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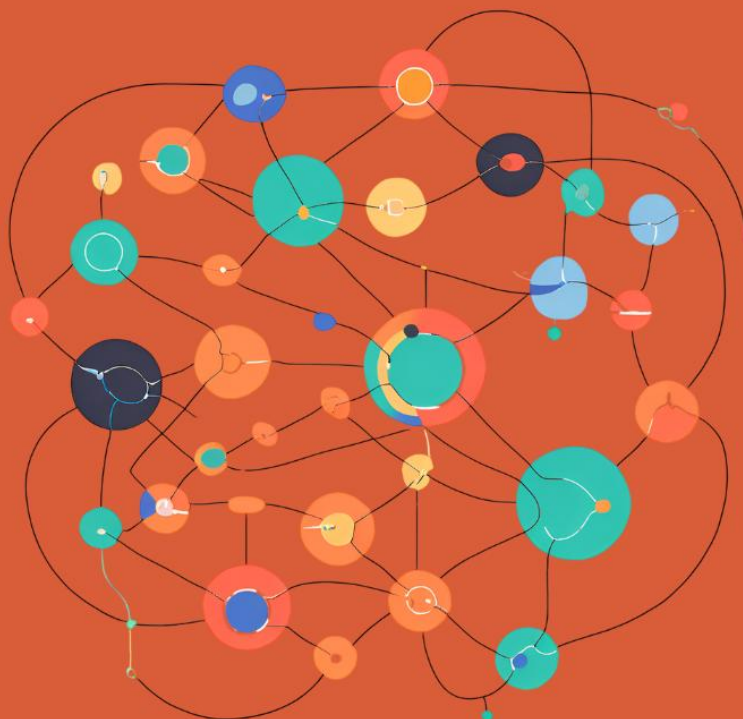
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# THE EU AND SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA: THE BEST IS YET TO COME

MIHAELA-ADRIANA PĂDUREANU



BUCHAREST, APRIL 2025  
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## **The EU and South and Southeast Asia: The best is yet to come**

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# The EU and South and Southeast Asia: The best is yet to come

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**Abstract:** *This paper draws a concise overview of the economic relationship between the European Union (EU) and selected Asian regions in the context of the twin transition – green and digital. A series of significant initiatives adopted in recent years to consolidate the cooperation with these regions are emphasised. The final section of the paper presents a number of policy recommendations that aim to highlight how the cooperation between the EU and its Asian partners can continue, while also transforming to better respond to the current issues these regions are facing.*

**Keywords:** *European Union; Asia; South-Asia; South-East Asia; cooperation.*

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This paper examines the trade cooperation between the European Union (EU) and the South and Southeast Asia regions. While in some documents and references we will mention the Indo-Pacific region and the ASEM<sup>2</sup> format, the primary focus of this paper lies in the South Asia and Southeast Asia regions. The working paper analyses the actions taken after the COVID-19 pandemic until the end of 2024. The approach is based on the starting point that, in 2020 the pandemic negatively affected EU's trade with third countries, resulting in a decline in exports (-9.4%) and imports (-11.6%), in comparison to the previous year<sup>3</sup>. On this matter, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Trade (DG TRADE) predicted a loss of almost €300 billion (bn) in the EU exports and €250 bn in extra-EU imports<sup>4</sup>. As EU trade with Asia continued to be rather dynamic in the last years: for example, the highest trade deficit was recorded in 2008 with €275 bn, then in 2019 with €270 bn, while in 2020 it amounted to €244 billion<sup>5</sup>, the problems caused by the pandemic started to receive a comprehensive response. This has resulted in a significant progress in the EU's approach towards **responsible supply chains** with the objective to stabilise trade in the event of unforeseen circumstances.

Building from this context, the paper uses the following structure: the first section presents the evolution of the EU-Asia trade relations since the COVID-19 pandemic and provides a concise overview of the manner in which these relations are delineated in some of the most pertinent Romanian official documents. The final section proposes several recommendations for a more stable trade relation between the EU and the South and Southeast Asia.

Trade and, specifically, **economic cooperation have substantial positive benefits on the interaction between the EU and other third parties**. We have so far experienced only one example of a country leaving the EU, the United Kingdom (UK), which had a very different relation with the EU, and we saw that Brexit greatly affected the British economy. For instance, in 2022, the total value of exports in goods from the UK to the EU decreased by 6.4% (27

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Mihai Sebe and Eliza Vaş for their valuable feedback on the earlier versions of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> According to their website: "The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is an intergovernmental process established in 1996 to foster dialogue and cooperation between Asia and Europe. Presently it comprises 53 Partners: 30 European and 21 Asian countries" see also: ASEM Info Board, accessed March 31, 2025, <https://aseminfoboard.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> Eurostat, "EU trade in goods strongly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020", March 25, 2021, accessed December 2, 2025, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20210325-1>.

<sup>4</sup> Cernat, Lucian. "The #covid19 global pandemic: The European response", p. 7, World Trade Organisation, 30 April, 2021, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://www.wto.org/english/res\\_e/reser\\_e/cernat\\_290421.pdf](https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/reser_e/cernat_290421.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Eurostat, "Asia-Europe Meeting: EU trade deficit at €244 billion, November 24, 2021 accessed December 2, 2024, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/edn-20211124-1>.

billion pounds), due to the fact that the value of these dropped<sup>6</sup>. In order to do this, to describe and analyse the EU relations with these regions we will use different official documents, official interviews and /or declarations from the national and/or European decision-makers.

