Overview

The first two sessions raised concerns. Tensions in the Asian region seem to be rising - China appears more confident and determined and the US decline is widely acknowledged. Trade policy, it was suggested, has never been so political. Seismic shifts in the global order require recalibration of institutions, and with rapid movements in economic power the development of institutions has just not kept up. Historical perceptions matter - not just in China-Japan-Korea relations, but all over the place, including between ASEAN countries and also in Australia’s relations with ASEAN. These perceptions continue to be influential with the rising generation - and in dialogues such as this we have the opportunity to counter tenacious stereotypes.
In the ASEAN-Australia session the delegates were able to discuss the positive initiatives that Australia and ASEAN have taken together, and to confirm that there is strong bipartisanship in Australia regarding the ASEAN priority. There still seems, however, to be a lack of recognition of the size and importance of ASEAN in the wider Australian community. The media has an important role to play in building understanding, as do Think Tanks and Dialogues. One vital development is the new Colombo plan, which conveys a clear message that Australians now believe we have much to learn from Southeast Asia, and Asia generally.

With respect to Australia and New Zealand engagement with ASEAN, practical engagement continues to offer long-term advantages. Cooperation in the search for MH370 has been very successful in deepening Australia’s engagement with ASEAN, and not only Malaysia - just as our involvement in handling the tsunami disaster a decade ago, for all its tragedy, brought Australia closer to Indonesia and the other countries affected. There seem to be plenty of areas requiring cooperation and collaboration as we look to the future. Apart from being prepared for possible new natural disasters, the participants addressed the increasingly important areas of cyber security and irregular migration. The potential for ASEAN to achieve consensus and become a powerful voice in developing national strategies for cyber-resilience was discussed. Whilst acknowledging Australian support for ASEAN community building, some ASEAN participants suggested that greater support from Australia for ASEAN centrality would offer advantages to Australia as well as ASEAN. It was also argued that Australia should give more support to the ASEAN Institute of Peace.

An implication in the discussion of cooperative, practical initiatives is that these initiatives tend to develop further habits of cooperation - habits that have the potential to flow into other areas, and can even be of help in dealing with the dangerous, strategic contest which was focused on in the first two Dialogue sessions.