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EU and ASEAN: A comparative study of regional cooperation in the 21st century

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Abstract

The paper examines a comparative study of the two regional institutions, the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The paper tries to study the historical origin of the EU and ASEAN, and the conditions that followed World War II and the Cold War, which generated the idea in the minds of then global leaders to form these institutions. Talking specifically about the EU, it came into the picture about the devastating conditions of World War II when the regional players wanted cooperation & peace and the avoidance of future war at any cost. This enables the member state to pool a part of its sovereignty to a supranational institution for the regional peace, economic integration, and political stability, which led to the emergence and evolution of the EU. In contrast, ASEAN was established during the Cold War to promote regional peace, development and cooperation through an intergovernmental model rooted in the “ASEAN Way” of consensus and non-interference. The study compares both institutions across dimensions of economic integration, political and security cooperation, sovereignty, and global influence. The EU has an effective role in the global arena through its deeper institutionalism through the single market, common currency, and unified foreign policy, while ASEAN maintains flexibility and diversity among diverse political systems. Despite having different approaches - the EU’s rule-based integration versus ASEAN’s dialogue-driven cooperation, both have a significant contribution when it comes to regional peace and prosperity. The paper concludes that the future of the EU will depend on how this institution balances deeper economic integration with national sovereignty, while ASEAN’s strength lies in transforming from a consultative to an action-oriented community. Both institution has different but complementary pathways towards regional unity and global relevance in an increasingly complex international order.

Keywords: European Union (EU), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), regional cooperation, economic integration, political stability, sovereignty, global governance

Introductions

Historical Origins and Objectives

After the devastating atmosphere in World War II, every country in Europe, no matter how big or small, wanted peace and cooperation among themselves. This led to the emergence of the idea proposed in the Schuman Plan by the then Foreign Minister of France, Robert Schuman, in 1950 led to the establishment of the foundation stone of the present-day giant supranational institution called the European Union.

It was not the first time that the world wanted to have cooperation and peace against battles. The Horrific event of World War I and the vision of the then-President of the United States of America, Woodrow Wilson, then too tried to convince the world leaders to form a global institution named the League of Nations for cooperation, whose primary focus would be on diplomacy and conflict negotiation rather than fighting wars in the battleground, but with some challenges this initiative did not succeeded much and sooner resulted into the event like World War II in 1939.

After World War II and the formation of the United Nations in 1945, the European leaders were still in fear that what happened with the League would not repeat with the United Nations, which may have led to the start of another series of battles in Europe, especially between France and Germany. So, in 1950, under the Schuman Plan, it was proposed to pool the coal and steel resources of France and Western Germany under common authority to make war between these countries materially impossible. Also, at that time, apart from avoiding future conflict, there was an urgent need for economic recovery, and for that, cooperation through liberal institutions was the best-suited option available in front of the leaders.

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They thought cooperation would not only provide a larger market, free trade and shared growth in the economy but would also provide political stability by reducing the rivalry among the nations, strengthening the democratic system of governance and building mutual trust among the nations. Apart from the domestic issues, the small European state was unable to withstand the ideological battle of the Cold War, so for Europe to maintain peace and global influence, unity among them became the need of the hour, which resulted in the foundation of the European Union.

After the proposal of the Schuman Plan in 1950, when the coal and steel production of France and Germany came under common authority and war between them became materially impossible, this led to the idea of the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951-52. ECSC became the first supranational body in Europe, where member states delegated a part of their sovereignty and decision-making power to a higher authority, which is above the nation-state. Seeing the promising result of ECSC, the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) & Euratom under the Treaty of Rome in 1957-58, which created a common market and cooperation in atomic energy. Through common agriculture and competition policies in the 1960s-70s, this integration further deepened among the parties. At the same time, other supranational institutions like the European Commission, the European Court of Justice, and the European Parliament are also getting strengthened. Apart from that, the transnational network formed by the political parties, business groups and experts also contributed in the rise of the new European polity.

In the later years, countries like the United Kingdom, Denmark and Ireland (1973), Greece (1981) and Spain and Portugal (1986) joined and expanded the EEC. The Treaty of Maastricht in 1992 transformed the EEC into the European Union (EU) and expanded its reach and influence in Europe and worldwide. The emergence and evolution of the EU reflects both the economic need and the broad visionary ideals of European Unity.

