Future of EU-ASEAN relations

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Reinhard BÜTIKOFER (Greens /EFA, DE) on the future of EU-ASEAN relations.

Members considered that ASEAN is at present one of the most important emerging regional organisations in the world, in terms of both economic development and geopolitical dynamics. The ASEAN Economic Community aims to create an internal market for 600 million people by 2015 which would allow it to rise to the level of its economic competitors (the EU, the United States, China, Japan and India).

For an economic integration respecting social norms: Members encouraged ASEAN to continue its political and economic integration path and to pursue the liberalisation of its internal labour market.

They underlined the great economic potential of the ASEAN region and encouraged the ASEAN states and national and foreign enterprises operating in ASEAN countries to act in accordance with the principles of corporate social responsibility, to actively respect ILO core labour standards. They considered that in particular that the ASEAN countries should advance towards a new phase of inclusive economic and social development, with particular emphasis on promoting their peoples human, social, labour and economic rights.

Towards a common EU approach to the ASEAN region: Members emphasised that the EU and ASEAN have shared values as well as common political and economic interests, and that, in recognition of the importance of this relationship, the EEAS is actively considering the appointment of an EU Head of Delegation for relations with the ASEAN countries. They believed that the EU and its Member States should work on **a common and coherent approach for the ASEAN region**, supporting and complementing each other and, thus, enabling the EU to develop a stronger economic and political presence in the region.

Members warmly welcomed the negotiation of seven Partnership and Cooperation Agreements between the EU and seven individual ASEAN member states, which will be the cornerstones for deepening mutual relations. They supported the strengthening of the parliamentary dimension of the relationship with the establishment a formal Euro-ASEAN inter parliamentary assembly. At the same time, they stressed the need to upgrade and extend the role of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and the Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership (ASEP), as the existing channels for dialogue between the parties.

Security and geopolitical challenges: Members supported ASEAN in developing its own space within the conflicting economic and security interests of China, Japan and the United States. They would like the **EU to be an active political partner for ASEAN in its pursuit of non-military solutions** to important security and geostrategic challenges by sharing the EU's experience of conflict prevention, resolution and dispute settlement in managing border and territorial disputes, in order to enhance peace and regional stability. In this regard, Members are concerned at the recent developments in the South China Sea and called for a peaceful and mutually beneficial solution to the maritime border dispute in the area.

Cultural and educational dimension of EU-ASEAN relations: Members urged broader coverage of the ASEAN region in state-run media and education by increasing their presence in the region through cultural institutes or other means. They called for the promotion of a mutual cultural dialogue and the organisation of a 'cultural' year with a changing topic every year, whereby an EU country could be featured in ASEAN member states, and vice versa.

Members highlighted the important role of exchange programmes to facilitate the mobility of young people, such as Erasmus, for intercultural students' and research cooperation. They believed that the **EU needs to expand university programmes in English to better facilitate access for Asian students to European universities**, while EU researchers should be helped to join research programmes in Asia.

Furthermore, Members proposed that the Union strengthens its relations with the ASEAN countries to improve the rights of minorities, women and children. They called for the launching of a city-twinning initiative in order to link up regions in Europe and Asia as well as other inter-regional cooperation initiatives with ASEAN on disaster and crisis prevention and management, sustainable development, food security, support for small farmers, climate change, renewable energy, tourism and research.

The struggle against poverty and inequality: Members noted that poverty continues to be a problem in the ASEAN countries and that it mainly affects women, the poorly-skilled, rural areas and minority ethnic or religious groups. They considered that there is still a need for a new EU strategy to promote development and combat inequality in these countries, including by **providing access to financing via microcredits**. Such a strategy should be based in the principles of policy coherence for development, long-term aid effectiveness, priority for basic social needs and the participation of national and local stakeholders as well as development NGOs in the region.

Members also called for enhanced cooperation and mutual rapprochement on human rights issues such as freedom of expression and of the media, freedom of assembly and association. They suggested that **mechanisms for dispute settlement and sanctions in case of human rights violations** should be developed, along the same lines as those existing in other regions.

They urged the Commission to **carry on helping ASEAN countries to continue to reduce disparities between countries** and to accompany them along the path of political, economic and institutional integration at regional level, paying special attention to Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.

Protection of biodiversity and over-exploited areas: Members expressed concern regarding environmental policy, in particular over the rate of illegal logging, burning and resulting smog that has a significant negative impact also across ASEAN borders. They particularly regretted the fact that the **EU biofuel policy** contributes to the rapid expansion of oil palm production, leading to dispossession and/or adverse incorporation of the rural poor into oil palm plantation. They deemed it therefore essential to support, within the context of development aid, **the right to land resources** of poor people in developing countries. They also encouraged stronger efforts for the protection of the environment and biodiversity.

Other sectoral questions: Members raised many other questions, such as the question of migratory flows within the ASEAN countries or the situation of ethnic minorities such as the Rohingyas. In this regard, they urged the Burmese Government and its neighbours to make every possible effort to improve their living conditions and rights as citizens.

Finally the Members called for:

- strengthening the dialogue between European and Asian companies and public-private cooperation on financial, investment, economic and trade issues with the view to improving access to the Asian markets;
- respect for social standards by the countries concerned so that they can benefit from the GSP and GSP +;
- strengthening of the peace process and the democratic reforms in Myanmar/Burma;
- the ratification by ASEAN member states of statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the UN Convention Against Corruption.