s status as a significant player in the Asia Pacific, the EU regards its relationship with ASEAN as critical to broadening its Asia policy beyond China (Xuechen 2018: 236).

The impact of these trends on EU-ASEAN normative relations and the EU’s approach towards regionalism promotion in Southeast Asia has been quite important. In general terms, the multiple crises (financial crisis, refugee crisis, Brexit) which have hit the EU in recent times have weakened the credibility and attractiveness of the European model of regional integration based on liberal values. As a consequence, the EU’s ability in ideational diffusion has been also affected. As far as ASEAN is concerned, these crises have reinforced its self-perception as a distinctive model of regional integration that intentionally differs from the European experience (Beeson and Stone 2013; Fitriani 2014), that can offer a model to Africa and other regions of the world (Mahbubani and Tang 2018: 110) and should induce the EU itself to learn from the ASEAN Way and ASEAN’s flexibility (Mahbubani and Sng 2017: 116-121).

Moreover, pragmatic considerations induce the EU to pursue two apparently contradictory policies. On the one hand, it supports both further consolidation of ASEAN



and ‘an ASEAN-led regional security architecture’ (EEAS 2016: 38), as ‘a united and self-confident ASEAN is a key to ensure that regional challenges are addressed in a rule-based manner’ (European Commission 2015). On the other hand, it tempers the goal of regionalism promotion in its foreign policy by fostering bilateral relationships (Smith 2014: 67). Not by chance, the EGS clearly states that ‘the EU will support regional organizations [...] where possible and when in line with our interests’ (EEAS 2016: 32). The attempt to sign a EU-ASEAN Free Trade Area (FTA), launched in 2007, was dropped by the EU as it grew frustrated with ASEAN’s inability to make progress in common positions on trade, and with the reluctance of poorer ASEAN countries to accept EU pressures on liberalization concerning the so-called ‘Singapore issues’^{xi}. As an alternative, the EU pushed the partner countries to sign a raft of new bilateral trade deals, overturning its own policy that favours bloc-to-bloc relations. This came ‘as a belated response to the battery of trade accords offered by the United States and China across Asia in the early 2000s – a time when the EU was still keen to prioritize the multilateral Doha Round’ (Youngs 2014: 75). As a result, bilateral trade agreements with Singapore and Vietnam were signed in 2018 and 2019 respectively. This pragmatic turn in trade was clearly called for by the ‘Global Europe’ Trade Strategy of the European Commission, which explicitly linked the creation of jobs in Europe with the opening up of new markets abroad (European Commission 2006). For their part, ASEAN states hope that bilateral deals with the EU will serve as a counterweight to their increasing trade dependence on China. While the EU’s official position presents bilateral FTAs between the EU and ASEAN countries as building blocks towards a future EU-ASEAN agreement, bilateralism can also maliciously be interpreted as an instrument for the EU to increase asymmetries with partners (following a *divide and rule* logic) and cause its trade preferences to prevail; furthermore, nothing can guarantee that bilateral trade deals will lead to a bi-regional agreement and not exert centrifugal pressures on the bloc-to-bloc process, undermining it (Finizio 2015b: 149).

The increasing importance of Southeast Asia in world affairs and the gradual rebalancing of power asymmetries between the EU and ASEAN have also affected the effectiveness of the former in pursuing the affirmation of liberal values in the region. As early as 1990s, for instance, these dynamics had fueled the traditional cleavage within the EU between countries which are more pragmatic, dialoguing and inclined to reconcile ideals and national interests, and countries which are more intransigent and in favour of intervening to respect democracy



and human rights (Smith 2006: 162). Whereas countries such as France and Germany did not feel comfortable holding their relations with ASEAN hostage because of Myanmar, UK, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands were inflexible in relation to respect for those principles (Youngs 2001: 139). European concerns, especially from France, Germany, and Italy, that economic relations were being affected by issues related to human rights and democratization led to the creation of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in 1996, an interregional forum in which the question of Myanmar was depoliticized, dialogue on human rights was avoided and from which the European Parliament (EP), one of the most critical voices of Myanmar, was excluded (Youngs 2001: 123; Gaens 2018)^{xii}. In other words, ASEM can be considered a tool to enable the EU and its member states to bypass their own principles and democratic conditionality, which were making interregional relations with ASEAN extremely difficult.

