

COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC PARTNERS: ASEAN and Australia after the first 50 years 2024

Nicholas Farrelly / Lina A. Alexandra / Sharon Seah / Kimly Ngoun





ASEAN matters to Australia. If you look up from Australia, up north, you see the ASEAN nations at the centre of our region. That's why it's so important for us to continue to engage, and so important for us to build on our long-standing partnership.

Senator the Hon Penny Wong,
Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs

“

The vision and passion of young people across the region fills me with optimism for the next fifty years of ASEAN-Australia relations. It is a joy to see the openness, kindness, and respect we hold for one another and an honour to witness connections formed and strengthened that will impact our shared future. The best part is that we are only just getting started.

Ms. Racheline Tantular,
Chief Executive Officer, ASEAN-Australia
Strategic Youth Partnership

“

With this 50th anniversary we are no longer young: you know that you have survived and achieved quite a bit through years of collaboration. We show that we have been agile, productive and adept enough to deal with the issues. For us, Australia has been one of the most loyal Dialogue Partners.

Professor Dewi Fortuna Anwar,
Research Professor, Indonesian Institute of Sciences

◀ Cover: University of Tasmania students working with partners, including Universiti Sains Malaysia, in Balik Pulau, Malaysia, January 2024. As part of the University of Tasmania's UniGO program, supported by the Australian Government's New Colombo Plan, they studied sustainable ecosystem management across the ASEAN region. © Australian Volunteers International

Australia was the first ASEAN Dialogue Partner and the first Comprehensive Strategic Partner. This speaks volumes of the importance of these dialogue relations. And we are now talking about how to cooperate across the Asia-Pacific and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

H.E. Dr. Cheunboran Chanborey,
Cambodian Ambassador to Australia

“

Ultimately the 50th anniversary is a celebration of where we are in our close relationship. Australia has reinvented the way it has engaged with the ASEAN region. Australia builds its relationship based on strong trust and lot of empowerment in its development of programmes for the region. Very few Dialogue Partners can match this level of deep empowerment and prioritisation of what ASEAN needs.

H.E. Satvinder Singh, Deputy Secretary General of
ASEAN Economic Community, ASEAN Secretariat

“

Australia is proud of the breadth of our cooperation with ASEAN over the past fifty years, now embodied in our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. At this historic milestone, we will outline our vision for how, together, we can address shared challenges and shape our region.

Ms. Michelle Chan,
Australia's Senior Official for ASEAN

Australia was one of the most active of the Dialogue Partners of ASEAN. If we wanted to move something then Australia was not just active, but the diplomacy was also first class. Australia was full of ideas in those days. There was a natural partnership with Australia.

Mr. Peter Ho,
former Head of the Singaporean Civil Service

“

What makes the ASEAN-Australia relationship so special is the decades long people-to-people connections that have driven economic, cultural and education links. The next step for Australia is for Australian business to seize the opportunities offered across the ASEAN region. How business answers this call, and utilises these opportunities, will shape Australia for decades to come.

Mr. Glenn Keys, Chairman, Aspen Medical,
and Chair, Australia-ASEAN Council Board

“

When ASEAN was set up in 1967 it was all so different. Since then, ASEAN has had a huge role in stabilising the region. It ensures greater coherence, seeks to resolve issues, and offers structure for economic advances.

Mr. Ric Smith,
former Australian Secretary of Defence

Overview

The 50th anniversary of partnership between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Australia in 2024 is a major milestone. In 1974, Australia became ASEAN's first formal Dialogue Partner. Now, as one of ASEAN's first Comprehensive Strategic Partners, an enhanced relationship established in 2021, ASEAN and Australia share deep commitments to building strong and lasting strategic, economic and cultural links. The anniversary is an opportunity to take stock of the history and future direction across many areas of cooperation.

This report explores Australia's partnership with ASEAN through an up-to-date stocktake of the major activities that support economic, socio-cultural and political-security ties. It also analyses the appreciation of this work within the ASEAN Secretariat, and among other significant ASEAN and Australian stakeholders from government, business and civil society.

The report has been co-produced with key ASEAN partners and draws on a wide range of Australian and ASEAN expertise. Through consultations, interviews, roundtables and events, the authors have sought to generate a deeper appreciation of the history of the dialogue partnership, while also looking to the political, economic and cultural issues over the horizon.

Further conversation on ASEAN-Australia connections will benefit from appreciating the current picture of cooperation and the various perspectives in Australia and ASEAN on the value of these linkages, while also considering the next wave of shared ideas for the future of this important relationship. The report offers recommendations for the future of the ASEAN-Australia partnership to support deliberations in the 50th anniversary year and beyond.

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Executive summary and recommendations

ASEAN and Australia have worked closely together for fifty years, fostering a cooperative partnership which supports the peace and prosperity of dynamic societies increasingly defined by their inter-connectedness.

In 1974, ASEAN and Australia agreed the first formal dialogue partnership in a model of cooperation that has proved remarkably resilient and wide-ranging. Australia's early commitment to ASEAN's success – based on political and diplomatic engagement that signalled increasing confidence with Australia's own place in the world – provides the foundation for the continued expansion of bilateral and multilateral ties across Southeast Asia. ASEAN's track record of stabilising the region is based on its ability to develop new models for diplomatic and political cooperation, while building frameworks for shared economic development that have contributed to increasing prosperity for many of the region's 670 million people. ASEAN has also increased its own strategic weight, with unparalleled convening and normative power in the Indo-Pacific, while grappling with an increasingly complex set of internal priorities and external demands.

With the fiftieth anniversary of ASEAN-Australia dialogue partnership in 2024, a wide range of historical dynamics, current areas of mutual interest, and opportunities for future engagement need to be considered closely. The reality for Australia is that its relative importance to ASEAN has shifted over the decades, from rhetorical support in the early days of ASEAN's establishment to active and intensive engagement today. ASEAN's members also pursue their own active foreign policy and economic development priorities. ASEAN convenes discussions, including with external partners like Australia, that allow for deep reflection, considered debate, and even for significant disagreement. While detractors will continue to find fault with its approach, we argue that ASEAN models of inclusive diplomacy need to be understood carefully on their own terms.

Australia, perhaps more than some others, has been prepared to watch, learn and then engage in ways that have built a significant set of relationships and trust across Southeast Asia and with ASEAN sustained throughout five decades of social, economic and strategic change. The 2021 agreement of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between ASEAN and Australia is a strong endorsement of this model of diplomatic and people-to-people ties coupled with practical cooperation responding to ASEAN priorities.

Over the past fifty years, Southeast Asia has changed dramatically. To start, the ASEAN grouping has expanded from five to ten members, with Timor-Leste set to achieve full membership in the years ahead. Then there is the fact that economic development across ASEAN has been remarkable – with total GDP expanding to over \$3 trillion in 2024, up from \$600 billion in 1994, and an estimated \$50 billion in 1974. Six of Australia's top fifteen trading partners are members of ASEAN and the ASEAN grouping is Australia's second largest trading partner, ahead of both the United States and Japan. Recent Australian Government statements highlight the ambition to further expand on this level of economic enmeshment. *Invested: Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040*, a major Australian Government report launched in 2023, sets out substantial recommendations to support trade and investment, with priority put on agriculture and food, resources, the green energy transition, infrastructure, education and skills, the visitor economy, health, the digital economy, professional and financial services, and creative industries.

It is clear that Australia and ASEAN should continue to work together as closely as possible: we are facing shared challenges, and we have shared interests in a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous region. The history of ASEAN-Australia relations has proven that we are all far more successful when we work together.

Such work is a reminder that the steady, incremental evolution of Australia's cooperation with Southeast Asia and ASEAN as an institution has tended to be the most effective strategy for all sides. The ASEAN-Australia dialogue partnership has created conditions for the development of mutual trust, the evolution of technical and cultural practices that help reinforce modes of cooperation, and the expansion, over time, of joint work into an ever-increasing range of activities. The fact that Australia also enjoys particularly strong bilateral ties across Southeast Asia has contributed to this success.

Over time, Australia's closest relationships within the region have also evolved in response to different strategic and economic opportunities. In this respect, the decades of effort summarised in this report are a reminder of the way that diplomatic cooperation – and the people-to-people ties that sustain such diplomacy – only succeeds with constant attention to relationships, contexts and shared priorities.

Taking stock after fifty years of working together means looking at the way that investments have been made, while also considering, carefully, the creation of this shared culture of cooperation. Thinking ahead, it is important to consider some of the models of engagement that will help to sustain a peaceful and prosperous region for many years to come. ASEAN also has its own capacity issues, with increasing engagement from many different partners. Australia will therefore need to continue its pattern of co-design and cooperative development at a time when ASEAN itself faces new pressures and demands operationally and strategically.

Recommendations

1. Establishment of an ASEAN-Australia Centre

Australia and ASEAN would both benefit greatly from the establishment of a future-focussed, analytically-minded and commercially-oriented ASEAN-Australia Centre, drawing strength from existing institutions and proven models of cooperation.

2. Integrated model of ASEAN-Australia youth leadership

Better integrating cohorts of high-potential future leaders from ASEAN and Australia, creating a shared sense of purpose, direction and belonging, and providing opportunities for them to build long-term partnerships.

3. Digital economy transformations and knowledge sharing

ASEAN and Australia can continue to strengthen cooperation in cybersecurity, cyber-governance and cyber-technology, and also around the regulation and management of social, political and economic progress in the digital age.

4. Shared innovation on climate change and the energy transition

With the long-term planning and supply chain shifts required for the next phase of the energy transition, it should be possible to use both ASEAN and Australian experience to promote cooperation on different initiatives, including on linking physical infrastructure, promoting sustainable financing, and harmonisation of standards.

5. Strengthen Timor-Leste as a new ASEAN member

From both Australian and ASEAN perspectives, there is broad-based support for Australia to offer advice and resources to help Timor-Leste become a productive member in ASEAN, and to sustain its engagement over the years ahead.

6. Deepen and broaden Australia's ASEAN diplomacy

The current assessment in ASEAN capitals is that Australia is a trusted and energetic partner. There is scope to broaden the level of engagement across the Australian Government through formal Senior Official and ministerial engagement in all sectors.

7. Continue to invest in Indo-Pacific security and ASEAN Centrality

With ASEAN now embracing the Indo-Pacific concept for its own strategic deliberations, Australia can play a key role in the discussions that will help to safeguard regional peace and prosperity.

8. Investments in peace, security and development cooperation with ASEAN's newer members

By leveraging its expertise and resources, Australia has an opportunity to contribute significantly to the region's development, aligning its efforts with ASEAN's goals and priorities to ensure sustainable and inclusive growth.

Today's partnership

Australia and ASEAN in a changing world

After fifty years of dialogue partnership, ASEAN and Australia enjoy a close, wide-ranging and fruitful relationship across multiple themes and shared priorities. Engagement by Australia in the region's economic, socio-cultural and political-security architecture is more expansive than ever, and recent significant investments in building joint capabilities, especially under the terms of the ASEAN-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreed in 2021, provide a strong grounding for the further enhancement of this foundational regional partnership. In the decades since Australia became its first formal Dialogue Partner, ASEAN has expanded its own membership from five to ten, with Timor-Leste set to achieve full membership in the years ahead. This prospect is a further signal, for Australian and Southeast Asian policymakers and analysts, that long-term connections, especially those that are sustained through periods of difficulty, can support successful and creative diplomatic, economic and social outcomes.

Today's tapestry of ASEAN-Australia ties needs to be considered at the multilateral, bilateral, local and individual levels. The multilateral dimensions draw their strengths from trade and commercial linkages, a well-established portfolio of regional dialogue on security and defence issues, as well as a very wide range of educational, cultural, political, artistic, research, innovation and technological ties. At the bilateral level the intensity of current engagement between Australia and the ten countries of ASEAN has generally expanded significantly in recent years.

