“I go to many international Dialogues — Malaysians meeting with one country or another, including the big Northeast Asian countries — but there seems to be something different about this one with Australia and New Zealand. I’m not sure just how to describe it, but there is a real openness in the way we talked about things, a high degree of frankness.”

—Senior Malaysian participant at the AANZ Dialogue 2010
The relentless rise of China, set against the relative decline in United States’ capacities, has created the potential for dramatically new regional dynamics. To discuss these evolving dynamics, the Dialogue brought together leading specialists on strategic and economic issues, who ensured that the deliberations were informed and incisive.

Just as the complexity of regional institutional architecture evokes deeper geo-strategic transitions, so the wide-ranging Dialogue deliberations about the ‘role of the major powers’ in the region conveyed a sense of our being in a period of change and uncertainty. Some argued that the state of geo-strategic flux gave this particular Dialogue an enhanced importance. It seemed more urgent now than ever for Australians and New Zealanders to meet with their ASEAN colleagues to discuss and debate the likely directions in which the Asia region might move over the next decade or so.

Making an assessment of China’s aspirations and future policy decision-making was one central issue but attention was also focussed on the problem of analysing the responses of the United States, Japan and India amid current regional uncertainty. There was no consensus on what shape the power transition in the region would take, but the common interests of the ASEAN-10 and the Tasman-2 in dealing with regional change was acknowledged.

In assessing the need for closer regional cooperation and collaboration, the Dialogue also considered economic and defence cooperation, regional responses to people smuggling and the importance of deepening ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand people-to-people contacts. Dialogue discussion highlighted the following points across seven sessions.

The importance of Track II diplomacy was affirmed recently at the ASEAN-New Zealand ministerial meeting in Hanoi on 22 July 2010. In the joint declaration on the ASEAN-New Zealand comprehensive partnership, the parties were urged to ‘foster continued Track II dialogue on economic, political and security and socio-cultural issues.’ The recently concluded ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Dialogue fulfilled that objective and, according to a number of participants, took place at a turning point in the history of the Asia region.
Analysing Southeast Asia’s economic competitiveness

ASEAN economic integration faces serious challenges — there is ‘clearly a tremendous gap between ambition and integration’. True, tariff liberalisation is completed for the original ASEAN-6 but the liberalisation of services and the freer flow of skilled labour has a long way to go. The main purpose of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), it was pointed out, is not to build competitiveness within ASEAN but to make ASEAN competitive in the world.

The value of the burgeoning number of Free Trade Agreements in the region was debated. One participant suggested: ‘these FTAs don’t do much that really matters either in commercial terms or broader economic terms.’ This view was challenged by an ASEAN economist arguing that FTAs can provide the impetus — and the justification — to push through institutional and legislative reforms. Their strategic importance should also not be overlooked, another participant added, citing the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (AANZFTA) as strengthening ties at the diplomatic level.

In the process of regional economic integration through the AEC and AANZFTA, Australia and New Zealand need to pay particular attention to the Mekong countries, that is, ASEAN’s newest members Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

Investment into ASEAN economies had ‘gone into the doldrums’ while investment into China is ‘skyrocketing’. ‘China and India are snapping at our heels’ one economist said, ‘and we have to remain vigilant and competitive by improving government and building infrastructure.’ Australian investment in the region is lagging — only three percent of Australia’s investment goes to Southeast Asia and two-thirds of this is to Singapore.

Is the low level of Australia’s investment in ASEAN a result in part of insufficient familiarity with the region? One proposal was an ‘ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand leadership program’ — an initiative that might help deepen understanding and networks of relationships at elite level. Not surprisingly, the role of Track II diplomacy was also stressed. Another proposal entailed bringing Australian and New Zealand students together in ‘community engagement programmes’.

An existing initiative, the Australian Centre for Education (ACE) in Cambodia was described as being a possible model for strengthening future ties. ACE ‘adds value’ through a business centre that has been incorporated into the education centre.

‘People to people relationships are the foundation of everything,’ one New Zealander noted, and it was pointed out that the joint declaration for the AANZFTA makes this point.

Deepening people-to-people ties

People-to-people interaction is at first glance busy — with student exchanges, tourism, and strong trade — but opinion polling by the Lowy Institute and others suggests serious perception anxieties are difficult to shift.

