

**EVENT RECAP**  
**14th ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand (AANZ) Dialogue**  
9-10 March 2022



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0930-1215 Malaysia Standard Time (UTC +8)

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**Welcoming Remarks**

**Associate Professor Dr Hoang Anh Tuan**  
Chair  
ASEAN-ISIS Network;  
Vice President, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam

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The 14th ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand (AANZ) Dialogue was convened online via Zoom on the 9th and 10th March 2022 from 9:30 am to 12:30 pm GMT+8.

The 14th AANZ Dialogue was structured around three 90-minute moderated sessions. It focused on the changing dynamics within ASEAN and between ASEAN and their dialogue partners. These conversations were largely shaped by the emergence of new minilateral arrangements such as the Quad and nearby geopolitical conflicts such as the situation in Myanmar.

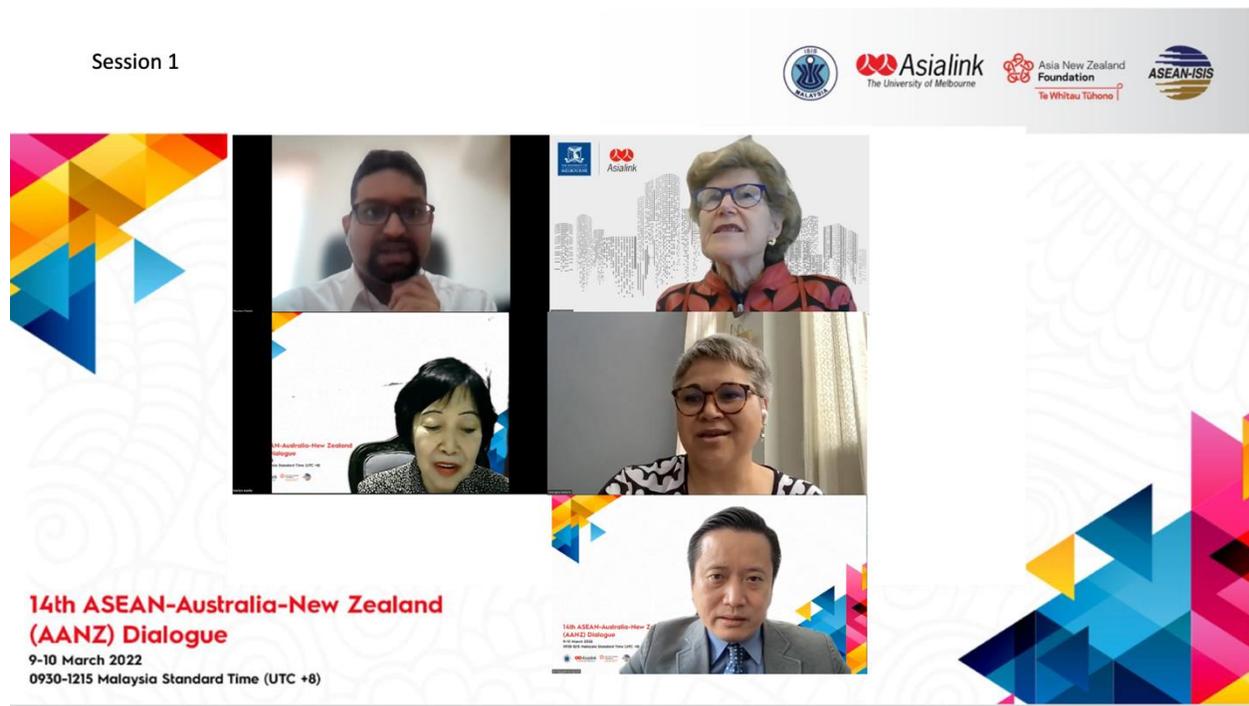
Session 1 saw a robust mix of senior academics and practitioners from Southeast Asia, Australia and New Zealand, who were able to draw on their experiences and knowledge to put forward questions and suggestions on the evolving dynamics among ASEAN, Australia and New Zealand.

Participants from Session 2 consisted mostly of well-seasoned academics from Southeast Asia, New Zealand and Australia. They discussed the growing prominence of authoritarian practices in Southeast Asia and the limitations found in ASEAN's existing means of managing them.

Session 3 also saw the participation of academics from Southeast Asia, New Zealand and Australia. Matters discussed included the impact of minilateral initiatives and geopolitical competition on ASEAN-centric mechanisms and the importance of maintaining stability through cooperation.

The Dialogue saw robust attendance by participants from various backgrounds, including government officials, academics, journalists and analysts. A total of 65 attendees and 20 role-players attended the two-day event.

