

Interregionalism or Merely a Fourth-Level Game? An Examination of the EU-ASEAN Relationship

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Abstract It is argued in this paper that the normative nature of both the conscious and unconscious attempts of the European Union as a ‘civilian power’ to export its model of regional integration elsewhere, has led to the claim that an ostensibly new form of interaction in international relations - one characterized as interregionalism - has emerged. An examination of the EU-ASEAN relationship, however, would suggest that this assertion is greatly exaggerated. Between conventional bilateral relations, between individual EU members and individual Southeast Asian nations, and forms of multilateral and asymmetrical bilateral relations between the EU as a global actor and individual ASEAN members, the space for interregionalism is indeed very limited. Rather, by building on Putnam’s seminal work enunciating his metaphor of “two-level games” (i.e. the domestic and the international) and its extension in Patterson’s and Deutsch’s discussion of ‘three level games’ (the third level being the intra-regional), it is suggested that interregionalism is merely the addition of a minor fourth level in international relations bargaining. Such a characterization has the salutary effect of drawing attention back, both to the different forms of regional integration, and to the varying capacities within regional entities. It is these elements that are worthy of further research, rather than some imagined alchemy denoted as interregionalism. The latter can best be described as a normative milieu goal, rather than being an appropriate and useful analytical category.

Keywords ASEAN · EU as global actor · Four-level games · Interregionalism

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Introduction

The object of this paper is to focus on an ostensibly European contribution to international relations behaviour, namely interregionalism, through a case study of EU relations with another regional entity with a similar degree of longevity, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), founded in 1967. Interregionalism is defined “as a process of widening and deepening political, economic, and societal interactions between international regions” ([82], p. 18). Interest in this subject was an understandable outcome of the studies of “new regionalism” and the burgeoning school of comparative regional integration studies [2]. While the comparative study of regional integration is now widespread internationally, concern with interregionalism is, at the moment at least, a largely European enterprise almost exclusively concerned with Europe’s relations with regional entities of various hues in other parts of the world.¹ At least two explanations can be given for this. On the one hand, the existence of clearly the most heavily institutionalised regional entity - one which structurally attempts to “speak with one voice” say in trade negotiations and one with ambitions for a common security and defence policy – generates quite logically a concern with its behaviour as a global actor, including with other regional entities. On the other hand, and most importantly from the perspective of this author, interregionalism is intimately related to the promotion of Europe as a “civilian power” [24, 93, 73], “tranquil power” [3] and/or “normative power” [64, 65] with a capacity to impose its normative preferences elsewhere in the world [58]. Yet such eponyms are loaded, denoting goals as much as descriptions ([65], p.45).

Moreover, a concern with interregionalism springs from the distinctive nature of the European Union as a *sui generis* global actor, one that relies on its attributes of soft power [72] to pursue its multidimensional interests. In other, rather banal, words what the EU is, in and of itself, generates the way it acts externally. In this light, interregionalism can be seen as a way of carrying out these European normative agendas in international relations [44]. Interregionalism, it is argued, is in Arnold Wolfers’s [101] classic terminology, a foreign policy milieu goal designed to frame the international environment in which individual nation-states act. Yet does empirical study support the achievement of this objective? Only through an examination of particular cases can this be assessed. This article is a modest contribution to this exercise through its focus is on EU-ASEAN relations.

The EU and the Promotion of Regional Integration in Southeast Asia

In May 2008, on the eve of the French Presidency of the European Union, Cyclone Nagis hit the coastline of Burma/Myanmar devastating already one of the world’s poorest countries. In Europe’s response to this disaster the multidimensional nature of the European Union came to the fore once again. Humanitarian aid was provided both by the European Commission (through its EuropeAid directorate), by individual European countries as well as by transnational European NGOs. On the

¹ To the knowledge of this author there are, for example, no studies of relations say between SAARC and ASEAN, or NAFTA and ASEAN that use the terminology of interregionalism.

political level, in attempting to persuade the Burmese junta to accept humanitarian assistance, Europe “spoke” with multiple voices. At the level of individual member states, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and French President Nicolas Sarkozy as well as their foreign ministers, were to be the most vocal in urging European intervention. Yet it was the European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, Louis Michel, who was to go to Rangoon first in order to assess needs and offer aid. And it was the European Parliament by dint of its representative legitimacy that, once again, was to take the moral high ground as the ostensible custodian of a European conscience. As in many other external relations examples, dealing with the Burmese situation demonstrated the kinds of multilevel and innovative governance that characterize the EU (Tömmel and Verdun 2009). However there was also an attempt to work with another regional association (ASEAN) to deal with the disaster. This was to be yet another ostensible example of the inter-regional nature of EU-Southeast ASEAN relations.

