

ASEAN-EU Ministerial Conference: Remarks by High Representative/



Today the European Union participated in the ASEAN Regional Forum following which the High Representative co-chaired with Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan the ASEAN-EU Ministerial Conference.

Thank you Vivian (Foreign Minister Balakrishnan),

Dear friends, dear colleagues, dear Ministers,

Let me start by thanking Vietnam for assembling us today despite the difficult situation, and Singapore for the work you have done since 2018 as coordinator for EU-ASEAN relations.

We already met for a Ministerial meeting dedicated to our COVID-response in March, but as this is my first formal ASEAN Ministerial with you, let me assure you again of my personal attachment to bringing our two organisations closer. It is very important for us to be as close as possible.

If the pandemic has taught us something, it is that it is time for like-minded and multilateral organisations to come together, even those as geographically distant as the European Union and ASEAN. Distant geographically, but much closer intellectually, in my point of view.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the last in a series of global challenges that require a multilateral response, which our two organisations are attached to.

I'm afraid that others undercut multilateralism, but our organisations should ensure that our trading systems, prosperity and security are governed by rules and based on international agreements, not on the idea that "might makes right". None of us – neither ASEAN nor the EU – is ready to become part of any "sphere of influence", not to say new Cold Wars.

The EU has been at the forefront of the global response to the Coronavirus.

In May we successfully pushed for the adoption of a Resolution on the Coronavirus by the Assembly of the WHO which foresees an impartial, independent and comprehensive review of the lessons learned from the international health response.

We have also assisted our partners around the world in tackling the virus and its socio-economic impact. In ASEAN alone, we mobilised over €800 million in assistance, more than any other partner of ASEAN.

We all know that the short-term challenge is the search of a vaccine. Here in Europe we are facing second waves of the virus and we will not be rid of it until we are better protected. Also here, we choose a multilateral response and the European Union is mobilising up to €400 million in guarantees to support COVAX. We will put our expertise and resources at work with COVAX to accelerate and scale-up development and manufacturing of a global supply of vaccines for citizens across the world, in poor and rich countries.

And today, I would propose that our experts – from the EU and from ASEAN – get together to see how best we can cooperate on vaccine security.

But the virus is not just about health, its economic impact is also tremendous, so let's talk about economic recovery. Because the second priority for all of us will be to reboot our economies. As the first investors in ASEAN, the European Union is committed to stepping up our intense economic partnership. The challenge is to promote deeper ASEAN economic integration as well as closer ties between us. Let us do this by setting norms and standards as opposed to taking these from others.

But what does that mean in concrete terms?

First, to pursue our trade agenda: I am happy that our agreements with Singapore and Vietnam have entered into force and that we are negotiating other agreements with several of you. We should pursue these with a renewed energy and urgency.

Secondly, to work even more closely together to enhance connectivity. I've been saying very nice and good words about it – connectivity will be the work of the 21st Century. We will build on our numerous EU-ASEAN programmes to facilitate trade and integration and to build infrastructure to speed up economic recovery. The launching of the EU-supported ASEAN Customs Transit System later this year is just one example of this support.

And thirdly, we look forward to the finalising of the Air Transport Agreement as soon as possible. The agreement would be the first of this kind, creating the world's biggest aviation market for over one billion people.

I would like to stress the need for a rules-based order as a source of security. We are focusing on COVID-19 and the economic impact, but we should also be vigilant about the undercutting of the international rules-based order in other domains.

We cannot allow countries to unilaterally undermine international law and maritime security in the South China Sea, thereby representing a serious threat to the peaceful development of the region.

Asian security is also European security. Also here, we need to intensify our cooperation. And that's why, for example, we are working with you, our ASEAN partners, to deploy military and counterterrorism advisors in several of our European Union Delegations across Asia, including in Jakarta.

Last year, my predecessor signed an agreement on Vietnam's participation in our European military and civilian missions. I am very happy of that because these missions are deployed on three continents, from the Indian Ocean to Africa. And they contributed a lot to being security providers.

I hope it will be the first of many with our friends in ASEAN, because our missions do not only serve the European interest. They serve first and foremost the interest of peace and security worldwide, especially in some of the most troubled parts of our world, and we have them, we have a lot of problems in our world. We should contribute together to reduce tension and ensure peace.

Dear Ministers, dear friends, I am looking forward to our exchange today. Once again, we are very far away geographically, but our minds grow closer and should be closer in the future.

Thank you.

Closing remarks

Thank you. Yes, I would like to build with all of you the same personal relationship which I have been building since we met in March and I would like to thank you publicly for your participation in the university, summer university, this year, talking about the future of the world, and sharing with a lot of Ministers and professors and students our thoughts on that. Your intervention was very much celebrated and I would like to thank you and to ask that in the future other Ministers of ASEAN can participate in this kind of reaching out to people from an academic and intellectual point of view.

Because I really, I really feel convinced that an ambitious agenda lies in front of us and it is up to us to implement it. In a way we share the same understanding about it, if I may, from what I said; no-one will be safe until everyone will be safe. That way we have to continue to support each other, our mutual health and economic systems. And to provide a global supply of vaccines which has to become a real public good.

We are willing to work together to reboot our economies, and this means to facilitate trade and enhance connectivity.

You will find in the European Union always a trustworthy, reliable and predictable partner. We have no hidden agenda. Only a clear and public agenda, which is to defend the rules-based international system, and ensure that every human being can enjoy the security and rights we sometimes

take for granted. But this is not the case for us to be part of humankind.

Dear colleagues, we share a special responsibility: the maintenance of the global, multilateral order, because a unilateral order is just the law of the strong. And our common commitment to this cause and the value of this dialogue – which I have been very happy to share with you today – cannot be underestimated. In times of national protectionism, in times of US-China rivalry and global uncertainty, I think it is more relevant than ever – this kind of agreement, this kind of context, this kind of mutual understanding.

As I said, this partnership should not be considered a luxury; it's a real necessity, for us, Europeans. So thank you, thank you very much, Ministers. I'm looking forward to meeting again during the next EU-ASEAN Foreign Ministers [meeting] in December. Maybe we will be able to meet in person in order to strengthen better our personal links. Thank you very much.