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The Philippines' Role as ASEAN-EU Country Coordinator: Its Prospects and Challenges for the National Defense Establishment

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INTRODUCTION

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU) upgraded their external relations to a strategic partnership on 01 December 2020. While the two regional organizations established relations in 1977, it was characterized as a donor-recipient dynamic.¹ Some ASEAN member states (AMS) perceived the EU as a "peripheral security actor" because they question its willingness to commit towards strengthening regional security in Southeast Asia. However, the Union has shown determination in the region by contributing to security and economic cooperation, environmental protection, and sustainable development. Security interactions between the two organizations were based on cooperation towards addressing non-traditional security issues such as maritime security, transnational crime, etc.² Moreover, with China's assertiveness over the South China Sea and the US's uncertain commitment towards regional security, the ASEAN has grown to need the EU as a strategic partner.³

The Philippines will assume the ASEAN-EU country coordinatorship this 2021 until 2024, in line with the ASEAN external relations coordinator plan.⁴ Country coordinators are responsible for promoting the ASEAN's interests with its dialogue and strategic partners while enhancing relations based on mutual respect and equality. They also have informal clout in determining the tempo and venue of strategic and diplomatic discussions and reframe multilateral issues to settle disputes or create cooperative mechanisms.⁵ The Philippines' coordinatorship could help the national defense establishment's national security objectives and capabilities in non-traditional security. The establishment can gain first-hand knowledge and

experience from the partnership's politico-security initiatives and mechanisms. Active participation means strengthening the country's knowledge and capabilities in non-traditional security and human security issues within the defense establishment's purview.

While the Philippines and the EU have enjoyed their diplomatic relations, the country has to address its bilateral issues with the Union which can affect the coordinatorship. The European Parliament filed a resolution for the temporary removal of the Philippines' Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) status due to its human rights issues.⁶ The GSP+ is a trade preference wherein Philippine goods enter the European economic zone duty-free or at a lower price, making Philippine products more competitive. However, the country must commit to implementing the 27 international core conventions ranging from human rights, good governance to environmental protection.⁷ While Philippine-EU relations are being reassessed, they must find a modus vivendi to continue harmonious relations while strengthening their relations with the ASEAN.

This policy brief explores the Philippines' role in strengthening the harmonious relations between the ASEAN and EU while discussing the expected programs and areas of cooperation between the two regional organizations. It shall examine the prospects for and challenges to the Philippines' coordinatorship vis-à-vis pursuing its national security interests. Furthermore, it will provide some policy considerations for the

national defense establishment's active engagement in the coordinatorship.

BACKGROUND OF THE ISSUE

Importance of the ASEAN-EU Strategic Partnership

EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borell remarked that the ASEAN-EU strategic partnership is "no longer a luxury but a necessity."⁸ ASEAN centrality and regional unity are being challenged at all fronts from defending a rules-based international order in the South China Sea. Regional integration between AMS is being challenged due to the great power rivalry between the United States and China and the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Union presents itself as a "trustworthy, reliable, and predictable partner" that share a common interest in upholding the global, multilateral order.⁹

The ASEAN and EU share a long history of diplomatic cooperation since 1972. The European Economic Community (EEC), the precursor organization to the EU, established contacts with the ASEAN wherein they were made dialogue partners under the ASEAN-EEC Agreement on 07 March 1980.¹⁰ While experts initially characterized their partnership as a donor-recipient dynamic, both organizations revamped their relations. In 2007, the two organizations enhanced their partnership with the signing and adoption of the Nuremberg Declaration on an EU-ASEAN Enhanced Partnership. The declaration contained their aspirations in boosting their cooperation in the political, economic, and socio-cultural fields. The Bandar Seri Begawan Plan (2013-2017) in April 2012, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in July 2012, and the ASEAN-EU Plan of Action (2018-2022) further strengthened ASEAN-EU relations. The regional agreements formalized the EU's collaboration with the ASEAN on various projects, programs, and dialogues ranging from politico-security issues, trade and economic ties to environmental and sustainable development concerns.¹¹ The two organizations' relations still persevered despite the COVID-19 outbreak. The Union donated €800 million through its Team Europe Initiatives to support the ASEAN's pandemic recovery and response mechanism,

strengthening AMS's health, water, and sanitation systems and mitigating the socio-economic impact brought by the virus in Southeast Asia. ASEAN-EU relations were elevated to a strategic partnership at the 23rd ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting on 01 December 2020.¹²

