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From Civilian Power to Emerging Security Provider? The European Union's Evolving Role in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the European Union has articulated increasingly explicit ambitions to act as a security provider in the Indo-Pacific. Southeast Asia constitutes a particularly revealing arena in which to assess this evolution, as the region sits at the geopolitical core of the Indo-Pacific while remaining anchored in ASEAN-centred security practices, non-alignment and sensitivity to external power projection. This article examines whether the EU's expanding security engagement in Southeast Asia reflects genuine role learning, understood as a transformation of its international identity, or a more limited process of role adaptation within an essentially civilian and normative framework. Drawing on role theory, the analysis adopts a triadic approach linking role conception, role performance and role recognition. Empirically, it combines an examination of EU strategic documents and policy initiatives with elite perception data from regional surveys and a systematic analysis of ASEAN official statements and plans of action. The findings show that while the EU has broadened its security-relevant activities in the Indo-Pacific, these developments remain layered onto pre-existing civilian-oriented roles. As such, Southeast Asian actors continue to recognise the EU primarily as a normative and stabilising partner rather than as a provider of regional security. The article concludes that the EU's trajectory in Southeast Asia is best understood as adaptive adjustment rather than deep role learning, highlighting the possibilities and limits of stretching a civilian role in a competitive Indo-Pacific order.

Keywords: *European Union foreign policy; role theory; Indo-Pacific; civilian power; security cooperation*

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Introduction

Once widely regarded as a 'civilian' or 'normative' power, the European Union (EU) increasingly presents itself as an actor with security ambitions extending beyond its immediate neighbourhood (Pugliese 2023; Michalski & Parker 2024). In recent years, this evolution has become particularly visible in the Indo-Pacific, a strategic frame through which Brussels now articulates its responses to geopolitical competition, maritime insecurity and challenges to the rules-based international order. Within this broader strategic horizon, Southeast Asia occupies a distinctive position, lying at the geopolitical heart of the Indo-Pacific while remained anchored in ASEAN-centred norms of non-alignment, consensus and strategic autonomy (Qiao-Franco, Karmazin & Kolmaš 2025). It is therefore in Southeast Asia that the EU's evolving security posture becomes both most observable and most politically consequential, as the Union seeks to translate a traditionally dialogue-driven and values-oriented presence into more tangible contributions to regional stability. The publication of the 'Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific' (2021) and the 'Strategic Compass' (2022) marked an important moment in this trajectory, projecting an EU that aspires not only to economic and normative engagement, but also to a more visible role in safeguarding maritime order and regional security (Lin 2021; Crabtree 2022). This duality makes Southeast Asia not merely a sub-region of the Indo-Pacific, but a critical testing ground for assessing whether the EU's expanding security ambitions amount to a meaningful transformation of its international role.

Against this backdrop, existing scholarship has long debated the foundations and evolution of the EU's international identity. Early conceptualisations such as François Duchêne's notion of 'civilian power' and Ian Manners's 'normative power Europe' framed the Union as an actor deriving influence primarily from persuasion, law and example rather than coercion (Manners 2002; Orbie 2006). More recent analyses, however, point to the emergence of a 'geopolitical Europe', one that seeks to reconcile its normative ethos with a growing emphasis on strategic autonomy and security provision (Kilic 2024; Naeni & Kaunert 2025). Yet, while this debate has generated significant theoretical reflection, empirical analyses often remain Eurocentric or policy-specific, with limited attention to how this transformation is perceived and negotiated in other regions. In such regard, Southeast Asia provides a particularly revealing vantage point for observing the EU's ongoing role metamorphosis, given the region's adherence to the principles

of consensus, non-interference and strategic autonomy, which makes it both a mirror and a test case for the EU's evolving external identity, as well as a space where European discourse on multilateralism and security is acknowledged, but also critically scrutinised.

Accordingly, this article takes Southeast Asia as a case-study for assessing how the EU's role conception, performance and recognition are changing as the Union seeks to expand its security engagement beyond Europe's immediate neighbourhood. It argues that the EU's shift from a normative to a security-oriented actor does not necessarily represent a departure from its foundational ethos, but rather a process of role adaptation or learning, the nature of which remains to be determined. While the Union's growing security presence in the Indo-Pacific reflects adjustment to systemic pressures and strategic opportunities, the central question is whether this evolution also entails deeper learning, intended as a redefinition of self-understandings, values and responsibilities that reshapes the Union's international identity. Closely related to this is the question of how such a transformation is perceived and interpreted within Southeast Asia, particularly by ASEAN and key regional partners, and to what extent the EU's claim to a new security role is recognised, conditionally accepted or contested. Together, these two interrelated puzzles link the internal evolution of the EU's role conception and performance to the external dimension of recognition, providing a comprehensive understanding of how the Union's strategic identity is constructed, enacted and negotiated in the Southeast Asian context.

Theoretically, the study is grounded in role theory, an approach that seeks to explain how foreign policy identities emerge and evolve through the interplay between self-perception and the expectations of others. Rather than viewing international behaviour as the product of material capabilities or institutional design alone, role theory understands it as a socially constructed process in which actors continuously define who they are and how they should act in relation to their environment (Aggestam 2006: 12–14). Within this framework, three interdependent dimensions can be distinguished (Harnisch 2011). Role conception refers to how actors interpret their place in the international system and the responsibilities they believe they ought to assume. Role performance, in turn, captures the policies and practices through which these self-understandings are enacted and projected externally. Finally, role recognition denotes the feedback loop of acceptance, contestation or reinterpretation that arises as other actors respond to these performances. The interaction among these three dimensions creates a dynamic process through which identities are not only expressed but also reshaped over time.

Such a perspective is particularly well suited to the study of the EU, whose external behaviour cannot be reduced to the sum of its member states' preferences. As a composite and evolving polity, the EU's foreign policy roles are constantly

negotiated within and beyond its institutional boundaries. Internally, tensions between supranational and intergovernmental logics generate competing role conceptions and uneven role performances (Maurer & Wright 2021). Externally, the Union's pursuit of legitimacy and recognition compels it to adapt its self-understanding to changing geopolitical contexts and the perceptions of international partners (Stoddard 2015). In this sense, role theory provides a nuanced framework for examining both the internal contestation and the external validation that shape the EU's international actorness. It also highlights the mechanisms of change that underpin these processes – namely role adaptation, involving incremental adjustments in behaviour or strategy to maintain relevance, and role learning, implying a deeper cognitive and normative transformation that redefines the actor's identity and sense of purpose (Harnisch 2011: 12–14). Together, these insights offer a powerful conceptual lens through which to interpret the EU's evolving foreign policy identity in Southeast Asia.

