

Normative Power Europe at a Crossroads? The Normative Dimensions of the EU's Relations with ASEAN and ECOWAS

by Natthanan Kunnamas and Bernardo Venturi

ABSTRACT

To what extent can the EU exert normative pressure on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Economic Community of the West African States (ECOWAS)? As the EU displays multiple sets of policies espousing these norms and attaches normative conditionality to financial assistance to external partners, the concept purported by Ian Manners called “normative power Europe” is used to analyse the normative aims of the EU in ASEAN and ECOWAS. In particular, attention is devoted to democracy, human rights, and to the political and economic domains. In the political sphere, human rights and non-intervention pose significant challenges to EU–ASEAN relations. In contrast, in the economic domain, the EU successfully utilised economic incentives to expand its normative power in ASEAN. Normative pressure in ECOWAS is more focused on political domains, in which peace and security norms are prioritised over human rights and democratic processes. In contrast, the economic and development models of the EU are less well received in ECOWAS compared with ASEAN, where trade remains the priority of interregional cooperation.

ASEAN | ECOWAS | EU external relations

keywords

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by Natthanan Kunnamas and Bernardo Venturi*

1. Normative power Europe at a crossroads

The European Union is (said to be) a normative power through norm diffusion to its external partners.¹ In this paper, the concept of "normative power Europe" (NPE) is used to assess EU's bilateral relations between with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and with the Economic Community of the West African States (ECOWAS). According to Ian Manners, the force of the EU consists of "its ability to shape conceptions of 'normal' in international relations" in line with its unique normative basis related to its values.² The EU displays multiple sets of policies espousing these norms and attaches normative conditionality when providing financial assistance to external partners.³ In recent years, criticisms of NPE have grown, as the EU has been increasingly constructed as an actor with complex and mixed motives, similar to other international players. Mark Pollack, for instance, has concluded that the tolerance of illiberalism within and outside Europe poses a double threat to NPE.⁴ Bettina Ahrens has also singled out the EU's normative ambiguities, although she has also suggested that the EU should openly accept and

¹ Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?", in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (June 2002), p. 235-258 at p. 242, DOI 10.1111/1468-5965.00353.

² *Ibid.*, p. 239. The main mentioned values are peace, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, good governance, respect for human rights, social solidarity, anti-discrimination and sustainable development.

³ Natthanan Kunnamas, "Normative Power Europe, ASEAN and Thailand", in *International Economics and Economic Policy*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (July 2020), p. 765-781 at p. 769, DOI 10.1007/s10368-020-00478-y.

⁴ Mark A. Pollack, *Living in a Material World: A Critique of 'Normative Power Europe'*, Preliminary draft of a paper prepared for publication in Hubert Zimmermann and Andreas Dür, eds., *Key Controversies in European Integration* (London: Palgrave, 3rd edition, forthcoming), 18 May 2020, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1623002>.

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embrace norm contestation and use pragmatism in its external relations.⁵ This last approach seems particularly fertile to dive into the EU's normative ambiguities and pragmatic approach to its external projection.

In practice, EU norm diffusion to sovereign partners outside of Europe has delivered mixed results. In Asia, violation of human rights is an EU area of great concern. China's human rights violations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang have continued. The EU also suspended negotiations with China on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment in May 2021 after a European Parliament resolution.⁶ Furthermore, in February 2022 the Chinese government was not invited to the Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in Paris due to violations of human rights of China's Uyghur minority in the Xinjiang province.⁷ The EU–China relations further deteriorated as a result of Beijing's stance on Russia's 2022 large-scale aggression on Ukraine. The human rights situation in Myanmar reached its lowest point when four anti-government activists were hanged in July 2022,⁸ which questions the effectiveness of EU sanctions on the military elites following the military coup d'état that ended civilian rule in February 2021.⁹

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the EU faces resistance to a normative approach and in working on democracy, peace, freedom and liberty.¹⁰ The EU has been unsuccessful in supporting democracy and peace through its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), before and after the 2011 Arab Spring. Indeed, prior to 2010, the EU was silent on authoritarian MENA leaders,¹¹ whom the EU assumed to be "smart dictatorships". The MENA leaders welcomed economic incentives and tariff reduction but resisted normative pressure on democracy consolidation and freedom. The ENP, which initially aimed to create a "ring of friends", has then turned into an insufficient exercise in managing a "ring of fire", especially in relation to the civil war in Syria and the subsequent refugee crisis.¹²

⁵ Bettina Ahrens, "Normative Power Europe in Crisis? Understanding the Productive Role of Ambiguity in the EU's Transformative Agenda", in *Asia-Europe Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (June 2018), p. 199-212, DOI 10.1007/s10308-018-0507-8.

⁶ European Parliament, *MEPs Refuse Any Agreement with China Whilst Sanctions Are in Place*, 20 May 2021, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20210517IPR04123>.

