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CHOOSING THE BEST FORUM:

The ASEAN as a Regional Partner for the EU’s Climate Diplomacy

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Executive Summary

The EU's climate diplomacy has, in the past, been driven by its role in the UN's climate conferences. Its recent adoption of the concept of circular economy opens doors for the EU to more systematically engage with issues specific to other world regions. In Southeast Asia, this includes plastic waste and the ensuing ocean pollution. In the search for partners to address this issue, the EU has a few options. This paper shows that initiatives started with the ASEAN are more stable than the outcomes of bilateral talks and more effective than multilateral summits. Its aim is to enhance the EU's climate diplomacy with insights and proposals on how to build on this region-to-region cooperation.

Short Bio

Thibaut Le Forsonney has previously held internships at the Friedrich Naumann Foundation in Manila and the German Institute of Global and Area Studies in Hamburg. He graduated with a BA in Politics, Philosophy and Economics from the University of Exeter, where he held research assistant positions in the Economics and Management Departments. His research interests include marine pollution, emerging economies, and ethnic conflict in Europe, Asia, and Africa.



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List of Abbreviations

ACB	ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity
AEMM	ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting
AOSIS	Alliance of Small Island States
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ARISE	ASEAN Regional Integration Support by the EU
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
AWGCME	ASEAN Working Group on Coastal and Marine Environment
AWGCW	ASEAN Working Group on Chemicals and Waste
AWGESC	ASEAN Working Group on Environmentally Sustainable Cities
CfNR	Council for Rainforest Nations
COBSEA	Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia
DCI	Development Cooperation Instrument
EBCGA	European Border and Coast Guard Agency
EEAS	European External Action Service
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
E-READI	Enhanced Regional EU-ASEAN Dialogue Instrument
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
PEMSEA	Partnerships in Environmental Management for the Seas of East Asia
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
UNEP	United Nations Environmental Programme
US	United States
WTO	World Trade Organisation



1. Introduction

On July 16, 2019, Ursula von der Leyen unveiled the political guidelines for her Presidency of the European Commission (EC) in a document titled *A Union that strives for more: my agenda for Europe*. In it, she pledges, following only the commitments on CO₂ emissions, that the European Union (EU) will become a “world leader” in the area of circular economy under her tenure (von der Leyen, 2019). The ability to spread its values to other multilateral organisations is a measure of the EU's soft power. This paper seeks to enhance the EU's climate diplomacy by providing a better understanding of where, i.e. in which fora, and how, i.e. with what initiatives, to pursue its vision for a circular economy in Southeast Asia. The overall argument is broken down into three parts, each with a dedicated section of the paper. First, the EU's push for a circular economy at home is influencing its climate diplomacy abroad. These themes are especially tied to one another in the period between the Paris Agreement of 2015 and the Glasgow Conference in 2021. Second, the EU has an interest in environmental outcomes in other world regions. This includes those issues that have received less attention from national governments, despite the great burdens put on local inhabitants, such as plastic pollution. Third, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a better suited regional partner for sustainable and effective measures, to tackle those local issues and create a circular economy, than bilateral talks or global summits. The paper then gives a set of policy recommendations that address where and how the EU should promote interregional measures when certain environmental issues are paired with certain diplomatic realities.

2. Circular Economy in the EU's Climate Diplomacy

In a circular economy the outputs of one process become the inputs for another (Crippa et al., 2017). Hence, there is no end to a product's lifecycle, and therefore, no waste. This contrasts with a linear economy where the by-products of production and consumption leave the system as waste. The concept most likely developed in the 1960s when Kenneth Boulding compared humanity's place on Earth with life on a spaceship, where resources are finite and need to be reused. The EC also played a part in the 1970s, when high energy prices prompted it to finance a report by Walter Stahel and Geneviève Reday-Mulvey (Stahel, 2016). Their research showed that while making cars and houses is relatively energy-intensive, repairing them is rather labour-intensive. Therefore, costly energy can be substituted for cheaper labour with each extension of the product's lifecycle. In the modern view, the product would also be designed to be easily reused, remade, and recycled from the beginning.