A tangible example of the EU’s interregionalist agenda is that by May 2009 a total of €70 million had been allocated by the Commission in support of ASEAN regional integration efforts.² Behind these financial commitments, observers of the EU’s foreign relations cannot help but be cognizant of the fact that the European model of regional integration, despite disclaimers in a 1995 Communication of the European Commission (1995, p. 8), is at least promoted as reference point for regional integration elsewhere.³ The EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, predicted that “in the years ahead these inter-regional dialogues will steadily reshape the nature of international politics and forge new mechanisms to manage global interdependence and tackle cross-border problems” (quoted in [36], p. 299). The promotion of intra-regional cooperation is, as Karen Smith cogently argues “clearly an EU foreign policy objective that stems directly from its own internal identity” (Karen [89], p. 95), one that has led to the following succinct argument in one of the standard textbooks on EU foreign policy:

“... the reasoning goes, if states elsewhere learned to resolve their disputes peacefully, as had the EC, the prospects for a more peaceful world might improve. Given this philosophy, when the EU engages in *interregional* cooperation, it almost always, at the same time supports *intra*regional cooperation.” (Hazel Smith [88], p. 26)

There is thus a “propensity of the (European) Community to reproduce itself... advocating its own form of regional integration” ([14], p. 249), even if such a policy objective cannot be found in the various EU treaties. There is quite a vast literature that presents the Europe Union as a model for Asian, and particularly, Southeast Asian regional integration [26, Moxon-Browne 2008, 74, 86, 97]). The narrative of the European project - with its conscious or unconscious projection into a future utopia ([71] - can be considered as one aspect of European soft power. Amongst the overseas “markets” for a European model of regional integration, the ten-member

² IP/09/834 27th May 2009 (accessed at www.ec.europa.eu/external_relations/asean/index_en.htm).

³ This is certainly the experience of this author in numerous two-track dialogue meetings throughout Asia and in his appreciation of the political objectives behind the significant financial support provided to European Studies centres in Asian universities.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) would appear to be a priority niche.

The European Commission's approach to ASEAN is expressed in its Communication of July 2003, "A New Partnership with Southeast Asia". First amongst the six priorities elaborated in the communication is:

"Supporting regional stability and the fight against terrorism... The European Union can contribute through using ASEAN and ASEM as frameworks for conducting policy dialogues, and through **providing its expertise in regional integration**". ([31], p. 1, my emphasis)

This approach has a larger ambit than Southeast Asia to encompass all of Asia. The European Commission's "Strategy Document on Regional Programming for Asia 2007–2013" issued in May 2007 lists once again as its first priority the support for regional integration ([33], p. 2). Behind these declarations can be discerned an appreciation of a new international order involving strengthened regional entities as burgeoning structuring elements in international relations [55]. In this regard the relations between the European Union and ASEAN are perceived as having a unique importance [4, Chia & Tan 1998, Dosch 2001, 59]. First of all the agreement between the then EEC and ASEAN, dating from 1973, was the first inter-regional agreement signed between the precursor to the EU and another regional entity. Writing some 17 years afterwards, Manfred Mols [68] could describe these relations as a "success story", while some 35 years later it has been argued that the "ASEAN-EU relationship is widely considered the model of interregional relations" ([42], p. 32).⁴ Seen from Southeast Asia the recognition of ASEAN as a serious international player, provided by another regional entity, the European Union, serves a legitimizing function for the Southeast Asian actors (politicians, public servants, civil society groups) who have invested a deal of political capital in strengthening the organization.

Asymmetries in the EU-ASEAN Relationship⁵

ASEAN has been described by one Singaporean policy advisor as a 'Neighbourhood Watch Group' [57] that is one devoted to informal solidarity, without formal commitments, and based on the inviolable principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of its members. It's lack of formal membership rules – at least till the adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2008 – has led some realist scholars to describe it as a 'regional delusion' [53] more concerned with process rather than results [54]. An in-depth discussion of the Association is well beyond the scope of this article⁶ particularly as ASEAN needs to be examined within the context of

⁴ However, in counterpoint, a salutary reminder of the relative unimportance of ASEAN to the EU can be found in Christopher Hill & Karen Smith's collection of key documents in European foreign policy: out of the 211 documents collated, two only concern ASEAN with another two devoted to Burma/Myanmar ([46], pp. 435-439).

⁵ The most complete overviews of EU-ASEAN relations are provided by [81], who particularly emphasises the economic factors, and Yeo (2007; [104]) who highlights the political aspects.

⁶ But see [1, 9, 40, 50, 69, 70 and 75].

integration in a contested Asian region [11, 17, 21]. To state the obvious, the two regional entities have very different institutional contours, membership norms and ideological underpinnings. In particular the historical path dependency of ASEAN [56] is of a very different nature than that of Europe [10, 45, 85, 99]). For example, the overriding concern of political leaderships in Southeast Asia with maintaining national sovereignties must be understood in reference to the colonial experience of all of the members of ASEAN, with the exception of Thailand, and their relatively short period of existence as independent nation-states following decolonisation. While historically there has been rivalry and tensions between Southeast Asian polities, there has been no historical experience that approximates the types of total war that Europe experienced over a number of centuries. Thus, seen from a neo-functional perspective, the kinds of compromises required to promote regional peace and stability that are acceptable to political leaderships in ASEAN are of a different order than in Europe. Membership in ASEAN is perceived by political elites as a useful complement to nation-building and regime consolidation. Above all membership is seen as enhancing individual national sovereignties, not weakening them. Yet, as it will be demonstrated, it is diverging views of national sovereignty that are a stumbling block in developing interregional relations between the EU and ASEAN.

