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PROSPECTS FOR COOPERATION BETWEEN ASEAN AND FRANCE IN THE DIGITAL FIELD

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Abstract: The article explores major factors behind ASEAN's interest in cooperation with France in the digital field, as well as its prospects. On revealing the specifics of the digital component in ASEAN's integration policy, the authors proceed to summarizing the reasons for ASEAN's slipping into dependence on extra-regional partners, as well as behind its interest in diversifying suppliers of digital infrastructure-related solutions, technologies and skills. Then, key directions of France's policy in Southeast Asia are outlined, and prospects for cooperation between ASEAN and France in the digital field are assessed. In the authors' opinion, ASEAN's interest in cooperation with France is strong and is likely to grow in the foreseeable future. The article is prepared by specialists in European (France as the primary field) and Asian (ASEAN the primary field) studies, which allowed carrying out a deep and academically insightful analysis of the priorities and policies of either partner. The relevance of the article stems from ASEAN's interest in elaborating on effective digital tools as a key success factor behind the implementation of its projects and initiatives after the year 2025. As the association explores additional mechanisms to raise its competitiveness, including by means of expanding cooperation with extra-regional partners, the article has obvious academic and practical significance.

Keywords: ASEAN, EU, France, multilateral cooperation, digital transformation, competitiveness

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Научная статья. Исторические науки

ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА МЕЖДУ АСЕАН И ФРАНЦИЕЙ В ЦИФРОВОЙ СФЕРЕ

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Аннотация: В статье проанализированы основные факторы заинтересованности АСЕАН в сотрудничестве с Францией в цифровой сфере и перспективы его развития. Выявлены особенности цифровой составляющей интеграционной политики АСЕАН, систематизированы причины нарастания ее зависимости от внерегиональных партнеров, а также заинтересованности в диверсификации поставщиков цифровых инфраструктурных решений, технологий и компетенций. Далее раскрыты ключевые направления политики Франции в Юго-Восточной Азии, и дана оценка перспективам сотрудничества АСЕАН с Францией в цифровой сфере. С точки зрения авторов, заинтересованность АСЕАН в сотрудничестве с Францией высока и в обозримой перспективе будет иметь тенденцию к усилению. Статья подготовлена специалистами в области европейских (с акцентом на Францию) и азиатских (с акцентом на АСЕАН) исследований, что позволило провести глубокий и академически выверенный анализ приоритетов и политики каждого из участников сотрудничества. Актуальность статьи определяется заинтересованностью Ассоциации в выработке эффективных цифровых инструментов как одного из ключевых факторов успеха в реализации ее проектов и инициатив после 2025 года. Поскольку Ассоциация разрабатывает дополнительные механизмы повышения собственной конкурентоспособности, в том числе расширяя диалог с внерегиональными партнерами, подготовленная статья имеет очевидную научную и практическую значимость.

Ключевые слова: АСЕАН, ЕС, Франция, многостороннее сотрудничество, цифровая трансформация, конкурентоспособность

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After the establishment of ASEAN Community 2025 the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) opens up a new page in its history. Southeast Asia is a major trade, investment and technological hub, and ASEAN leaders aim to increase the inflows of foreign investment and incentivize both ASEAN and external companies to expand their presence in the region. At the same time, however, the association critically depends on technologies of its dialogue partners in order to increase its competitiveness. More specifically, digital resilience and, by extension, digital tools loom large in ASEAN's order of priority. As the association lacks necessary resources, logically, it aims to obtain them from its external partners.

In this regard, the European Union (EU) attracts ASEAN's growing attention. The EU is a multilateral dialogue platform whose experience the association has traditionally tried to emulate. Additionally, the European Union has participated in the ASEAN Regional Forum, which discusses cybersecurity and related issues, since the latter's inception. As the association aims to strengthen and diversify its tools of competitiveness, the EU's experience becomes especially valuable and potentially rewarding.

Within the EU, ASEAN's relations with France are of special significance. France seeks to act as a bridge between Europe and Southeast Asia, which is a central feature of its policy in the EU, and simultaneously to rely on the Union at the directions where its assets are limited. If so, tracing the dialogue between ASEAN and France on digital issues is a timely and relevant exercise.

