



## **35 Years of EIAS and EU-Asia Relations - What is Next?**

### Event Report

*18 February 2025*

*EIAS Brussels*

On 18 February 2025, the European Institute of Asian Studies celebrated its 35th anniversary with a briefing seminar titled “35 Years of EIAS and EU-Asia Relations – What is Next?” **EIAS Director Lin Goethals** opened the event by thanking everyone present and those that have been supporting the institute since its founding in 1989. While acknowledging the challenges presented by shifting U.S. policies, the Ukraine crisis, climate change and other global dynamics, Asia continues to become ever more important, emphasising the opportunities for deeper cooperation between Europe and Asia. In order to capitalise on these opportunities and continue to engage with its Asian partners in a meaningful and mutually beneficial way, the EU will need to: (1) speak with a united voice; (2) recognise the call from Asian nations, especially ASEAN, for a more equal partnership; and (3) acknowledge the interdependence and need for the EU and Asia to work together, especially in resolving upcoming technological challenges.

**EIAS Chairman Dick Gupwell** then reflected on EIAS’s origins upon its foundation in 1989, explaining how its creation stemmed from the European Parliament’s growing interest in South and Southeast Asia. Yet, early European external relations left Asia comparatively underrepresented. As the European Parliament expanded its scope and embarked on visits to ASEAN and other Asian countries, the need for a dedicated think tank became evident. This led to the founding of the institution, which formally broadened its scope to China and Northeast Asia by 1996.

The panel discussion, moderated by **EIAS Senior Associate and Member of the Advisory Board Xavier Nuttin**, covered the perspectives of South and Southeast Asia, Europe and civil society towards EU-Asia relations. Nuttin began the panel by emphasising how new powers are challenging the world order and its core values. Meanwhile, as the U.S. has pivoted its focus to Asia. Europe is called to action and will need to do the same, with a renewed focus on Asia.

In what followed, H.E. **Jamie Victor Ledda, Ambassador of the Philippines in Brussels**, underscored the importance of the ASEAN-EU partnership in fostering prosperity and stability, referencing areas of shared interest such as disaster risk reduction and maritime cooperation. He urged ASEAN and the EU to not allow for global political instability to detract from the



upwards trajectory of ASEAN-EU trade investments, and advocated for the continued pursuit of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) between the two regions. Citing the success of the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) program in boosting exports, H.E. Ambassador Ledda advocated for trade relationships to be solidified through FTAs. Think tanks, he added, are crucial for research and dialogue, bridging policy gaps and fostering deeper regional integration. He therefore called on European think tanks like EIAS to continue to explore collaborations with regional organisations in the Philippines and ASEAN.

**Eddy Laurijssen, Vice-Chairman of EIAS**, focused on the role of civil society in enhancing EU-Asia cooperation. Civil society organizations, he noted, play a key role in achieving and maintaining good governance. They can advocate for transparency and help address global challenges such as climate change, education, and digital transition through monitoring the impact of laws and recommending best practices. Yet, while some Asian countries are recognising their importance, Laurijssen underlined that countries need to work on building interactions with civil society and increasing government transparency. Civil society organisations play an important role in the development of FTAs, something both Asia and Europe would benefit from.

Following Laurijssen's speech, **H.E. Chandana Weerasena, Ambassador of Sri Lanka to Belgium, Luxembourg and the European Union** focused on Sri Lanka's constructive and cordial relationship with the EU. He stressed how pivotal the GSP+ scheme has been for the Sri Lankan economy, especially in the apparel sector—with 80% of the country's exports benefiting. However, going forward, Sri Lanka wants to become a partner of the EU, and not just a receiver. Weerasena emphasised Sri Lanka's strategic position between India and China – and the country's good relationships with both – which serves as potential to become a regional trading hub. He concluded his remarks by calling for greater people-to-people engagement, noting that most Sri Lankans know little about the EU and vice versa, and urged for more educational and cultural exchanges.

**Marco Ferri, Senior Expert at the European External Action Service**, focused his remarks on EU-China engagements and highlighted 3 points: the domestic factor, the EU approach, and outlooks. First of all, Ferri stressed that everything China does has domestic considerations in mind – Xi's priority will be national security and maintaining CCP rule. There are definitely domestic issues facing China –the country is currently facing economic headwinds, and the PLA's constantly changing personnel may impact China's global ambitions. For the EU approach, Ferri commented how the Chinese government considered the EU's "partner, competitor, strategic rival" approach contradictory, comparing it to a "traffic light with all the lights turned on." However, this approach still best reflects the intricacies of EU-China relations. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the competition and rivalry aspects of the relationship is growing. Lastly, Ferri stressed that we must remain "clear-eyed" about our approach to China.



Finally, during the Q&A session, participants commented about the state of global affairs and how best to sustain optimism amid geopolitical uncertainties. Ledda, for example, stressed the Philippines' continued desire to advocate and champion the rules-based international order. Weerasena echoed the sentiment, adding that Sri Lanka had seen enough war and reiterated the need for the EU to engage with countries as partners. Ferri concluded by noting that the EU has historically found ways to strengthen itself in times of crisis and that the current era—marked by tensions with Russia and economic imbalances with China—may prompt the EU to take new steps.

Overall, the event underscored the pressing need for enhanced cooperation between Europe and Asia in areas ranging from trade to civil society engagement. Speakers agreed that think tanks play a vital role in shaping informed policy discussions and that a more strategic, united EU approach toward Asia—coupled with reciprocal engagement from Asian partners—will be crucial to navigating the evolving global landscape.