The new approach towards ASEAN reveals that the balance between interests and values is in flux, as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law are not so central in bi-regional relations as they were in the past. Since 2012 the EU has significantly toned down its norm-exporter rhetoric and developed a reflective vision in terms of its relations with ASEAN. Rather than stressing universality of European norms and standards, the EU now places less emphasis on norm promotion practices (Xuechen 2018: 234). For instance, it has opened trade talks with ASEAN countries without requiring democratic reforms. In the case of Cambodia, among others, the Commission's trade directorate blocked a member state proposal to remove trade preferences on human rights grounds (Youngs 2014: 119). In order not to hamper bi-regional cooperation, the values debate is addressed in a nonconfrontational way through a specific EU-ASEAN Human Rights Policy Dialogue, launched in October 2015. However, all sides agree that these instruments are rather formalistic and devoid of tangible results.

The EGS explicitly recognizes the ongoing rebalancing between interests and values launching the vague, oxymoronic and widely debated concept of 'principled pragmatism' as a guideline for EU's external action, stemming as much 'from a realistic assessment of the strategic environment as from an idealistic aspiration to advance a better world' (EEAS 2016, 16; Tocci 2016; Biscop 2016).



6. Conclusions

The objective of this chapter has been to analyze the evolution of the normative dimension of EU-ASEAN relations, assessing whether the EU has been able to use interregionalism to change the normative identity of the partner organization and its member states, and to influence the path of regional integration in Southeast Asia.

The EU-ASEAN relations are characterized by a greater normative gap and a less asymmetrical relationship, which has induced ASEAN to resist pressures from the EU and even develop its own normative identity in response to them. The analysis of the normative interaction caused by the violation of democratic principles by Myanmar has highlighted how the EU has failed to use interregionalism ‘to democratize’ ASEAN’s and Myanmar’s normative identities, allowing interregional relations to be undermined, instead, by a normative confrontation which has not been resolved. This evolution has deeply challenged the EU’s external identity as a normative and transformative power, which, in the 1990s, was itself seen as ‘an embryonic microcosm of the way that [the] emerging international system would ultimately function’ (Youngs 2010: 4), as an actor which could (and was expected to) transform the world along regionalist and liberal lines. Furthermore, it has challenged the EU’s Eurocentric and, to some extent, arrogant vision of world order which increasingly appeared blind to the winds of change brought by the multipolarization of the international system, in general, and the rise of Asia, in particular.

The year 2012 marked a turning point in EU-ASEAN relations, mainly as a consequence of the impact of the Eurozone crisis on the EU and the European economies, of the continuous rise of Asia, and of the Obama Administration ‘Pivot to Asia’ Policy. While the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis had shown to Europe and to the world the resilience of ASEAN, which was relaunched as a multidimensional institution and the hub of a wider regional architecture in the Asia Pacific, the financial crisis which hit Europe since 2009 accelerated and made the relative decline of Europe more evident to policy-makers. These factors, together with Asia’s increasing strategic relevance for Europe and the major powers (especially United States and China), have brought the EU to inject increasing pragmatism in its foreign policy and in its relations with the region. On the one hand, a kind of ‘marginalization anxiety’ suffered by the EU has brought it to redefine its interests and strategy in South-East Asia, trying to upgrade its relations with ASEAN to a strategic



partnership, and expanding them beyond the spheres of trade and economy, thus including defense, security, development-aid, too. As a consequence, it appears that the EU has gradually accepted the much-lauded ASEAN Way. On the other hand, these factors are fueling a rebalance between values and interests, between idealism and realism in the EU foreign policy, which is affecting the normative dimension of EU-ASEAN relations. The relative loss of importance of principles such as democracy and human rights and the relative turn from interregionalism to bilateralism in EU-ASEAN relations indicate that the EU's external identity, which has been built on the very centrality of these principles and of regionalism promotion, is changing. The direction and final destination of these trends are far from being clear, however, at least to ASEAN countries. In fact, ASEAN still considers the EU as an economic partner, rather than a strategic and political one, does not recognize yet the EU as reliable security provider and tends to privilege relations with big powers which are more effective in the region, such as Japan, US, and China (Xuechen 2018: 238).

