

# SPECIAL REPORT

Australia as an ASEAN Community partner

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Graeme Dobell

February 2018



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Graeme Dobell, a journalist for 45 years, has been reporting on Australian and international politics, foreign affairs and defence, and the Asia Pacific since 1975. He is Journalist Fellow with the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, writing for ASPI's blog, [The Strategist](#).

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**ASPI**

Level 2  
40 Macquarie Street  
Barton ACT 2600  
Australia

Tel + 61 2 6270 5100

Fax + 61 2 6273 9566

Email [enquiries@aspi.org.au](mailto:enquiries@aspi.org.au)

[www.aspi.org.au](http://www.aspi.org.au)

[www.aspistrategist.org.au](http://www.aspistrategist.org.au)



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australia should seek membership/partnership of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

We should aim for a form of ASEAN membership/partnership by 2024, the 50th anniversary of Australia becoming the first ASEAN dialogue nation.

New Zealand should join any Australian effort to join ASEAN. A joint Australia – New Zealand effort will be mutually reinforcing.

The ASEAN–Australia summit in Sydney in March is the launch point for a discussion of what much closer cooperation could mean for the future of the ASEAN Community.

Alternative routes to membership could be used:

1. Half-in status by 2024, with Australia and New Zealand becoming ASEAN observers. This embraces the existing ASEAN system.

Or, what I've come to see as the better course:

2. The creation of a new form of ASEAN membership—embracing Australia and New Zealand as ASEAN Community partners. This avoids the geographical veto (not part of Southeast Asia) while acknowledging the value Australia and New Zealand could bring to ASEAN. As ASEAN Community partners, Australia (and New Zealand) would have full ASEAN rights and obligations.

As the geostrategic and geo-economic pressures build in Asia, ASEAN, as a middle-power grouping, needs the extra middle-power heft offered by Australia and New Zealand.

Australia's ASEAN membership wouldn't affect our alliance with the US, any more than formal alliances with the US have restricted the ASEAN roles of Thailand or the Philippines. Certainly, the quasi-alliance Singapore has created with America hasn't altered Singapore's ASEAN commitment. Australia's alliance would be an asset, not a hindrance, just as the US alliance was no barrier to Australia signing ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation.

A Twitter straw poll on whether Australia should join ASEAN got a Yes majority in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and The Philippines. The No majorities were in Australia and Indonesia.

Australia's Asian future will be shaped by ASEAN's success or failure. We have fundamental interests in ASEAN. If the ASEAN Community project is a success—in its social, political and strategic dimensions—Australia will want to be deeply involved in that vibrant community. Equally, Australia's interests would be deeply compromised if ASEAN stalls or fails.

Australia knows the Southeast Asia it wants to live with. Joining ASEAN is the best way to give full expression to our future in Southeast Asia and in Asia more broadly.

# BEYOND ENGAGEMENT: TIME TO JOIN

The evolution of Australia's thinking about ASEAN has gathered enough pace that it's time to propose a new Australian passion and purpose. Instead of constant pledges of engagement, Australia's future in Southeast Asia lies in joining ASEAN. The long engagement must move to commitment and union.

Our strategic interests, economic aspirations and democratic principles are served by the creation of the ASEAN Community. We should become part of that community.

Australia wants closer strategic alignment with ASEAN and ever-greater economic integration—the 10-nation grouping now represents about 15% of total trade. ASEAN is our third largest trading partner, after China and the EU.

In March, with Sydney Harbour as the glittering setting, Australia has the chance to get ambitious about its place in what Malcolm Turnbull calls 'our region', as the Prime Minister hosts the [Australia–ASEAN summit](#), the first on Australian soil.

The Sydney summit is the moment to launch the long conversation about Australia joining ASEAN. The summit can give that engagement an aim and a timeline. Australia should join the Community in 2024, the 50th anniversary of Australia becoming the first ASEAN dialogue partner.

If Australia reaches for it, New Zealand will want in—it would be a joint Oz–Kiwi quest. Convincing the Kiwis will be the easiest part.

When I first started talking and writing about Oz–Kiwi membership of ASEAN, I suggested reaching a half-in point in 2024—seeking the status of ASEAN observer as a step to eventual full membership. This approach embraces the existing ASEAN system, matching the official observer status already granted to Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea. Start the climb to full membership after achieving, consolidating and contributing from the half-in role of observer.

As I've pursued the idea, though, various ASEAN insiders have argued that the observer route is too cautious, and doesn't acknowledge the importance of what Australia could offer ASEAN—and the significance of what Australia must rethink. Being so careful risks half-hearted failure.

Singapore's former top diplomat, Kishore Mahbubani, says observer status is no big deal—the real challenge Australia faces, he says, is a 'fundamental change in mindset'. Mahbubani thinks that hard geopolitics will eventually trump Australia's cultural identity and that a turn to ASEAN is inevitable.

A former Secretary-General of ASEAN, Ong Keng Yong, says that, rather than pursuing the Observer route, a more elegant solution is to create a new category of partner/member for Australia and New Zealand. Such a new ASEAN category would sidestep the geographical veto (they aren't in Southeast Asia; they can't be part of ASEAN). Get all the rights and obligations of a member by sidestepping the word 'member'. The title I gave this new category of belonging (association, alignment, alliance) is 'ASEAN Community partner'.

The adventurous option is not to go half-in in 2024, but to use that date as the moment when Australia and New Zealand step up as ASEAN Community members. Australia and ASEAN will have to decide on the size and speed of the ambition.

The imprecision about the final form makes this fine summit fodder. At the Sydney meeting, Australia and ASEAN can pledge to seek new levels of togetherness, then spend the six years working out how to do it. A certain imprecision about the eventual form of membership/partnership will be useful. A six-year timeline makes it close enough to be real, but far enough into the future for leaders to leave the detail for later. It's the perfect summit announceable: symbolism now, substance later.

Turnbull declares the [Sydney summit](#) a 'historic and unprecedented opportunity to strengthen Australia's strategic partnership with ASEAN and deliver tangible economic and security benefits to Australia'. Time, then, to make history. In the way of such gatherings of the great, leaders can do good by gathering together existing trends and giving them a big shove-along.

Coming just after ASEAN's 50th birthday, the Sydney summit can stir ambition into the symbolism, reaching towards substance. Australia and ASEAN have lots they agree on. And plenty of fears they share.

Australia and ASEAN are in heartfelt agreement that they must never have to choose between China and the US. Yet the size of the geo-economic prizes and the pressure of the geopolitical puzzles keep building. All that weight will make it natural for ASEAN to seek more from Australia and New Zealand. Southeast Asia's middle-power grouping needs added middle-power heft.

Summits seldom solve anything. But sitting with a chilly, clear view at the top of the mountain, leaders can agree on interests, align national approaches and even sketch ways forward. Summits get to first base when they do no harm. They get to second and third bases if they actually tackle the big topics. Communiqués are always an attempt to sketch the future, as much as a record of compromises paraded as agreement.

In Sydney, the Business Summit can do—well, business—and the Counter-Terrorism Conference will confront the nightmare that's gripping polities everywhere. Up the metaphorical mountain, the leaders at their dual summit-retreat can have a meeting of minds that ranges over Asia's tectonic strategic trends, the meaning of the new ASEAN Community, and what Australia could bring to Southeast Asia's future.

The mountaintop agenda was offered in the final pages of Turnbull's 2017 [Shangri-La speech in Singapore](#). After kicking China with shrill vigour and dancing carefully around Donald Trump's Hunger Games realpolitik, Turnbull examined the import of his declaration: 'In this brave new world we cannot rely on great powers to safeguard our interests.'

