

# PERSPECTIVE

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## Catalysing ASEAN-Africa Relations and South-South Cooperation

*Christophe Dorigné-Thomson and Joanne Lin\**



*The 2nd Meeting of the ASEAN-South Africa Joint Cooperation Committee (ASA-JSCC) convened at the ASEAN Headquarters in Jakarta to discuss the progress of ASEAN-South Africa Relations on 21 November 2024. Source: ASEAN, Facebook.*

*\* Christophe Dorigné-Thomson is Researcher and Doctor in Politics from Universitas Indonesia and the author of *Indonesia's Engagement with Africa* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), and Joanne Lin is Senior Fellow and Co-coordinator of the ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.*

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- ASEAN-Africa relations are taking on greater significance, driven by the need to navigate the challenges and opportunities of an increasingly complex global landscape. Anchored in shared aspirations for equitable development and economic collaboration, these interregional ties align with the principles of South-South Cooperation (SSC) and offer a platform to address mutual challenges and opportunities.
- The conferment of Sectoral Dialogue Partnership (SDP) status to South Africa and Morocco in 2023 highlights ASEAN's commitment to fostering long-term relations with Africa. These partnerships serve as gateways to broader economic, political, and socio-cultural cooperation between the two to support the vision of SSC.
- Africa's growing consumer base, coupled with ASEAN's expertise in trade and infrastructure development, presents immense potential for collaboration. Initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement and the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) align both regions' goals for sustainable development and trade diversification, highlighting opportunities in sectors like renewable energy, digital transformation, and logistics.
- The "ASEAN minus X" formula and the African Union's (AU) "Banjul formula" offer practical frameworks for advancing targeted cooperation without imposing commitments on all members. This approach enables willing ASEAN and AU states to explore mutual priorities in a targeted manner.
- ASEAN and Africa can build on platforms like the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) to enhance interregional engagement. By addressing informational gaps and fostering inclusive partnerships, both regions can redefine Afro-Asian relations, setting a model for intercontinental collaboration and shared prosperity in a multipolar world.
- The 70<sup>th</sup>-anniversary celebration of the Bandung Conference in April 2025 presents an opportunity for Indonesia, Malaysia (as ASEAN Chair), and South Africa (as G20 Chair) to jointly support an ASEAN-Africa exchange platform with the African Union (AU) and its Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in advancing Afro-Asian cooperation.

## INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia-Africa relations are gaining importance as both regions have come to recognise the untapped potential of economic and other aspects of collaboration within the framework of South-South Cooperation (SSC). ASEAN countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam are spearheading efforts to engage Africa, setting the stage for broader regional involvement.<sup>1</sup>

Africa, with its rapidly expanding consumer base and the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement fostering Africa's economic transformation and industrialisation by addressing infrastructure gaps and facilitating Global Value Chains (GVC) integration,<sup>2</sup> offers significant opportunities for ASEAN. African countries like Kenya and Nigeria are accelerating export growth through infrastructure development and diversification, drawing ASEAN companies to invest in sectors such as logistics, fintech and renewable energy.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, ASEAN's dynamic growth and rising intra-regional trade positions it as an attractive partner for Africa-based businesses. As such, initiatives like the Indonesia-Africa Forum,<sup>4</sup> the Africa Singapore Business Forum,<sup>5</sup> the "Colours of Africa 2024" in Thailand,<sup>6</sup> and the inaugural AirAsia X's flight to Nairobi, Kenya,<sup>7</sup> among others, symbolise this growing connection and mutual interest in enhancing Africa-Southeast Asia trade, tourism, and cultural exchanges. Beyond trade, Southeast Asia-Africa engagements also hold significance, as both regions share development challenges, colonial histories, and aspirations for shared prosperity.<sup>8</sup>

The conferment of the Sectoral Dialogue Partnership (SDP) status to South Africa and Morocco in 2023 underscores ASEAN's commitment to meaningful cooperation with Africa. Building on this momentum, Malaysia, as the ASEAN Chair in 2025, is well-positioned to enhance cooperation with Africa and amplify ASEAN's role as a key player in the Global South. This aligns with Malaysia's (and member or partner countries of BRICS such as Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam)<sup>9</sup> strategic goals for economic and geopolitical diversification.<sup>10</sup> Expanding ASEAN's external relations will no doubt enhance its global agency and reinforce the grouping's relevance. ASEAN, as Asia's most credible and cohesive regional organisation, is uniquely suited to lead interregional cooperation. ASEAN's ability to set a Pan-Asian agenda makes it an ideal platform to revive the New Asia-African Strategic Partnership (NAASP)—led by Indonesia,<sup>11</sup> driving meaningful Asia-Africa collaboration.<sup>12</sup>

## ASEAN'S ROLE IN REVITALISING INTERREGIONAL RELATIONS

Despite the historical significance of the 1955 Bandung Asia-Africa Conference, which symbolised Afro-Asian solidarity through anticolonial struggles and aspirations for non-alignment, the relationship has struggled to achieve meaningful institutionalisation.<sup>13</sup> The lack of sustained epistemic communities and tangible frameworks has hindered the development of an intellectual and institutional foundation for Afro-Asian cooperation.<sup>14</sup> While rhetoric of solidarity remains, practical implementation has been elusive.

Initiated and co-chaired by Indonesia and South Africa,<sup>15</sup> the New Asian-African Strategic Partnership (NAASP), launched in 2005 and revived in 2015 during the Asia-Africa Summits (AAS) to commemorate Bandung's 50<sup>th</sup> and 60<sup>th</sup> anniversaries,<sup>16</sup> aimed to revive Afro-Asian solidarity. It envisioned an innovative intercontinental bridge through "African"

multilateralism to tackle global challenges collaboratively.<sup>17</sup> However, NAASP's overly ambitious scope, insufficient financial resources and limited commitment from major Afro-Asian powers prevented its operationalisation, disillusioning Indonesia, which was its main proponent.<sup>18</sup> Larger Asian powers prioritised their bilateral Africa+1 engagements over multilateral efforts.<sup>19</sup> For African countries, the lack of immediate material benefits and intra-Africa challenges, such as the Western Sahara issue, made the NAASP an unattractive venue for "forum shopping".<sup>20</sup> Unlike established platforms like the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) or the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM),<sup>21</sup> there is no equivalent Asian-African framework today.

As such, ASEAN with its established external relations platform, might be well-positioned to develop more institutionalised Afro-Asian ties. Through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), Africa has increasingly entered ASEAN's geopolitical considerations. Geopolitical shifts and Africa's growing interest in partnerships beyond major powers offer ASEAN a window to propose new collaborations through mutual respect and equality.<sup>22</sup>

Southeast Asia's economic resilience and development success stories make it an attractive model for Africa. Despite ongoing challenges such as Myanmar, ASEAN has outperformed Africa in economic growth and regional stability in the past decades. The combined GDP of ASEAN was US\$3.8 trillion in 2023 (4.1% growth rate),<sup>23</sup> as compared to Africa's GDP of US\$2.8 trillion in 2024<sup>24</sup> (3.1% growth rate in 2023),<sup>25</sup> despite having a much higher population. ASEAN's approach to strategic multilateralism, hedging, pragmatic engagements with major powers, and leveraging regional economic powers like China, Japan and Korea provide valuable lessons.<sup>26</sup> Southeast Asia also offers an accessible example for Africa, thanks to its public spending targeting rural communities, the poor, pro-business environment, and healthy macroeconomic management and stability. For example, Indonesia's partnership with China in developing its nickel-based industrialisation, bringing new infrastructure, technology, capital, training, and employment,<sup>27</sup> has been well-received as a replicable resource beneficiation strategy in Africa.<sup>28</sup>

Having had a strong focus on defence diplomacy during his tenure as Defence Minister, President Prabowo Subianto is poised to continue Jokowi's "*ad hoc* minilateral *hilirisasi* and green diplomacy".<sup>29</sup> Indonesia's green collaboration with the Democratic Republic of Congo to protect and leverage their tropical forests offers a good example of a global Afro-ASEAN partnership.<sup>30</sup> The Afro-Indonesian socioeconomic gap feels more bearable than the Afro-Korean or Afro-Japanese one. Indonesia's diversity resembles Africa's more than China's. African elites comprehend Indonesian corruption and reform issues but recognise Indonesia's transformation in the primary and secondary sectors as lessons for Africa.<sup>31</sup> Lee Kuan Yew too is often referenced in Africa.<sup>32</sup>