As interest in circular economy has grown, there is an increasing understanding, at the policy-making level, of the real-world complexities that come with integrating modern industrial goods and services into a ‘closed-loop system’ (Crippa, 2019). This has been reflected in the evolution of the EC's documents on the subject. The Action Plan of 2015 focused on a clear set of areas including plastic, food, buildings, biomass, and metals with resource efficiency, lifecycle extension, and waste management as the main issue areas (EC, 2015). Though the initiatives proposed to ‘close the loop’ mostly targeted the better-known ‘end-of-pipe’ problems. The Action Plan of 2020 expanded the set of key products to include electronics, batteries, vehicles, packaging, plastics, textiles, buildings, food, and water (EC, 2020). However, the new plan also provided a



much more holistic vision, with each stage of the cycle addressed and goals tied to related issues, most notably to climate change. The greater detail came thanks to a relatively high level of engagement and publication of supporting documents during the five year period.

The EC's engagement with the circular economy has also included an increasingly international dimension. Documents released a year before the Action Plan of 2015 relay an eagerness to work "both at the multilateral and bilateral level" with partners abroad on the subject (EC, 2014). However, the plan only related its ambitions to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted earlier that year at the United Nations (UN). The concept of circular economy has often been explained in terms of one or more of the SDGs, especially Goal 12 on 'responsible consumption and production.' A review by Schroeder et al. (2018) found that 'closing the loop' practices contribute positively to each of the SDGs. Therefore, it seems that in 2015 the EU only envisaged a limited engagement on the circular economy with partners abroad. However, this had changed by the release of the Action Plan of 2020, which sets an objective to "support a global shift to a circular economy" (EC, 2020a). Additionally, the accompanying documents cite bilateral talks with eight countries and a multilateral initiative with the ASEAN, as achievements of the EU's climate diplomacy (EC, 2020b).

This shift in international engagement is not only due to developments within the EU, but also those without. On July 18, 2017, China notified the World Trade Organisation (WTO) that it would ban much of the import of waste materials into the country. China had been the largest net importer of plastic waste, such that the ban put immediate pressure on net exporters to find alternatives. An indicative example is the drop in plastic waste shipped from Germany to China, from 346,000 tons in 2017 to 16,000 tons in 2018 (Wang et al., 2019). At the time, the recycling rate for plastics in Germany stood at 36% while the global rate was estimated at 10%. Furthermore, the then 28 EU member states accounted for 31% of exported and 8% of imported plastic waste by value. This led the EU to develop the Plastics Strategy of 2018, which provided the, till then, most-detailed set of measures for a circular economy. Additionally, it recognised the role of "international developments" in the problems with the plastics trade and the necessity of "international engagement" in their solution (EC, 2018a). Considering the relatively low level of publication on circular economy from 2015 to 2017, it is likely that China's import ban indirectly revitalised the concept as a key objective for the EU (Penca, 2018).

While the Plastics Strategy of 2018 proposed working within "international fora" for issues such as marine litter, the Action Plan of 2020 went one step further and called for a "global agreement on plastics." However, this might be seen as a return to a less successful form of climate diplomacy. Simon Schunz (2019) characterises the EU's former approach to climate negotiations as favouring "top-down" regimes with treaties to accomplish "global, multilateral, legally binding solutions." This has also been called 'leadership-by-example' since the adoption of technical standards and legal commitments is part of the EU's toolset for achieving its own climate policy integration. Stavros Afionis (2011) notes several failures to negotiate based on this approach, such as The Hague Conference of 2000 and the New Delhi Conference of 2002, where an excess of ambition and lack of flexibility lead developing countries "into the arms" of the United States (US). With each problem, the EU has also adapted its negotiating strategy. However, the failure to reach a global agreement at the Copenhagen Conference of 2009 prompted a greater question, with calls for a "bottom-up" regime that would give national governments more room to set their



own CO₂ targets (Schunz, 2019). The new approach is largely to thank for the relative success of the Paris Agreement of 2015. Since then, the entry of the circular economy into the EU's climate diplomacy has opened new avenues for international cooperation on issues that are related to, but separate from, emissions reduction.

