

Exploring the Dilemmas of the ASEAN Development Model in the Context of the New EU-ASEAN Strategic Partnership

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Abstract. With the establishment of the strategic partnership between ASEAN and the EU in 2020, both sides have gained positive developments in different areas. ASEAN's economic partnership has been enhanced, but it has also created new challenges and dilemmas for ASEAN's development model. This study discusses the political, economic, and cultural challenges in the context of the new EU-ASEAN strategic partnership. As a regional organization, ASEAN has a loose organizational structure and flexible operational mechanisms, showing trends of internal integration and openness to the outside world. However, at the same time, ASEAN suffers from the dilemma of an inherently inadequate organizational structure, over-reliance on the economies of major powers, and declining influence in regional cooperation. In addition, under the analytic perspective of World-systems theory and the theoretical model of "regional whole", the EU has increased its cooperative relations with ASEAN to resist China's influence. There is also a clear non-reciprocity in EU-ASEAN cooperation. The resources the EU can mobilize are becoming more limited, which leads to the difficulties of achieving the strategic goals between EU and ASEAN.

Keywords: ASEAN; Development model; EU-ASEAN strategic partnership; World-systems theory.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the new EU-ASEAN strategic partnership has attracted widespread attention and has become the focus of discussion among IPE scholars. The upgrading of the EU-ASEAN strategic partnership is an essential change in the inter-regional relations between the two sides, which has also created new changes in the development model of ASEAN. Furthermore, the development of the relationship on this cooperation path faces many factors that limit the development of ASEAN, which will also bring different challenges to both the EU and ASEAN. However, the academic community has not specifically studied the dilemmas faced by the existing development model of ASEAN in this context. It is necessary to conduct more relevant research based on the current research results.

The dilemma of ASEAN's development model is one of the critical topics for scholars in different fields today. Early scholars mainly focus on analyzing ASEAN's economic cooperation, organizational structure and operational mechanism, economic integration, and foreign trade. Among Chinese scholars, Cheng Xinhe, Hu Shuxiu, Guan Xin, LianChenchao, and Wei Hong are typical. Among them, the primary bias is that the development of the EU-ASEAN strategic partnership faces the objective existence of factors such as the ASEAN approach, the "capability-expectation" gap, regional protectionism, and the lack of consensus, which lead to the inevitable development of the EU-ASEAN strategic partnership. There is a limit to the development of the EU-ASEAN strategic partnership [1]. Although many scholars have started to pay attention to the unique features of EU-ASEAN cooperation, there is still a research gap in the Chinese academia regarding the specific case of ASEAN, given the opportunity of establishing a new partnership between the two. The study will explore the opportunities and challenges for the future development of ASEAN after the establishment of the new EU-ASEAN strategic partnership.

With the development of the international situation, ASEAN's potential and international status have gradually increased, and its importance in global integration has become increasingly prominent.

In the context of current global economic context and international relation, the study aims to explore the concrete dilemmas of the ASEAN development model and how to promote EU-ASEAN cooperation.

2. The ASEAN Development Model and the Dilemma

After the end of the Cold War, the bipolar standoff between the Soviet Union and the United States disintegrated worldwide with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The United States became the sole superpower. The U.S. alliance system strives to construct its dominant world system and occupies a dominant position in the Asia-Pacific security order [2]. At the same time, European integration is developing, and the European Union is gaining strength; Japan's economy is taking off so rapidly that becomes one of the world's political powers; The third world is liberating; National forces are rising in various countries, which makes the world multi-level and diversified, forming a pattern of "one superpower and many powers". In recent years, the international world has been in flux and change. The rise of China, which became the second largest economy in the world, has changed the original world pattern; the slow development and relative decline of the United States, Europe, and Japan; The trend of forming a "New Cold War" international pattern; The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022. There are still existing many challenges in the international world.

