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The prospects of South Africa's engagement with ASEAN countries

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Introduction

According to the South African draft White Paper on Foreign Policy 'Building a better world: the diplomacy of ubuntu', the Asian continent is of increasing importance to South Africa and Africa.¹ This is linked to the fact that Asia has been experiencing on average higher economic growth than any other region and its growing economic importance is also reflected in South Africa's changing trade patterns with Asia.² Close to 40% of South Africa's international trade is with Asia and economic links with this continent are expected to expand rapidly as Asian development expands.³

The importance of Asia in the South African foreign policy is commonly attributed to the level of bilateral relations and increasing trade relations South Africa has with the Asian emerging powers such as China, India and Japan to name a few. However, it is of great interest to reflect on South African foreign policy approach and relations with the Southeast Asia region, contrary to the general focus on South Africa's engagement with the dominant Asian emerging powers.

This policy brief discusses the importance of South Africa's bilateral relations with the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the need to transform these relations into formal partnership with ASEAN as a regional bloc. Policy recommendations are provided for South African foreign policy approach on the need to build stronger ties and strategic relations with ASEAN community after 2015.

South Africa's relations with ASEAN countries

The context of South Africa's foreign policy is firmly rooted in Africa and the South. Bilateral relations between South Africa and countries in the Asia-Pacific, Central Asian and Latin American regions have expanded significantly over the past decade.⁴ The case of South Africa's relations with the Southeast Asian region is of great interest to be analysed, particularly South African engagement with ASEAN and its member states. To some extent South Africa – ASEAN relationship is not systemically defined and in most occasions it is being overshadowed by South Africa's relations with the emerging power grouping of BRICS. However this is not just South African challenge; it applies to most if not all African countries in general. Basically relations between Africa and the Southeast Asia have been both sporadic and meagre, this is in spite of constant reference to Afro-Asian friendship, exchanges of students and missions, efforts by Africans and Asians to establish closer contacts and even the existence of periodicals solely interested in Afro-Asian problems.⁵ Specifically, relationship between ASEAN and African countries is not fully functioning and active both at the country and regional level

However, despite the lack of formal status for partnership with ASEAN, South Africa share bilateral diplomatic relations with all ASEAN member states; Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Four of these relations have been in existence before South Africa became a democratic state in 1994, while full diplomatic relations with the other six nations were established after 1994.

These bilateral relations signify and highlight the importance and values of the relationship shared by South Africa and ASEAN member states. For example, South Africa's relations with Indonesia holds a historical significant both politically and socially in terms of their dedicated role to strengthen relations of the Asia- Africa continents. In 2005 South Africa joined a bid with Indonesia to revive the spirit of the Bandung movement to launch the New Asia Africa Strategic Partnership (NAASP).⁶ In terms of trade, the two countries agreed in 2012 to enhance bilateral relations and to conduct a joint study to explore trade opportunities by signing a Joint Trade Committee (JTC) in Jakarta, to provide mutual benefit for the economic development of both countries.

Country	Exports (R'Million)	Imports (R'Million)
Brunei	20,329,204	191,910
Cambodia	14,017,826	168,754,645
Indonesia	4,872,427,993	8,416,992,419
Laos	5,871,803	2,660,704
Malaysia	6,459,512,381	9,563,177,240
Myanmar	9,654,209	5,698,800
Philippines	837,929,176	1,457,647,630
Singapore	9,490,972,997	19,017,662,457
Thailand	4,569,270,272	26,539,647,113
Vietnam	1,643,004,737	9,569,623,445
SA - ASEAN trade figures 2013		

The same has been said about South Africa's engagement with other key ASEAN states.

In 2012 bilateral trade turnover between South Africa and Vietnam almost reached 1 billion USD and with Thailand it is 5 billion USD in 2012. The new relation with Myanmar where trade volume amounts to a mere 3.2 million USD has a long way to go. Consequently, the level of trade between South Africa and ASEAN member states is still a challenge in that it remains below expectations even though it has improved.

Another example that signifies the increasing importance of South Africa- ASEAN relations is the fact that high level official visits from South Africa to ASEAN member states are growing. The main purpose of these visits is to promote trade, investment and to boost other forms of cooperation. For example, in 2013 high level visits were made by Vietnam and Thailand to South Africa and President Zuma visited Malaysia in August 2013. Again, in 2013 the South African Deputy Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Mr. Ebrahim Ebrahim undertook a Working Visit to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar in December accompanied by business delegation. The focus of the visit was trade and investment, marking South Africa's first business venture into Myanmar after this country normalized its domestic situation recently. These kinds of high level visit play a commendable and important role in drawing the picture of how South Africa views and values its relationship with the Southeast Asian nations

The importance of South Africa-ASEAN relations

ASEAN as a regional bloc has formal external relations with a number of states and international organisations which are meant to develop friendly relations and mutually beneficial dialogue, cooperation and partnerships.⁷ However in these external relations there is no reference to an African individual states, the only reference made is ASEAN relations with sub-regional communities such as SADC but those relations are in informal manner and inactive.