On this note, the next section of the paper, will emphasise the relevance of the topic for the European agenda **thereby arguing for the necessity of a clear understanding of the present dynamics characterising the region**. Especially in the last decade, the attention given to the deepening of bilateral and multilateral relations with the states that are part of these regions increased significantly, which is arguably a consequence of the US pivot to Asia<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, this paper will examine the European approach on the growing relevance of the area for the international context and on how this relation can be consolidated in the future.

The regions of South and Southeast Asia are considered to be one of the most dynamic in terms of economic growth and also in terms of positive expectations regarding their future development. The World Bank anticipated a 6.4% economic increase for South Asia in 2024<sup>8</sup>. “India - the world’s most populous country and its fastest-growing major economy” is located within this region<sup>9</sup>. **The EU should prioritise deepening its relations** with the states of the wider Indo-Pacific region, which is of interest to many actors<sup>10</sup> as the economic resources of this region are considered highly important. In the next sections, we will use official documents, official interviews and /or declarations to describe and analyse the EU relations with these regions.

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<sup>6</sup> London School of Economics and Political Science, “Brexit reduced goods exports by £27bn – with smaller firms most affected”, December 18, 2024, accessed January 21, 2025, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/News/Latest-news-from-LSE/2024/1-December-2024/brexit-reduced-goods-exports-by-27bn>. The study is available here: Freeman, Rebecca *et al.*, “Deep integration and trade: UK firms in the wake of Brexit”, The Centre for Economic Performance (CEP), Discussion Paper, No. 2066, December 2024 ISSN 2042-2695, accessed January, 21 2025, <https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp2066.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Blackwill, Robert D., “The Rise and Fall of the Economic Pivot to Asia”, *Foreign Policy*, August 1, 2024, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/08/01/lost-decade-us-economic-pivot-to-asia-defense/>.

<sup>8</sup> World Bank, Overview South Asia, October 10, 2024, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/overview>.

<sup>9</sup> Kugelman, Michael, “2025 Could Kickstart Connectivity in South Asia” in *Rays of Optimism Bright Spots in Foreign Policy*, p. 19, Wilson Center, accessed January 21, 2025, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Rays\\_of\\_Optimism\\_2025.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Rays_of_Optimism_2025.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> di Carlo, Ivano, Islam, Shada, “EU–South Asia relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Rethink, reimagine, reshape”, European Policy Center, May 25, 2021, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/EUSouth-Asia-relations-in-the-21st-century-Rethink-reimagine-reshape~3f27f8>. See also: European Parliament, South Asia, the website of the European Commission, accessed December, 2, 2024, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/181/south-asia>.

## 2. The intense dynamics between the EU and South and Southeast Asia

In this section, we will present the current relations between the EU and the regions of South and Southeast Asia. We will examine the manner in which the EU pursued its economic cooperation with these regions, after the pandemic. Furthermore, we will also investigate how the twin transition is reflected in the approach towards South and Southeast Asia.

Even before the pandemic, there were voices stressing the importance of an enhanced relationship between the EU and Asia<sup>11</sup>. Others, more recently, called for a more prominent role for the political and business communities of the two regions to strengthen the cooperation<sup>12</sup>. However, although the European Union has always had strong ties with the regions of South and Southeast Asia, the attention given to these increased after the COVID-19 pandemic. As the European Union is one of the key global economic actors, with a GDP of 18,59 (trillion \$),<sup>13</sup> its economic partnerships are also important because of the effects they can have on third countries – like, for example, access to the EU’s single market of 449 million consumers<sup>14</sup>. Another argument in favour of the EU’s role in international trade is that in 2023, the international trade in goods and services was projected to be equivalent to 22.4% of its GDP<sup>15</sup>. Thus, we can say that the EU, given its economic power, is a very important actor in the global economy, and that is why its relationship with the dynamic region of Asia matters greatly.

Therefore, in the aftermath of the pandemic, which had a significant impact on the supply chains, a number of recently adopted official documents supported the deepening of EU-Asia relations. From the perspective of this paper, one of the most relevant documents

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<sup>11</sup> Cameron, Fraser. “It’s Asia, Stupid”: Time for the EU to Deepen Relations with Asia”, GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, GIGA Focus, Number 6 ISSN 1862-359X, November 2017, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://pure.giga-hamburg.de/ws/files/21619591/web\\_asien\\_2017\\_06.pdf](https://pure.giga-hamburg.de/ws/files/21619591/web_asien_2017_06.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> “ASEM InfoBoard, Trade and Investments”, ASEM Info Board, August 2024, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://aseminforboard.org/community/trade-and-investments/#:~:text=According%20to%20European%20Commission%20statistics,%E2%82%AC126.1%20billion%20in%202022.>

<sup>13</sup> “GDP (current US\$) - European Union”, World Bank, accessed December 2, 2024 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=EU>.