⁷ Deutsche Welle, "Why Is the EU so Interested in the Indo-Pacific?" [Video], in *YouTube*, 21 February 2022, <https://youtu.be/-3dJXOZJfdc>.

⁸ Council of the European Union, *Myanmar/Burma: Declaration by the High Representative on Behalf of the EU on the Execution of Pro-Democracy and Opposition Leaders in Myanmar/Burma*, 25 July 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/07/25/myanmarburma-declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-execution-of-pro-democracy-and-opposition-leaders-in-myanmarburma>.

⁹ Council of the European Union, *Myanmar: Declaration by the High Representative on Behalf of the European Union*, 2 February 2021, <https://europa.eu/!pU63Nk>.

¹⁰ Edward Burke, "Running into the Sand? The EU's Faltering Response to the Arab Revolutions", in *CER Essays*, December 2013, <https://www.cer.eu/node/3657>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹² Paul Taylor, "EU 'Ring of Friends' Turns into Ring of Fire", in *Reuters*, 27 September 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN0RR090>.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, democratic processes and human rights violations have been frequently overshadowed by security and migration concerns in the framework of principled pragmatism. In particular, the Sahel¹³ has been the major region where the EU has ostensibly attempted to implement its integrated approach by combining different foreign policy instruments, ranging from development cooperation to military training. In this region, the EU has prioritised security in cooperation with the Sahelian government due to the increasing jihadi threats, but maintaining a wide array of instruments. At the same time, before the recent coup d'états – two in Mali (August 2020 and May 2021), Chad (April 2021), Burkina Faso (January 2022) and Niger (July 2023) – human rights were not prioritised by Brussels. Only some evident human rights violations perpetrated by the national armies forced the EU to tie its support for those governments to the respect of human rights. However, the coup d'état in the region annulled whatever effect conditionality was supposed to have. Furthermore, the increased role played by the Russian Federation has prompted the EU to condemn the deployment of Russian mercenaries in the Sahel, which poses a great threat to civilian populations.¹⁴

Against this backdrop, this study explores the relationships between the EU with the ASEAN and the ECOWAS, which are the most advanced forms of regionalism in Southeast Asia and West Africa respectively. In particular, this paper addresses the normative aims of the EU using the concept of NPE and focuses on the following domains: reactions to coup d'états, democratic elections, freedom of expression and respect for human rights, and economic integration.

2. ASEAN–EU relations

ASEAN is one of the oldest viable regionalisms in Asia. Established in 1967, it now comprises nearly all Southeast Asian states except for Timor Leste.¹⁵ The political systems of its member states differ massively, ranging from socialist systems to military rule to democratic states. The economic performance is also very heterogeneous, with newer members Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar lagging behind the older ones. Despite the large disparity in political and economic developmental levels, ASEAN holds the ambition to achieve the ASEAN Community through three pillars, namely, the ASEAN Economic Community, ASEAN Political and Security Community and ASEAN Socio-cultural Community.¹⁶

¹³ A “narrow Sahel” is usually described as including Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, all ECOWAS members. A broader definition also includes Chad and Mauritania.

¹⁴ Lorne Cook, “EU Warns Mali, Sahel States over Use of Russian Mercenaries”, in *AP News*, 26 January 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/64a6e0e36a6a7753325446aa209dea90>.

¹⁵ The ten ASEAN states are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

¹⁶ ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint*, June 2009, p. 1, <https://asean.org/book/asean-political-security-community-blueprint-2>.

ASEAN–EU relations commenced in 1977 when the European Communities became the first ASEAN dialogue partner. In 45 years, the interregional relationship has undergone various changes due to the diverse missions and visions of the two organisations. Both organisations share the United States security umbrella under the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in Europe and US security commitments to ASEAN members, including military bases in Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines, and the US military presence in the South China Sea.

In the post-Cold War era, both organisations were preoccupied with the widening membership and deepening integration. The EU's enlargement process required new members to incorporate norms on democracy, rule of law, individual freedoms and market economy (the so-called "Copenhagen Criteria"), while ASEAN embraced socialist states to be members without delay. Since the accession of Myanmar in 1997, human rights have become an area where the perspectives of the two regional organisations have greatly diverged. This evolution has negatively influenced the overall relationship, as the EU has complained about perceived ASEAN's leniency with Myanmar's persistent human rights violations under the cover of the non-intervention norm.¹⁷ This ASEAN way of non-intervention was the major impediment in EU-ASEAN relations for nearly a decade already in the 1990s, with the ASEAN–EU Dialogue not taking place from 1997 to 2000 and the region-to-region relationship itself stagnating during much of the 1990s and 2000s.¹⁸ The underlying tension in the EU–ASEAN relations was also a result of conflicting worldviews, that is, normative relativism as espoused by ASEAN and normative universalism as championed by the EU.