The African Union (AU) wants to learn from ASEAN's disaster management and emergency response abilities.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, both ASEAN and AU share a preference for regional solutions to regional problems.,<sup>34</sup> encapsulated in ASAP (African Solutions for African Problems) and ASEAN solutions to its challenges based on consultation and consensus, or the "ASEAN way"<sup>35</sup> based on the ASISEAS Perspective 2025/7, 24 January 2025EAN Charter.<sup>36</sup>

However, ASEAN's engagement with Africa remains fragmented and primarily driven by its largest economies. Connectivity gaps, limited diplomatic representations, and a lack of knowledge further hinder the deepening of relations. As such, former Singapore Prime Minister

Lee Hsien Loong once advocated for selective engagement with Africa to ensure focused and impactful collaborations.<sup>37</sup>

Lee had praised the NAASP for helping to “foster greater cooperation between the two continents...and recognises how interdependent and inter-related our two continents have become and the opportunities that we have in jointly tackling challenges like terrorism, pandemics and climate change,” in his speech at the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1955 Asian African Conference in 2015.<sup>38</sup>

The upcoming Bandung 70<sup>th</sup>-anniversary celebration in April 2025 offers an opportunity for Indonesia, the birthplace of the Bandung Conference, to collaborate with Malaysia as the ASEAN Chair and South Africa as the G20 Chair to support an ASEAN-Africa exchange platform involving the African Union (AU) and its Regional Economic Communities (RECs),<sup>39</sup> as a step towards substantiating the Afro-Asian cooperation.

## **SOUTH AFRICA AND MOROCCO AS GATEWAYS TO AFRICA**

The conferment of SDP status to South Africa and Morocco in 2023 marked a pivotal milestone in advancing ASEAN’s engagement with Africa. These partnerships reflect ASEAN’s broader strategy to diversify external relations and strengthen South-South cooperation while simultaneously stimulating ASEAN’s integration by fostering collaboration under the three ASEAN Community pillars (Political-Security, Economic, and Socio-Cultural), as outlined in the respective Practical Cooperation Areas (PCA) 2024-2028 for both SDPs.<sup>40</sup> South Africa and Morocco serve as critical gateways to the African continent, enabling ASEAN to increase its global influence and unlock new opportunities for trade, investment, and sustainable development.

Although formal relations between ASEAN and both these countries are new, bilateral engagement dates back to the 1990s. South Africa and Morocco were early adopters of ASEAN instruments, with South Africa acceding to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC)—a legally binding code for interstate relations in the region and beyond—in 2020<sup>41</sup> and Morocco in 2016.<sup>42</sup> Both sides have also demonstrated a commitment to strengthening their partnerships through the establishment of embassies in Southeast Asia, accreditation of ambassadors to the region, and active diplomatic engagement. During the 8<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in 2002, former South African President Thabo Mbeki highlighted Asia and Africa’s shared destiny and emphasised South-South Cooperation as a central factor in addressing inequalities between the Global North and South.<sup>43</sup>

Morocco’s strategic geographic location, extensive free trade agreements with the European Union, the US, and the Gulf Cooperation Council, and membership of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement make it a key partner for ASEAN, heightening the latter’s ability to gain access to North and West African markets, the broader Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region, and the EU. Trade between ASEAN and Morocco expanded from USD 849 million in 2016 to USD 1.38 billion in 2022, driven by sectors like renewable energy.<sup>44</sup> Morocco’s active participation in ASEAN activities,<sup>45</sup> contributions to capacity-building initiatives,<sup>46</sup> and training for ASEAN diplomats highlight its commitment to practical cooperation and building mutual trust.<sup>47</sup>



South Africa positions itself as the gateway to Africa through Southern Africa. As Africa's most industrialised economy and a BRICS member, South Africa complements ASEAN's strategic priorities, including sustainable development and climate action. Trade between ASEAN and South Africa increased from USD 9.5 billion in 2018 to USD 12.8 billion in 2022, driven by agriculture, ICT, and renewable energy.<sup>48</sup> Initiatives like the Just Energy Transition Partnership and its leadership in AfCFTA resonate with ASEAN including its outlook on the Indo-Pacific and green energy aspirations.<sup>49</sup>

Beyond bilateral trade, South Africa offers ASEAN strategic access to multilateral platforms such as the United Nations, the G-20 and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). South Africa's focus on regional integration through the Southern African Development Community (SADC) also aligns with ASEAN's efforts to foster cohesion across its community pillars.

The admission of both South Africa<sup>50</sup> and Morocco<sup>51</sup> as formal partners of ASEAN since 2023 under Indonesia's chairmanship has opened the door for ASEAN to deepen cooperation with countries on the African continent. Apart from South Africa and Morocco, Egypt has acceded to the TAC.<sup>52</sup> There are also three ASEAN Committees<sup>53</sup> in Africa, namely in Pretoria, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; and Abuja, Nigeria. These are established to promote ASEAN's interest and cooperation between ASEAN and the host countries.<sup>54</sup> In addition, a dozen African countries have accredited Ambassadors to ASEAN.<sup>55</sup> Although ASEAN's cooperation is limited to just a handful of African countries on a continent of over 50 countries, these engagements are an important first step in tapping into both the growing regions, particularly in broadening investment opportunities for Southeast Asia.

## **ASEAN-AFRICAN BRIDGES AS PILLARS OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

ASEAN and the African Union (AU) are *de facto* conceptually intertwined in their goals of fostering equitable development, regional integration, and sustainable growth. This positions both organisations as vital pillars of the Global South, offering significant potential for interregional collaboration to address global challenges.

Indonesia's 2003 ASEAN Chairmanship contributed to rejuvenating Afro-Asian ties. Responding to South African President Thabo Mbeki's call for greater Afro-Asian collaboration,<sup>56</sup> the Asian-African Sub-Regional Organisations Conference (AASROC) in 2003 (hosted by Indonesia) and 2004 (hosted by South Africa) laid the groundwork for the New Asian-Africa Strategic Partnership (NAASP).<sup>57</sup> These conferences exemplified a balanced, region-centred approach that addressed important areas of cooperation such as trade, investment, industrialisation, conflict prevention, peacebuilding, arms control, and combating terrorism. Unlike the asymmetrical Africa + 1 forums,<sup>58</sup> AASROC emphasised shared agency, respecting member states' diversity,<sup>59</sup> and avoided subordinating one region to another, allowing ASEAN and the AU to shape equitable growth and cooperation.

ASEAN, as the most coherent regional organisation in Asia, is uniquely positioned to lead efforts to promote Afro-Asian collaboration. A strong ASEAN-AU partnership, with greater collaboration or alignment between the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement and the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP),<sup>60</sup> could unlock vast economic potential for both regions. Despite their historical and structural

differences, ASEAN and the AU share common goals of economic integration, political stability, and sustainable development, offering a promising foundation for deeper cooperation.

The low-hanging fruit for AfCFTA-RCEP interoperability lies in harmonising trade protocols,<sup>61</sup> fostering investment in industrialisation,<sup>62</sup> and leveraging digital trade opportunities. Africa can increase exports of high-demand commodities like agricultural products, (critical) minerals, and light manufacturing to RCEP markets, while RCEP countries can boost investments in Africa's manufacturing,<sup>63</sup> infrastructure,<sup>64</sup> and renewable energy sectors,<sup>65</sup> supporting Africa's economic transformation and value-addition towards fairer trade structures. Digital trade offers immediate potential through e-commerce platforms and mobile payment systems to bridge the regions' businesses and consumers.<sup>66</sup> The pathway to achieving this interoperability includes establishing policy dialogues to align trade standards, incentivising private-sector collaboration, and addressing logistical and connectivity barriers. By addressing these foundational steps, both regions can achieve mutual economic benefits and integrate their value chains despite significant challenges ahead.<sup>67</sup>

The AU's Agenda 2063,<sup>68</sup> which envisions a peaceful and prosperous Africa, parallels ASEAN's vision of economic integration and stability. Without a viable conflict resolution framework, ASEAN could learn from the AU's proactive governance mechanisms such as the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) which enhances conflict resolution, manages disputes, and promotes resilience.<sup>69</sup> In return, ASEAN's experience in multilateralism, pragmatic economic policies, and leveraging great power dynamics offers valuable insights useful to Africa's regionalisation.