Southeast Asia is a region with many countries, diverse ethnicities, and religions, which frequently causes conflicts. Besides, the strength of countries in Southeast Asia varies greatly, and the international economic, political and cultural influence is weak. This series of drawbacks make Southeast Asian countries gradually realize that only the union can have more voice. On August 8, 1967, five countries - Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines - signed the ASEAN Declaration in Bangkok, Thailand, announcing the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). From the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, the five ASEAN member countries became the fastest-growing economies in the world. With the establishment of a regional preferential trade system within ASEAN, trade between ASEAN was promoted through the elimination of trade tariffs, the abolition of non-tariff barriers, and the limited purchase of ASEAN goods by national governments. So far, ASEAN membership has expanded to ten, including Brunei, which joined in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999 [3]. By the early 21st century, the Asia-Pacific region had become a model of regional cooperation of its long history of peace and rapid economic development.

The establishment of ASEAN mainly aims at three functions.

The first function of ASEAN is to maintain regional peace and security in Southeast Asia. This function within ASEAN plays a role in regional reconciliation in Southeast Asia. In the mid-1990s, a scholar of Franco-German reconciliation noted that "reconciliation as a concept and political process has received virtually no attention in the literature of international relations, conflict studies, and peace studies. However, many empirical examples of countries and groups that have successfully moved from hostile to peaceful relations through the use of reconciliation policies" [4]. Historically, Southeast Asia has had many conflicts, such as the struggle over ideology and local control between Malay Malaysians and Chinese, Indians, and native Malaysians. The territorial disputes between Cambodia and Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore, etc. [5]. The ASEAN Declaration from 1976 to the Instrument of Accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 1998 aimed to promote friendship and cooperation among people in the region and to enhance solidarity. Through continuous efforts, ASEAN has developed the "ASEAN way", which is based on seeking common ground while reserving differences, gradual progress, non-interference in countries' internal affairs, and consensus, "to adopt an approach to resolving conflicts and contradictions in line with Asian values on regional issues, externally, to speak with one voice" [6]. In addition to this, ASEAN also conducts joint efforts in combating external forces, such as terrorism.

The second function of ASEAN is to promote regional economic development. The Southeast Asia Free Trade Area (AFTA), created by the Framework Agreement on Strengthening ASEAN Economic

Cooperation in 1992, is playing a leading role in promoting complementary division of labor and coordinated development from point to point.

The third function of ASEAN is to promote the process of regional integration. According to Cheng Xinhe and HooShuxiu, the establishment of the ASEAN Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community, and the ASEAN Social and Cultural Community among the ten ASEAN countries is a milestone in the development of ASEAN towards integration. The establishment of the ASEAN Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community, and the ASEAN Social and Cultural Community is a milestone in the development of ASEAN towards integration, marking a new period of historical cooperation in ASEAN politics, economy, and culture [7].

Influenced by the uneven economic development of ASEAN member countries and the inconsistency of their internal and external economic policies, ASEAN has adopted more pragmatic economic cooperation measures, forming a relatively loose and flexible organizational structure and operational mechanism, as well as a development model that increases the degree of economic integration internally, trade and investment liberalization and facilitation externally. This development model has basically met the needs of ASEAN countries for economic development and enhanced their overall competitiveness.

However, there are some dilemmas in the existing ASEAN development model. First, there is an inherent deficiency in the ASEAN organizational structure. So far, ASEAN has not developed a supranational decision-making organization. ASEAN is a regional organization composed of several member countries, which started without an organizational structure and legally binding nature. The “ASEAN way” gradually emerged as only a code of conduct. Although a secretariat has been established and has gradually become a regional organization, ASEAN does not have absolute decision-making power but mainly plays a coordinating role and is inefficient in implementation.

Secondly, in addition to the wide gap in economic development among ASEAN member States, there is also a wide gap between national conditions, cultural differences, and the rich and poor of the population. Social contradictions will be unusually prominent in the face of economic globalization and political democratization. Since 2006, Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, and other countries have experienced regime turmoil and disputes, the Philippines has received threats against its top leaders, terrorism is rampant in the south, and democratization is being questioned in Myanmar. Whether to establish a human rights commission to improve regional democracy has been impossible to agree upon [8]; all of these have caused tensions among ASEAN member states, but ASEAN has not played a mediating role or had a limited role.