The ASEAN–EU relations improved following the Nuremberg Declaration on the ASEAN–EU Enhanced Partnership in 2007. Additionally, the formation of the European External Action Service in 2009 gave some more solid support to the EU's interregional relations.¹⁹ In 2012, the EU signed ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and joined the ASEAN Regional Forum. Additionally, the EU–ASEAN Partnership for Strategic Purpose was launched in 2015. Currently, six out of ten ASEAN states have a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU.²⁰

¹⁷ Giovanni Finizio, "The Normative Dimension of EU-ASEAN Relations: A Historical Perspective", in *Perspectives on Federalism*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2020), p. 124-145, http://webarchive-2009-2021.on-federalism.eu/attachments/351_347_Pof_2020_Vol.12-1_Finizio.pdf.

¹⁸ Ludovica Marchi Balossi-Restelli, "Obstinate and Unmovable? The EU vis-à-vis Myanmar via EU-ASEAN", in *Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2014), p. 53-70, <https://doi.org/10.30722/anzjes.vol6.iss1.15147>; Kerstin Schembera, "The Rocky Road of Interregionalism: EU Sanctions Against Human Rights-Violating Myanmar and Repercussions on ASEAN–EU Relations", in *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2016), p. 1022-1043, DOI 10.1080/09557571.2016.1230590; Kerstin Radtke, "ASEAN Enlargement and Norm Change: A Window of Opportunity for Democracy and Human Rights Entrepreneurs?", in *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (December 2014), p. 79-105, <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810341403300304>.

¹⁹ Joachim A. Koops and Giulia Tercovich, "Shaping the European External Action Service and Its Post-Lisbon Crisis Management Structures: An Assessment of the EU High Representatives' Political Leadership", in *European Security*, Vol. 29, No. 3, p. 275-300, DOI 10.1080/09662839.2020.1798410.

²⁰ The EU has signed PCAs with Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Finally, Singapore and Vietnam have signed free trade agreements with the EU.

3. NPE and ASEAN

As previously discussed, Myanmar-related questions have dominated EU human rights concerns regarding ASEAN. Two years after the 2010 general elections and the victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, the EU decided to lift the sanctions it had previously imposed on Myanmar.²¹ The EU Delegation office was re-established in Yangon, Myanmar's greatest city and former capital. However, after Suu Kyi's government faced human rights and genocide allegations against the Rohingya Muslim minority in Rakhine state in 2017, things went awry again. In April 2018, the EU suspended military cooperation with Myanmar and relaunched restrictive measures in order to prevent the export of dual-use goods and equipment for monitoring communications used by Myanmar border guard police and army personnel.²² Moreover, the EU froze the assets of the military and police personnel involved in human rights violations.

The situation in Myanmar deteriorated after General Minh Aung Lhai, leader of the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's armed forces), staged a coup on 1 February 2021 and imprisoned Suu Kyi. ASEAN took more than two months to deliver a stance on the Myanmar coup and finally declared the Five-Point Consensus on the Myanmar crisis on 24 April 2021, which emphasised diplomatic means such as sending the envoys to conflicting parties as well as sending humanitarian assistance.²³ Nevertheless, the Tatmadaw regime continued to use force on civilians.²⁴ Hence, the ASEAN Ministerial meeting decided to invite only low-ranking bureaucratic representatives from Myanmar. This decision resulted in the Myanmar military regime declining to participate in ASEAN summits and other related meetings.²⁵

²¹ Council of the European Union, *Burma/Myanmar: EU Sanctions Suspended*, 14 May 2012, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9626-2012-INIT/en/pdf>.

²² Council of the European Union, *Myanmar/Burma: EU Sanctions 7 Senior Military, Border Guard and Police Officials Responsible for or Associated with Serious Human Rights Violations against Rohingya Population*, 25 June 2018, <http://web.archive.org/web/20181226040212/https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/06/25/myanmar-burma-eu-sanctions-7-senior-military-border-guard-and-police-officials-responsible-for-or-associated-with-serious-human-rights-violations-against-rohingya-population>.

²³ The first point aimed to end the force and violence in Myanmar. The second was to find a peaceful settlement through constructive talk among all parties. Third, ASEAN Chair's special envoy would liaise negotiations with assistance from the ASEAN Secretary-General. Fourth, ASEAN would provide humanitarian assistance through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management Centre. Fifth, ASEAN special envoys will travel to Myanmar to meet all parties.

²⁴ ASEAN Secretariat, *Chairman's Statement on the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting*, 24 April 2021 and Five-Point Consensus, 24 April 2021, <https://asean.org/?p=33200>.

²⁵ "ASEAN to Exclude Myanmar Foreign Minister from Meeting, Says Cambodia", in *Reuters*, 3 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/cambodia-says-non-political-myanmar-rep-invited-asean-meeting-2022-02-03>.