As in Europe, the development of Southeast Asian regional integration is both a response to challenges in the international environment and a related factor, the role of a hegemonic power, in this case the United States [55]. In Europe US Administrations from the Marshall Plan onwards have sought to encourage, or at least, to acquiesce in continued European integration. In Southeast Asia, on the other hand, the United States has sought to function in a bilateral manner preferring to deal with weaker partners in an ad hoc bilateral way [43]. While the US may pay lip service to the importance of ASEAN as a regional body, US practice tends to downplay its role, as demonstrated in its generally low level representation at ASEAN summits. Moreover, in negotiating trade agreements the US has done so bilaterally with individual members and the one regional integration project for which the United States has provided some lukewarm support, namely APEC, is trans-Pacific involving North and South America, Australasia as well as Northeast Asia. This body, ostensibly concerned with economic co-operation, allows little room for ASEAN to act as a separate entity, a situation accentuated by the relative economic unimportance of the individual ASEAN countries compared to the heavyweight economies of Northeast Asia. Finally, to further its overriding security concerns the US functions bilaterally with individual ASEAN member states.

EU-ASEAN Relations: The Political Dimension

In dealing with the countries of ASEAN, the European Union has had to deal with an ambiguous colonial heritage. With the exception of Siam (Thailand) all of the countries of Southeast Asia were colonized and in all cases by Europeans. For Europeans, familiarity with their former colonial territories has been undoubtedly an advantage in fostering economic and political contacts today. The cases of British investment in Malaysia or that of French companies in Vietnam could be cited in this

regard. Nevertheless, the impact of these “privileged relations” in a globalized world can very easily be exaggerated. On the one hand, European investors are merely competitors in a global market very often finding themselves in third place after those from Japan and the United States, as evidenced say in the place of European automotive multinationals in the Southeast Asian market. On the other hand, the number of European countries with an historic experience in Southeast Asia is quite small: one fifth of the present 27 members, and still only one third of the previous pre-enlargement 15 EU, are concerned. Moreover, given Southeast Asian sensitivities concerning these past accusations of neo-colonialism arise periodically in EU-ASEAN negotiations.⁷

Another element in the EU-ASEAN relationship is the Cold War context. With Communist insurgencies within their borders and Communist victories in Indochina more than a distinct possibility, the founding of ASEAN in 1967 was designed to create a bulwark against communism in Southeast Asia. As well it was meant as a confidence building initiative amongst the first five members, all of whom had territorial claims on the others. Yet for ASEAN to function, it required legitimacy and encouragement, not only from the ultimate guarantor of security in the region, namely the United States, but also from other external actors. With the end of the war in Vietnam and later Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, on the borders of an ASEAN member, the need for recognition from the European community became greater. Meetings between European and ASEAN foreign ministers began in 1978 and two years later a cooperation agreement between the EEC and ASEAN was signed. The 1980s were to be a critical period in ASEAN’s development for its members, up until the peace agreement of 1990, were able to coalesce around a common enemy, namely Vietnam. European support in defending ASEAN’s position, particularly in the United Nations, provided a useful fillip to the Association. However with the end of the Cold War in Southeast Asia, and the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia, ASEAN’s need for external approbation diminished. Concomitantly, European concern with insecurity in the region as a distant threat to a peaceful world order declined. Without a shared adversary causes of friction in the EU-ASEAN relationship came to the surface.

A major cause of tension in EU-ASEAN relations - until the referendum in 1999 on independence - was the 1975 Indonesian annexation of East Timor, a territory then considered in international law as a Portuguese colony. Indonesia’s brutal occupation of the territory was constantly being brought to the fore in the European media. Moreover the existence of an exiled Timorese community in Portugal that conducted a very effective campaign of communication over the years meant East Timor was never forgotten. Their efforts combined with that of a number of European advocacy NGOs, was relayed in the Brussels community, particularly in the European Parliament. Moreover, in multilateral forums the Portuguese were also able to rely on cultural and linguistic links with a major emerging power, Brazil, to amplify opposition to the Indonesian occupation.

⁷ For example a former Malaysain trade minister accused European environmental NGOs of transforming the paternalistic philosophy of the “white man’s burden” into that of the “green man’s burden” in advocating restrictions on imports of bio-fuels produced from palm oil [60].

After East Timorese independence in 1999 in violent circumstances, the Portuguese both made the greatest European contribution to the United Nations peacekeeping force sent to the island under the auspices of the UN, and continue to provide the bulk of European aid and assistance to this struggling new nation. Moreover, Portuguese lobbying has made sure that EU development assistance to East Timor is the highest per capita in Asia. Leaving aside the normative questions of the justice of the European approach, the East Timorese issue demonstrates the capacity of one member state, namely Portugal, to have European Union policy towards not only a major Asian partner, namely Indonesia, but also ASEAN as a whole, to some extent subordinated to the resolution of a question over which it had an overriding interest. The East Timorese case also confirms the potential pre-eminent role that the former colonial power can have in Europe in making sure particular attention is given to its former territories. Successive French government's have successfully been able to leverage a special bilateral relationship to ensure that Vietnam remains, not only the largest Asian net recipient of French bilateral development assistance, but also the recipient of the largest amongst of multilateral EU aid in Southeast Asia [102]. However, counter examples are provided by successive Dutch and Spanish governments who have either not sought, or have been unsuccessful, in ensuring that Indonesia and the Philippines, respectively receive favoured attention.⁸

In the absence of either the expression of a strong interest, nor resistance amongst other EU members, the political leadership of one member country, Portugal, was able to impose a strong diplomatic position. In the European Council of Ministers it would seem the vast majority of members had neither stakes in - nor even an interest in - East Timor, allowing an agenda-setting role to Portugal. This is the contrary, say, to the case of relations with China, where competing, ardently-defended, positions of national interest lead no member state being able to impose its agenda and, thus, to the adoption of minimalist consensus positions.