Joint initiatives in maritime security, counterterrorism, digital transformation, and sustainable energy could address shared threats<sup>70</sup> and foster mutual growth. Educational exchanges, grassroots partnerships, and cultural diplomacy, building on historical ties such as Indonesia's connections to African diasporas in Madagascar and South Africa or Timor-Leste's Lusophone links, would strengthen trust and cooperation,<sup>71</sup> and promote inclusivity.<sup>72</sup>

### *Exploring Cooperation between ASEAN and the African Union (AU)*

ASEAN and the AU may explore cooperation without pursuing rigid or overly structured partnerships. ASEAN's preference for flexible frameworks offers a pragmatic pathway to enhance interregional ties. Instead of formal mechanisms, ASEAN could leverage existing initiatives such as the AOIP to explore cooperation with the AU. Lessons can also be drawn from successful models like China's Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), but with an emphasis on flexibility and regional autonomy.

One promising avenue in the spirit of AASROC is to deepen collaboration with African Regional Economic Communities (RECs) such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), and the East African Community (EAC). These partnerships could facilitate knowledge-sharing and create opportunities to address shared priorities such as trade facilitation, digital transformation, and sustainable development. For ASEAN, engaging with these RECs allows member states to navigate Africa's diverse markets and allowing African nations to explore Southeast Asia's dynamic economic environment.<sup>73</sup>

*The Role of Malaysia as ASEAN Chair in 2025*

Malaysia's emphasis on South-South cooperation, as well as inclusive and equitable growth, supports the fostering of Asian-African synergies. As the ASEAN Chair in 2025, it has the potential to play a leading role in exploring ASEAN-AU relations,<sup>74</sup> specifically, initiatives that would align ASEAN's frameworks or initiatives such as the AOIP, with AU's development priorities.<sup>75</sup> Exploring ASEAN's engagement with AfCFTA through RCEP would reinforce ASEAN's position as a leader in multilateralism and fair trade systems.<sup>76</sup>

**ENSURING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF ASEAN-AFRICA RELATIONS**

ASEAN-Africa relations hold immense potential but face significant challenges which should be addressed to transform shared aspirations into actionable South-South cooperation outcomes. Political instability,<sup>77</sup> information and knowledge asymmetries, limited funding, inadequate connectivity, and uneven regional commitment, all hinder collaboration.

Informational and knowledge gaps complicate interregional cooperation, as limited academic exchanges and sparse media coverage perpetuate stereotypes, hinder trust, and restrict meaningful interactions between ASEAN and Africa. Robust epistemic communities, think tank forums, and academic exchanges are critical for generating intellectual capital,<sup>78</sup> fostering policy innovation, and addressing cultural barriers.<sup>79</sup> Economic disparities and mismatched economic priorities further challenge ASEAN-Africa relations. Africa's reliance on commodity exports contrasts with ASEAN's focus on higher-value trade integrated into Global Value Chains (GVC). Fragmented African markets and inadequate infrastructure also limit ASEAN's access to Africa's growing consumer base and resource potential.

Within ASEAN, uneven engagements with Africa reflect broader regional disparities. Larger ASEAN economies have taken the lead in African initiatives, while smaller members face resource constraints and limited foreign policy prioritisation regarding Africa.<sup>80</sup> To sustain momentum, ASEAN will need to embrace a multidimensional approach that combines inclusive leadership, broader participation across its member states and innovative frameworks.

The sustainability of ASEAN-Africa relations hinges on harmonising economic collaboration, knowledge exchange, and complementary governance approaches. ASEAN's pragmatism in multilateralism and economic integration resonates with Africa's development priorities. While ASEAN's informal governance style differs from the AU's more interventionist approach,<sup>81</sup> these differences provide opportunities for mutual learning. ASEAN's emphasis on consensus-building and non-interference can complement Africa's regional problem-solving frameworks, offering a hybrid model for interregional cooperation.<sup>82</sup>

Moving forward, the ASEAN-minus X formula offers a flexible mechanism for willing ASEAN members to spearhead interregional initiatives without requiring unanimous consent, enabling progress while preserving regional cohesion.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, the AU's official "Banjul formula"<sup>84</sup> is a streamlined approach involving a smaller African delegation decided by Africans. According to the formula, Africa is represented by the AU chair and previous chair; the AU Commission (AUC) chair; the five New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) Agency founders (Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal and South Africa); and eight Regional Economic Communities (RECS) chairs. Combined with the ASEAN-minus X formula, this framework, if conveniently adapted, could facilitate targeted cooperation among



willing ASEAN and AU members. Such a flexible format avoids imposing commitments on member states that are not ready, while enabling interested countries to advance interregional cooperation in a practical and effective manner.<sup>85</sup>

## CONCLUSION

ASEAN-Africa relations present a unique opportunity to establish a workable South-South cooperation axis amid shifting geopolitics and major power competition, by building on shared histories and aspirations for equitable development. The conferment of Sectoral Dialogue Partnership (SDP) status to South Africa and Morocco in 2023 underscores ASEAN's commitment to deepening ties with Africa and fostering intercontinental collaboration.

By moving beyond symbolic milestones like the 1955 Bandung Conference to actionable frameworks, ASEAN-Africa relations can address critical global issues such as climate justice, equitable trade, and governance reform. Through bridging institutional gaps, leveraging economic synergies, and fostering mutual understanding, both regions can revitalise the Bandung legacy and create a sustainable and inclusive model for the Global South.

ANNEXES

**Organisations and initiatives mentioned including the African Union’s eight official Regional Economic Communities (RECs):**

