



CEIAS Southeast Asia Program • Policy recommendations

2027 and beyond: Advancing EU and Slovak relations with Southeast Asia

Alfred Gerstl

Key takeaways

- 1** The current geopolitical and geoeconomic environment, along with overlapping strategic interests of the EU and ASEAN, creates strong opportunities to deepen Europe–Southeast Asia relations across the board.
- 2** Established EU–ASEAN cooperation mechanisms provide a solid platform for smaller EU members to advance ties with ASEAN and individual Southeast Asian countries. To stand out, however, they must actively target niches and make concrete, value-adding offers to partners in the region.
- 3** Given Slovakia's sizable trade deficit with Southeast Asia, it should more proactively promote the region as an attractive, globally integrated export market. Slovakia's overall strengths in automotive, fintech, nuclear energy, semiconductors, water and waste management, and security and defense (including cybersecurity) are also intriguing to regional partners.

4 Beyond signaling credible engagement through regular high-level political and business visits, Slovakia should strengthen coordination with other Central European countries. This would pool resources and reduce zero-sum competition, particularly in attracting skilled labor from Southeast Asia.

Introduction

The European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are obvious—and, in some areas, even natural—partners. Since 1977, the two most deeply integrated regional organizations have continued to deepen their cooperation. Their collaboration has traditionally been strongest in the economic sphere: The EU is ASEAN's third-largest trade partner and investor. Conversely, ASEAN is the EU's third-largest non-European trade partner, behind only the United States and China, and an important investor in Europe, though investment is unevenly distributed, with Singapore accounting for the lion's share. Not only are the Singaporean investment holdings GIC and Temasek major investors, but also foreign companies use Singapore as a global financial hub from which to invest in Europe.

Over recent decades, EU-ASEAN collaboration has expanded to academia, technology, culture, civil society, and even security and defense. The EU is a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum and aspires to join the East Asia Summit, a major ASEAN-led transregional cooperation format.

Both the EU and ASEAN navigate a challenging geopolitical and geo-economic environment and share many strategic and economic interests. The year 2027, the 50th anniversary of EU–ASEAN dialogue relations, presents a timely opportunity to deepen ties, both formally and substantively, at the planned autumn summit in Singapore. Further deepening cooperation serves both sides as they navigate a challenging geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape and pursue shared strategic and economic interests. Smaller EU countries such as Slovakia and other Central European countries directly benefit from closer EU-ASEAN relations; they can also help shape them and can exploit niches. By taking concrete steps such as Slovakia's accession to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, or leading specific Global Gateway Initiative (GGI) projects, they can accelerate cooperation.

The EU and ASEAN: Shared interests but also differing perspectives

The EU and ASEAN share concerns about the demise of the rules-based order, rising protectionism, and the erosion of global trade rules. Both advocate multilateral cooperation and make joint efforts to strengthen international law.

Differences remain, however, in how some conflicts and crises are viewed, for example, Russia's illegal war against Ukraine and the situation in the Middle East. Continuous dialogue—both at the EU–ASEAN level and among individual member states, involving academics and citizens—is essential to clarify perspectives and interpretations of principles such as sovereignty and non-interference. Such exchanges can foster mutual understanding and reduce the risk of unproductive accusations of double standards.

Highly conducive to expanding cooperation is that the EU and its member states are, in principle, widely welcomed partners by ASEAN and Southeast Asian countries. Most of these countries pursue hedging strategies: they avoid aligning exclusively with either China or the United States and seek to reduce dependence on both by cultivating diversified, omnidirectional partnerships with regional and external actors. The EU is particularly valued for supporting the rules-based international order. Conversely, the EU's de-risking strategy significantly increased Southeast Asia's strategic relevance for Europe.

However, Southeast Asia should be approached on its own terms rather than framed solely as a potential alternative to China. The region has long been among the world's fastest-growing. Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand have achieved striking socioeconomic success, while Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam are expanding rapidly. All Southeast Asian economies, including less-developed members such as Cambodia, Laos, and Timor-Leste, are closely integrated into supply chains that are of critical interest to Europe. The region's roughly 700 million citizens are relatively young and tech-savvy, fueling rapid growth in the digital economy, an opportunity for European companies.¹ Moreover, a rising middle class has significant purchasing power and is eager to travel and study abroad, including in Europe.