<sup>14</sup> European Commission, “30th anniversary of the single market 1993 – 2023”, accessed January 21, 2025, [https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/single-market/30th-anniversary\\_en#what-are-the-key-benefits-of-the-single-market](https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/single-market/30th-anniversary_en#what-are-the-key-benefits-of-the-single-market). Council of the EU and the European Council, “EU single market”, accessed January 21, 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/deeper-single-market/>. See also: Oneașcă, Iulian, “The Marvel of Social Market Economy – Things We Do Not Talk About”, Working Paper no. 52, ISSN online: 1841 – 4281, European Institute of Romania, accessed January 21, 2025, [http://ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/WP-no.-52\\_The-Marvel-of-Social-Market-Economy.pdf](http://ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/WP-no.-52_The-Marvel-of-Social-Market-Economy.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Eurostat, “World trade in goods and services - an overview”, July 2024, accessed December 2, 2024 [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=World\\_trade\\_in\\_goods\\_and\\_services\\_-\\_an\\_overview#Highlights](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=World_trade_in_goods_and_services_-_an_overview#Highlights).



addressing this issue is the *EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, adopted in 2021<sup>16</sup>. The Strategy calls for a closer connection between the two parties mentioned in the document: **the EU and the states of the Indo-Pacific** – by the Indo-Pacific states we mean Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea and the Republic of South Africa - **and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)**<sup>17</sup> -, as they are considered “natural partner regions in terms of trade and investment”<sup>18</sup>, while their economic cooperation is the greatest in the world – understood as a geographic region. The Strategy identifies a set of eight principles on which the relationship should be based. These principles reflect both a political and an economic approach, with an important role being given to the democratic principles. For example, the first principle the strategy focuses on is: *“solidify and defend the rules-based international order, by promoting inclusive and effective multilateral cooperation based on shared values and principles, including a commitment to respecting democracy, human rights and the rule of law”*. Based on this, we can assume that the other principles are to a considerable extent related to or built around this one. The other seven principles mention aspects such as an “open and fair environment for trade and investment” and related support.

In addition, the Strategy considers the advancement of sustainable development goals through bilateral and multilateral cooperation:

*“Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to addressing climate change and environmental degradation on land and in the ocean, and to supporting sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development; bilateral and multilateral cooperation with partners to meet the objectives of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), multilateral and regional cooperation with the United Nations and Bretton Woods Institutions, as well as regional organisations such as ASEAN and the African Union in the Western Indian Ocean; truly inclusive policy-making and cooperation, where the*

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<sup>16</sup> European Commission, “The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, Brussels, 16.9.2021 JOIN(2021) 24 final, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> European Commission, “The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, Brussels”, Brussels, 16.9.2021 JOIN(2021) 24 final, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf), p. 1. According to their website: “ASEAN represent the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN. It was established on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand, with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) by the Founding Fathers of ASEAN: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Brunei Darussalam joined ASEAN on 7 January 1984, followed by Viet Nam on 28 July 1995, Lao PDR and Myanmar on 23 July 1997, and Cambodia on 30 April 1999, making up what is today the ten Member States of ASEAN”. See: <https://asean.org/about-asean/>.

<sup>18</sup> European Commission, “The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, Brussels, 16.9.2021 JOIN(2021) 24 final, p. 1, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf).

*voices of civil society, the private sector, social partners and other key stakeholders count; mutually supportive trade and economic relations with the region that foster inclusive economic growth and stability, and promote and facilitate connectivity; raise awareness on the impact of global demographic trends*”<sup>19</sup>.

Notably, the document mentions that ASEAN is considered central to the region and that: “The EU appreciates ASEAN’s commitment to effective multilateralism and supports the principle of ASEAN centrality, its efforts to build a rules-based regional architecture, and the multilateral anchor that it provides”<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, after listing the eight core principles, the Strategy lists **seven areas considered priorities for the EU-Asia relationship**: “Sustainable and inclusive prosperity; Green transition; Ocean governance; Digital governance and partnerships; Connectivity; Security and defence; Human security”<sup>21</sup>. These seven priorities reflect the key areas guiding the formulation of current EU policies, with a particular focus on the digital and green transitions.

The first two themes (sustainability and the green transition) have been constant anchors for the EU’s approach to policy making, even before the pandemic, but especially in the last decade. For example, there are publications on how to sustain the EU’s Clean Industry sector: “Identifying levers to unlock clean industry”<sup>22</sup> or on the competitiveness of EU eco-industries<sup>23</sup>. The data presented in these papers help formulate an approach based on the same principles followed in relation with the EU’s partners. At the same time, they demonstrate that the EU is coherent in its approach to its partners and that it is committed to upholding the same values and principles as it does at the European level.

The third theme mentioned in the Strategy, that of ocean governance, is currently being debated at the EU level as the European Commission is drafting the European Oceans Pact - announced by President von der Leyen in her political guidelines for the next European

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<sup>19</sup> European Commission, “The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, Brussels, 16.9.2021 JOIN(2021) 24 final, pp. 2-3, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> European Commission, “The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, Brussels, 16.9.2021 JOIN(2021) 24 final, p. 5, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> European Commission, “The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, Brussels, 16.9.2021 JOIN(2021) 24 final, p. 5, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Debergh, Pieterjan; John, Katrin; Gehrke, Birgit; Bilsen, Valentijn; Unterlass, Fabian; Greeven, Sebastiaan; Lemmel, Annika, “Identifying levers to unlock clean industry”, August 3, 2016, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/64e07ba8-4cf5-4ed1-990e-8fc83b356214>.

<sup>23</sup> See for example: Bilsen, Valentijn; Rademaekers, Koen, “Study on the competitiveness of the EU eco-industry 2009”, March 3, 2014, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/76dab816-c9d2-4469-9239-e1c25e55c675>. More studies and topics are available [here](#).

