

EVENT REPORT

THE INDO-PACIFIC: A NEW GLOBAL CENTRE OF GRAVITY?

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Participants (from left to right):

- **Jim Maher** – Senior Policy Advisor at the European Parliament in ASEAN
- **Jonas Nitschke** – Programme Manager for Democracy and Governance at the Multinational Development Policy Dialogue (KAS), Brussels
- **Freya Chow-Paul** – Youth Project Lead at the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)
- **Yuneswaran Ramaraj** – Member of Parliament of Malaysia
- **Rey Uzhmar C. Padit** – Programme Manager for Political Cooperation at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS), Singapore

The global center of gravity is shifting from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In an international context marked by uncertainty and crises, a prosperous, secure, and resilient Indo-Pacific, home to 60 % of the world's population, is more crucial than ever. This was hallmarked in the EU's 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy, which identifies the region as a key player in shaping the rules-

based international order and in addressing global challenges. But what exactly can be expected from the EU's new strategic engagement with the Indo-Pacific? How is Europe working to strengthen long-standing alliances with like-minded partners such as Australia, ASEAN, and Japan? And what role can young people play in shaping the future of EU-Indo-Pacific relations?

These questions were addressed on June 10th, 2023 at the 2023 European Youth Event in a panel discussion on 'The Indo-Pacific: A new global center of gravity?' hosted by the Directorate-General for Parliamentary Democracy Partnerships and the European Parliament in ASEAN together with the Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF) and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung's Multinational Development Policy Dialogue (MDPD). The panel was moderated by Jonas Nitschke, Programme Manager for Democracy and Governance at the MDPD, and was joined by distinguished speakers from the EU and the Indo-Pacific region, who discussed the most relevant issues of EU-Indo-Pacific engagement with the young audience.

Jim Maher, Senior Policy Advisor at the European Parliament in ASEAN, opened the discussion by quoting EU High Representative Josep Borrell, who reaffirmed in his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore at the beginning of the month, that the 'the epicenter, the core of the global competition, is in the Indo-Pacific'¹. Maher argued that this is mirrored in recent global developments, such as the largest-ever US-Philippines joint military exercise in April 2023, the United Kingdom's announced accession to the trans-Pacific trade bloc CPTPP, the inauguration of the trilateral security alliance AUKUS between Australia, the UK, and the US, the envisioned opening of a NATO office in Japan, and the inclusion of Indonesia and Vietnam at the G7 summit in Hiroshima in May 2023.

Maher continued by addressing the EU's increased engagement with the Indo-Pacific region and the strengthening of EU-ASEAN ties. He referred to the EU's 2021 Indo-Pacific strategy² in which the EU positions itself as a 'cooperative partner' intending to expand collaboration on the climate crisis, biodiversity, ocean governance, trade, supply chain resilience, disaster recovery, and health. To this end, Maher highlighted the Indo-Pacific's central role in global supply chains, with an estimated 40% of the EU foreign trade passing through the South China Sea³ and 1.6 million EU citizens residing in the region⁴. Maher then proceeded to speak about the EU's concerns about the rapidly changing security environment in the Indo-Pacific relating to China's fast-growing military capabilities and pertaining tensions in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, which the European Parliament addressed in a 2022 resolution⁵. He

¹ EEAS Press Release (June 3, 2023). Singapore: Speech by HR/VP Borrell at Shangri La Dialogue.

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/singapore-speech-hrvp-borrell-shangri-la-dialogue_en

² EEAS. EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Fact Sheet:

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu-indo-pacific_factsheet_2022-02_0.pdf

³ Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS): China Power. How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea? <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>

⁴ See European Parliament (2022): Report on the EU and the security challenges in the Indo-Pacific.

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0085_EN.html

⁵ European Parliament resolution of 15 September 2022 on the situation in the Strait of Taiwan (2022/2822(RSP)). Available online: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0085_EN.html

highlighted the Parliament's call for a consistent and united EU approach to China moving forward, with continued cooperation on issues of common concern such as the climate crisis.