If we enlarge our perspective to include the role of non-state actors within the European Union, then EU policy over East Timor is explicable. As mentioned, amongst these non-state actors the media and NGOs associated with the Catholic Church are of utmost importance. The scenes of the Dili Massacre of November 1991, in which around 250 pro-independence demonstrators were killed by the Indonesian Armed Forces, had a profound impact on European public opinion. The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 to the archbishop of Timor, Carlos Félipo Belo, and the overseas representative (and present president of East Timor), José Ramos-Horta, kept the East Timorese situation on the European political agenda. In the European Parliament, where Horta was received, East Timor, like Burma, was a *cause célèbre*, involving touchstones on questions of the defence of human rights. The Parliament awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in 1999 to the independence leader of East Timor, Xamana Gusamao. In short, what we find evidence of is the kind of three -level games alluded to later in this article.

⁸ Spanish external relations priorities in the EU institutions are much more directed towards favouring Latin America.

The tsunami of 26th December 2004 that ravaged the coast of Aceh provided an occasion for the EU to provide substantial amounts of emergency aid. More importantly, after the tsunami, the peace agreement brokered under the guidance of a former Finnish president, Martti Ahtisaari, between the Acehnese separatist movement, GAM, and the Indonesian government also allowed a strong European input [67]. EU observers were amongst the 219 sent to monitor the successful disarming of the separatists and the withdrawal of Indonesian troops from this province in the north of Sumatra. The EU continues to have a presence monitoring the decentralized political recovery of the province.

Despite the progress in democratisation that occurred in Indonesia under presidents B.J. Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Sukarnoputri and, what is considered as the stable leadership of the present president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (elected first in October 2004 and re-elected in July 2009), neither political nor economic relations between the EU and Indonesia have developed profoundly since the fall of Suharto. For example, there has been no visit by a major European leader to what is the world's largest Muslim country, one that could now claim to be the world's third largest democratic nation. European companies have remained relatively reticent to invest in Indonesia in part because of continuing social instability, continuing corruption and the lack of a legal framework and judicial system conducive to protecting their interests. European disinterest can be explained by three factors. First of all there is no political leadership in any member country that gives a particular priority to the Indonesian situation. On the contrary to Vietnam (and Cambodia) where a former European colonial power, namely France, can successfully lobby for, say, higher levels of development assistance by building an intra-European coalition with former Communist countries of Eastern Europe, this has not been the case for the Dutch in relationship to Indonesia. Moreover unlike in the East Timorese case, as well as in the case of Burma/Myanmar, there are no influential advocacy groups in European civil society to maintain Indonesia as a priority area for European intervention. In this regard there is no equivalent of say the 300,000 Viet Khieu in France, as well as tens of thousands in eastern Germany and the Czech republic, to constitute a diasporic lobby for the "homeland". In other words, the kind of three level bargaining entities and processes that give impulsion to EU actorness, are either weak, or non-existent, concerning Indonesia. This is not the case in relation to the Burmese situation.

European policy towards Burma is discussed in detail by Renaud Egreteau elsewhere in this special issue. Suffice it here to indicate that disagreements over a political transition in Burma/Myanmar remain a key stumbling block in political relations between the EU and ASEAN and the human rights issues there and the problem of political transition are perpetual issues in the various dialogues with ASEAN countries [77]. The explanation can be found at the three-level game metaphor further elaborated below. Generally speaking, at the domestic level within individual EU members the Burmese situation - symbolized by the continued imprisonment of the leader of the democratic movement, Aung San Suu Kyi - remains the most high profile and emotionally charged issue - pertaining to Southeast Asia. It also is an issue which enjoys a pan-European consensus. For example, the European Parliament in 1990 made Aung San Suu Kyi its third recipient of the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of

Thought. An alliance between elements of the Burmese diaspora and local well-organized advocacy groups in the United Kingdom and in some Scandinavian countries contributes to maintaining Burma as a subject of continued media interest. Once again this situation contrasts with that pertaining to Vietnam. While a number of associations amongst the much larger Vietnamese diaspora in Europe, and in particular in France, are strongly anti-communist and critical of the Vietnamese regime, above all on questions of religious freedom, they do not militate for the isolation of the Vietnamese government. On the contrary, they tend to lobby for continued European economic assistance and engagement and are themselves actors in the economic development of the country.

The benefits for European political leaders in maintaining a strong moral stance on Burma far outweigh any economic costs: European economic stakes in Burma are minimal, of no comparison with those in China, for example. At the intra-European level obtaining a consensus position on sanctions requires little compromise and virtually no political costs. An interesting comparison can, once again, be made here with the case of Vietnam, where French governments have been able to impose a posture of “constructive engagement” on human rights issues in relation to another authoritarian, if less oppressive, regime ([102]: 182). In the Burmese case another former colonial power, Britain, on the contrary has been at the forefront of the continued ostracism of the Burmese junta. Of course, to be balanced another major difference in the two cases is that pertaining to the two regimes. At least since *doi moi* the Vietnamese communist leadership has sought international engagement (e.g. membership of the WTO) while the Burmese military junta apparently seeks isolation. It could be argued that, by furthering isolation, European policy towards Burma is going in the direction that the regime wishes and helping it to maintain its control!