There are a number of reasons why South Africa should concentrate in building bridges with the ASEAN and to be connected with the rest of Southeast Asia region. Namely, when ASEAN becomes integrated into a community by 2015, it will consist of three pillars; ASEAN political-Security community, ASEAN Economic community and ASEAN Socio-cultural community. These pillars will function according to the mandate and objectives of the integration which means external relations of the ASEAN member states will be guided by the principles of the integration. For example, the principles range from trade and investment policies to development and tourism policies. From each of these pillars, South Africa, provided it construct a suitable approach to the region, stand a better chance to improve its economic diplomacy and cultural diplomacy. This can increase the level of South Africa's partnerships within the region.

From an ASEAN perspective, its relation as a community with South Africa is one step ahead in laying the brick for a formal partnership. While South Africa lacks a strategic approach to engage with the ASEAN as an organization. ASEAN has created a formal platform and strategic approach to facilitate ASEAN activities and relations with South Africa. A committee was established in 2008 by ASEAN known as the ASEAN Pretoria Committee (APC), which consists of the seven ASEAN mission based in Pretoria; Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Myanmar and Vietnam. The committee is one of the ASEAN Committees in the Third Countries and it represents the interest of ASEAN member states relations with South Africa.

The APC has "set their sights on strengthening multifaceted cooperation between ASEAN and South Africa to ensure the goals of building the ASEAN community by 2015 are met".⁸ During a meeting which took place in January 2014, the APC defined its objectives of the first half of 2014,

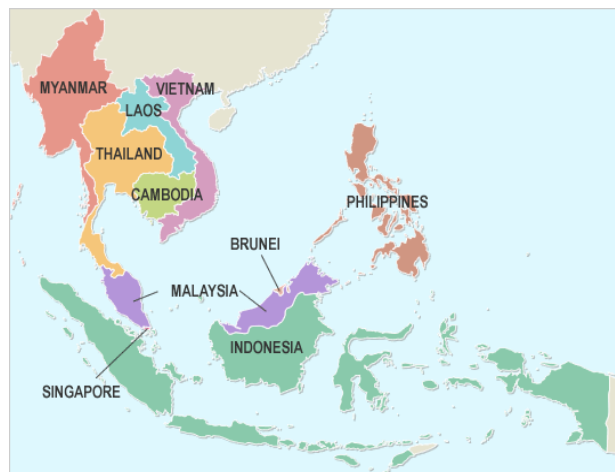
which is to strengthen the image and position of ASEAN member countries in South Africa and organise practical activities to introduce ASEAN's potential investment, trade and tourism to South African partners. Basically the APC seeks to broaden cooperation between ASEAN countries and South Africa, and it is up to South Africa on how it responds to this anticipated cooperation

Conclusion and policy suggestion

Consequently, cooperation between ASEAN and South Africa provides potential to grow in the field of geo-political (South South Cooperation) trade-economy as well as infrastructure development, technology transfer, education and tourism. South Africa must continue to generate and expand its level of engagement and its strategic interest to increase trade and investment in abovementioned sector. On a positive note, the existence of APC provides the South Africa government with an opportunity to construct a clear policy framework on how to create a meaningful relation and to build a stronger economic partnership with ASEAN

Policy suggestions

- There must be a united and a strategic approach from the South African government departments on what constitutes South African interest in the Southeast Asia region. This includes the need for South Africa to focus on a strategic engagement with the ASEAN community after 2015.
- This can be done through engagements and dialogues with research institutions and organizations that are conducting researches in the Southeast Asia region.
- South Africa needs to examine ways for cooperation with the APC; this will provide South Africa with an opportunity to realize where it needs to improve its relations with the ASEAN community.



Notes

- 1 South African Foreign Policy White paper, 2011, 'Building a better world: the diplomacy of ubuntu'.
- 2 Shelton, G. 2012. South Africa and East Asia: Missed opportunities. In South African foreign policy review volume 1, ed. C. Landsberg and J. Van Wyk, 215- 236. Pretoria. Africa Institute of South Africa.
- 3 An Annual Address by the Director-General of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Dr Ayanda Ntsaluba at the 70th Anniversary Celebrations of the South African Institute of International Affairs, 20 May 2004 <http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/2004/ntsa0521.htm>.
- 4 Von der MEHDEN, F. R. 1965. Southeast Asian relations with Africa. Asia survey, Vol.5 (7): 341-349.
- 5 Kornegay, F. 2012. South Africa and emerging powers. In South African foreign policy review volume 1, ed. C. Landsberg and J. Van Wyk, 215- 236. Pretoria. Africa Institute of South Africa.
- 6 ASEAN External Relations. <http://www.asean.org/asean/external-relations>.
- 7 Vietnam chairs ASEAN Pretoria Committee meeting <http://english.vov.vn/Politics/Vietnam-chairs-ASEAN-Pretoria-Committee-meeting/272650.vov>
- 8 ASEAN committee works to promote image in South Africa <http://www.talkvietnam.com/2014/01/asean-committee-works-to-promote-image-in-south-africa/>



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