Stepping up Slovakia's presence and visibility in Southeast Asia

During the Cold War, Slovakia, as part of Czechoslovakia, had close relations with Communist nations Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. A further positive factor in relations with the region is that Slovakia, unlike other European nations, has no colonies in Southeast Asia. Slovakia's intention to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, a core ASEAN treaty, has also been very well received in Southeast Asia.

Slovakia's Indo-Pacific Strategy demonstrates a strong awareness of the strategic and economic importance of the region and, in particular, Southeast Asia for Europe and Slovakia. For a relatively small country, Slovakia has a strong diplomatic presence in Southeast Asia. In this regard, the reopening of the embassy in Kuala Lumpur and the opening of an embassy in Manila in 2025 were major milestones. Southeast Asian diplomats and scholars regularly emphasized in interviews with the CEIAS research team the importance of being present in the region, both through permanent diplomatic representations and through regular high-level visits by politicians and business leaders.

Since not all EU member states always send high-ranking representatives to EU–ASEAN meetings in Southeast Asia, the participation of smaller European states stands out all the more, for example, that of Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Juraj Blanár at the 25th EU-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Brunei in April 2026. His visits to Malaysia (April 2026) and to Indonesia and Singapore (February 2026), where about 20 Slovak business leaders accompanied him, were important steps, but they need to be repeated regularly. To sustain momentum, other ministers, such as those responsible for the

¹ See the CEIAS paper Preparing for DEFA: A European strategy for ASEAN's digital market by Matej Šimalčík and Maria Monica Wihardja (2026).

Slovakia's diplomatic presence in ASEAN



Five embassies and seven honorary consulates provide a strong diplomatic network to advance Slovakia's interests in Southeast Asia.

■ Embassy of the Slovak Republic ● Honorary Consulate of the Slovak Republic



Note: Colors denote territories covered by each individual embassy. Singapore territory not to scale (for the sake of visibility).

Data: Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic

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economy, defense, education, and health, should also make regular visits to the region, aligned with sectoral priorities and trade missions.

Political visits and business missions by the Slovak Investment and Trade Development Agency (SARIO) help raise awareness in Slovakia of the significance of Southeast Asia. However, there is a further need to inform the broader public to ensure strong support for deepening the relations with the region.

It is also important to raise Slovakia's profile in Southeast Asia. Besides national initiatives, cooperation with other Central European countries is useful for increasing the visibility of Slovakia and Central Europe in general and for benefiting from the

Slovakia's trade with ASEAN states (2023)



Slovakia has significant trade deficits with Southeast Asian countries, in particular Vietnam, Malaysia, and Thailand. But there is a high potential to increase Slovak's exports.

Country	Exports (USD mil)	Imports (USD mil)	Trade balance (USD mil)
Brunei	3.4	0.1	3.3
Cambodia	6.7	85.2	-78.5
Indonesia	15.5	173.9	-158.4
Laos	0.9	1.4	-0.5
Malaysia	25.8	538.4	-512.6
Myanmar	0.3	91.1	-90.8
Philippines	32.4	67.9	-35.4
Singapore	33.3	78.2	-45.0
Thailand	49.3	482.5	-433.2
Timor-Leste	n.a.	0.0009	n.a.
Vietnam	48.5	4,631.0	-4,582.5
Total	216.1	6,149.7	-5,933.6

Data: World Integrated Trade Solution (2026)

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networks and experience of neighbors. Notably, Poland is very active in Southeast Asia, as data from the [EUSEAR Tracker](#) demonstrates.

Given its limited resources, Slovakia should focus on deepening its relations with ASEAN in general and with selected Southeast Asian countries, and on identifying three to five policy or economic-sector priorities for each country. Priority should be given to trade facilitation and export promotion. As a result, [partnerships](#) among Slovak ministries, SARIO, Eximbanka, and the Slovak-ASEAN Chamber of Commerce are instrumental in providing business companies with all relevant and practical information.

Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam stand out regarding presenting economic opportunities. Deepening ties comprehensively, thereby focusing on niches, is not a contradiction. As Minister Blanár's visits to Southeast Asia in 2026 demonstrate, collaboration in automotive, fintech, nuclear energy, semiconductors, water and waste management, and security and defense (including cybersecurity) is especially [promising](#).

As they modernize their militaries, Southeast Asian countries are shifting away from Russian arms and [diversifying](#) their procurement, spending heavily in this process. Indonesia, the largest Southeast Asian and Muslim country in the world, is a heavyweight in the region. Concluding the planned [strategic partnership](#) in the near future would significantly improve Slovakia's regional visibility. Under President Prabowo Subianto, Slovak-Indonesian defense cooperation has expanded significantly, including technology transfer and joint manufacturing, which offers Slovak companies interesting opportunities. A key cooperative project is a Czech-Slovak-Indonesian [industrial partnership](#) in which Slovak and Czech firms, led by the Czechoslovak Group (CSG), supply armored chassis, subsystems, and turrets (including the TURRA 30 remote-controlled weapon station) for final assembly and integration in

Indonesia by the state-owned defense contractor PT Pindad. Counter-terrorism cooperation has also increased. Slovakia can benefit from best practice deradicalization programs in Indonesia and Singapore.

Another increasingly important defense partner is Malaysia. The procurement of 18 EVA M2 155mm self-propelled wheeled howitzers by Malaysia is both economically and strategically significant, as Malaysia is in this regard an important reference customer in Asia. Ensuring a strong presence for Slovak companies at Malaysia's biennial Defense Services Asia (DSA) exhibition and conference—a major pan-Asian defense forum—will be increasingly important in the coming years.

Due to historical reasons and strong economic relations, Vietnam is a logical key partner for Slovakia. During his visit to Vietnam in April 2026, Prime Minister Robert Fico signed an agreement on a bilateral strategic partnership. However, relations with Vietnam remain a divisive issue in Slovak society due to the 2016 abduction of a former Vietnamese politician from Berlin via Bratislava by the Vietnamese intelligence service. Vietnam, for its part, responded very positively to Slovakia's official recognition in 2023 of the Vietnamese minority (approximately 10,000 people) as the 14th ethnic minority. Slovakia's intention to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation has also been very well received in Vietnam and Southeast Asia more broadly.

Recommendations for the EU

- Policymakers from the EU and member states should maintain a stronger on-the-ground presence in Southeast Asia. Beyond attending regular ASEAN meetings, frequent high-level visits, accompanied by business and academic delegations, would raise Europe's visibility. Visits by parliamentary friendship groups can further deepen mutual understanding through open, candid dialogue.
- Cooperation projects, including those under the GGI such as Lien Chieu Port in Vietnam's Da Nang (Eximbanka coordinates Slovakia's participation), should deliver tangible benefits for citizens, clearly demonstrating the added value of partnering with Europe. Bureaucracy must be reduced without compromising governance standards. The applied Team Europe approach can be extended to collaboration with Southeast Asia on security and defense, but needs to be more strongly coordinated by the EU, notably the EU Delegations in Southeast Asia.
- The EU should provide stronger financial and technical support for awareness campaigns in both Europe and Southeast Asia on the importance of EU–ASEAN relations. The 2027 anniversary year is an ideal moment for public events, from cultural, tourism, and culinary showcases to business and student outreach on both sides.
- The EU must ensure that agreements and treaties move beyond promises to full implementation and deliver tangible benefits for citizens in both regions.

Recommendations for Slovakia

- To promote its interests both strategically and in an efficient manner, Slovakia should carry out its activities on three levels: the EU level, together with other EU

members (Team Europe approach), notably other Central European countries, and bilaterally, thereby focusing on exploiting niches.