Commission (2024-2029)<sup>24</sup>. At the same time, the Commission has announced that the document, understood as part of the ocean governance, will be presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> UN Ocean Conference in June 2025<sup>25</sup>.

The same direction is significantly reflected in the issue of digitalisation, which is mentioned as the fourth and the fifth priority in this Strategy. At the European level, in December 2020, the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy presented the EU's Cybersecurity Strategy for the Digital Decade<sup>26</sup>. Discussions with key Asian countries (China, India, Japan and South Korea) on digital partnerships have intensified over the last decade especially, in the areas of research and development, 5G and AI<sup>27</sup>. As trade, but also other forms of interaction with major actors from this region, are increasing, the digital domain and how the interaction in the digital space is regulated becomes even more relevant. From this perspective, the Digital Services Act aims to provide a safer online space<sup>28</sup>, and the Digital Markets Act becomes a tool for "regulating the behaviour of digital platforms acting as gatekeepers between business users and their customers in the EU"<sup>29</sup>. As a result of these initiatives, European consumers are arguably the most empowered and informed in the world when it comes to their digital footprint.

Therefore, given the high level of economic cooperation between these regions, it would be rather difficult to believe that the EU will be able to meet its very high environmental standards - as mentioned in the Green Deal<sup>30</sup> and the digital transition - if the trade with Asia continues as it is today<sup>31</sup>. Digitalisation and connectivity are two topics of interest for the EU and Asia: in November 2020, the first Asia-Europe Sustainable Connectivity conference took

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<sup>24</sup> European Commission, "Political Guidelines 2024-2029", July, 18, 2024, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://commission.europa.eu/document/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/document/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en).

<sup>25</sup> European Commission, "Shaping the European Oceans Pact: Commission launches a call for evidence, January 20, 2025, accessed January 21, 2025, [https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/news/shaping-european-oceans-pact-commission-launches-call-evidence-2025-01-20\\_en](https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/news/shaping-european-oceans-pact-commission-launches-call-evidence-2025-01-20_en).

<sup>26</sup> European Commission, "The EU's Cybersecurity Strategy for the Digital Decade", December 14, 2020, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/eus-cybersecurity-strategy-digital-decade-0>.

<sup>27</sup> European Commission, "Shaping Europe's digital future Asia-Pacific", accessed December 2, 2024, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/asia-pacific>.

<sup>28</sup> European Parliament, Legislative Train Schedule, "A Europe Fit for the Digital Age", December 15, 2024, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-a-europe-fit-for-the-digital-age/file-digital-services-act>.

<sup>29</sup> European Parliament, Legislative Train Schedule, "A Europe Fit for the Digital Age", December 15, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-a-europe-fit-for-the-digital-age/file-digital-markets-act>.

<sup>30</sup> European Commission, "Communication on The European Green Deal", December 11, 2009, accessed December 12, 2024 [https://commission.europa.eu/document/daef3e5c-a456-4fbb-a067-8f1cbe8d9c78\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/document/daef3e5c-a456-4fbb-a067-8f1cbe8d9c78_en).

<sup>31</sup> \*\*\* "Carbon tax proposed by EU unilateral, arbitrary to hurt India's export: FM Sitharaman", The Economic Times, October 9, 2024, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/carbon-tax-proposed-by-eu-unilateral-arbitrary-to-hurt-indias-export-fm-sitharaman/articleshow/114085692.cms>.

place (AESCON)<sup>32</sup> and a second conference was held in March 2022. This second event reflected the growing interest for the topic and became the source for the AESCON Policy Brief series<sup>33</sup>.

The last two priorities of the Strategy are linked to the broader issues of security, defence and human security. From this perspective, it is expected that the EU will continue to provide substantial humanitarian aid in 2025. For Asia, €182 million has been earmarked for humanitarian aid (in particular for the crisis in Myanmar and its effect on Bangladesh, and for the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan)<sup>34</sup>. On the same topic, the EU has increased its investment position, which in 2022 “accounted for 42% of the world’s outward investment positions”. On the same note, between 2012 and 2022 “Northern America and Asia became a more common location for foreign investment”<sup>35</sup>. In the medium and long term, these investments contribute to a closer and more stable relationship between the parties involved.

Another document, perhaps even more relevant in terms of its impact on the EU policy-making process, is the 2022 *Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* which mentions the goal of strengthening tailor-made partnerships with the Asian neighbours<sup>36</sup>. It highlights the importance of the Indo-Pacific region and calls for greater cooperation between the EU and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on issues such as: “violent extremism, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats, cybersecurity, maritime security, transnational crime, humanitarian and disaster relief and crisis management”<sup>37</sup>.

**ASEAN** is one of the EU’s most important partners in the region, and the two parties were already discussing ways to strengthen their relationship before the pandemic, with the health crisis only underlining the importance of an open and reliable approach in times of uncertainty<sup>38</sup>. As a region of more than 660 million consumers, **ASEAN is the EU’s third**

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<sup>32</sup> \*\*\* “Asia-Europe Sustainable Connectivity Scientific Conference (AESCON) 2020”, ASEM InfoBoard, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://aseminfoboard.org/asem\\_events/asia-europe-sustainable-connectivity-scientific-conference-aescon-2020/](https://aseminfoboard.org/asem_events/asia-europe-sustainable-connectivity-scientific-conference-aescon-2020/).