These relationships are strengthened by the diasporic links between Southeast Asia and Australia. Over 1.1 million Australians declared Southeast Asian heritage in Australia's 2021 census. There are also large Australian citizen populations in most ASEAN countries, especially in Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia, with those individual connections buttressed by a diverse portfolio of ASEAN and Australian educational, economic and cultural investments.

"In 100 years, ASEAN will be here, Australia will be there, we need to be able to work together."

Dr. Piti Srisangnam, Executive Director,
ASEAN Foundation

The development of formal Australian ties to ASEAN over the past fifty years came after the abandonment of the White Australia Policy in 1966, and the end of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War in 1973. Since then, Australia has sought to develop deeper relationships with ASEAN, initially focused on the five members – Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand – that established the grouping in 1967. While building strong bilateral relations with each ASEAN member, Australia has also been supportive of the multilateral institutionalist ambitions at the core of regional diplomacy. As Sally Percival Wood (2014: 13) described, the "expanding network of formal engagement is valuable on both a functional basis and in terms of guaranteeing Australia's ongoing goodwill and cooperation with its region".

▼ Australia's Assistant Foreign Minister, Tim Watts MP, hosted the launch of the Aus4ASEAN Scholarships 2023 at Old Parliament House, 9 August 2023. © DFAT





ASEAN INDONESIA 2023



3RD ASEAN – AUSTRALIA SUMMIT

▲ Australian Prime Minister, The Hon Anthony Albanese MP, with ASEAN Leaders at the 3rd Annual ASEAN-Australia Summit in Jakarta, 7 September 2023.
© ASEAN Indonesia 2023

ASEAN's expansion to include Brunei in 1984, followed by the inclusion of Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia in the 1990s, has helped tailor a model of diplomatic engagement across a diverse range of political and economic systems. Together, the ten countries of ASEAN have confronted challenges from the East Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, through to terrorist attacks, global economic upheavals, supply chain disruptions and, most recently, the COVID-19 global pandemic and now the military coup in Myanmar.

ASEAN's responses to these challenges reflect a model of diplomacy which puts a high value on consensus, avoids public disparagement, and seeks to balance a wide range of internal interests. While ASEAN's expectations are that each country is treated equally by external partners, the reality is that ASEAN itself is a complex grouping of different interests, friendships, histories, languages, economic connections, strategic priorities, and societal challenges. The fact that the initial five ASEAN members have now been joined by five more countries is itself a remarkable story of creative collaboration, with Timor-Leste on a roadmap to become its 11th member (see discussion in Lin, et al, 2024). ASEAN has also, at the institutional level, helped to frame broader diplomatic efforts to ensure the "centrality" of its role.

Under the principle of "ASEAN Centrality", the grouping prefers a model of engagement that avoids interference in each other's internal affairs, while also seeking sustainable region-wide outcomes that generate shared benefits for all ASEAN members. In many respects, the model has worked to a remarkable extent. The fact, as outlined by leading Southeast Asia analyst Susannah Patton (2022: 5), is that:

In 1980, Australia's economy alone was around 85 per cent of all the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) economies combined. Even excluding ASEAN's newer member states such as Vietnam, these combined economies are now around twice as large as Australia's.

At the same time, significant differences between regional economies and the competitive nature of global commerce ensure that discussions about greater integration and cooperation at the regional level are informed by national and local priorities. On strategic issues there are similar complexities. The art of ASEAN diplomacy is ultimately in the management of these differences and the development of shared awareness about the value of working together across languages, religions, cultures and histories (see Acharya, 2012). By creating a joint model of diplomatic action, ASEAN has also helped to define the management of bilateral challenges among its members, while also setting expectations for the security, economic and diplomatic engagement of external partners.



▲ Former Australian Ambassador to ASEAN, H.E. Will Nankervis, meets with the President of Timor-Leste, H.E José Ramos-Horta, 13 December 2023.
© Australian Mission to ASEAN

Learning to work together

Part of the success of the ASEAN-Australia partnership is based on recognition, among generations of Australian and ASEAN decision-makers, that long-term discussion and joint activity requires open communication, realistic planning, a sense of common purpose, and ambitions for beneficial outcomes to be shared. Australia has, in this respect, learned much from its work with the countries of ASEAN, building deep people-to-people and government-to-government links, while also helping to develop a model of regional engagement of significant value to all stakeholders. As Catherine Renshaw explains (2018: 169), “successive Australian Governments have viewed ASEAN and its many extended groupings as a key vehicle for promoting and nurturing the principles of cooperative regionalism”.

Considering the development of this model of cooperative regionalism, distinguished Australian foreign policy practitioner, Allan Gyngell, argued, “The Australia-ASEAN story has been long and positive” (2022: 18). From his (2022: 16) perspective:

Australian policymakers and commentators sometimes talk about “ASEAN” as a collective name for the whole region, but it is also important to understand the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations because it is so intertwined with the way individual members think about the world and act in it.

This point is sometimes overlooked by critics of the regional grouping. ASEAN is not simply its Secretariat and the annual cycle of official meetings. It has, more broadly, encompassed conceptual and strategic priorities that have shaped the way that Southeast Asian leaders and officials, and to a varying extent the wider regional population, define themselves and see the world. It is common, nowadays, to see ASEAN-themed advertisements and to find the region with a common set of shared narratives, if not always a shared identity.

“ASEAN has also become central to Australia’s relations with Southeast Asia. In 1974, Australia became the first external country to develop a formal multilateral relationship with ASEAN. Australia as a Dialogue Partner has, since 1980, taken part in consultations at the time of ASEAN’s annual Foreign Ministers’ meetings and has many other sectoral consultations.”

Dr. Frank Frost, historian of ASEAN-Australia relations (2016: 2)

Among ASEAN leaders and policy practitioners there is understandable pride in the successes achieved collectively, and in concert with Dialogue Partners, but they are also attentive to the challenges ahead. How Southeast Asia manages strategic tensions is now widely discussed as the primary challenge facing the regional grouping. There are also significant environmental and economic issues that receive priority both from the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta and also across ASEAN capitals. The need for countries such as Australia to maintain their engagement with these issues at the multilateral and bilateral levels has been articulated many times over the decades. For example, in a speech delivered at the University of Sydney in October 1988, titled 'What ASEAN is and What it stands for', the then ASEAN Secretary-General, Rodolfo Severino (2008: 22), argued:

Wherever possible and appropriate, countries such as Australia, too, need to get behind the effort to strengthen the cohesion of ASEAN through support, for example, for the regional, in addition to the strictly bilateral, dimension of their relations with the countries of Southeast Asia.

In managing these different levels of interaction, Australia has developed its own repertoire of foreign policy concepts and tools, some of which take their direct inspiration from what has been learned through ASEAN. As Gyngell (2022: 7) explains, "With the creation of...ASEAN...Australia had to learn how to deal effectively with regional institutions."

Indeed, the complexity of ASEAN is a day-to-day reality for diplomats, officials, analysts, policy advocates and a wide range of other stakeholders who directly engage with its many different arms. It is apparent, for instance, that many successes have been forged by strong inter-personal ties: between politicians, government officials, scholars and others. In this context, according to one senior ASEAN diplomat, "working level personalities really matter...strong personal dynamics being important". Over time they learn how best to build coalitions and generate opportunities for cooperation. Their successes – which are usually the product of careful and sustained engagement and compromise – are the outcome of a specific model of regional engagement which is attentive to Southeast Asia's history, its many cultures, the varying strengths of its members, and the specific contexts in which decisions need to be made. As ASEAN's longest standing Dialogue Partner, Australia plays its part in this system – seeking ways to influence outcomes that are both attentive to interests within Southeast Asia, while also looking towards outcomes that are relevant for Australia's changing foreign policy.

Beyond Australia, ASEAN has now developed formal dialogue partnerships with a further ten partners, while embracing Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships with Australia, China, India, Japan and the United States, and soon the Republic of Korea. The further maturing of Australian engagement, especially through the work of the Australian Mission to ASEAN, which was established in 2013 and is based in Jakarta, will require attention to historical dynamics and current trajectories.

In this context, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi stated in 2023 that, "We have high expectations for Australia to become a positive force in the region and support ASEAN's centrality in shaping regional dynamics." This report is therefore both a stocktake of the development of ASEAN-Australia relations over five decades but also, importantly, an analysis of how the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership can be further developed and articulated in the years ahead.

Understanding ASEAN-Australia relations

Fifty years of close diplomatic engagement between ASEAN and Australia means that there is a significant amount of reflection and analysis on this important set of relationships.¹ Within Australia and across Southeast Asia there are longstanding communities of government officials, academic researchers, think tank analysts and regionally-oriented journalists who have made major contributions to how we understand regional complexities and the specific role ASEAN plays in regional and global affairs.

Within ASEAN, there are also important debates about the institution's role, its future priorities and its engagement on specific issues, such as disputes in the South China Sea and the management of Mekong River resources. ASEAN, like its Dialogue Partners, also faces questions about the best approach to a range of humanitarian and security challenges within and beyond its borders. Since its February 2021 military coup, Myanmar has been a particular focus of regional diplomacy, with the challenges faced in the implementation of ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus raising questions about the region's abilities to manage significant political and security issues. The lack of consensus on how best to respond to conflicts in other parts of the world, whether in Eastern Europe or the Middle East, is a further consideration for ASEAN leaders. The expectation that ASEAN uniformly agrees on the biggest questions is being tested by challenges from near-and-far, including, for example, how best to manage strategic competition in the South China Sea.

¹ Including important contributions from Frost, 2016; 2014; Percival Wood and He, 2014; Roberts, 2012; Okamoto, 2010; Richardson and Chin, 2004; Lawe-Davies, 1981; see also Astanah Abdul Aziz and Milner, 2024, for recent analytical attention from ASEAN-Australia viewpoints.

Three ASEAN Community pillars

ASEAN diplomacy is structured around its three pillars: economic, socio-cultural and political-security, each of which shapes the functions of the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta and an annual calendar of both official and less formal interactions. More generally, the development of these pillars has proved essential to ASEAN's coherence and to the expansion of its ambitions. In Jakarta, the ASEAN Secretariat reflects these concepts in its organisational structure, and much of the work of ASEAN and its partners is defined by their contributions to "the pillars". The structure allows for some level of local, national and indeed regional re-interpretation, and over time key ASEAN voices have defined and then re-defined the requirements of the pillars. Dialogue Partners, such as Australia, are encouraged to align their engagement with ASEAN to match the requirements of these three pillars and the newer ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).

For external partners, the three pillars make it possible to appreciate ASEAN and its ambitions for a consolidated ASEAN Community, while remaining attentive to the expectations of its bilateral relationships and indeed the changing shape of global geopolitics. For Australia, the projects and activities agreed under the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership are actively developed to align with the pillars, with the need for attention to the increasingly complex issues defined as "cross-pillar" for current and future ASEAN work.

To understand these dynamics, it is worth considering the perspectives of a group of senior Southeast Asian officials. According to a senior diplomat based in Southeast Asia interviewed for this report, "Compared to other Dialogue Partners, Australia is one of the most active." He went on to explain that the "art of ASEAN diplomacy rests on unity in diversity, following the ASEAN Charter, and positive ways to cooperate to discuss issues internally".

▼ New Colombo Plan 2024 Scholars. Over 40 of these DFAT-funded New Colombo Plan Scholars will be studying and completing internships in countries across the ASEAN region. © New Colombo Plan



Offering some further context, a current senior Southeast Asian diplomat noted that getting agreement on new initiatives within the three pillars is “not so difficult when Australia proposes something”. This is a regular theme of discussion, with another diplomat explaining that “not only is Australia our first Dialogue Partner, not only now up to fifty years, but it is how we work together...especially when it comes to developing creative ideas”.

