The EU and ASEAN – prospects for future cooperation

European External Action Service Chief Operating Officer

David O'Sullivan

"I am delighted to be here and want to thank Minister Reynders and the Belgian MFA as well as Fraser Cameron and the EU-ASIA Centre for organising this important event.

The number of conferences and debates on EU-ASEAN relations is rising markedly. I know this is the third trip of the Secretary General to Brussels in less than one year. On our side we have had both President Van Rompuy and Barroso visiting several ASEAN countries last November, while the HR/VP has already been twice to the ASEAN region and will next month visit Jakarta, including the ASEAN Secretariat, plus Thailand and Myanmar, making it her third trip to the region in less than 12 months.

There is also a growing number of visits by EU Commissioners and Member States' Foreign Ministers to the region – and vice versa. This is immensely welcome and proof of the growing importance we all attach to the EU-ASEAN 'Enhanced Partnership'.

I want to thank the Secretary General for sharing his assessment of ASEAN's progress on reaching its ambitious 2015 goals – and for giving us some early thinking as to what lies next. Let me complement that with a few remarks on EU-ASEAN cooperation; on where we came from and where we are headed.
We are ASEAN’s first ever Dialogue Partner. And we have long had strong trade and investment links plus a very significant record of development cooperation. On top of that, we have, in the past few years, been working hard to transform the relationship in a political sense.

In Brunei in 2012, at the EU-ASEAN Ministerial we agreed to bring the partnership to a higher level. We adopted the Plan of Action with more than 90 agreed actions in three areas: political and security; trade and economic; and socio-cultural, thus matching ASEAN’s three pillars or Communities.

The informal motto of that Brunei meeting was: ‘let us build a more ambitious, more political partnership’. Both sides decided it was time to scale up and re-direct, developing a more politically rounded relationship. With joint work on Connectivity, non-traditional security and human rights identified as the most promising areas. And with Ministers urging us to realise the full potential – and yes the strategic significance – of this relationship.

And so we have. Today, there is positive momentum; with plenty of practical work taking place and with more in the pipeline; with mutual trust growing and a good alignment of what this relationship is about and how it should develop into the future.

Going forward we must keep this momentum and ensure we capitalise on the deeper, ‘special quality’ of two regional integration projects working together. Different in our respective origins and evolution but like-minded ‘partners in integration’.

We both know the imperative and the rewards of regional integration. But equally we both know how hard it is in practice to build consensus, to reach ambitious goals, to implement what has been agreed and to sustain public support along the way.

The Secretary General has spoken about ASEAN’s progress towards its 2015 integration goals and what lies next.

I want to be very clear and explicit. This is YOUR integration process. You will find your own path – as indeed you have done. But we can perhaps offer some suggestions, or lessons we have learned along the way, including the hard way. When things didn’t quite work as well as we thought they might at the outset...

We want you to succeed – and are convinced you will. Perhaps more than any other partner of ASEAN, our interests, values and assets all point in the same direction: we want a strong, united, self-confident ASEAN proceeding with its integration.

As many analysts have suggested these days, the wider Asian region seems increasingly marked by great power rivalry; with many countries hedging their bets. There is a contrast between ‘economic Asia’ (optimistic and integrating) and ‘security Asia’ (pessimistic and fragmenting). And all this without an over-arching framework of institutions and rules to manage these tensions. One thing is clear though. In the midst of that you – and we – want a strong ASEAN.
ASEAN can rightly claim to have made a major contribution to regional peace and stability. First, by promoting security and prosperity among ASEAN members. But second, also by engaging Partners in all sorts of ASEAN-centred and ASEAN-driven structures and partnerships: the ASEAN plus processes, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Treaty on Amity and Cooperation, the East Asia Summit etc. ASEAN is constantly working on integrating the wider region and spreading the practice of peace and stability through “confidence building and preventive diplomacy” to use the words of the ARF.

There is no doubt that ASEAN has Dialogue Partners that are closer – in geographic and perception terms. It is right and proper that you develop strong relations with a number of these Partners. But, if I may, only the EU can play that special role as ‘partner in integration’; as someone with whom you can share the trials and tribulations of Continent-wide integration. It is no accident that the EU has long been the biggest supporter of the ASEAN Secretariat.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

EU-ASEAN collaboration is proceeding in many areas. In fact, there is hardly any area of public policy without some degree of cooperation between us. Let me quickly highlight some of the more politically significant areas:

Connectivity: this is clearly a mobilising theme for ASEAN and it plays into core EU strengths. Practically all EU programmes support ASEAN Connectivity in its three dimensions: physical, institutional and people-to-people. The largest of them ARISE, of 15 million euros, helps ASEAN to improve customs procedures and facilitate trade.

