



EU-Singapore Dialogue 2021
Strengthening Multilateralism: Opportunities for EU-Singapore Cooperation

Panel 1: “Understanding Multilateralism and Opportunities for EU, Singapore and ASEAN collaboration”

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Good afternoon everyone,

I would like to thank the EU Embassy in Singapore and the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute for inviting me to participate in this Dialogue.

Let me state at the onset that I agree with most of what Professor Maull has said about Multilateralism. I do not propose to add anything substantial to the discussion on concepts and definitions.

Instead, I would like to make three points:

- First, multilateralism remains crucial to helping solve the complex problems in today’s world. So, why is it under grave threat?
- Second, I believe the key to unlock this dilemma is to persuade the big powers – and medium-sized powers and non-state actors - to subscribe to multilateralism; to respect its rules and regulations. Problem is, how to get them to embrace what is so evident to the rest of us?
- Third, to propose three prerequisites to achieve this task.

Multilateralism under threat

Most people would agree that multilateralism is important as a platform and process for countries to find ways to solve problems and to work together for



their respective interests. Through a lot of effort, hard work and cooperation made in the past, several poor states have moved up the socio-economic ladder.

- For a small state like Singapore, multilateralism is crucial. That's why one of our first acts on independence in 1965 was to join the United Nations. Another was to be a founding member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Recognition and acceptance of a state's sovereignty and being in an organisation whose members are obliged to respect international law and regulations enshrined in the UN Charter, are as valid today as it was over 50 years ago.

- Being part of ASEAN acts as an influence multiplier. Collectively, ASEAN has established neutral platforms for the major powers to come together to achieve common understandings on key issues at the ASEAN+3, the ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asian Summit. As a market of over 655 million people with a combined GDP of US\$3.1 trillion, an economically-integrated ASEAN is far more attractive than any member on its own.

Moving on, most people would also agree that reform of multilateral agencies is necessary. Global institutions need to reflect contemporary realities. Reform is critical to ensure necessary buy-in of states which will, in turn, enhance an organisation's legitimacy and influence.

Yet, despite much agreement, there has been little movement at reform. Taking the crucial next step is where things often break down. The major powers and medium-sized powers do subscribe to international rules, obligations, and responsibilities, with one caveat: As long as it coincides with their national interests!

Bringing on board the major powers and medium-sized states

We need more than a *Pax Romana*, a period of relative peace in the world. Yet even Rome's 'peace' rested on its power to suppress opposition.

The UN borrows a passage from the book of Isaiah about "beating swords into ploughshares..." But there is another passage, where Isaiah describes a very



different kind of peace, one more appropriate to what we seek today: where enemies live in actual – willing – peace with one another.

To illustrate this, Isaiah used a variety of different images: “In that day the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the baby sheep together...” (Isaiah 11:6).

How do we achieve this lasting peace? How do we get nations to recognise and embrace the notion that respecting international rules and regulations is meant for the good of all - including themselves - even if it entails making sacrifices in the short-term, where benefits will only be seen much later?

Frankly, I do not have the answer. But I do believe that we can set out on the right path if we start by taking three steps forward.

Three prerequisites to Peace

The first step, or prerequisites to peace as I call them, is the need for big and medium-sized powers to undertake a mind-set change: to tread less the path of Realist power politics which emphasizes geography, size, military power, and a state’s capacity to force change. Wishful thinking? What I am suggesting has been done before, only not often.

- We in ASEAN have been fortunate that 50 years earlier, then Indonesian President Soeharto showed great wisdom to take the road less travelled. He discarded the confrontational policies of his predecessor; emphasized the need for Southeast Asian countries - big and small - to come together and set aside their bilateral disputes, focus on cooperation and decision-making by consensus, and respect for international law.
- President Soeharto did not do this for altruistic reasons. He understood that a stable regional environment was a necessary pre-condition to allow him to concentrate on Indonesia’s domestic development. Also, working closely with his ASEAN neighbours enabled them to deal with the common threat of communism in their respective countries.



- This laid the foundation for ASEAN to establish a common culture of cooperation and consensus; and in concert with major powers, to manage differences peacefully. Today, ASEAN is the fastest growing region economically in the world.

The second prerequisite is the need to build up trust and confidence, not only between rival powers, but all states; trust and confidence in the rules governing organisations to which we belong. The fundamental element is to focus on forgiveness, not revenge. Rwanda and Timor Leste have shown the world that after a painful conflict, it is better to forgive and reconcile than to seek revenge and retribution.

- Likewise, ASEAN. During the Cold War, the countries of Southeast Asia were divided into two rival camps: those on the side of the US and those allied to the Soviet Union. But once the Cold War ended, there was no reason not to forge good relations and work together to integrate neighbouring Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia into ASEAN.
- On the flip side, history is replete with instances of states bent on revenge, only to trigger a vicious cycle of conflict, killings, and counter-killings. From a personal standpoint, during my six-year posting in Riyadh, I recall having been told of many tragic instances where the desire for revenge led to a perpetuation of sorrow and regret.

The third prerequisite is to recognise that given the complexity of the issues confronting us today, there is no single multilateral platform, not even the UN, capable of solving problems on its own. We need to work in multiple platforms and sub-groups, and in concert with each other.

There are practical ways for small and medium-sized countries to push the multilateral agenda forward. Often, these states are better equipped to pilot new initiatives, and better positioned to play honest broker on thorny issues.

- In Singapore's case, we are members of ASEAN and other international bodies. Within these groups are sub-groups such as the Forum of Small States (FOSS), which amplifies our voice in larger organisations like the UN.



- Singapore also plays a major role in the Global Governance Group (3G), an informal grouping of small and medium-sized countries with the aim of providing all of us greater representation through channelling of our collective views into the G20 process more effectively.

Which brings me to the point that in riding on our collective strengths, ASEAN and the EU can contribute much to a world currently adrift of leadership and ideas. One of their most far-sighted achievements occurred when, at the suggestion of then-Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, ASEAN, together with China, Japan, and South Korea, met with EU member states and European Commission in Bangkok in 1996 to form the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM).

Collectively, ASEM accounts for 60 per cent of the world's population and 65 per cent of the world's economy. It is a group with considerable weight and influence. That ASEAN and the EU, as well as the other ASEM partners, can come together successfully shows that the perceived differences between so-called European versus Asian models of regional multilateralism are not profound. There is much that ASEM leaders can achieve by working together to provide the much-needed leadership and resolve to steer the world through its current catalogue of global crises.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by stating unequivocally: I am not proposing that we ignore the realities of the Realist approach or embrace the Liberal Order unreservedly. We need to embrace the best ideals of both schools of thought – magnanimity from the rich and powerful, coupled with mindset change from ALL actors in building trust and confidence, with the emphasis on forgiveness over revenge and retribution.

Then, blend this with a healthy dose of pragmatism – recognising it takes time to see results, and that such efforts are not pipe-dreams but have been done before with positive outcomes.



Surely, in today's interconnected world, where transboundary problems are beyond the ability of any state to resolve alone, where there is a surfeit of weapons to inflict catastrophic harm not only on the helpless but the most powerful states, it is in everyone's interest to work together to avoid conflict and solve problems, for the benefit of all.

Thank you.

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