Empirically, the analysis focuses on the EU's engagement with Southeast Asia between the adoption of the 'European Security Strategy' in 2003 and the 'Strategic Compass' in 2022, a period that captures the Union's gradual shift from a primarily diplomatic and developmental actor to one with explicit security ambitions. In its attempt to investigate how the EU's self-understanding and external behaviour have evolved amid intensifying geopolitical competition, and how these changes are interpreted by regional partners, the article follows the triadic framework developed earlier. Accordingly, it first explores the role conception dimension, assessing whether strategic discourse and official documents indicate a redefinition of the EU's self-image from civilian power to security actor. It then examines role performance, evaluating to what extent concrete initiatives, such as the 'European Peace Facility' (EPF) and the 'Coordinated Maritime Presence' (CMP), reflect adaptation to systemic pressures or genuine learning. Finally, it scrutinises role recognition through a combined analysis of ASEAN's official discourse and regional elite perception surveys, capturing how the Union's evolving security role is received, negotiated or questioned within Southeast Asia. Taken together, these dimensions clarify whether the EU's evolving engagement in Southeast Asia reflects pragmatic adjustment or deeper identity change.

By linking role conception, role performance and role recognition within a single analytical framework, the study contributes to two interconnected strands of scholarly debate. First, it speaks to ongoing discussions on the nature of EU global actorness and the uneasy coexistence between the Union's normative self-understanding and its emerging strategic ambitions (Engelbrektet et al. 2020; Simão 2022). Rather than treating these dimensions as mutually exclusive, the analysis demonstrates how they interact in practice, producing patterns of engagement that are neither purely civilian nor fully securitised. Second, the article advances the application of role theory to composite actors whose identities are

not fixed, but continuously negotiated across multiple institutional levels and external arenas. In doing so, it shows how role change cannot be inferred solely from shifts in discourse or policy instruments, but must also be assessed through the lens of external recognition and contestation. The case of Southeast Asia illustrates this dynamic particularly clearly: far from being a passive recipient of European policies, the region emerges as an active arena of mutual role construction, where the EU's evolving claims to strategic relevance are interpreted, filtered and selectively validated by regional actors. As a result, Southeast Asian responses play a constitutive role in shaping the meaning and limits of the EU's international identity, underscoring the importance of analysing role change as a relational process, grounded not only in what the EU seeks to become, but also in how that aspiration is received beyond Europe.

Role conception, performance and recognition: A framework for analysis

Role theory offers a particularly well-suited framework for analysing how the EU's foreign policy identity is constructed and transformed through the interaction between self-understandings and external expectations. Originating within Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), role theory was first articulated by Kalevi Holsti, who defined 'national role conceptions' as policymakers' subjective understandings of their state's appropriate purposes and conduct in international relations (Holsti 1970: 245–246). These conceptions, grounded in beliefs and ideas rather than material capabilities, shape foreign policy choices by defining what an actor considers legitimate, desirable or appropriate behaviour within the international system. Subsequent constructivist scholarship reconnected this insight to broader social theories of identity and recognition, emphasising that international roles are not fixed attributes but intersubjective positions formed through ongoing interaction with others (Cantir & Kaarbo 2012). Roles thus acquire meaning relationally, emerging from the intersection between self-expectations and how external actors interpret, respond to and validate those expectations.

To render this relational process analytically tractable, later contributions have sought to operationalise the concept of 'role' into distinct yet interrelated components. Sebastian Harnisch's formulation is particularly influential in this respect and provides the core analytical framework adopted in this article. Building upon Holsti's seminal work, Harnisch conceptualises roles as social positions that arise from the interaction between ego expectations, referring to an actor's self-perception and role claims, and alter expectations, referring to how others respond to, accept or contest those claims within a structured social environment (Harnisch 2011: 8). On this basis, he distinguishes three analytically separable dimensions. Role conception refers to how an actor interprets its own position, responsibilities

and appropriate behaviour in international politics. Role performance captures the concrete policies and practices through which these self-understandings are enacted. Lastly, role recognition denotes the external feedback loop through which other actors validate, reinterpret or resist those performances. Together, these dimensions allow for a systematic examination of how foreign policy identities are formed, expressed and socially embedded over time.

Significantly, Harnisch also emphasises that roles, while often characterised by strong path dependency, are inherently dynamic. As both cognitive frames and social constructs, they evolve through interaction, learning and contestation (Harnisch 2011: 10–11). Role change may occur abruptly in response to major systemic ruptures, such as the post-1945 renunciation of militarism by Germany and Japan (Maull 1990). More commonly, however, it unfolds incrementally, as actors adjust their behaviour in response to shifting contexts, misalignments between expectations and outcomes, or sustained external feedback. A frequently cited example of this latter pattern of incremental role change is the gradual transformation of the United States from a predominantly isolationist power in the late nineteenth century to a globally engaged security provider after 1945, a process that unfolded through successive crises, overseas commitments and contested domestic debates rather than through a single decisive break (Ambrose 2010; Wertheim 2024). Accordingly, it can be argued that not all role change is of equal depth. Role metamorphosis may affect only surface-level behaviour, or may extend to more fundamental elements of identity and self-understanding. This dynamic understanding of roles is thus essential for analysing the EU's gradual and uneven evolution from a predominantly civilian and normative actor toward a more security-conscious posture.

Against this backdrop, the distinction between adaptation and learning is central to understanding the different degrees of role change experienced by international actors. Adaptation refers to incremental adjustments in behaviour, instruments or rhetoric undertaken to preserve relevance within an unchanged role conception. In foreign policy terms, adaptation may involve recalibrating policy tools or expanding functional engagement without redefining underlying values or purposes. Learning, by contrast, implies a deeper cognitive and normative transformation, whereby an actor revises its beliefs, preferences and sense of responsibility in light of new experiences (Harnisch 2011: 10). Moreover, it entails qualitative change, signalling the emergence of a revised identity and a rearticulated understanding of legitimate international conduct. This dichotomy provides the analytical lens through which the article's empirical puzzle is examined. As the EU broadens its security-related engagement in Southeast Asia, the core question is whether these developments signal genuine role learning, or whether they instead reflect adaptive adjustments that extend a fundamentally civilian role into emerging strategic domains.

Building on the crucial difference between adaptation and learning, subsequent scholarship has explored how role change is shaped by the interaction between agency and structure. Lisbeth Aggestam (2006: 14–18), for example, introduces a structurationist perspective that situates role evolution within institutional and social contexts. Drawing on Anthony Giddens, she argues that foreign policy roles are produced and reproduced across three interconnected levels. At the institutional level, norms, rules and bureaucratic routines anchor expectations of appropriate behaviour. In the EU's case, long-standing commitments to multilateralism, legalism and a rules-based order have sustained its self-image as a civilian and normative power. At the interactional level, roles evolve through sustained engagement with others, as dialogue and cooperation generate feedback that may reinforce or challenge existing self-understandings. In this regard, the EU's long-standing interaction with ASEAN illustrates how repeated engagement can both socialise partners and expose tensions between self-perception and external recognition. Finally, at the intentional level, actors may consciously redefine their roles when existing scripts lose relevance. The EU's increasing emphasis on 'strategic autonomy' can be interpreted as such a reflexive response, aimed at reconciling its normative identity with the realities of intensified geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific.

