Creating a new dynamic in EU-ASEAN relations

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Relations between Europe and ASEAN were founded on strong ties of cooperation that were first formed in the early 1970s when a number of informal contacts took place. The nature of this cooperation had now developed quite substantially as a result of economic and political changes that had taken place in the two regions concerned. Efforts to adapt EU-ASEAN relations to changing circumstances had to date been based on the EC-ASEAN cooperation agreement signed in March 1980. The Community was ASEAN's oldest international partner, the first informal relations dating back to 1972 following an initiative by ASEAN that was primarily focused on commercial development. The first contact at ministerial level took place in June 1972, when a delegation led by the Indonesian Minister for Trade was received at a special meeting by the Members of the Commission. In 1974 the Commission first proposed the idea of a cooperation agreement based on the model that had already been concluded with India in 1973. This failed to materialise due to a lack of adequate institutional structures at ASEAN level. However, at the first ASEAN summit held in Bali in 1976 it was decided that the necessary steps should be taken to extend the level of contact and formalise a dialogue with the Community. The first EEC-ASEAN ministerial meeting took place in Brussels in November 1978. This was the first time that the Foreign Ministers of the EEC Member States, acting at Community level, had ever met their counterparts from a regional development group that was not associated with the Community. The decision was then taken to conclude a cooperation agreement and this was duly signed by the two parties in March 1980. Since then, EC-ASEAN relations had evolved within the legal framework of this agreement and ministerial meetings were organised on a regular basis in order to head the meetings of the joint cooperation committee set up by the agreement. EC-ASEAN meetings had been held on a regular basis since 1978, with 11 at ministerial level and 12 at joint committee level. As a partner in dialogue the EC had, since 1980, also taken part in the post-ministerial conference organised each year (at the end of July) immediately after the ministerial meeting with ASEAN. With the end of the Cold War and the impressive economic development under way in the ASEAN region the time had come to review the framework within which this relationship operated. For this reason it was decided, at the 9th EU-ASEAN ministerial meeting in Luxembourg in 1991, to revise the 1980 agreement in order to take account of the new set of requirements that had to be met as part of the mutual cooperation between the two parties. However, since July 1992 the Council had been unable to reach agreement on a negotiation directive for the Community that would form the basis of a new agreement. This did not prevent a strengthening of political links, including the regular participation of the EU in the ASEAN Regional Forum, which met for the first time in July 1994, and the development of a joint dialogue within the strict limits set by the 1980 agreement and on the basis of the consensus obtained at the 10th EU-ASEAN ministerial meeting that had been held in Manila in October 1992. The EU-ASEAN political framework proved to be sufficiently flexible to allow a number of modifications to be made to the cooperation prerogatives that had developed since 1980. The Commission guideline document 'Towards a new Asian strategy', which was published in July 1994, illustrated the changes that had taken place in relations between the Union and ASEAN and emphasised the need for a partnership based on an equal footing with ASEAN. Those attending the 11th EU-ASEAN ministerial meeting in Karlsruhe (Germany) in October 1994 were strongly in favour of the Commission document and undertook to strengthen and intensify the level of dialogue and cooperation that was now well established between the European Union and ASEAN. To this effect a group of eminent persons was set up with the remit to propose concrete measures designed to promote EU-ASEAN relations. This group presented its report in June 1996. Within the framework of EU-ASEAN cooperation the highest level of institutional dialogue took place at the EU-ASEAN ministerial meetings, which were attended by the relevant foreign ministers. The 11th ministerial meeting was held in Karlsruhe in October 1994. The meetings took place every two years and the agenda focused on political and economic matters and joint cooperation. In addition to this, a meeting of senior civil servants was held in order to maintain a political dialogue in the intervening period between ministerial meetings. The last meeting of senior civil servants took place in Singapore in

May 1995. As part of the cooperation agreement joint committee meetings were organised about every 18 months in order to discuss current and future projects. The 12th meeting of the joint cooperation committee was held in Brussels in October 1995. Four sub-committees had been set up under the joint cooperation committee to deal with the following areas: trade, economic and industrial cooperation, science and technology, and forests. The sub-committees normally met once a year and reported to the joint cooperation committee. The European Union participated in those ASEAN meetings that were open to ASEAN dialogue partners, namely the Post-Ministerial Conference and the ASEAN Regional Forum, which took place immediately after the annual ASEAN ministerial meeting. The Post-Ministerial Conference reviewed the general political and economic situation in the ASEAN region and the state of relations between ASEAN and the EU, while the Regional Forum discussed the security problems affecting the ASEAN region. The Brussels-based ASEAN Committee ensured that daily contact could be maintained between the EU and ASEAN. This Committee grouped together all ASEAN representatives in Brussels . The chairmanship of the Committee, which ran for one year, was organised on similar lines to that of ASEAN. In addition, a national coordinator was appointed for a period of two years. Meetings between the Commission and the Brussels-based ASEAN Committee were held on specified dates.