## Session 1: Evolving cooperation between ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners



Moderator	Jenny McGregor, Founding Group CEO, Asialink	
Discussants	Ambassador Marilyn Alarilla Former Ambassador to Lao PDR and the Republic of Turkey The Philippines	Dr Nguyen Hung Son Vice President Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam
	Dr Huong Le Thu Senior Analyst The Australian Strategic Policy Institute Australia	Georgina Roberts Divisional Manager for the Asia Regional Division New Zealand Foreign Affairs and Trade New Zealand

Session 1 took a region-wide approach in examining the relationship between ASEAN, Australia and New Zealand, especially with new regional security arrangements such as

AUKUS, ASEAN's fast-paced economic growth and the growing importance of other dialogue partners like China, Korea and Japan.

The key takeaways highlighted in the discussion include:

First, the participants acknowledged the deep and long-standing ties between ASEAN, Australia and New Zealand. The participants agreed that it was within the interests of all parties that this cooperation should be further strengthened for the common and mutual benefit of all parties. However, there were mentions of the growing asymmetrical economic relationship between these dialogue partners. A given example was that while ASEAN is Australia's second largest trading partner, Australia is only ASEAN's eighth largest trading partner. Also, Australia's gross domestic product (GDP) vis-à-vis ASEAN's total GDP was far smaller than it was at compared to when Australia became a dialogue partner. Strategies aiming to improve relations between the parties in this new economic context would be fruitful and welcomed.

Second, the participants suggested numerous avenues to deepen cooperation between ASEAN and its Australian and New Zealand dialogue partners, which included cooperation on combating corruption and projects with the private sector. As per discussant comments, there was scope for dialogue partners to be more consultative in the co-design of projects, to ensure the concerns and needs of receiving parties are met. They also proposed the possibility of a minilateral approach for cooperation between certain ASEAN member states, Australia and New Zealand. Discussants acknowledged the cumbersome nature of working with bureaucratic bodies, which has given rise to the idea of governments being able to approach civil society actors more easily. This stemmed from a growing sentiment that there was a need for cooperation on the grassroots-level and that the people of ASEAN, Australia and New Zealand should be involved in strengthening cooperation.

Furthermore, it is important to compare the Australian and New Zealand relations with ASEAN to the role that other dialogue partners have begun to assume. The need for more comparative data was highlighted to make such an assessment. It seemed clear, however, that Australia and New Zealand continues to make leading contributions in the areas of education and professional development. Both Australia and New Zealand reaffirmed their commitment to ASEAN but it is important today to re-assess their contributions in the context of other dialogue partner endeavours, including those of China, Japan, South Korea and the European Union.

Third, the commitment to ASEAN centrality and how it can be maintained was also discussed at length. This included the role of dialogue partners in maintaining and

applying ASEAN centrality; the possibility of minilateral and bilateral arrangements, which would ideally support ASEAN centrality and grassroots-level initiatives; and how there needs to be an evolution in policy and practice of ASEAN centrality while maintaining their grounding principles. The session made many references to minilateral arrangements while bearing in mind there is another session on the subject at a later time.

Fourth, the discussion also brought up the issue of trust and impatience. Southeast Asian participants conveyed there was a sentiment felt by ASEAN that Australia and New Zealand were impatient with the institution and their progress on certain issues such as the situation in Myanmar. Australian and New Zealand participants clarified that their countries do support ASEAN and ASEAN centrality, but it was also suggested ASEAN could evolve its processes and mechanisms when it comes to addressing internal issues such as those developing in Myanmar.

Fifth, the significance of other security arrangements involving dialogue partners such as AUKUS and the Quad was also discussed. These arrangements do not align with ASEAN's regional architecture and its vision of the Indo-Pacific. It was acknowledged that there were some ASEAN member states who were surprised or uncomfortable with these arrangements and believed that greater transparency from their dialogue partners could help ease fears. There is understanding in ASEAN that these arrangements are necessary for the relevant dialogue partners, particularly at a time when there has been anxiety about future United States commitment to the Asian region.

Finally, there was consensus that major geopolitical issues such as the Sino-US competition and the conflict in Ukraine have affected multilateral arrangements within ASEAN. Member states had been, in many ways, forced to pick sides on these issues. Furthermore, many important issues that were raised within ASEAN have been subsumed by bigger geopolitical issues. This can hinder cooperation with dialogue partners. A strong concern in this session was the need to make a detailed assessment of what ASEAN's full range of dialogue partners contribute to ASEAN, and for this assessment to be a basis for reviewing Australian and New Zealand policies for the future. Thus, there is a need to build stronger relationships within ASEAN and with other dialogue partners such as Australia and New Zealand that focus less on the big-picture geopolitical issues. This policy deliberation should include dialogues, minilateral arrangements and grassroots-level cooperation.