Regional Institution/Regional Economic Community/Initiative Name	Establishment Date	Number of Members	Member Countries	Objectives	Areas of Focus	Website	Headquarters	Notes
Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)	1967	10	Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam	Promote regional peace, stability, and economic cooperation among Southeast Asian countries.	Economic growth, political stability, cultural exchange, free trade agreements.	<a href="http://www.asean.org">www.asean.org</a>	Jakarta, Indonesia	Focuses on Southeast Asian integration and serves as a model for regional cooperation globally.
Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)	2020	15	10 ASEAN countries and 5 of its FTA partners: China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.	Create a modern, comprehensive, high-quality, and mutually beneficial economic partnership among Asia-Pacific countries.	Trade liberalization, e-commerce, intellectual property, investment, SMEs.	<a href="https://rcepsec.org/">https://rcepsec.org/</a>	Jakarta, Indonesia (ASEAN Secretariat)	Largest free trade agreement in the world by GDP; includes ASEAN and its six FTA partners: China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.
African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)	2018	54	All African nations except Eritrea	Establish a single market for goods and services. Facilitate free movement of people and investments. Accelerate industrialization and sustainable economic growth. Complement the RECs by integrating their efforts into a continent-wide economic framework.	Tariff reduction, trade facilitation, intellectual property rights, dispute settlement.	<a href="https://au-afcfta.org/">https://au-afcfta.org/</a>	Accra, Ghana	Aims to integrate all African economies into a single market.
Asian-African Sub-Regional Organizations Conference (AASROC)	2003	36 countries, 22 sub-regional organisations (AASROC-I)	Asian-African nations	Strengthen Asia-Africa relations through cooperation between regional organizations.	Inter-regional dialogue, trade, political cooperation, development.	N/A	AASROC I organised in Bandung, Indonesia, on 29 - 30 July 2003 and AASROC II in Durban South Africa, on 19 - 20 August 2004	A precursor to the NAASP, emphasizing inter-regional collaboration and partnerships between Africa and Asia.
New Asian-African Strategic Partnership (NAASP)	2005 and 2015	106	Asian-African nations	Revitalise and institutionalise the Bandung Spirit by fostering South-South Cooperation in peace, security, and development between Asia and Africa.	Political solidarity, economic cooperation, cultural exchange.	N/A	Launched in Jakarta, Indonesia	Built on the principles of the 1955 Bandung Conference, NAASP aligns with broader global initiatives like the SDGs.
Asia-Africa Summits	Original Asia-Africa Conference organised in 1955 (Bandung). Revived in 2005 and 2015 for Bandung's 50th and 60th anniversaries.	29 in 1955, 106 in 2005, 109 in 2015	Asian-African nations	Revitalise and institutionalise the Bandung Spirit by fostering South-South Cooperation in peace, security, and development between Asia and Africa.	Political solidarity, economic cooperation, cultural exchange.	N/A	Organised in Jakarta and Bandung	Embodies the enduring spirit of the 1955 Bandung Conference in fostering Afro-Asian solidarity and South-South cooperation.
Arab Maghreb Union (UMA)	1989	5	Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia	Achieve economic integration and political unity among North African countries.	Trade liberalisation, free movement of people, shared economic policies.	<a href="https://maghrebarabe.org/">https://maghrebarabe.org/</a>	Rabat, Morocco	Algeria and Libya overlap with COMESA, Mauritania overlaps with CEN-SAD. Frozen due to regional tensions.
Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)	1994	21	Burundi, Comoros, DR Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe	Promote economic integration through trade, investment, and transport.	Free trade area, customs union, infrastructure development, cross-border investment.	<a href="http://www.comesa.int">www.comesa.int</a>	Lusaka, Zambia	Significant overlap with EAC (Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda), SADC (Zimbabwe, Zambia, Eswatini, etc.), and others.
Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD)	1998	29	Benin, Burkina Faso, CAR, Chad, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia	Foster unity and sustainable development in the Sahel and Saharan regions.	Economic integration, agricultural development, combating desertification.	N/A	Tripoli, Libya	Extensive overlap with ECOWAS, COMESA, and IGAD.
East African Community (EAC)	2000	8	Burundi, DR Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Somalia	Establish a political federation and promote economic integration and regional cooperation.	Customs union, common market, monetary union, political federation.	<a href="http://www.eac.int">www.eac.int</a>	Arusha, Tanzania	Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda overlap with COMESA; DR Congo overlaps with ECCAS.
Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS)	1983	11	Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, CAR, Chad, Congo (Brazzaville), DR Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe	Promote regional economic and monetary integration in Central Africa.	Peace and security, trade liberalisation, natural resource management.	<a href="http://www.eccac-eccas.org">www.eccac-eccas.org</a>	Libreville, Gabon	Angola overlaps with SADC; DR Congo and Burundi overlap with EAC.
Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)	1975	15	Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo	Promote economic integration and political stability in West Africa.	Common external tariff, free movement of goods and people, peacekeeping, energy cooperation.	<a href="http://www.ecowas.int">www.ecowas.int</a>	Abuja, Nigeria	Most members overlap with CEN-SAD. Facing competition from the new Alliance of Sahelian States regrouping Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger after military coups.
Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)	1996	8	Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda	Promote sustainable development, peace, and regional cooperation in East Africa and the Horn of Africa.	Conflict resolution, drought and desertification mitigation, food security.	<a href="http://www.igad.int">www.igad.int</a>	Djibouti, Djibouti	Overlaps with COMESA (Kenya, Djibouti, Uganda, etc.) and CEN-SAD.
Southern African Development Community (SADC)	1992	16	Angola, Botswana, Comoros, DR Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe	Promote economic growth, peace, and security through regional integration.	Trade and investment, infrastructure development, peace and security, natural resource management.	<a href="http://www.sadc.int">www.sadc.int</a>	Gaborone, Botswana	Overlap with COMESA (Zimbabwe, Zambia, Madagascar, etc.) and ECCAS (Angola, DR Congo).

**Brief comparison between the AfCFTA and RCEP:**

	<b>AfCFTA</b>	<b>RCEP</b>
<b>Market Size</b>	Covers 54 African countries with a combined GDP of \$3.4 trillion and a population of 1.3 billion.	Covers 15 Asia-Pacific countries with a combined GDP of \$29 trillion and a population of 2.3 billion
<b>Key Benefits</b>	Facilitates intra-African trade by removing tariffs on 90% of goods	Reduces trade barriers and simplifies market access among member states with harmonized standards
<b>Sectoral Focus</b>	Encourages industrialization, export diversification, and value-added production	Enhances regional supply chains, particularly in manufacturing, technology, and services
<b>Trade Scope</b>	Covers goods, services, intellectual property, and digital trade	Covers goods, services, investment, e-commerce, and technology transfer
<b>Foreign Investment</b>	Promotes foreign direct investment (FDI) by opening up access to African markets	Attracts FDI to strengthen Asia-Pacific economies and global value chains
<b>Job Creation</b>	Expected to create 10-15 million jobs through trade facilitation and investment	Indirectly supports job creation by enhancing global value chain integration and infrastructure
<b>Trade Facilitation</b>	Streamlines customs procedures and reduces non-tariff barriers (NTBs)	Simplifies rules of origin and trade documentation to lower trade costs
<b>Export Potential</b>	Projected to increase intra-African trade by 52% and total exports by 32% by 2035	Strengthens regional trade ties, covering 30% of global GDP and 28% of global trade
<b>Economic Integration</b>	Promotes Pan-African integration with free movement of goods, services, and people	Deepens regional integration among Asia-Pacific countries, enhancing competitiveness globally
<b>Technology and Innovation</b>	Encourages investment in digital trade, AI, and e-commerce under its digital trade protocol	Boosts collaboration in technology transfer, innovation, and digital economies
<b>Infrastructure</b>	Addresses infrastructure gaps through increased investment and public-private partnerships	Builds on existing infrastructure and logistics networks to support seamless trade flows

**ENDNOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> We try to remain accurate in our use of the terms “regional”, “interregional”, “continental” or “intercontinental” as much as possible while preserving easy comprehension. Therewith, it should be noted that Africa is a continent with various regions (North, West, East, Central and Southern).
- <sup>2</sup> “The AfCFTA is the world’s largest free trade area bringing together the 55 countries of the African Union (AU) and eight (8) Regional Economic Communities (RECs). The overall mandate of the AfCFTA is to create a single continental market with a population of about 1.3 billion people and a combined GDP of approximately US\$ 3.4 trillion. The AfCFTA is one of the flagship projects of Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, the African Union’s long-term development strategy for transforming the continent into a global powerhouse.” Source AfCFTA website: <https://au-afcfta.org/>
- <sup>3</sup> “By 2030 we forecast that trade expansion between ASEAN and Africa stands to outpace the average global annual growth rate” Sunil Kausha, “How ASEAN and Africa and building stronger communities through trade and investment”, Standard Chartered, 12 September 2023, <https://www.sc.com/en/news/economy-and-trade/unified-goals-asean-africa-building-stronger-communities-trade-investment/>
- <sup>4</sup> Organised in Bali in September 2024, IAF-II generated \$3.5 billion in deals, six times more than the first IAF in April 2018. Yet, IAF-II suffered from being organised at the same time as FOCAC, which was widely favoured by African heads of state. Dorigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia’s Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Clynch, Harry. 2024. “Widodo Bids to Strengthen Africa Ties at Indonesia-Africa Forum (Interview with Christophe Dorigné-Thomson).” *African Business*. 2024. <https://african.business/2024/08/trade-investment/widodo-bids-to-strengthen-africa-ties-at-indonesia-africa-forum>; Hancock, Adam. 2024. “African Leaders Snub Indonesian Summit in Favor of China Visits.” *Voice of America*. 2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/african-leaders-snub-indonesian-summit-in-favor-of-china-visits/7770769.html>; Sh, Inang, and A P Sari. 2024. “Perkuat Pembangunan Indonesia Dan Negara-Negara Afrika, Ini 8 Hasil Penting Forum HLF-MSP Dan IAF 2024.” *Kompas.Com*. 2024. <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2024/10/31/16002261/perkuat-pembangunan-indonesia-dan-negara-negara-afrika-ini-8-hasil-penting>. Figures announced in such forums should always be taken cautiously, though, and actual implementation should be verified in the medium-long run.
- <sup>5</sup> Enterprise Singapore, Africa Singapore Business Forum 2023, 29-31 August 2023, <https://www.enterprisesg.gov.sg/resources/allevnts/key-events/africa-singapore-business-forum-2023/overview>
- <sup>6</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, “The Colours of Africa 2024, 9-11 September 2024, <https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/the-colours-of-africa-2024-en?cate=5d5bcb4e15e39c306000683e>.
- <sup>7</sup> AirAsia, “Air Asia X expands its horizon to Africa with maiden flight to Nairobi”, Air Asia News Room, 16 November 2024, <https://newsroom.airasia.com/news/airasia-x-expands-its-horizons-to-africa-with-maiden-flight-to-nairobi#gsc.tab=0>; Africa’s leading airline and an Ethiopian State-owned enterprise, Ethiopian Airlines launched flights with the Philippines in 2015 and with Indonesia in 2018. Dorigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia’s Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- <sup>8</sup> Landry Signe, Foresight Africa podcase, “New trends in Africa-Asia economic relations”, Brookings, 29 May 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/new-trends-in-africa-asia-economic-relations/>
- <sup>9</sup> Izzah Aqilah Norman, “Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand became partner countries of BRICS”, Channel News Asia, 24 October 2024, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-indonesia-vietnam-thailand-brics-asean-global-south-russia-china-4699841>
- <sup>10</sup> Yusof, Amir. 2024. “What Will Malaysia Push for as next ASEAN Chair and Could It Affect Grouping’s Unity?” Channel News Asia. 2024. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-asean-chairman-china-brics-myanmar-south-china-sea-4668091>.