Complexities of diplomatic engagement

Australia maintains bilateral diplomatic missions across Southeast Asia, with Embassies, High Commissions, Consulates-General and Consulates in 19 locations in the ten ASEAN countries, and an Embassy in Timor-Leste. Southeast Asia is, by far, the region of greatest diplomatic resourcing for Australia and hosts several of the largest Australian Embassies globally.

It is also home to the Australian Mission to ASEAN, which is based in Jakarta where the ASEAN Secretariat is headquartered. In Canberra, the Office of Southeast Asia in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade draws together the Southeast Asia Maritime Division, Southeast Asia Regional and Mainland Division, and Southeast Asia Strategy and Development Division. Beyond the Foreign Affairs portfolio, there are linkages with ASEAN across industry, education, defence, competition, trade and economic, security, and immigration portfolios, among others.

The complexity of the bureaucratic arrangements are themselves important to note, whether in Canberra, in a single Australian Mission in Southeast Asia, or indeed at the interface with the ASEAN Secretariat and ASEAN's ten member governments.





▲ Australia's 29th Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull AC, and ASEAN Leaders at the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit in Sydney, 17–18 March 2018.
© ASEAN-Australia Special Summit 2018

The multilateral and bilateral machinery that generates the ongoing momentum for ASEAN-Australia relations is itself a significant achievement, and it is on the basis that this machinery is working well that further ambitions can be achieved. In developing this report, the assessment from stakeholders in Australia and across ASEAN was largely positive. Many explained that the expansion of the Australian Mission to ASEAN to implement the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the bolstering of its Jakarta-based team has improved Australia's capacity to engage effectively, promptly and at the requisite scale with key ASEAN stakeholders.

This has occurred in a context where recent geostrategic changes have highlighted tensions within ASEAN, and where some Southeast Asian stakeholders are particularly concerned about unproductive competitive dynamics. For some, "the common motivator", according to one senior Southeast Asian official, "is not to become a satellite of China". One key analyst from Indonesia highlighted, "Within ASEAN it is hard to find a common position with Dialogue Partners" on issues like Myanmar and the South China Sea, and also on Ukraine and conflict in the Middle East. From their perspective, the "ten countries in ASEAN all will therefore have different priorities with China, with the China factor, but also individual factors". Another analyst explained that within ASEAN it is "challenging to have a common position on anything...but we all want peace, prosperity and security in the region, and between dialogue partners".

As one long-time Australian observer of ASEAN explained, "there is now no alternative where everyone can meet and talk in this way." He went on to argue that "any viable regional organisation is never going to be perfect". The same theme is explored by Singaporean practitioner-analysts, Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng, in their important book, *The ASEAN Miracle:*

A Catalyst for Peace, where they observe:

ASEAN never progresses in a linear fashion... Yet miraculously, when one takes a longer view, analyzing progress decade by decade, ASEAN's forward progress becomes visible. Despite its many imperfections, it keeps moving forward. (Mahbubani and Sng, 2021: 3)

They go on to explain how "like any living organism, ASEAN faces the threat of mortality" (Mahbubani and Sng, 2021: 177). From their perspective, both internal and external challenges require constant attention. Yet Mahbubani and Sng (2021: 232) conclude by arguing:

It is vital to emphasize that ASEAN will succeed imperfectly....ASEAN's movements are often erratic and never proceed forward in a straight line. However, these imperfections only reinforce the message of hope that ASEAN provides. If such an imperfect corner of the world can deliver both peace and prosperity to its 625 million citizens, the rest of the world can surely replicate ASEAN's imperfect record. This is the ultimate paradox of the ASEAN story: its strength lies in its imperfections.

Another Southeast Asian analyst of these issues makes the argument even more strongly: "it will never be perfect, that's the point of it".

Australia's commitment to Southeast Asia

The imperfections of ASEAN receive plenty of attention from both Southeast Asian and Australian analysts. Indeed, the standard critiques of ASEAN practice – the counterpoints to the paradox thesis advanced by Mahbubani and Sng – are heard regularly. Nonetheless within Australian foreign policy circles there is wide-ranging appreciation of the tally of ASEAN successes. Allan Behm, a retired Australian official and former advisor to the current Foreign Minister, argues (2022: 234):

Although it is fashionable for some Western commentators to deride ASEAN as a grouping that talks a lot and does very little, the fact that it has been able to maintain a strategically stable region for nearly five decades is a political triumph.

Such assessments provide the evidence for Southeast Asian stakeholders who now argue that “Australia has succeeded in being able to understand the region”. According to one senior ASEAN diplomat, Australia is “not threatening or dictating, that is the success; you try to really understand how to engage with us”.

The breadth and complexity of Australia's engagement with the countries of Southeast Asia is also widely noted. As the same diplomat suggested, the partnership between Australia and ASEAN is “not just government to government, but also business to business, academicians, students and individuals”. A key Cambodian analyst argued that “cooperation between ASEAN and Australia is not a matter of choice, it is a matter of necessity”. The goal, from their perspective, is to build “open, inclusive regionalism”.

The suggestion is that the concept of “strategic equilibrium” allows for “Australia to have a more active role”. As a Southeast Asian diplomat explained, the approach taken in ASEAN is “co-creation, cooperation, analyse the situation, and not to make decisions that would be detrimental”.

In response to these ASEAN preferences, and in different ways across the decades, Australia's international relations and foreign policy have been shaped by the changing circumstances presented across Southeast Asia. There have been periods when countries in the region have been deemed threatening to Australia's interests. At other times opportunities for economic and people-to-people exchange have proved remarkably resilient, even through times of tension and disagreement. The advice from a leading ASEAN official is that “Australia has successfully managed its relationship with each Member State, with attention to the fact that one of the strategic points is *how* Australia should go about engaging with ASEAN”.

This focus on the practicalities of multilateral and bilateral engagement is a key theme for any discussion of Australia's future engagement with ASEAN, especially on evolving political, security and economic issues. As former Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa (2018: 224) argues in his fascinating book, *Does ASEAN matter? A view from within*, “among the many future challenges that ASEAN is likely to encounter, is how to attain equilibrium between the seemingly conflicting demands of a state-centric and people-centric ASEAN”.

▼ Reception event to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Australia's support to ASEAN in countering trafficking in persons, 28 November 2023.
© Australian Mission to ASEAN.



History of ASEAN-Australia relations

Early years, 1967–1974

The formation of ASEAN was a response to the strategic conditions of the Cold War, drawing together leaders and officials from Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. At the time, these five countries were seeking a model to work together more effectively and limit the prospect of conflict within the region. War in Indo-China, as well as the local and regional tensions unleashed by decolonisation, meant that many doubted the long-term viability of the nascent organisation. Previous efforts to bring together different configurations of Asian nations had struggled. One leading Southeast Asian commentator explained how, in the early years, he “was a critic but admits that it has gone better than expected, we have actually achieved so much”.

Despite some cynicism, Australia was an early supporter of the ASEAN ambition, committing resources and ideas to help buttress its development. At the beginning, in 1967, both the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition spoke positively of their hopes for the grouping. As Allan Gyngell (2021: 36) writes of ASEAN at its establishment:

The Australian Government welcomed the new organisation but, especially because of the neutralist sentiments in the preamble, no serious thought was given to Australian membership. It was hard at that stage to see whether ASEAN would develop far, but it represented a new sort of homegrown Asian regionalism to which Australia would soon have to respond.

According to the leading historian of ASEAN-Australia relations, Frank Frost (2016: 1), writing in *Engaging the neighbours: Australia and ASEAN since 1974*, the establishment of ASEAN in 1967 was marked by both positive endorsements from Australia and some hesitation:

There was at that time good reason to doubt whether ASEAN would become a durable regional organisation. Its founding members...were highly diverse. They were rivals and in some cases recent enemies. Previous efforts at indigenous regional cooperation and organisation in Southeast Asia had not succeeded.

And yet it has proved possible for ASEAN to flourish, expand and now take on a key position globally.

“In 1974 everything was different...and fifty years is a long way, which is something we should cherish and celebrate.”

Senior ASEAN diplomat, 2023

It was under the government of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, elected in 1972, that Australia sought to engage with ASEAN more formally, becoming its first official Dialogue Partner. According to Frost (2016: 25), “After assuming office, Whitlam moved quickly to assert the importance for his government of Southeast Asian relations and multilateral cooperation.” For Australia, the opportunity to engage with ASEAN was immediately judged valuable and, in time, it became an “article of faith”, according to one Australian foreign policy veteran, that working with ASEAN was “vitally important for all of us”. As Gyngell (2021: 112) explains:

In April 1974 Australia became the first non-member state to establish formal relations with ASEAN, providing aid to the group as a whole. The process of engagement continued under (Prime Minister Malcolm) Fraser with the establishment in 1977 of an annual ASEAN-Australia Forum. Australia’s experience formed the template for ASEAN’s relations with other countries and helped provide the building blocks for a broader relationship between it and the outside world.

What has been important, as explained by a senior ASEAN analyst, is that while there have been “lots of ups and downs, and at certain times issues affect our partnership, such as geopolitical issues, geoeconomics circumstances, there is a fundamental commitment to work together”.

“ASEAN has been much less about what it can do than about what it can prevent from happening – schisms and divisions in the region and any return to inter-state conflict. For this reason, it can be difficult to recognise all that ASEAN has achieved.”

Allan Gyngell, former senior Australian Government official (2022: 16-17).

► ASEAN-Australian joint economic research projects meeting at the Australian National University, Canberra, 1983.
© Image courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: A6180, 13/4/83/1.





▲ ASEAN journalists visit the World Expo '88 site, 1987. © Image courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: A6180, 1/5/87/3.

Growing partnership, 1974–1995

From the 1970s through to the 1990s, ASEAN and Australia needed to manage a range of issues, including some early tensions. The end of the Vietnam War created conditions for further engagement between Australia and the countries of mainland Southeast Asia. It was a period, as explained by Rhondda Nicholas, when the view that “Australia needs ASEAN more than ASEAN needs Australia [had] become a well-worn cliché in diplomatic and other informed circles” (1983: 153).

There were significant economic and political developments that required deft handling on all sides, with a dispute over civil aviation policies, the response to the Indo-China refugee crisis, and the management of conflict in Cambodia all needing attention. At the time, some analysts offered bleak assessments of the future of ASEAN-Australia relations, in a climate of significant great power competition and what was perceived as diminishing Australian influence (see discussion in Lim, 1984). Yet, according to Frost (2016: 54), the fuller historical record shows that:

In its response to the refugee crisis, Australia had lent valuable support on an issue of major concern to all of the ASEAN members, and it had demonstrated a capacity to make a contribution towards participating in the resolution of a serious regional problem.

Australia’s credibility as a reliable partner became more important than ever when, through the 1980s, ASEAN needed to respond to “the conflict over Cambodia [which] became the dominant political, diplomatic and security problem in Southeast Asia” (Frost, 2016: 56). Frost (2016: 78) goes on to explain how:

Without the dialogue and communication between Australia and ASEAN, and with Indonesia in particular, the peace process might well not have been developed. The issue of Cambodia was a substantial instance where Australia and ASEAN cooperated on a major issue of security and regional concern and achieved a significant outcome.

While committing significant intellectual and organisational resources to this long-term work there was also pragmatic Australian responsiveness to ASEAN needs. As a senior ASEAN statesman explained, it was “always possible to get the Australian Government to quickly consider project X or Y” compared to some other partners which “took years”.

Then, with the end of the Cold War, there were new opportunities for Australian diplomacy in ASEAN, with the step-by-step expansion of the regional grouping

to Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. As Frost (2016: 4) explains:

From the late 1980s, in the context of the decline of Cold War confrontation, relations with ASEAN were central in Australia's contributions to the Cambodian peace process and to the development of two new regional groups to enhance economic and security cooperation, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) grouping and the ARF [ASEAN Regional Forum].

