

Shaping The Future Regional Security:

The EU-Malaysia Defense Connection

by

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The defence relationship between the European Union (EU) and Malaysia has evolved into an enduring partnership for enhancing regional stability and countering transnational security threats in Southeast Asia. Even though the defence cooperation between the European Union and Malaysia is rather limited at the moment which individually, some European Union members such as Germany and France have extensive engagements with Malaysia while others have limited to no defence cooperation with Malaysia but it did not hinder the further collaboration in the sector. This essay asserts the importance of EU-Malaysia defence cooperation by highlighting the mutual benefits derived by both parties.

THE EUROPEAN UNION STRATEGIC COMPASS FOR SECURITY AND DEFENCE

The European Union's 27 member states adopted the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence on 21 March 2022. This Strategic Compass is structured around 4 pillars which are the **Act**, which allows the EU to react rapidly and robustly to a crisis. **Secure**, which involves the EU anticipating, deterring and responding to security challenges. **Invest**, which involves the EU member states to commit defence expenditures to reduce military and civilian capability gaps, and strengthen its European Defence Technological and Industrial Base and finally **Partner**, where the EU will seek to address shared threats and challenges by strengthening cooperation with strategic partners such as NATO, the UN, and regional partners, including the OSCE, AU and ASEAN.

MALAYSIA-EU PARTNERSHIP AND COOPERATION

Malaysia stands as a pivotal strategic partner for the European Union (EU), with bilateral relations based on mutual interests and shared values. On 14 December 2022, Malaysia and the European Union formalised their relationship by signing the Malaysia-EU comprehensive Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). This agreement underscores a mutual dedication to advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, guided by key international and EU policy frameworks, notably the Paris Agreement, the Global Gateway Strategy, and the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The collaboration focuses on priority areas such as democracy, gender equality, environment, climate change, trade, as well as human rights and security.

Under security spectrum, the PCA highlights the collaboration in essential areas, including counter-terrorism, radicalization, combatting organized crime and Trans crime organisations, drugs, cybersecurity, the exchange of information in the fields of education and training, research and development of new policies and best strategies to safeguarding Southeast Asia's security. Other than that EU and Malaysia also will encourage cooperation in the fields of science, technology, and innovation such as ICT, cybersecurity, space technology, and renewable energy.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Under the EU's Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia (ESIWA) project, the EU is decisively scaling up its engagement with ASEAN countries, including Malaysia. ESIWA promotes effective practical cooperation, capacity building, and essential exchanges between the EU and its Asian partners. Notably, ESIWA has already collaborated with Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) in Lahad Datu, Sabah, Malaysia in conducting a successful workshop on enhancing maritime security. The objective of the seminar are to stronger a collaboration in counterterrorism and preventing countering violent extremism. The seminar convened 35 experts from several Malaysian security agencies and their EU counterparts representing the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), France, Hungary and Spain, among others. The event also was specifically designed for stakeholders operating in the TriBorder Area between the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Next, The Malaysian Institute of Defence and Security (MiDAS) MINDEF, EU (through ESIWA) and the German Armed Forces will organise a Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) in the Indo-Pacific at the interface between Disaster Risk Management and Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI).The workshop is planned to be hosted by Malaysia in September 2025. The workshop aims to bring together policy practitioners and experts from the EU and ASEAN countries to delve into the strategic role of CIMIC in the areas of disaster risk management and approaches to strengthen cooperation and trust among different units via confidence-building measures.

Recently, in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) retreat in Penang, Germany has been accepted as an observer under the Expert Working Group (EWG) observer programme of the ADMM-Plus for the 2024 -2027 period. These new developments will indirectly open up additional avenues for heightened EU-Malaysia.