<sup>11</sup> “The term “New” signifies an innovative approach in tackling the challenges faced by the two continents in the present world situation, as well as the persistent problems from the past, such as poverty and instability. The word “Strategic” denotes a comprehensive, sustained and sustainable programme of cooperation. “Partnership” means an interaction in which all participants stand on equal footing, since it is based on common interest, mutual benefit and common ownership.” Alatas, Ali. 2005. “Towards a New Strategic Partnership between Asia and Africa.” Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies (IDSS) Commentaries - RSIS Publications - Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. 2005. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/679-towards-a-new-strategic-partne/#.YV2fkWJBw2w>. The NAASP was particularly inspired by ASEAN and led by Indonesia, ASEAN’s *primus inter pares*. The African Union itself was notably formed to emulate Asia, especially ASEAN, admired by African leaders. Mills, Greg, Olusegun Obasanjo, Hailemariam Desalegn, and Emily van der Merwe. 2020. *The Asian Aspiration. Why and How Africa Should Emulate Asia - and What It Should Avoid*. London: Hurst & Company; Dorigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. Indonesia’s Engagement with Africa. Palgrave Macmillan. While ASEAN and Indonesia sought to rebuild their image after the Asian financial crisis with the NAASP, Africa, especially South Africa, wanted to attract Asian investment. The NAASP’s creation was meant to benefit ASEAN’s regional model attractiveness. Its operationalisation and institutionalisation failure until now relate to its dilution in over-expansive and abstract Afro-Asian ambitions and intra-continental divisions. Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Kenny Dlamini, “Building Asia-Africa Cooperation: Analysing the relevance of the New Asia-Africa Strategic Partnership (NAASP), Institute for Global Dialogue, associated with University of South Africa, occasional Paper 76, December 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23048?seq=2>; Dorigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia’s Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Based on Dorigné-Thomson’s research, including: Dorigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2022. “The Attempted Extension of the Indonesian Developmental State towards Africa.” *Langgas: Jurnal Studi Pembangunan (Universitas Sumatera Utara)* 1 (1): 38–50. <https://talenta.usu.ac.id/jlpsp/article/view/8620/4848>.

<sup>15</sup> South Africa was invited by Indonesia to co-lead and co-chair this initiative, and accepted. For a more detailed description of the birth of the NAASP: Alatas, Ali. 2005. “Towards a New Strategic Partnership between Asia and Africa.” Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies (IDSS) Commentaries - RSIS Publications - Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. 2005. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/679-towards-a-new-strategic-partne/#.YV2fkWJBw2w>; Dorigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia’s Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>16</sup> In 2015, the NAASP was said to be “reinvigorated”. NAASP was “relaunched” at the 2015 AAS, celebrating its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The revamped NAASP was supposedly a more effective framework, supporting more Afro-Asian “structured, systematic and intensive” cooperation. See: “New Asian-African Strategic Partnership (NAASP). (2005, April 23). Declaration on the New Asian-African Partnership, Bandung, Indonesia.” In . [http://www.bandungspirit.org/IMG/pdf/naaspcomplete-bandung\\_of\\_states\\_2005.pdf](http://www.bandungspirit.org/IMG/pdf/naaspcomplete-bandung_of_states_2005.pdf); and “Declaration on Reinvigorating the New Asian-African Strategic Partnership, April 2015.” 2015. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000077938.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> The term “Afrasia,” coined by historian Arnold Toynbee, is described by Mine as a potentially dominant platform in the future, primarily due to its significant demographic weight. Amakasu Raposo de Medeiros Carvalho, Pedro Miguel, David Arase, and Scarlett Cornelissen. 2018. *Routledge Handbook on Africa-Asia Relations*. London and New York: Routledge; Dorigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia’s Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Mazrui, Ali A., and Seifudein Adem. 2013. *Afrasia. A Tale of Two Continents*. Lanham: University Press of America; Mine, Yoichi. 2022. *Connecting Africa and Asia. Afrasia as a Benign Community*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

<sup>18</sup> Although it aimed to develop realistic and concrete fields of cooperation. Dorigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia’s Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Kemlu. 2019.



“New Asian-African Strategic Partnership (NAASP).” Kementerian Luar Negeri Indonesia. 2019. [https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/165/halaman\\_list\\_lainnya/cooperation-between-new-asia-africa-strategic-partnership-naasp-background](https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/165/halaman_list_lainnya/cooperation-between-new-asia-africa-strategic-partnership-naasp-background); NAASP. 2015. “Declaration on Reinvigorating the New Asian-African Strategic Partnership, April 2015.” 2015. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000077938.pdf>. “*The Afro-Asian movement faced historically similar difficulties with the absence of political coherence. The NAM was more united, given its common non-alignment principle.*” Dornigé-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia’s Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. Full description in: Dornigé-Thomson, Christophe. 2021. “Indonesia’s African Foreign Policy Shift under President Jokowi.” *Journal of Social and Political Sciences* 4 (3). <https://doi.org/10.31014/aior.1991.04.03.301>; Dornigé-Thomson, Christophe. 2022. “Indonesia’s Foreign Policy Shift towards Africa in the Asia-Africa Context under the Leadership of President Ir. H. Joko Widodo.” Universitas Indonesia; Dornigé-Thomson, Christophe. 2022. “The Attempted Extension of the Indonesian Developmental State towards Africa.” *Langgas: Jurnal Studi Pembangunan (Universitas Sumatera Utara)* 1 (1): 38–50. <https://talenta.usu.ac.id/jlpsp/article/view/8620/4848>; Dornigé-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia’s Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>19</sup> Japan’s Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) was launched in 1993; China’s Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000; the Korea-Africa Forum (KOAF) in 2006; and the India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) in 2008.

<sup>20</sup> On “forum shopping”: Ibid.; Soulé, Folashadé. 2020. “‘Africa+1’ Summit Diplomacy and the ‘New Scramble’ Narrative: Recentering African Agency.” *African Affairs*, no. May 2020, 633–46. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adaa015>. The NAASP failed to be officially recognised by the AU’s Partnerships Management and Resource Mobilisation (PMRM) Directorate in charge of better choosing and coordinating Africa’s external partnerships. The AU Constitutive Act mandates the institution for international cooperation through international partnerships, insisting on African agency and ownership. African Union website: “External Partnerships between the AU and Organisations, Regions or Countries.” <https://au.int/en/partnerships>; Dornigé-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia’s Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Gwatiwa, Tshepo. 2022. *The African Union and African Agency in International Politics*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan; Tiekou, Thomas Kwasi. 2021. “Punching above Weight : How the African Union Commission Exercises Agency in Politics.” *Africa Spectrum*. Despite South Africa’s 2013 request to include the NAASP in the AU’s multilateral partnership framework, it remains excluded, limiting its strategic impact. This shortfall underscores the NAASP’s paradoxical inability to institutionalise and develop realistic cooperation mechanisms despite its ambitious objectives of fostering people-to-people relations and intergovernmental collaboration (Dornigé-Thomson, 2023; Kemlu, 2019; NAASP, 2015). NAASP. 2015. “Declaration on Reinvigorating the New Asian-African Strategic Partnership, April 2015.” 2015. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000077938.pdf>; Kemlu. 2019. “New Asian-African Strategic Partnership (NAASP).” Kementerian Luar Negeri Indonesia. 2019. [https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/165/halaman\\_list\\_lainnya/cooperation-between-new-asia-africa-strategic-partnership-naasp-background](https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/165/halaman_list_lainnya/cooperation-between-new-asia-africa-strategic-partnership-naasp-background); Dornigé-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia’s Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>21</sup> The NAASP framework might still hold promise if effectively operationalised through ASEAN directly or within an ASEAN Centrality framework like the EAS. For Hassan Wirajuda, former Indonesian foreign minister, the original continent-to-continent approach proposed by the NAASP remains the ideal model, as it respects African pride. This vision might counter criticisms in Africa of Africa+1 forums, often perceived as diminishing African agency. Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Geopolitical upheavals include France’s rejection in Africa, and EU difficulties in general. For the problems in the EU-Africa partnership: Lopes, Carlos. 2024. *The Self-Deception Trap. Exploring the Economic Dimensions of Charity Dependency within Africa-Europe Relations*. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan. Afro-Asian partnerships should be elaborated in a framework of co-construction as evoked concerning Indonesia-Africa relations or co-creation concerning Japan-ASEAN relations for example. Dornigé-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia’s Engagement with Africa*. London:

Palgrave Macmillan; Lin, Joanne. 2024. “Building upon Deep Trust: ASEAN-Japan Ties at a Crossroads.” *ISEAS Trends in Southeast Asia*. Singapore.