Australia worked very creatively to see the ARF established at a time when other ASEAN Dialogue Partners were reluctant to see a loose organisation emerge (for historical discussion see Haacke and Morada, 2010). Yet what was described by a senior Australian official as a "mood of optimism" created the space for an approach to confidence building, preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution that could be "built around ASEAN". Expanding on this point, Allan Behm (2022: 174) argues:

As a multi-level forum for discussion, including discussion with external parties (such as the ASEAN Regional Forum provides), the association [ASEAN] is a critical component of South-East Asia's way of doing business. Indeed, the habit of consultation and conversation offers a critical method for issue and problem resolution in a time of disruption and uncertainty.

It is the gradual evolution of this inclusive model of regional diplomacy that has also offered Australia the chance to often have a seat at the table.

Expanding connections, 1995–2007

The expansion of ASEAN in the 1990s was a key period for broadening Australia's engagement with the countries of Southeast Asia. The emergence of new economic hubs, including the so-called "Asian tigers", was accompanied by greater ambitions to develop the opportunities arising from the end of the Cold War. As Gyngell (2021: 212) has explained, "The ARF's role was circumscribed by the caution of its ASEAN core." Yet it was also during this period that, according to one Southeast Asian security analyst, "ASEAN kept the lid on all types of conflict, and of all the different models of diplomacy this one happened to work".

A key example was the management of the political and security situation in Indonesia from the late 1990s onwards, leading to the independence of Timor-Leste. While there were a range of short-term difficulties, especially in Indonesia-Australia relations, Frost (2016: 118) explains how:

In the longer term... the process of independence for East Timor [Timor-Leste] gradually removed an issue that had been a major obstacle and cause of tension in the Australia–Indonesia relationship since the 1970s and this assisted in improving the climate for Australia's ASEAN relations.

Closer security connections then emerged when, from 2001, Australia and Southeast Asia began to collaborate on counter-terrorism issues. There is now an annual ASEAN and Australia counter-terrorism dialogue. Like in some other sensitive areas, "most of the cooperation on terrorism in Southeast Asia was bilateral", however, according to Frost (2016: 124), "this increased contact extended the sense of mutual interest between Australia and many ASEAN members." During this period, Australia also worked to support ASEAN's response to the Indian Ocean tsunami on 26 December 2004, committing substantial resources and technical assistance, much of it under the auspices of ASEAN. In 2005, Australia was a founding member, with ASEAN, of the East Asia Summit, which is now the region's premier leader-level forum for strategic discussion.

Strategic collaboration, 2007–2020

It was through the next phase of collaboration between ASEAN and Australia that the emerging scope of today's activities became more apparent. During these years, the countries of Southeast Asia also faced a range of political, economic and humanitarian challenges. From the response to Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar followed by the country's gradual political liberalisation, through to the global financial crisis, and the rising assertiveness of China in regional affairs, this was a period of significant change for ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners.

It was also during these years that Australia nominated an Ambassador to ASEAN who was, from 2008, a "senior, Canberra-based diplomat whose duties would include participating in meetings at the ASEAN Secretariat and in other regional ASEAN meetings" (Frost, 2016: 148). Gillian Bird, the first Australian Ambassador for ASEAN, used a 2010 speech at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore to explore the theme of "Australia and ASEAN: 35 years on". In the same year, the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area (AANZFTA) came into force, with a more recent upgrade of this agreement widely welcomed by ASEAN analysts who suggest it is the "best quality FTA in the region".

By 2013, the Australian Ambassador was based permanently in Jakarta, the same year that ASEAN and Australia celebrated 40 years of partnership with a summit in Naypyidaw, Myanmar. Speaking at the Foreign Service Institute in Manila in 2015, Australian Ambassador to ASEAN, Simon Merrifield, explained how:

A key feature of our future relationship with ASEAN will be the culture of two-way partnership. This notion – that Australia has much to learn from our friends in the region – underpins the thinking behind the New Colombo Plan, our scheme to provide opportunities to young Australians to live, study and work in Asia.

From this time onwards, the expansion of Australian engagement with ASEAN has continued, with a growing team based in Jakarta. In 2015, the Australia-ASEAN Council was established with a mandate to “generate opportunities that deepen cultural understanding, cooperation and connections with ASEAN member countries”. As Australia’s next Ambassador to ASEAN, Jane Duke, remarked at a business conference in Adelaide in 2017, “we can’t rest on our laurels. Competition for influence in ASEAN is rising. We need to continue to work more creatively to stand out as a partner of choice.”

This increased tempo of multilateral cooperation was further marked by the 2018 ASEAN-Australia Special Summit in Sydney. During this period, according to Allan Gyngell (2021: 381), “The idea that ASEAN should be central to the structure of Asian institutions took on a greater urgency as a stabiliser for Australia in the rapidly changing Indo-Pacific.” As long-time ASEAN-watcher Malcolm Cook has explained, the “ASEAN-Australia Special Summit in Sydney in March 2018 was the definitive symbol of ASEAN mattering more for Australian diplomacy in Southeast Asia” (2021: 8). Writing after the Special Summit, Huong Le Thu, a strategic analyst with deep experience across Southeast Asia, struck a more cautious note when she argued that “Canberra would also be best advised to ponder over ASEAN’s needs and expectations surrounding a partnership with Australia... Australia needs a comprehensive, lasting and coordinated Southeast Asia policy” (2018: 32).

Responding to change, 2020–2024

Australia’s engagement with ASEAN was designated as a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2021, the first agreement of its type. ASEAN currently has only five such agreements – with Australia, China, United States, India and Japan – among its eleven Dialogue Partners. This agreement was achieved with speed and precision, a strong signal of the high regard in which Australia is held by ASEAN members and within the ASEAN Secretariat. A key figure in the ASEAN Secretariat suggests, “The Australian Mission to ASEAN listens and moves quickly and is empowered to move on things within their own system.” Another key Jakarta-based figure explained, “The way [Australia] works is what distinguishes you, partly because you are comfortable supporting some things step-by-step.” It is this well-balanced approach which has now created a model of cooperation which has generated significant benefits for ASEAN and for Australia, and which provides the foundation for future cooperation. This includes the establishment of the Aus4ASEAN Futures Initiative, which is driven by ASEAN priorities and now has a dedicated Aus4ASEAN Futures Office at ASEAN Headquarters. As a former ASEAN senior official explained, “When working with us, Australia uses existing structures. We don’t need to reinvent the wheel.”

▼ Secretary-General of ASEAN, Hartono Rekso Dharsono, with Australian Ministers Andrew Peacock and Mick Young in Indonesia, May 1977.
© Image courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: A6180, 5/5/77/3.





▲ Australian Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans, opens Eyes on ASEAN exhibition in Melbourne, 1994.
© Image courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: A6180, 18/10/94/10.

The COVID-19 global pandemic brought a temporary pause to much of the easy flow of people-to-people engagement between Australia and ASEAN. For long periods from 2020-2022, national and local borders impeded the movement of travellers and business people and required new approaches and systems to ensure health and economic security. Many Australians and Southeast Asians could not enjoy their usual range of easy linkages to each other. It was also a period of significant technological innovation, with some ASEAN countries leading the world in their pandemic responses, managing complex social and humanitarian issues, while maintaining commercial linkages.

“There is a very strong brand for Australia working in Southeast Asia where we focus on ground up interests. Per capita Australia is the largest donor to ASEAN. But most importantly Australia is always available when urgent support is needed.”

ASEAN official, 2023

Nonetheless, official diplomacy and a multitude of informal people-to-people links were maintained during this period. ASEAN-Australia relations, including Leader-level interactions, shifted online, where social distancing could be maintained throughout periods of significant social change.

Australia and the countries of ASEAN also cooperated closely on a range of COVID-19 responses, including the acquisition, purchase, mutual swap and, in some cases, gifting of vaccines; technical cooperation on epidemiological and economic responses; and the management of challenging logistical and trade issues. The fact that during this period ASEAN and Australia also agreed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership signals a shared commitment to managing challenging issues effectively. In this context, total Official Development Assistance flows from Australia to Southeast Asia and East Asia have increased to an estimated \$1.24 billion in 2023-24 (up \$8.7 million from \$1.23 billion in 2022-23), with Southeast Asia bilateral programs at \$610.5 million in 2023-24, allocations to Southeast Asia regional programs at \$62.5 million, and allocations to ASEAN and Mekong programs at \$102.4 million.

“What Australia has done so far has been the ideal thing, we can nurture this success together and we can continue on what we have achieved, with no negativity especially in the last decade.”

Senior ASEAN diplomat, 2023

ASEAN IN 2023



ASEAN



ASEAN
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Priorities for cooperation

Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

The 2021 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) between ASEAN and Australia is a further indication of the growing and vibrant interaction across multiple domains of activity. Like other ASEAN CSPs, the agreement with Australia builds on decades of cooperation in a wide range of fields. A senior Southeast Asian diplomat describes the current relationship as “very intensive and very useful” in a context where “having worked together for fifty years and beyond, the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is something very significant, and it shows that the commitment from Australia is genuine”. In this context, they explained that it will be “up to all of us to look into the future”.

With the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) as a new consideration in ASEAN-led mechanisms, it is apparent that Australia’s elevation to CSP status has enhanced the visibility of key activities and is widely considered a substantive further enhancement to the relationship (see Sukma, 2019; 2023). In terms of the CSP, another senior ASEAN diplomat “firmly believes all of our cooperation is advancing together...and we value and appreciate that Australia was our first dialogue partner”. The current level of economic cooperation raises other questions, with challenges now receiving high-level Australian Government attention. What is intriguing in this context, as noted by a leading ASEAN analyst, is that “ASEAN is more about norms and values, less about hard security and free trade”. ASEAN analyst Hoang Thi Ha assessed that “there is more to the shared interests between ASEAN and Australia in shaping the Indo-Pacific order than meets the eye” (Ha: 2018, 7). There are new channels for cooperation too. For instance, ASEAN has begun to engage with other key multilateral institutions through the AOIP such as through Secretariat-to-Secretariat agreements with the Indian Ocean Rim Association and the Pacific Islands Forum.

Political-Security

ASEAN’s cooperation with Australia under this pillar is wide-ranging, with the ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking Program as the largest component currently, with its twenty-year track record of cooperation marked in 2023. The program collaborates with ASEAN to strengthen criminal justice systems, ensure just punishment of traffickers and protect the rights of victims of trafficking. According to Danielle Alford, who leads the work of project partner DT Global in Asia, “Australia has a long history of working with ASEAN to combat human trafficking – spanning more than 20 years...During this time, the partnership has continued to mature to now focus on advancing human-rights based approaches and promoting gender-equality and inclusion in counter-trafficking responses.”

The ASEAN-Australia Political Security Partnership, which was implemented from 2019 onwards, has a specific focus on cybercrime and other transnational crime, countering radicalisation and violent extremism, maritime security, and women, peace and security. Australia also supports human rights dialogues and activities, as well as capacity-building support for Timor-Leste’s accession to ASEAN.

Economic

Australia’s development cooperation has been founded on the economic pillar - primarily through the AANZFTA Economic Cooperation Support Programme and the ASEAN-Australia Development Cooperation Program, through its two phases. Today, the largest activity related to economic cooperation is these programs’ successor: the Regional Trade for Development Initiative which supports implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and AANZFTA, which was upgraded in 2023. The Aus4ASEAN Futures Initiative is similarly focussed on significant economic projects across ASEAN. Other key projects in recent years have focussed on COVID-19 recovery, digital trade standards, food security, bio protection and invasive species, and agricultural value chains. Australia also provides funding for the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, a Jakarta-based think tank affiliated with ASEAN.