The European Union has furthermore expressed its desire to strengthen partnerships with allies in the Indo-Pacific region, such as Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and ASEAN. The EU is currently ASEAN's third-largest trading partner⁶ and the second-largest source of foreign direct investment⁷. The EU also holds bilateral trade agreements with both Singapore and Vietnam, while negotiations with Indonesia are ongoing. Maher mentioned that trade talks are expected to commence with Thailand in September and said that many in the European Parliament remained optimistic about the potential for agreements with the Philippines and Malaysia, and possibly a bloc-to-bloc arrangement one day.

While there remain points of disagreement, such as the deforestation regulation adopted by the Parliament in April 2023, there are numerous instances of deepened EU-ASEAN cooperation, notably the signing of a strategic partnership agreement in 2020, the finalization of an air transport agreement in 2022, as well as sectoral agreements in the digital and green sectors. Maher also insisted on the growing importance of cross-regional peer-to-peer exchanges such as the 2022 inaugural EU-ASEAN Youth Summit and spoke about the European Parliament's desire to establish an inter-parliamentary assembly with ASEAN, which is reflected by the almost monthly visits of parliamentary committees to Southeast Asia. Overall, Maher reassured that, for the European Union, **a prosperous and cohesive ASEAN at the heart of the Indo-Pacific would be the greatest bulwark against Chinese hegemony in the region.**

Maher then briefly focused on India-EU relations, which celebrated their 60-year anniversary in 2022. The EU is India's second-largest export destination, and 6,000 EU companies are present in India generating 1.7 million jobs directly and 5 million more indirectly⁸. The EU and India finally relaunched trade negotiations in the past year, the same year that India assumed the G20 presidency.

Lastly, Maher addressed the existing US-Chinese rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region. According to a comprehensive 2023 survey titled 'The State of Southeast Asia'⁹, the EU has solidified its position as the favored "third party" for engagement among Southeast Asian nations amidst the ongoing US-China rivalry. Notably, nearly 43% of respondents from the region expressed a preference for the EU as an alternative partner, well ahead of Japan, the UK, and India. It is evident, however, that most Indo-Pacific nations are not inclined to choose sides. Maher noted

⁶ See European Commission: Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/association-south-east-asian-nations-asean_en#:~:text=The%20EU%20is%20ASEAN's%20third,largest%20investor%20in%20ASEAN%20countries

⁷Ibid.

⁸ European Commission: EU trade relations with India. Facts, figures and latest developments.

https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/india_en

⁹ ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute (2023). The State of Southeast Asia: 2023 Survey Report.

<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/the-state-of-southeast-asia-2023-survey-report-2/>

that during a recent ministerial forum held in Stockholm, Indonesia's foreign minister, Retno Marsudi, emphasized ASEAN 'is not interested in being part of a new cold war, nor to be proxies of great powers.'¹⁰ Alluding to the US-China rivalry, Singapore's foreign minister, Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan, furthermore stated, 'Our objective is not to draw divisive lines, but rather to have overlapping circles of friends, partners, and investors.'¹¹

Yuneswaran Ramaraj, Member of Parliament of Malaysia, followed with an insightful keynote address on Malaysia's recent political and economic progress and encouraged young people to overcome challenges to participate in the political decision-making process. Ramaraj recounted his personal journey into politics, starting as a political activist. In 2015, he was charged under Malaysia's 2012 Peaceful Assembly Act (PAA) in his capacity of organizer of a peaceful 'Black 505' rally, which formed part of the larger 2013 general election strikes¹². His charges were related to non-compliance with the mandatory ten-day notice provision outlined in section (9) of the law.¹³ The newly introduced act effectively limited people's right to peaceful assembly and freedom of speech during a time when political opposition was rising. Ramaraj explained that the 2012 legislation was in violation of Malaysia's constitution and its commitments to international human rights standards¹⁴. When Malaysia's People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR) assumed power in 2022, after decades of leading opposition, Ramaraj was elected as a member of parliament. Explaining the challenges he faced trying to enter the political stage, Ramaraj motivated the young audience to continue fighting for change. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's agenda encompasses good governance, the rule of law, anti-corruption, and economic growth, with a strong emphasis on the protection and monitoring of human rights. As an example of such commitment, the Malaysian parliament unanimously voted to abolish the mandatory death penalty on April 3rd, 2023.