Digital Multilateralism in ASEAN's Priorities and Policy

As a reputable international actor, that drives multilateral cooperation in Southeast Asia and beyond, the association cannot leave the advent of the digital era unattended. In response, ASEAN has undertaken many initiatives, from ASEAN Vision 2020 to the presently discussed Digital Economy Framework Agreement¹, as well as sees itself as “a leading and connected Digital and Technological Community with open and interoperable, secure and trusted digital ecosystem”². From a practical perspective, the association develops several policy directions.

The first one relates to cooperation among the ASEAN countries exclusively in the digital space. Examples include, but are not limited to, ASEAN Framework on Digital Data Governance, ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025, Consolidated Strategy on the Fourth Industrial Revolution for ASEAN, ASEAN Data Management Framework, Framework for Promoting the Growth of Digital Startups in ASEAN, Expanded ASEAN Guide on

AI Governance and Ethics – Generative AI. At present, the ASEAN countries are negotiating on the Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA). The contents of these documents demonstrates that the association has gone a long way from narrow, or niche, initiatives, mostly in the ICT sector, to a comprehensive effort to make Southeast Asia a digitally enabled area.

The second track focuses on equipping ASEAN-led ongoing projects and initiatives with digital tools. Examples are numerous, but the most representative one stands for the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). As AFTA, as well as its main component ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA), was developed in the pre-digital period, logically, it does not grasp the current realities. In response, the association launched negotiations aimed at upgrading ATIGA in 2022. Among the issues that need to be considered, a revision of CoO (Certificate of Origin), classification of goods, custom procedures, etc. stand out. An implementation of digital tools and regular upgrade them will produce a trade facilitation effect, to the best advantage of intra-ASEAN cooperation. A more challenging task the association is encountering relates to equipping its flagship Asia-Pacific project the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) with digital tools. It is much more difficult given that ASEAN countries are recipients rather than producers of digital technologies and, by implication, digital tools.

The third track accounts for stimulating intra-ASEAN technological cooperation. It dates back to the 1970s, when ASEAN Ministerial Meeting of Science, Technology and Innovation (AMMSTI) was established. At present, this track embraces many directions, including microelectronic and information technology, and science and technology infrastructure and resource development³. Additionally, the association develops cooperation with its dialogue partners in the R&D area. Taken together, these efforts strengthen and expand the basis for intra-ASEAN technological exchanges with positive implications for equipping ASEAN-led multilateralism with digital tools.

Along with exploring these areas, the association elaborates on the legal basis for regulating grass-root digital processes across Southeast Asia. Among the latter, startups that use Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools stand out. Such startups operate in many fields that include, but are not limited to, deep innovations (DeepTech), digital medicine (MedTech), digital education (EdTech), environmentally friendly technologies and solutions (CleanTech), and digital marketing (MarTech), to mention just a few examples. Apart from it, in the fintech sector digital insurance (InsurTech)

and digital wealth enhancement (WealthTech) are in growing demand. Exotic (at least for now) fields, like digital tools of faith (FaithTech), are emerging. Currently, many Southeast Asian states are developing artificial intelligence (AI) tools for the public and corporate sectors. In addition to fostering cooperation among its member states, the association organizes various events with its dialogue partners. The most illustrative example is ASEAN NEXT, a set of events combining the ASEAN–United Kingdom Summit on Artificial Intelligence, the ASEAN-China Conference on Artificial Intelligence, and others. Apart from it, the ASEAN Science, Technology and Innovation Week is held every three years. There, the latest achievements, including those in the field of AI, are demonstrated. Specific measures for fostering R&D cooperation are outlined in the ASEAN Action Plan on Science, Technology and Innovation for 2016-2025⁴ and the ASEAN Action Plan on Science, Technology and Innovation for 2026-2035⁵.

Concerning startups using AI tools, the initiative ASEAN Digital Transformation Award (formerly known as the ASEAN ICT Development Award) stands out. Its nominations include Public and Private Sector Categories, Digital Inclusivity Category, Digital Content Category, Digital Start-up Category and Digital Innovation Category⁶. Simultaneously, the association integrates efforts of its member states into its multilateral cooperation agenda. The key motive is to keep up with global trends in the field of digital transformation, create comfortable conditions for specialists and entrepreneurs, as well as ordinary citizens, of those countries. Special importance is attached to creating a multiplier effect on related and unrelated spheres with a comprehensive AI ecosystem as an outcome.