In fact, ASEAN split on the matter. While Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore wanted a hard-line stance toward Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand pushed for a compromise with the Tatmadaw regime. ASEAN consensus collapsed when Hun Sen, the Cambodian Prime Minister and ASEAN chair for the year, visited the coup leader in January 2022 to press Myanmar for a peace plan without informing other ASEAN counterparts.²⁶ Furthermore, protesters in Myanmar witnessed that Hun Sen's visit backfired and legitimised the military junta. Malaysia countered the Cambodian act by calling for ASEAN to arrange a talk with the National Unity Government, the Myanmar government in exile formed after the coup in 2021. Indonesia (supported by Brunei, Malaysia and Singapore) proposed that ASEAN adopt sanctions on Myanmar. This request generated another crisis in the ASEAN consensus. Nevertheless, ASEAN has reiterated its standpoint to achieve the Five-Point Consensus.²⁷

What has the EU's role in all this? The High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Commission Vice-President, Josep Borrell, has supported and endorsed the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus. Borrell stated that the coup leader must allow UN and ASEAN envoys to mediate the situation to end all acts of violence and bring Myanmar back to a democratic path.²⁸ The Council of the European Union condemned "in the strongest terms" the coup. The EU called upon "the military to immediately and without any conditions release the President, the State Counsellor and all those who have been arrested".²⁹ The EU took action by freezing the assets of military leaders and companies providing financial support to the army. Restrictive measures were applied to 93 individuals and 18 entities, including a travel ban from entering or transiting through EU territory.³⁰ EU financial aid to Myanmar was suspended in areas that would support the military regime except for humanitarian assistance to independent humanitarian partners.

EU economic pressure on Myanmar was harder than what had been the case with the 2014 coup in Thailand by General Prayut Chan-o-cha. The EU only suspended the high-ranking official visits of both sides and halted the negotiations of the PCA.³¹ EU measures were mainly addressed through Council statements with

²⁶ Shaun Turton, "Cambodian PM Becomes 1st Leader to Meet Myanmar Military Chief", in *Nikkei Asia*, 7 January 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Myanmar-Crisis/Cambodian-PM-becomes-1st-leader-to-meet-Myanmar-military-chief>.

²⁷ ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Leaders Review and Decision on the Implementation of the Five-Point Consensus*, 11 November 2022, <https://asean.org/?p=117289>.

²⁸ Josep Borrell Fontelles [@JosepBorrellF], "EU welcomes UNSC Resolution 2669 on #Myanmar", in *Twitter*, 22 December 2022, <https://twitter.com/JosepBorrellF/status/1605883971023282178>.

²⁹ Council of the European Union, *Myanmar: Declaration by the High Representative on Behalf of the European Union*, cit.

³⁰ Council of the European Union, *Myanmar/Burma: EU Imposes Sixth Round of Sanctions against 9 Individuals and 7 Entities*, 20 February 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/02/02/myanmar-declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union>.

³¹ Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Thailand*, 23 June 2014, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/28035/143330.pdf>.

regard to the call for arranging elections, lifting martial law and releasing student detention. No trade embargoes, asset freezing or travel bans were imposed on Thailand.

EU norm diffusion in Southeast Asia has been more successful in the economic realm especially the EU's zero tolerance on illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU). The EU is the world's largest importer of fisheries and aquaculture products (31.9 billion euros in 2022).³² The IUU framework of the EU started in 2002 with the launch of the Action Plan on Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing following the code of conduct of the Food and Agriculture Organisation and the International Labour Organisation.³³ The EU has been the first actor to apply this norm to its external trading partners.

Historically, Southeast Asian states have been amongst the EU's main concerns regarding IUU fishing. Four ASEAN states, namely Cambodia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam were labelled as "non-cooperating states" in 2012, 2014, 2015 and 2017, respectively.³⁴ Cambodia's situation was so bad that the EU imposed a total ban on aquaculture trade with it.³⁵

In fact, ASEAN adopted the IUU code of conduct before the EU. In 1995, ASEAN issued a Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries in cooperation with the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDEC), which was financially supported by the Japan Trust Fund (JTF). Later, the SEAFDEC and JTF issued numerous plans and codes of conduct for responsible fishing.³⁶

Nonetheless, IUU fishing has been present in Southeast Asia. ASEAN concrete actions began when Thailand, which is the world's major exporter of fisheries and aquaculture products, received continuous warnings from the EU between 2015

³² European Market Observatory for Fisheries and Aquaculture Products, *The EU Fish Market 2023 edition*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, November 2023, p. 23, <https://eumofa.eu/market-analysis?#yearly>.

³³ Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), *International Plan of Action to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing*, 2001, <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en?details=71be21c9-8406-5f66-ac68-1e74604464e7>.