<sup>33</sup> Five policy briefs were published on the topic, available [here](#). Okano-Heijmans, Maaïke. Dekker, Brigitte. Clingendael, “*EU-Asia Digital Connectivity*”, AESCON Policy Brief series, July 7, 2022, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/eu-asia-digital-connectivity-aescon-policy-brief-series>.

<sup>34</sup> European Commission, “EU will provide €1.9 billion in initial humanitarian aid for 2025”, January 16, 2025, accessed January 21, 2025, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_25\\_265](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_265).

<sup>35</sup> Eurostat, “World direct investment patterns”, the website managed by Eurostat and an official website of the European Union, June, 2024, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=World\\_direct\\_investment\\_patterns](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=World_direct_investment_patterns).

<sup>36</sup> European External Action Service, “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence”, p. 13, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic\\_compass\\_en3\\_web.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> European External Action Service, “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence”, p. 55, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic\\_compass\\_en3\\_web.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> For a more in-depth presentation of the effects of the pandemic on the relation see: Yeo, L., “Impact of Covid-19 pandemic on Asia-Europe relations”, *Asia Europe Journal*, vol. 18, 2020, pp. 235–238, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-020-00575-2>.

**largest trading partner after the US and China, with trade in goods worth €252.5 billion in 2023<sup>39</sup>.**

But the partnership between the two actors goes further than the economic dimension and in October 2024, the EU and ASEAN signed a new agreement on disaster management and response to disasters<sup>40</sup>. This is another indicator of the complex interaction and cooperation between the EU and ASEAN, as their interaction covers a number of diverse topics.

As we have seen, the main official EU documents deal with the subject of EU-Asia relations in a rather general way, given its complexity. However, the increased attention given to the economic relations with the Asian countries has begun to be reflected in other EU documents as we will see in the next section.

In the quest for like-minded partners, India and Japan represent countries with which the EU wants to deepen its economic cooperation, especially in the tech sector. With **India** the EU has set-up the **EU-India Trade and Technology Council** in 2023, following the model used for the relationship with the US; this is the second one for the EU, while for India this is the first design of its kind established with a third party<sup>41</sup>. The purpose of the Council is to “increase bilateral cooperation, to boost bilateral trade and investment”<sup>42</sup>.

As for EU’s relationship with Japan, important initiatives to enhance the bilateral cooperation have been put in place, such as the **Memorandum of Cooperation to support secure, resilient and sustainable submarine connectivity** and the **Memorandum of Cooperation on semiconductors**<sup>43</sup> or the cooperation under the **Working Group on international cooperation on policies for building more transparent, resilient and**

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<sup>39</sup> European Commission, “Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)”, the website of the European Commission, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/association-south-east-asian-nations-asean\\_en](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/association-south-east-asian-nations-asean_en).

<sup>40</sup> European External Action Service, Delegation of the European Union to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), „EU and ASEAN sign new agreement on Disaster Management”, 17 October 2024, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/association-southeast-asian-nations-asean/eu-and-asean-sign-new-agreement-disaster-management\\_en?s=47](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/association-southeast-asian-nations-asean/eu-and-asean-sign-new-agreement-disaster-management_en?s=47).

<sup>41</sup> European Commission, “First EU-India Trade and Technology Council focused on deepening strategic engagement on trade and technology”, May 16, 2023, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_23\\_2728](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_2728).

<sup>42</sup> Delivorias, Angelos. “EU-India Trade and Technology Council”, EPRS European Parliamentary Research Service, January, 2024, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2024/757587/EPRS\\_ATAG\(2024\)757587\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2024/757587/EPRS_ATAG(2024)757587_EN.pdf). See also: Nachiappan, Karthik, “Digital and Technology”, in Sánchez-Cacicedo, Amaia, *EU-India Relations. Gaining strategic traction?*, EU Institute for Security Studies, Chaillot Paper 181, February, 2024, pp. 27-33, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP\\_181.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_181.pdf).

<sup>43</sup> European Commission, “EU and Japan boost strategic cooperation on digital and on critical raw materials supply chains”, July 13, 2023, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_23\\_3831](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3831).

**sustainable supply chains**<sup>44</sup>. Worth mentioning is that Japan is also part of the EU's Raw Materials Diplomacy Initiative, a tool through which the EU seeks access to key raw materials<sup>45</sup>.

Reaching the end of this section, we have assessed the current relations between the EU and the regions of South and Southeast Asia, and the main directions of the post-pandemic cooperation. In addition, we have observed the documents which govern EU's relations with these regions in terms of the twin transition.

### 3. Romania and its interaction with these regions

Romania is an active participant in the debate on how the EU and the regions of South and Southeast Asia can have a more structured cooperation. Some of the official documents mentioning and explaining the relations between Romania and the Asian regions are:

- *The National Defence Strategy for 2020-2024 "Together for a safe and prosperous Romania in a world marked by new challenges"* mentions Asia-Pacific as a region where "regional hegemonic ambitions intersect Europe and that [...] Asia-Pacific will be the most exposed to significant changes in terms of security developments"<sup>46</sup>.
- According to the **2024-2028 Programme for Government**, Romania aims to consolidate the Strategic Partnerships with Japan and the Republic of Korea<sup>47</sup>. The previous Programme for Government (2023 – 2024) included even more actions that Romania could take to deepen the relations with Asia and increase the economic cooperation with these regions, which is mentioned to be an important goal<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> European Commission, "EU and Japan hold first working group to discuss economic security and supply chains", January 30, 2024, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-and-japan-hold-first-working-group-discuss-economic-security-and-supply-chains-2024-01-30\\_en](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-and-japan-hold-first-working-group-discuss-economic-security-and-supply-chains-2024-01-30_en).