<sup>23</sup> ASEAN, ASEAN Annual Report 2023, July 2024, [https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/FIN\\_ASEAN-Annual-Report-2023-June-December-Epub.pdf](https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/FIN_ASEAN-Annual-Report-2023-June-December-Epub.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Visual Capitalist “Mapped: Just Five Countries Make Up Half of Africa’s GDP”, 5 October 2024, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/mapped-just-five-countries-make-up-half-of-africas-gdp/#:~:text=Africa's%20GDP%20stands%20at%20%242.8,the%20rest%20of%20the%20continent.>

<sup>25</sup> African Development Bank Group, African Economic Outlook 2024, <https://www.afdb.org/en/knowledge/publications/african-economic-outlook>

<sup>26</sup> Adem, Seifudein. 2018. “Is Southeast Asian Experience Relevant for Sino-African Relations?” *Africa Review* 10 (1): 72–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09744053.2017.1399564>; Dornigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia’s Engagement with Africa*. Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>27</sup> Tritto, Angela. 2023. “How Indonesia Used Chinese Industrial Investments to Turn Nickel into the New Gold.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2023. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/04/11/how-indonesia-used-chinese-industrial-investments-to-turn-nickel-into-new-gold-pub-89500>.

<sup>28</sup> Downstream resource-based industrialisation or beneficiation is called “hilirisasi” in Indonesia.

<sup>29</sup> Thus consolidating Indonesia’s role as an alternative partner and model for Africa. During a 2024 presidential election campaign debate, Prabowo stated Indonesia had become a model for many African countries, a statement which was debated in Indonesia. Dornigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2024. “Indonesia ‘Panutan’ Bagi Negara Afrika?” *Geotimes*. 2024. <https://geotimes.id/kolom/indonesia-panutan-bagi-negara-afrika/>.

<sup>30</sup> Dornigné-Thomson has called Indonesia’s effort to present itself as a model for mineral and green resources beneficiation to fellow resource-rich nations in Africa and the Global South in general as “ad hoc unilateral hilirisasi and green diplomacy”. Indeed, Indonesia also presents itself in Africa as a Global South sustainability leader, forging a Tropical Forrest Alliance with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Brazil. *Ibid.*; Dornigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia’s Engagement with Africa*. Palgrave Macmillan; Fabry, Guilhem. 2024. “L’Indonésie «veut Avoir Une Relation Avec l’Afrique Qui Est Égalitaire».” *Radio France Internationale (RFI)*. 2024. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/monde/20240214-l-indonésie-veut-avoir-une-relation-avec-l-afrique-qui-est-egalitaire>.

<sup>31</sup> Mills, Greg, Olusegun Obasanjo, Hailemariam Desalegn, and Emily van der Merwe. 2020. *The Asian Aspiration. Why and How Africa Should Emulate Asia - and What It Should Avoid*. London: Hurst & Company; Dornigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia’s Engagement with Africa*. Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>32</sup> Like recently by Senegalese Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko in his General Policy Statement. Sonko, Ousmane. *Déclaration de Politique Générale, Séance du Vendredi 27 Décembre 2024 par Monsieur Ousmane Sonko, Premier Ministre, République du Sénégal*. <https://www.primature.sn/publications/actualites/suivez-en-direct-la-declaration-de-politique-generale-du-premier-ministre-0>.

<sup>33</sup> ASEAN Secretariat. 2024. “Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN for ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Welcomes the Delegation from the African Union on Learning Visit.” ASEAN News. 2024. <https://asean.org/deputy-secretary-general-of-asean-for-asean-socio-cultural-community-welcomes-the-delegation-from-the-african-union-on-learning-visit/>

<sup>34</sup> Regional or continental, depending on the scope.

<sup>35</sup> Also based on the four principles of non-interference, quiet diplomacy, non-use of force and decision-making through consensus. See Harsh Mahseth, “The Use of The ASEAN Way In Resolving disputes”, *Modern Diplomacy*, 22 June 2022, <https://modern Diplomacy.eu/2022/06/22/the-use-of-the-asean-way-in-resolving-disputes/>

<sup>36</sup> ASEAN, The ASEAN Charter, 20 November 2007, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> Advising Singaporean firms to carefully choose the right countries and local partners in Africa. Liang, Lim Yan. 2023. “Singapore Firms Should Be Aware of Opportunities in Africa, Break New

- Ground: PM Lee.” The Straits Times. 2023. <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/singapore-firms-should-be-aware-of-the-opportunities-in-africa-break-new-ground-pm-lee>
- <sup>38</sup> PM Lee Hsien Loong, Statement by PM Lee Hsien Loong at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Asian-African Summit on 22 April 2015, Prime Minister Office Singapore, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/transcript-statement-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-asian-african-summit-22-april-2015>
- <sup>39</sup> ASEAN Secretariat. 2024. “ASEAN, South Africa Reaffirm Commitment to Strengthening Partnership.” ASEAN. 2024. <https://asean.org/asean-south-africa-reaffirm-commitment-to-strengthening-partnership/>; Chimoio, Mkhululi. 2024. “South Africa’s G20 Presidency in 2025: A Pivotal Moment for the Country and Africa.” Africa Renewal. 2024. <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/november-2024/south-africas-g20-presidency-2025-pivotal-moment-country-and-africa>.
- <sup>40</sup> ASEAN Secretariat. 2024. “ASEAN, Morocco Reaffirm Commitment to Strengthening Partnership.” ASEAN. 2024. <https://asean.org/asean-morocco-reaffirm-commitment-to-strengthening-partnership/>; ASEAN Secretariat. 2024. “ASEAN, South Africa Reaffirm Commitment to Strengthening Partnership.” ASEAN. 2024. <https://asean.org/asean-south-africa-reaffirm-commitment-to-strengthening-partnership/>.
- <sup>41</sup> ASEAN, Overview of ASEAN-South Africa Sectoral Dialogue Partnership, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Overview-ASEAN-South-Africa-Relations-as-of-Sep-2024.pdf>
- <sup>42</sup> ASEAN, Overview of ASEAN-Morocco Sectoral Dialogue Partnership, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Overview-ASEAN-Morocco-Relations-as-of-Sep-2024.pdf>
- <sup>43</sup> South African History Online, Address at the 8<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit, 5 November 2022, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/address-8th-asean-summit-5-november-2002>
- <sup>44</sup> ASEAN internal sources.
- <sup>45</sup> USD 2 million over three years.
- <sup>46</sup> ASEAN internal sources.
- <sup>47</sup> ... “such as peace and reconciliation, climate change and environment, health, sustainable finance, trade and investment, digital economy and transformation, sustainable agriculture and infrastructure, fertilisers production, fisheries, aquaculture, supply-chain security, renewable energy and energy transition, transport, halal food industry and certification, food and water security, education, science, technology and innovation, cybersecurity, disaster management, people-to-people exchanges, youth, sports, culture, and tourism, including sustainable tourism and scientific tourism.” ASEAN Secretariat. 2024. “ASEAN, Morocco Reaffirm Commitment to Strengthening Partnership.” ASEAN. 2024. <https://asean.org/asean-morocco-reaffirm-commitment-to-strengthening-partnership/>.
- <sup>48</sup> ASEAN internal sources.
- <sup>49</sup> Official governmental website on South Africa’s Just Energy Transition Investment Plan (JET-IP): <https://www.climatecommission.org.za/south-africas-jet-ip>
- <sup>50</sup> ASEAN, Overview of ASEAN-South Africa Sectoral Dialogue Partnership, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Overview-ASEAN-South-Africa-Relations-as-of-Sep-2024.pdf>
- <sup>51</sup> ASEAN, Overview of ASEAN-Morocco Sectoral Dialogue Partnership, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Overview-ASEAN-Morocco-Relations-as-of-Sep-2024.pdf>
- <sup>52</sup> ASEAN, Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), <https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/outward-looking-community/treaty-of-amity-and-cooperation-in-southeast-asia-tac/>
- <sup>53</sup> ASEAN Committees in Third Countries and International Organisations (ACTCs) are established (in accordance with Article 43 of the ASEAN Charter) to promote ASEAN’s interest and identity in the respective host countries and/or international organisations. To date, 55 ACTCs have been established to assist in coordinating and facilitating ASEAN matters in their respective host countries.
- <sup>54</sup> ASEAN, ASEAN Committee in Third Countries and International Organisations (ACTCs), <https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/outward-looking-community/external-relations/>
- <sup>55</sup> Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Libya, Morocco, Nigeria, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe, at <https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/outward-looking-community/external-relations/>