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Taking stock of major powers: How the region views China and Japan

The dilemma for ASEAN states is that China's economic rise presents both opportunities and risks for the region — ‘security insecurities’ need to be carefully managed. Contested sovereignty in the South China Sea has seen tensions between the US and China over interpretations of their role in the Asia region. 'As far as ASEAN is concerned,' one participant observed 'Australia is likely to be seen as an ally of the US. It needs to be asked: how does this impact on the ASEAN region?'

The far-reaching implications of a power shift from the United States to China were discussed, but the question was also asked whether the whole structure of regional inter-state relations might eventually be changed. How unified was ASEAN really? Would Chinese economic integration with the sub Mekong region have a centrifugal impact on ASEAN? Can we assume that a reduced US role could take place without far reaching institutional transformation?

An ASEAN specialist on China stressed that China would be willing to share power in the region so long as Chinese interests in Taiwan, Tibet and Sinkiang are respected. ASEAN countries ‘should look at what the US and Japan can provide in terms of adjustments’ it was suggested. ‘There is no need for strengthening alliances where alliances are already very strong.’

The significance of Japan in the region was acknowledged. ‘Japan is still a great power and we need to be careful how Japan is factored into the shifting dynamics in the region.’ There has been a potentially dangerous tendency to neglect the analysis of Japanese apprehensions and likely policy responses. Japan’s security dependence on the US, for instance, may give Japan an interest in maintaining US-China rivalry. Circumstances in the region may compel Japan to re-examine its position on nuclear weapons.

Taking stock of major powers: How the region views India and the US

The United States, one participant emphasised, must accept the need to exchange primacy for cooperation as the Chinese and Indian economies grow. US economic power may not have declined in absolute terms, but it has in relative terms. This tilt in the regional equilibrium must be recognised. This participant also observed that, at the moment, no other country in the world identifies with the US so strongly as Australia does.

In discussing the ‘major powers’ of the region, one participant asked: ‘Should India be included in this group?’ India has a serious strategic potential and an enormous potential economy, but there are real structural issues in its economy. Vietnam and Cambodia are supportive of India playing a role in the region. This arises not simply from strategic and economic concerns — India is seen as a positive political influence. US President Obama’s recent visit to New Delhi was cited. He chose India, the region’s largest
democracy, to herald the virtues of democracy in Asia. India’s economic success was also seen as a positive for the region, partly because it lessens dependence on China — something that ‘is good for ASEAN’.

Australia and New Zealand agreed on the centrality of ASEAN in any regional architecture formations and the newly expanded East Asia Summit — to include the United States and Russia — was a good example of this. The newly formed ADMM-Plus (ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting, plus Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Russia and the United States) also shows promise as strengthening regional dialogue on issues of security and defence, although China was only prepared to discuss non-traditional security issues. The ADMM-Plus is scheduled to take place every three years only, unlike the EAS meetings which are annual.

Defence cooperation

There is too little appreciation of the depth of the security relationship between ASEAN countries, Australia and New Zealand. In everyday practical areas, Australia and New Zealand have been active in the region over a long period. ‘The Five Power Defence Arrangements’ (involving Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand and Britain) is seen as highly valuable — but largely for reasons that were not anticipated when it was established in 1971. Can the FPDA be the basis of broader security cooperation in the region? Historically, Indonesia had frowned upon the FPDA, but the prevailing sentiment is one of indifference. It was suggested that the FPDA could become the basis of broader security cooperation in the region.

The US remains the single largest supplier of military hardware in Southeast Asia. ‘But is this relevant to our needs?’ a participant asked. ‘We almost slavishly follow that path. The alternative is to make a painful decision to abandon that technological universe and opt for another.’ Some ASEAN leaders have started to think about that, and what this might mean for regional military organisation. With the political will, new military arrangements in the region could be formed.

State-to-state ‘eruptions’ occupy the lower end of the security scale yet still attract the concentrated military effort. Non-traditional security (NTS) threats, on the other hand, are ever more present. Piracy and terrorism, for example, will be with us for the long term and yet attract a disproportionate military effort. This puts us in what one participant called a ‘schizophrenic frame of mind’ where defence cooperation is concerned.

With respect to maritime issues, both traditional and non-traditional security threats are likely to be of growing importance in the developing East Asia region.
Regional cooperation and people smuggling

It is often not understood that Australia is, in international terms, a leader in the acceptance of refugees. In terms of people smuggling, however, Australia is keen to work with its neighbours, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, to combat the problem. Australia and Indonesia jointly chair the Bali Process, which was established in 2002 to combat irregular migration. The emphasis has shifted from country-to-country approaches, to regional solutions that consider not only the destination country but also the source and transit countries.