The strategic partnership is characterized as the consolidation of the current range of cooperative arrangements and shared objectives elevated to regular summits and at the leadership level.¹³ For Borell, the ASEAN and EU should be "partners in integration," having shared interests over international vaccine cooperation, socio-economic recovery from the pandemic, and promoting a rules-based international order while working together for multilateral solutions towards them.¹⁴ These shared interests are the defining factors in the crucial areas of cooperation between the two regional organizations. Additionally, the EU presents itself as a formidable actor in politico-security cooperation and is committed to preserving regional peace and stability. It is currently working with AMS on numerous issues, from combating non-traditional security challenges, enhancing maritime security, promoting the disarmament and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, and advancing human rights, good governance, and peace-oriented values in Southeast Asia.¹⁵

The EU is a significant economic partner for the ASEAN. They are its third-largest trading partner in which two-way trade between Europe and Southeast Asia amounted to USD 280.6 billion or PHP 13.6 trillion in 2019. It is also the region's third greatest source of foreign direct investments, with a total inflow of USD 16.2 billion or PHP 785.7 billion in 2019.¹⁶ The Union supports fiscal and financial stability by expanding free and fair trade, business, and investment within the region and in each AMS. The partnership plans to strengthen collaboration in the fields of regional transport, energy security, and aviation. It also promotes confidence-building measures, information sharing, and exchange of best practices in science and technology to encourage food, agriculture, fisheries and aquaculture development, and forestry in Southeast Asia.¹⁷ In terms of socio-cultural cooperation, the EU is a strong advocate for human rights and sustainable development. It will utilize ASEAN-led mechanisms to promote gender equality and women and children's

empowerment, address regional and global environmental challenges, and enhance dialogue and capacity-building activities in public health and disaster risk reduction management.¹⁸

MAJOR CASE ISSUES

The Philippines' Role as ASEAN-EU Country Coordinator

The ASEAN Charter underscores the country coordinator's role in conducting the ASEAN's external relations with relevant dialogue and strategic partners and organizations. The coordinatorship is held on a rotational basis among AMS, and the handover usually takes place in July. Each member state is assigned to coordinate with a specific partner for three years wherein they promote the ASEAN's interests while enhancing relations in conformity with mutual respect and equality. In addition, coordinators are entailed to co-facilitate relevant meetings between the ASEAN and external partners. They are supported by "the relevant ASEAN committees in Third Countries and International Organizations to discharge their duties."¹⁹

The Philippines will take over the ASEAN-EU coordinatorship from Singapore in July 2021, wherein they are expected to enhance its strategic partnership. The ASEAN-EU Plan of Action (2018-2022) serves as the coordinator's guide for implementing policy initiatives and mechanisms between the two organizations. In addition, as coordinator, they shall oversee the ASEAN and EU's cooperation on specific priority areas ranging from maritime security cooperation, counter-terrorism and transnational crimes, disarmament and non-proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) and chemical, biological, and nuclear (CBRN) materials, and the promotion of human rights, peace-oriented values, and good governance in Southeast Asia.²⁰

While managing the partnership's main mechanisms, i.e., ASEAN-EU Post Ministerial Conference (PMC), ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM), and the biennial ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meetings (AEMM), the Philippines must direct EU's heightened participation as a strategic actor in ASEAN-led security mechanisms and programs such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on

Transnational Crime (SOMTC), ASEAN-EU High-Level Dialogue on Maritime Security Cooperation, ASEAN-EU Policy Dialogues on Human Rights, etc. In addition, the country is also expected to implement ASEAN-EU policy initiatives such as ASEAN-EU Work Plan to Combat Terrorism and Transnational Crime, the ASEAN Comprehensive Plan of Action on Counter-Terrorism, ASEAN Work Plan on Securing Communities Against Illicit Drugs, etc.²¹

Prospects and Challenges to the Philippines' Coordinatorship

The Philippines can boost its profile as regional security and diplomatic player and at the same time pursue its national security objectives through the coordinatorship.