While these perspectives illuminate the structural conditions of role change, other contributions highlight the importance of contestation within domestic and institutional arenas. Cristian Cantir and Juliet Kaarbo (2012) argue that roles are rarely unitary and are often contested vertically between elites and publics, as well as horizontally among bureaucratic, partisan and institutional actors. As a result, their framework foregrounds domestic politics as a key source of role instability and incoherence, emphasising how competing actors and institutional arenas generate overlapping and sometimes contradictory role expectations. This insight is particularly relevant for the EU, whose composite and multilevel governance structure multiplies sites of contestation across the European Commission, the Council, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the member states. Authority over external action is fragmented rather than centralised, while responsibility for defining strategic priorities, allocating resources and bearing political costs is unevenly distributed (Freudlsperger & Weinrich 2022; Rakutienė 2025). This institutional dispersion not only complicates coherent role articulation, but also increases the likelihood that external partners encounter inconsistent signals regarding the EU's intentions, capabilities and willingness to act. Hence, understanding these tensions as instances of internal role contestation helps explain the EU's incremental, uneven and occasionally ambiguous evolution toward greater security engagement.

Equally important is the relational dimension of role legitimacy, elaborated by Rikard Bengtsson and Ole Elgström (2012). They argue that the credibility of an

actor's international role depends on the degree of congruence between internal role conceptions and external recognition. Persistent misalignment between rhetoric and practice, or between self-ascribed roles and external expectations, undermines legitimacy and weakens influence. In this perspective, their analysis of the EU highlights how inconsistencies between normative discourse and policy behaviour can erode credibility, particularly when values are invoked selectively or instrumentally. Although their empirical focus lies on regions such as Eastern Europe and the 'African, Caribbean and Pacific' (ACP) countries, their insights are directly applicable to Southeast Asia, where normative claims are often scrutinised against concrete practice. In such contexts, a perceived gap between values and action constrains recognition and limits the effectiveness of role projection. This dynamic is central to the ASEAN case examined in this article, where official discourse and elite perceptions provide a critical lens through which the EU's evolving security claims are evaluated, qualified or contested.

The concern with coherence and legitimacy resonates also with Sonia Lucarelli's normative reading of the EU's role conception and performance. Lucarelli argues that the EU's distinctiveness lies not in the originality of its values, but in their specific interpretation and hierarchy. These 'interpreted values', including legalism, multilateralism, solidarity and harmony with nature, constitute the ideational substance of the Union's political identity and inform its external roles (Lucarelli 2006: 49–56). From this perspective, role conception and role performance are co-constitutive elements of an ongoing process of self-identification. In parallel, Lucarelli also underscores the link between internal identification and external credibility, showing how fragmentation or contestation within European societies weakens the coherence of Brussels' international role and undermines its legitimacy abroad. This insight is particularly salient for a polity like the EU, whose authority and identity are distributed across multiple institutional and political levels, which renders congruence between values and action a particularly demanding condition for sustaining role credibility.

Collectively, these theoretical contributions portray the EU as a reflexive actor whose international identity is continuously reconstructed through dialogue, contestation and performance. Role change, in this view, is rarely abrupt, as it more commonly unfolds through processes of layering and recalibration, whereby new elements are added to existing role scripts without fully displacing them. In such context, the EU's gradual shift from a civilian power toward a more security-oriented posture in Southeast Asia offers a revealing testing ground for assessing whether recent developments signal substantive identity change or an incremental stretching of an established civilian role. To address this question, the study examines the EU's evolving role through a triadic analytical framework linking identity, behaviour and recognition. Methodologically, role conception is traced through a structured discursive analysis of key strategic texts that articulate

the Union's evolving self-understanding in international politics, including the 2003 'European Security Strategy' (ESS), the 'Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy' (2016), the 'Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific' (2021) and the 'Strategic Compass' (2022).

These documents were selected because they represent the EU's most authoritative strategic statements during the period under examination, and collectively reflect how the Union has progressively reframed its security ambitions in response to a changing geopolitical environment. Through a close reading of the language, priorities and policy prescriptions embedded in these texts, the investigation identifies how the EU defines the scope of its international responsibilities and how this evolving understanding of its international role relates to its engagement in Southeast Asia. To this end, the study engages in an interpretive analysis of strategic discourse, focusing on recurring themes, conceptual framings and policy priorities through which the EU articulates its security ambitions and regional engagement. Particular attention is paid to references to the Indo-Pacific, maritime security, partnership with ASEAN and the broader framing of the EU as a security actor beyond its immediate neighbourhood. Building on this analysis of role conception, role performance is then assessed by examining selected policy initiatives and operational practices through which these strategic role conceptions are translated into concrete action. In particular, the analysis focuses on initiatives such as the already recalled EPF and CMP, and participation in multilateral security exercises, which illustrate the practical instruments through which the EU has expanded its security-related engagement in the region.

The third analytical dimension concerns role recognition. This specific realm is examined by combining regional elite perception data with an analysis of ASEAN's institutional discourse. The study draws, in particular, on the 'State of Southeast Asia Survey' conducted annually by the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, which provides one of the most comprehensive sources of elite perceptions across the region. These perception data are complemented by a focused corpus of ASEAN–EU institutional documents adopted between 2018 and 2023, including the joint statement establishing the 'ASEAN–EU Strategic Partnership' and the most recent 'ASEAN–EU Plans of Action'. Such texts were selected because they constitute high-level institutional expressions of ASEAN's collective position toward the EU during the period in which the Union's Indo-Pacific engagement became more visible. While such diplomatic documents inevitably reflect negotiated language between partners and therefore capture only part of the broader regional debate, their analysis nevertheless provides valuable insight into how the EU's evolving role is formally framed and recognised within ASEAN's institutional discourse. Taken as a whole, the combination of documentary analysis and regional perception data makes it possible to capture both the formal and informal dimensions of external validation. On the basis of this analytical and methodological framework,

the following section turns to the analysis of role conception, examining how the EU's strategic discourse has articulated and redefined its security ambitions in relation to Southeast Asia.

Changing narratives: The EU's evolving conception of its international role

For much of its post–Cold War history, the EU saw itself as a civilian and normative power, deriving influence less from military capabilities than from its ability to project values, law and institutions (Lenz 2013). In International Relations, a civilian power shapes world politics through diplomacy, economic engagement and the promotion of shared norms. Rather than relying on coercion, its authority derives from attraction and example, and is legitimised by international law, multilateral institutions and a sustained commitment to peaceful conflict resolution. Accordingly, such actors do not renounce the use of force, but they subordinate it to collective decision-making and legal constraint, viewing it as a last resort within a broader political strategy. This conception found particularly fertile ground in the EU, whose integration project was born of a rejection of power politics and a belief that interdependence and law could replace balance-of-power rivalry as the foundation of peace. In such a context, the notion of Europe as a 'civilian power', first articulated by François Duchêne in the early 1970s, became a key conceptual pillar for understanding the Union's global posture (Duchêne 1972). The concept posited that Brussels' distinctiveness lay in its reliance on economic leverage, diplomacy, legalism and multilateralism rather than on coercive instruments typical of other great powers. As mentioned, this framing later gained further prominence through Ian Manners's concept of Europe as a 'normative power', which cast the EU's role as an exporter of liberal-democratic values as constitutive of its legitimacy and effectiveness.