<sup>45</sup> European Commission, "Raw materials diplomacy", accessed December 2, 2024, [https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/raw-materials/areas-specific-interest/raw-materials-diplomacy\\_en](https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/raw-materials/areas-specific-interest/raw-materials-diplomacy_en). See also: Eur-Lex, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Tackling the Challenges in Commodity Markets and on Raw Materials COM/2011/0025 final, Publications Office of the European Union, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52011DC0025>.

<sup>46</sup> Romania Presidential Administration, *The National Defence Strategy for 2020-2024 "Together for a safe and prosperous Romania in a world marked by new challenges"*, p. 21, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/National\\_Defence\\_Strategy\\_2020\\_2024.pdf](https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/National_Defence_Strategy_2020_2024.pdf).

<sup>47</sup> Romanian Government, "Programme for Government 2024-2028", p. 42, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://gov.ro/en/objectives/programme-for-government-2024-2028>. See also: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Strategic Partnerships and Special Relations, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://www.mae.ro/en/node/2186>.

<sup>48</sup> Romanian Government, "The 2023 – 2024 Programme for Government Vision for Nation", p. 147, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://gov.ro/fisiere/pagini\\_fisiere/23-06-16-12-32-52Programul\\_de\\_Guvernare\\_2023-2024.pdf](https://gov.ro/fisiere/pagini_fisiere/23-06-16-12-32-52Programul_de_Guvernare_2023-2024.pdf).



- *The White Paper on Defence* mentions the “competitions among the great actors for the control of areas of common strategic interest (Black Sea region, Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East, Asia-Pacific) and that the involvement or indirect involvement of these actors in ongoing conflicts have reverberations on the regional security”<sup>49</sup>.

In this section we will briefly present the main frameworks of cooperation established between Romania and three Asian states that belong to the region and were previously mentioned. These countries are the Republic of Korea, Japan and India.

Romania has been the first EU Member State which signed a Strategic Partnership with Republic of Korea, in 2008: the *Joint Declaration on the Establishment of the Bilateral Strategic Partnership*. After adopting this Declaration, in 2010 the Joint Plan of Action for the implementation of the partnership was signed<sup>50</sup>. More recently, in April 2024, the two countries decided, through a common statement to strengthen their strategic partnership including the defence industry sector and energy sector: *Joint Statement on Strengthening the Strategic Partnership between Romania and the Republic of Korea*<sup>51</sup>. At the same time, the two countries signed an agreement on defence cooperation<sup>52</sup>. In this context, Romania’s significant role in the region, including through its participation in the Three Seas Initiative, has been recognised<sup>53</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> Ministry of National Defence, “Carta albă a apărării” [The White Paper on Defence], 2021, p. 11, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://www.mapn.ro/legislatie/documente/carta\\_alba\\_2021.pdf](https://www.mapn.ro/legislatie/documente/carta_alba_2021.pdf).

<sup>50</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Embassy of Romania in the Republic of Korea Brief history”, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://seoul.mae.ro/en/node/393#null>.

<sup>51</sup> Presidential Administration of Romania, „Declarațiile de presă susținute de Președintele României, Klaus Iohannis, în cadrul vizitei oficiale în Republica Coreea”, [The press statements of the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, on the occasion of the Official Visit to the Republic of Korea] April 23, 2024, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/declaratiile-de-presa-sustinite-de-presedintele-romaniei-klaus-iohannis-in-cadrul-vizitei-oficiale-in-republica-coreea>. See also: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Joint Statement on Strengthening the Strategic Partnership between Romania and the Republic of Korea, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://www.mae.ro/sites/default/files/file/anul\\_2024/pdf\\_2024/ro\\_alternate\\_joint\\_statement\\_rok.pdf](https://www.mae.ro/sites/default/files/file/anul_2024/pdf_2024/ro_alternate_joint_statement_rok.pdf). Kim, Sarah, “Korea, Romania agree to strengthen strategic partnership at summit”, The Korea JoongAng Daily, April 3, 2024, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/about/about.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Statul Major al Apărării, „Acord de cooperare în domeniul apărării între România și Republica Coreea semnat, în premieră, la Seul”, <https://www.defense.ro/acord-de-cooperare-in-domeniul-apararii-intre-romania-si-republica-coreea-semnat-in-premiera-la-seul>. [The English version: The first Defence Cooperation Agreement between Romania and the Republic of Korea was signed at Seoul no. 76, April 23, 2024, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://english.mapn.ro/cpresa/6217\\_-the-first-defence-cooperation-agreement-between-romania-and-the-republic-of-korea-was-signed-at-seoul-](https://english.mapn.ro/cpresa/6217_-the-first-defence-cooperation-agreement-between-romania-and-the-republic-of-korea-was-signed-at-seoul-).