Although ASEAN's vision is comprehensive, as well as its efforts deserve praising, nevertheless, its policy is encountering considerable difficulties. The association lacks infrastructure, content platforms and skills to retain its digital sovereignty amidst an intensifying global digital transformation. To exemplify, there are huge gaps between the access to internet services in various ASEAN countries. As the construction of the 5G Internet infrastructure in ASEAN states is carried out mainly by non-ASEAN companies, mostly by those from China and the US, the problem the association is encountering relates to slipping into dependence on its external partners with more advanced digital assets.

No less importantly, non-ASEAN companies operate the content platforms most popular among the ASEAN consumers⁷. Those platforms are indispensable for advertising and, more broadly, exploring the markets, across Southeast Asia. Lastly, non-ASEAN companies implement large-

scale digital skill-training programs, which is exemplified by “Cloud Ready SG with AWS” (Amazon Web Service), “Go Digital ASEAN” (Google), “FutureReadyASEAN” (Microsoft), “Seeds for the Future” (Huawei) and some others.

In view of the afore-mentioned, the association aims to hedge risks and diversify tools to increase its competitiveness. As discussed earlier, the countries of Southeast Asia are “in between” the Chinese and the American digital ecosystems in terms of infrastructure construction and the popularity of content platforms. The US-China contradictions, including those in the digital field, exert a profound impact on ASEAN and its member states.

At that complicated juncture, the association deepens cooperation with its dialogue partners. Among the latter, the European Union stands out. ASEAN and the EU have been strategic partners since 2019. At present, they coordinate prospective plans along many directions. At the goal-setting level, the Association synergizes the provisions of ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 with those of 2030 Digital Compass: the European Way for the Digital Decade. At the practical level, ASEAN-EU Statement on Cybersecurity Cooperation and ASEAN-EU 2024 Digital Workplan, in which practically-oriented directions of cooperation are outlined, are noteworthy. Lastly but importantly, digital tools to support niche areas of cooperation and their upgrade are discussed at meetings of relevant joint working groups (for example, ASEAN-EU Joint Working Group on Trade and Investment focuses on the development of digital tools for trade and investment exchanges).

Within the EU, France stands out as a promising partner in the digital field. On the one hand, France pays close attention to the digital transformation of its economy and society. On the other hand, the country has powerful non-digital and digital tools to share its experience with the ASEAN member states.

France's Policy in Southeast Asia

Despite its colonial past, France is a relative “newcomer” in Southeast Asia. Under the presidency of Jacques Chirac, France established defense ties with Singapore and Malaysia. France was also the first EU country to join the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in January 2007⁸. Under President Nicolas Sarkozy, the ideological and value factor presented a significant obstacle to establishing strong ties with the region. During the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in May 2008, the French Foreign Minister Hervé Morin proposed to extrapolate the French experience of applying the right to prosecution in the fight against Somali pirates to

similar multilateral activities in the Strait of Malacca. This proposal was met with skepticism by the ASEAN states⁹. Nevertheless, slow but progressive development of relations was in place. France accredited its ambassador to ASEAN and signed a strategic partnership agreement with Indonesia in 2009 and 2011 respectively¹⁰.

France's pivot to Asia was influenced by the growing popularity of economic diplomacy. Specifically, François Hollande changed the country's regional policy from a focus on relations with China to stronger presence in Asia. As a result, France expressed its readiness to join the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus)¹¹. Arguably, the country still claims to be ADMM+8 and eventually ASEAN dialogue partner. The list of French strategic partners was expanded by Singapore in 2012 and Vietnam in 2013. These relations were elevated to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2025 and 2024 respectively¹².

Emmanuel Macron further strengthens this trend. His vision of France's policy in Southeast Asia was presented in the framework of a more systematic Indo-Pacific strategy. In Southeast Asia, France focuses on developing bilateral relations based on shared values and interests, and on dialogue with regional organizations, especially ASEAN, as well as, more broadly, on promoting the common good (combating climate change, helping biodiversity, encouraging health, education, and social development, digital technologies and constructing high-quality infrastructure)¹³.