EU-ASEAN Relations: The Economic Dimension

For the European Union as a whole and for the 27 member countries individually, the economic dimension of relations with Southeast Asia overshadows the political dimension, even if it is the latter that is given the greatest visibility in the media. For example, the consensual ASEAN-EU [8] report jointly compiled by eminent persons from both Europe and Southeast Asia, has as its central focus the promotion of economic prosperity. In 2003 at the time of the publication of the European Commission’s Communication, “A New Partnership with South-East Asia” ASEAN was the EU’s third largest trading partner and the EU was ASEAN’s third largest trading partner. In 2006 the European Union exported €48.2 billion of merchandise to the ASEAN countries as a whole, while importing €78.2 billion of merchandise from them. The result was a €29.8 billion trade deficit in that year. In percentage terms, in 2006 the ten ASEAN member countries together accounted for 5.79% of EU 25 merchandise imports and 4.15% of exports from the EU. Trade in services was worth €13.5 billion of imports and €14.7 billion of exports for the EU 25, resulting in a €1.2 billion surplus, and thus was more favourable to the EU. By way of comparison, the EU-25 exported €63.4 billion of merchandise to China and

imported €191.8 billion resulting in a monumental €128.4 billion trade deficit. As for Japan, the figures for the same year are €44.7 billion of exports from the EU 25 and €76.5 billion of Japanese imports, resulting in a similar merchandise trade deficit as with ASEAN, namely €31.8 billion.⁹

However the general macroeconomic picture with the ten ASEAN members collated together hides the significant disparities in the level of trade with individual ASEAN members. As to be expected, trade with the wealthier ASEAN members is considerably greater than with the poorest. In 2006 the level of merchandise trade with the city-state of Singapore - €19.5 billion of EU25 exports and €19.4 of imports – was considerably higher than with the largest ASEAN country, Indonesia, for whom the figures were €5 billion and €15.2 billion respectively. In other words, Singapore alone absorbed 40% of EU exports and provided a quarter of ASEAN imports into the EU. Among the middle-income ASEAN countries, levels of EU trade were commensurate with their level of GDP per capita: in Malaysia the EU-25 exported €10.3 billion of merchandise and imported €17.3 billion, while in Thailand the figures were lower, with €7.2 billion of exports and €14.2 billion of imports. Leaving aside the particular case of Burma/Myanmar which is subject to EU trade sanctions, in Cambodia, another of the poorest countries of ASEAN, the EU 25 exported a mere €100 million of merchandise and imported €700 million of goods and services.¹⁰

In 2006, among the now 27 members of the European Union, Germany with 29% of the total (i.e. €14.5 billion) was by far the largest exporter, with exports double that of its closest competitor, France, responsible for 14% of the total (€6.8 billion). The British level of exports was almost equivalent to that of France (€6.5 billion or 13%). On the other side of the trade balance sheet, the Netherlands (€16.2 billion or 20%) was the largest importer of ASEAN goods followed by both the United Kingdom (€15.3 billion) and Germany (€14.8 billion) each at the 19% level. EU 27 trade with ASEAN is dominated by manufactured goods which, in 2006, accounted for about 85% of both imports and exports. Machinery and vehicles alone made up about half of EU trade with ASEAN that year.

Turning to Foreign Direct Investment, however, the EU's importance to ASEAN as a whole is much greater. In the decade from 1995 to 2004, Europe contributed over a third of accumulated FDI in Southeast Asia compared to 18% from the United States and 13.6% from Japan ([49]: 57). In the period since then, while there has been a decline - with the European Union contributing 25.5% of FDI in 2006 compared to 7.4% from the United States and 20.6% from Japan¹¹ - nevertheless, the EU still is the largest provider of FDI to the Southeast Asian countries. However, when one looks behind the macroeconomic figures for Southeast Asia as a whole there are enormous disparities in the places of investment. By 2004 Singapore alone had received almost two thirds (63.3%) of European FDI, followed by Malaysia (10.3%), Thailand (10.2%), Indonesia (8.6%) and the Philippines (5.9%) with the poorest new member countries receiving a mere 1.8% of European FDI ([49], p. 56). More recently, European FDI has become significant in the massive total expansion

⁹ Eurostats statistics: STAT/07/158 dated 15th November 2007.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Statistics of the ASEAN Secretariat downloaded from www.asean.org

of FDI into Vietnam which tripled from US\$2 billion in 2005 to US\$6 billion in 2007 (*The Economist* 25/4/08). In Vietnam at the end of 2006 the EU, with 15% of total FDI, was the second largest investor after Japan (17%) and ahead of the US (13%).¹² As with Japan, this movement to Vietnam can be considered as expressing the willingness of European companies not to put “all their eggs in the Chinese basket” and to take advantage of low labour costs and a skilled workforce.

The preceding elaboration of these statistics on trade and investment provides the background for the negotiations to establish an EU-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement. With the potential failure of the Doha Round in bringing about further trade liberalisation, the then European Union Trade Commissioner, Peter Mandelson, announced in October 2006 that the European Union would end its moratorium on negotiating preferential trade agreements and seek such individual agreements with China, Japan and all of ASEAN [32]. This change is just one further step in a 20 year process that has seen the EU adopt a ‘deep’ trade agenda by seeking to influence the making of domestic rules in its trading partners. The changing agenda is itself the result of having to cope with new actors domestically (parliaments, NGOs, non-trade agencies) and internationally, particularly influential developing countries [106].