The middle powers will have to do a lot for themselves, and Turnbull offered an ASEAN-flavoured vision of a region where the habits of cooperation and transparent rules can outweigh force and coercion. Any Australian leader playing back to ASEAN its habits of mind about finding regional solutions to regional problems is going to get lots in return.

In marking ASEAN's 50th birthday, Turnbull lauded the association's past strategic success as a formula for the future: 'We support a strong, united ASEAN that continues to convene and strengthen organisations such as the East Asia Summit, the region's only leaders-led forum that can help manage the region's strategic risks. And we support an ASEAN that remains committed to liberal economic values.'

Do more than support. Join. At the Sydney summit, Australia has the chance to move beyond engagement to commitment.

Two huge discussions need to be launched. The 10-member association will take a mountain of convincing. The other country that will have to make big changes in its thinking and understanding of itself is Australia. The shift in Australian attitudes would be as significant as that within ASEAN.



This paper draws on conversations and interviews in Southeast Asia over the past couple of years. In those conversations—after working through the objections of ASEAN interlocutors—the same end point was often reached: Australia will have to convince itself before it can convince ASEAN. If we come to believe it, many in ASEAN would be interested in the conversation that will follow.

The ultimate arguments won't be about the geography of Southeast Asia, but about attitudes, understandings and beliefs. And the right to belong that comes from a sense of belonging.

The geography argument, by the way, can be confronted in two ways. One is to argue that Australia, as a nation sharing a border with Indonesia, is seeking the same ASEAN membership status as two other Indonesian neighbours, Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste. We could seek the observer status held by Papua New Guinea since 1976 and Timor-Leste since 2002.

The alternative approach says Australia can do much for ASEAN—it must be a special case. Australia's aspiration would be to play a bigger, more constructive and active role than the existing observers. On the journey to the ASEAN Community—social, political and strategic—Australia can be a major contributor. Thus, ignore the geographical veto and create a new form of ASEAN membership for Australia and New Zealand.

Australia won't have to give up deeply held beliefs about democracy and human rights to enter ASEAN. We can heartily embrace the values formally expressed in the ASEAN Community.

Membership wouldn't affect our alliance with the US, any more than formal alliances with the US have restricted the ASEAN roles of Thailand or the Philippines. Certainly, the quasi-alliance that Singapore has created with America hasn't altered Singapore's ASEAN commitment. Australia would come at this from a different direction, but with the same spirit. The alliance would be an asset, not a hindrance, to ASEAN membership, just as the US alliance was no barrier to Australia signing ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation.

# THE CASE FOR AUSTRALIA'S ASEAN MEMBERSHIP

A strong voice for Australia joining ASEAN is the former head of Singapore's Foreign Ministry, the ASEAN intellectual Kishore Mahbubani (anointed by *The Economist* as Asia's Toynbee, while *The Washington Post* sees him as Asia's Max Weber).

Mahbubani thinks the country facing the most painful adjustment to the Asian century is undoubtedly Australia. Joining ASEAN is a smart response to the danger that 'Australia could well be left beached, together with New Zealand, as the sole Western entity in Asia.' He contends that [Australia's ASEAN dilemma](#) is national ego versus long-term interests—and that hard geopolitics will trump Australia's cultural identity:

In the long run, Australia will also have no choice but to seek membership in ASEAN. Right now, any such option is unthinkable in the minds of the Australian elite. Yet this is precisely the kind of 'unthinkable' option that Australia has to consider as it enters the most challenging geopolitical environment of its history. In thinking of the unthinkable, Australian leaders should also ask themselves a simple question: why is Australian membership of ASEAN unthinkable? In due course, the honest answer will come out. The main disconnect between ASEAN and Australia is in the cultural dimension. ASEAN is Asian in culture and spirit. Australia is Western in culture and spirit. The main reason why Australia will be uncomfortable as a member of ASEAN is that it will have to learn how to behave as an Asian rather than as a Western nation. In thinking about this discomfort, Australians should bear in mind a new reality for Australia. Australia will have to change course in the Asian century. It will only have painful options. There will be no painless options. The big question that Australia will have to ponder as it looks ahead at its future in the 21st century is a simple one: will it be more painful for Australia to join ASEAN (and thereby accept both its constraints and its valuable geopolitical buffer) or will it be more painful for Australia to remain beached alone as the sole Western country (with New Zealand) in a resurgent Asia of 3.5 billion people?

No choice but to join! When I started work on this project, Mahbubani's was my first formal interview. He says the biggest challenge Australia faces is a 'fundamental change in mindset'. The inevitability of the choice will be driven by the inexorable decline in the relative size of Australia's economy compared to East Asia's. As Mahbubani comments: 'It's frightening that not more Australians are saying, "It's time to change".'

Singapore, he says, would gladly have Australia in ASEAN and has said so privately.

As Foreign Ministry Secretary (1993–1998), Mahbubani raised the idea of a community of 12 (the ASEAN 10 plus Australia and New Zealand) with Australia's Foreign Affairs Secretary, Michael Costello, during the Keating Labor government (1991–1996). 'I used to mention it when I was in ASEAN senior officials' meetings—there was no outrageous reaction.' Back then, the veto by Malaysia's Mahathir would have been instant. Now, Mahbubani thinks, Malaysia would see advantages.

Several other ASEAN thinkers believe the geopolitical veto would be from China—using Cambodia as proxy. Beijing could replay the unsuccessful spoiler role it attempted when Australia got membership of the East Asia Summit. Mahbubani isn't so sure that China would object:

From China's point of view, it means Australia is less pro-American and more sensitive to its Asian neighbourhood; it's a plus for China. If you want to join ASEAN you become less pro-American and you behave more like an ASEAN state; it's in their [China's] interests.'

No strong ASEAN veto sentiment exists, he says, partly because the idea hasn't come up:

I may be wrong, but I don't think so. I mean, you need to lay the groundwork. You need to prepare everyone for the change. The problem is no one has ever thought about it because it wasn't on the cards. Once it appears on the cards then they'll start thinking and reflecting on the pros and cons.

Mahbubani sees a bid for half-in status as an ASEAN observer as a good but small step:

**Mahbubani** Observer status is no big deal.

**Dobell** Accepting that view, doesn't that make it a gentle way to ease into the membership discussion?

**Mahbubani** I think the critical thing is to decide whether or not you think it's in your national interest to join, and work towards that goal. Observer status is just a little subterfuge to try and get close on the way there—it should not become the end destination.

Many elements would feed into Australia's ASEAN shift. Mahbubani nominates:

- Asian language courses for every Australian schoolchild (not confined to ASEAN languages)
- Australia systematically signing up to ASEAN agreements
- Getting closer to the ASEAN voting stream at the UN.

'Your biggest challenge is domestic,' Mahbubani says. 'You've got to persuade the Australian population.'

Brushing aside the observer route into ASEAN, a former Secretary-General of ASEAN, Ong Keng Yong, says the association could create a special category of partnership just for Australia and New Zealand.

Ong says Australia and New Zealand are so important to the ASEAN Community project that the association could refashion its structure. The former Singaporean diplomat says that the approach of getting Australia and New Zealand half-in as ASEAN observers is too constrained by what exists now. Better, he thinks, to come up with a fresh form that expresses the mutual importance of ASEAN, Australia and New Zealand.