This uncertainty about the dynamics of the EU's identity is largely due to the difficulty for a non-traditional actor, still lacking traditional foreign policy tools and resources such as the military power, to move beyond the 'normative power' approach towards an area of the planet which is strategic for very traditional actors, such as China and the US. On the other hand, it is also due to the turbulences and uncertainties still characterizing the European integration process.

* Assistant Professor in History of International Relations at the University of Turin, where he teaches European Union Foreign Policy; Adjunct Professor, Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, Buenos Aires.

ⁱ 'The EU and its Member States act in support of democracy drawing on strong parliamentary traditions, based on the role of national Parliaments and regional and local assemblies in Member States and that of the European Parliament' (Council of the European Union 2009).

ⁱⁱ The promotion of regionalism is the EU's inclination to classify neighbouring countries together under regional strategies and policies, and to encourage regional groupings to establish common institutions, develop common identities and establish themselves as actors in international relations (European Commission 1995: 3; Smith 2014: 67; Finizio 2015b: 133).

ⁱⁱⁱ Romano Prodi, at the time President of the European Commission, stated in 2000: 'Europe needs to project its model of society into the wider world. [...] We have a unique historic experience to offer. The experience of liberating people from poverty, war, oppression, intolerance. We have forged a model of development and continental integration based on the principles of democracy, freedom, solidarity – and it is a model that works. A model of consensual pooling of sovereignty in which every one of us accepts to belong to a minority' (Prodi 2000: 3).

^{iv} In particular, according to Manners, these norms include five 'core norms' (peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law, human rights), as well as four 'minor norms' (social solidarity, anti-discrimination, sustainable development and good governance).

^v In that year, a Conference at Ministerial level between the European Communities and their Member States on the one hand, and ASEAN on the other was organized in Brussels (20-21 November), and a Joint Declaration in favour of political dialogue and economic cooperation was adopted (ASEAN-EC 1978).



vi UNESCO Courier 40, March 1994.

vii At the Bangkok Conference, China, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia spoke of a distinctive cultural legacy and values, and the communal (state) obligations of its citizens while emphasizing that the interpretation, implementation, and monitoring of rights is within the purview of the state. See in particular the statements by Wong Kan Seng, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, and the statement by Ali Alatas, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Head of the Delegation of Indonesia, both reproduced in Tang (1995: 242, 228).

viii The mapping of these lines of action was provided by European Council (1995).

ix The ARF was created in 1994 with a mandate to discuss political and security issues, and is presently the principal forum for security dialogue in Asia (Tavares 2010: 90). It currently comprises 27 countries/actors, including the US, the EU and Russia.

x An exception is Grant (2012).

xi Four issues introduced to the WTO agenda at the December 1996 Ministerial Conference in Singapore: Trade and investment, trade and competition policy, transparency in government procurement, and trade facilitation.

xii Not surprisingly, intense debates on ASEM and human rights took place within the European Parliament, fueled in particular by the accession of Myanmar to ASEAN, in 1997. Many Members of the EP, and the Assembly as a whole, urged the Council to exclude the country from ASEM. Moreover, they tried to induce it to request that human rights issues be included in the agenda of the Second ASEM Summit (ASEM II), planned for 3-4 April 1998 in London. See, for instance, the debate on ASEM process which took place on 11 March 1998: Official Journal of the European Communities, *Debates of the European Parliament*, 4-516, pp. 150 ff. Georg Jarzenbowski (PPE), among others: 'I share the view of my fellow Members that if it is to address economics, trade, finance and foreign policy, the ASEM Summit will also have to discuss the underlying problems which are common both to ourselves in Europe and to our Asian partners, that is, issues such as the fight against poverty, the observation of human rights, the development of democracy and the rule of law and the environment?'

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