<sup>56</sup> In November 2002, during the 8th ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh, Thabo Mbeki, serving as both South African President and AU Chairperson, extended an invitation to Asia (and ASEAN in particular) to deepen collaboration with Africa, emphasising the need for a “systematic exchange of experiences” between the two continents. Mbeki, Thabo. 2002. “Address by the President of South Africa and Chairperson of the African Union, Thabo Mbeki at the 8th ASEAN Summit.” ASEAN. 2002. [https://asean.org/?static\\_post=address-by-the-president-of-south-africa-and-chairperson-of-the-african-union-thabo-mbeki-at-the-8th-asean-summit](https://asean.org/?static_post=address-by-the-president-of-south-africa-and-chairperson-of-the-african-union-thabo-mbeki-at-the-8th-asean-summit); Dornigé-Thomson, Christophe. 2023.

*Indonesia’s Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. “Mbeki wanted to link NEPAD with ASEAN” (“or at least with SADC”) Ibid. Created in 2001, NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa’s Development) was seen as “the new social-development programme to bring prosperity, development, democracy and peace to Africa. The AU positioned NEPAD as the main framework of engagement with Africa for external powers.” Ibid. NEPAD can be considered as ASEAN’s ASEAN Economic Community. In fact, with APSA and AGA (African Governance Architecture), the AU has, like ASEAN, a three-pillar approach.

<sup>57</sup> Alatas, Ali. 2005. “Towards a New Strategic Partnership between Asia and Africa.” Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies (IDSS) Commentaries - RSIS Publications - Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. 2005. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/679-towards-a-new-strategic-partne/#.YV2fkWJBw2w>; Rubiolo, Florencia. 2016. “Southeast Asia in Africa: A Partner for Development? Southeast.” *Bridges Africa* 5 (7): 22–25; Dornigé-Thomson, Christophe. 2023.

*Indonesia’s Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. “AASROC-I was attended by 36 countries and 22 sub-regional organisations. AASROC participants included ASEAN, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).” “In between AASROC-I and-II, a Ministerial Working Group Meeting was held in Durban in March 2004”. Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> including the IAF, which was criticised in Africa and is not officially endorsed by the AU. See, for example, CNN’s International Correspondent of Kenyan origin Larry Madowo’s criticism on X (<https://x.com/LarryMadowo/status/1830516348998320403>) and LinkedIn ([https://www.linkedin.com/posts/larrymadowo\\_everyone-has-a-plan-for-africa-except-africa-activity-7236035683704856577-vnEH/](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/larrymadowo_everyone-has-a-plan-for-africa-except-africa-activity-7236035683704856577-vnEH/)).

<sup>59</sup> Based on Ibid. Therefore, “*The NAASP was composed as an intergovernmental forum bolstered by cooperation through sub-regional organisations and the development of People-to-People relations*”. Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> “As the world’s largest trade bloc, RCEP covers nearly 30% of global GDP and population, representing a combined GDP of USD 29 trillion and 2.3 billion people”. Hourn, H.E. Dr. Kao Kim. “Remarks.” *RCEP High-Level Dialogue on Economic and Trade Cooperation*, 24 September 2024, Shangri-La Hotel, Nanning, China. An ASEAN-led initiative applying ASEAN Centrality, RCEP enhances regional supply chain integration, leveraging advanced economies like China, Japan, and South Korea to promote trade and technology transfer.

<sup>61</sup> The AfCFTA and RCEP offer significant opportunities for Africa to enhance its trade in goods and services. The AfCFTA’s tariff reductions can boost intra-African trade and align with RCEP standards, granting better access to major Asian markets like China, Japan, and South Korea, while RCEP’s harmonised tariffs can simplify market entry for African exports. In services, AfCFTA prioritises sectors like finance and telecommunications, while RCEP liberalises digital services, logistics, and tourism. Africa’s tech hubs and untapped tourism potential present “low-hanging fruit” for mutually beneficial trade expansion.

<sup>62</sup> The AfCFTA promotes industrialisation and value addition, while RCEP fosters seamless investment in manufacturing and infrastructure. Africa can leverage these frameworks to attract RCEP investments in agro-processing, pharmaceuticals, and renewable energy, advancing industrial hubs and reducing reliance on raw material exports.

<sup>63</sup> RCEP investors can support African industrialisation and export diversification through joint ventures in agro-processing, automotive assembly, and textiles.



<sup>64</sup> The AfCFTA focuses on reducing logistical barriers and enhancing market connectivity. RCEP countries, notably China, Japan, and Singapore and Malaysia for example in ASEAN, bring expertise in financing and building infrastructure. Key opportunities include RCEP investment in transport corridors, such as railways and logistics hubs linking production centers to ports, and the development of smart ports with digital and automated systems to boost Africa's trade efficiency.

<sup>65</sup> Africa's industrial growth under the AfCFTA can align with sustainable practices, creating opportunities for green trade and innovation. RCEP nations, with advanced cleantech and low-carbon solutions, can partner with Africa to drive sustainability. Key initiatives include renewable energy projects in solar, wind, and hydrogen, as well as joint efforts in climate-resilient agricultural technologies to support sustainable development.

<sup>66</sup> Under AfCFTA, digital trade protocols promote e-commerce integration across African nations, reducing transaction costs and fostering regional digital markets. RCEP includes dedicated chapters on e-commerce, facilitating cross-border digital transactions and data flow. A key low-hanging fruit is the development of cross-border platforms through joint ventures between African and RCEP tech companies, creating digital marketplaces that connect businesses and consumers in both regions. Africa's mobile money solutions, such as M-Pesa (Kenya), can integrate with RCEP markets to enhance cross-border financial inclusion and drive seamless trade transactions.

Harmonising the AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol (DTP) with the future ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) will also be crucial. AfCFTA Secretariat. *Protocol to the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area on Digital Trade, Adopted by the 37th Ordinary Session of the Assembly, Held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on 18 February 2024*; ASEAN Secretariat. *Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA): ASEAN to Leap Forward Its Digital Economy and Unlock US\$2 Tn by 2030*. August 19, 2023. <https://asean.org/asean-defa-study-projects-digital-economy-leap-to-us2tn-by-2030/>.

<sup>67</sup> AfCFTA-RCEP interoperability faces several challenges, including divergent trade protocols, such as differing rules of origin and tariff structures, as well as non-tariff barriers like bureaucratic hurdles and inconsistent customs procedures. Infrastructure deficits, including poor transport networks and limited digital connectivity, exacerbate logistical inefficiencies, while limited institutional capacity and nascent dispute resolution mechanisms hinder trade facilitation. Economic disparities, with RCEP including developed economies and Africa predominantly comprising least-developed nations, create imbalances, further compounded by Africa's digital divide. Knowledge gaps and high transaction costs deter private sector engagement, while geopolitical tensions and differing regional priorities add complexity. Addressing these issues requires harmonising policies, investing in infrastructure, fostering private sector collaboration, and building institutional capacity to unlock the vast economic potential of AfCFTA-RCEP integration.