Dialogue partner already trumps observer status, he says. Create something new to step beyond the dialogue partnership—not a sideways step to the observer platform, as Ong explains:

We should not look at this issue purely in the traditional way of the meaning of being a member in the regional grouping. ASEAN and Australia, we are already dialogue partner. And during my time as ASEAN Secretary-General I have actually asked: How do we go one step further? From dialogue partner, what is the next level cooperation of association with each other? This is something the ASEAN countries will have to deliberate.

Ong, Secretary-General of ASEAN from 2003 to 2007, echoes the analysis of his predecessor, Rodolfo Severino (Secretary-General from 1998 to 2002) in describing the objections that will be raised to Australia and New Zealand joining ASEAN. In the Ong analysis, the two 'important constraints' are ASEAN'S geographical definition of Southeast Asia and the identity and values expressed by ASEAN.

Unlike Severino, though, Ong sees persuasive counterarguments focusing on what Australia and New Zealand can do for the ASEAN Community. Speaking as a Singaporean, he thinks Oz-Kiwi membership of the association is 'not impossible'; that reflects my view that, if Australia and New Zealand got serious and started making the case, Singapore would be among our strongest supporters within ASEAN.

Ong says ASEAN's own interests offer many reasons to get together with Australia and New Zealand for a more substantive and integrated partnership:

If you look at the future in terms of trade, people-to-people exchanges, even politics and security—maritime security—increasingly it is almost impossible to separate Australia and New Zealand from our future. So how do we develop a so-called half-in-half-out kind of status for Australia? It should not be observer. In our scheme of things, dialogue partner is higher than observer. So I think we need to study this. And in the last few years Australia's relations with individual ASEAN countries have become even more intensified and solidified. So we can find something.

Ong says creating a new and higher form of ASEAN relationship for Australia and New Zealand would help sidestep the geographical argument about not being part of Southeast Asia: 'What kind of vocabulary can we develop to bring a dialogue partner like Australia to a more elevated level which signifies we can have a more substantive connection, a more substantive integration?'

The ideal, then, is to promote Australia and New Zealand beyond dialogue partner. How to describe this shift? The descriptor would be a new category of partner-cum-member—a partner with member rights. My suggestion, based on Ong's idea, would be for Australia and New Zealand to become ASEAN Community partners; embrace ASEAN but commit to the rights and obligations of the great Community project. Australia could bring much to the development of ASEAN's Community in its [political-security](#), [economic](#) and [socio-cultural](#) dimensions.

Southeast Asia is feeling the pressure from Asia's big beasts—the US, China, Japan and India. ASEAN, as a middle-power grouping, needs extra middle-power heft from Australia and New Zealand. The strategic case for ASEAN taking its partnership with Australia and New Zealand to higher levels is a key element of Ong's thinking. A new ASEAN status for Australia and New Zealand, he says, would offer geopolitical benefits for ASEAN that could outweigh the standing geographical veto over ASEAN membership for anyone outside Southeast Asia:

Right now the ASEAN countries as a group, increasingly we can feel we are being squeezed between China, Japan and India. One thing good about the Americans is that they are so benign as a big power, vis-a-vis Southeast Asia. We never really got serious pressure from them. Once in a blue moon we got a hammering by them on human rights issues and, lately, people smuggling. But overall, they come across as a very benign strategic power which we in Southeast Asia—even our friends on mainland Southeast Asia would admit it—we like having the Americans around. They bring in business, investment, a new way of looking at the world. We leave the big, big politics to them, working with the Chinese and the Indians and the Japanese. Lately because of the South China Sea issue, it's starkly displayed what it would be like if we, ASEAN, have to deal with this by ourselves. It is not easy. Continental Southeast Asia is very much sensitive to what the big brother [China] wants. But maritime Southeast Asia—Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines and Brunei—go, 'Oh, dear!' That's why the stress now is always on multilateralism and inclusive, open-ended development. So, conceivably as our ASEAN business and trade and other relations grow with Australia and New Zealand in the next 10 or 15 years, there will be more of a balance. The geography of Southeast Asia will not be just the ten, eleven Southeast Asians nations, not just ASEAN as an organisation. But with Australia and New Zealand as part of the equation—part of, in Chinese terms, part of the equation.

**Dobell:** Bulking up ASEAN as the middle-power grouping by bringing in a couple of more middle powers?

**Ong:** Yes, we are also geographically somewhere in the middle. I assume the Indian Ocean will be very much India and South Asia; northern Pacific will be China, Japan and Korea. And until now, the southern part of the Western Pacific is Australia and New Zealand. No issue. So if it goes on in this current trajectory with everybody trying to grab what they can, establish their sphere of influence, we in ASEAN will go back to our [1967] [Bangkok Declaration](#) and say, 'Hey, we are not interested in your sphere of influence or your reshaping of the regional order.' We just want to be ASEAN and whoever works with us. And in this respect, Australia and New Zealand will be a major factor; because we grow our trade—China, yes, we grow our trade; Japan, we grow our trade — but in terms of the people exchange, the development of the next generation of professionals, it's quite different. Because more Southeast Asians come to study in Australia, they spend years in Australia.

Ong's thinking on integrating Australia and New Zealand with ASEAN centres on the term 'partnership', not 'membership.' He sees going the observer route as being too compliant with ASEAN forms, while simultaneously not delivering real substance or conferring much membership status. Instead, sidestep the opposition to anyone beyond Southeast Asia being an ASEAN member by creating a new form of belonging for Australia and New Zealand—a bigger and better and more intimate Oz–Kiwi relationship with ASEAN. But what to call it?

**Ong:** I don't think we ought to use the term 'associate'—we don't like the word 'associate'. We don't like the word 'membership' per se, because we say it's only ASEAN 10—and now the big debate is about Timor-Leste. So I think it will be more driven by the concept of partnership, moving from dialogue partnership to what? You're the wordsmith—you can invent something!

**Dobell:** That's why I chickened out and just took the observer model—but supercharge it so it describes a different ASEAN relationship with Australia and New Zealand, different from what you have with Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste. Because at least observer is an existing basis.

**Ong:** It's an interesting concept. People can understand it. But I don't know. I think it may not work that way. It may not be useful to have that existing vocabulary. Because it doesn't project the new century relationship between Australia, New Zealand and Southeast Asia.

A little un-ASEAN, this. Ditch the existing vocabulary. Do something new. Express the 21st-century relationship with a fresh category. Australia and New Zealand need to reach for a partnership that goes well beyond dialogue to become part of ASEAN's creation of Community. It's a classic ASEAN fix: give Australia and New Zealand membership rights but call it some form of super partnership.

Exercising my Ong-conferred status as wordsmith, the label I came up with would emphasise an embrace of the Community equal to the embrace of ASEAN. The solution: Australia and New Zealand could become ASEAN Community partners. As ASEAN Community partners, we would get all the benefits and obligations of membership without having to meet Southeast Asia's geographical test.

# THE CANBERRA CAUTIONS

The proposition that Australia should join ASEAN gets lots of kicks in Southeast Asia and plenty of hits in Canberra. The negative Australian response offers a fascinating calibration of how Australia measures its interests: committed to Asia, of course, but not totally committed. We want to be in, yet perhaps not all-in.

Canberra's argument of defeat runs that ASEAN would just say, 'No.' So why would we ask? And why would we want it anyway? Seeking ASEAN membership would consume a lot of time and effort, complicating the relationship with ASEAN.

The view from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) is that Australia should put all its weight into making the East Asia Summit stronger and better. Seeking to operationalise the East Asia Summit is all about working with ASEAN, not opening a new front in a quixotic quest that will fail.