3. Interregional Solutions for Regional Problems

The new approach, while being more flexible and less demanding for the EU's partners, encouraged EU negotiators to consult directly with foreign governments. Belis et al. (2015, 2018) use the term “multiple bilateralism” to describe the increased tendency, after the Copenhagen Conference of 2009, to hold bilateral talks with partner countries before large multilateral climate summits. The Paris Agreement serves as the natural showpiece for proponents of the new approach. A more surprising argument came with a blow to the agreement, when the US announced its intent to withdraw on August 4, 2017. The pressing need to tie global climate issues into bilateral talks between the EU and the US demonstrated the scale of the shift. Similarly, in 2009 the EU and the ASEAN agreed to pause their region-to-region trade negotiations in favour of region-to-country meetings (Perez de las Heras, 2016). Thereafter, the EU has signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with two ASEAN member states, Singapore in 2018 and Vietnam in 2019. That the first deal was signed at the margins of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is perhaps indicative of the wider trend, bilateral solutions were increasingly becoming the answer to multilateral problems (ASEM, 2018).

However, there are three caveats that come with the recent success of the multiple bilateral approach. First, the region-to-country meetings relied on the parties agreeing to play a leading role on an issue. This could be due both to a heightened responsibility for, and a heightened vulnerability from, climate change. The most notable collaborations came, therefore, out of talks with other big emitters, especially China (Belis et al., 2018). Singapore and Vietnam were already the first and second largest trade partners among the ASEAN's member states before the signing of their respective FTAs. Second, several countries that had previously been reluctant to adopt climate targets in the 2000s became more eager in the 2010s. This is perhaps because an increased awareness of the consequences of climate change outweighed other concerns, such as equitable commitments between more and less developed countries (Overland et al., 2017). The change in outlook was also apparent at the ASEAN when five of the ten member states openly voiced their disappointment at the US's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. Third, the region-to-country meetings typically served to coordinate positions to be advanced at a larger multilateral summit. The multiple bilateral approach is, therefore, less suited for climate diplomacy when the EU's chosen partner does not play a leading role, does not share its priorities, and there is no established forum on the issue.

The UN's annual conferences on climate change provide a forum for talks on some of the most pressing environmental issues, notably CO₂ emissions. The Plastics Strategy encourages the EU to search for alternative avenues for building a circular economy, since its principal issues are related to, but separate from, the purview of the conferences (Penca, 2018). The opportunity to choose where to engage with these issues raises concerns given earlier with ‘multiple bilateralism’ and others from the literature on ‘forum shopping.’ Nevertheless, the EU has opened region-to-



country dialogues on circular economy with Chile, China, South Africa, Colombia, Japan, Indonesia, India, Mexico, Singapore, Malaysia, and Senegal. A mission to Nigeria in April 2020 was cancelled due to travel restrictions in the wake of the coronavirus epidemic. Furthermore, the issue of ‘closing the loop’ was also raised at meetings of the G7, G20, and the UN’s Environment Programme (UNEP).

An alternative to such forms of bilateral and multilateral avenues is a region-to-region dialogue. The Plastics Strategy initially singled out Southeast Asia as a region where the issues with plastic pollution and marine litter are especially severe. This is due to the region’s growing economies, high population density, and inadequate waste management systems (Akenji et al., 2019). Among the contributing factors are the overreliance on sachets, small plastic packages of consumables, or the importation of waste products, often with little oversight. Additionally, of the ten countries that produce the most mismanaged waste in the world, five are member states of the ASEAN (Jambeck et al., 2015). That four of the five countries also chose to voice their disappointment at the US’ withdrawal from the Paris Agreement lends support to the view that ‘concern for the planet’ embeds itself best in countries that are both responsible for and vulnerable to environmental problems. This group, consisting of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, were also early adopters of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions (Elder and Miyazawa, 2015). Though, there is also a group of late adopters with less mismanaged waste, consisting of Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar. Compared to the maritime states, the continental ones might appear less vulnerable to the region’s environmental problems. However, assessments of state capacity show that these states are also the least likely to be able to deal with them (Yusuf, 2009).