Concerning perceptions of people smuggling from one country to another — there is a particular conflict of perceptions between Australia and Indonesia. For example, one participant pointed out, ‘the domestic perception in Indonesia is that this is not so much a “push and pull” issue — Indonesians see it as push’.

US and Australian actions in Iraq and Afghanistan are seen as promoting the people smuggling problem. Also, it is not seen as helpful for Australians to speak of the ‘Indonesian solution’. The problem should be ‘framed differently.’

More emphasis needs to be placed on ‘transit’ countries — although, as one participant noted, there is little understanding that refugees often remain in the transit country. ‘In Indonesia we have a village of Iraqis who were in transit but stayed on.’ Australians should recognise that, although figures are difficult to determine, there are between 500,000 and one million illegal immigrants in Malaysia alone.

Indonesian police confirm that people smuggling operators are increasingly sophisticated, tapping into intelligence and using expensive boats. But they are also operating across borders within the ASEAN region — throughout Myanmar and Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines — that are essentially artificial. And, ‘in Southeast Asia, we look like each other and people cannot tell who is there legally or illegally.’


Australia and New Zealand updates

Despite debates in the region regarding trade agreements, New Zealand reported that its FTA with China resulted in a ‘surge in our exports to China in a timely way after the global recession, and our trade with ASEAN continues to move positively in focussed directions’ under the AANZFTA. New Zealand has not been as resilient to the global financial crisis as Australia and this has resulted in restraints on ‘our diplomatic presence in the region, on our development assistance capability close to home in the Pacific, and a restraining of our participation in defence.

Australia also reported that AANZFTA would further strengthen economic ties with ASEAN and New Zealand. ‘We think FTAs are important strategically and economically,’ an Australian participant said. ‘It’s the largest FTA we’ve entered into — involving some 600 million people.’ More broadly, Australia was described as ‘prosperous but unsettled’
politically after a year of political turmoil. Policy issues around the environment, water, and the preservation of rural life against these concerns, are contested.

In economic terms, continued strong growth in Australia, alongside ASEAN’s continued growth, offers ASEAN and Australia the prospect of acquiring great critical mass, one participant pointed out. ‘This closer economic cooperation will contribute to a more prosperous future, which is important when seen against the rise of China and India. As they rise, ASEAN, Australia and New Zealand working in an economically integrated way and utilising the AANZFTA gives us a better future ahead of us.’

The AANZ Dialogue: Asialink is sponsor and a key player in the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Dialogue, convened by ISIS (Institute of Strategic and International Studies) Malaysia annually. The Dialogues are informal meetings among the ASEAN states, Australia and New Zealand that consider major issues in the Asia region, and the roles that this group can play in their resolution. Asialink and the Asia New Zealand Foundation are partners in the Dialogue and facilitate the Australian and New Zealand participation respectively.

The third AANZ Dialogue was held in Kuala Lumpur on 28–30 November 2010 and attracted strong participation from government as well as Track II institutions. The Australian group included Andrew MacIntyre and Hugh White (Australian National University), Melissa Conley Tyler (Australian Institute of International Affairs), Simon Longstaff (St James Centre for Ethics), Martine Letts (Lowy Institute), Ian Buchanan (AusPECC) and Tony Milner (Asialink and CSCAP) — as well as Jenny McGregor (CEO, Asialink).

The Australian government representatives were Gillian Bird, Australian Ambassador to ASEAN and Deputy Secretary, DFAT — who led discussions in two of the Dialogue sessions — and Miles Kupa, Australian High Commissioner to Malaysia.

The New Zealand group was led by Richard Grant, Executive Director of the Asia New Zealand Foundation. David Taylor, New Zealand Ambassador to ASEAN was also a participant, as well as David Kersey, the New Zealand High Commissioner to Malaysia.

The Malaysian Minister for International Trade and Industry, The Hon Dato’ Seri Mustapa Mohamed, who has had a long relationship with Australia and has been a strong supporter of the Dialogue, spoke at the official Dialogue dinner. New Zealand High Commissioner, David Kersey, hosted a reception for participants on the evening before the Dialogue began. For the Dialogue program, see: http://www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au/our_work/corporate__and__public/internationalforumsasean-australia-new_zealand_dialogue
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