

Australia and ASEAN: Together for the Sake of a New Multipolar World Order

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The Australian Foreign Policy White Paper released by the Turnbull government in November 2017 was refreshing in the way it reprioritised Southeast Asia as a key focal point. Southeast Asia is an important region for Australia due to its proximity and economic potential, among other reasons. However, Australia's recent enthusiasm over Southeast Asia needs to be accompanied by a more nuanced and patient understanding of the region, as well as its defining institution the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). While imperfect and often perceived as ineffective, ASEAN remains an important actor in the evolving multipolar world order and it is in Australia's best interests to support this multilateral institution.

The Special Summit: Late but Substantive

The Australia-ASEAN Special Summit that took place in mid-March is one of the flagship initiatives of the Turnbull government and an early realisation of a Foreign Policy White Paper prescription.³⁶ A diplomatic success, the Summit showcased the current government's unusually high sensitivity to the feelings of Southeast Asia's leaders. The high-profile and substantive week-long activities associated with the Summit stood out from other summits held between ASEAN and its dialogue partners—including the high-profile US-ASEAN Sunnylands Summit under President Obama in February 2016, the Sochi Summit with Russia in May 2016, the India-ASEAN Summit in Delhi in January 2018 and numerous ASEAN-China summits—in the way it included various interests and issue-specific discussions. As a result, the Sydney Declaration³⁷ was accompanied by a number of separate meetings on counter-terrorism, cyber security, maritime security, infrastructure and business that discussed concrete cooperation frameworks.

The Special Summit happened at a potentially pivotal moment when regional developments cast doubt not only around power and stability, but also upon the broader direction of the region. In March 2018 the People's Republic of China's thirteenth National People's Congress amended its constitution

³⁶ See Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 'About the Special Summit', <aseanaustralia.pmc.gov.au/special-summit/about> [Accessed 16 June 2018].

³⁷ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 'Joint Statement of the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit: The Sydney Declaration, Sydney Australia, 18 March 2018', <aseanaustralia.pmc.gov.au/Declaration> [Accessed 16 June 2018].

erasing presidential term limits.³⁸ As a result, President Xi Jinping has consolidated power domestically and signalled a more ambitious role for China in global affairs. Meanwhile, the United States introduced a confusing mix of policies, such as retreat from free trade and a withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, but a more confrontational approach towards China in asserting their 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific', as detailed in the National Security Strategy and the National Defence Strategy.³⁹ The Indo-Pacific concept, while still yet to be clarified by the Trump administration, has already raised questions among actors in the region over how the omission of "Asia" in the title may impact regional arrangements. Australia is a supporter and a promoter of the Indo-Pacific concept and by reaching out to ASEAN through the Summit it effectively responds to existing concerns in Southeast Asia.⁴⁰ The Turnbull government successfully reassured ASEAN leaders that the Southeast Asian multilateral organisation plays a central role in its understanding of the Indo-Pacific concept. The Summit clearly demonstrated that Australia's approach to ASEAN has evolved since former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's proposal to establish an Asia-Pacific Community. Bearing in mind that the idea was rejected by the region because it was perceived to be a step towards sidelining ASEAN, the Turnbull government recognised in the Foreign Policy White Paper ASEAN's centrality in the region's economic and security institutions.⁴¹

Why Now?

The Summit symbolises Australia's fresh approach to the region and its institutions. As of 1974 Australia became ASEAN's first Dialogue Partner, which, in fact, makes Australia's history of formal engagement with ASEAN even longer than half of its members (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam only joined ASEAN in the 1990s).⁴² Whilst Australia has been a strong supporter of the East Asia Summit it seems Canberra is only recently waking up to the importance of Southeast Asia and the benefits of partnering with it. In the view of many in the region this awakening has been triggered by a growing sense of instability and lessening of certainty in the reliability of its great and powerful but distant friends. Under President Trump, American

³⁸ 'Xi Jinping Unanimously Elected Chinese President, CMC Chairman', People's Daily Online, 17 March 2018, <en.people.cn/n3/2018/0317/c90000-9438338.html> [Accessed 16 June 2018].

³⁹ President of the United States, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, <www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>; US Secretary of Defense, *Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, January 2018, <www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> [Accessed 16 June 2018].