The 2003 ESS codified this worldview at the doctrinal level, offering the clearest articulation of how the Union understood its role in global politics at the turn of the century. Published under the optimistic title 'A Secure Europe in a Better World', the document opened with the assertion that 'Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free', and that 'large-scale aggression against any Member State is now improbable' (Council of the European Union 2003). Rather than rival powers or territorial threats, it identified diffuse, transnational challenges such as terrorism, weapons proliferation, regional conflicts, state failure and organised crime as the main dangers to European security. Interestingly enough, these were portrayed as problems of governance rather than of geopolitics, to be addressed through prevention, development and international cooperation. Such logic was emblematically captured by the claim that 'the best protection for our security is a world of well-governed democratic states', which suggested that peace and stability were expected to flow from democracy, law and effective institutions,

rather than deterrence or military strength (Council of the European Union 2003: 6). As a result, the ESS advanced a normative-institutionalist conception of order, seeing insecurity as the product of weak governance and prescribing collective action, multilateral cooperation and stronger international rules as remedies.

In line with this view, the document also suggested that Europe's comparative advantage lay in its wide range of diplomatic, economic and developmental instruments, insisting that none of the 'new threats' that characterised the international arena at the turn of the century were purely military in nature. In doing so, the ESS thus presented the Union to domestic and global audiences as a champion of an 'effective multilateralism' anchored in the United Nations and regional partnerships, consolidating the EU's self-image as a normative actor projecting influence through law, dialogue and assistance rather than through power projection (Bailes 2005). Consistent with this logic, the EU's model of integration was portrayed as a source of external stability, grounded in enlargement and the emerging neighbourhood policy, which aimed to export prosperity and good governance rather than pursue narrow geopolitical ambitions. As such, the strategy linked Europe's security to 'a ring of well-governed countries to the East of the European Union and on the borders of the Mediterranean', implying that stability would come from transforming, not containing, its periphery (Council of the European Union 2003: 5). In this perspective, the notion of a 'ring' of like-minded partners embodied a clear civilian-power ideal, with security achieved through cooperation, conditionality and interdependence. As a result, the ESS concluded that the EU's influence ultimately resided in its ability to socialise neighbours into its norms and institutions, extending stability outward by attraction and soft power.

Yet, the strategy also exposed the limits of this identity. By defining threats largely in non-military terms and privileging long-term prevention, the EU assumed a cooperative international environment where development, governance reform and multilateral institutions could reliably manage crises. This outlook reflected both the optimism of the early 2000s and the institutional design of the Union, which was not equipped for rapid or coercive action. References to 'early, rapid, and when necessary, robust intervention' remained subordinate to the broader normative narrative, since military means, when envisaged at all, were framed as complements to diplomacy and reconstruction rather than as instruments of strategic competition (Council of the European Union 2003: 6). Moreover, the strategy offered no sustained reflection on the possible return of great-power rivalry or the geopolitical consequences of rising authoritarianism, namely the blind spots that would become increasingly evident in the decade that followed. Therefore, the ESS codified Europe's role as a post-geopolitical actor whose legitimacy rested on law, persuasion and comprehensive crisis management rather than deterrence and force, anchoring a self-image that proved difficult to adjust as the international system grew more contested.

This orientation remained largely intact between 2003 and 2016, even as the Union's institutional architecture evolved. The 2009 Lisbon Treaty, in particular, entrenched democracy, the rule of law and human rights as guiding principles of external action, reinforcing the ethos embedded in earlier doctrines. At the same time, several structural factors further reinforced continuity in its external projections as a civilian power. These underlying conditions included the absence of a supranational military command, the persistence of strategic divisions between 'Atlanticist' and 'autonomist' preferences, and continued reliance on NATO's protective umbrella, which allowed Europe to prioritise soft security while depending on US deterrence (Maurer & Wright 2021). Still, the configuration put forward by the ESS suited the relatively benign post–Cold War environment and encouraged partnerships aligned with the EU's cooperative ethos. In Southeast Asia, its emphasis on dialogue and institution-building resonated with ASEAN's principles of non-interference and consensus. Through mechanisms such as the 'ASEAN Regional Forum' (ARF) and the 'Regional EU–ASEAN Dialogue Instrument' (READI), the Union promoted collaboration in education, environmental governance and public health, while deliberately avoiding hard-security issues like the South China Sea disputes. As a result, this posture preserved Europe's legitimacy as a cooperative partner, offering capacity-building and normative reassurance without military entanglement.

By the mid-2010s, however, geopolitical disruptions including Russia's annexation of Crimea, China's growing assertiveness, Brexit and uncertainty over US commitment undermined the liberal order on which the European approach had rested, forcing the Union to reconsider its global role and lending new weight to the emerging discourse on strategic autonomy (Varma 2024). This reassessment found its first coherent expression in the 2016 Global Strategy, which marked a rhetorical and conceptual departure from the optimism of the early 2000s by recasting the EU's identity around resilience, pragmatism and strategic autonomy. The document, more specifically, portrayed the Union as facing 'times of existential crisis' and a 'more connected, contested and complex world', where the European security order had been violated in the east and security tensions were rising in Asia (EEAS 2016: 7). At the same time, it insisted on the need for a 'stronger Europe', noting that partners increasingly expected the Union to act as a global security provider, thus broadening the scope of the EU's international responsibilities beyond civilian and developmental functions. Even more importantly, the strategy reaffirmed the importance of multilateralism and rule-based order, but no longer defined the Union primarily as a civilian power. Instead, it argued that 'soft and hard power go hand in hand' and explicitly nurtured the ambition of 'strategic autonomy' in security and defence (EEAS 2016: 4).

Such language, coupled with calls for more investment in defence capabilities, resilience and integrated crisis management, signalled an identity shift towards

a more comprehensive security actor. Thus, in terms of role theory, it can be claimed that the 2016 Global Strategy redefined the EU's role conception by layering a security provider dimension onto its traditional image as a normative and civilian power, suggesting that credible defence capabilities and a more assertive presence were now part of what the Union considered appropriate behaviour in a turbulent environment. This evolving self-understanding acquired a more concrete regional focus with the 2021 Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. While reiterating familiar themes of an 'open and rules based regional security architecture', the document framed the Indo-Pacific as a theatre where European interests and values were directly at stake, citing challenges such as coercive maritime behaviour, cyber threats and strategic competition (European Commission 2021). In parallel, it called for secure sea lines of communication, enhanced naval presence and expanded maritime capacity building, thereby normalising the idea that the EU should maintain a visible security footprint in a region far beyond its immediate neighbourhood. More importantly, the document envisaged more frequent joint exercises and port calls with regional partners and considered the extension of the already recalled CMP concept to the Indo-Pacific, with the aim of making a European naval presence a regular feature of the regional landscape.