Next, ASEAN is too dependent on the economies of the major powers and is heavily influenced and constrained. When there is a crisis in the global economy, most developed countries will adopt trade protectionism to protect their interests [9]. For example, during the global economic crisis in 2008, ASEAN countries were deeply affected by inflation due to their economic dependence on big countries, and their investment and trade shrank significantly. 2010 European debt crisis caused the import demand of euro countries to shrink. ASEAN countries relied on European countries for a large part of their trade exports, which led to a significant decline in the growth rate of ASEAN’s trade exports, as well as a large amount of capital withdrawal, which affected the economic growth of ASEAN countries, and ASEAN countries had fiscal deficits for many years. Growth and ASEAN countries have experienced fiscal deficits for many years. The Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022 led to the imposition of economic sanctions by the West, causing problems such as food price volatility, inflation, rising interest rates, a global economic downturn, and turmoil in financial markets, a tremendous challenge for ASEAN as an emerging economy. The growth rate of international trade exports of emerging market countries has declined by 1.7% since 2022 [10]. The global epidemic in recent years has led to economic recession, and ASEAN has been hit economically again. And member countries have not coordinated financial policies well, opened up markets, and taken coordinated measures but have resorted to trade protectionism to some extent.

In addition, ASEAN has had difficulty addressing non-traditional security issues. In recent years, ASEAN countries have faced many non-traditional security threats. In response to these issues,

ASEAN has taken several measures, such as coordinating assistance to countries affected by bombings, tsunamis, and hurricanes; setting up an ASEAN Research Center to study solutions to food, energy, and environmental issues [11]; holding a special meeting on combating the COVID-19 epidemic to consult on the new crown pneumonia. This is the “threat-benefit” transformation mechanism, which promotes the linkage and complementarity of different mechanisms and considers the resolution of non-traditional security crises as the common interests of all parties [12]. Despite ASEAN’s efforts, it has generally been unable to respond to non-traditional security issues.

Finally, the influence of ASEAN as a regional cooperation organization in regional cooperation has declined. On the one hand, most ASEAN member countries have cooperated economically with countries outside ASEAN based on their interests. On the other hand, since the beginning of the new century, ASEAN’s status has declined as China and Japan have increased their economic strength and invested more in economic cooperation in East Asia. Australia, India, and New Zealand have joined the East Asian Cooperation Community. The lack of a more precise direction and goals for ASEAN in the organization’s development, coupled with the promotion of the “Asia-Pacific Community”, has weakened the position of ASEAN in regional cooperation [13].

3. The Dilemma of the ASEAN Development Model after the Establishment of the EU-ASEAN New Strategic Partnership from the Perspective of World-Systems Theory

3.1 Wallerstein’s World-systems Theory and the Theoretical Model of “Regional Whole”

Wallerstein’s World-systems theory mainly includes two parts. First, he believes that World-systems theory has three layers of structure, namely, “core—semi-periphery—periphery”, the “unequal exchange” between the core and the rest of the world, and the “capital accumulation” of the core countries promote the formation of the world system. World-systems theory creatively expounds on the vital role of semi-periphery countries [14]. Second, world-systems theory defines “world system” as one entity; as a system, it mainly involves three parts, namely, “world economy”, “world politics”, and “civilization” [15]. Wallerstein stresses the interaction of economy, politics, and society. There is an interactive strengthening relationship of “core-periphery (semi-periphery, periphery)” in the world system driven by the intrinsic motivation of the economy [16].

Compared with the previous interregional theory, the World-systems theory can reflect the opportunities and challenges faced by the construction of the ASEAN community from the perspective of globalism. World-systems theory is praised for its “all-embracing”. However, because of its all-inclusive characteristics, the analysis of some problems in this theory is not detailed enough—It focused only on the disadvantage of the edge of the underdeveloped countries in the circular structure of the center. However, it did not study them as a “regional whole”. To a certain extent, it ignores the “regional whole” such as ASEAN, which transcends “marginalization”.