⁴⁰ Rory Medcalf, 'In Defence of the Indo-Pacific: Australia's New Strategic Map', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 68, no. 4 (2014), pp. 470-83.

⁴¹ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2017)

⁴² Huong Le Thu, 'Should Australia Join ASEAN? Lessons from Vietnam', *East Asia Forum*, 10 May 2018, <www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/05/10/should-australia-join-asean-lessons-from-vietnam/> [Accessed 16 June 2018].

foreign policy is increasingly unpredictable. Indeed, Donald Trump's comments and actions have framed traditional US allies and partners as a burden,⁴³ making Australia, arguably the United States' most loyal ally, quite insecure as China's increasing assertiveness manifests itself nearer and nearer Australian shores.

Australia's relationship with China has deteriorated significantly over the past eighteen months, largely due to the debate around China's influence in Australian politics, media and universities.⁴⁴ As such, the growing sense of loneliness is a pressing driver for Canberra to seek a 'Plan B' in its foreign policy.⁴⁵ ASEAN, being at the centre of regional architecture and geographically half-way between China and Australia, subsequently gains more of Canberra's attention.

Opening ASEAN to Australia: A Diversion from Reason

Leading into the Special Summit, Indonesian President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) suggested, in comments to the media that attracted more attention than they deserved, that Australia could become a member of ASEAN.⁴⁶ These comments triggered a considerable amount of consternation and discussion, such as cultural notions of Javanese politeness to explain Jokowi's utterances.⁴⁷ This discussion did not address the core question of why Australia would desire membership and what it would do differently if it were to become an ASEAN state. These are questions Australia would have to answer before support for membership was sought.⁴⁸ There is little, if any, consideration among ASEAN member states regards Australia's membership in the organisation and the actual mention of it displays how out-of-tune some current leaders of ASEAN are. Jokowi, who in the early days of his presidency disregarded ASEAN's importance to Indonesia,⁴⁹ has become the target of ridicule for his rather uninformed quotes, as has

⁴³ 'Lexington', 'Donald Trump Seems to See Allies as a Burden', *The Economist*, 4 February 2017, <www.economist.com/united-states/2017/02/04/donald-trump-seems-to-see-allies-as-a-burden> [Accessed 16 June 2018].

⁴⁴ See 'China's influence in Australia: Maintaining the Debate' *Policy Forum*, Asia & the Pacific Policy Forum, 27 March 2018, <www.policyforum.net/chinas-influence-australia-maintaining-debate/> [Accessed 16 June 2018].

⁴⁵ Anthony Milner and Sally Percival Wood (eds), *Our Place in the Asian Century: Southeast Asia as the 'Third Way'* (Melbourne: Asialink, University of Melbourne, 2012).

⁴⁶ James Massola and Peter Hartcher, 'Indonesian President Widodo Says Australia Should Be in ASEAN', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 March 2018, <www.smh.com.au/world/asia/indonesian-president-widodo-says-australia-should-be-in-asean-20180315-p4z4ha.html> [Accessed 16 June 2018].

⁴⁷ Dedi Dinarto, 'Deciphering Jokowi's Javanese Card in ASEAN-Australia Relations', *The Conversation*, 27 March 2018, <theconversation.com/deciphering-jokowis-javanese-card-in-asean-australia-relations-93750> [Accessed 16 June 2018].

⁴⁸ Le Thu, 'Should Australia Join ASEAN?'

⁴⁹ Felix Utama Kosasih, 'Indonesia and ASEAN: Where Are We Going?', *Global Indonesian Voices*, 30 July 2015, <www.globalindonesianvoices.com/21846/indonesia-and-asean-where-are-we-going/> [Accessed 16 June 2018].

President Rodrigo Duterte for advocating Mongolia and Turkey's membership in the organisation.⁵⁰ Rather than showing ASEAN's open-mindedness, these comments reveal that the intergenerational communication of ASEAN's collective interests, visions and values have not been effective.⁵¹ It is indeed an indictment on the new generation of Southeast Asian leaders that some in their rank lack the knowledge of what ASEAN is, what it stands for and what it is lacking. This is a worrying trend and it has already challenged ASEAN's coherence and is likely to continue doing so.

