

ASEAN and Australia

Opening statement by Professor Tony Milner to the inquiry into 'Australia's relationship with ASEAN', to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, Parliament House.

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At a conference in Melbourne last week one participant referred to ASEAN as an "obstructionist mean-spirited little grouping". Especially with the thrilling rise of China, we are perhaps tempted to be dismissive regarding ASEAN – regarding the countries and the organization itself. I would argue, however, that this type of dismissiveness is wrong-headed and dangerous.

Let me make a couple of points to underline the importance of ASEAN, and then speak about aspects of Australia's approach to the region.

It is true that ASEAN has only 600 million people against China's 1.3 billion, but this is still a very large number, and these people live close to us. Also, ASEAN as a grouping is today a larger trading partner for us than China, Japan or the United States. We have had as well a decades-long security involvement in the region, including in counter-terrorism.

The ASEAN region remains turbulent. It includes a number of relatively new nation states, some still in the process of formation. This means, for instance, very complex border relations between Myanmar/Burma and Thailand, and Thailand and Malaysia. There is also ongoing suspicion between Indonesia and Malaysia.

The continuing turbulence of Southeast Asia is an important context for considering the institution of ASEAN itself. As a regional organization it is often criticized for not solving practical problems such as the Myanmar political crisis. The stress in ASEAN on consensus, consultation, non-interference and gentle confidence building – and the constant talk talk in the region – are often criticized. But we need to recall how new ASEAN regionalism is by the standards of European regionalism. Recall too that ASEAN is fragmented by different cultural influences: Theravada Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism. There is no single religious heritage as Europe possesses.

The codes of behaviour and interaction in ASEAN have actually helped to create a sense of community and identity. They also appear to have had a moderating influence on inter-state disputes.

One further aspect of ASEAN is its role in building a wider Asian and Asia-Pacific regionalism. Many of us today are frustrated by the overlap and contest between regional organizations, regional architectures, and by their weakness as institutions. The architecture is certainly messy. But we should note that we are in a period of far-reaching transition – when Western influence is in decline. The architectural mess is a sign of deeper processes underway – shifting economic and military power, identity struggles and so forth.

In such a period of contest and experimentation – a period in which might have cause to feel vulnerable – we ought to recall first, that the elites of ASEAN have had long diplomatic experience in handling larger outside powers; secondly, that ASEAN itself has been a project for some forty years, and is currently helping to socialize China in the wider Asian community; and, thirdly, that if ASEAN was not in the 'driver's seat' of this broader Asian regionalism, the task of determining which major power would replace ASEAN would not – at least at this stage – be easy.

Over the last decade China, as is well known, has been painstaking and successful in fostering favourable relations in the ASEAN region. Over many years we have sought to

enhance Australian influence among these countries. Today we do so partly because the wider world expects us to: effective relations give us street cred.

To have an effective engagement with the ASEAN region, however, is demanding. Dealing with ASEAN as an institution is one matter – and I would applaud the government for appointing last week an Ambassador to ASEAN – but we also need to deal with the ten individual ASEAN countries.

Acting bilaterally as well as multilaterally – developing bilateral trade, security and other relations – we recognize the different character of the individual states, and of the relations we have with them.

In considering the demands of dealing with so many ASEAN countries – with their range of languages and political cultures – I would like to make three points.

First, as a community we must acknowledge that Australia requires a highly sophisticated diplomatic and intelligence operation. This needs proper resourcing as a matter of national interest, and national security.

Secondly, maximum use should be made of Australia's Track II capacities. Track II networks – organizations that are formally independent of government but maintain close working relations with government officials (including Ministers) – are a strong feature of the ASEAN region. Australia began to see the national advantage in engaging in this Track II action back in the 1980s and 1990s. I would be happy to speak about the Track II institutions in which I have engaged: these would include the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific, the Asialink Conversations, the St. James Ethics Centre regional meetings and a new initiative for a regular Australia/New Zealand meeting with the influential ASEAN-ISIS network. That network's openness to such an arrangement is one further step in the process of building Australia into the Asian region.

From a government point of view, such Track II endeavours are of course an inexpensive contribution to this nation's Asian engagement.

The third and final point I want to make about Australia's approach to ASEAN concerns our knowledge capacities. The task ahead is immense. We should be pleased by the Government's decision to spend some sixty million over three years to promote Asian languages and Asian studies in our school system. But it should be noted that twenty million per year is equivalent to the purchase of two Abrams tanks.

When I say the educational task is immense, consider that (according to the Asian Education Foundation) only about 400 university students are studying the Indonesian language and just a handful are learning Thai or Vietnamese.

Such figures suggest that – given Australia's geopolitical location and given the highly significant changes at present underway in the region – our current educational base is inadequate in terms of Australia's national interest.

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For all other inquiries, contact the Sub-Committee Secretary, John Carter, on 02 6277 4306 or visit the committee website at

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jfadt/asean1/index.htm>