## Session 2: Authoritarian governance in the region

Session 2

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Moderator	Simon Draper, Executive Director, Asia New Zealand Foundation	
Discussants	Dr Rizal Sukma Senior Fellow Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Indonesia	Dr Thitinan Pongsudhirak Director Institute of Security and International Studies (ISIS) Thailand
	Tashny Sukumaran Senior Analyst Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia	Dr Lee Morgenbesser Senior Lecturer School of Government and International Relations Griffith University Australia
	Assoc Prof Jim Ockey University of Canterbury New Zealand	

The session evaluated both the short- and long-term effects of the observed decline towards greater authoritarian practices in Southeast Asia. Such changes were also discussed in consideration of the role ASEAN can play in developing regional situations such as the Myanmar coup and future disruptions.

Key takeaways highlighted in the session included:

First, the speakers acknowledged that the region entered a period of strategic and domestic instability. It marked a deviation from an unusually long rules-based order that managed to mitigate pre-existing tensions. However, discussants noted with concern that due to the enduring global trends of authoritarianism, states that have declined are unlikely to return to that democratic status quo. They also noted that countries in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, that are vulnerable to such changes will find greater difficulty resisting such trends in the long-term.

Second, the observed decline raises more questions regarding the definition and conception of democratic governance. Some discussants argued that doing so was difficult as very few states in Southeast Asia can qualify as democratic in the first place. Much of this stemmed from disparities between 'Eastern' and 'Western' norms of social and political order, which have contributed to the ongoing debate as to whether a universal standard can be determined. This was also supported by the observation that Southeast Asia saw greater coexistence with military or authoritarian governments in the prior three to four decades. However, over time, increased divisiveness amongst ASEAN member states saw disagreements over the willingness to engage with these regimes.

Third, the discourse surrounding contrasting ideals and purposes have added further strain on the overall cohesiveness of ASEAN and its related groups. ASEAN's limited enforcement mechanisms, in spite of its rules and practices, have remained one of the bigger criticisms of the institution. This was also made in reference to ASEAN's recent actions, or lack thereof, towards the coup in Myanmar. Some discussants asserted that much of ASEAN's collaborative actions have rarely been based on regime types. Rather, the main objective of the institution was to foster an environment conducive to economic development. That point did raise the question on how to build institutional robustness in ASEAN without retreating internally, and create the open space needed for reforms that can aid in managing future crises.

Fourth, authoritarian governments have demonstrated their ability to use state apparatus to control the scope and practice of civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-government organisations (NGOs) as part of securing their position in power.

These concerns have become increasingly serious as the long-term effects are being reflected in continuous government restrictions on CSO activities through the exploitation of the legal and judicial systems. Consequently, some discussants proposed for greater engagement at the grassroots-level, where a coherent identity could be better achieved through exchanging ideas and information through CSOs and NGOs vis-à-vis bureaucrats and the business community.

Finally, these concerns have effects on the quality of engagements between ASEAN member states and their dialogue partners such as Australia and New Zealand. Some dialogue partners such as New Zealand are smaller countries, leaving them highly dependent on the stability of the liberal democratic system that has been put in place. However, with such ongoing authoritarian trends, it presents a risk to dialogue partners who would not want to be entangled in these competitive dynamics. Some discussants proposed that given such lack of consensus, Asean dialogue partners are rather encouraged to be selective with their engagements, where they should cooperate and collaborate in areas that can produce meaningful outcomes.

## Session 3: Impact of emerging multilateral and minilateral mechanisms on regional stability and security

Session 3

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Moderator	Thomas Daniel, Senior Fellow, Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), Malaysia	
Discussants	Kaymany Oraboune Deputy Director-General Institute of Foreign Affairs Laos	Ong Keng Yong Executive Deputy Chairman S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Singapore
	Herman Joseph S Kraft Fellow Asia Pacific Pathways to Progress Foundation The Philippines	Prof Allan Gyngell National President Australian Institute of International Affairs Australia
	Dr Manjeet Pardesi Senior Lecturer Victoria University of Wellington New Zealand	

Session 3 focused on the impact of emerging multilateral and minilateral mechanisms on regional stability and security. The conversation examined the impact of initiatives such as the Quad and AUKUS on ASEAN sentiment, as well as whether they may potentially undermine ASEAN-centred mechanisms. The contexts and conditions required for open engagement were discussed, particularly involving these mechanisms and Southeast Asia on issues such as the South China Sea.

The key takeaways highlighted in the discussion were:

The overarching importance was the role of diplomacy in ASEAN, the process of forging such ties and keeping in mind of the priorities of this bloc. Cooperative mechanisms along with policy roadmaps offer opportunities for states in the region and partners to work together on a wide range of areas from political security to environmental cooperation. In fact, smaller groupings increasingly promise to be part and parcel of the Southeast Asian landscape going forward. However, subregional cooperation mechanisms must refrain from competing against each other and instead work to complement each other for the good of the region.