ASEAN Matters But Only for What It Is, Not What Others Want It to Be

When considering engagement with Southeast Asia, it is necessary to bear in mind that Southeast Asia does not equal ASEAN, as Graham, Le Thu, and Cook recently reminded Australian audiences.⁵² Southeast Asia has many strengths, which include its relatively youthful workforce, its expanding middle class and its GDP growth rates. Challenges also exist in the region, some traditional, such as territorial disputes, and some non-traditional such as extremism. Proximity and inter-connectedness mean that Australia and Southeast Asia share these challenges. Australia must engage its neighbours to seek security with, rather than from, Asia. Closer ties with both Southeast Asia and individual Southeast Asian states should become a constant priority, uncontested by any change of governments.

ASEAN, as an organisation, on the other hand, is less dynamic. It is an intra-governmental institution that has a diplomatic function. And while renewed enthusiasm for ASEAN is necessary for Australia's strategic outlook, as well as for ASEAN's own fragile institutional confidence, Canberra needs to embrace the organisation for what it is, not for what Canberra wants it to be.⁵³ ASEAN is an important regional body, with flaws and imperfections, that accommodates a very diverse set of members. Given that there is no equivalent in Northeast Asia—indeed, the only

⁵⁰ 'Philippines' Duterte Says Turkey, Mongolia Could Join Asean', *The Straits Times*, 16 May 2017, <www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/philippines-duterte-says-turkey-mongolia-could-join-asean> [Accessed 16 June 2018].

⁵¹ Huong Le Thu, 'Vietnam and Singapore: Working Together to Keep ASEAN Relevant', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 1 September 2016, <www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/vietnam-and-singapore-working-together-keep-asean-relevant> [Accessed 16 June 2018].

⁵² Euan Graham, 'Is ASEAN Still Central to Australia?', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 5 February 2018, <www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/debate/asean-centrality#debatResponse_344521>; Huong Le Thu, 'ASEAN: Different Strokes for Different Folks, But Future Should Be in Sync', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 8 February 2018, <www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/debate/asean-centrality#debatResponse_344641>; Malcolm Cook, 'ASEAN Is Not South East Asia', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 13 March 2018, <www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/asean-not-south-east-asia> [Accessed 16 June 2018].

⁵³ Huong Le Thu, 'China's Dual Strategy of Coercion and Inducement Towards ASEAN', *The Pacific Review* (2018), DOI: 10.1080/09512748.2017.1417325.

analogue is the ASEAN-Plus Three mechanism⁵⁴—ASEAN remains the only regional architecture available. The ASEAN debate in Australia needs to be informative, frank and unorthodox. The region has been overlooked for a long time and the current juncture presents a golden opportunity for Australia to embrace it.⁵⁵ But we need to remember that just because we are now interested in ASEAN, it has not miraculously evolved into what we want it to be just because it has gained Canberra's attention.

Arguments that espouse ASEAN's role in regional security can be misleading; crediting ASEAN with the delivery of regional peace needs to be done with caution and rigorous testing.⁵⁶ Take, for example, the popular argument that the lack of major war in the region is a result of ASEAN. This theory is problematic on numerous levels. First, it is difficult to demonstrate any causal relationship between ASEAN's existence and the 'long-peace' in Southeast Asia. Second, the occasions where ASEAN has undertaken meaningful preventative diplomacy are few in number. Sure, ASEAN's facilitation of dialogue may have had an ameliorating effect on otherwise hostile situations, but that outcome is an indirect result of dialogue and a general recognition that peace is in everybody's best interest. Third, even if ASEAN has displayed a capacity to ensure peace in the region the question is raised as to why it is unable to quell the recently flaring disputes over territorial sovereignty in the South China Sea.

ASEAN's role in providing for regional security requires clarification. ASEAN is, and will remain, a forum for expressing concerns, and even that has been frequently challenged. ASEAN is not a vehicle to solve security related problems, nor is it a collective security mechanism. Australia would face bitter disappointment if it were to work under an assumption that ASEAN might serve as an anti-China bulwark.⁵⁷ Seeing any nation, let alone Southeast Asian nations in a binary 'with us, or against us' lens is counterproductive. While there are some indicators that suggest smaller Southeast Asian states are either in pro-China or pro-US camps, as many studies frame the situation, what motivates this outcome is usually misunderstood.⁵⁸ All nations will always prioritise self-interest and national policies that lean towards either power are just a means to satisfy that priority. To expect Southeast Asians to display a similar level of allegiance

⁵⁴ ASEAN, 'ASEAN Plus Three', <asean.org/asean/external-relations/asean-3/> [Accessed 16 June 2018].