Those are strong arguments. Yet they're arguments about the old ASEAN and 20th-century Australia—and a fading Asia calculus. The perspective is drawn from the experience of the past 50 years, not what we need in coming decades.

The negative case misses the potential benefits by peering too closely at the difficulties. Further, the refusal to contemplate such an initiative underestimates Asia's changing times. All sorts of diplomatic shifts and adjustments are a-coming.

Asia's [balance of power](#) is on the move. Who now writes [the rules](#)? The dark view is that Asia's complex security tapestry 'has been unravelling for some years and [the rate of deterioration](#) may be accelerating'.

The changes inside ASEAN are nearly as dramatic—at least compared to the way ASEAN used to operate. ASEAN has to adapt, ready or not. Time for Australia to adapt as well.

The Canberra case for the negative, as seen by DFAT, was offered in detail by Bob Carr (Foreign Minister, 2012–13) in [his memoirs](#). The issue was running during Carr's time as foreign minister because of a call by Paul Keating, in November 2012, for Australia to join ASEAN. The former prime minister's speech on [Asia's new order](#) argued that Australia's power and influence are shrinking. To matter in the future, Keating said, it'll be 'completely natural' for Australia to line up with ASEAN:

In the longer run we should be a member of it—formalising the many trade, commercial and political interests we already share. This is the natural place for Australia to belong; indeed, the one to which we should attribute primacy.

Responding to Keating, Foreign Minister Carr gave the classic the-time-is-not-ripe [answer](#):

Yeah, the day might come, but they're very proud, the 10 ASEAN nations are very proud of what they call ASEAN centrality. And you don't force your way in to a community before time. To be right before it's appropriate is to be wrong. The day could well come, but I suspect now is not the time. But again this is where Paul Keating has been very, very useful, he's challenging us to think about a different future, about different arrangements in the future.

I would not want Australia to put its hand up to seek membership of ASEAN at a point where the 10 ASEAN nations focused on ASEAN centrality, focused on some of the challenges in South-east Asia, the emergence of Myanmar towards democracy, for example; or the disputes over territory in the South China Sea, were not ready for an Australian admission.

Carr wrote that this prompted DFAT to jump. It was one of those moments when the ‘department springs to life in ways that reveal its hidden personality’. Up came a submission from DFAT asking Carr to clarify that ‘Australian has no plans to seek or even consider membership even in the long term and that doing so is not necessary to pursuing closer engagement with the region.’ Carr recorded DFAT’s thinking:

The submission says membership of ASEAN would ‘subordinate aspects of Australian foreign policy to ASEAN. It would require Australia to refrain from any real criticism of ASEAN governments (e.g. on human-rights issues) and from putting forward alternatives to ASEAN positions. It would require Australia to accept other ASEAN countries, notably the ASEAN Chair, representing Australia in discussions with external parties such as the United States, China and international organisations.’ It then goes on to warn that membership of ASEAN would involve with it Australia having to set up an ASEAN National Secretariat to implement ASEAN decisions at the national level and that in general it would cramp Australian independence. It also warns that ASEAN countries would be strongly opposed to Australia joining. It says the Singaporean High Commissioner was twice asked informally if recent public commentary is as a result of policy consideration with the Australian government.

Australia confronts a version of the Groucho Marx line: ‘I don’t want to belong to any club that would accept me as one of its members.’ Or Canberra muses on a complicated semi-Groucho conundrum: ‘Love the club. Think it’s a wonderful, vitally important club. But we’d never want to join. Oh, and they don’t want us.’

The essentials of DFAT’s negative case run:

- Base argument: ASEAN would say, ‘No’.
- Minor point: ASEAN membership would involve a lot of work.
- Major point: Australia would subordinate itself to ASEAN.

**Base argument:** If asked today, ASEAN would, indeed, give various responses that would amount to a negative consensus. Thus, Australia wouldn’t ask. This paper’s argument is that Australia would not be so blunt, and ASEAN’s response need not be abrupt. What’s needed is a conversation stretching over the next six years about how much closer the relationship can become. Much that’s already happening in Asia will make this a necessary, even vital process of imagination, as much for ASEAN as for us.

**Minor point:** The ‘too much work’ argument is a laugh. Repurpose another Groucho line and move on: ‘Diplomacy is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly and applying the wrong remedies.’

**Major point:** The subordinate-to-ASEAN line is interesting in what it claims about the reality of ASEAN workings today and the future of the ASEAN Community. Neither the proclaimed theory nor the habits of ASEAN make this a knockout blow in the case for the negative. ASEAN is a long way from becoming the European Economic Community, much less the European Union. We pay our diplomats to know the difference between Europe and Asia.

The subordinate-our-values line is significant. [Matt Davies](#), of the Australian National University, argues that ASEAN norms would be ‘a pre-emptive blanket that smothers the possibility of criticism from other member states. Australia joining ASEAN would have numerous deleterious consequences for the promotion of our values. What is the benefit of Australia being willingly mute in the realm of human rights and democracy?’

If accepted, this is a killer semi-Groucho. Here’s a rebuttal in several parts. First, Matt isn’t describing an Australia I recognise. His is an Australia that sits still, shuts up, goes along and doesn’t push. Not us. Australia would no more change its fundamental nature within ASEAN than Indonesia or Malaysia or the Philippines or Vietnam or any of the 10 have changed their essential natures in the association.

Further, on the long march to the Community, ASEAN is seeking to remake its regionalism in important ways that Australia will happily embrace. The proclaimed norms are shifting—we'd be pushing with the Community tide. An Australia inside the ASEAN Community would be intent on seeing fellow association members fulfil the democratic principles set in the foundation documents of the Community. There's a big gap between the democratic promise of the Community aspiration and current political reality in many ASEAN states. That democratic deficit, though, is a reason for Australia to get closer and work harder, not to hold back. We must keep asking ASEAN to harken to the better angels of its own proclamations.

In the values discussion, [the Blueprint for the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community](#) commits to an ASEAN that will 'promote human and social development, respect for fundamental freedoms, gender equality, the promotion and protection of human rights and the promotion of social justice.' Not much in that to force Oz diplomats to sit down and shut up.

Australia has already had a big subordinate-ourselves-to-ASEAN argument that turned out to be a mouse that couldn't squeak, much less roar. To gain the seat at the East Asia Summit, Australia had to sign an ASEAN foundational document, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). Oh horror, went the subordination argument, Australia will have to compromise its commitment to the US alliance. This was tosh.

Australia signed the TAC while stating that the treaty had no impact on alliance commitments. ASEAN didn't twitch and neither did the alliance. And into the East Asia Summit marched Australia. Joining ASEAN, Australia wouldn't even need the clarifying letter we used with the TAC. We'd be joining for—and loudly boosting—the aims of the Community.

When I spoke to Bob Carr, he ran through the negative argument and came down finally to the problem of Australia reaching for ASEAN membership as a huge distraction:

The Department's view was that this was not in our interest, that we had a foreign policy focus different from that of most of the other nations in ASEAN, and that we'd have to compromise some of our national interests if we sat as a member of ASEAN. There was an argument I don't think the Department used that I would have used: that is it would have taken an enormous amount of diplomatic capital to have got us into the thing. And I think softer diplomacy in Southeast Asia reflects our national interest better—not the arm twisting and the lecturing and the hectoring that would have been involved in persuading ten nations to allow Australia in. The process of attempting to get in would have had them all thinking of the ways Australia is different from them. So, if I were Foreign Minister, and someone put to me that we should join ASEAN, I would have thought that it is a huge distraction—one that could have activated and agitated hostility or reservations at very least about Australia.