- A rolling three-year calendar of high-level political visits, aligned with key anniversaries and major regional meetings, would streamline coordination between Slovak diplomats in the region and ministries in Bratislava. This planning should be embedded in a broader Southeast Asia strategy as a dedicated chapter of the Indo-Pacific strategy, covering the relevant policy areas.
- As an export-oriented economy and in line with its overall foreign policy goals, Slovakia should keep urging the EU to conclude trade agreements with more Southeast Asian countries and, ideally, with ASEAN as a bloc. Such agreements provide businesses with greater certainty at a time when the global trading system is under strain.
- In its priority Southeast Asian partner countries, Slovakia should identify the sectors most relevant to Slovak firms and, through its ministries, embassies, SARIO and Eximbanka, provide businesses with ongoing sector updates. Recurring minister-led business delegations to the region should further expand opportunities for Slovak companies.
- Beyond these priority partners, Slovakia should map cooperation areas in every Southeast Asian country. Even less-developed economies can offer valuable opportunities in other policy domains; for example, Timor-Leste is a credible partner on democracy and human rights.
- To raise awareness of Southeast Asia, Slovakia should cooperate with Southeast Asian embassies to organize a “Southeast Asia Week” in Bratislava and other cities, featuring cultural and culinary programs, business forums, and study-abroad showcases that allow for more interactions with the broad public than the activities on the “Asia Day”.
- To raise awareness of Slovakia (and Central Europe) in Southeast Asia, Bratislava should organize joint campaigns, such as a “Central Europe Week” roadshow or fair series, in key partner countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, highlighting shared history, cultural links, and short travel distances to encourage multi-country itineraries and longer stays of tourists. Representatives of the Slovak diaspora can thereby act as citizen-diplomats.
- Academic cooperation in general and in particular in various technology-related fields, including semiconductors,² is another promising area of Central European–Southeast Asian collaboration. The Austria-led interdisciplinary academic network ASEA-UNINET brings together around 30 Austrian, Italian and Czech universities, as well as more than 60 Southeast Asian universities, promoting research collaboration and student and scholar mobility. Slovak universities are not yet represented in this initiative but would benefit significantly from joining this well-established network,

² For more information on EU-ASEAN semiconductors cooperation, see the CEIAS paper [Chips that connect: EU-ASEAN cooperation in a fragmented world](#) by Filip Šebok (2026).

furthering their internationalization and increasing the visibility of the Slovak scholarship program.

- To build Southeast Asia expertise at Slovak universities and think tanks, and make it available to political and economic decision-makers, targeted government support, including research funding and mobility grants, is essential.

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Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS) is an independent think tank focusing on Europe-Asia relations and developments in the Indo-Pacific region. Originally founded in 2007 in Slovakia, CEIAS is today a **transnational think tank with main branches in Bratislava (Slovakia), Prague (Czech Republic), and Vienna (Austria)**, and further regional presence in Poland, Hungary, Canada, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and beyond.

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Our outputs are referred to in the work of other thinktanks, e.g. Brookings (USA), Clingendael (Netherlands), MERICS (Germany), Institute for Security & Development Policy (Sweden), IFRI (France), ISPI (Italy), Global Taiwan Institute (USA), Prospect Foundation (Taiwan), ISEAS (Singapore), Elcano Royal Institute (Spain) and many others.

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CEIAS Southeast Asia Program

The Southeast Asia Program seeks to deepen understanding of the Southeast Asia region by analyzing the foreign policy, security, and economic strategies of ASEAN and its eleven member states. It examines their relationships with major global powers—including China, the United States, Japan, Australia, India, and the EU—with particular attention to the strategic approaches they adopt, such as hedging.

Southeast Asia, home to 700 million people and some of the world's fastest-growing economies, is becoming an increasingly important region on the global stage. However, it is also beset by domestic and regional security and development challenges. These include unresolved territorial disputes in the South China Sea, ongoing human rights abuses committed by Myanmar's military regime, the growing impact of climate change, and the rising prevalence of cyber scams.

The program also examines the engagement of the EU and Central and Eastern European countries with ASEAN and its member states across various areas, including politics, economics, security, civil society, academia, and technology. Additionally, it examines Southeast Asia's interactions with other international actors and tracks key domestic developments that shape the region. In addition to research, the program hosts public events and offers policy recommendations to a range of stakeholders.

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