Freya Chow-Paul, Youth Project Lead at the *Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)*, gave an insightful speech on how to bridge political and cultural understanding between young people from Asia and Europe. She referred to the results of a 2019 ASEF study¹⁵ involving over 8000 students and young professionals, which demonstrated that 76 % of the young participants see multilateral arrangements or institutions as essential in promoting peace and human

¹⁰ See Center for Research and Security Studies (2023): No Proxies of Great Powers. <https://crss.pk/no-proxies-of-great-powers/>

¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore (2023, May 14). Available online: <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2023/05/20230514fmvsweden>

¹² *Public Prosecutor v. Yuneswaran* [2015] 9 C.L.J. 873.

¹³ Peaceful Assembly Act 2012, Article 9. See translated version online: https://www.rightofassembly.info/assets/downloads/2012_Peaceful_Assembly_Act_of_Malaysia.pdf

¹⁴ See Human Rights Watch (2013). Malaysia: Drop Charges Against 'Black 505': Prime Minister Najib Razak Should Permit Peaceful Protests. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/04/malaysia-drop-charges-against-black-505>

See also Human Rights Watch (2015). Creating a Culture of Fear: The Criminalization of Peaceful Expression in Malaysia. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/10/27/creating-culture-fear/criminalization-peaceful-expression-malaysia>

¹⁵ ASEM-Wide Youth Survey: Views of the 9th Model ASEM (ModelASEM9). Applicants on Effective Multilateralism. Available online: https://asef.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ModelASEM9_OpenCallSurvey.pdf, p. 6

development. She explained that ASEF is working with youth (aged 18-30) from 51 different countries and aims to facilitate peer-to-peer exchanges and quality engagement in the thematic areas of culture, media, governance, sustainable development, public health, and education. Amongst youth, ASEF is furthermore invested in promoting intercultural understanding and improving leadership capacities. Chow-Paul stressed that young people are already driving societal impact all over the world but remain largely excluded from the political decision-making process. Aiming to deliver a platform for aspiring youth, she presented recent ASEF projects, including the upcoming 5th ASEF Young Leaders Summit (ASEFYLS5)¹⁶ and other ASEF-supported initiatives, such the 2022 Young Indo-Pacific Forum¹⁷, which was organised by young people from three different student think tanks and brought together young people from both regions to exchange on topics relating to the EU and the Indo-Pacific. The forum was held alongside the 2022 EU-ASEAN Commemorative Summit, where the young participants shared concrete policy recommendations with the Heads of State and contributed to the 2022 first-ever EU-ASEAN Youth Summit¹⁸.

Rey Uzhmar C. Padit, Program Manager for Political Cooperation under the Regional Programme Political Dialogue Asia in Singapore, continued on the importance of empowering young people to enter the political stage. During his keynote address, he presented the Konrad Adenauer School for Young Politicians (KASYP)¹⁹, a regional capacity development programme for aspiring youth. Padit referred to the success story of Yuneswaran Ramaraj, a current alumnus of the KASYP. He furthermore introduced the KASYP Bridging Democratic Leadership Program²⁰, which establishes a dialogue between young politicians from Asia and Europe to draw lessons from their various experiences shared and find solutions to different political challenges faced. Padit further explained how KASYP is working to connect members of political parties with representatives from civil society organizations to foster dialogue on holistic solutions to social and political issues. Overall, Mr. Padit emphasized the importance of improving EU-Asian cross-regional dialogue and peer-to-peer exchanges.