The idea of ASEAN also emerged due to a conflicting situation in the Southeast Asian region. It was the era of the Cold War when both blocs were trying to spread their ideology and establish their dominance around the world. Under this situation, many of the newly independent nation-states in South-East Asia were facing challenges among themselves. Some were trying to resolve the territorial conflicts with others, while some wanted to secure their security and sovereignty from the influence of the superpowers. The problems like poverty, underdevelopment, and the effect of colonial rule were strangling their part of progress. To reduce these tensions, to develop trust among the neighbours and the bring cooperation for growth and development, the five founding states - Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand came together in 1967 to form ASEAN. They emphasised the principle of peace, Stability, Non - non-interference, and regional cooperation, which became the foundation of the "ASEAN Way"

Since its establishment in 1967 in Bangkok, the main motivation behind its creation has remained regional peace and stability in the context of the Cold War and the threat of communist insurgencies; apart from this, economic cooperation and development have also remained at its cornerstone, making non-interference, amity, and

cooperation the founding principles of this institution.

Over time, ASEAN gradually expanded its membership, including Brunei (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997) and Cambodia (1999), making it a ten-member regional organisation. In the years of the 1990s and 2000s, ASEAN dived deeper into its integration. In the year 1997, ASEAN adopted "The ASEAN VISION 2020". Similarly, in 2015, ASEAN members transformed the institution, making the region a cohesive community built on three pillars: the ASEAN Political-Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.

Despite challenges such as the South China Sea dispute, external pressures from major powers, and internal political differences, ASEAN has grown into one of the most active regional organisations in Asia. Its focus on cooperation, dialogue, and consensus has helped it stay relevant and unified for more than fifty years, while it continues to work on strengthening regional identity and integration.

Institutional Structure and Decision-Making

The European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are two different models for regional cooperation that function in their own unique ways. The EU has developed on the funding principle of supranationalism, under which the member states have diluted a part of their sovereignty to the superior institutions, which make common laws and regulations for the region. For example, the European Parliament directly represents EU citizens and passes laws binding on all regions within the EU. Similarly, the European Commission serves as the primary executive body, proposing and implementing policies. The European Court of Justice ensures the uniform implementation and application of the laws made by the European Parliament. This Supranational political structure of the EU ensures greater efficiency and deeper integration by having a binding provision on all member states, even if some member states disagree. For instance, the Eurozone monetary policy is governed by the European Central Bank, which applies to all member countries to use the Euro, regardless of national preferences. On the other hand, ASEAN has adopted an intergovernmental model, where each member nation-state is completely sovereign and decisions among them are made through consensus. They popularly call this was as the "ASEAN WAY". Under this model, no policy or agreement is imposed on any member unless all the members agree. *This makes the decision-making a bit slow, but the decision mutually benefits all.* For example, ASEAN in handling a regional issue of the South China Sea dispute often reflect this principle of consensus, where a country with conflicting or different interests (like Vietnam and the Philippines versus Cambodia) can block collective statements or actions if they feel that their national sovereignty or interests are threatened. This system ensures flexibility and respect for national sovereignty, but often makes decision-making slow and less effective, especially in times of crisis.

While comparing both models, we concluded that the EU's Supranationalism brings a stronger and more binding outcome in the form of the Single Market and a common trade policy, but in return, it is noticeable that sometimes member state feels constrained by losing autonomy. On the other hand, ASEAN's intergovernmentalism preserves the Sovereign authority of the member-nation states and

provides flexibility to them. This system minimises conflicts and confusion among the members, but it is often witnessed that this model compromises efficiency and effectiveness, particularly in times when addressing sensitive political, security and economic issues. Thus EU prioritises more in integration and uniformity, while ASEAN gives more emphasis on cooperation without compromising sovereignty.

Economic Integration: EU and ASEAN

Through economic integration, countries coordinate and unify their economic policies by reducing trade barriers, creating a cohesive mechanism for shared growth, and establishing a stable ecosystem. The European Union and ASEAN are two examples of regional integration, but they differ significantly in depth, structure and goals.

The European Union (EU) is the most advanced form of economic integration in the world. Since its evolution after World War II, its major aim has been to prevent further conflict and to rebuild the European economy. The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) emerged in 1951 as a foundation that was later formalised through the Treaty of Rome (1957), under which the European Economic Community (EEC) was established. The EEC, in recent years, has functioned as a customs union, removing tariffs and establishing a common external tariff for non-member countries. Soon, over a decade through the Single European Act (1986), it transformed into a single market, ensuring free movement of goods, services, capital and people.