The country can become a crucial role player in augmenting ASEAN-EU relations through the tools of the coordinatorship. Dr. Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit, from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, discovered that coordinators can exert informal clout beyond their mandated roles as an external relations facilitator and administrative mechanism. It involves having an agenda-setting power that can define and persistently include issues at stake in relevant meetings aside from opening and concluding sessions, allot time for parties' right to speak, and summarize the results obtained from a negotiation. As a result, coordinators can revitalize dialogues or negotiations by selecting "pivotal" venues which can set the direction of meetings, aid parties to amend and discuss issues, and progress negotiations and agreements among them. Issue linkage is another tool for coordinators to reframe the issues' subject matter by linking various yet reconcilable issues. This action is done to influence the mindset of the involved parties to make collaboration and cooperation more viable.²² Being knowledgeable on the coordinatorship's role and tools will give the Philippines an advantage to progress cooperation and agreements, settle disputes and issues at stake, and deepen relations between the ASEAN and EU. Furthermore, this can boost the country's role as a regional diplomatic player.

While the Philippines serve at the diplomatic frontlines of the strategic partnership, it can also benefit from its policy initiatives,

mechanism, and agreements in the non-traditional security field. For example, maritime security cooperation is one of the prominent areas of the ASEAN-EU Plan and the Union's strong suit from which the Philippines can learn. The EU as an ASEAN strategic partner "promotes international and regional cooperation, information sharing, capability development, risk management, and training to ensure safe, secure, and clean seas and oceans."²³ Non-conventional problems from the South China Sea (SCS) dispute, such as marine waste pollution, sea piracy, illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing, would require non-traditional solutions. The creation of marine protected areas (MPA) is one of the EU's expert capacities. Creating MPAs can protect and conserve fish stock-flow and population, safeguard endangered marine species, manage marine waste pollution, and deter IUU fishing. Additionally, it increases marine conservation and maritime domain awareness while fostering capacity building and multilateral cooperation among the maritime states in the SCS.²⁴

Another prominent example is in the field of pandemic response and recovery from the COVID-19 outbreak. The EU has been proactive in supporting ASEAN's efforts towards the COVID-19 pandemic by donating € 800 million through its Team Europe initiative. It also provided another € 20 million for a "Southeast Asia Health Pandemic Response and Preparedness" implemented by the World Health Organization. It further allocated € 11 million in humanitarian assistance and disaster preparedness aid to support individual AMS affected by natural disasters, the coronavirus pandemic, and conflicts.²⁵ Furthermore, the ASEAN and EU agreed for a robust socio-economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that is "more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient "by implementing the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework and the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility's assistance.²⁶ Aside from being ASEAN country coordinator, the Philippines can gain first-hand knowledge and advantages from the ASEAN-EU's non-traditional security initiatives and mechanisms to aid their national security objectives.

The Philippines may also face challenges towards the ASEAN-EU strategic partnership and also to its coordinatorship. The "singularity trap" is an instance wherein a single bilateral issue

between an individual AMS and the EU negatively affects the whole ASEAN-EU relations. Due to the EU's rigid principle of promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, it has strained its bilateral relations with individual AMS over their domestic and political developments. An example of this would be the EU's branding of Myanmar as a "rogue state," plus the censure of its human rights record strained ASEAN-EU relations during the 1990s.²⁷ The Union recently sanctioned eleven Burmese military and government officials who were involved in the recent military coup in Myanmar, suspended Cambodia's EU duty-free trade privileges, and stalled Free-Trade Agreement (FTA) talks with Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines because of their human rights records and cases.²⁸ It also had conflicts with Indonesia and Malaysia over the palm oil ban in the European market because producing the oil caused extensive deforestation in both countries.²⁹

Former ASEAN Deputy Secretary-General V.P. Hirubalan initially argued that bilateral issues between individual AMS and the EU should not interfere with ASEAN-EU relations. However, individual AMS with tense relations with the Union can defer or oppose proposals that would enhance the two organizations' partnership, particularly in the politico-security field.³⁰ The Philippines as coordinator must be knowledgeable on the coherence challenges within the ASEAN-EU partnership and the Union's bilateral relations with individual AMS while ensuring ASEAN centrality at its forefront.