³⁴ "Fighting Illegal Fishing", in *The ASEAN Post*, 4 April 2019, <https://theaseanpost.com/node/4264>.

³⁵ EU IUU Fishing Coalition, *Driving Improvements in Fisheries Governance Globally: Impact of the EU IUU Carding Scheme on Belize, Guinea, Solomon Islands and Thailand*, March 2022, <http://www.iuuwatch.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/2022-EU-IUU-Coalition-Carding-Study.pdf>.

³⁶ Malinee Smithrithee et al., "Pushing for the Elimination of IUU Fishing in the Southeast Asian Region", in *Fish for the People*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2020), p. 2-12 at p. 3, <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12066/6610>; Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center, *Guidelines for Preventing the Entry of Fish and Fishery Products from IUU Fishing Activities into the Supply Chain*, 24 August 2015, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/App-9-ASEAN-Guidelines-IUU-SSOM36th-AMAF-final.pdf>; ASEAN and Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center, *Joint ASEAN-SEAFDEC Declaration on Regional Cooperation for Combating IUU Fishing and Enhancing the Competitiveness of ASEAN Fish and Fishery Products*, 3 August 2016, <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2016-ASEAN-SEAFDEC-Decl-on-IUU.pdf>.

and 2019.³⁷ Under Thailand's ASEAN chairmanship in 2019, IUU became a priority, so much so that it led to the creation of the ASEAN common fisheries policy.³⁸ In 2018 an ad hoc task force was established under the ASEAN Sectoral Working Group on Fisheries to test the possibility of establishing the ASEAN General Fisheries Policies (AGFP).³⁹ The EU funded this task force from the budget of the Enhanced Regional EU–ASEAN Dialogue Instrument (E-READI) and EU Common Fisheries Policy know-how is referred for this study task between 2019 and 2020.⁴⁰

Under the EU E-READI, in 2019 the Thai government convened the ASEAN Meeting on Combating IUU Fishing in Partnership with the EU with the endorsement of the AGFP. As a result, the ASEAN Network for Combating IUU Fishing was established. The network is a cooperation framework for exchanging information between legal enforcers to promote the Regional Plan of Action to Promote Responsible Fishing Practices, including combating IUU fishing in the region. Once again, Thailand hosted the first network meetings in 2000.⁴¹ Currently, the Thai government has developed guidelines and online communication platforms. Evidently, the region-to-state relations between the EU and the Thai government have been crucial as a bridge between the EU and ASEAN interregional cooperation.

The IUU framework has been incorporated into the broader International Ocean Governance Agenda in 2016 with the establishment of the EU International Ocean Governance (IOG) Forum. In 2021, the IOG Forum published a crucial document called "Setting the course for a Sustainable Blue Planet: Recommendations for Enhancing EU Action".⁴² Later, in the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, ASEAN is acknowledged as a like-minded partner of the EU in ocean governance.

With regard to ASEAN economic integration, the EU has supported the integration of ASEAN through the ASEAN Regional Integration Support from the EU (ARISE 2013–2022) fund, which amounted to 40 million euros and was granted to the ASEAN Secretariat.⁴³

³⁷ "EU Withdraws Ban Threat on Thai Fisheries after Reforms", in *Bangkok Post*, 8 January 2019, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1607574>.

³⁸ Graeme Macfadyen and Heiko Seilert, *Development of an ASEAN General Fisheries Policy Feasibility Study*, Jakarta, ASEAN Secretariat, 19 June 2020, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/15.-AGFP-Feasibility-Study-report-28ASWGF.pdf>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. II.

⁴⁰ The suggested models of AGFP by the task force are to be selected either the integrated common policies as one policy statement like that of the EU Common Fisheries Policy or the differentiated integration by having policy reports of ASEAN and member states separated. See Graeme Macfadyen and Heiko Seilert, *Development of an ASEAN General Fisheries Policy Feasibility Study*, *cit.*, p. 2.

⁴¹ Malinee Smithrithee et al., "Pushing for the Elimination of IUU Fishing in the Southeast Asian Region", *cit.*, p. 2-3.

⁴² Joe Dodgshun et al., *Setting the Course for a Sustainable Blue Planet: Recommendations for Enhancing EU Action*, EU International Ocean Governance Forum, April 2021, <https://www.rifs-potsdam.de/en/node/7865>.

⁴³ European External Action Service, *ASEAN Regional Integration Support by the EU (ARISE+)*, 27 May 2019, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/63333_en.

In summary, NPE in ASEAN was more successful in trade and economics than in political domains. IUU fishing has significantly been solved in ASEAN, while the limited sanctions on Myanmar and least on Thailand failed to bring regime change. Limitations on human rights and freedom of expression remained unrestrained in Southeast Asia, particularly in Myanmar and Thailand.