Later scholars have also criticized the World-systems theory. Wang Zhengyi points out in his work, the researchers could take Southeast Asia as a “regional whole” and place Southeast Asia in the changes of the geopolitical and economic structure of the whole world, to analyze the history of the formulation of the development strategy of the countries in the region, the economic structure and social structure designed in the development strategy, and the development power within Southeast Asia and outside the region [17]. ZhaiKun believes that the World-systems theory is different from the analytical logic of the universal development model, which is based on the concern for third-world countries such as Latin America and the “core-periphery” logic of dependency theory. It is more essential to attribute the underdevelopment of marginal countries to the two “regulated” processes of “inclusion” and “marginalization”. However, the theory ignores that these periphery countries still have great subjective initiative and can use their own geopolitical advantages to “counter-regulate” the behavior of the core and semi-periphery countries. They can be brought into the subregional system of their own regulation to a certain extent [14].

While Wallerstein's World-systems theory looks from Europe to the world, the study of ASEAN offers a new perspective on the world system theory. It is clear that the study of ASEAN as a regional whole in the context of the "world system" complements this theory and is a better way to analyze the current international situation. This paper is, therefore, a new theoretical model for the study of ASEAN, based on a critical development of the theory and previous literature, which places ASEAN as a "regional whole" within the "world system". The aim is to fill the theory gaps and provide a new perspective to analyze the current international strife better.

3.2 Challenges to the Existing ASEAN Development Model Following the Establishment of the EU-ASEAN Strategic Partnership

World-systems theory has creatively elaborated on the critical role of the semi-periphery status. The semi-periphery status between the core and the periphery, which presents a process of marginalization for the core and a process of centralization for the periphery, is of great importance for maintaining the stability of the present world system or for building up the triggers of change for the future "world system" [14].

With the development of Southeast Asian countries, the ASEAN countries have been working to maintain the core position of ASEAN integration by setting overall regional goals, preventing them from being marginalized by other powers externally, and strengthening the unity of ASEAN countries internally to place themselves at the core of regional cooperation in East Asia. This model of regional integration in the current complex international relations has moved the ASEAN countries out of the periphery and into the semi-periphery as a "regional whole".

The formalisation of the EU-ASEAN strategic partnership in December 2020 marks a new phase in the relationship between ASEAN and the EU. Southeast Asia is crucial to the EU's economic and social development as a novel semi-fringe region.

However, no matter how much the EU emphasizes cooperation with ASEAN in this relationship, it cannot hide one basic fact. This strategic partnership was established primarily to keep China's ASEAN power in check. The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy, published in September 2021, proposes strengthening cooperation with ASEAN and jointly promoting multi-sectoral cooperation to exert pressure on China at the political and economic levels, with a policy orientation that is clearly marked by a "zero-sum game". As the first country to establish a strategic partnership with ASEAN and explicitly support ASEAN's central role in regional cooperation in East Asia, the EU has been intensifying its efforts to suppress China while drawing in ASEAN. The EU has been intensifying its efforts to suppress China as it draws closer to ASEAN. Once this behavior against China and the "zero-sum game" is fully implemented, it will cast a shadow on the ASEAN region's economic, political, cultural, and security aspects and bring new challenges to the ASEAN development model.

The ASEAN Community consists of an economic community, a political community, and a cultural community. It aligns precisely with World-systems theory's three-dimensional analytical framework of economy, politics, and civilization. The challenges it faces will be analyzed from the following three perspectives.

Politics has a solidifying effect on the structure of the "world system". At the political level, in Wallerstein's-World systems theory, there is a reinforcing "core-periphery (semi-periphery, periphery)" interaction in the "world system", where the central region grows to become the political centre by consolidating its hegemonic position in the economic sphere, restricting the development of semi-marginal regions through political means and making them dependent on it, and dominating international security affairs, leading to stronger and weaker states in all areas of state relations [16]. This is reflected in the EU-ASEAN strategic partnership in the following two ways.