⁵⁵ Huong Le Thu, 'Australia's Ever-Changing Perspectives on ASEAN: Time to Get It Right', *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 1 March 2018, <www.aspistrategist.org.au/australias-ever-changing-perspectives-asean-time-get-right/> [Accessed 16 June 2018].

⁵⁶ Gary Clyde Hufbauer, 'Success Ensures ASEAN's Long-Term Importance to the United States', *East Asia Forum*, 27 March 2018, <www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/03/27/success-ensures-aseans-long-term-importance-to-the-united-states/> [Accessed 16 June 2018].

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Max Fisher and Audrey Carlsen, 'How China Is Challenging American Dominance in Asia', *The New York Times*, 9 March 2018, <www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/03/09/world/asia/china-us-asia-rivalry.html?mtref=t.co> [Accessed 16 June 2018].

to the United States as Australia does, especially considering the security the United States provides Australia, is rather unrealistic. So even if there is a pressing need to balance China's power in the region—better understood only among a few of ASEAN's leaders—hoping for a concerted and collective approach to China, which would inevitably elicit a retaliation from Beijing, is highly problematic. National interest as opposed to 'ASEAN interest' has been, and is arguably becoming more, divergent. Canberra needs to take account these nuances in order to not commit policy overstretch. Bilateral relations with strategically like-minded states, such as Vietnam, will hold the most value for both sides of the partnership. In fact, the strategic partnership agreement signed on the eve of the Special Summit is so far the most concrete and meaningful outcome of the recent embrace between Australia and its Southeast Asian neighbours.⁵⁹

Australia's interests regarding ASEAN are best served by reinforcing the meaning of multilateralism. Multilateral fora, even when facing challenges as they do today, maintain a relevant role in international and security affairs and it is more critical now than ever that the international community support these organisations. Australia and ASEAN can play important roles, both together and separately, in providing such support. Australian enthusiasm helps prevent ASEAN from falling into obsolescence. Moreover, Australian support for ASEAN communicates a view on the emerging multipolar world order, that a functional regional architecture in Southeast Asia that enjoys international support could operate as a pole of global power. Australia's Foreign Policy White Paper articulated such a view, but stronger policy communication and justification must follow, reinforce and complement the document.

Conclusion

There are many pressing priorities on the Australian strategic plate. Recent global power shifts have created space for consideration beyond the known and the comfortable. The question that will linger, even after a photogenic summit, is: Can Australia sustain its interests in ASEAN or will it return to its natural tendency of preoccupation with the Great Powers?

Careful thinking around long-term mutual interests and the potential of creating lasting engagement is needed. To do so, a clear understanding of the relevant policy approaches is essential. Canberra needs an ability to translate the nuances between 'ASEAN language—whereby declarations, plans and initiatives outline visions of harmonious, prosperous and functional community—and 'ASEAN practices'—where the constraints on true integration remain formidable. Inaccurate expectations and assessments of

⁵⁹ Huong Le Thu, 'Shared Vision Behind Australia's New Strategic Friendship with Vietnam', *Australian Financial Review*, 12 March 2018, <www.afr.com/opinion/columnists/shared-vision-behind-our-new-strategic-friendship-with-vietnam-20180312-h0xcbn> [Accessed 16 June 2018].

ASEAN have caused disillusionment and, perhaps needlessly, reduced confidence in what the partnership with the regional body can achieve. Expectations must be tailored to fit reality by accepting what ASEAN is and what it is not.⁶⁰ Canberra would also be best advised to ponder over ASEAN's needs and expectations surrounding a partnership with Australia, rather than solely communicating good intent and expectations in a one-way dialogue.

Australia needs a comprehensive, lasting and coordinated Southeast Asia policy. A policy that includes but does not rest on hosting special summits. The Foreign Policy White Paper started a conversation in the right direction, but a turn towards Southeast Asia needs to be a continued effort, rather than just a one-off summit.

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⁶⁰ Le Thu, 'ASEAN: Different Strokes for Different Folks'.