4. ECOWAS–EU relations

ECOWAS, founded in 1975 by 14 West African states as an economic organisation,⁴⁴ has progressively focused more on governance, peace and security. For a while, specifically until the late 2010s, ECOWAS was more successful in democracy protection than in trade promotion.⁴⁵ Yet, the recent coups d'état in the region, especially in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, have reversed the trend. As presented in the next section, ECOWAS faced political dilemmas in addressing the coups d'état, for example in imposing sanctions: non-imposing them could be perceived as a justification or a sign of weakness, while imposing sanctions was often perceived as against African interest and influenced by Western governments. Similarly, the suspension of member states (Mali and Guinea in 2021, Burkina Faso in 2022 and Niger in 2023) created significant controversies with local governments in the region. At the end of January 2024, these tensions peaked when the three military juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger announced their withdraw from ECOWAS.

EU–ECOWAS relations are based on several issues, *in primis* trade and sustainable development, but also stability, security and good governance. Regular EU–ECOWAS meetings take place at ministerial and senior official levels. For example, The EU and ECOWAS held 23 Political Dialogue Meetings at Ministerial Level, the last in February 2023 in Brussels.⁴⁶

In the economic field, EU–ECOWAS relations have evolved during the past decades. In particular, ECOWAS and the EU signed in February 2014 the negotiations for an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) to strengthen trade and investment for sustainable development between the two regions. The EU is West Africa's biggest trading partner, which accounts for 20 per cent and 22 per cent of West Africa's exports and imports, respectively.⁴⁷ Overall, however, ECOWAS has exerted a very limited impact on EU trade (approximately 1.5 per cent of the total). The EPA

⁴⁴ The 14 states were: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. The 15th, Cape Verde, joined in 1977.

⁴⁵ Haroldo Ramanzini Júnior and Bruno Theodoro Luciano, "Regionalism in the Global South: Mercosur and ECOWAS in Trade and Democracy Protection", in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 9 (2020), p. 1498-1517, DOI 10.1080/01436597.2020.1723413.

⁴⁶ European External Action Service, *23rd EU-ECOWAS Ministerial Dialogue*, 6 February 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/425196_en.

⁴⁷ European Commission, *Economic Partnership Agreement with West Africa - Facts and Figures*, last updated 10 June 2021, <https://circabc.europa.eu/ui/group/09242a36-a438-40fd-a7af-fe32e36cbd0e/library/4144ba88-d3ad-44f4-929d-88a17783b9bc/details>.

also foresee the option to plan further negotiations on sustainable development, services, investment and other trade-related issues. For example, in October 2023 the EU Commission and ECOWAS signed seven agreements worth 212.5 million euros on trade, food security and energy.⁴⁸

During the Political Dialogues, the EU and ECOWAS have regularly discussed and planned cooperation on democracy, good governance, human rights, the rule of law, peace and security.⁴⁹ However, the cooperation has been less structured than on economic issues and more *à la carte*, as discussed in the following section.

5. NPE and ECOWAS

Historically, the EU has projected normative power in Africa by prioritising democracy, human rights, peace and security, rule of law and good governance.⁵⁰ All these values and norms were part of the dialogue with ECOWAS as a regional organisation and with its member states. In recent years, however, despite the EU's self-identification as a normative actor, its ability to use norms to influence the behaviour of ECOWAS countries has been fading. While the EU aims to combine its interest-driven orientation with its traditional soft power, it has struggled to balance interests and norms.

Since 2016, the principled-pragmatism approach introduced by the EU Global Strategy tried to balance EU's values and interests and this precarious equilibrium has emerged in Western Africa.⁵¹ Yet, many African partners perceive the EU normative approach as paternalistic and resulting in the discussion of African problems through European solutions more than facing common challenges and opportunities.⁵²

ECOWAS's ambitions in this field have gradually expanded, with member states regularly giving ECOWAS a mandate to mediate, as seen during the political crisis

⁴⁸ European External Action Service, *European Commissioner Urpilainen and the ECOWAS Commission President Touray Launch a Major Package to Stabilise the Region and Drive West African Socio-Economic Development*, 20 October 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/434579_en.

⁴⁹ See for example European External Action Service, *23rd EU-ECOWAS Ministerial Dialogue*, cit.

⁵⁰ Sibylle Scheipers and Daniela Sicurelli, "Empowering Africa: Normative Power in EU-Africa Relations", in *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2008), p. 607-623, DOI 10.1080/13501760801996774; Bernardo Venturi, "The EU's Struggle with Normative Leadership in Sub-Saharan Africa", in *IAI Working Papers*, No. 16|29 (November 2016), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/6960>.

⁵¹ Richard Youngs et al., "Crafting an EU Strategy for Coups", in *European Democracy Hub*, 24 November 2023, <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/?p=1424>.