Socio-Cultural

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia enhanced its existing health cooperation with ASEAN, offering substantial financial and technical support for the region. Through the socio-cultural pillar, Australia is also a significant contributor to the soon-to-be-established ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases, to help enhance regional capacity to prepare for, prevent, detect and respond to pandemics. Australia supports a strand of work on health cooperation which is specifically focused on reducing the risk of pandemics from zoonotic diseases using One Health approaches. Australia also funds key activities on labour migration as well as gender equality and disability inclusion, to support equitable, inclusive and stable growth in the region. As Panudda Boonpala, Deputy Regional Director, ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, has said, “Effective governance of labour migration benefits the lives and livelihoods of millions across the Asia-Pacific region. Australia’s long-term commitment to ILO’s flagship TRIANGLE in ASEAN programme helps us deliver this in the ASEAN region.” The ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance also receives funding to support its response to humanitarian crises in Myanmar, and for strengthening the Centre’s capability to respond effectively to human-induced crises, including conflicts.

◀ Australian Prime Minister, The Hon Anthony Albanese MP, with Indonesian President, H.E. Ir H Joko Widodo, at the 3rd Annual ASEAN-Australia Summit in Jakarta during Indonesia’s 2023 ASEAN Chair year, 7 September 2023. © ASEAN Indonesia 2023

“People on the street see ASEAN as a community of leaders, so we need more that is focussed on a community of peoples.”

Indonesian analyst of ASEAN, 2023

Aus4ASEAN Initiatives

With the initiation of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, ASEAN and Australia are implementing a set of further activities under the Australia for ASEAN (Aus4ASEAN) banner, building on earlier strategic collaborations. This includes the Aus4ASEAN Futures Initiative, an ASEAN-driven fund which supports ASEAN-led projects that respond to ASEAN-led priorities. Proposals for projects funded by the Futures Initiative are considered by the Joint Planning and Review Committee, which brings together senior ASEAN officials to make consensus decisions. In some key instances, small projects funded under the second phase of the ASEAN-Australia Development Cooperation Program have now led to expanded activities. Australia supported the development of the ASEAN Strategy for Carbon Neutrality, a study on the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement, and is also providing support to the ASEAN Secretariat's Analysis and Monitoring Capacity on the AOIP. Other work deals with maritime connectivity, tariff regulations, unique business identification number guidelines, and the ASEAN Sustainable Urbanisation Strategy. Australia is also assisting with longer-term planning including through the development of the ASEAN Plan of Action on Science, Technology and Innovation, as well as the preparation and implementation of the ASEAN Economic Community Post-2025 Agenda. Other Aus4ASEAN programs included the Aus4ASEAN Digital Transformation and Skills Initiative, and 100 Aus4ASEAN Scholarships commencing in 2023 which support emerging leaders from across ASEAN to undertake postgraduate study in fields that support the AOIP.

Track 1.5 and Track 2 Diplomacy

Importantly, there is a much broader story of ASEAN-Australia cooperation, including the many different diplomatic engagements that occur outside official channels. Australia has now built up a long tradition of regular engagement through its think tanks, universities, community and arts organisations, political parties, and humanitarian and religious groups. These engagements are sometimes supported by government, but many of the linkages are, in fact, the product of individual or group relationships developed, in many cases, over long periods of time between Australia and ASEAN members.

The range of Track 2 diplomatic work between Australia and ASEAN is worth considering in more detail. Some examples include the Australian Committee of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific, which has been based for many years at the Australian National University, and the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Dialogue convened by the Institute for Strategic and International Studies in Malaysia and Asialink at the University of Melbourne. These organisations, like others, regularly engage senior counterparts from across ASEAN while also building pathways for the emergence of future leaders. Many of those emerging leaders can then be found making major contributions through the Australia Indonesia Youth Association, the Australia Vietnam Leadership Dialogue, and the alumni associations of Australian universities, among many other activities. As one of the contributors to these types of programs explained: “ASEAN youth want to travel and do cultural exchange. They are not afraid to engage.”

“I don't want to see ASEAN as a community where some dominate...it is our utopia.”

ASEAN youth leader, 2023

To fulfill this appetite for engagement, the ASEAN-Australia Strategic Youth Partnership, which was initiated by alumni of the New Colombo Plan, has grown to be a significant contributor to informal diplomatic links. With over 300 members and participants each year from all parts of Australia and from every ASEAN member, it is a unique platform for coordinating young leaders who have already demonstrated their personal commitment to advancing ASEAN-Australia ties. As one ASEAN youth leader explained:

Having another party involved is very helpful for us because even ourselves in ASEAN, we don't know each other. So, there is a chance to build a bridge where Australia can also help us to better figure ourselves out.

The impression from youth leaders is that while “they are trying so hard” to make an active contribution they find that it is not always possible for people in senior positions to “hear us” and so when it comes to, for instance, the ASEAN Secretariat – “it is hard for us to understand how our generation can take over these positions”. This is an area where further ASEAN-Australia cooperation could be valuable. Another format for this type of interaction is the Australia-ASEAN Emerging Leaders Program, which is a well-curated leadership development opportunity for ASEAN and Australian social entrepreneurs. In both instances, funding from the Australia-ASEAN Council has proved a useful catalyst.

► Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator the Hon Penny Wong, and ASEAN Secretary-General, H.E. Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, open the Aus4ASEAN Futures office at the ASEAN Secretariat, 12 July 2023. © DFAT



People-to-people and diaspora links

Throughout the decades of ASEAN-Australia cooperation, migration from Southeast Asian countries to Australia has grown to become a major element supporting people-to-people linkages. While these flows of migrants may have started relatively small, by 2021 over a million Australian citizens have a family connection to the ten countries of ASEAN. Large numbers of people with links to Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and elsewhere now call Australia home. There is also a significant Australian diaspora spread across ASEAN, with many Australians living and working in Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia, in particular. Increasingly, members of this Australian diaspora also have Southeast Asian heritage, showcasing Australian multiculturalism to the region in all of its diversity. The impression that this generates, according to another youth leader, is that “Australia is really open, with good work-life balance, and a business culture that brings people together”. It is regularly noted in discussions across the region that an increasing number of senior Australian leaders, across all sectors, have strong connections to Southeast Asia, including the Foreign Minister, the Hon Senator Penny Wong.

“Australia is very diverse, which makes Australians very open-minded about collaboration.”

ASEAN youth leader, 2023

Business engagement, investment and trade

In 2023, the Australian Government launched a new strategy for expanding two-way trade and investment with the region by its Special Envoy for Southeast Asia, Nicholas Moore AO. In the context of the AANZFTA and RCEP, the *Invested: Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040* report identifies long-term ambitions for greater two-way trade and investment cooperation. It offers analysis and recommendations on the further development of economic relations between Australia and Southeast Asia, highlighting the need to raise awareness, remove blockages, build capability and deepen investment. The report is based on the view, widely shared across ASEAN and in Australia, that economic engagement is not as strong as it could be. As one business leader argued:

From an Australian perspective, Southeast Asian economic success is absolutely in our interests. A rich and prosperous region would then need more of what we have. By contrast, a poor, unhappy region is a disaster for Australia.

The currently favourable conditions across most of ASEAN, which have encouraged significant investments from around the world, do not appear to have generated the same level of enthusiasm among Australian businesses, which the *Invested* report seeks to address.

▼ Australia-ASEAN Council Board Member Tamerlaine Beasley with grant recipients from the ‘Australia-ASEAN Virtual International Business Plan Competition’, 3 July 2019, UNE Sydney, Parramatta Campus. © Tamerlaine Beasley





▲ Former Australian Ambassador to ASEAN, H.E. Jane Duke, with Australia-ASEAN Council Board Members and Heads of Mission from ASEAN members in Sydney, May 2017. © Tamerlaine Beasley

In some cases, it appears that out-dated information distorts assessments of the risks and potential rewards. As the business leader went on to say about some of their counterparts across the senior ranks of Australian businesses:

The ones who end up coming to Southeast Asia are self-selected. The government needs to articulate the vision and educate boards and investors that it is in the national interest for us to expand our presence in Southeast Asia.

In response, *Invested* has 75 recommendations for government, business and the wider community, mostly focussed on what Australians can do to advance their engagement with Southeast Asia. A leading Southeast Asian analyst said in response:

Invested 2040 is very helpful to set up the foundations to get things done because it signals the [Australian] government's strong intent. However, there is a risk of a lack of follow through, with communications now quiet. How well it ultimately lands will depend on the follow up.

Some examples of key recommendations are to develop a whole-of-nation plan to strengthen Southeast Asia literacy in Australian business, government, the education and training system, and the community. The Australian Government has also committed to a new Australia-Southeast Asia business facilitation initiative to undertake sectoral business missions and build the capability of business chambers.

Invested also recommends that Australia should develop a strategy to engage with Australia's Southeast Asian diaspora to inform efforts to deepen SME business links with the region. Other points relate to the education, infrastructure, energy and tourism sectors.

One of the elements of this story that has received the greatest attention in *Invested* is the establishment of new investment 'deal teams' for Southeast Asia, which are designed to blend private sector and Australian Government capabilities to provide outward investment (including financing) services. Aligned to much of the feedback about Australia's long-term success educating generations of ASEAN leaders, the report also emphasises that the Australian Government should do more to coordinate a whole-of-nation initiative to better engage Southeast Asian alumni, including through what is proposed to be a scheme for connecting alumni with Australian and Southeast Asian businesses. Such work can build on initiatives from the Australia-ASEAN Council in recent years, including its support for the Australia-ASEAN Emerging Leaders Program which brings together young social entrepreneurs. The Australia-ASEAN Chamber of Commerce's regular survey of Australian business opinion also helps to shape an appreciation of the region with attention to specific historical, economic and national trends.



ASEAN perspectives on Australia

Long-term priorities

ASEAN policymakers and analysts offer a wide range of perspectives on Australia and its contributions, past and present, to the Southeast Asian region. It helps that many Southeast Asian leaders, officials, academics and commentators have personal experience, often as students, in Australia. They therefore appreciate the complexities of the Australian story and understand the different geographical, cultural, economic and strategic rationales for Australia's engagement with their own country, and the wider region. As one ASEAN analyst with a PhD from a top Australian University explained: "Dialogue Partners need to be critical, reminding ASEAN of its own principles, values and commitments." Another former student in Australia noted, "Australia and ASEAN have achieved a lot at the elite level. There needs to be more attention on implementation at the popular level where there is potential for disharmony." And another Australian alumna clarified how "Australia has been one of the most loyal Dialogue Partners" in a context where "ASEAN is important, but bilateralism is also important... one cannot replace the other".

For ASEAN's analysts, one area of long-term interest and occasional tension is Australia's alliance relationship with the United States, especially with the further development of relations in the Quad and through AUKUS.² As one Southeast Asian analyst explained, "Australia has been so proud to be an annex of the US in this part of the world." While they thought that this strong historical commitment was understandable, another person interviewed for the project argued, "Australia has an interest in showing up as an Asian power, not just as a western power at the bottom of Asia." Expanding on this point and offering some guidance for Australians, Mahbubani and Sng (2021: 81) argue:

If ASEAN were to fall apart, one of the biggest losers will be Australia. If ASEAN were to do well, Australians would be among the biggest beneficiaries. All this is patently obvious. This is why this book needs to be read and understood by all Australian policy makers, present and future.

On the same theme, another Southeast Asian analyst insisted, "When Southeast Asia is stable, Australia is stable...which is a miracle given....we have the full diversity of political systems: sultanate, democracy, socialist, etc."

The biggest difference between Australia and other Dialogue Partners is that Australia is in the region, and so is China. There are therefore economic links and people-to-people links. For instance, between Singapore and Australia there are diasporas that are shared and there is therefore a very close connection.