At the level of role conception, the Indo-Pacific Strategy marked a departure from a purely normative script by articulating a vision of the EU as an engaged security partner tasked with protecting common goods, such as freedom of navigation, through a combination of diplomacy, development and operational presence. This trajectory was further consolidated by the 2022 Strategic Compass, the most ambitious statement to date of the Union's identity as a security and defence actor. Framed as a response to a 'new world of threats' and shaped by the shock of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the document called for a 'quantum leap' toward a more assertive and decisive security role (EEAS 2022: 5–7). In addition, it advanced a comprehensive threat assessment extending beyond Europe, explicitly identifying the Indo-Pacific as a region where European security interests are engaged and where naval exercises, regular port calls and enhanced security partnerships should become routine (EEAS 2022: 55–57). The Compass also outlined plans to strengthen rapid deployment, joint exercises, defence investment and tailored capacity-building for partners, linking these tools to the protection of European citizens, values and interests. Conceptually, this completed the shift from a post-geopolitical narrative centred on civilian power toward a hybrid role that combines internal security provision with external stabilisation. At the same time, the persistent emphasis on multilateralism, international law and a rules-based order indicated that this role is framed less as a rupture with the EU's normative legacy than as its recalibration under more adverse conditions. How this layered role conception translates into concrete action in Southeast Asia, and how it is received by regional actors, therefore becomes a critical test of whether the EU's

evolving self-understanding is matched by substantive behavioural change and external recognition.

From rhetoric to action: EU role performance in Southeast Asia

This section examines the evolution of the EU's behaviour in Southeast Asia to address the key research question that shaped the study, namely whether and to what extent the Union's external action has shifted from the traditional parameters of a civilian and normative actor toward the profile of an emerging security provider. Whereas the preceding part of the analysis traced the rhetorical and conceptual evolution of the EU's self-understanding as an international actor, the present discussion turns to the realm of practice by examining how this evolving identity is translated into action. In doing so, it shifts attention to the concrete policies and initiatives through which the Union sought to shape regional dynamics in Southeast Asia and to give operational meaning to its emerging role ambitions. Scrutinising these initiatives and their relative weight is essential to determine whether the EU's engagement reflects adaptation, understood as incremental behavioural adjustment within a stable role identity, or learning, implying a deeper transformation of its purpose and external role. By examining developments across development cooperation, non-traditional security, political dialogue, maritime cooperation and emerging defence instruments, this section assesses whether the EU's role performance remains an expanded civilian repertoire or points to a more substantive behavioural reorientation, in line with its recent strategic ambitions.

In this regard, it is worth recalling that throughout much of the post–Cold War period the EU's behaviour in Southeast Asia remained closely aligned with its civilian and normative self-conception. From the early 1990s to the mid-2010s, the Union emerged primarily as a development and trade partner, as well as a supporter of ASEAN's regional integration efforts, channelling resources into institution-building efforts, educational exchanges, legal and regulatory cooperation, environmental governance and connectivity (Camroux 2008). Early frameworks of cooperation, such as the 'Nuremberg Declaration on an Enhanced Partnership' (2007) and subsequent plans of action, reinforced the perception that the EU's comparative advantage lay in the provision of public goods rather than in traditional security commitments. In parallel, European initiatives through programmes such as Erasmus+, SHARE, Horizon 2020 and READI equipped ASEAN states with technical expertise, regulatory models and capacity building mechanisms that deepened interregional socialisation, but did not signal a willingness to engage in hard security. This mercantilist approach that shaped the EU's regional posture came once again to the fore in 2007 with the launch of negotiations for the EU-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, which dominated the bilateral agenda for the following years (Meissner 2016).

In this phase, security surfaced mainly through the lens of non-traditional threats, including disaster management, climate change, pandemics and transnational crime. Because these issues overlap substantially with development and governance agendas, the EU could present its long-standing activities as contributions to regional security, without altering its underlying civilian posture. Yet, this very framing limited external recognition of the EU as a security actor. Although Brussels funded projects in counter-terrorism, food security, environmental protection and disaster preparedness, and participated in relevant multilateral fora such as the ARF, the Union was not regarded as a strategic player, partly because it remained absent from bodies such as the 'East Asia Summit' (EAS) and refrained from involvement in sensitive matters like the South China Sea. Against this backdrop, analyses of ASEAN–EU relations during this period consistently emphasise that, despite such contributions, Southeast Asian policymakers continued to view the EU largely as a development and governance partner rather than a meaningful security actor (Jetschke & Portela 2013: 5–6). From a role theory perspective, this period thus illustrates a strong alignment between role conception and performance, inasmuch as the EU behaved as a civilian power and was perceived as such, with little evidence of significant behavioural evolution.

From the mid-2010s onwards, however, the EU introduced new instruments and practices that expanded its security-relevant activities, even if much of this evolution remained anchored in its civilian toolkit. The Union's accession to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2012 signalled a symbolic step toward embedding itself in the region's diplomatic security architecture and opened the way for cooperation in maritime security, peacekeeping training, humanitarian assistance, military medicine and counter-terrorism (Qiao-Franco, Karmazin & Kolmaš 2025: 423–425). In parallel, the 'Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace' (IcSP), introduced in 2014 as the EU's main financial tool for crisis prevention, peacebuilding and security-related capacity-building, enabled more substantive support for border management, crisis response and rule-of-law initiatives, while several member states also began participating more regularly in multilateral naval exercises and confidence-building measures, particularly in maritime domain awareness and coast-guard training (Maier-Knapp 2018: 4). Taken together, these developments point to an incremental securitisation of the EU's regional presence, in which security concerns were addressed through civilian mechanisms such as technical assistance, capacity-building and non-binding dialogues. Yet this expansion still amounted to adaptation rather than learning, as the Union stretched existing instruments to meet new demands, without rethinking its broader approach to power projection or operational engagement. As a result, despite greater visibility in selected functional areas, Southeast Asian elites continued to view the EU primarily as an economic and normative partner, reinforcing its profile as a provider of soft security rather than a substantive strategic actor.

Nonetheless, a more pronounced behavioural shift began to take shape from 2020 onwards, most notably with the elevation of EU–ASEAN relations to a Strategic Partnership. This step opened unprecedented avenues for cooperation in the security domain, albeit primarily in the area of non-traditional and asymmetrical security challenges such as counter-terrorism, cybersecurity and maritime security. Building on this institutional upgrade, the adoption of the EU's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in 2021 and the Strategic Compass in 2022 further reinforced a more assertive and security-oriented posture, progressively reshaping the Union's engagement with Southeast Asia. The most visible manifestation of this shift has been the gradual intensification of the EU's maritime profile, particularly in and around contested naval spaces such as the South China Sea (Michalski & Parker 2024: 275–276). Several EU member states have also developed their own regional strategies, increased naval port calls, participated in freedom-of-navigation operations and engaged in joint maritime activities in support of a rules-based order at sea (Wacker 2021). This trend was further institutionalised in 2022 with the extension of the EU's CMP blueprint, initially launched in the Gulf of Guinea, to the Indo-Pacific through the establishment of a CMP in the North-Western Indian Ocean (Nováky 2022). Within this framework, August 2022 marked the first EU–Indonesia joint naval exercise in the Arabian Sea, involving the Indonesian Navy corvette KRI Sultan Iskandar Muda and the Italian frigate ITS Virginio Fasan (Pejsova 2023). Focused on anti-piracy and interdiction scenarios, the exercise illustrated both the EU's expanding operational footprint and Southeast Asian openness to practical security cooperation with European forces.