⁵² Otilia Anna Maunganidze, "Partnership, Not Paternalism, Is what Africa and Europe Need", in *The Progressive Post*, No. 18 (Winter/Spring 2022), p. 16-18, <https://feeps-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/PP18.pdf>; Geert Laporte and Daniele Fattibene (eds), *Ready for a Common Africa-Europe Future? Our Reflections beyond the 6th EU-AU Summit*, ETTG Publications, April 2022, <https://ettg.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/ETT-G-COLLECTIVE-ISSUE-2.pdf>.

in Mali in June 2020, or to use the threat of force, as was the case during the 2017 Gambia crisis.

In this context, the EU has regularly interacted with ECOWAS especially on governance, democracy, peace and security in the region. The EU's limited normative power and its interregional relations with ECOWAS can be observed through the attitude of the EU toward the five recent coups d'état conducted in the Sahel (2020–2023).

The case of Mali well represents the main NPE dynamics in EU–ECOWAS relations. In August 2020, army officers led by Colonel Assimi Goïta toppled Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. ECOWAS promptly reacted with drastic measures such as shutting down its borders with Mali and suspending the country from its decision-making bodies. Due to regional pressure echoed by the EU, the transitional government vowed to restore civilian rule by early 2022. This move led to a lifting of economic sanctions, although Mali remains suspended from ECOWAS. Mali's second coup in 2021 was met with widespread diplomatic condemnation, including from the EU and the Western African organisation. ECOWAS initially opted for targeted measures, but then in January imposed new sanctions.⁵³

On both occasions, the EU diplomatically supported ECOWAS. In December 2021, Brussels adopted restrictive measures against Malian individuals and entities involved in the coup.⁵⁴ In February 2022 the Council sanctioned prominent members of the transitional government.⁵⁵ Brussels maintained this approach when the Malian junta extended the duration of the transition proposing a five-year plan that calls for the next presidential elections to be held in 2026.

Seemingly, the EU approach shows a clear agreement between the EU's normative approach and ECOWAS in sanctioning the coup d'état in a critical security context like Mali.

Overall, the ECOWAS perspective shows that Brussels' normative power is at least jeopardised, EU pragmatism prevails over principles and norms⁵⁶ and its credibility on democratic norms and the rule of law is questioned. Indeed, as stated by Lidet Tadesse, "The EU's inconsistent responses to the recent coups call into question the union's credibility as a normative actor."⁵⁷

⁵³ ECOWAS, *4th Extraordinary Summit of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government on the Political Situation in Mali. Final Communiqué*, Accra, 9 January 2022, <https://ecowas.int/?p=52898>.

⁵⁴ Council of the European Union, *Mali: EU Sets Up Autonomous Framework for Sanctions against Those Obstructing the Political Transition*, 13 December 2021, <https://europa.eu/!k9jTJG>.

⁵⁵ Council of the European Union, *Mali: EU Adopts Targeted Sanctions against Five Individuals*, 4 February 2022, <https://europa.eu/!6q6Jry>.

⁵⁶ Bernardo Venturi, "The EU's Diplomatic Engagement in the Sahel", in *IAI Papers*, No. 22|08 (May 2022), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/15254>.

⁵⁷ Richard Youngs et al., "Crafting an EU Strategy for Coups", cit.

In the economic field, the EU has projected norms through the initiation, in 2014 and after more than a decade of negotiations, of an EU–West Africa EPA. The agreement was the first economic partnership that united sixteen countries of the region⁵⁸ and their two regional organisations, namely, ECOWAS and the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU).⁵⁹ France, with support from the EU, pushed for the WAEMU to take the European Monetary Union as a model. As a consequence, WAEMU explicitly followed the EU institutions and practices.⁶⁰

In the EPA framework, Brussels showed a limited normative power. According to the EU, the EPA takes account of the current differences in the level of development between the two regions. While the EU has widely opened its market, ECOWAS countries are bound to remove import tariffs only partially over a 20-year transition period. At the same time, Brussels seeks to support West African closer regional integration.⁶¹

Nonetheless, EPAs remain a sensitive issue in West Africa. During the negotiation process, a few African governments and NGOs were concerned about EU's goods that could easily enter the region at a generous price. Furthermore, a handful of African governments perceive EPAs as additional *fatigue* in the framework of the African Continental Free Trade Area, because certain African negotiators are compelled to follow two processes and make them consistent with one another.⁶²

Overall, the role of the EU has remained marginal on normative issues in the interregional sphere. Brussels displays limited normative power on its traditional values in terms of democracy, human rights and governance while it pushes more of its model on regional integration and development.

6. ASEAN–ECOWAS comparative analysis

The EU's norm projection displays different features and challenges in ASEAN and ECOWAS. Table 1 indicates a comparative analysis of the two areas to which NPE has extended.