Second, various types of unilateral mechanisms exist. It is acceptable to engage with or join these various forums, as long as ASEAN remains focused on its purpose, solidarity and unity. Some discussants argued that the rise in minilateral agreements was a direct result of the dissatisfaction with multilateral agreements. To prevent any ideological splits, the bloc must focus on common challenges and focus on regional success, peace and stability. ASEAN must take a strong leadership role in cooperative action in the region, particularly on security issues. Synergy between these initiatives and ASEAN-centred mechanisms have to be explored.

Third, it was noted that responses to China's increasing assertiveness is to some extent becoming a compass for foreign policy. Nations such as Australia and New Zealand have changed strategic perceptions due to this growing strategic competition to accommodate for the potential increase in confrontation or conflict. Other complex disruptors include climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic. This period was described as transitional, compounded by the advent of new technologies. Due to this flux, ASEAN must be open to engagement. The resilience and staying power of various groupings was also discussed. Participation in groupings such as the Quad do not necessarily show clarity in what the strategic objectives are for all partners.

Fourth, the increasing use of social media across the region is enabling younger audiences to participate in political discussions in new ways. However, social media is also being used to spread disinformation and other falsehoods, undermining overall

national and regional stability. Discussants concurred that more study is needed to understand what impact this is having in the region.

Finally, the forum underscored the importance of working in tandem to bring stability to the region, regardless mechanism employed, be it multilateral or unilateral.

Coordination as well as the perceptions towards said coordination are both equally important to support the shared objective of ASEAN centrality.

## Closing Remarks

### Closing Remarks



**Professor Anthony Milner**  
International Advisor Asialink



**Suzannah Jessep**  
Director (Research and Engagement)  
Asia New Zealand Foundation



**Herizal Hazri**  
Chief Executive  
ISIS Malaysia

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## Key takeaways from the Dialogue

- The ongoing effects of the pandemic continue to manifest in different ways, much of which remain difficult to anticipate in the medium-to-long-term. The emerging political, economic and social challenges highlighted by discussants are complicating factors.
- Governments around the world have been confronted with the erosion of democratic values and civil liberties, much of which is compared against their presumed incompatibility with cultural norms. However, while this has been a source of criticism against ASEAN and its member states, participants were also alert to the opportunities to mitigate against the decline into authoritarianism.
- Great power rivalries and their related geopolitical tensions remain a concern for the region. While the responses may take different approaches from those involved, it has served as a persistent reminder that the region needs to be able to prepare itself against potential disruption from these developments.
- A greater understanding of ASEAN, in the ways its institutions and member states operate, especially in regard to how they navigate operational challenges and other difficult areas, was invaluable to its Australian and New Zealand stakeholders.

## **Issues and ideas moving forward**

- The decision to go with the online Dialogue has both its advantages and disadvantages.
  - It limits the number of sessions and issues that can be discussed but manages to attract and retain a larger number of participants.
  - An online Dialogue allows for a greater number of discussants at a lower fiscal cost. However, less time can be allocated for Q&A.
- Despite maintaining a scaled-down version of the Dialogue, active participation of Track 1 participation, namely officials from the ASEAN Secretariat, Foreign Ministries and Australian and New Zealand Ambassadors to ASEAN, was limited.
  - Some were present but as silent participants.
  - Moving forward, future dialogues, even if held online, should find a way to more actively incorporate these officials.
- As co-convenors of the AANZ Dialogue, Asialink, Asia New Zealand Foundation (ANZF) and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia should consider additional changes to how the dialogue is organised, such as but not limited to:
  - Regularised meetings or engagements to ensure that communication remains up to date. This is particularly important in the planning stages so as to eliminate potential sources of miscommunication and confusion.
    - This will also include considering the input and/or feedback from other members of the ASEAN-ISIS network concerning the subjects discussed for future dialogues.
  - The submission of an outcome document to their respective Track 1 stakeholders, upon the conclusion of future dialogues. However, this should not be the only written output to increase visibility of the dialogue. The merits and drawbacks of such a document would need to be discussed further.
- The Dialogue's co-convenors should consider the possibility of more online meetings, even smaller scaled ones, to allow stakeholders to remain in touch.
  - The meetings can be hosted by all dialogue co-convenors on rotation throughout the year.
  - The smaller meetings could be an avenue to further develop deeper Track 1 engagement and institutionalising networking and collaboration among academics and analysts from Southeast Asia, Australia and New Zealand.
- The 15th AANZ Dialogue which is scheduled to be held in 2023, should be held in-person, given the ongoing removal of restrictions on international travel. There should be a discussion between the three co-convenors on where this Dialogue

should take place. ISIS Malaysia would be prepared to host this if funding were made available.

- On the part of ASEAN stakeholders, there is a desire for this dialogue to be hosted by either Asialink or ANZF at some point in the future.