First, the economic and political cooperation between ASEAN and the EU has gradually been replaced by bilateral cooperation between the EU and ASEAN countries, severely impacting the ASEAN political community. Although the EU has always emphasized the central position of ASEAN in East Asia and affirmed ASEAN's identity as a "regional whole", the EU's preference for bilateralism has primarily affected ASEAN's internal solidarity. The bilateral FTAs signed between

the EU and ASEAN member states have had a substantial impact on the multilateralism-centered “ASEAN way” - the way ASEAN is organized and policymaking and the ASEAN-led regional cooperation process, which has forced ASEAN to face the risk of fragmentation. “Unity” is the cornerstone of the centrality of ASEAN [18]. Maintaining ASEAN’s unity is thus the most significant internal challenge facing ASEAN in dealing with the changing regional order.

Secondly, the EU issued the “EU Indo-Pacific Strategy” in September 2021, which shows an apparent willingness to participate in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. ASEAN and its related multilateral forums are described by the US as the institutional core of the Indo-Pacific Strategy and inherited from the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. the fundamental purpose of the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy remains to balancing China’s economic and political influence in the Indo-Pacific region [19]. The strategy proposes to strengthen cooperation with ASEAN and jointly promote multi-disciplinary cooperation in order to exert pressure on China at the political and economic levels. The strategy proposes strengthening cooperation with ASEAN and jointly promoting multi-sectoral cooperation to exert pressure on China at both the political and economic levels. As a “broker”, it is evident that ASEAN is facing another challenge in mitigating political conflicts between significant powers while maintaining its “central position”.

The economy is the endogenous cause of forming a “world system”. According to the World-systems theory, to maintain their central position, the central regions restrict the development of the semi-periphery regions by economic means to make them dependent on them. In line with the World-systems theory, the economic challenges are mainly in the following two parts.

One is that the EU signed bilateral FTAs with ASEAN member states while establishing a new strategic partnership with ASEAN. Member states are more inclined to use bilateral mechanisms to coordinate their relations than the multilateral trade platform provided by ASEAN, which has impacted ASEAN’s regional economic cooperation.

The other challenge is that ASEAN’s economy and security depend on the balance of power between the major powers, and the unstable relationship has put pressure on ASEAN’s foreign trade and economic cooperation. With the advent of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the balance of power has been shaken. Given the hegemonic position of the US, most ASEAN countries are wary of US tariff policies and generally choose to buy more US products to prevent retaliation. At the same time, ASEAN countries are also generally concerned about spillover effects due to their heavy reliance on trade ties with China. As the first country to negotiate an FTA with ASEAN and the largest trading partner with ASEAN, Chinese support is essential for building the ASEAN Economic Community. The imbalance in the balance of power will put ASEAN, which is reluctant to “stand in line”, under more significant pressure to engage in economic and trade cooperation with China.

At the cultural level, Wallerstein’s World-systems theory believed that civilization has a bonding effect on maintaining the “world system”. “World system” observes a historical whole of habits, structures, cultures, and other factors that converge in a long cycle around the world, whose life is held together by conflicting forces that hold each other together and which disintegrate when each group keeps seeking its interests to reorganize it [15]. ASEAN continues to cooperate extensively in education, youth, women’s and children’s rights, environmental protection, and sports to build a peaceful, inclusive, flexible, harmonious, and healthy socio-cultural community [20]. However, as Western and East Asian civilization systems have long influenced ASEAN, it has become the “frontier” of the clash of civilizations between East and West. In line with World-systems theory, Whether the complex clash of civilizations can inspire a collective consciousness of ASEAN as a “regional whole” and hence a unique regional culture has become a challenge in the current process of building an ASEAN cultural community. This is now a challenge for ASEAN in building a cultural community.