Questions asked by the audience

The first question pertained to whether Europe would step up its military engagement amidst the increased militarization of great nations, like China, the US, and India. Jim Maher pointed at an observable shift in the mindset of many European states, with Finland and Sweden being the most recent examples, as well as stronger military collaboration between EU member states. He referred to the increased use of the European Peace Facility to send military equipment to Ukraine and on June 1st the European Parliament backed a draft bill to increase

¹⁶ Asia Europe Foundation: 5th ASEF Young Leaders Summit August- December 2023. See: <https://asef.org/projects/5th-asef-young-leaders-summit-asefyls5/>

¹⁷ Young Indo-Pacific Forum: <https://yipforum.com/>

¹⁸ See also video of the EU-ASEAN Commemorative Summit: Opening Ceremony: <https://video.consilium.europa.eu/event/en/26241>

¹⁹ Konrad Adenauer School for Young Politicians: <https://www.kas.de/en/web/politikdialog-asien/konrad-adenauer-school-for-young-politicians-kasyp->

²⁰ See KASYP 2022-2023: Programme Information. Available online: <https://www.kas.de/documents/288143/12513953/2022-2023+KASYP+Programme+Information.pdf/20a06a60-7fb3-118b-366b-6368b00b1bb4?version=1.0&t=1630576693748>

European production of ammunition and missiles²¹. Furthermore, in regard to the Indo-Pacific, the EU and Indonesia hosted their first-ever joint naval military exercise in August 2022. However, Maher also highlighted that Europe cannot replicate the United States' military might in the Indo-Pacific. Instead, the EU is presenting itself as a valuable and ambitious partner in the economic sphere, which will remain the focal point of EU-Indo-Pacific relations in the near future. Reference was made also to a recent study by the European Council on Foreign Relations²². While 74 % of participants thought that the EU should not continue to rely on the US in security matters, the vast majority preferred the EU to remain neutral in case of a US-Chinese conflict over Taiwan. Adding to that, Ramaraj underlined the importance of maintaining peace and stability through continued dialogue and strengthened EU-ASEAN relations. According to Ramaraj, the Indo-Pacific nations see the EU playing a major role in maintaining peace across the two regions, as European and Asian security can no longer be separated. He furthermore emphasized that **'wars do not bring solutions'** and that **'we should condone any kind of violence in every part of the world'** expressing himself very concerned about the situation in Myanmar.

A second question addressed the future of Sino-Malaysian relations, specifically in the scenario of a Chinese military offensive on Taiwan. Yuneswaran Ramaraj referred to the long-standing trade and business relations of Malaysia and China, with Malaysian Chinese making up the second largest ethnic group in Malaysia, and an announced Chinese investment commitment into Malaysia of RM 170 billion (\$38.5 billion) in April 2023²³. He also stressed that, while Malaysia is openly voicing its concerns on matters impacting the region's security, it adhered to the principle of non-interference. Thus, in case of an escalating conflict between China and Taiwan, Sino-Malaysian relations would likely remain unaffected.

Lastly, a question was raised on the colonial history of European countries in the Asian region and how policy-makers would navigate the sensitivity of the issue while fostering stronger collaboration between the two regions. Freya Chow-Paul addressed the question by highlighting the importance of promoting a deep inter-cultural as well as political understanding between the two regions. Global collaboration would need to consider the complexities of different cultures, values and ways of thinking, and young people should take the lead in doing so. Padit agreed with Chow-Paul and added that through increased efforts of dialogue and rising awareness, nations would be empowered to move forward into a better future, overcoming their path dependency. Padit said, 'at the end of the day, knowledge is evolving and as knowledge evolves, culture will too'.

²¹ European Commission: Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP). https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/act-support-ammunition-production-asap_en

²² European Council on Foreign Relations (2023). Keeping America close, Russia down, and China far away: How Europeans navigate a competitive world. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/keeping-america-close-russia-down-and-china-far-away-how-europeans-navigate-a-competitive-world/#china-is-not-russia>

²³ Reuters (April 4, 2023). China commits to investing nearly \$39 bln in Malaysia - PM Anwar. <https://www.reuters.com/article/malaysia-china-investment-idINL4N3671S2>



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