Another contention point to the Philippines' coordinatorship is the EU's censure of the country's human rights cases, leading to the temporary withdrawal of its Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) status. GSP+ is a trade preference that allows Philippine export products to enter the European market duty-free, but in return the country must commit to effectively implement 27 international core conventions, ranging from human and labor rights, good governance, and environmental concerns.³¹ The Philippine economy has benefitted from the GSP+ wherein bilateral trade in goods amounted to € 12.2 billion (approximately PHP 715 billion) in 2020 while trade in services equaled €4.3 billion (approximately PHP 252 billion).³² Furthermore, Philippine goods such as animal products, fish and related products, prepared foodstuffs, edible fruits,

automotive parts, leather, textiles, and footwear enjoy duty-free entry to the European market.³³

The European Parliament declared through its 17 September 2020 resolution the temporary withdrawal of the Philippines's GSP+ status due to its human rights violations. They cited the Philippines' extrajudicial killings, lowering the age of criminal responsibility, denying ABS-CBN's broadcast franchise renewal, and other issues as "grave and serious concerns."³⁴ The Philippine government viewed the Parliament's actions as "meddling in the Philippines' internal affairs," which led them to reject numerous development aids formally, defer invitations to multilateral forums, and pressure EU ambassadors with expulsion.³⁵ While this bilateral issue should be resolved between the Philippines and the EU, it may create tensions and complications towards the country's coordinatorship and the strategic partnership.

However, the Philippines and EU are both exploring a *modus vivendi* in their bilateral relations. Both parties resumed talks on the EU-Philippines Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) on 28 January 2020 to find a systematic way to strengthen Philippine-EU relations based on "mutual interest and respect." At the same, the two parties are enhancing cooperation in the different fields of security, socio-economic development, sustainable development, environment and natural resources, and science and technology.³⁶ While both parties are committed in principle for the Philippines' FTA, EU Ambassador to the Philippines Luc Véron replied that "the EU focuses its engagement with the Philippines on the implementation of several international Conventions under the General Scheme of Preferences (GSP+), from which the Philippines currently benefits."³⁷

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Philippines plays a crucial role in strengthening the ASEAN-EU strategic partnership despite the prospects and challenges in managing the two organizations' bilateral relations. While the partnership contributes to strengthening a rules-based international order in the Southeast Asian region, it can further enhance the Philippines' capabilities in non-traditional

security. However, the country must be mindful and resolve its bilateral issues with the EU to avoid any upset towards the partnership and its coordinatorship. With this in mind, the study puts forward some policy recommendations, most notably to the national defense establishment's consideration in strengthening international security cooperation and at the same time pursuing its national security objectives.

As country coordinator, the Philippines must strengthen ASEAN centrality as the forerunner of the ASEAN-EU strategic partnership while enhancing the EU's role as a strategic partner in the ASEAN. ASEAN centrality must be at the forefront of the strategic partnership with the EU. The Philippines, as country coordinator, must ensure the coherence of regional interests and values within the ASEAN and its member states in pursuing meaningful external relations with the Union. The country can utilize the coordinatorship's informal tools to manage the strategic partnership while easing any bilateral tensions between individual AMS and the EU. The Philippines must also strengthen the EU's role as a strategic partner in the ASEAN. The country has to oversee the Union's participation in crucial ASEAN fora such as the ARF, PMC, AMM, AEMM, and its eventual membership to the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+). While the EU suffers from low visibility and its lingering perception as a "peripheral security actor," the country can help raise its visibility profile at the level of public diplomacy within the Southeast Asian Region.³⁸

The Philippines as ASEAN-EU Country Coordinator must further secure the EU's support for regional security in the South China Sea (SCS). While both the ASEAN and EU share the same interests and commitments towards a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region, the Philippines as coordinator should further obtain and secure the EU's support for regional security in the SCS. The Philippines must obtain its concrete support for the peaceful resolution of disputes over the SCS; bolster the ASEAN's actions towards an effective and legally binding Code of Conduct over the SCS; and strongly oppose any unilateral actions that would undermine regional stability and the international rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region.³⁹ These unilateral actions does not solely entail China's gray zone tactics, but

it includes transnational maritime crimes over the SCS such as marine waste pollution, sea piracy and trafficking, illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing, etc.