Singaporean youth leader, 2023

Appreciating the diversity of ASEAN members and their range of different priorities, the link between bilateral and multilateral diplomacy is crucial for more fully appreciating Australia in ASEAN visions. As a former Indonesian security advisor explained, the "Australia-ASEAN relationship is perfectly fine as it is, but bilaterally there is so much to work on". Much of the discussion about Australia and ASEAN is, in practice, therefore focussed on national and local issues where Australia is judged to have a particular interest working closely with certain Southeast Asian partners. This can introduce issues with the expectation from some Southeast Asian analysts that Australia needs to continue to offer "diplomatic gestures to show that it believes in ASEAN processes – be patient, tactful". Within ASEAN there is a deep appreciation that, as noted by a former ASEAN Secretary General, "strategically there is a role for Southeast Asia to exist between the two giants China and India". From this vantage, "the challenge is to develop as ASEAN as part of a tripod in the Asia Pacific". How this tripod is configured requires attention to emerging issues.

Perspectives across the region

Questions about the place of Australia within the region draw out a range of different perspectives, and it is important to emphasise that there is no single view on how Australia best engages ASEAN in the long-term. On the one hand, there is the assessment offered by former Singaporean diplomat turned analyst, Kishore Mahbubani (2022: 89), who recently assessed:

The Australia-ASEAN relationship remains positive. But Australia shouldn't assume that it will automatically remain positive. Australia will have to work hard to keep it positive.

◀ University of Tasmania and Van Lang University students participating in a 'Sustainable Development Goals Hackathon' in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, in January 2024. Over 80 students and staff from both Universities worked together across a four-day program. Van Lang University students from the winning Hackathon teams will visit the University of Tasmania to continue their environmental focus. © University of Tasmania

² The Quad is the name of a diplomatic partnership that brings together Australia, India, Japan, and the United States through their shared commitment to an open, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and resilient. The Quad's origins date back to collaboration after the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. In September 2021, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States announced their collaboration through AUKUS, which is a new capability partnership. The first major initiative of AUKUS is to support Australia acquiring conventionally-armed, nuclear-powered submarines, with other elements focussed on technical and defence cooperation.



▲ Australia hosts ASEAN officials for the 36th ASEAN Australia Forum in Melbourne, ahead of the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit in 2024, 5-6 February 2024. © DFAT

The reality, according to one ASEAN emerging leader, is that “we have a very positive sense of Australia, but the Australia-ASEAN relationship isn’t something that immediately comes to mind”. The reason for this, he suggests, is that so much geopolitical discussion is framed around the United States and China, and so there is simply less space to consider some of the other important relationships that help to support Southeast Asia’s success, such as the enduring ASEAN-Australia partnership. In this context, he says that the fact Australia is “showing up is very important for creating networks”.

Where there is perhaps the greatest divergence of views on the role of ASEAN-Australia relations is not on geographical lines, but rather a divide that has emerged between generations. The emphasis among established analysts and policymakers is understandably on sustaining institutional linkages and in maintaining high-level connections to bind Australia and ASEAN together. The success of this approach is apparent. As one senior figure noted, “What role Southeast Asia plays is important for Australia. A disinterested or passive ASEAN is not good for Australia.” Kishore Mahbubani has recommended that “on major foreign policy issues [Australia] could, as a standard procedure, ask how close or divergent its position will be from the ASEAN position” (2022: 85).

On the other hand, young leaders who have contributed to this report have emphasised the need for deeper linkages among emerging leaders and for a more coherent set of opportunities to build joint ASEAN-Australia capabilities. They are most focussed on environmental, social, and human rights priorities.

Their view is, ultimately, that there is much more to be done to strengthen the Socio-Cultural pillar of ASEAN. They are almost all heavily focussed on the need to find more innovative and creative ways to connect and exchange. Many had their earliest experiences of ASEAN-Australia engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, confined to home and connected to the world through teleconference technology.

“ASEAN countries need to prove themselves worthy to become strategic partners for middle and even major powers, precisely because of certain qualities that make them equal, which in this case is by being a strong, cohesive and responsive organisation.”

Dr. Lina Alexandra, leading Indonesian analyst (2021: 3)

Risks and challenges

Three levels of risk to the future success of ASEAN-Australia relations deserve closer scrutiny. First, there is the consistent commitment from Australia, with many assessing that Australia has rarely, if ever, proved as attentive to Southeast Asia as it has done in recent years. Southeast Asian analysts wonder whether this level of enthusiasm, resourcing and engagement survives any significant geopolitical or economic shock. For now, they raise gentle questions about the viability of Australian engagement at a time when migration, terrorism and strategic competition are, once again, prominent in Australian public debate.

“It is natural that relations between Australia and ASEAN should be good. We take this for granted. And we take for granted that it will still be in good in the future. But might it not be so good?”

Senior Indonesian analyst, 2023

Second, there are the internal issues for ASEAN that can undermine its effectiveness and the capacity of external partners to work effectively within its model of inclusive regional diplomacy. The unresolved and interlinked crises in Myanmar – security, political and humanitarian – are the most obvious illustration of the challenges for ASEAN when things go badly wrong. As a Southeast Asian analyst explained, “If the reforms are not successful in ASEAN, then what do we fall back on?” While Mahbubani and Sng tend to offer a positive appraisal of ASEAN’s historical and future roles, they also warn, “ASEAN should psychologically prepare itself for some surprising, perhaps even shocking, resurfacing of long-buried fault lines” (2021: 196).

Third, there are the challenges of engaging with great power competition in the years ahead. As a senior Australian business figure noted:

There is also a fair bit of negativity about ASEAN and predictions of its demise. Yet the management of conflict in Southeast Asia, where they are able to keep conflict under control in a quiet and understated way, is crucial. We have often desperately underestimated the value of ASEAN for managing China. There is an assumption that because in Southeast Asia they’re not shouting we assume they are subservient.

Then, as Sebastian Strangio (2022: 47), an Australian journalist based long-term in Southeast Asia, has also argued:

Even as ‘ASEAN’ has grown to become a synonym for ‘South-East Asia’, the bloc’s increased political diversity has made it trickier to agree on key issues. Currently, the ten ASEAN nations differ considerably on the question of China, and, in particular, on the South China Sea disputes.

Across the decades, in Palmer and Reckford (1987: xiv) and Frost (2016), there are careful appraisals of how ASEAN has managed relations with major powers, with ASEAN subject to challenges around how to navigate the decline in global leadership by the United States in its role upholding the rules-based order. It has led to a situation where, as Frost (2016: 191) describes:

Pluralism in conceptions of ‘region’ reflects the challenges of an environment of overlapping and competitive interests and at times of severe tensions among the major powers. In this environment, no individual major power would be acceptable to others as a sponsor or leader in regional institutions, especially in relation to security issues.

The fact that Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines all have overlapping sovereignty claims in the South China Sea and disputes with China over its maritime claims sharpens the types of calculations that far-sighted diplomacy and strategy should keep in mind. Indonesia too has objected to certain Chinese activities within its exclusive economic zone in the southern part of the South China Sea.

The risks, of course, are that Southeast Asian countries could misjudge their own skill at handling the priorities of powerbrokers in Beijing and Washington. While that risk cannot be ignored, perhaps the more prudent Australian approach is to spend as much time as possible listening to the thoughtful ASEAN voices considering their own futures adjacent to China attendant with the risks of a shrinking US security umbrella. But one fail-safe approach would be for Australia to continue to uphold the principles of international law together with ASEAN countries against any rising tides of revisionism.

“Something will happen in terms of crisis management, and the question is how quickly can we deal with a crisis...it should not be too long.”

Long-time ASEAN observer, 2023

Opportunities for the future

In this dynamic context, debates about structure and strategy within ASEAN will continue, with the grouping needing to find effective ways to maintain cohesion while responding effectively to a wide range of challenges. Some of its members will continue to argue for innovation and reform, while others will be content to gradually consider evolving circumstances. As a long-term ASEAN-watcher based in Jakarta explained, “ASEAN is formed by crisis, and it does adapt, and it is forced to find new ways to respond to challenges.” The fact that the grouping contains such diversity of political, cultural, economic and strategic conditions will ensure the need for ongoing negotiation and flexibility. It is these characteristics which have shaped ASEAN’s development since 1967. Australia, arguably more than other partners, with its turn towards embracing greater diversity from the 1970s, has shown a consistent ambition to support this approach and learn from ASEAN’s experiences. Careful planning around opportunities for the future of ASEAN-Australia relations therefore needs to start with an awareness that over the past fifty years, through ASEAN, Australia has developed its own appreciation of the value of regional multilateral diplomacy. A question that is often raised is should Australia aspire to membership of ASEAN. According to a former senior ASEAN official, “Indeed, Australia could be a natural part of ASEAN, but it is technically better to continue the current role.”

ASEAN in Australia's changing foreign policy

ASEAN Centrality

There are, by now, a set of strong traditions and principles about the tone of Southeast Asian diplomacy. In ASEAN there is a preference to avoid open conflict on ideological or self-interest grounds. Instead, the expectation is for mutual patience and grinding compromise, with the possibility of falling back on uncomfortable contradiction. This model has generated a successful expansion of economic opportunity for the region's 670 million people and a period of peaceful coexistence perhaps never previously sustained in this region in recorded history. For that, ASEAN diplomats are justifiably proud and perhaps the message for the Australian public is that further commitments to buttress this model will pay handsome returns in the years ahead.

"Areas of potential collaboration include health, technologies of the future, English language and technical training, and anything else that allows Australia to be part of the conversations about what Southeast Asia wants to do in the future."

Australian business leader, 2023

The development of Australia's foreign policy for Southeast Asia, and specifically for engaging with ASEAN, has been a step-by-step process, over decades, creating confidence within Australia and across the region. Australia has embraced the guiding principles of ASEAN diplomacy, including the key concept of "centrality". As Tan See Seng, a leading Singaporean analyst has explained, "Centrality, as such, is the assumption that the Association should rightfully be the hub of and driving force behind the evolving regional architecture of the Asia Pacific" (Tan, 2012: 26). That architecture now includes the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and a variety of other ASEAN "plus partners" meeting formats, convened at a range of levels including regular leader-level engagements.

Yet within ASEAN some of the debates about how to best shape the region's future are loud and vibrant. To consider the Indonesian foreign policy landscape is to grapple with, for instance, the longstanding call from Rizal Sukma, a former Executive Director of the Centre for International and Strategic Studies in Jakarta, and a former Indonesian Ambassador to the United Kingdom, for consideration of a "post-ASEAN foreign policy" (Sukma, 2012). As Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto (2017) summarises:

There have been calls for Jakarta to contemplate a 'post-ASEAN foreign policy', introduce ASEAN-minus-X or voting mechanisms, or focus on alternative multilateral groupings that can better fit Indonesia's strategic preferences.

According to a well-placed analyst in Jakarta, any discussion in Indonesia about foreign policy "beyond ASEAN" simply reflects a "feeling of frustration among the largest member of ASEAN if ASEAN is unwilling to move forward, then there is a serious danger of losing interest in ASEAN". If a post-ASEAN strategy were to be contemplated, then the question must be: which power or organisation will take the place of ASEAN? For now, the only viable pathway for the rest of ASEAN's Member States, without the capacity to contemplate such a possibility, is to continue to maintain that precarious balance of accommodating regional interests for the sake of survival and in so doing, enhance ASEAN's agency in decision-making (for historical context and critique see Lim, 1998). To do so, ASEAN needs mechanisms to manage differences and to deal with the sometimes divergent needs of its members. Some of these dynamics will likely never be resolved. As one Southeast Asian analyst explained:

Within ASEAN, maritime Southeast Asia looks at mainland Southeast Asia as a different world, and the fact is that maritime and mainland histories don't intertwine, and the region has separate histories.