<sup>53</sup> \*\*\* “Speech by H.E. Mr. Kap-soo RIM, the Ambassador of the Republic of Korea to Romania, at the “Bucharest Leaders’ Summit: Licence for a Better World”, Nineoclock.ro, April 6, 2024, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://nineoclock.ro/2024/04/06/speech-by-h-e-mr-kap-soo-rim-the-ambassador-of-the-republic-of-korea-to-romania-at-the-bucharest-leaders-summit-licence-for-a-better-world/>. For more information about the Three Seas Initiative see: Sebe, Mihai (coord.), “Anticipating the 2023 Three Seas Initiative Bucharest Summit. Advancing the common agenda”, Working Paper Series, No. 46, April 2023, European Institute of Romania, accessed December 2, 2024, <http://ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/WP-46-Anticipating-the-2023-3SI-Bucharest-Summit.pdf>.

Another Asian country Romania has a Strategic Partnership with is Japan. The document was signed in 2023 (back in 2021, the two countries celebrated 100 years of diplomatic relations) and aims to facilitate: political and security dialogue, economic and development cooperation and culture, science and technology, research and development, innovation, people-to-people contacts<sup>54</sup>.

Furthermore, Romania has a special relation with India, and this has been reflected by the signing, on March 8, 2013, of a *Joint Statement on Establishing Extensive Partnership between Romania and India*. In 2023, Romania and India signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement aiming to expand and consolidate military cooperation<sup>55</sup>. The first meeting of the Romanian Indian Joint Defence Cooperation Committee took place at the Ministry of National Defence in Bucharest, in April 2024 and highlighted topics of interest such as: “maritime security, fight against terrorism, joint participation in UN-led missions, cooperation in the technical-military field or education and military history”<sup>56</sup>. In 2024, the two countries marked 75 years of diplomatic relations and on February 23, 2024, following the *10th Anniversary of the signing of the Joint Statement on Establishing Extensive Partnership between Romania and India* a Joint Declaration was adopted<sup>57</sup>. The Declaration highlights three major areas of cooperation for the two countries: energy, information technology and communication (IT&C), and manufacturing industry<sup>58</sup>. Mirroring this close relation, the economic cooperation grew in the past five years from \$543.83 million in 2019-2020, to \$2980.80 million in 2023-2024<sup>59</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Joint Statement on the Establishment of the Strategic Partnership between Romania and Japan”, March 16, 2023, [https://www.mae.ro/sites/default/files/file/anul\\_2023/pdf\\_2023/2023.03.16\\_declara%C8%9Bie\\_parteneriat\\_ro-jp.pdf](https://www.mae.ro/sites/default/files/file/anul_2023/pdf_2023/2023.03.16_declara%C8%9Bie_parteneriat_ro-jp.pdf). See also: Ueda, Hiroshi, “Japan - Romania Strategic Partnership: Together we build bridges and defend our values”, March 7, 2023, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://www.ro.emb-japan.go.jp/files/100476580.pdf>.

<sup>55</sup> Rao, Archana, “India-Romania Bilateral Trade and Investment Relations: An Overview”, India Briefing, January 23, 2025, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://www.india-briefing.com/news/india-romania-bilateral-and-trade-relations-an-overview-35903.html/>. See also: Express Defence, “India and Romania ink the first ever Defence Cooperation Agreement; focus on Indo-Pacific and more”, April 5, 2023, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-india-and-romania-ink-the-first-ever-defence-cooperation-agreement-focus-on-indo-pacific-and-more-3035442/>.

<sup>56</sup> Ministry of National Defence, “Inaugural Meeting of the Romanian-Indian Joint Defence Cooperation Committee”, Press release 77, April 24, 2024, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://english.mapn.ro/cpresa/6218\\_Inaugural-Meeting-of-the-Romanian-Indian-Joint-Defence-Cooperation-Committee](https://english.mapn.ro/cpresa/6218_Inaugural-Meeting-of-the-Romanian-Indian-Joint-Defence-Cooperation-Committee).

<sup>57</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Extensive Partnership with India”, accessed December 2, 2024, <http://infoeuropa.ro/node/35618>.

<sup>58</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Joint Declaration following the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the signing of the Joint Statement on Establishing Extensive Partnership between Romania and India”, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://www.mae.ro/node/64332>.

<sup>59</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Department of Commerce, “India-Romania Bilateral Relations”, July 15, 2024, accessed December 2, 2024 <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Romania-Bilateral-15-July-2024.pdf>.



The bilateral relation has also benefitted from other common actions such as the launch, in September 2024, of a commemorative joint postal stamp, in order to mark the closeness between the two countries, India and Romania<sup>60</sup>.

In Romania, a sector which has seen important developments in the last five years and is connected to South Asia is labour force. For example, by the end of 2023, there were 211,000 workers from South Asia<sup>61</sup>. This is a domain where the relations can deepen and develop in order to ensure a more just approach for the parties involved. To conclude this section, we can affirm that the economic relations with Asia are stable. Between 2022-2023 there was an increase of 4.41% in exports and a decrease of 5.09% in imports<sup>62</sup>, however, January 2023 saw an increase of 11.87% in exports<sup>63</sup>. Due to its position on the European continent, Romania can be a key player on the route trade with Asia, especially concerning the goods from South Korea<sup>64</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusions/ Recommendations

In this paper, we have examined the ways in which the EU improved its post-pandemic relations with Asian regions that are important economic partners for the Union. We saw that different unpredictable events - such as the pandemic or surge prices - can have a significant impact on the trade process and can affect in a negative manner the life of the EU citizens. As the trade links between Europe and Asia have deepened in the last decades, the goal of ensuring **responsible supply chains** has become a guiding tool in the policy-making approach of the responsible decision-makers. As has been the case especially after 1991, the EU has had a

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<sup>60</sup> \*\*\* “India continues to develop ties with Europe, deepens cooperation with Romania”, Sarkaritel.com, September 18, 2024, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://www.sarkaritel.com/india-continues-to-develop-ties-with-europe-deepens-cooperation-with-romania/>.