The Department of National Defense (DND) should consider further involvement in the Philippines' ASEAN-EU country coordinatorship for 2021-2024. The DND should consider engaging in the coordinatorship and pursue its national security interests vis-à-vis advancing the ASEAN's agenda in the field of regional peace and security. The defense establishment can play a proactive or leading role in the partnership's non-traditional security programs and policy initiatives that would further enhance politico-security cooperation (i.e., ARF, ASEAN SOMTC, ASEAN-EU High-Level Dialogue on Maritime Security Cooperation, ASEAN-EU Work Plan to Combat Terrorism and Transnational Crime, ASEAN Convention and Comprehensive Plan of Action on Counter-Terrorism, ASEAN Work Plan on Securing Communities Against Illicit Drugs, etc.) Proactive engagement could enhance the EU's role as a non-traditional security partner for the ASEAN and facilitate capacity-building measures, knowledge sharing, and best practices exchange within individual AMS and the Union. The Philippines can gain first-hand knowledge, experience, and benefits in strengthening its non-traditional security policies and initiatives.

Utilize the Philippine Defense and Armed Forces Attaches to aid the Philippines' coordinatorship. Considering the challenges within the ASEAN and bilateral issues with the EU, the DND can assist the Philippines' coordinatorship role by utilizing the Defense and Armed Forces Attaches (DAFA). The DND can: (1) Coordinate with DAFAs assigned in individual AMS to diplomatically ensure the coherence of interests and values towards the strategic partnership, particularly in the field of politico-security cooperation; (2) Dispatch DAFAs to ASEAN-EU policy initiatives and mechanisms (e.g., ASEAN-EU Joint Cooperation Committee, ARF, ASEAN SOMTC, etc.) to aid the Philippines' coordinatorship and ensure multilateral cooperation and participation between relevant parties; (3) Furthermore, DAFAs posted in the Southeast Asian and European region can help the ASEAN-EU relations by sustaining their presence and diplomatic participation at the public level.

The Philippines should consider reaffirming its human rights commitments to the international community. While the Philippine-EU relations are exploring a modus vivendi, the Philippines must consider reaffirming its human rights commitments to the international community. This entails reviewing its international human rights commitments, upholding its respect for human rights in declarations and statements to the international community, and revisiting its internal policies and mechanisms that would further strengthen the country's justice system. These actions would signal the EU and the rest of the world of the Philippines' transparency and its willingness to address human rights issues while pursuing its agenda to solve the proliferation of illegal drugs and other non-traditional security challenges facing the country.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

ASEAN-EU relations are deep and broad because both organizations play essential roles in the peace, stability, and development in their respective regions. Individual AMS have benefitted from the EU's generosity both in diplomatic aids and sharing of experiences and capacity-building measures in politico-security cooperation. Reciprocally, the EU values its trading relationship with the ASEAN, wherein they are one of its crucial factors for the region's continued economic prosperity. Despite divergent challenges in terms of "singularity trap" issues and differences of interests and values, the ASEAN-EU strategic partnership must be based on mutual interests, rules, and norms. Candid discussions and exchanges of views between the two regional organizations can better understand emerging developments and challenges in their respective regions and develop practical yet substantive solutions in addressing them.⁴¹

The Philippines' role as ASEAN-EU country coordinator is crucial. They are responsible for managing the conduct of ASEAN-EU relations, ensuring ASEAN centrality among individual AMS, and handling bilateral issues that may affect the whole strategic partnership. The DND must also consider its participation and involvement in the coordinatorship to gain first-hand benefits, knowledge, and experience in the non-traditional security field. It can also boost the country's profile

as a leading regional security and diplomatic player. However, the country must also ensure to put their bilateral affairs with the EU in order before assuming the coordinatorship this July 2021.

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