The choice of negotiating an inter-regional agreement in the case of ASEAN is significant. While negotiations with Mercosur have been going on for almost a decade these have not produced tangible results. However Chinese – and to some extent Japanese – success in negotiating with all of ASEAN would seem to have provided a stimulus for the European Commission to embark on a similar strategy, if only to better cope with US and Chinese competition.¹³ As Peter Mandelson admitted, “our major competitors are picking off individual countries in the region one by one. Japan, Australia and the US are all active” [63]. For the European Union the purpose of such an agreement would be to increase trade and to reduce or eliminate the trade deficit with the ASEAN countries. Domestic pressures within the European Union are pushing towards a more aggressive trade policy in order to address the burgeoning trade deficits with China in particular and the rest of Asia in general. The imposition of quotas on Chinese (and other Asian) textile and footwear imports in order to protect European manufacturers in 2005 and 2006 was a harbinger of the more protectionist mood pervading the European polity.

A quantitative report commissioned by the European Commission in 2006 argued that an ASEAN-EU FTA would boost EU exports to ASEAN by 24.2%, while the latter would benefit from an increase of 18.5% of its exports to the European Union. It went on to conclude that an EU-ASEAN FTA would contribute to more than a 2% gain in the ASEAN GDP, although the increase for the four least developed ASEAN countries would be more modest. In addressing four possible scenarios involving varying degrees of liberalization, the study concluded that the bulk of gains for ASEAN would lie in the liberalization of services [12]. The second, this time qualitative study, based partly on a survey of European business people, concluded that there was “a compelling case for going ahead with an EU-ASEAN FTA” ([7]: 189). However, when one examines the

¹² Statistics of the Delegation of the European Commission to Vietnam.

¹³ This feeling was apparent in the survey of EU business people conducted as part of the study of a potential EU-ASEAN FTA ([7], pp. xi., 169).

number of qualifications on implementing such an agreement and the limitations on its effectiveness provided by these authors - arguments which they have expressed more openly in a recent academic article – it is not at all clear why the negotiating of such an agreement should be a priority for the European Union. Indeed as they have argued “in order to be beneficial, the EU-ASEAN FTA will also need to be quite broad and to encompass trade-related issues such as competition policy or Intellectual Property Rights protection” ([6]: 126)¹⁴. Despite declarations from various intra-European business groups [15], other studies also suggest that the European business community needs to be convinced of the usefulness of such an FTA [87].

Unlike negotiations for an EU-Korea FTA, which at the time of writing had led to a signed agreement after eight rounds of serious discussions, the Commission admitted that only the third meeting of the Joint Committee for the EU-ASEAN FTA held in Brussels on 1st February 2008, was the first to see a “first open, frank and constructive exchange of views of the various parties on the various issues that the EU would like to see covered under the final agreement.”¹⁵ The fourth meeting held in Bangkok in April 2008 coincided with the tabling and adoption of a report in the European Parliament [34], one which while supportive of the FTA, firstly emphasised that it was a second best option compared to the successful conclusion of the Doha Round. Secondly the report adopted unanimously in the Committee on International Trade suggested a series of conditionalities from encouraging sustainable development, transparency in the banking sector in Singapore, through to the promotion of human rights generally and regime change in Burma. In response to the report, Peter Mandelson seemed to acknowledge the problems in negotiating an agreement with such a heterogeneous entity as ASEAN, declaring in Brussels on 7th May 2008:

“... Every time an ASEAN member country cannot deliver on a specific issue we are faced with the lowest common denominator problem. We are also faced with problems of resources because the capabilities of the ASEAN states are stretched by the wide number of FTAs they are currently negotiating. As a result it is hard to see the timeframe for a full region-to-region agreement as less than three to four years, and it is difficult to see us achieving a consistent high level of ambition.” [63].¹⁶

Following this declaration, and under Mandelson’s successor, Catherine Ashton, in the latter part of 2008 and early 2009 European negotiators placed discussions on an EU-ASEAN FTA on hold and began a series of bilateral negotiations with individual ASEAN members including the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. It was also explicitly stated that any putative EU-ASEAN agreement would certainly not include Burma and that Cambodia and Laos would only be a party

¹⁴ The question of State capacities is the much-neglected Achilles heel in regional integration efforts in Asia generally (cf [41]).

¹⁵ Minutes of the meeting on the Commission website, www.europea.eu.

¹⁶ These reservations were held in a number of European countries. For example the Belgian Foreign Minister, Karel De Gucht, told the Thai business community in Bangkok that these discrepancies, coupled with the Burmese question, were obstacles to an FTA (*The Nation*, 13/6/2008), while the British Minister for Trade and Investment, Gareth Thomas, told a Singapore audience that there was the need for a fast track process with individual ASEAN countries (*Agence France Presse* 14/1/2009).

somewhat later (*Bangkok Post* 15/9/08). After a sixth round of negotiations in October 2008, in early May 2009 at the EU-ASEAN Finance Ministers meeting in Hanoi it was discreetly decided to freeze negotiations in order to give time to “pause and reflect” (*Jakarta Post* 7/5/09). Although the term “suspension” was avoided, European negotiators clearly placed blame for the failure on the side of ASEAN (*Business Mirror* 17/5/09).