Australia's strong connections with both maritime and mainland Southeast Asia is, in this context, noted as a significant benefit of its engagement with ASEAN. There are few other countries with such obvious interests in all corners of Southeast Asia.

"ASEAN multilateralism is founded in a model of cooperation where ASEAN provides the central platform for a range of other regional bodies, including the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN plus 3, and the East Asia Summit. Australia is deeply committed to this model."

Former Australian Ambassador to ASEAN,
H.E. Will Nankervis, 2021



Invested: Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy



▲ The Hon Anthony Albanese, Prime Minister of Australia, Senator the Hon Penny Wong, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Australia, Mr. Nicholas Moore, Australia's Special Envoy for Southeast Asia, and Indonesian dignitaries, including Mr. Asjad Rasjid, Chairman of the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, at the launch of *Invested: Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040* in Jakarta, 6 September 2023. © DFAT

Building shared futures through ASEAN

Attention to managing different perspectives is also relevant to ASEAN's engagement with Australia. Among both ASEAN and Australian analysts there is appreciation that there will not always be agreement on issues of significance, but that there is now a long history of productive interaction. For Australia, questions of democratic and humanitarian values can complicate both multilateral and bilateral engagements. At the same time, for ASEAN, Australia is sometimes expected to play a useful role helping to translate its institutional and cultural perspectives to its close allies and partners in other parts of the world. Indeed, while Gyngell (2022: 19) argues, "The ASEAN way – low-keyed, allusive, indirect – is not Australia's", it appears that, over time, Australia has become more comfortable with the diplomacy modelled by ASEAN. Increasingly, Australian Governments prefer to find outcomes that rely on coalitions of shared interest and long histories of productive collaboration. Noting the value of such approaches, the message from one senior Indonesian analyst was that "Indonesia has ASEAN-ised the Indo-Pacific strategy".

There is now the opportunity to continue building on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and its structured approach to managing dialogue and joint activity. How might this be done? According to Allan Behm (2022: 266):

For Australia, a serious diplomatic investment on ASEAN and its institutions is a no-brainer, yet we potter around the edges of the association, substituting action with soothing words.

A major Southeast Asian policy advisor and analyst explained that the "most we can do is manage potential conflicts". Taking up this theme, Kishore Mahbubani (2022: 89) writes:

The best vision would be to position Australia as the natural bridge between the East and West. And to achieve this role, it must be accepted as a partner by both the East and the West, as ASEAN is. It can be done.

An emerging Australian analyst of ASEAN affairs goes even further, suggesting that:

Australia, at the government level, and in terms of what our universities do, needs to be much more flexible, with the recognition that Australia within Southeast Asia is really not that important in the scheme of things.

Priorities for Australia in Southeast Asia

Over the past five decades, Australia has increased and expanded its ambitions for cooperation with ASEAN. The next steps in this relationship can obviously build on the foundations that are now well-established. Careful diplomacy, broad ambitions, and a sense of shared purpose have shaped a remarkable story of cross-cultural engagement.



As Australia's Ambassador to ASEAN accredited in 2024, H.E. Tiffany McDonald, has emphasised, “we have so much to point to in terms of the success of the ASEAN-Australia partnership – but also so much to look forward to for the next fifty years and beyond. Our collaboration truly is going from strength to strength”.

For the future, there are reasons to imagine that Australia will need to continue to innovate to ensure that it remains a partner of choice in what will always be a rapidly changing region. In the specific context of ASEAN-Australia relations, Mahbubani and Sng argue that a “geopolitical buffer that ASEAN could develop is a closer partnership with Australia and New Zealand” (2021: 192). Maintaining awareness of these realities is a crucial starting point. As Allan Gyngell argues in his conclusion to *Fear of Abandonment*, “Everything Australia wants to accomplish as a nation depends on its capacities to understand the world outside its border and respond effectively to it” (Gyngell, 2021: 408).

Some parts of Southeast Asia know only too well the toll of military conflict, with ongoing conflict in Myanmar, and historical conflicts in Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, carrying serious local and regional consequences. The violence unleashed since Myanmar's 2021 coup is a further reminder of what can happen when a period of relative stability ends abruptly.

Avoiding such conflict is a foundational ambition for the ASEAN grouping, which has navigated regional and global storms since its inception. As we look ahead, continuing to develop Australia's engagement with the conflict resolution mechanisms of ASEAN should remain a core priority of both Australian and Southeast Asian foreign policies, and a primary goal of regional diplomacy. How the countries of the region work together to manage our most challenging security, economic and social issues will be the test for the next fifty years.

“A... long-term theme in Australia's ASEAN relations is that cooperation has worked best when Australia has been able to operate in collaboration with key members of ASEAN in developing policy initiatives.”

Dr. Frank Frost, historian of ASEAN-Australia relations (2016: 192)

Recommendations for the future

Through official statements, and in many other forums, ASEAN and Australia, and individual Southeast Asians and Australians, highlight ambitions to work together even more collaboratively and intensively in future.

As this report has explained, there are an increasing range of initiatives and activities which maintain Australia's long-term commitments to ASEAN's development. It is important that recommendations about the next stage of engagement build on these strengths and remain attentive to capacity and policy priorities within Australia and across ASEAN.

In highlighting a selection of recommendations for future activities, we have drawn on insights from interviews and discussions about where Australia has – both historically and today – proved successful in its engagement with the countries of Southeast Asia. These strengths provide a strong foundation for further discussion and for the consideration of ideas that can help to shape the future of ASEAN-Australia ties.

Opportunities for Australia and ASEAN

1. Establishment of an ASEAN-Australia Centre

Australia has a constellation of universities, think tanks, community organisations and other stakeholders that are deeply committed to further developing ASEAN-Australia relations, with many links to key institutions across Southeast Asia. Australia and ASEAN would both benefit greatly from the establishment of a future-focussed, analytically-minded and commercially-oriented ASEAN-Australia Centre. It could assist with fostering educational linkages, including through schools in Australia and ASEAN, as well as promoting cross-cultural ties. There are already successful models in Australia, such as the National Foundation for Australia-China Relations and the new Centre for Australia-India Relations. ASEAN has existing models of supporting ASEAN Centres with some of its Dialogue Partners, such as the ASEAN-Japan Centre, the ASEAN-Korea Centre and the ASEAN-India Centre, as well as the new U.S.-ASEAN Centre, a partnership with Arizona State University. There is also the successful model of the ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore.

One incremental approach would build on the Australia-ASEAN Council's existing mandate, potentially in a context where the new Centre grows to be hosted by a number of Australian institutions. The long-term model might also require a small physical footprint in ASEAN, probably in Jakarta, to help support coherent long-term collaboration. Like in other realms, there will remain a question of how much an ASEAN-Australia Centre would do to support specific bilateral relationships.

In practice, there will likely remain a range of different vehicles for engagement, including various official and semi-official groupings. Under its auspices an ASEAN-Australia Centre would be well-placed to curate an ASEAN-Australia Think Tank Network for regional dialogue that focuses on strategic issues and regional economic cooperation.

In concert with the new ASEAN-Australia Centre, existing groupings like the ASEAN-Australia Chamber of Commerce, and other business-oriented organisations, would be able to work to promote the understanding of Australia among Southeast Asian and Australian business leaders. The Centre would also have as part of its mandate a portfolio of awareness-raising activities to inform the Southeast Asian and Australian publics about the value and direction of their “fifty plus” years of partnership ties.

2. Integrated model of ASEAN-Australia youth leadership

Through the Australia Awards, the Australia for ASEAN Scholarships, the New Colombo Plan and other schemes, Australia has invested heavily in developing educational linkages with the countries of Southeast Asia. Australia is a top education destination for many ASEAN countries and has nurtured, over decades, cohorts of Southeast Asians who have been educated in Australia. What is currently lacking is a model to better integrate these cohorts, creating a shared sense of purpose, direction and belonging, and providing opportunities to high-potential future leaders to build connections from a young age. The ASEAN-Australia Strategic Youth Partnership is a positive example of what can happen when young leaders come together to share experiences, learn from experts, and share programs of interest to a wide range of people from both ASEAN members and from Australia.

The systematic management of alumni associations is one way to promote educational linkages between ASEAN countries and Australia, such as those highlighted by *Invested: Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040*. As one example, the Australian Alumni Association of Cambodia has organised events, often in partnership with the Australian Embassy in Phnom Penh, which bring together its members and maintain their relationships with Australia. Some of its members, upon the completion of their studies in Australia, have become successful in their home country and assumed leadership positions in the private and public sectors. The fact that it has a physical presence in Phnom Penh makes it a focal point for many different activities.



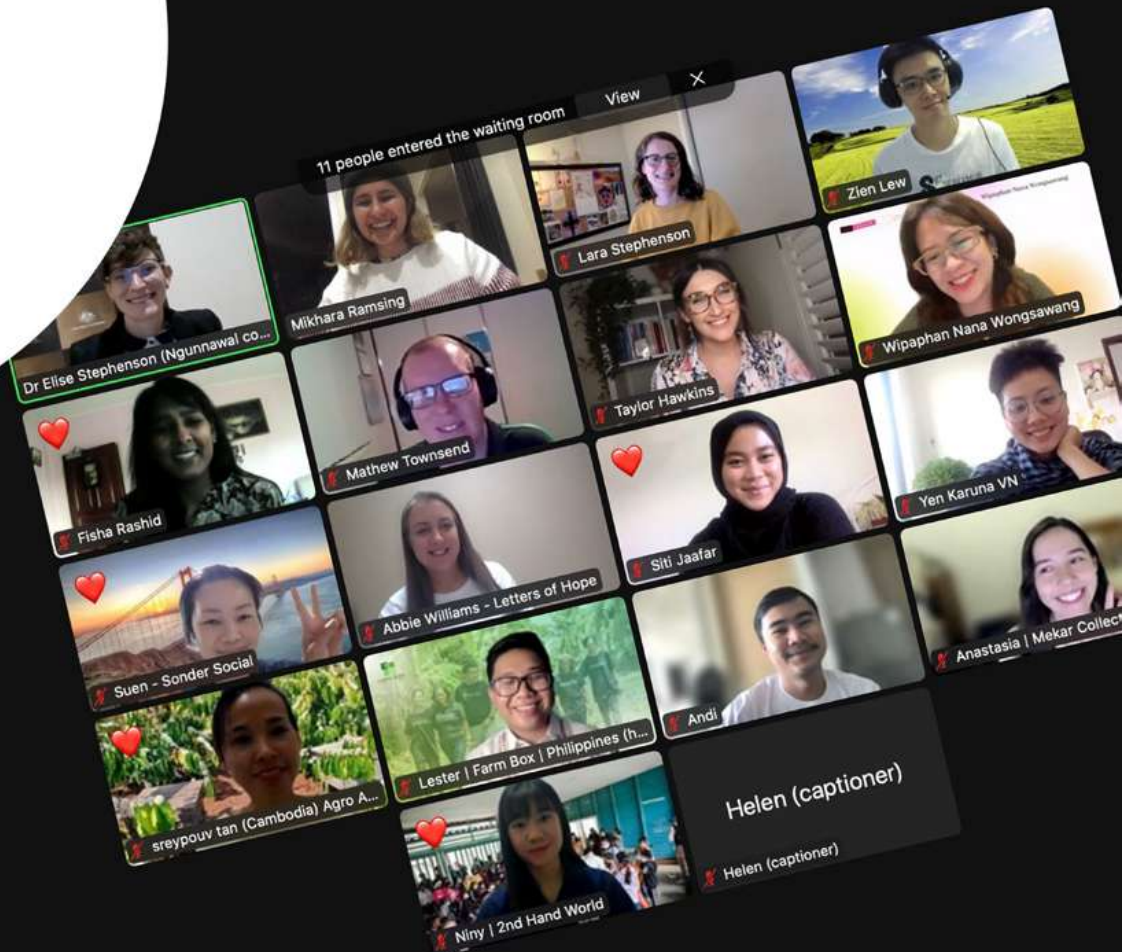
▲ Australia's first resident Ambassador to ASEAN, H.E. Simon Merrifield, presented Letter of Credentials to the Secretary-General of ASEAN, H.E. Le Luong Minh, 1 October 2013. © ASEAN Secretariat

A further area worthy of exploration is tailored scholarship support for policy and academic talent in ASEAN countries to study and research on the development of Australian foreign policy, society and politics. Such leaders would be encouraged to sustain career-long linkages between ASEAN and Australia, building on aspects of the successful Australia-ASEAN Emerging Leaders Program, which focuses on social entrepreneurs, and on the range of activities convened under the ASEAN-Australian Strategic Youth Partnership banner.