4. Problems of the New EU-ASEAN Strategic Partnership

As two strong local paradigms of cooperation, the EU and ASEAN have established many regular cooperation mechanisms, such as the AEMM/ASEM and the EU's participation in the ARF mechanism. However, most collaborations have focused more on economic cooperation. "The most substantial cooperation between the EU and ASEAN is currently in the area of trade and economy", said Arsèle Borkowski, a researcher at the Center for European Policy Studies, as an example. The confirmation of the strategic partnership in 2020 will be an epochal development, pushing the two sides to broaden the existing areas and further develop in four areas of common interest: economy, security, sustainable connectivity, and development. It will also be improved in terms of cooperation density and mechanism [21].

However, despite the EU-ASEAN Strategic Partnership Framework, which sets a series of cooperation goals, there are still many problems in the future.

First, the EU-ASEAN cooperation fundamentally implies cooperation between the two regional member states. There is an evident inequality in the level of cooperation, which means that there are many political symbolic documents and declarations, but no actual content [22].

Moreover, the cooperation between the EU and ASEAN is unsatisfactory due to the "capacity-expectation" gap. In inter-regional relations with ASEAN, besides economic support, the EU has limited resources to mobilize compared to China and the US [22]. The limited capacity and resources cannot ensure the achievement of its strategic goals [21]. In addition, according to Wallerstein's world system, the influence of the hegemonic state will also have a continuous impact on EU-ASEAN cooperation.

The third point is the lack of consensus between the two sides, as the pursuit of different values by the EU and ASEAN implies a potential competition and conflict in their perceptions.

The fourth point is the threat of trade protectionism and economic nationalism, such as the EU's policy support to make its enterprises more competitive in the international market, which undoubtedly puts similar industries in ASEAN at a disadvantage.

5. Additional Findings

Here the authors would like to provide the experience of China-ASEAN relations as the reference for EU-ASEAN cooperation. Based on this, the authors focus on China, a core force in the Indo-Pacific region. Although the cooperation between the two sides does not involve China's policies, it could be found that, according to the challenges in ASEAN's development mentioned above, the Indo-Pacific region's policies toward China are always in the way of ASEAN's development. This factor cannot be ignored for the new strategic partnership between the EU and ASEAN.

The China-ASEAN dialogue and partnership of more than 30 years has led to the formation of a closely related community of destiny. The initial establishment of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (FTA) concept in 2001 has opened the meridians of cooperation. Currently, China is committed to promoting industrial restructuring and international division of labor among ASEAN member states in the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area, with steady trade and economic integration progress. The authors believe that ASEAN-China cooperation in the Free Trade Area could be a better example of EU-ASEAN cooperation, allowing ASEAN to burst into life under a new type of partnership.

6. Summary

Based on previous studies, this study applies Wallerstein's world theory system to study ASEAN as a regional whole in the world system, providing a new perspective for the new EU-ASEAN strategic partnership. Despite the formation of a unique ASEAN approach to steady development, the limitations of the organizational framework of its development model, the turmoil of regimes in the member states of the Union, and the international forms of oppression all make the future development of ASEAN still challenging.

This study also summarizes the problems and challenges of the EU-ASEAN partnership in four points. Firstly, the lack of actual cooperation is caused by the inequality of power of the partner countries. Secondly, the limited ability of the EU makes the EU-ASEAN economic cooperation unable to ensure the achievement of strategic goals. Thirdly, the world order mainly led by hegemonic states, especially America, continuously impacts EU-ASEAN relations. Lastly, trade protectionism and economic nationalism threaten economic cooperation between the two regions. This paper also draws some additional findings through the China-ASEAN relations to provide a reference for further cooperation in the new EU-ASEAN strategic partnership.

The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022 has made it more difficult for ASEAN countries. Western sanctions against Russia exacerbate the difficulty of economic recovery in ASEAN countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The intensified competition between major powers has led to increased disagreement within ASEAN. In addition, the Russia-Ukraine conflict from the beginning of 2022 also significantly impacts the EU in the field of security, politics, and economy. Especially the energy crisis has made the EU unable to take care of its economy. How to deal with new international problems and create a win-win situation in the new EU-ASEAN strategic partnership is still a topic worthy of a long-term study.

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