Certainly on the ASEAN side there would seem to be a reluctance to negotiate and to implement such an agreement because, unlike in the case of the China-ASEAN FTA and the Korea-ASEAN FTA, it is not ASEAN who is seeking to promote such an agreement, but rather the EU or, to be more specific, the European Commission. There is already fairly free trade of goods between the EU and ASEAN, so that it is liberalization of services that is a priority for the EU [15], however it is this area that most ASEAN countries, with the exception of Singapore, are most reluctant to make concessions [94]. It is not at all clear that Southeast Asian business groups would benefit from such an FTA, or, at least, that they need to be convinced of its potential usefulness [5]. Furthermore, within the ASEAN countries a number of civil society groups have already begun a campaign of opposition to the proposed FTA criticizing it both for the method of implementation and for its substance. On the one hand that there has been no public consultation and, on the other, they argue that it would be detrimental both to urban workers and to farmers [95].

An initial Indonesian study [51], and a more substantive report published in April 2009 by a Manila-based advocacy group were at best lukewarm, and at worst, hostile to the free trade agreement [27]. A number of local consumer groups also joined in this criticism arguing, for example, in Thailand that the IPR measures in the agreement would increase the cost of essential medicines in the treatment of HIV-Aids [61]. As could be expected other potential losers in an FTA, for example Filipino fishermen, also expressed their hostility. Indeed, one of the ironies of the debate on the FTA is that the European Union, which has consistently supported the strengthening of civil society in ASEAN, as indeed in Mercosur [39], as part of its twin objectives of democratization [107] and intra-regional consolidation, now finds that groups in the various civil societies have become more critical of European intentions and European action.

Beyond these questions of political willingness on the ASEAN side there are four serious structural and systemic issues that mean that the creation of an EU-ASEAN FTA is problematical. Firstly, the level of intra-ASEAN trade (25.1%) is very low compared to the two-thirds that constitute intra-European trade. In other words ASEAN, unlike the EU, is not, or at least not yet, a common market [92; 105]. Secondly, while the European Commission is mandated to negotiate for all of the 27 EU members, the ASEAN secretariat and the representatives of the rotating presidency do not possess such a mandate for the ten ASEAN members. Thirdly, the significant disparities between the ten members of ASEAN lead to very different priorities on trade, investment and development. Between Singapore with a GDP per capita of €23,830 and Burma/Myanmar with a GDP per capita of €183 the interest in, and gains from, an FTA are very different. Related to these disparities of income is a fourth serious difficulty previously alluded to namely that “capacity-building measures are necessary in the case of some countries for the FTA negotiation process

and also in order to allow them to implement successfully the results of the negotiations” ([6], p. 126).

Given these multiple caveats it is worth asking why the European Commission continues to pursue the negotiations for an EU-ASEAN FTA. Part of the answer lies in the place of FTAs, or preferential trade agreements (PTAs), to be more etymologically exact, as an expression of European soft power and the propagation of norms. Indeed the importance of the EU-ASEAN is largely symbolic at most “a stepping-stone for future negotiations on contentious issues” ([94], p. 2), despite some hype on its potential benefits [96]. A recent comparative study of existing European and US PTAs by a Brussels-based economic think tank concludes that the EU “seems to be using trade agreements to promote its views on how countries of the world should be run... Trade policy therefore provides a vehicle for declaratory diplomacy” ([48], p. vi).¹⁷

A complicating element in the economic area of EU-ASEAN relations is that the ASEAN countries are, not only trading and investment partners, some are also aid recipients. Relations of donor-recipient are of a different order than that between trading partners and the investment strategies of European multinational corporations in Southeast Asia have a different logic than that of development, let alone humanitarian aid. An EU that prides itself on being the world’s largest provider of ODA seeks through the kinds of conditionalities attached to its aid to bring about reforms of the state, laws and institutions, to change socio-economic power structures and, importantly, to develop regional integration [47]. These are milieu and normative goals.

Thus, given the weakness of interregionalism as a *modus operandi* in the economic area, the EU has been left with finding symbolic political means to give substance to this normative milieu goal. Thus it was decided in 2004 that the expansion of ASEM would include a representation of the ASEAN Secretariat and that the EU would accredit ambassadors to the Association. In practice this has meant giving an extra portfolio to the Head of the EU Delegation and the member state ambassadors based in Jakarta. At the 17th ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting, held in Phnom Penh on 27 and 28 May 2009, the Czech Foreign Minister (representing the rotating presidency of the EU) alongside the Deputy Director General of DG Relex in the European Commission signed a declaration of accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia.¹⁸ Yet in this meeting, as in others, if the photo opportunity as political message is more important than the declarations (that have already been finalized previously by senior officials), then the EU does not live up to its rhetoric on the pre-eminence of the EU-ASEAN partnership. While the ten ASEAN foreign ministers and the foreign ministers of China, Japan and South Korea were present, their counterparts from Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Spain were absent. Two thirds of EU countries sent junior officials [13].

At one level the limited results of interregionalism is explicable and revolves around fundamentally different conceptions and praxis concerning the defence of national sovereignties previously alluded to. Institutions count and, as enunciated at the outset, ASEAN and the EU are different kinds of institutional arrangements with

¹⁷ A similar assessment on the shallowness of European FTAs has been made by [66].

¹⁸ Council of the European Union 10520/09 (Presse 162).

different forms of actorness. However, to fully understand the paucity of results of interregionalism as a *modus operandi* requires looking at both domestic factors in member countries and the processes of intra-European bargaining.