The need for initiatives that tackle the build-up of waste materials in the area leaves a sizable opening for the EU’s push for a circular economy in its climate diplomacy. Three reasons why the EU cares about the situation in Southeast Asia can be teased out of the text of the Plastics Strategy. First, mismanaged plastic waste often travels through waterways into the world’s oceans. The inflow of plastic debris into the Mediterranean has shown that the Barcelona Convention is no longer an adequate framework for preventing pollution of the sea (Crippa, 2017). Second, a large volume of goods is traded between the EU and the ASEAN. The shift to a circular economy has also been used to call for a reshaping of supply chains for sustainability, resilience, and regulatory oversight (Crippa, 2019). Third, the protection of the environment and the people that inhabit it are increasingly seen as forming part of the EU’s core values.

4. The ASEAN as a Regional Partner

The EU and the ASEAN have been steadily increasing their interregional cooperation. The Nuremberg Declaration of 2007 and its accompanying Plan of Action for 2007-2012 call for cooperation on a variety of issues, including climate, biodiversity, pollution, and sustainability. However, concrete proposals are restricted to working within established international fora, such as the Kyoto Protocol. The Bandar Seri Begawan Plan of Action for 2013-2017 set out new initiatives and identified key areas for knowledge exchange on water management near the Danube and Mekong. The Plan of Action for 2018-2022 adds peatland ecosystems and haze pollution to the set of key areas and announces initiatives to tackle them. The region-to-region talks have, therefore, been more fruitful when dealing directly with smaller scale topics of interest.



Interestingly, the most recent plan was also the first to include the notion of circular economy, though merely on a conceptual level.

Based on the previous section, the EU also had two other avenues for broaching the subject of circular economy with partners in Southeast Asia. The bilateral route necessarily involved separate talks with several countries and met differing levels of success. Indonesia has been a valuable partner on environment issues. It best fits the three criteria for success in multiple bilateralism, having shown leadership on emissions pledges, shared values during the recent Climate Diplomacy Week, and taking its commitments into a larger forum, namely the ASEAN. Additionally, Indonesia adopted its National Action Plan on Marine Debris in 2017. Malaysia and Thailand followed a year later with roadmaps dealing with single-use plastics and waste management, respectively (Akenji et al., 2019). Though, it is worth noting that Indonesia also withholds cooperation on certain issues. For instance, it only ratified the Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution of 2002, in 2015 (Elder and Miyazawa, 2015). This reflects a downside to the bilateral route seen before with the US, where stakeholders can unilaterally become troublemakers. When this happens, the EU would struggle to compensate by turning to others such as Laos, Cambodia or Myanmar, where the shared values are weaker.

The multilateral route similarly runs into problems when regional issues are brought to larger international institutions. This is because a divide in the ASEAN's member states is also a divide in Southeast Asia. The threat of ocean plastic is one such issue where one world region needs to be addressed specifically. This limits the EU's ability to 'forum shop' for the best multilateral agreement for two reasons. First, the other multilateral bodies, with either a regional or thematic interest in issues like plastic waste in Southeast Asia, lack of means to act on them. Consequently, of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Partnerships in Environmental Management for the Seas of East Asia (PEMSEA) and Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia (COBSEA), only the latter has research competences on most areas needed to tackle plastic waste, and none have policymaking competences (Lyons, 2019). Second, there is also a divide in Southeast Asian state's preferred multilateral bodies. Singapore often warns of the threat of rising sea levels through the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), Thailand and Indonesia coordinate climate strategies with the Cartagena Dialogue, and Vietnam participates proactively in the Council for Rainforest Nations (CfNR) (Goron, 2014). Therefore, there are few attractive avenues for the EU's climate diplomacy outside the ASEAN.

Josep Borrell (2020), the EU's High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, recently described the strengthening of ties with the ASEAN as an "urgent necessity," but also noted that its level of integration was "hardly comparable" to that of the EU. Indeed, the 'ASEAN Way' has also been described as a 'lowest common denominator' approach to regional agreements (Goron, 2014). However, an upside to this approach is the stability that it brings. Deepak Nair (2019) argues that this 'culture of compromise' builds consensus in a region where leadership is highly personalised and bilateral channels are restrictive. There might be a trade-off between the sort of effectiveness advanced by the EU and the stability incorporated by the ASEAN. Therefore, one can expect environmental issues to become steadily bolder as they enter into the ASEAN's priorities for cooperation. With issues such as plastic waste, the problem lies as much with the countries' ability to tackle them as their willingness to work together. This includes measures needed on the ground, since waste management is often the responsibility of local



municipalities, and research and design, since developing responses to environmental issues is information-intensive. The best strategy for the EU's climate diplomacy is, therefore, to encourage the adoption of circular economy themes into the ASEAN's meetings while investing in capacity-building initiatives.