In 1992, under the Maastricht Treaty (1992), the European Monetary Union (EMU) was established, under which the concept of a common currency was introduced. The Eurozone was formed by 20 member states, where they agreed to use a common currency, the Euro.

Later, the European Central Bank (ECB) was formed, which manages the Euro and coordinates the monetary policy for the entire Eurozone. This high level of integration has facilitated trade and investment, and stabilised the macroeconomic stability among the member states, making the EU the world's second largest economy in the world. However, this highly integrated economy faced some challenges in 2009 in the form of the Eurozone crisis (2009-2013), which exposed the economic difference between northern and southern European Economies (Greece, Spain & Portugal). In spite of these challenges, the EU has remained the most institutionalised and successful regional bloc in history by balancing economic growth with social and political integration.

On the other hand, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), established in 1967, has a gradual and flexible model of integration that is based on consensus and respect for sovereignty among the member states. They popularly call this the "ASEAN Way."

During the 1990s, economic cooperation became the cornerstone of ASEAN, under which they created the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), whose primary focus aimed to reduce trade barriers and promote inter-regional trade and investment among the member states. In 2015, ASEAN launched the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) to create a single market and production base for facilitating the free flow of goods, services, investment, Capital and skilled labour.

However, the model of economic integration that ASEAN

follows is intergovernmental, under which the decisions are made through consultation rather than binding authority, unlike the EU's Supranational institution.

When it comes to trade liberalisation and regional cooperation, ASEAN has achieved considerable progress. The intra-ASEAN trade has also grown steadily, and the region has become a global hotspot for investment, especially in manufacturing and the digital sector. ASEAN has also signed a broader trade treaty known as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which has further integrated ASEAN with the big economies like China, Japan, Korea, Australia and New Zealand. Yet there are several challenges which have been faced by this institution. The developmental gap between several rich economies like Singapore and the developing economies like Laos and Myanmar hinders the uniform growth of the region. ASEAN also lacks a common currency, a central bank, and a fiscal policy, making deeper integration difficult. Also, political diversity, more priorities over domestic issues and non-binding agreements further slow down collective decision-making.

Analysing both the institution, the integration in the European Union is more deep-rooted, rule-based and supranational, whereas the integration of ASEAN is flexible, state-led and consensus-driven. In the EU, unity is prioritised more through common institutions and a legal framework, whereas cooperation without undermining national sovereignty is the core of ASEAN. The achievement of the EU model has been done through a common currency, Shared regulation and strong institutions like the European Commission and the European Court of Justice. Whereas ASEAN's economic integration remained market-driven and voluntary, focusing on global liberalisation rather than uniformity.

In talking about challenges, although the EU has created one of the single largest markets and also ensures stability and prosperity but it has also faced crises like Brexit and Eurozone debt turmoil. ASEAN is on the other side of the world, has managed to promote regional peace and trade without surging major conflicts, but its economic cooperation remains uneven due to differences in political and developmental levels.

Political and Security Cooperation

For strong regional integration, Political and security cooperation holds an important aspect for the overall growth and development of any institution, as it ensures trust, stability and collective ability to respond to a crisis. During the evolution process of the European Union and ASEAN, both institution have developed their special framework for political and security coordination, but their approach differ significantly in depth, purpose and institutional design. Talking about the EU, it has built a strong and formalised security structure rooted in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), whereas ASEAN depends on a dialogue-based, non-confrontational mechanism such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC).

Under the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, the European Union has established the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which aims to coordinate the foreign policy of its member states and project the EU as a single voice in the global arena. It has created an image of the EU as an institution of not just the economic union, rather a political

union too, capable of addressing diplomatic, defence and humanitarian issues collectively. The CFSP allows members to take a joint position on international crises, human rights and peacekeeping. Within this framework, the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) was created to develop joint military and civilian operations, enabling the EU to undertake peacekeeping, conflict prevention, and crisis management missions abroad for instance, in Bosnia, Mali, and the Horn of Africa.

In addition, the EU also maintain a close security partnership with NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation). NATO provide a primary defence alliance to Europe, providing a collective defence mechanism under Article 5. ("an attack on one is an attack on all"). Together, this arrangement makes the EU's Security system one of the "hard security", involving actual military and defence capabilities. Still challenges like difference among member states over military spending, Foreign Policy Priorities (Relation with Russia and China) and dependence on the USA leadership in NATO sometime limits the EU's strategic Autonomy.