The Defense Ministry's 2019 Strategy for France in the Indo-Pacific conceptualized and expanded some of Macron's theses, adding protection of freedom of navigation and overflight, strategic autonomy and diversification of partnerships as priorities. It was stressed that "China's increasing power and territorial claims, as well as the global competition under way with the United States, are weakening the balance of power in the region¹⁴." To a large extent, this message was addressed to the Southeast Asian countries, as many of them are involved in the South China Sea dispute. In addition, the post of Ambassador for Indo-Pacific Affairs was established on September 16, 2020¹⁵. All this demonstrated that France's strategic thinking in the Indo-Pacific region had broadened its horizons.

Grand France's Indo-Pacific Strategy, published in February 2022 and updated in July 2025, summarized the French policy in the region. Although France has not yet developed special sub-regional strategies, it aims to expand and diversify ties with India and China, as well as with the countries of Oceania, with a focus on Australia, and Southeast Asia¹⁶. Revealingly, however, France lacks resources necessary for fulfilling its Indo-Pacific ambitions. For instance, in 2020, 39% (€3.6 billion) of the bilateral

Official development assistance (ODA) went to Africa, and the French Development Agency (AFD) allocated at least 85% of financing to the Africa and Mediterranean region¹⁷. This suggests that the Asia-Pacific region, and, by implication, Southeast Asia, is not among France's top priorities.

Paris' important asset is its reliance on the EU in conducting its foreign policy in Southeast Asia, as well as tools to lobby for the development of a common European foreign policy. France was among the proponents of the EU-Singapore Free Trade Agreement, signed in October 2018. It provides French companies with expanded access to the Singapore market and serves as one of the starting points for their entry into the pan-ASEAN level¹⁸. A similar agreement was signed between the EU and Vietnam, another important partner of France, in June 2019¹⁹. Besides, the Paris Declaration Business Europe's Council of Presidents was adopted in November 2021²⁰.

"Intense diplomatic work" for deepening relations with Indo-Pacific countries was declared as an important priority during the French presidency in the European Council in the first half of 2022, when Paris hosted the first EU-Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum. In particular, the Strategy 2022 stated that "the French territories should be bridgeheads for EU activities in the region" and, accordingly, be included in the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy, adopted in 2021 partly from the filing of France²¹. Its provisions correlate with the French concept in understanding the destructive impact of the geopolitical competition on trade, technology and security, the need for a "pragmatic, flexible and multi-faceted" approach to relations with the region in order to promote "effective rules-based multilateralism" through "ASEAN-led regional architecture"²² in various areas.

The EU's financial instruments are used at the bilateral track of relations between France and individual Southeast Asian countries. The Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources of Indonesia (MEMR) and the French Development Agency (AFD) signed a five-year energy transition cooperation program in November 2024. The program includes AFD and EU grants as part of the Global Gateway²³.

As a cumulative effect of its efforts, France received the status of an ASEAN development partner in September 2020²⁴. The ASEAN-France Development Partnership Committee (AF-DPC) was launched in 2021. Later on, ASEAN-France Development Partnership: Practical Cooperation Areas (2022-2026) was signed in November 2022²⁵. Simultaneously, the fourth meeting of the AF-DPC established the ASEAN-France Foundation²⁶. This suggests that the development of a truly multifaceted partner-

ship with ASEAN has been a novel feature in France's policy towards Southeast Asia under the Macron administration.

In general, France has intensified its activities in Southeast Asia, building a network of trust-based partnerships with the ASEAN countries and the association, to pursue both its own and the EU interests. Notably, however, these success stories are limited due to France's concentration on other regions and, consequently, the allocation of large financial resources there rather than to Southeast Asia.

The French Niche Partnership Strategy in Southeast Asia: Implications for ASEAN-France Digital Cooperation

The French approach towards Southeast Asia is based on a search for partnership niches in various areas, taking into account the needs of its partners²⁷. To date, France has established several sectoral partnerships with the ASEAN countries. Areas for cooperation are expanding in the fields of preventing climate change and developing energy resources, combatting non-traditional security threats, providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and supporting healthcare. In this context, the most promising and, accordingly, relatively free niche that the French business is trying to explore is the digital field.

In that area, the European Union is actively cooperating with ASEAN. Specifically, the EU helped the association to create the ASEAN Digital Index (ADIX), a tool for measuring its digital progress, which is synergized with the Enhanced Regional EU-ASEAN Dialogue Instrument (E-READI)²⁸. In its turn, the French strategy focuses on interconnecting the physical and the digital infrastructure across the region²⁹. So, the European and the French approaches to developing relations with the ASEAN countries in the digital field have much in common.