If ASEAN is central to the main game, how is getting ever closer to ASEAN a distraction from the main game? Or, put another way, how close to ASEAN is actually too close?

When he was Foreign Minister, Carr mounted powerful arguments for Australia's need to align with ASEAN, the importance of ASEAN views, and an embrace of ASEAN centrality as part of Australia's 'more sophisticated understanding of our region and our place within it.' In a [speech in Singapore](#), Carr praised ASEAN as integral to the political shifts in Asia towards democracy and freedom:

We've seen the achievement of ASEAN centrality at work and a shift from regional cooperation to regional integration. Australia listens and takes close note of what ASEAN and its member states think. And I highlight alignment with ASEAN as a feature of my period as foreign minister.

Accepting those arguments of regional integration and ASEAN alignment means looking at whether an ever-closer relationship leads to ASEAN membership. That's the logic-path followed by the former Foreign Affairs Minister and Defence Minister, [Stephen Smith](#), who emphasises ASEAN's centrality and the vital Australian relationship with Indonesia. Smith says Australia should reach for observer status in 2024 (the 50th anniversary of Australia becoming ASEAN's first dialogue partner), leading to full membership in 2050:



We should start a conversation with Indonesia and with ASEAN about Australia becoming an Observer to ASEAN. The qualitative difference between a Dialogue Partner (which all of the East Asia Summit plus 8 members are) and an Observer, is that being an Observer potentially puts you on a pathway to membership of ASEAN. At present Timor Leste and Papua New Guinea are ASEAN Observers. This puts them on a potential pathway to membership of ASEAN. This is not something for today but it might be something for 2050. So you go to a halfway house, to Observer status, that says to ASEAN and Indonesia, ‘we’re serious about this’ and puts you on a potential pathway to ASEAN membership but not a pathway you necessarily have to adopt.

A position of alignment with ASEAN and its centrality is a useful place for Australia to start a membership discussion. With all its complications, the Australian argument can be divided into opposing camps, where the difference is just one of degree:

- We should be close as possible to ASEAN, but not in ASEAN
- We should be all-in with ASEAN

See how this debate plays through the words of three fine Australian thinkers, two from the close-but-not-too-close side and one all-in advocate.

The first of the close-but-not-in advocates is former diplomat [John McCarthy](#), who argues that, above all, Australia wants ASEAN to survive—its unity is more important than its robustness:

If we put store by ASEAN unity and the value of ASEAN centrality to the Asian architecture, the case is unconvincing (other than in an essentially economic context) for a structurally closer Australian association with ASEAN and negligible for Australian membership of ASEAN—even if we really wanted either. Many in ASEAN wonder about the integrity of our professed identification with the region given the wholesale priority we have put on our security dealings with the United States since 9/11 and the degree to which we alternatively blow hot and lukewarm on our engagement with the region. But even if we were to convince ASEAN that we meant what we said about closer association, it’s impossible to see the Australian political style and the current overriding priority we attach to the American relationship permitting ASEAN’s acceptance of our overtures.

Another close-but-not-in perspective is from ASPI’s [Rod Lyon](#), who thinks Australia’s entreaties for closer strategic relationships with ASEAN will be more credible if our motives are pure, and Australia is not also a mendicant for admission to ASEAN:

What does Australia want from Southeast Asia? Good neighbours, certainly—and a shared sense of community is the foundation stone of a peaceful, interactive sub-region. We also want good trade relationships with regional states, a shared willingness to invest political and economic capital in addressing common challenges, and a stronger, more developed and more resilient sub-region. But there’s something else we want too, and it’s perhaps the most important of all our interests. We want a Southeast Asia that’s a positive contributor to a stable, liberal, prosperous Asian security order.

The ‘all-in’ case is from Sinologist [Stephen FitzGerald](#), who says embracing ASEAN would express an independent Australian foreign policy and revive the idea of Australia being part of Asia:

A renewed engagement with ASEAN would have many advantages. It would encourage us to plumb the varieties of Asian thinking on regional affairs and power politics rather than discount them as we often do, and this would be of immense value for us in developing a long-term framework, more predictable policy-making and a more Australian narrative for our foreign policy. It wouldn’t entail repudiation of the United States or China, but it could give us collective weight in seeking to influence and moderate their more high-risk behaviour. It could give us collective caucusing and cooperation in balancing between the United States and China and resisting when necessary both their blandishments and their importunities and pressures. It would be welcomed in ASEAN countries as an Australian rededication to regional partnership, and there’s a host of economic and pressing transnational issues on which we can only benefit from much closer cooperation with ASEAN countries, not least the question of asylum seekers. It could also help Australia refocus and reimagine the positives of our Asian engagement.

# ASEAN'S ASPIRATION AND ANGST AND AUSTRALIA

To ponder 50 years of ASEAN is to see the constant interplay of shadow and substance. On the shadow side, ASEAN always talks a good game and promises much. At the same time, quietly and slowly, the association strives to piece together substance to solidify the shadows. The declaration of the [ASEAN Community](#) in 2015 is a classic of the genre. ASEAN announces that the deed is done with the birth of three communities: the Political–Security Community, the Economic Community and the Socio-Cultural Community. Having created and established the Community, ASEAN then sets off to build substance worthy of the title.

Much substance already glows within the shade. For a start, the [ASEAN Economic Community](#) is ‘collectively the third largest economy in Asia and the seventh largest in the world’. The hard road ahead will be to make the community more collective in its functions. The Economic Community churns through reports, summits, blueprints and action plans, and merrily monitors as it guides integration and investment. Many meetings. A plethora of plans. Ample announcements. Some movement. It’s the ASEAN way. Ditto for the Security Community, although the metrics are more nebulous.

I’ve used the shadow/substance framework to understand ASEAN since I plunged into reporting the multidimensional maze of the Cambodia peace process in the 1980s and early 1990s. Back then, ASEAN’s six members prodded and pulled warily at both China and Vietnam, while China and Vietnam bashed each other. Add in the four Khmer factions and the Soviet Union in its last moments, plus the UN Security Council, and stir and stir and simmer and simmer. Amazingly, something palatable emerged from the witches’ brew. Substance was created from much ASEAN *wayang* work.

Admiration for ASEAN’s ability to play a weak hand with skill was one of many reasons Vietnam quickly became the association’s seventh member at a ceremony in Brunei in 1995. It took two decades, from ’75 to ’95, but the Vietnam domino did finally fall—not to crush Southeast Asia, but to join it.

My defining memory of that 1995 gathering in Bandar Seri Begawan is Vietnam’s Foreign Minister, Nguyen Manh Cam, walking on stage to be greeted by the other ASEAN foreign ministers. Sitting impassively in the front row of the audience was China’s Foreign Minister, Qian Qichen. As the Vietnamese minister turned to face the audience, his eyes went directly to the face of the Chinese minister. Vietnamese grin met icy Chinese stare. Here was a moment of Sino-Vietnamese history with a prelude of thousands of years, a triumphant moment of Southeast Asian regionalism mingling with the complex ancient relationship with China.

As ASEAN marked its 50th birthday in 2017, the shadow/substance frame deserved updating. ASEAN’s achievements decree that the *wayang* way needs a reboot. My fresh version is to adopt Walter Bagehot’s 19th-century division of the English Constitution into the *dignified* and the *efficient*. The dignified bits, the great hack wrote, are used to inspire the people and preserve reverence. The efficient side is the part that actually works and rules.