In contrast, ASEAN's political and security cooperation is built on the principle of non-interference, consensus, and dialogue known as the "ASEAN Way". In place of collective defence ASEAN approach gives priority to soft security Building trust, diplomacy and preventive cooperation. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), established in 1994, plays a key role as a platform for dialogue on political and security issues in the Asia-Pacific Region. It brings unity among ASEAN members and the regional Major players like China, Japan, USA, India and Russia and opens a forum for discussion of Regional peace, maritime security and counterterrorism and promotes confidence-building and preventive diplomacy.

For institutionalising the regional security, ASEAN has also created the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) in 2009, with the aim that member states should live in peace with each other and with the rest of the world. The APSC's Prime objective is to promote the principle of the rule of law, good governance, Human rights and conflict resolution through dialogue rather than confrontation. ASEAN's Non-interference Policy has been applauded for maintaining regional stability among diverse political systems, but at the same time has also been criticised for limited effective response when it comes to internal crises - such as the Myanmar coup (2021) or the South China Sea dispute. ASEAN, in its history, has been seen as preferring diplomacy and consensus to avoid divisions, reflecting its focus on stability over enforcement.

While comparing the two, the EU's main focus is on "hard security" through military cooperation, defence missions, and a cohesive foreign policy approach. Whereas ASEAN prioritises "Soft security" trust building, diplomacy, and conflict avoidance are the prime objectives of ASEAN when it comes to regional security. The EU can deploy its military for the peacekeeping operations, while ASEAN lacks a military component and lacks a binding security mechanism. The EU coordinate more effectively with major global powers through NATO, while ASEAN plays a balancing role between competing powers like the USA and China by maintaining neutrality and preserving regional harmony. The EU's Strength lies in its institutional model, which allows it to act collectively in the global arena, while its challenges lie in differing national interests and reliance

on NATO for collective security, whereas the ASEAN model, on the other hand, succeeded in preventing inter-state conflict and maintaining regional order, but when it comes to managing internal political crisis, the institutions suffer.

Sovereignty and Non-Interference

Sovereignty is the cornerstone of international relations; it is the authority of a state to govern itself in national and international politics. But its meaning differs and depends on the interpretation when it comes to regional organisation. The European Union (EU) represents a unique model where member states have pooled a part of their sovereignty to the higher supranational authority to achieve deeper political and economic integration. Where, in the case of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the member states uphold the principle of strict sovereignty and non-interference, respecting the national independence, territorial integrity and political diversity. This different approach of these institutions shapes their management in regional crises and in exercising collective authority.

If we talk about the case of the European Union, the member states willingly transferred certain sovereign powers to the supranational institutions like the European Commission, European Parliament, and European Court of Justice. This "pooling of sovereignty" means that major decisions, like trade, competition, human rights, environment, and even aspects of foreign and security policy, are decided by the EU on behalf of entire member states and the decision itself is binding on all members. Here, the goal is to achieve greater unity and coherence, allowing Europe to act collectively on global issues. This collective global approach also helps the EU to deal with a crisis-like situation with an efficient and effective policy. For example, During the Balkan war in 1990, there was been major role of post-war peacebuilding and reconstruction done by the EU, which they have done through diplomacy and economic assistance. Similarly, in the case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2014 and 2022), there have been unified sanctions on Russia and military and financial aid to Ukraine, which was provided by the EU. However, this model also faces challenges when national interests diverge, as seen in differing stances on defence spending, migration and energy dependence.

On the other hand, ASEAN's approach is deeply rooted in the principles of state sovereignty, equality, and non-interference in internal affairs, which have also been mentioned in the ASEAN Charter (2008). The ASEAN Way emphasises consensus, mutual respect and non-confrontation, which reflects the regional political diversity, from democracy to authoritarian regimes. This approach helps ASEAN to maintain regional peace and avoid direct conflict among member states. However, ASEAN faces challenges in responding to the internal crisis within member countries. For instance, during the 2022 military coup in Myanmar, ASEAN initially struggled to deal with this crisis due to its non-interference policy. However, later, with its "Five-point consensus" and a call for dialogue and humanitarian aid, ASEAN has been seen as partially addressing the situation. Similarly, in the Case of the South China Sea, ASEAN's cautious diplomacy has constrained it from taking any effective address and action.