Towards Explanation: From Three-Level to Four-Level Games

In their studies of, respectively, agricultural policy and intra-European trade Lee Ann Patterson [76] and [22] build on Robert Putnam's [78] seminal work on two-level games (i.e. the domestic and international) to propose the existence of a further sphere, namely the intra-regional, as a third level game.¹⁹ In his study of trade liberalisation in Europe, in particular in relation to the Common Agricultural Policy, Deutsch, like Patterson before him, points that the governments of the member state are negotiating not only at two tables but also at a third table at the same time, namely within the Council of the European Union and in interactions with the European Commission. Given the increasing importance of the European Parliament and the ensuing increased complexity in the functioning of the European Union, this third table may even be conceived of as having three sub-tables: that of the Council of the European Union, the Commission and the European Parliament.

Putnam and his followers pointed to the importance of the statesman or head of government within the context of the two level game. Indeed there is nothing controversial in the assertion that national leaders are addressing, and negotiating with, two audiences or constituencies, one national the other international. The first may be made up of by voters, constituencies, pressure groups, lobbies, etc., while the latter audience is traditionally conceived of as the homologues of national leaders in bilateral contexts. However multilateral forms of governance complicate the situation somewhat for, from a systemic perspective, the audience on the international scene may be actors in transnational organisations (the WTO, United Nations, transnational corporations, international NGOs such as Greenpeace, Oxfam or Amnesty International, etc.). Furthermore if we begin to factor in considerations, such as the existence of a transnational civil society, then the situation becomes increasingly complex. Take, for example, action over humanitarian intervention in Burma/Myanmar. Given that the NGOs most directly concerned with these questions are transnational, a national leader may at the same time be talking to a national audience (a local branch of Doctors without Borders, for example), but also the overseas membership of the same organisation. The existence of this "third meso table" can be interpreted in other terms, from the national up, as a further site in which national preferences are both advanced and modified. Thus, certain so-called intra-regional choices are no longer made after a laborious compromise between domestic and global factors. Rather, for individual members of the EU they constitute an elaboration at the national level of a regional expression of a global strategy. Such an elaboration involves functioning at the three levels described above [18]. Where, therefore, do inter-regional relations impact on, and add to these existing levels?

¹⁹ A further suggestion for the necessity for this three level analysis is by the authors of a study on the European Union which places a particular focus on the role of actors. Telo 2007.

Extrapolating from this study of EU-ASEAN relations this article posits the existence of yet another level, the fourth, namely the interregional. In figurative terms it can be conceptualized as a fourth table that has been brought into the negotiation room, one that sees, for example, representatives of the European Commission in consultation with members of the ASEAN secretariat or the rotating ASEAN presidency. Yet this fourth level of international relations behaviour does not function in isolation from the others. On the contrary, it is dependent on, and contiguous with, the functioning of the other three. As the specific example of EU-ASEAN FTA negotiations tangibly illustrates the actors involved range from domestic manufacturers, national political leaders, pan-European civil society bodies such as the European Confederation of Trade Unions, European Commission bureaucrats and European parliamentarians, etc. Moreover multilateral negotiations, i.e. the factoring in of the international, cannot be neglected, for, ultimately the whole exercise is related to the WTO bargaining processes and any agreement will require approval and acceptance multilaterally. Moreover in an EU-ASEAN two track diplomacy context, it is the non-official, non-governmental interactions between Europeans and Southeast Asians that, so far, would appear to have the greatest degree of resilience [104]. This is primarily because those Southeast Asian civil society actors enjoy in the process a degree of empowerment often absent in their home countries by being able to bask in an aura of legitimacy by dint of the approval of their interregional counterparts.²⁰

Conclusions

What then is the place for interregionalism? As has been suggested, evidence drawn from other cases of inter-regional cooperation would be required before it would be reasonable to claim that interregionalism is a new form of international relations behaviour. So far, analyses of the only other inter-regional relationship that has generated any degree of study – namely that between the EU and Mercosur - does not provide such evidence [25, 39]. Interregionalism, as has been suggested, can better be conceptualized, not as new form of international relations behaviour as is sometimes suggested [38, 42, 82, 84, 91] but, rather, as a normative goal or process to be promoted in the case of the European Union, and linked to its self projection in a global context [44]. Interregionalism is not so much a means employed by the EU as a global actor but, rather, an end in itself, or to use the classic distinction of Arnold Wolfer's [101] previously alluded to, a milieu goal that is one designed to shape conditions of functioning beyond national boundaries. To use a quaint contemporary American colloquialism, the EU may “talk” interregionalism but it essentially “walks” bilateralism and multilateralism. Indeed many so called interregional relations can be better conceived of as forms of asymmetrical bilateralism [16, 23] in which one of the parties, the EU, is a regional entity, albeit a multidimensional one, and the others are individual national actors.

²⁰ Some of the NGOs involved in these discussions, particularly those from countries with more authoritarian regimes may best be described as GONGOs, i.e. government organized non-governmental organizations.

In seeking solutions to the global financial crisis that began in September 2008 political actors have relied essentially on domestic and multilateral mechanisms, with the notable exception of the EU which has been engaged in trying to develop intra-regional approaches particularly amongst Eurozone members. Moreover European leaders have promoted the G20 as a new institution of global governance, one that can be seen as promoting the EU's normative power [79]. While The EU has acquiesced in the entry of the largest ASEAN member state, Indonesia, into this group it has not sought to pursue an interregional approach with ASEAN. Given the lack of intra-ASEAN coordination itself in dealing with the crisis this is understandable. With little political space between the Charybdis of domestic politics and the Scylla of multilateralism, indications to date are that interregionalism as a form of international relations behaviour is becoming even less salient than has been suggested in the pre-crisis evidence presented above.

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