Practical people often dismiss the artifice and ceremony of the dignified side as useless—ASEAN gets that all the time, with the cry of ‘all process and no product’. As Bagehot observed, those urging mere utilitarianism miss the way the two elements are essential to the whole. The dignified parts of government, Bagehot wrote, create the force: ‘They raise the army, though they do not win the battle.’ Without that ability to create and assemble, the efficient side would have no force to deploy.

Bagehot's categories work well in understanding ASEAN. The only problem is that word 'efficient'; the understanding is right, the label wrong. *Efficient* carries engineering baggage, suggesting elegantly made and smoothly running machinery. In the economic realm, *efficient* is about productivity and the best possible use of resources. Elegance of operation and maximum output aren't what ASEAN offers.

My tweak is to keep *dignified* while labelling the working side *drives*. This captures what drives ASEAN and what it's driving for. So, from shadow/substance to dignified/drives.

The *dignified* parts are all there in the document of creation, the [ASEAN Declaration](#) signed in Bangkok in 1967: economic growth, regional stability, equality and partnership.

The *dignified* language of the declaration translates into security *drives* to give Southeast Asia autonomy and safety and the organisational purpose of ASEAN centrality.

ASEAN has built a region with a set of agreed (dignified) purposes. The ASEAN drives have given substance to a regional imagining that unites Indochina and maritime Southeast Asia.

ASEAN's greatest achievement is internal: the creation of a set of mutual guarantees that have become important strategic and political norms for the 10 members. Just as the European Union makes another war between France and Germany unthinkable, so ASEAN has spent 50 years driving for a Southeast Asia that won't war with itself. The ASEAN peace dividend is remarkable.

ASEAN's central purpose is as a mutual reassurance system among the 10 member states of Southeast Asia. From that base, the dignified dressings of the system and the drives aim to:

- deliver peace and prosperity by protecting state sovereignty and maximising influence
- leverage the collective influence of the 10 states to give ASEAN members a central role in developing Asia's strategic system
- influence the way strategic competition is conducted, aspiring to the creation of regional norms
- use ASEAN to manage the big powers
- get maximum diplomatic and security space—avoid ever having to choose between the US and China.

Over half a century, the ASEAN believers argue, the combination of the dignified and the drives has delivered a [Southeast Asian miracle](#). The insistent question amid the 50th birthday celebrations is 'Can the old miracle formula still deliver the magic?'

The deepest angst is over how that internal achievement can be directed outwards to deal with the big beasts roaming across the Asia-Pacific. ASEAN is ever beset by existential angst. The 'A' in ASEAN stands for 'Angst' as well as 'Association'. Regard this as more description than criticism. The Angst Association of South East Asian Nations always has lots to worry about. Angst and anxiety are rational responses.

The questions are constant: Can the association hold together? Can it actually do anything? Will ASEAN be crushed as it's courted by the bigger beasts of Asia?

One of the things ASEAN does best is agonise over tough times and hard choices. And the evidence of its history is that the association will both survive and thrive. China can constrain ASEAN, but it can't crush it. The association is too useful to its 10 members and all the other players in Asia—even China.

ASEAN's members are relatively weak, and the association must play a weak hand. And before going into the game, ASEAN must always look inward to balance the dynamic among its disparate members. The wonder isn't ASEAN's weak hand, but its long-game skill and the leverage it extracts.

All that angst over many decades has taught Southeast Asia a lot about the value of regionalism. One basic ASEAN lesson holds true: hang together or hang separately.

Australia's dealings with the 10 nations of ASEAN are set by geography, flavoured by history, worked by diplomacy and driven by trade. Throbbing always are the central concerns of power and strategy and defence. The geography and the diplomacy and the power mean Southeast Asia must be a constant interest even if the terms of the obsession change shape over time.

The interests and obsessions inject many layers into Australia's interactions with ASEAN as the regional institution. Not least in the continuous shape-shifting is the steady movement of weight, wealth and power in the ASEAN direction. Over the four decades of the official Australia–ASEAN relationship, relative power has flowed steadily to ASEAN. And the wrangles have always been tough.

Tracing the evolution of Australia's multilateral relations with ASEAN from 1974, when Australia became the first country to establish a multilateral link with the association, [Frank Frost](#) remarks that 'closeness can produce partnership but can cause discord and contest'.

The deals and discords ran through the creation of the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation group (1989), the Cambodia peace agreement (1991), the ASEAN Regional Forum (1994), the conclusion of the ASEAN – Australia – New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (2008), the development of the East Asia Summit (from 2005), and Kevin Rudd's attempt to create an Asia–Pacific Community, which was [kicked to death](#) by ASEAN, with Singapore using the biggest boots.

Frost lists five factors that will shape Australia's future dealings with ASEAN:

1. ASEAN's progress towards its declared goals for economic integration and security cooperation—the Community project—will be crucial.
2. The climate and evolution of interactions among the major powers: 'Increasing major power competition could undermine ASEAN's capacity as a diplomatic actor.'
3. Whether wider multilateral dialogues can make substantive contributions to cooperation and security in East Asia.
4. The character and evolution of Australia's interactions with ASEAN as an institution.
5. The health and viability of Australia's bilateral relationship with Indonesia.

# ASEAN AND AUSTRALIA: NO, MAYBE, INTERESTING

The Southeast Asian rejection of Australia joining ASEAN is simply expressed: ‘You’re not from around here. You don’t think like us. You don’t belong.’ The argument is about identity defined through geography.

The No case is put by Rodolfo Severino, a Philippines diplomat who was the Secretary-General of ASEAN from 1998 to 2002. His summary of the negative case:

ASEAN will say, ‘You’re not Southeast Asian.’ And that’s all the criterion is, to be a member of ASEAN. You must belong to a region called Southeast Asia, which was invented by Lord Mountbatten [during WW2] by the way—South East Asian Command—but that’s neither here nor there. The fact is that the region exists now, conceptually, which is the most important thing.

Severino’s long-held view is that Australia has a ‘sometimes [ambivalent and fluctuating](#) relationship’ with ASEAN. He describes the elements of this variable approach as:

- Australia’s desire for economic engagement with Southeast Asia
- Southeast Asia’s strategic location between Australia and the rest of Asia
- ASEAN’s role as the hub of East Asian regionalism
- Australia’s close and unwavering relationship with the US.

Severino thinks the fluctuations with ASEAN reflect Australian ambivalence about its place in East Asia. The former ASEAN Secretary-General was [caustic](#) in 2005 about the Howard government’s initial refusal to sign the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. John Howard viewed the TAC as non-aligned nonsense—a ‘relic of the Cold War’. The ASEAN ultimatum—no TAC signature, no seat at the East Asia Summit—produced what Severino saw in 2005 as a humiliating about-face:

Canberra’s initial refusal to sign the treaty—indeed, its denigration of it—had affected Southeast Asians’ perceptions of its intentions and motives. Australia continued to signal its reluctance even after it had apparently decided to accede to the TAC; [Foreign Minister] Downer was quoted as saying, ‘If the price (of participation in the East Asian Summit) is signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, we’ll do that’ ... Under either political party, Australia has long considered close association with ASEAN and with the larger East Asian region to be in its highest interests. Accession to the TAC, as well as participation in the East Asian Summit, will be a highly visible manifestation of this association. All’s well that ends well, of course, but a bit more enthusiasm and a bit less reluctance on Canberra’s part would have been even better.