FURTHER AREAS OF COOPERATION

The EU and ASEAN, with Malaysia as a key player, must expand their cooperation beyond traditional defence collaboration to include critical areas such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence (AI) and defence technologies, as well as diplomacy, peacebuilding, and maritime security in the South China Sea. As cyber threats escalate widely, EU and ASEAN countries could deepen their collaboration in

cybersecurity. In this area, the EU could assist in developing resilient cybersecurity infrastructures and share best practices in cyber defence, which are vital for national security and economic stability.

The potential for collaboration in AI, particularly in defence applications, is immense. The EU and ASEAN should work together to co-develop cutting-edge defence systems, including drones and advanced cybersecurity solutions. Furthermore, the EU should actively support technology transfer to enhance the defence capabilities of ASEAN countries, driving innovation and technological advancement. In addition to defence, the EU and ASEAN, particularly through Malaysia, must seize the opportunity to collaborate on peacebuilding and diplomatic efforts. These joint initiatives are crucial for enhancing regional stability and forging stronger international relations.

BENEFITS FOR MALAYSIA

The defence cooperation between the EU and Malaysia delivers critical advantages for Malaysia. First and foremost, it grants access to cutting-edge defence technology. EU member states such as France, Germany, and Italy are at the forefront of defence innovation. Through this collaboration, Malaysia could secure state-of-the-art technologies, particularly in cybersecurity, air defence, and maritime security. These technologies are indispensable for safeguarding Malaysia's national security and tackling emerging threats head-on.

Malaysia also could benefit through training programs in defence that are provided in the EU such as programs in the European Security and Defence College (ESDC), PESCO projects, the European Defence Agency (EDA), and other specific training programs. These training programs could help equip Malaysian personnel with essential skills and tactical knowledge in terms of enhancing interoperability, developing capabilities, promoting common understanding, responding to evolving security challenges and address skills gaps. This enhances the operational readiness of the Malaysian armed forces and significantly bolsters their ability to conduct joint operations and navigate complex security challenges effectively. The EU's expertise in counter-terrorism, particularly in intelligence gathering, law enforcement collaboration, and community-based strategies, is valuable in supporting Malaysia's efforts to address these challenges and prevent radicalization.

By cooperating with the EU, Malaysia not only strengthens its defence capabilities but also elevates its regional and global standing, reinforcing its diplomatic leverage within ASEAN and beyond. This partnership unequivocally positions Malaysia as a pivotal security player in the ASEAN region.

BENEFITS FOR THE EU

For the EU, fostering a strong partnership with Malaysia is essential for its strategic interests in Southeast Asia. Malaysia's influential role in ASEAN makes it a crucial ally in confronting regional security challenges, including territorial disputes in the South China Sea, piracy, and terrorism. Strengthening defence ties with Malaysia would empower the EU to shape security policies in Southeast Asia, a region that is rapidly gaining geopolitical importance. Malaysia's strategic location along vital maritime trade routes is critical, as these routes are essential for global trade. Therefore through its defence collaboration with Malaysia, the EU could secure these shipping lanes, which are of substantial economic significance for Europe and this move will uphold the EU's new strategy on the Indo-Pacific which was launched in April 2021.

Moreover, EU-Malaysia defence cooperation enables the EU to expand its influence within ASEAN by providing technological and strategic support to member states. As global power dynamics shift especially with China's growing presence the EU's partnership with Malaysia is vital for upholding a rules-based international order.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, EU-Malaysia defence cooperation is not only multifaceted but also indispensable. By confronting key security challenges such as maritime security, counter-terrorism, and capacity building, this partnership significantly bolsters Malaysia's defence capabilities while contributing to regional and global stability. For the EU, Malaysia represents a strategic partner in Southeast Asia, enabling the EU to maintain influence in the region and safeguard vital maritime trade routes. As global security dynamics evolve, EU-Malaysia defence cooperation will play an increasingly pivotal role in shaping the region's future security landscape. By pursuing further collaboration in critical areas like cybersecurity and AI, both parties can ensure sustained progress and stability in an increasingly complex world.