

ASEAN-Australia: Close Partners for an even Closer Future Together

The setting is an important conference bringing together the Leaders of ASEAN and Australia. The discussions were cordial and comprehensive, covering trade and economic cooperation, tourism and commodities. The outcome document, pledging enhanced cooperation in the future, was issued at the end of the historic Summit. Handshakes were given, and words of praise, in English and other ASEAN languages were given to the Australian Prime Minister. There was every expectation that relations between ASEAN and Australia would grow as a result of this historic occasion.

Is this a foresight as to what will happen on 17-18 March in Sydney at the historic ASEAN-Australia Special Summit? Perhaps.

But what was described above has already happened, at another historic event some forty years ago.

The setting? Kuala Lumpur. The date? 7 August 1977. The occasion? The ASEAN Post Summit Meeting with Australia. The participants? Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and the five Leaders of ASEAN, which at that time comprised only five Southeast Asian countries.

This was the first time that Leaders from ASEAN and Australia met. Indeed, it was the first ever meeting between ASEAN and any Dialogue Partner. The significance of this historical context cannot be understated. It reflects the long standing ties between ASEAN and Australia of more than four decades. After all, Australia was ASEAN's first Dialogue Partner, the two having formalized relations in 1974. And with this long standing relations is the expectation -- from both sides -- that they could count on one another, with mutual understanding and mutual respect.

Australia is certainly no stranger to ASEAN and Southeast Asia. And vice versa. Throughout the decades, Australia has contributed significantly to developments in this region that remains an important neighbour to Australia, an important trading partner for Australian companies and an important tourist destination for Australians.

Australian ideas and initiatives have helped promote peace and prosperity in Southeast Asia throughout the past four decades.

From the peace process of what many call the

Third Indochina Conflict to enhanced connectivity across the Mekong River -- through the first ever bridge between Thailand and Lao PDR across this river. From security dialogue fora such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to regional economic cooperation frameworks such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

Close people-to-people ties have been promoted continuously, through the efforts of academics, artists, sports figures and ordinary people.

From Olivia Newton John to Kylie Minogue to Sia, songs such as "Let Me Be There", "Can't Get You Out of My Head" and "Cheap Thrills", have entertained and enthralled three different generations of Southeast Asian music enthusiasts. Sports lovers, on the other hand, have enjoyed the exploits of the legendary Wallabies fullback David Campese and his trademark steps on the rugby field and Socceroos winger Harry Kewell and his scything runs on the football pitch.

What has been happening over the past forty years is thus the gradual strengthening of networks of linkages--economic, social and political--which bind Australia closer to ASEAN and ASEAN closer to Australia. For all these reasons and more, there is a legitimate expectation that Australia should be one of the partners that understands ASEAN most. After all, the foundation for these relations are strong as they are multifaceted and long standing.

Fast forward some forty years, from 1977 to the present.

Today, ASEAN is vastly different from the organization that had that historic first Summit with Australia four decades ago. Today, ASEAN is even more integrated and interconnected -- Community of ten countries, evolving from a looser association of five. With its single market and production base, and its vast network of sea, air and land links, the ASEAN Community is already the sixth largest economy in the world. If it can implement all of its economic agreements, it has the potential to become the world's third largest economy by 2030.

Furthermore, ASEAN is more rules-based, anchored on its Charter and the multiple agreements and conventions governing almost all walks of life and promoting different aspects of human security. It has early warning arrangements

to help reduce the impacts to the region of transnational threats, from tsunamis to piracy to the Ebola. And ASEAN has helped develop strong regional frameworks of cooperation, through the ASEAN-centered regional architecture. Bodies such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus have helped manage the peace and stability of the wider Asia-Pacific region.

So if anything, the importance of ASEAN to Australia has increased in the past four decades. A cursory look at the economic statistics are telling.

Today, the over 100 billion dollars in two way trade between Australia and ASEAN is equal to, if not higher than, the trade between Australia and both the U.S. and Japan combined. Five of Australia's top fifteen trading partners are ASEAN countries. Thailand, for example, is the fourth largest source of imports for Australia. From ASEAN's perspective, Australia is ASEAN's seventh largest trading partner, sixth largest foreign direct investor and fifth largest source of foreign tourists.

There is thus great mutual benefit in the growing economic partnership between ASEAN and Australia which is an important pillar in the growing ASEAN-Australia Strategic Partnership.

Ever growing people-to-people ties will remain critical to our partnership. That is why there is strong support for the New Colombo Plan scholarships that bring many capable Australians to the ASEAN region, contributing to better mutual understanding. Meanwhile, Thailand's Under 19 woman's soccer team is already in Australia to play against an Australian team, as part of our continuing efforts to link up people at all levels.

Today, the region is facing rapid change and uncertainties. Whether the source of such change and uncertainties come from a more complex relations amongst the major powers or the rising challenge of global transnational crime and disruptive technologies, the ASEAN-Australia Strategic Partnership has the ability and indeed responsibility to help address these challenges and mitigate the impact of uncertainties for the benefit of Southeast Asians and Australians alike.

And that is why the upcoming ASEAN-Australia Special Summit, initiated by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, is so important.

The Sydney Summit will of course give a strong

boost to the multi-dimensional partnership between ASEAN and Australia. Reinforced with a strong private sector engagement at a Business Forum preceding the Summit proper, economic linkages will most certainly be enhanced. Thailand has contributed to preparing for the Summit with the convening of the inaugural ASEAN-Australia Conference on Micro Small and Medium Sized Enterprises in Bangkok just last month.

In the security field, an important ASEAN-Australia Counter Terrorism Conference in Sydney right before the Summit will strengthen cooperation to address the challenge of terrorism and extremism. A number of concrete deliverables are expected. Thailand has contributed to its preparation as well, by convening the ASEAN-Australia Conference on promoting cybersecurity in this increasingly digitized world, in Bangkok a couple of weeks ago.

But equally important will be the Summit's expected contribution to reinforcing the peace and prosperity of the wider Asia-Pacific.

Australia's ideas on the Indo-Pacific will not only be relevant but also important to help shape the region's posture and positioning in response to growing change and uncertainties in our region. ASEAN's ideas on managing such change and uncertainties by reinforcing the ASEAN-centered regional architecture will likewise be important. These ideas can certainly complement and reinforce one another.

Enhanced cooperation to address shared challenges in the region will also be important as we strive to contain regional hotspots while building greater strategic trust at the regional level. And support for ASEAN's efforts to develop centers that advance regional cooperation in active ageing and innovation as well as in sustainable development will help strengthen the region's overall resilience to longer term challenges to human security.

The Special Summit in Sydney will thus be a milestone not only in the long standing ASEAN-Australia partnership but also in the broader regional effort to promote peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. It is certainly something that we can all lend our support, as a tribute to our collective efforts of the past, and as an investment to our people's welfare in the future.

**ASEAN Thailand
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