When I sat down with Rodolfo Severino, he returned to those themes of Australian ambivalence and reluctance, and the basic idea that to be ASEAN is to be Southeast Asian.

I put to him the argument that conceptions of Asian geography are expanding. The East Asia Summit embraces the US and India as well as Australia and New Zealand.

What of a slow push for Australia to have membership/partnership in ASEAN by 2024, the 50th anniversary of Australia's dialogue partnership with ASEAN? 'That would be something to think about,' Severino muses. 'We can't predict the long term. But in the short term the instinctive reaction would be to reject it. For many reasons. One is—to me the more resonant one—is the tendency of Australians to tell Southeast Asians what is good for them. Maybe it needs saying, but not as a member, a permanent observer.'

Southeast Asians, he says, look at Australia as a little US and, 'although secretly the US is welcome' in the region, it's not politically fashionable to say so publicly. 'Australia,' Severino says, 'is regarded as a deputy sheriff of the US.' The question he poses to Australia is: 'Are you Asian enough?' For Severino, a push for Australia to get membership of ASEAN would crash against the basic issue of Asian identity.

Severino says Australia has a record in Southeast Asia for practical diplomacy and contributing as a good partner, but part of the Australian psyche is still European: 'The problem with Australia is its ambivalence. At some point when Australia feels confident enough to say, "We are in Southeast Asia and we deserve to be in ASEAN," then that will be the time. But this has to be worked out internally, domestically.'

This No case is substantive, reflecting much that has happened between Australia and ASEAN in previous decades. The response argument needs to discuss not just the way Australia is shifting, but just as importantly the way ASEAN is seeking to change and the pressures Southeast Asia is facing.

An Australia seeking to join ASEAN is going to face tough questions about its interests and identity. Some in Southeast Asia think an Australian republic would be a more natural fit for ASEAN than an Australia still pledged to the British monarch. A surprising proponent of that view is a leading member of Cambodia's royal family, the former deputy prime minister and foreign minister, [Prince Norodom Sirivudh](#).

In my conversation with the Prince, I found myself laughing as I exclaimed, 'Your Highness, for Australia, you're a republican!'

The equally cheerful response from Prince Norodom Sirivudh is that he'd have to apologise to his fellow royal, Queen Elizabeth. But, as Sirivudh says, there's a lot involved in a discussion about whether the 'white guys' (Australia and New Zealand) can join the club of the 'Asian guys'.

On Australia's mindset and place in Asia, Sirivudh turned unprompted to the republican issue, pointing to Australia's [failed republic referendum in 1999](#):

I followed this very closely. The republican referendum is an ideal example—I'm sorry for Her Majesty the Queen—to distance [Australia] from the United Kingdom. You must pass somewhere through a referendum. It's so important, it's so fundamental. That one day Australia says it's nothing to do with Her Majesty based in London, but we are a nation. It's mindset again. Politically, nothing changes. But mindset grows from things like that. And in ASEAN, too, we think about this kind of mindset. I think a referendum must be an obligation of passage. It's so important that you bring this to the Asian guys.

ASEAN is going to ask Australia deep questions, not least the proposition from a Southeast Asian prince that Australia should drop the royals. Talk about a challenge to the John Howard mantra that Australia doesn't have to choose between its history and geography in making its future in Asia. The Howard no-need-to-choose line is good politics and a wonderful debating point. Yet diplomacy and strategy are always about choices. And the bigger the issue, the tougher the choices. Australia joining ASEAN might have to be added to the list of things that Canberra doesn't want to think about until after [Queen Elizabeth II departs the throne](#).

Prince Norodom Sirivudh agrees that Australian membership/partnership is a conversation worth having, while offering caveats and cautions. On the positive side, he says, the geographical veto—that Australia isn't part of Southeast Asia—is no longer the end of the argument. Sirivudh says ASEAN has emphatically broadened its geographical reach through the creation of the East Asia Summit.

From interests, though, the Prince turns to identity and how Australia thinks of itself in Asia:

If I'm an Australian—do I feel more Asian, or do I stick with my Western identities, cultures, organisation system? It is a big debate. It is a long debate. It seems to us that you feel more and more Asian in terms of economics, in terms of political–security. Perhaps the feeling has grown. Perhaps the closer link is with Asia, with the Asia continent, with Asian states. But in terms of culture, in terms of the Australian consciousness, how they think of themselves as the white guys.

Sirivudh says that Australia identifies itself as a 'US cousin' and has a strong focus on the US alliance. The Australia–US alliance could be a barrier in ways that don't apply to Thailand and the Philippines as formal US allies, and Singapore as an informal but committed US ally.

The Prince thinks that China's opposition would be important in preventing any ASEAN consensus on Australia. Sirivudh says China would say to friends such as Cambodia and Malaysia: 'You must think twice. One more American ally in your family?' He says Australia would face the suspicion that it was acting for the US, not for itself. 'We work on consensus', Sirivudh says of ASEAN. 'Only one disagrees, everything stuck. So the chance is very, very thin—based on consensus.'

Would Australia have to change the way it does foreign policy as well as ditch the Queen?

'You have to show that you are first, Australian', Sirivudh replies. 'You are friends with the US. And you are friends with China. You are not the US proxy.'

Sirivudh thinks a slow process in which Australia takes the half-step to become an ASEAN observer is an interesting idea. When, as Cambodia's foreign minister, he launched Cambodia's effort to enter ASEAN, observer status was the useful intermediate step.

Before such mechanics, however, comes the mindset. Australia will have to convince itself. And ASEAN. And Indonesia.

Indonesia is central to ASEAN's future just as Indonesia is central to Australia's Asian future. Our history with Indonesia is a roller-coaster of high moments of great optimism and low periods of clash and argument. An Australian conversation with ASEAN about the Community is also another element in Australia's dialogue with Indonesia about the relationship between the world's two most disparate neighbours.

As one example of Australia's thinking about Indonesia, note Tony Abbott's view that it's 'in many respects our most important overall relationship'. Heading off to [Jakarta on his first overseas trip as PM](#) in 2013, Abbott saw the approach to Indonesia as vital: 'It's probably not realistic to think of Australia having the same relationship as it has with New Zealand but that's the direction you would like it to move in.'

The Oz–Kiwi relationship has a depth of history and culture that we'll never have with Indonesia. But Abbott is surely right that Indonesia is a central factor in Australia's regional future. I could offer quotes of a similar tenor from every Australian PM going back to Menzies (although the Menzies embrace of the idea of living with Indonesia forever was deeply coloured by [dread](#)). As an example, see Paul Keating's 2012 [Murdoch lecture](#), in which he argued that Indonesia will become Australia's most important strategic partner:

How things go in the Indonesian archipelago, in many respects, so go we. Indonesia remains the place where Australia's strategic bread is buttered. No country is more important to us—and it is a country which has shown enormous tolerance and goodwill towards us. Focus on this country should be a major imperative driving our foreign policy.

An Australian move to join ASEAN would be about the centrality of Southeast Asia to our strategic and economic future. And at the heart of that equation is Indonesia.

A discussion of Australia joining ASEAN is also a way to conceptualise a deeper association with Indonesia. The importance of Indonesia should feed into the understanding of what Australia could do with ASEAN. The bilateral builds towards the regional, just as the regional fosters the bilateral.

The previous Indonesian foreign minister, [Marty Natalegawa](#) (2009–2014), rejects [Keating's call](#) for Australia to join ASEAN, arguing that it'd be a distraction for ASEAN and could even inflame tensions inside Australia about our alignment with Asia. Natalegawa's two big worries are China tearing apart ASEAN and the Jokowi administration musing about a 'post-ASEAN' diplomacy.