At the same time, the EPF scheme, launched in 2021 as the EU's first instrument allowing military support to partner states, opened avenues for security assistance in the Indo-Pacific that would have been politically unthinkable a decade earlier, ranging from equipment provision to maritime surveillance capabilities and comprehensive 'train and equip' programmes (Mustasilta & Karjalainen 2025). These initiatives connected directly to the expectations articulated in the Strategic Compass, which portrays the EU as a future 'security provider' responsible for protecting both its own interests and broader international stability. Despite the reorientation of European defence spending toward the Eastern flank following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, several EU member states have simultaneously expanded their role as providers of military hardware in Southeast Asia, as illustrated by Indonesia's 2022 purchase of 42 French Rafale fighter jets, Germany's deepened 2024 Strategic Partnership with Singapore accompanied by EUR 1.2 billion in approved arms transfers, and Italy's 2025 agreement to supply Malaysia with Leonardo maritime patrol aircraft (Ballestracci 2025; Hutt 2025). Yet even with these advances, the emerging security posture remains layered, for although it signals a clearer willingness to assume a security role, it continues to rely on functional cooperation and modest operational steps rather than on the kind of

defence commitments that would mark a decisive break with the EU's longstanding civilian identity.

As a result, the EU's role performance in Southeast Asia as an emerging security provider reveals a trajectory of incremental but cumulative expansion in the defence domain, which has significantly deepened and stretched Brussels' repertoire of tools and diplomatic priorities, without yet amounting to a fundamental redefinition of its external identity. Although the EU has begun to behave in ways that are more consistent with the ambition to play a more incisive role in global security endorsed in recent strategic documents, much of its engagement continues to rely on developmental and normative instruments, and its operational footprint remains limited. Accordingly, initiatives such as the CMP and the EPF have in practice extended long-standing logics of civilian rather than military engagement, by relying on low-intensity deployments rather than the build-up of credible coercive capabilities. In a similar fashion, the scope of Brussels' assistance has broadened to encompass the military domain, but the focus of such efforts is still directed toward capacity-building, governance reform and the enabling of partners' resilience, rather than toward the creation of hard balancing coalitions or binding defence commitments.

In light of the above, it can be argued that what appears at first glance as a significant 'security turn', in reality represents a calibrated extension of long-standing practices. The EU continues to frame its actions through the language of partnership, multilateralism and the protection of global commons, avoiding positions that would require clear alignment in regional rivalries or active participation in deterrence architectures. Moreover, member state participation remains highly uneven: while France and, increasingly, Germany and Italy contribute to a more visible maritime and defence footprint, many others remain reluctant to prioritise Indo-Pacific security over commitments in Europe's neighbourhood (Keßler 2024). This unevenness further constrains the emergence of a cohesive, Union-wide strategic role. Finally, the absence of hard security guarantees, a unified military command structure or sustained deployments capable of altering regional balances of power underscores the continued dominance of civilian logics in EU foreign policy practice (Bouffaron & Blandin 2025). As a consequence, the Union's initiatives broaden its presence and deepen cooperation, but they do not constitute the type of sustained military engagement or strategic risk-taking that would signal a deeper identity transformation of the kind associated with genuine learning. The resulting pattern is therefore one of gradual behavioural adjustment within an essentially stable identity, where adaptation helps the EU respond to a more contested Indo-Pacific environment without fundamentally revising the normative foundations of its external action. Yet, whether this adaptive trajectory can evolve into deeper role learning ultimately hinges not only on European choices and capabilities, but also on how the Union's expanding security posture is interpreted, validated or contested by Southeast Asian actors.

Southeast Asian perceptions and the external recognition of EU role claims

A core insight of role theory is that no international role is fully realised unless it is acknowledged by others. The meaning and effectiveness of an actor's self-ascribed role depend not only on its internal conception and behavioural performance, but also on the degree of recognition granted by external partners. In the case of the EU, whose identity is defined as much by its normative ambitions as by its capacity to shape international outcomes, Southeast Asian perceptions constitute a crucial test of whether its emerging security posture is seen as credible, legitimate or strategically consequential. As for any evolving role in global affairs, regional actors did not merely observe the progressive evolution of the EU's role claims, they interpreted, negotiated and at times contested them, thereby influencing the trajectory of the Union's external identity. For these reasons, analysing ASEAN and regional reactions offers indispensable evidence to assess whether the EU's shift toward a more security-oriented profile amounts to genuine role learning or remains confined to adaptation. If regional counterparts continue to frame Brussels primarily as a development and governance partner, despite its expanding security-related instruments and operational aspirations, this would suggest that the underlying role transformation is not externally validated. If, by contrast, Southeast Asian actors begin to recognise the EU as a credible contributor to regional order and maritime stability, this would indicate a deeper shift in the Union's socially acknowledged role.

To investigate how Southeast Asian counterparts perceive the EU's emerging security role, this section adopts a dual-source methodological approach that integrates regional perception data with official documentary evidence. The first pillar draws on annual elite perception surveys conducted across Southeast Asia, specifically the 'State of Southeast Asia' survey series produced by the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, which captures the views of policy-influencing respondents from government, think tanks, academia, the private sector and civil society. These surveys provide insight into how actors directly involved in shaping national and regional policy debates assess the EU's influence, credibility and strategic relevance. For the purposes of this study, the analysis focuses on the 2020–2025 editions and concentrates on indicators that speak to the EU's perceived political influence, leadership in upholding the rules-based order, trustworthiness as a global actor and attractiveness as a 'third-party' partner amid the intensifying US-China rivalry. Considered together, these indicators allow us to assess whether the EU is recognised merely as a legitimate normative actor, or it is also increasingly perceived as strategically relevant in security-related terms. A second layer of analysis, based on a corpus of ASEAN official documents, situates these perceptions within the discursive frameworks through which Southeast Asian institutions articulate expectations toward extra-regional partners. As such, these

two sets of sources provide a robust basis for evaluating the external recognition dimension of the EU's evolving role performance.

Across the six survey cycles examined, a clear pattern emerges: Southeast Asian elites continue to perceive the EU primarily as a normative and governance-oriented partner, yet they increasingly acknowledge elements of strategic relevance associated with its more active posture in the Indo-Pacific (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute 2020–2025). While the EU never rises beyond a modest share in rankings of actors with the greatest political and strategic influence in Southeast Asia, its position is strikingly stable over time and comparatively insulated from the sharp fluctuations experienced by larger geopolitical players. More tellingly, when respondents are asked to identify the most reliable champions of the rules-based order, the EU consistently occupies one of the top three positions, at times overtaking the United States and significantly outpacing China. This resilience underscores a strong regional expectation that the Union will continue to play a central role in sustaining the normative foundations of regional order. Trust indicators reinforce this picture. Despite year-to-year oscillations and moments of decline, particularly in the editions published after 2022, confidence that the EU will 'do the right thing' remains structurally high and rebounds in 2025, signalling the persistence of reputational capital that is not easily eroded by internal European turbulence or global crises (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute 2025: 60–61). The distribution of trust further suggests that the EU's appeal is strongest among actors seeking predictable, non-coercive partners capable of enhancing governance standards while respecting sovereignty, a combination closely aligned with Brussels' self-ascribed identity.