⁵⁸ The fifteen ECOWAS countries plus Mauritania.

⁵⁹ WAEMU is composed of eight states (Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo) mainly French-speaking as a second language.

⁶⁰ Giulia Piccolino, "International Diffusion and the Puzzle of African Regionalism: Insights from West Africa", in *UNU-CRIS Working Papers*, No. 2016/1, <https://cris.unu.edu/node/9923>; Vincent Zoma and Wendpanga Manassé Congo, "Foundations of the Regional Integration of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU)", in *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2022), p. 77-83, <https://www.socialsciencejournal.in/archives/2022/vol8/issue2/8-2-24>.

⁶¹ European Commission, *Economic Partnership Agreement with West Africa - Facts and Figures*, cit.

⁶² Geert Laporte and Daniele Fattibene (eds), *Ready for a Common Africa-Europe Future?*, cit.

Table 1 | Comparative matrix of EU normative dimension of ASEAN and ECOWAS

Regional organisation EU normative dimension	ASEAN	ECOWAS
Normative relativism versus universalism	EU applies its norms to ASEAN in contrast with the region's human rights relativism.	EU applies its normative universalism to ECOWAS with jeopardised consensus among ECOWAS institutions and member states.
Interventionism	EU's normative power is interventionist compared to ASEAN's consensus-based way of doing business.	EU's normative power is prone to intervene (e.g. through sanctions) in line with ECOWAS's approach.
Democracy	The EU was active in punishing coups d'état in the region, far from ASEAN's silent approach. Sanctions are however limited.	Often Brussels follows ECOWAS normative approach to coup d'état when in line with its values.
Human rights	Significant divergences between the EU's normative approach with ASEAN and ASEAN non-intervention.	Human rights emerged as a priority for the EU starting in the late 1970s. In the last decade, with a growing pragmatic approach, they became less relevant in Western Africa compared to security issues. This recent approach limited possible tensions with ECOWAS countries.
Trade/Fair trade	The EU pushes for ASEAN sovereigntist/ intergovernmental integration and economic development and is intolerant to some norm violations (i.e., illegal fishing and intellectual property rights).	The EU pushes for its model of integration and economic development.

As far as ASEAN is concerned, the EU normative power is more widely felt in the economic field and less in such domains as democracy and human rights. As for ECOWAS, the EU has been active in punishing democratic reversals, but not so much on trade and human rights.

In terms of human rights relativism versus universalism,⁶³ ASEAN is more relativist than the EU and even ECOWAS, which has created significant contrasts with Brussels. Similarly, and partially consequently, ASEAN is not interventionist, adhering to the non-interference principle on its members compared with the EU and ECOWAS. These different postures also derive from diverging approaches to democracy and human rights. ASEAN's silent approach to human rights violations and coups d'état is far from the vocal normative orientation of the EU. The EU's approach is more in line with ECOWAS, although Brussels' double standards among African countries (for example, the inconsistent responses to the recent coups in the Sahel) have generated tension between the two regional organisations. Similarly, ASEAN's respect for the sovereignty of the states on human rights contrasts with the normative approach of the EU. In Western Africa, human rights emerged as a priority for the EU in the late 1970s. In the following decade, they became less relevant in Western Africa compared with security issues, due to a more pragmatic approach, which limited potential tension with ECOWAS countries. In terms of trade, the EU pushed for its model of economic development and found ASEAN a good partner, except for the contracts on specific issues related to rights (i.e., illegal fishing).

Conclusion

As the EU has widely tied normative conditionality to financial assistance to external partners, this paper used the concept purported by Ian Manners called "normative power Europe" to analyse the normative aims of the EU in ASEAN and ECOWAS. Particular attention was devoted to democracy, human rights and political and economic domains.

The challenge of human rights and the principle of non-intervention by ASEAN has become a major issue in EU–ASEAN relations. This is especially evident due to the increasing incidents of reported human rights violations in Southeast Asia, particularly in Myanmar.

However, in economic domains, the EU has linked norm localisation with economic interests using economic incentives as an instrument for expanding the normative power of Europe across partner countries. The EU's punishment for

⁶³ Universalism refers to a core of human rights valid globally, while relativism anchored them to local traditions, concepts and cultures.

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illegal fishing in ASEAN was relatively successful. This normative pressure also led to the ASEAN Common Fisheries Policies initiative.

For ECOWAS, EU normative pressure emerged more in the political domain rather than in the economic one. Interest-driven external action, however, has overshadowed democratic processes and human rights norms. The EU demonstrated its normative power in responding to the coup d'état in the Sahel, with an increasing relevance of its principled pragmatism. Normative power Europe was less evident in economic domains in the region. Trade remains the priority of interregional cooperation, but the EU economic and development model was not welcomed in the ECOWAS region as it was in ASEAN.

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