<sup>61</sup> Kryeziu, Alza. “Romania Sees Surge in Foreign Workers, Primarily From South Asia”, October 1, 2024 Schengen News, accessed December 2, 2024 <https://schengen.news/romania-sees-surge-in-foreign-workers-primarily-from-south-asia/>. See also: Coşciug, Anatolie (coord.), Coşciug, Andriana. Porumbescu, Alexandra. Kyrychenko, Viktoriia. Mercea, Andreea. Adamescu, Alexandra. “Romania: Exploratory study on labour immigration”, January 14, 2025, accessed March 31, 2025 [https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/library-document/romania-exploratory-study-labour-immigration\\_en](https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/library-document/romania-exploratory-study-labour-immigration_en).

<sup>62</sup> Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Tourism, International Trade Results of Romania in the period 01.01.-31.01.2023, Monthly Newsletter, No. 01/2023, p. 26, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://www.imm.gov.ro/adaugare\\_fisiere\\_imm/2023/05/RO-Comert-international-01-2023.pdf](https://www.imm.gov.ro/adaugare_fisiere_imm/2023/05/RO-Comert-international-01-2023.pdf). Data for January 2023 published in April 2023.

<sup>63</sup> Sfetcu, Camelia. Trofimp, Alexandru. Romanian Agency for Investment and Foreign Trade Rules, Monthly Newsletter No. 1, 2024, p. 26, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://arice.gov.ro/1/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/RO-Comert-international-01-2024.pdf>.

<sup>64</sup> Bănciulea, Nicoleta. „Daraban: Portul Constanța poate reprezenta un hub comercial pentru mărfurile care vin din Coreea”, [Daraban: Constanta Port can be a commercial hub for the goods coming from Korea], Agerpres, September 12, 2024, <https://www.agerpres.ro/economic-intern/2024/09/12/daraban-portul-constanta-poate-reprezenta-un-hub-comercial-pentru-marfurile-care-vin-din-coreea--1353725>.

positive impact (meaning supporting economic growth and developing the countries) in its trade partnerships with third parties. According to official data between “1999 and 2010 the EU foreign trade doubled and now accounts for over 30% of the EU’s gross domestic product (GDP)”<sup>65</sup>. Although, many actions were taken in the last five years, more can be done to consolidate and develop the cooperation between the EU and South and Southeast Asia. Aiming to develop and strengthen cooperation is based on the mutual shared values that we identified in the interactions between these actors such as the support for the sustainable development goals, the green transition, the responsible approach for the development of artificial intelligence (AI) and the disaster management in crisis situations. At the same time, the EU can deepen its cooperation with the countries belonging these regions by emphasising its unique approach, through a stronger partnership centred around values and principles such as respect for human rights and environmental protection. Stronger support for a multilateral approach to today’s major uncertainties is particularly relevant in the context of a more interconnected world - in the digital or virtual space but also in terms of access to clean energy. Continuing and increasing the number of high-level meetings between officials representing these actors would also be an option to advance the cooperation between the EU and South and Southeast Asia.

As the last five years have demonstrated, although sometimes the interests of the parties involved can be very different and maybe hard to reconcile<sup>66</sup>, the joint efforts can bring great benefits. The interconnection that we have witnessed and experienced, especially due to the development of technology and affordable international travel provides a complex environment for the fast spreading of different pathogens, but at the same time creates opportunities for developing economies. Enhancing the dialogue between policy-makers, but also people-to-people contacts, closer civil society cooperation and cultural diplomacy<sup>67</sup> may have a significant impact on the cooperation. In addition, Romania can build stronger partnerships with

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<sup>65</sup> European Union, Directorate-General for Communication, “Towards open and fair world-wide trade”, accessed December 2, 2024, [https://european-union.europa.eu/priorities-and-actions/actions-topic/trade\\_en](https://european-union.europa.eu/priorities-and-actions/actions-topic/trade_en).

<sup>66</sup> Hutt, David. “ASEAN summit: EU seeks to build bridges in Southeast Asia”, October 10, 2024, Deutsche Welle <https://www.dw.com/en/asean-summit-eu-seeks-to-build-bridges-in-southeast-asia/a-70454646>.

<sup>67</sup> Ocon, David. Bonet, Lluís. “Stronger cultural ties needed to deepen ASEAN–EU cooperation in a polarised world”, January 3, 2025, East Asia Forum <https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/01/03/stronger-cultural-ties-needed-to-deepen-asean-eu-cooperation-in-a-polarised-world/>. See also: European External Action Service, Delegation of the European Union to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), “ASEAN youth convene, contribute to EU-ASEAN Strategic Partnership”, March 21, 2025, accessed March 31, 2025 [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/association-southeast-asian-nations-asean/asean-youth-convene-contribute-eu-asean-strategic-partnership\\_en?s=47](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/association-southeast-asian-nations-asean/asean-youth-convene-contribute-eu-asean-strategic-partnership_en?s=47).

the Asian countries by using its strong advantages in areas such as the information technology sector, agriculture and infrastructure<sup>68</sup>.

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