Yet, what is most revealing for this study is how the region situates the EU within the strategic landscape shaped by intensifying US-China competition. When respondents are asked which 'third party' ASEAN should turn to in order to hedge against superpower rivalry, the EU is repeatedly placed at or near the top of the list between 2020 and 2023, highlighting its attractiveness as a stabilising actor capable of broadening Southeast Asian strategic options without imposing hard alignments (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute 2023: 37–38). Although this preference moderates somewhat in the 2024–2025 editions, as Japan and, to a lesser extent, India gain prominence, the EU remains a preferred partner for diversification and for insulating ASEAN autonomy from the pressures of bipolar competition (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute 2024: 47–49). This pattern indicates that the Union's incremental operational initiatives, including maritime presence schemes and security-related capacity-building, are noticed and valued, even if they do not yet suffice to reclassify the EU as a security guarantor. Instead, regional elites appear to interpret the EU's evolving posture as a phenomenon that blends continuity and cautious adjustment. Against this backdrop, Brussels continues to be valued primarily for its civilian clout and normative leadership, while its expanding

engagement in maritime security and crisis-response cooperation has begun to modestly enrich its strategic profile.

A closer examination of survey editions published after 2022, moreover, reveals an important nuance that complicates any linear reading of the EU's growing security engagement. While trust in the Union's normative leadership remains comparatively strong, a rising share of respondents expresses doubts about its strategic capacity in the context of mounting global instability. In the surveys conducted in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU is increasingly perceived as preoccupied with internal and proximate challenges, including energy insecurity, inflation, political fragmentation and the material demands of sustaining military support for Ukraine (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute 2025: 60–61). These assessments, most notably, are closely associated with the view that the Union lacks the political bandwidth or operational resources to sustain a long-term security role in distant theatres such as the Indo-Pacific (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute 2024: 66). Although the 2025 survey registers a partial recovery in overall confidence, the underlying sources of scepticism remain consistent, portraying the EU as institutionally complex, strategically overstretched and unlikely to prioritise Asian security over pressing commitments in its immediate neighbourhood. From a role-theoretic perspective, this pattern therefore reinforces the interpretation that recent European initiatives are understood primarily as adaptive adjustments, rather than as evidence of a deeper strategic transformation.

A complementary perspective on Southeast Asian perceptions emerges from the official documents through which ASEAN articulates its expectations toward external partners and defines, in formal diplomatic language, the boundaries of their recognised roles. While elite perception surveys capture informal and often candid assessments, ASEAN joint statements, leaders' declarations and plans of action represent the institutional voice of the region and thus provide an authoritative gauge of how the EU is framed within ASEAN's normative and strategic imagination. To capture this dimension, the analysis examines four key texts adopted between 2018 and 2023, namely the 'ASEAN–EU Plan of Action' (2018–2022), the 'Joint Statement on the Establishment of the ASEAN–EU Strategic Partnership' (2020), the 'ASEAN–EU Commemorative Summit Leaders' Statement' (2022) and the 'Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN–EU Strategic Partnership' (2023–2027). Taken together, these documents span a period marked by intensifying geopolitical competition and by the EU's growing ambition to assume a more explicit security role in the Indo-Pacific. Their discursive framing therefore offers a critical benchmark against which to assess whether ASEAN's official recognition has evolved in step with the Union's changing posture.

Interestingly, the analysis of these texts reveals a striking degree of continuity in how ASEAN officially conceives of the EU's external role. Across all four documents, the Union is overwhelmingly portrayed as a normative, developmental

and governance-oriented partner rather than as a security provider. The 2018–2022 Plan of Action defines cooperation primarily in terms of 'sustainable economic development, connectivity, good governance, climate change and environmental protection', while the section on political and security cooperation focuses on disaster management, human security and dialogue-based conflict prevention (ASEAN & EU 2017: 1–5). Maritime security is framed through technical and legal cooperation, notably the promotion of maritime safety and adherence to international law, including UNCLOS. This normative register persists in the 2020 joint statement on the establishment of the ASEAN–EU Strategic Partnership, which foregrounds shared commitments to democracy, human rights and the rules-based international order, while describing security cooperation in functional terms such as enhancing 'maritime domain awareness, peacekeeping training, and counter-terrorism capacity-building' (Council of the European Union 2020). Although the statement acknowledges the EU's growing engagement in the Indo-Pacific, it explicitly situates this involvement within ASEAN-led frameworks and affirms that cooperation should proceed in support of ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

The same pattern is visible in documents adopted after 2021, even as the EU's own strategic vocabulary became more assertive. The 2022 Commemorative Summit Leaders' Statement repeatedly emphasises cooperation on sustainable development, digital transition, health security and climate action, while situating security collaboration within a non-traditional paradigm. It reaffirms commitments to 'maintain peace, security, and stability through dialogue and cooperation' and welcomes EU support for ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ARF and the 'ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus' (ADMM-Plus) (ASEAN & EU 2022a: 3). However, security-related references remain firmly embedded in language of capacity-building, information-sharing and maritime governance, notably encouraging cooperation to 'promote maritime security and safety, freedom of navigation and overflight, and adherence to UNCLOS', without any suggestion of a deterrent or force-projection role for the EU (ASEAN & EU 2022a: 3). The 2023–2027 Plan of Action further expands the spectrum of cooperative activities to include cyber resilience, law-enforcement cooperation, peacekeeping training and exchanges among defence officials, yet it remains anchored in civilian and technical modalities (ASEAN & EU 2022b: 1–5). In line with this approach, references to the EU's Strategic Compass are framed as a basis for enhanced dialogue and practical cooperation, rather than as evidence of a redefinition of expectations regarding the Union's security role. Even more significantly, nowhere across these four documents does ASEAN describe the EU as a 'security provider' or articulate expectations comparable to those associated with established security actors in the region.

Considered together, these findings therefore demonstrate that ASEAN's official discourse has not undergone a significant reorientation in response to the

EU's evolving strategic posture. While the Union is increasingly recognised as a constructive contributor to maritime governance, cyber resilience and crisis-response cooperation, these acknowledgements remain firmly embedded within the normative and civilian paradigms that have long defined the relationship. The absence of any explicit discursive upgrade recognising the EU as a provider of regional security suggests that external validation has not kept pace with the Union's self-ascribed ambitions. Instead, ASEAN continues to frame the EU primarily as a longstanding partner in development, connectivity and institution-building. This discursive continuity mirrors the cautious optimism and persistent scepticism captured in elite perceptions, confirming that Brussels' behavioural innovations have yet to translate into a transformed external identity. The resulting misalignment between expanding role performance and stable patterns of recognition highlights the structural constraints facing the EU's security ambitions, whilst also underscoring the conditions under which adaptive role stretching might, in the future, give way to genuine role learning.

