

ASEAN AND THE AFRICAN UNION: TIME FOR A STRONGER COOPERATION?

by Mark Edel V. Diaz

Regionalism has figured quite prominently in the discourse of international relations since the middle of the 20th century. The establishment of regional blocs such as the European Union (EU) in 1993 (earlier as the European Community in 1957), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967, and the African Union (AU) in 2001 exemplified the growing significance of regional groups in advancing the individual interests of member states that are unable to do so. These interests range from economic and politico-security to sociocultural, and from general areas of cooperation to more specific such as disaster response, among others.

As the younger regional organizations, ASEAN and AU have seldom been mentioned in the same breath despite their irrefutable similarities. Both ASEAN and AU share a troubled colonial past, unbalanced economic development, and to some extent they both uphold the principle of non-interference in internal affairs. Additionally, these organizations face similar security challenges in their regions and have to deal with the presence and influence of major powers (i.e., China and the United States). Despite these, the interaction between these organizations have been limited and often off the radar. It is, therefore, worth exploring the strategies that ASEAN can take in order to strengthen its interregional cooperation with the AU.

In an increasingly interdependent world order, it is practical to have diversified relationships with polities from all around the world. In the case of ASEAN and the AU, this may be made possible by reviving existing mechanisms, and identifying the barriers in forging a potentially beneficial partnership. More importantly, there is a need to locate the missing link in their relationship.

The beginnings of ASEAN-AU relations

The [1955 Bandung Conference](#) in Indonesia marked the beginning of Asia-Africa cooperation. There were strong non-aligned and anti-colonial sentiments at the time because of the onset of the Cold War, and a strong independence movement that swept across Asia and Africa. The 29 participating states signed a communique that pledged their commitments to economic, cultural and political cooperation. The document, however, was full of blanket statements founded on values of human rights, non-discrimination, and self-determination, which constituted *The Spirit of Bandung*. The solidarity formed in Bandung began to wane in the 1980s due to leadership changes and lack of engagement among the founding countries. Today, one may argue that the partnership has yet to reach its full potential in the political and economic realms, as efforts to enhance relations have been, for the most part, intermittent.

In 2003, the [first Asian-African Sub-Regional Organizations Conferences \(AASROC\)](#) was held in Bandung, Indonesia followed by another conference in Durban, South Africa a year later. The governments of Indonesia and South Africa, the de facto leaders of their respective regions, agreed to work together in determining ways and means to improve economic, cultural, social, and political cooperation on a multilateral level. On the 50th anniversary of the Bandung Conference in 2005, they also spearheaded the [New Asia Africa Strategic Partnership \(NAASP\)](#) to revive *The Spirit of Bandung* by increasing contact between the two regions, emphasizing on social and economic cooperation, and responding to non-traditional threats such as earthquakes, tsunamis and other natural disasters. This declaration proposed to hold a Leaders' Summit every four years, and a Ministers' Meeting every two years, among others. So far, only a couple of meetings under the AASROC framework took place, which were mostly initiated by AU countries.

The year 2017 marks an exciting year for ASEAN and AU, as they engage in more functional cooperation. In May 2017, a [World Bank South-South Exchange Visit](#) involving ASEAN and four African sub-regional organizations enabled representatives from the

two regions to engage in dialogues on climate change, food security, and disaster risk reduction. The meeting signifies the growing awareness about the non-traditional security challenges faced by the two regional blocs. Later this year, the first ever [Africa-ASEAN Business Expo 2017](#) in Johannesburg, South Africa will provide a platform to link business opportunities in the two regions, which is an excellent prospect to forge and strengthen trade partnerships. The expo builds on the trade momentum between Africa and ASEAN as it [increased](#) from USD 2.8 billion in 1990 to USD 42.5 billion in 2012 with an annual growth rate of 14 percent, making Africa the second largest regional trade partner of ASEAN, after Asia.

The need for stronger ASEAN initiatives – the role of think tanks

The Philippines can take the lead in revitalizing ASEAN-AU relations, specifically, under the sixth thematic priority of the Philippine chairmanship of ASEAN: *promoting ASEAN as a model of regionalism and as a global player*. In consideration of ASEAN's open, inclusive and outward-looking nature, Manila can help revive the NAASP and strengthen its capacity as ASEAN's dialogue platform with the AU. Other than [investing on informal platforms](#) to support the cause, ASEAN must first overcome the road blocks in the development of its relations with African countries. All efforts must be backed by strong political will and engagement before anything can move forward with the relations.

More importantly, knowledge and appreciation about Africa needs a shot in the arm as this sets the preconditions for policy development. Information is arguably the missing link in the blossoming of ASEAN-AU interregional cooperation. This is exactly where think tanks play an important role. In the age of post-truths and fake news, think tanks and the epistemic community need to develop facts-based accounts about Africa, and provide balanced narratives against the negative stereotypes perpetuated by the mainstream media. Africa is still seen by many Westerners as a country instead of a continent. Southeast Asians should not fall for the same thinking, as this tends to hamper Africa's development even more. Specifically, comprehensive studies about the opportunities presented by Africa need to reach the tables of Asian leaders. They, more than anyone at this time, should be well-informed about the long term benefits of political and economic cooperation with Africa, the same way that China, Japan, and India were made aware about it years ago.

The opportunities for cooperation between Southeast Asians and Africans are copious, and this can only be maximized if the knowledge bridge between their regions is built with strong resolve. In an era of rapidly changing global politics, it is nothing short of good for ASEAN and the AU to look beyond the horizon of traditional partners. These two regional organizations need not wait for another 50 years to revive the spirit of Bandung. They should start now. The countries in Africa are bright destinations for new and varying opportunities, and ASEAN must harness them while proactively espousing its anniversary theme of being a true *partner for change by engaging the world*. 🌸

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