“For young people in Southeast Asia, individual level life in Australia is attractive in terms of the culture, weather and the people. And so whether you were thinking about the bilateral ties or about Australia at the regional level it is really about people and how do you facilitate their connections.”

ASEAN emerging leader, 2023

With any such investments, it will remain important, from the beginning, to systematically manage the alumni community. Ideally there will be more opportunities for young leaders to contribute practical policy recommendations to official processes at the ASEAN-Australia interface. At the same time, it is worth considering how Australia can ensure it remains an open and accessible market for ASEAN talent. Many stakeholders engaged throughout this report praised Australia's shift towards embracing working holiday visas for young Southeast Asians, but also indicated that more assertive programs to foster talent mobility – in both directions – would be welcome.



▲ During the COVID-19 global pandemic the Australia-ASEAN Emerging Leaders Program convened online across Australia and around Southeast Asia to maintain close people-to-people relations. © Elise Stephenson

3. Digital economy transformations and knowledge sharing

ASEAN and Australia can continue to strengthen cooperation in cybersecurity, cyber-governance and cyber-technology, and also around the regulation and management of social, political and economic progress in the digital age. In the context of the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement, Australia and ASEAN should also consider cooperation in creating shared digital infrastructure as a mechanism for enhancing digital technology cooperation but also for promoting people-to-people digital linkages, and also improving digital literacy and managing the proliferation of disinformation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australia-ASEAN Academics Forum brought together innovators from the higher education sector to share lessons on digital pedagogy and student engagement. Australia is also currently committing resources to support Southeast Asian governments to respond to cyber threats through its Cyber and Critical Tech Cooperation Program. For instance, there is the Cyber Bootcamp Project initiated by the ANU National Security College and ANU Cyber Institute. These efforts are crucial for building resilient societies, and are a linchpin for the other positive agendas, such as cooperation in climate and energy transition issues, that ASEAN and Australia will want to advance in the years ahead.

4. Shared innovation on climate change and the energy transition

The challenges of climate change, decarbonisation, and sustainable green financing are a key theme in the ASEAN Strategy for Carbon Neutrality and in *Invested: Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040*. Many stakeholders across ASEAN are interested in how Australia and countries in Southeast Asia can cooperate on helping to develop a regional integrated smart power grid and Electric Vehicle production ecosystem, and how large-scale renewable energy linkages can be created. This is judged a key area for the revitalisation and diversification of Foreign Direct Investment, with clear economic and social benefits locally and globally.

“Might there be ways to develop green and blue economies? How do we explore the vast potential of Australia for renewable energy?”

Former senior ASEAN official, 2023

With the long-term planning and supply chain shifts implied by the next phase of the energy transition, it should be possible to use both ASEAN and Australian experience to promote cooperation on different initiatives, including on linking physical infrastructure, promoting sustainable financing, and harmonisation of standards. The concern in ASEAN is that many Australian investors in the climate and energy sectors remain focussed on local opportunities and have often struggled to fully appreciate the changes in Southeast Asian economies over recent decades. The energy transition and related regulatory, financing and innovation themes could be given extra prominence in the forward planning of ASEAN-Australia cooperation. Senior ASEAN figures are almost unanimous in their assessment that this is a high priority across the region and a clear area where cooperation with Australia will lead to long-term benefits for all involved.

5. Strengthen Timor-Leste as a new ASEAN member

From both Australian and ASEAN perspectives, there is broad-based support for Australia to offer advice and resources to help Timor-Leste become a productive member in ASEAN, and to sustain its engagement over the years ahead. The Australian Government has already allocated funding to support Timor-Leste to prepare for membership, including through various capacity building workshops and travel programs, and ASEAN members are working hard to ensure Timor-Leste is set up for success.

For Timor-Leste, there is also the need to build sufficient capacity to participate in the more than 1500 ASEAN meetings each year and to eventually host large meetings, meaning that they will need to continue learning by doing through coordinated capacity-building efforts of dialogue partners (Lin et al, 2024 :46). Australia's sustained commitment to this process will be crucial. Part of Australia's involvement can help to bolster intra-ASEAN mechanisms that will support Timor-Leste's success.

6. Deepen and broaden Australia's ASEAN diplomacy

The current assessment in ASEAN capitals is that Australia is a trusted and energetic partner. The fiftieth anniversary of Dialogue Partnership highlights many aspects of this partnership. ASEAN engagement by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is certainly broad and active. At the same time there are questions raised about the whole-of-government commitment from Australia and the need to ensure that a broad-base of relevant Australian institutions are involved. There is scope to broaden the level of engagement by other ministries across diverse ASEAN sectoral bodies through formal Senior Official and ministerial engagement, given Australia can sometimes be seen as lagging in this area in contrast to other ASEAN Dialogue Partners such as China, Japan and the Republic of Korea.

▼ Timor-Leste officials in a Diplomatic Training Programme supported through trilateral cooperation between Malaysia, Australia and Timor Leste, Kuala Lumpur, September 2023. © Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations of Malaysia



Consistent interactions between a range of Ministries and leaders are certainly desirable. It will also be important that Australia looks to all of the aspects of national power and influence that can support long-term and effective engagement with ASEAN. Ideally leaders at all levels and across all sectors within Australia – Australia's state governments, universities, enterprises and organisations of different scales – should have an appreciation of how their work in Southeast Asia can contribute to, and is supported by, the evolving ASEAN-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

One area for further Australian investment in strengthening the work of ASEAN institutions, is the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (ASEAN-IPR). While it has great potential to produce practical ideas and approaches for how ASEAN can prevent and manage conflicts, it currently lacks resources. Another area is for Australia to step away from values-based engagement and drill down into principles-based engagement with the region which aligns with Australia's interests in upholding a rules-based order. A focus on a principles-based approach can provide much assurance to ASEAN countries.

7. Continue to invest in Indo-Pacific security and ASEAN Centrality

ASEAN and Australia have a shared interest in a peaceful, inclusive, stable and prosperous region. They are also well aligned in how to achieve such a region – by maintaining and promoting agreed rules and norms, ensuring ASEAN Centrality, looking at practical measures to prevent and resolve conflict, and upholding the principles and purposes of the UN Charter, ASEAN Charter, Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and the AOIP.

Australia can influence its partners to invest in Indo-Pacific security, including through the East Asia Summit. Indeed, the East Asia Summit could be configured for better follow through on commitments made by leaders in the context of the AOIP.

With ASEAN now embracing the Indo-Pacific concept for its own strategic deliberations, Australia can play a key role in the discussions that will help to safeguard regional peace and prosperity. Geopolitical tensions have increased in recent years, with implications for Australia and across ASEAN. ASEAN stakeholders anticipate that the Indian Ocean and Pacific Island regions will remain important parts of this conversation, with Australia therefore usefully positioned as a key partner.

Australia's strong track record on rule of law puts it in good stead to support the development of institutions and governance mechanisms in ASEAN countries at the national and regional levels. Investments in strengthening the rule of law in ASEAN countries will benefit economy, society and security alike. Security for ASEAN is, understandably, broadly conceived as cooperation on managing geopolitical tensions; disaster risk reduction; pandemic prevention; humanitarian response; food security, which is widely deemed a "comparative advantage of Australia"; and cyber security and efforts to counter organised crime. Australia is judged to be active on each of these issues and could make further investments to support ASEAN priorities.

At the same time, ASEAN members have differing assessments of the relevance of AUKUS and Quad multilateralism. Some suggest that these will, in time, prove to be further well-accepted components of the regional architecture while others caution that Australia will need to ensure it continues to explain its own strategic and security priorities in ways that offer some level of reassurance to ASEAN partners.



On its side, the Australian Government will continue to explain how the Quad insists on ASEAN Centrality and that AUKUS makes Australia a more capable security partner for the region. In this context, there is wide agreement that maintaining a robust, rules-based ASEAN-led regional architecture will remain crucial for regional peace and prosperity.

8. Investments in peace, security and development cooperation with ASEAN's newer members

From the beginning of its cooperation with ASEAN, Australia has been a key initiator and participant in a wide range of multilateral and bilateral development activities. Australia remains an active development partner around the world, and has increasingly prioritised opportunities to work closely with ASEAN and Southeast Asia. An example is the Aus4ASEAN Futures Initiative which supports ASEAN priorities, including the Initiative for ASEAN Integration to assist less developed countries of mainland Southeast Asia to make the most of the potential benefits of regional integration. By leveraging its expertise and resources, Australia has future opportunities to contribute significantly to the region's development, aligning its efforts with ASEAN's goals and priorities to ensure sustainable and inclusive growth.

Australia's role as a constructive partner in addressing the complex challenges facing Southeast Asia is also widely recognised among officials and analysts. Australia is a long-term and widely trusted development partner across the region. It is well understood that Myanmar's recent political and economic deterioration is a major test for the region's overall peace and stability with potential spill-over risks to the rest of the region.

Australia's previous engagements in promoting security and stability in conflict situations in Cambodia and Timor-Leste are seen as valuable precedents. These engagements provide insights into the potential for positive influence in similar situations, albeit with the understanding that Myanmar's unique context requires careful consideration. Myanmar's evolving circumstances will need to be examined closely as Australia supports regional stabilisation, dialogue and peace-building work. Australian engagement on Myanmar will therefore need to remain attentive to ASEAN preferences with careful study of those areas where any future Australian contribution would be especially valuable.

"We need to be practical about the issues and we should be able to support the people on the ground. We do feel that Southeast Asia needs to be peaceful and stable and the more that Australia-ASEAN relations can build on that together the better it will be for everybody. The better that we manage all of these challenges elegantly the more valuable we will be for the world."

ASEAN official, 2023

▼ Australia's Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs, The Hon Tim Watts MP, signs the Second Protocol to Amend the Agreement Establishing the ASEAN-Australia New Zealand Free Trade Area (the AANZFTA upgrade) alongside Brunei, Indonesia and New Zealand, in Semarang, Indonesia, 21 August 2023. © DFAT





Note on sources

This report benefits from interviews, discussions and roundtables in Australia and across Southeast Asia. Cooperation from a wide range of institutions, including the ASEAN Secretariat and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, has made it possible to develop an up-to-date and wide-ranging analysis of the past, present and future of ASEAN-Australia ties. The authors

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Discussions and interviews were conducted with a wide range of people including:

| | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| Dr. Shafiah Muhibat | Ms. Januarina Septiyani | Mr. Him Rotha |
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| Mr. Kristoforus Adit | Mr. Aaron Connelly | Mr. Tim Paterson |
| Mr. Calvin Khoe | Mr. Evan Laksmana | Dr. Chheang Vannarith |
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| Ms. Racheline Tantular | Ms. Kou Siekmouy | Ms. Rosie Vlahos |
| Mr. Tavis Tan | Ms. Samreth Chansereiroth | H.E. Dr. Cheunboran Chanborey |
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| Mr. Ray Hervandi | Ms. Yeat Senghor | ASEAN- Australia Strategic Youth Partnership, Jakarta |
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| Mr. Glenn Keys | Mr. Soth Chhayheng | |
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