Conclusions

This study sought to assess whether the EU's evolving engagement in Southeast Asia reflects a genuine transformation from a civilian and normative power toward an emerging security provider, or whether it should instead be understood as a more limited process of adaptation within an essentially stable role identity. By combining role theory with a three-level empirical analysis of role conception, role performance and role recognition, the article has shown that while the EU's posture in the Indo-Pacific has expanded in scope, visibility and functional ambition, these developments do not yet amount to deep role learning. Rather, they point to an incremental recalibration of behaviour that stretches pre-existing civilian and normative instruments to respond to a more contested strategic environment, without fundamentally revising the Union's external identity or redefining its core understanding of international responsibility. At the level of role conception, the analysis documented a clear rhetorical evolution from the optimism of the early post–Cold War period to a more sober and security-conscious reading of international politics. The 2016 Global Strategy, the 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy and the 2022 Strategic Compass all reflect heightened awareness of geopolitical competition, coercion and strategic vulnerability. Yet, this evolution remains layered rather than substitutive. Security concerns are articulated primarily as enabling conditions for safeguarding the rules-based international order and preserving the EU's normative influence, rather than as autonomous strategic ends. As a result, the Union continues to conceive its international role as distinct from that of traditional security providers, emphasising multilateralism, legalism and non-coercive engagement even as it acknowledges the need for greater presence, resilience and strategic awareness in the Indo-Pacific.

The examination of role performance reinforced this interpretation. Over the past decade, the EU has undeniably broadened its security-relevant activities in Southeast Asia, particularly through maritime cooperation, capacity-building initiatives and the deployment of new instruments such as the EPF and CMP. These measures have increased the Union's operational visibility and diversified its policy toolbox, signalling a growing willingness to engage with security-related domains. However, they remain largely embedded within established civilian and functional frameworks that privilege training, governance support and co-ordination over enduring defence commitments or sustained power projection. Furthermore, several of the most consequential developments associated with this security turn have been driven primarily by individual member states, rather than by the EU acting as a unified strategic actor, as illustrated by France's sustained naval presence in the region or by bilateral defence agreements concluded by Germany and Italy with Southeast Asian partners. This continued reliance on nationally driven initiatives underscores the absence of a fully integrated European security posture, and reinforces the perception that the EU's engagement remains incremental rather than transformative, as Brussels responds to a more contested Indo-Pacific environment by recalibrating existing mechanisms rather than redefining its strategic purpose or hierarchy of priorities.

Emblematically, the recognition dimension provides the most decisive evidence in support of this interpretation. Drawing on elite perception surveys conducted among policy-relevant actors across Southeast Asia, as well as on ASEAN's official discourse, the analysis showed that Southeast Asian actors continue to frame the EU primarily as a normative, developmental and governance-oriented partner. While regional elites increasingly acknowledge the Union's strategic relevance as a stabilising third party amid the intensifying US-China rivalry, neither survey data nor formal ASEAN documents point to a reclassification of the EU as a provider of regional security. Instead, ASEAN's institutional language consistently situates cooperation within civilian, technical and ASEAN-led paradigms, reinforcing continuity in how the EU's role is understood and recognised. In other words, such data goes to show that in the case of EU-ASEAN ties, external validation has not kept pace with the Union's more ambitious role claims. Nevertheless, the conclusion that the EU's evolving engagement in Southeast Asia reflects adaptation rather than learning does not deny the significance of recent innovations, nor does it exclude the possibility of deeper transformation in the future. Rather, it rests on the observation that the Union's security-related initiatives remain largely embedded within established civilian frameworks, and are not accompanied by material risk-taking or institutionalised security commitments in the region.

From an empirical standpoint, the analysis has also allowed to highlight that the distinction between adaptation and learning advanced in this article rests on a set of observable criteria. A transition toward genuine role learning would

require, first, a sustained re-prioritisation of security objectives across multiple EU instruments and policy domains, rather than their incremental accommodation within existing civilian frameworks. Second, it would entail a willingness to incur durable political and material costs in Southeast Asia, including long-term operational commitments and strategic trade-offs vis-à-vis other theatres. Third, learning would be reflected in the institutionalisation of security partnerships that move beyond episodic port-calls, exercises and capacity-building programmes. Finally, such a metamorphosis would need to be externally validated through a discursive shift in ASEAN's formal documents, explicitly framing the EU as a contributor to regional security rather than primarily as a governance partner. As none of these conditions are currently met in a sustained and convergent manner, the recent evolution of the EU's presence in Southeast Asia seems to reflect a case of role adaptation rather than learning.

Seen in this light, the findings presented here should be read as capturing a specific stage in the EU's evolving external role, rather than a settled or final outcome. The analysis does not imply that the Union is incapable of deeper transformation, but rather that, under current political and strategic conditions, its expanding security engagement has not yet resulted in a fundamental redefinition of its international identity. Beyond Southeast Asia, this insight carries broader implications for how EU global actorness is understood and evaluated. In particular, the study demonstrates that the EU can widen its involvement in security-related activities without departing from the civilian and normative foundations that have long shaped its external action, especially in regions where it lacks historical primacy, entrenched military presence or formal alliance commitments. In such contexts, security engagement tends to complement existing modes of influence grounded in governance support, legal frameworks, and capacity-building, rather than displacing them. At the theoretical level, the study also underscores the value of role theory in distinguishing observable behavioural change from deeper processes of learning and identity transformation. This distinction is especially important when examining composite actors such as the EU, whose ambitions, capabilities and external recognition evolve unevenly across policy domains and geographic theatres. By systematically tracing the interaction between role conceptions, role performance and role recognition, role theory enables a more precise assessment of when change reflects strategic adjustment and when it signals a genuine reordering of purpose.

Looking ahead, the trajectory identified in this study thus points to an EU that is incrementally more present in Southeast Asia, yet structurally constrained in its ability to convert presence into strategic authority. While the Union has expanded its operational visibility and diversified its security-related engagements, these steps remain deliberately calibrated to minimise political exposure, material risk and binding commitments. Such caution reflects enduring features

of EU external action, including fragmented decision-making, consensus-driven security policy and a persistent preference for procedural legitimacy over strategic assertion. However, as geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific intensifies, this calibrated ambiguity may increasingly undermine the credibility of the EU's security claims. In a regional environment where expectations toward meaningful security contributors are rising, a posture characterised by limited operational depth and indeterminate strategic intent risks being interpreted as symbolic engagement rather than substantive commitment. The Southeast Asian case therefore underscores a broader constraint on the EU's global actorness, namely the difficulty of sustaining relevance in security-sensitive regions without clearer prioritisation, deeper investment and more explicit role definition. Absent such shifts, the Union's evolving presence is likely to remain perceived as supportive but secondary, reinforcing the conclusion that its current trajectory represents adaptation under constraint rather than a transition toward a fully recognised security provider role.

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