<sup>68</sup> Agenda 2063 is the AU's plan for "realising Pan-Africanism's ultimate objective of creating a united, prosperous and peaceful Africa by 2063". Murithi, Karbo &. 2018. *The African Union. Autocracy, Diplomacy and Peacebuilding in Africa*. Edited by Tony Karbo and Tim Murithi. London and New York: I.B. Tauris. It resembles ASEAN's three-pillar Communities.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.; Dorigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia's Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>70</sup> especially in the Indian Ocean, a critical link between the regions. In the South China Sea dispute, China leverages its strong ties with African nations and their substantial UN voting bloc to garner support. This strategic mobilisation of "friendly" African countries extends beyond the South China Sea, encompassing sensitive issues such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet Ibid.; Large, Daniel. 2021. *China and Africa. The New Era*. Cambridge: Polity Press. ASEAN's engagement with Africa can likewise be viewed through this lens of diplomatic support and strategic leverage. Dorigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia's Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>71</sup> Timor-Leste's impending ASEAN membership adds a unique dimension to ASEAN-Africa relations. Its Lusophone ties with Mozambique and Angola provide a diplomatic bridge, enriching Afro-Asian dialogues on governance, peacebuilding, and development. Furthermore, its experiences



in post-conflict reconstruction could inspire joint efforts in addressing governance challenges and promoting regional stability.

<sup>72</sup> Stigmas against Africans in Southeast Asia and against Asians in Africa are significant hurdles to increased ASEAN-Africa ties (Dorigné-Thomson 2023). Also based on discussions with diplomats facing these obstacles.

<sup>73</sup> See section on Overcoming Challenges and Ensuring the Sustainability of ASEAN-Africa Relations.

<sup>74</sup> Ibrahim, Rohani Mohd. 2024. "ASEAN, African Union Should Initiate Process Of Systematic Exchanges - South Africa's Envoy." Bernama. 2024. <https://www.bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2327069>.

<sup>75</sup> Yet, the AOIP itself and its four priority areas (maritime cooperation, economic, connectivity, and sustainable development) face institutionalisation and delivery issues, given how minilaterals like the QUAD and AUKUS challenge ASEAN Centrality. Lin recommends implementing the AOIP's four priority areas through the full spectrum of ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Plus-One, ASEAN Plus Three (APT), East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) (Lin, 2024a). These challenges should be well-considered for Afro-ASEAN linkage efforts.

<sup>76</sup> Bernama. 2024. "PM's Call For Equitable Trade, Deeper Trade Ties Vital For APEC, ASEAN To Navigate Global Uncertainties - ISIS Chairman." Bernama - Malaysian National News Agency. 2024. <https://www.bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2364680>. The Secretary-General of ASEAN recently met the Secretary-General of the African Continental Free Trade Area Secretariat ASEAN Secretariat. 2024. "Secretary-General of ASEAN Engages in Bilateral Dialogue with Secretary-General of the African Continental Free Trade Area Secretariat." ASEAN News, SecGen's Activities. 2024. <https://asean.org/secretary-general-of-asean-engages-in-bilateral-dialogue-with-secretary-general-of-the-african-continental-free-trade-area-secretariat/>.

<sup>77</sup> Conflicts and fragile governance in Sudan, the Sahelian nations, Mozambique, or the DRC deter investment and complicate partnerships. Thus, former Singapore PM Lee's call for selectivity in engagement.

Although less significant in Southeast Asia, conflicts like in Myanmar, Southern Thailand and the Southern Philippines, are also significant obstacles. The Papua issue in Indonesia also echoes in Africa, notably given racial solidarities. Dorigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia's Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>78</sup> The China-Africa Think Tank Forum offers an example of an Afro-Asian initiative, although largely driven by China. The idea is to create relational power and epistemic communities as China does, funding capacity-building, training, academic exchanges and media. Ibid.; Benabdallah, Lina. 2020. "Power or Influence? Making Sense of China's Evolving Party-to-Party Diplomacy in Africa." *African Studies Quarterly* 19 (3-4): 94-114; Haas, Peter M. 1989. "Do Regimes Matter? Epistemic Communities and Mediterranean Pollution Control" 43 (3): 377-403.

<sup>79</sup> The question of funding remains an issue.

<sup>80</sup> And vice versa with larger and smaller African nations. Dorigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia's Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>81</sup> Based on article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act of the African Union (July 2000), the AU can sanction members or intervene in severe democratic failures, such as coups or conflicts. Notably, in the early 2000s, the AU mandated Senegal to prosecute former Chadian dictator Hissène Habré. The AU's proactive approach embraces non-indifference, exemplified by its support for the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), whereas ASEAN remains committed to strict non-interference. Haacke, Jürgen, and Paul D. Williams. 2008. "Regional Arrangements, Securitization, and Transnational Security Challenges: The African Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Compared." *Security Studies* 17 (4): 775-809. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410802508014>; Williams, Paul D. 2007. "From Non-Intervention to Non-Indifference: The Origins and Development of the African Union's Security Culture." *African Affairs* 106 (423): 253-79; Dorigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia's Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. However, the AU's supranational nature remains both constrained and contested. National sovereignty continues to dominate as the

primary institution within African politics, as evidenced by the persistent challenges in implementing AU agreements across member states. Ibid.; Glas, Aarie. 2018. "African Union Security Culture in Practice: African Problems and African Solutions." *International Affairs* 94 (5): 1121–38.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy116>; Moe, Louise Wiuff, and Anna Geis. 2020. "Hybridity and Friction in Organizational Politics: New Perspectives on the African Security Regime Complex." *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 14 (2): 148–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2020.1729618>.

<sup>82</sup> Rüländ, Jürgen. 2014. "Constructing Regionalism Domestically: Local Actors and Foreign Policymaking in Newly Democratized Indonesia." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 10 (2): 181–201.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12002>; Rüländ, Jürgen. 2021. "Democratic Backsliding, Regional Governance and Foreign Policymaking in Southeast Asia: ASEAN, Indonesia and the Philippines." *Democratization* 28 (1): 237–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1803284>.

A sort of quiet diplomacy, based on non-interference, non-use of force, and consensus, the ASEAN Way "eschews bureaucratisation, big regional institutions and profound legalisation of regional cooperation, privileging flexibility and informality for more pragmatism. Prioritising national sovereignty, deprived of supra-national goals, ASEAN decisions appear non-binding." Dorigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia's Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>83</sup> ASEAN regionalism is often criticised for its slow and ineffective processes, raising doubts about its leadership role. ASEAN minilateral approaches based on A-X are emerging as a means to achieve tangible outcomes. Lin, Joanne, and Laura Lee. 2023. "Minilateral Cooperation in ASEAN May Help It Overcome Challenges in Multilateralism." *ISEAS Perspective* 16 (2023): 1–10.

<sup>84</sup> As notably proposed by the 2017 Kagame report. Kagame, Paul. 2017. "The Imperative to Strengthen Our Union: Report on the Proposed Recommendations for the Institutional Reform of the African Union." Addis Ababa. <https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/32777-file-report-20institutional20reform20of20the20au-2.pdf>. Decided at the 2006 AU summit in Banjul, Gambia, the 'Banjul Formula' means Africa is represented by the AU chair and previous chair; the AUC chair; the five NEPAD founders (Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal and South Africa); and 8 RECS chairs. The Banjul Formula, a sort of guide for African states' collective diplomacy, tried to "align the continent". It has been considered "unsuccessful" until now. India dropped it, for example. Gwatiwa, Tshepo. 2022. *The African Union and African Agency in International Politics*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan; ISS Africa. 2019. "How to Rationalise Africa's Many Partnerships?" PSC Report in PSC Insights. 2019. <https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/how-to-rationalise-africas-many-partnerships>. Yet, it could be useful in an ASEAN-Africa context and in a revamped and adapted format combined with A-X.

<sup>85</sup> This new hybrid format could also be a response to criticism of the Africa+1 format in Africa, being more respectful of African agency and dignity. ASEAN would benefit from a lighter format while distinguishing itself from the perceived arrogance of certain external powers such as the EU. Lopes, Carlos. 2024. *The Self-Deception Trap. Exploring the Economic Dimensions of Charity Dependency within Africa-Europe Relations*. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan; Dorigné-Thomson, Christophe. 2023. *Indonesia's Engagement with Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

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