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The EU and Singapore: Partnering for Resilience in the Indo-Pacific

By Lawrence Anderson

SYNOPSIS

As the world moves unprepared from a rules-based order, there is an urgent need for greater cooperation among regional and extra-regional countries to address the arising challenges. The partnership between Singapore and the European Union is a natural fit for the emerging geoeconomic and strategic needs.

COMMENTARY

The world is in a transitional phase. The global economy is in turbulence. Some countries are ignoring the WTO rules-based system, arguing that it curbs their economic potential and growth even though they had enjoyed benefits from WTO rules that facilitated business through the growth of global value chains. A major problem is the unilateral actions of the US, a traditional trading and security partner of many states which are members of the WTO.

Rules are the mechanism by which small countries and middle powers can plan, invest, and, if necessary, hold larger partners to account. When the US authorities treat these rules as optional, the states concerned will need to pursue alternative route, while maintaining their respective engagements with Washington.

Regrettably, uncertainty is not a temporary aberration to be waited out, as it is a structural feature of US policymaking that will persist even if the Democrats win back the White House in 2028. There is no natural constituency for free trade in Washington anymore.

What does this mean for Asian countries like Singapore?

For many countries, it means recalibrating how they manage the relationship with the US. Asian governments will need to assess whether the most effective way to cushion themselves from the worst impact of US tariffs is to cut individual deals with the Trump Administration in Washington.

Recalibration also includes increased cooperation with regional and extra-regional partners to strengthen global commitment to international law and respect for rules.

The EU-Singapore partnership is a natural fit for this endeavour, given the shared support of the European Union and Singapore for the rules-based multilateral system represented by the United Nations and its institutions. The EU can cooperate with Singapore and others to strengthen connectivity and trade, which underpin many countries' economic resilience. Over the past year in Asia, the EU expanded its network of FTAs, building on the EU-Indonesia FTA signed in September 2025, complementing EU FTAs with Singapore and Vietnam.

Singapore has also been actively activating its FTA with MERCUSOR, the South American trade bloc. At the ASEAN level, member states have recently upgraded FTAs with several Dialogue Partners.

Singapore must maintain momentum. A key initiative is the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). The EU should move quickly to achieve concrete results through the Trade and Investment Dialogue launched last November by the two blocs, focusing on five key areas: trade diversification, digital trade, trade and investment facilitation, supply chain resilience, and the global trade environment, including WTO reform.

Possible Areas for Future Collaboration

In this expanding trade and economic space, here are a few examples for future cooperation.

Firstly, Singapore is a country facing challenges related to alternative energy and climate change. In energy resilience, Singapore employs a four-switch approach to diversify its energy sources: solar, regional power grids, low-carbon alternatives (such as hydrogen and carbon capture), and natural gas. The EU can contribute positively to enhancing Singapore's energy resilience in these areas. Alternatively, for a potential fifth switch – nuclear energy in a safe and viable mode – by sharing relevant EU know-how and experience in governance and regulations.

As Singapore and its ASEAN neighbours focus on managing the decarbonisation journeys, the EU could share its experiences with its EU power grid. This collaboration will help the Southeast Asian states move the ASEAN Power Grid forward. Europe can partner with Singapore in Third Country Training Programmes to conduct courses at training centres in Singapore or other ASEAN countries.

Secondly, ASEAN is looking to deepen intra-Asian trade integration beyond the current agreements that dominate the regional landscape. This includes advancing services liberalisation, establishing comprehensive and open rules for digital trade, AI governance, and investment, harmonising regulation across borders, and setting guardrails around the resurgence of industrial policy.

The EU is well-equipped to contribute its shared experience and expertise, including through investments. ASEAN member states are exploring ways on how to make it easier for companies to secure funding and operate across borders by standardising rules and customs documentation, using AI in the process. These initiatives have started; the challenge is to make them attractive for others to join.

Thirdly, AI permeates all aspects of society. This requires wider collaboration with the private sector and external partners, as well as cross-sector exchanges. At the same time, countries assess opportunities and manage the risks of using AI in cybersecurity, defence, and dual-use technologies. For instance, can the EU-Singapore Digital Partnership (EUSDP) foster cooperation to better understand how cyber threats develop alongside major armed conflicts? Dialogue between the EU and ASEAN in this area would be very helpful.

A critical issue is the insidious spread of cross-border organised crime, money laundering, human and drug trafficking, and cyber-crimes. The US and China can work with ASEAN in fighting the host of nefarious cross-border activities that benefit criminals at the expense of human victims in many countries.

Fourthly, enhancing maritime and aviation security is another important area worth exploring between Singapore and the EU. It is necessary to consider a broader framework that covers the security of the logistics needed to facilitate supply chains. The current turmoil in the Middle East and Gulf/Strait of Hormuz underscores the importance of protecting maritime and aviation passageways. Can there be freedom of navigation in a more innovative modern sense, or will trade halt, slow down or disperse whenever conflicts threaten traditional navigation routes? Alternative arrangements cannot be made at the last minute.

It is almost impossible to divert or increase the number of flights to and over the affected regions, or to protect ships forced to take longer routes or to stop them from sailing, as maritime fuel costs escalate. Given modern military weapons and the potential of AI, this is an important area to explore. The EU-funded Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre and CRIMARIO II (a maritime capacity-building initiative) could collaborate with the Information Fusion Centre in Singapore on maritime security issues arising from major armed conflicts.

Beyond potential collaboration in the field of national economic security, what about traditional security threats? Here, AI is transforming how armed forces prepare for a host of challenges by providing smarter tools to support human judgment and effort. These apply to operations both in the physical realm and cyberspace.

AI features prominently in the fighting in Ukraine. The US used it when it captured the leader of Venezuela. Israel used it during its war in Gaza. AI is clearly at the forefront of the current conflict in Iran.

Asian countries would be keen to benefit from research into interceptor drone capabilities, and the EU could serve as a conduit for what the innovative Ukrainians have used successfully in their war against Russia.

Another crucial area is the protection and repair of damaged undersea oil and gas pipelines and fibre-optic cables. EU member states, particularly the Nordic countries, have gained significant expertise from dealing with multiple damage incidents to their undersea infrastructure in the Baltic Sea, as ASEAN countries have in the South China Sea. Both sides could benefit from open exchanges.

Conclusion

It is necessary to adopt a pragmatic approach to identify the priority sectors, align on where EU-Singapore interests overlap, and address them promptly. We should not always insist on bloc-to-bloc collaboration; depending on the sectors, a targeted collaboration between interested EU states and some ASEAN countries is possible. If successful, other EU and ASEAN countries, as well as like-minded partners could join in. How wisely we utilise this opportunity to preserve peace, security and stability is the key question.

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