Notable ASEAN initiatives established with support from the EU include the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB), founded with a grant €6 million, the ASEAN Regional Integration Support from the EU (ARISE) Plus, with €16 million, and the Enhanced Regional EU-ASEAN Dialogue Instrument (E-READI), with €25 million. The ACB has tended to be reserved when dealing with climate issues. However, its reports are increasingly tackling the issue of marine pollution and its impacts on life in Southeast Asia. Despite its broader mandate, the E-READI has been instrumental in calling attention to climate issues, framing them in terms of shared values, and identifying areas for collaboration with policymakers, researchers, businesses and advocates. Among its achievements, the E-READI counts a research project that identified gaps in the building of a circular economy for plastics in ASEAN (Akenji et al., 2019). The stakeholders in the project include the ASEAN Working Group on Coastal and Marine Environment (AWGCME), the ASEAN Working Group on Environmentally Sustainable Cities (AWGESC), and the ASEAN Working Group on Chemicals and Waste (AWGCW). Mark Elder and Ikuho Miyazawa (2015) have produced a helpful report on the role of the Working Groups (WGs) within the wider organisational structure of the ASEAN Secretariat. The EU's financial resources and research capacity can, therefore, be used to set up initiatives with and within the ASEAN. However, if this growing cooperation is to be stable, sustainable and effective, the EU should consider three proposed changes to its climate diplomacy.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

First, the EU should clearly pursue multi-level relations with the ASEAN. This entails engaging with the concept of circular economy in large summits, notably the ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting (AEMM). However, it also includes greater engagement with avenues that bring specific bodies from both organisations to the table, such as the High-Level Dialogue on Environment and Climate Change. Collaboration between the EU's Delegations and Directorates with the ASEAN's WPs builds more stable institutional relations and better integrates shared values into each organisation's work. This can be further enhanced with initiatives that bring together stakeholders from the private sector and civil society. Though, these would also need to be coordinated as part of the wider multi-level approach.

Second, as cooperation increases, policymakers should address the sustainability of their shared endeavours. The EU has been able to open new avenues by financing joint initiatives with the ASEAN. The Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), which is the largest route for EU financial assistance to the ASEAN, increased support for regional integration from €70 million in 2007-2013 to €170 million in 2014-2020 (Nuttin, 2017). The growing commitments, both to the region and the environment, reflect the need for interregional solutions. However, they do not reflect the growth of the EU's financial resources. A multi-level approach would then require that the 'return on investment' from new initiatives be assessed. The European External Action Service (EEAS), through its coordinating and diplomatic work, can also encourage a change in the



conversation, from one between more and less developed regions, to one between slow and fast growing economies.

Third, the EU should work to ‘close the loop’ between the two regions. The shift to a concept of circular economy and growing interest in marine pollution has encouraged the EU to focus on areas such as building competences in plastic recycling in ASEAN. However, this is only one end of the line. Projects should also consider the design and production stages for goods that pass between the regions. An interregional circular economy needs countries to play their strengths and cover their weaknesses. Therefore, the conversation should also be broadened to include leakages. When the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCGA) acts to interrupt the illegal export of plastic waste to Southeast Asia, this can be framed as part of a larger joint effort to reduce ocean plastics. Additionally, a broader conversation on the circular economy would reshape global supply chains in ways favourable to trade partners that share the EU's commitments. This gives the EU opportunities to retake a ‘leadership-by-example’ approach in its soft power.

Ursula von der Leyen's presidency has opened a debate on how her tenure would bring about a ‘geopolitical commission.’ If the EU wishes to remake this idea in the image of its own values, then it must address how our world's geography is changing in the industrial age. The EU's approach to the circular economy is one way to do that. It also answers deep-seated problems with plastic waste. This paper has argued that the EU's climate diplomacy is increasingly influenced by a circular economy, is interested in regional issues as well as global ones, and is best served in Southeast Asia when aimed at the ASEAN. The research has shown that region-to-region cooperation is more stable than bilateral talks and more effective than multilateral fora, on regional issues.



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