While comparing the EU's pooling of sovereignty, stronger and faster collaboration, action in times of crisis, with the

ASEAN model of preservation of full state sovereignty and internal independence, with slow and not so effective results, makes the EU an effective regional organisation compared to ASEAN. The EU's model of shared governance enhances its credibility as a global actor, while ASEAN's "soft" approach emphasises stability and non-confrontation in a region marked by historical sensitivities and political diversity.

External Relations and Global Role

The EU has emerged as a major global actor, especially in fields like International trade, climate change, and development aid. It has become one of the world's largest trading blocs and uses its trade policies as a key instrument in diplomacy and influence. In global affairs, the EU also plays a leading role in climate action and environmental diplomacy. In recent years, it has shifted its focus to sustainable growth and energy transition through initiatives like the European Green Deal and its active role in COPs (Conference of the Parties) climate negotiations. Other than that, the EU is one of the largest providers of developmental aid, by supporting developing countries and countries in crises, especially in the field of governance, democracy, and human rights. This significantly expresses the EU's reliance towards soft power, which is based on persuasion, cooperation and shared values rather than military confrontation.

In contrast, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) holds a central position in Asia-Pacific regionalism and acts as a major partner in promoting and maintaining regional stability and cooperation. Its prime object of ASEAN Centrality aims to remain at the focus of regional dialogue among major powers such as China, the USA, India, Japan and Australia. It's forums like the ASEAN regional forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), facilitate diplomatic discussion and promote peaceful co-existence in the region. Rather than accessing dominance, ASEAN emphasised consensus-building and non-interference and regional cooperation, reflecting its pragmatic and dialogue-driven form of soft power suited to the diverse political and cultural landscape of Southeast Asia.

Comparing the two, the EU's soft power is largely normative and global, grounded in promoting and spreading values like democracy, Human Rights and environmental sustainability, whereas ASEAN's soft power is Pragmatic and regional, founded on maintaining harmony, autonomy and balance among the great powers. Talking about institutions like the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and International Climate Negotiations, the EU plays a strong and major role and has a global voice in these institutions where whereas ASEAN, on the other hand focuses regional centric approach and plays crucial role by ensuring that all the major powers engage with it when it comes to regional matters this approach makes is a diplomatic hub of Asia-Pacific. Thus EU's influence extends globally through its values and aid programme backed by the support of NATO-like institutions where whereas ASEAN's strength lies in its ability to manage the regional dynamics through dialogue and balance.

Future Prospects

The Future prospects of both the EU and ASEAN totally

depend on how they handle internal division, external pressure and their perspective model of regional integration. For the EU, despite challenges like Brexit, migration disputes, and economic inequalities, the major questions will be whether it will move towards deeper integration or whether there will be more gradual fragmentation. The initiative, like Next Generation EU recovery plan, greater cooperation in defence and digital policy and a unified stance on climate change and the Russia-Ukraine war, has shown that the EU has a remarkable capacity to reform, adapt and move towards deeper integration. However, issues of migration, the Russia-Ukraine war and the internal disturbance created because of it may strain unity. If the EU wants to maintain its global influence and internal stability, it has to balance national sovereignty with collective decision-making.

For ASEAN, the central question for the future lies in its structure that whether it will evolve into a stronger, rule-based community or remain a loose association driven by consensus and non-interference. Initiatives like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) have made impressive progress for ASEAN in the field of economic integration. However, Political cooperation remains limited as seen in the case of the Myanmar Crisis 2022 and the South China Sea dispute. For ASEAN to become a stronger global institution, it would need to enhance its institutional capacity, promote shared regional norms, and develop mechanisms to manage security and human rights issues more effectively. Also, apart from maintaining ASEAN centrality, it had to balance the major powers like the USA and China.

When comparing both blocs, it has been noticed that both institutions can learn some valuable lessons from each other, like the EU can learn flexibility, a consensus-based approach from ASEAN, which will allow the institution to maintain unity among the diverse political systems and different cultures of Europe. This will help the EU to manage internal diversity and avoid over-centralisation. On the other hand, ASEAN can learn from the institutional strength and policy coordination mechanism of the EU. This will enable ASEAN to respond swiftly and effectively to crises. Also, a stronger Supranational mechanism could help ASEAN to move from symbolic unity to practical cooperation, especially in areas like health, environment, and society.

Summarising, the future of the EU lies in finding a balance between deeper integration and national sovereignty, while ASEAN's Future depends on transforming from a dialogue-based community to an action-oriented community. Both face different challenges but share a common goal — to remain relevant, resilient, and united in an increasingly multipolar and uncertain world.

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