



## GCC-ASEAN Webinar Series

### *Looking Forward: Outlines for Developing GCC-ASEAN Cooperation*

January 18, 2024

### Summary and Key Outcomes



**GCC-ASEAN WEBINAR**  
Looking Forward: Outlines for Developing GCC-ASEAN Cooperation



 **12:00-1:30 PM**  
(Saudi Arabia time)  
**January, 18 2024**



Dr. Abdulaziz Sager  
Chairman  
Gulf Research Center



Dr. Yeo Lay Hwee  
Senior Fellow  
Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA)



Dr. Mansour Almazrouei  
Director of the Center for Strategic Studies & American Studies  
Prince Saud Al Faisal Institute for Diplomatic Studies



Andrea Molina  
Chief Research Officer (Migration Studies)  
Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies  
Foreign Service Institute - Philippines



Gulf Research Center  
Knowledge for All



Dr. Hasan Alhasan  
Senior Fellow for Middle East Policy  
International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)



Newin Sinsiri  
Advisor, Geopolitics  
Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI)



Khin Maung Zaw  
Joint Secretary  
Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies



Dr. Ngo Di Lan  
Research Fellow  
Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies (IFPSS), DAV



Moderator: Dr. Christian Koch  
Director of Research  
Gulf Research Center

The Gulf Research Center (GRC) held the first session of its GCC-ASEAN webinar series entitled “Looking Forward: Outlines for Developing GCC-ASEAN Cooperation” on January 18, 2024. The event focused on the status of relations and the priorities related to the “ASEAN-Gulf

Cooperation Council Framework of Cooperation 2024-2028.” Dr. Christian Koch, the Director of Research at the GRC, moderated the session.

In his welcoming remarks, Dr. Abdulaziz Sager, Chairman of the GRC, emphasized the importance of developing stronger academic and think tank network relations with ASEAN countries. He also discussed the potential for expanding trade, labor market, investment, and innovation ties. Dr. Sager suggested that attention should be given to bringing about a GCC-ASEAN free trade agreement which would open the door for further cooperation in areas like renewable energy, food security, and the digital economy. The establishment of a GCC-ASEAN business council to facilitate private-sector engagement could also be beneficial.

Dr. Yeo Lay Hwee, Senior Fellow at the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA), expressed her aims for more dialogue between think tanks in Southeast Asia and the GCC countries as both regions face a lot of complex challenges. Their work together could therefore assist policymakers from the regions to overcome some of these issues. She highlighted that the current broader geopolitical and geoeconomic developments in the last few years have inevitably led the two regional blocs to strengthen their engagements with each other to build greater strategic alignment at the region-to-region level. In terms of economic relations in 2022, trade between the two blocs increased from USD 85.2 billion in 2021 to USD 110 billion, with the current trade volume reaching close to USD 140 billion. Trade has not only increased but also diversified from trading primarily in crude oil and fossil fuels and associated logistics to various products and services, from electronics and machinery to other high-growth sectors, such as food, financial services, and e-commerce.

Mr. Newin Sinsiri, Advisor on Geopolitics from the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI), highlighted how the ASEAN-Gulf Cooperation Council Framework of Cooperation could promote more economic cooperation through the increased role of private sectors and shared experience on economic integration in terms of policy dialogue on trade and investment. He underlined the importance of people-to-people connectivity with increased cultural exchanges,

knowledge sharing, trade fairs, and other mechanisms essential to narrowing the developmental gap between the two regions.

Dr. Hasan Alhasan, Senior Fellow for Middle East Policy at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), stressed how the GCC is expressing interest in engaging more substantively with ASEAN and how this is part of the GCC's broader strategic diversification plan, given the fact that the Gulf states are attempting to diversify their security, political, and economic relations away from the West, and looking for a broader set of partners. Dr. Alhasan reiterated how the GCC-ASEAN relationship remains centered on energy but he stated that there is also an increased focus on new emerging and renewable forms of energy. For the GCC states, the strategy is to cement themselves as central energy players and play a key role in the transition towards newer forms of energy.

Mr. Khin Maung Zaw, Joint Secretary from the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies, highlighted the importance of food security and how ASEAN can provide food supply security for the GCC states. He also identified digital currency and financial technology as another area that both sides should engage in. He suggested that the GCC and ASEAN, as regional blocs, can create a common market framework for food, marine products, livestock, and agriculture.

Dr. Ngo Di Lan, Research Fellow at the Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies (IFPSS – DAV), stressed the importance of fostering cooperation on both the multilateral and bilateral levels. He identified strengthening tourism flows between the two regions as important to further developing infrastructure, creating business opportunities, and boosting trade and investment flows.

Dr. Mansour Almarzoqi, Director of the Center for Strategic Studies & American Studies at the Prince Saud Al Faisal Institute for Diplomatic Studies, re-emphasized the institutional instrument of contact and that to understand one another better, one must develop efficient ways of communication through education. He argued that the two blocs were still in an 'exploration

stage' of developing their relations with one another. This includes, for example, the divergent security alliances of all the GCC and ASEAN member states and how certain countries have better relations with China than others. It should also be acknowledged that some GCC countries have stronger ties with ASEAN countries than others.

Andrea Molina, Chief Research Officer (Migration Studies) at the Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies, Foreign Service Institute, highlighted the importance of a conscious effort to bridge the gaps and build a stronger foundation, especially now that the challenges both regional blocs are facing, whether they be economic, geopolitical, or environmental, do not adhere to the arbitrary boundaries. She emphasized the waning influence of traditional global powers, coupled with the rise of new players, which created a shifting landscape. This new reality requires collective solutions that transcend borders in order to better face the apparent challenges in these volatile regions. It also reflects the policies of the GCC countries which are seeking diversification beyond their immediate allies.

The holding of the GCC-ASEAN summit in Riyadh in October 2023 should now be followed up with more focused ministerial meetings and exchanges. At the same time, many specific issues need to be addressed, which requires a second track of experts, where the cooperation of the regional blocks can examine what specific functional collaboration between the GCC and ASEAN can look like. Important issues mentioned were food security, AI technology, and renewables. The main focus on the second track of experts is to coordinate specific working groups between GCC and ASEAN experts to develop concrete ideas that can ultimately be proposed at the political level. On the societal track, people-to-people cooperation should be enhanced and focused on building networks and having regular exchange mechanisms. This will allow for greater familiarity to be created and generate a greater sense of understanding to be promoted between the two regional blocs, eventually moving out of the exploratory phase and towards regularized institutionalized cooperation.

**Overall, the session put forward several suggestions for policy consideration:**

- First, ASEAN should consider having the GCC as a comprehensive dialogue partner and invite the GCC to regular regional meetings, such as the 'ASEAN Regional Forum,' to enhance regional-to-regional cooperation and institutional relationships.
- Second, a comprehensive institutional framework should sustain the current GCC-ASEAN momentum, with more regular dialogues and joint working groups.
- Third, the importance of regular, structured, and institutional contact between GCC and ASEAN and the potential for cooperation in renewable energy, food security, and the digital economy should be emphasized.
- Fourth, it is essential to focus on the context of the rise of the GCC as a geopolitical global player, coupled with the return of regionalism.
- Fifth, there is a dire need for the think tank community to promote and educate both GCC and ASEAN regional bloc communities and understand each of the regional perspectives better to develop more pertinent and realistic policies.
- Sixth, safeguarding labor rights by the Global Compact for Immigration must be undertaken.
- Seventh, securing vital trade routes and economic interests to ensure regional stability and cooperation will also require that robust maritime security measures between both regions be increased.