In practical terms, France's policy to develop cooperation with ASEAN in the digital field resonates well with ASEAN's prospective plans. Specifically, Paris focuses on creating an open, secure and sustainable digital economy, and using ICT tools to promote innovation and entrepreneurship. More specifically, Smart Cities, the Internet of Things, 5G, AI, and big data analysis systems loom large in France's priorities. In a longer-term perspective, France looks forward to both training ICT specialists in the ASEAN countries and contributing to best practices in developing a regional digital ecosystem with an emphasis on e-commerce, improved management of cross-border data flows, AI and cybersecurity³⁰. However, at the ASEAN level, these initiatives are more declarative rather than substantial, and their implementation is in its infancy. One of very few

real, albeit relatively long-standing, developments is the accession of France (as an observer) to ASEANAPOL, a regional organization for cooperation between law enforcement agencies, which focuses on cybersecurity and combating cross-border digital crimes³¹.

Cooperation with Singapore presents France's most noticeable success story in the digital field. The city-state welcomes all, including completely foreign-owned, techno startups for developing its Smart Nation initiative. Examples of France's presence in Singapore are numerous. The French video game leader Ubisoft had established a studio in Singapore in 2008, six years before the Smart Nation was launched. The Roadmap for Deepening Cooperation in AI was adopted, and the parties signed the Franco-Singapore Agreement on Digital and Green Partnership (DGP) in 2020 and 2022 respectively. The aim is to create a digital trade corridor, introduce paperless trade pilots, and train digital skills of public and private sector employees. The parties pledged to support innovations by collaborating on intellectual property with AI, as well as through the Global Innovation Alliance and joint enterprise projects³².

France's cooperation with other Southeast Asian countries in the digital field is less developed. As the Philippines is the leader in business process outsourcing, France aims to expand its presence there. To exemplify, Teleperformance, a French company and a global leader in customer service outsourcing, operates in the Philippines. Alcatel-Lucent, another French company, cooperates with Globe Telecom in the field of 4G implementation in the country³³. In Malaysia, the Air Liquide Center for Innovation Operations (SIO) was established to modernize gas production in accordance with the industry 4.0 requirements³⁴. Therefore, digital cooperation is a complement to dialogue in other areas between France and those countries.

At present, the space for deepening ASEAN-France dialogue on digital issues is gradually expanding, as the parties are broadening and upgrading its foundation. Although the results achieved still lag behind policy slogans, cooperation between France and individual ASEAN countries, as well as between France and ASEAN as a multilateral dialogue platform, is gradually gaining momentum.

Conclusion

The analysis of cooperation between ASEAN and France in the digital field through the prism of ASEAN's priorities and France's policy in Southeast Asia leads to several broad assessments.

As the association, which aims to increase its digital competitiveness and is stuck between the Chinese and the American digital ecosystems, tries to broaden and diversify the spectrum of its digital tools, cooperation with external partners becomes increasingly important. The European Union offers ASEAN practically-oriented directions, which responds to ASEAN's prospective plans. If so, there are sufficient reasons to expect further increase of ASEAN's interest in developing cooperation with the EU in the digital field.

Expanding dialogue with France, an influential EU country, matters all the stronger to the association. France's regional policy is premised upon a synergy of non-digital and digital tools. From a non-digital perspective, Paris develops multi-faceted relations with the ASEAN countries as part of its broader Indo-Pacific strategy. The latter includes, but is not limited to, the French assistance in improving conditions in which the ASEAN countries may intensify their socio-economic and technological development. As far as the digital dimension of France's policy is concerned, a solid conceptual and institutional basis has been set up, as exemplified by bilateral and multilateral agreements on cooperation in artificial intelligence, digital skill-training etc. The interaction between France and Singapore in the digital field is comprehensive and includes sharing experience, joint financing of research and supporting each other's technology companies, to mention just a few benefits.

In light of this, prospects for cooperation between ASEAN and France in the digital field are positive. Expectedly, the parties will deepen the present directions and explore new areas. Although the progress will be slow, and major breakthroughs are unlikely, strengthening ties with France responds to ASEAN's priorities and prospective plans in the digital field.

ИНФОРМАЦИЯ ОБ АВТОРАХ

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