We are keen to build on that and are looking forward to welcome the people inside ASEAN in charge of the Connectivity agenda to Brussels next February, to exchange lessons learned (on the Internal Market, Trans European Networks, Schengen etc). It should be a flagship event and give a major push to our joint work, bringing in the private sector and working up innovative financing arrangements.

In Brunei, Ministers agreed that we should step up our cooperation on non-traditional security issues. I am pleased we have launched a new project on emergency response that will support the ASEAN Centre for Humanitarian Action but also build and strengthen national crisis rooms, for instance in Myanmar, and link them to the AHA Centre (ASEAN Centre for Humanitarian Action).

We will also organise a conference on maritime cooperation next month in Jakarta bringing together both officials and experts. The aim is to exchange best practices on how to build integrated regional policies and capacities to handle different aspects, from maritime surveillance and port security, to illegal fishing and joint development of resources. We see this conference as a mapping exercise and, hopefully, the beginning of a broader work strand on maritime security.
There is also an ambition on both sides to develop collaboration on cyber issues and border management, where we should expand on our assistance project into a wider cooperation, including how to combat people trafficking and other aspects of migration policy. Also as ASEAN is taking steps to move into a direction of eventually having a single visa for non-ASEAN visitors - and thus in the direction of what we call 'Schengen' in Europe.

More broadly, we are keen to play an active role in the emerging regional security architecture, including by being an active participants in the ARF. We believe we have an important contribution to make, through our comprehensive approach to doing security (see for instance our comprehensive strategy on counter-piracy). I am pleased we are teaming up with Myanmar to be the co-chairs this year of the ARF's ISG (Inter-sessional Group) on Confidence Building Measures and Preventive Diplomacy and the related Defence Officials Dialogue. This is proof of our commitment to the ARF as well as our support for Myanmar in transition and as incoming Chair of ASEAN.

Last year we signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. We take that commitment seriously and we are open to hold a roundtable, perhaps in the context of the ARF, to discuss the enduring relevance of the TAC including the principles it contains, as the guiding document to regulate international relations in South East Asia.

Human rights has been another 'growth area'. We had a successful study trip by the ASEAN Committee for the protection of the rights of Woman and Children to Brussels this year while our EU Special Representative Lambrinidis visited Jakarta in May. We now need to work up a more developed set of ideas of how we can best proceed, also to support the ASEAN Human Rights Commission (AICHR) as it develops its role and remit and with additional resources becoming available under the READI instrument.

Let me also touch on trade and investment which is so crucial for our mutual prosperity. As everybody knows, the figures are impressive: the EU is ASEAN's 3rd largest trading partner and 1st source of FDI. Especially the investment figure is impressive, being a better indicator of the health and strategic significance of the economic relationship.

We are making good progress with our bilateral FTAs. The Singapore FTA has been concluded; Vietnam and Thailand are moving ahead, and we are hoping for renewed momentum with Malaysia after the elections. We remain fully committed to revert to the region-to-region track, as Commissioner De Gucht has underlined, as soon as we have concluded a critical mass of individual FTAs and as ASEAN has reached its 2015 goals.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There are many aspects I could mention, such as the Aviation Summit we are organising together next February; or the simple facts that 10 million people travel between our regions every year and that up to 4000 ASEAN students come to Europe on EU or Member State funded scholarships.
There is a lot of joint work going on – perhaps more than is often realised. And more is yet to come, especially on Connectivity, non-traditional security and human rights.

We will have to make the best use of the upcoming events to sustain this momentum and to ensure a successful EU-ASEAN Ministerial next year here in Brussels.

Let me end with two final thoughts:

We probably need to do a better job at public diplomacy – telling the story of what the EU and ASEAN are doing together and why. Plenty is happening but sometimes it feels the whole is less than the sums of its parts. This is a responsibility for both sides.

We have a good sense of what lies ahead, roughly between now and 2015. It will require determination and creativity to deliver it across the three Communities. But we also need to start thinking about what lies after; what kind of ambitions we have and what we mean when we talk about recognising the strategic nature of the relationship.

In short, there is much we have achieved together but even more work to be done.

Thank you very much."