In both areas, Canberra should argue that a bigger Australian role in ASEAN would be more of an asset than a hindrance. Australia joining ASEAN would be another dimension in the middle-power engagement with China.

Natalegawa's predecessor as foreign minister, Hasan Wirajuda (2001–2009), took a more technocratic approach when I spoke to him about Australia joining ASEAN. Wirajuda pointed to the formal veto—not being part of Southeast Asia—plus an informal rule that a member of ASEAN can't be part of another regional grouping, as Australia is in the Pacific Islands Forum.

The response to those points is that Australia, as a nation with its own continent, has a series of regions. And formal rules can be changed as circumstances change.

Wirajuda sees the Australia-into-ASEAN idea as a replay of the debate within ASEAN about admitting Australia (and New Zealand) to the East Asia Summit: 'I communicated with my counterparts, early on, especially when Australia was invited to join the East Asia Summit, and said, accelerate the process of integration of Australia into this region, first into ASEAN but then into a larger community-building process.'

The former Indonesian foreign minister says the integration argument succeeded in the East Asia Summit, but failed when he pushed for Australia to be admitted to the [Chiang Mai Initiative](#), the currency swap arrangement between ASEAN, China, Japan and South Korea. Wirajuda says he strongly supported Australia joining Chiang Mai, but China was even more emphatic in rejecting Australian membership.

Wirajuda's advice on Australia's way ahead with ASEAN: 'I think Australia should make itself more accepted by the region. Speed up your integration—less in a formal process—more in substance.' He thinks that integration could lead to the moment when ASEAN admits Australia, initially as a half-member with observer status—shifting Australia from the status it has had since 1974 as an ASEAN dialogue partner:

I think in the future we should be open, ASEAN should be open to create this special status of observer. So far we work under the ASEAN-plus-one dialogue process, we have a regular dialogue process with Australia. In effect, it would not be much different with observer status, as the ASEAN-plus-one dialogue is done back-to-back with the summit. To me, the margin of difference between dialogue partner and observer is not so much.

Would Australia reaching for ASEAN membership be seen as too ambitious, raising too many questions for ASEAN? Ever the diplomat, Wirajuda replied with a meditation on whether Australia would be able to play by the club rules: 'In the dialogue process, ASEAN-plus-one, our partners can raise anything. But, of course, our partners know how the consensus decision-making process works in ASEAN, which also is perhaps a handicap for our partners.'

Australia's shift towards ASEAN could happen in step with the broadening and deepening of what we seek to do with Indonesia. That's the perspective of a former head of Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kishore Mahbubani. He says Australia's embrace of its strategic and economic future in Southeast Asia would move in step with its central relationship, with Indonesia:

Your relations with Indonesia have got to change. You have to show much greater sensitivity to them, closeness to them. Right now you have a good formal relationship, but it's all about government-to-government, not a heart-to-heart relationship with Indonesia. Mind you, I don't expect a big-bang change. I think it will be gradual for Australia.

Australia's gradual movement towards Indonesia must be closer and deeper, just as it must be with ASEAN. And an Australian discussion on entering ASEAN will hinge on new levels of understanding and trust between Australia and Indonesia. The Australia–Indonesia dimension was one of the interesting findings of a poll on Australia joining ASEAN.



# AN OZ-ASEAN SURVEY ON ‘SHOULD AUSTRALIA JOIN ASEAN?’

In 2016, a Malaysian citizen and Australian permanent resident, [Tirath Ramdas](#), (‘I do consider myself a part of the Australian community’) published the results of a Twitter poll he ran to gauge public sentiment for Australian membership of ASEAN.

The tech consultant’s [straw poll](#) posed a simple question: Should Australia join ASEAN?: Yes/No.

To compare sentiment, he set up separate Twitter promotion campaigns targeting Australia, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. He writes:

In the back of my mind, I did wonder if from a South East Asian perspective, Australia was perceived as so out of character with South East Asia that the idea of Australia being part of ASEAN was simply crazy, such that the poll would be pointless. I was prepared to pull the promotion campaigns after a few days to save my money if the results streaming in were a resounding ‘No’, but the results turned out to be rather close.

The results:

**Question: Should Australia join ASEAN?: Yes/No.**

Australia	907 votes	Yes: 47%	No: 53%
Singapore	2,435 votes	Yes: 57%	No: 43%
Indonesia	2,716 votes	Yes: 40%	No: 60%
The Philippines	2,431 votes	Yes: 58%	No: 42%
Malaysia	3,714 votes	Yes: 55%	No: 45%
Thailand	1,959 votes	Yes: 52%	No: 48%

The countries where the majority said Yes to Australia joining ASEAN:

- Singapore
- Malaysia
- Thailand
- The Philippines.

And the two countries where the majority said No to Australia joining ASEAN:

- Indonesia
- Australia.

As Ramdas wryly notes: ‘Australia and Indonesia have once again found common ground on something. Unfortunately, that common ground seems to be that they prefer to have as little as possible to do with each other.’

Some Twitter users, in addition to (or perhaps instead of) voting on the poll, responded with comments. Here are some of the ideas expressed:

- Fear that ASEAN is a 'proto-EU' type of organisation, and therefore something that Australia should avoid.
- Australian membership in ASEAN may be an economic win, but would dilute the identity of the ASEAN community.
- Visa-free travel to Australia was of interest to a few people.
- If Australia were to join ASEAN, why not New Zealand as well?
- Australia is in Oceania, not Southeast Asia, so there's no basis to the idea of ASEAN membership.

Ramdas concluded that his straw poll left much room for more discussion based on 'What if?' questions:

What would it mean for the overall security of the region if ASEAN included a FVEY [*Five Eyes* intelligence] member? What would ASEAN membership mean for Australia's own border? What would it mean for the 'brain drain' phenomenon suffered by many ASEAN countries, often to Australia's benefit? What would it mean for cross-border business, e.g. Malaysians buying property in Melbourne, and Aussies buying tech start-ups in Jakarta? From Australia's perspective, apparently the prevailing belief is that the huge effort required to make Australian membership in ASEAN a reality, is simply not worth it. Of course, that assessment was made before the prospect of a more isolationist USA, and furthermore it may have assumed a baseline narrative of Australia not being 'invited' in the first place. It could be an altogether different proposition if a significant portion of ASEAN's population would see Australia's inclusion as something positive.

# CONCLUSION

Australia should join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. And, to promote this big call even higher up the mountain to be climbed, Australia will become a member of ASEAN.

The 'should' and 'will' claims come with huge degree-of-difficulty handicaps and long timelines: hard to achieve, much persuasion required, and plenty of time needed. But not impossible to imagine. We should do it the gradual ASEAN way by using 2024 as a start point.

An ASEAN aspiration would offer a new dimension to Australia's role as an optimistic country living in Asia in the Asia century.

The 'should join ASEAN' argument rests on a broad range of Australia's Asia interests—not least the tectonic shifts in the power balance—as well as the many elements of Australia's relationship with Southeast Asia.

The other side of the 'should' claim is that bringing Australia inside would help the practical policies and political aspirations of the ASEAN Community. ASEAN aspires to big changes in the nature and meaning of the association; Australia offers much for that long-term Community project. And Australia offers much to ASEAN's dual geostrategic purpose: maintain stability, retain independence.

The 'will become a member' is more than just blue-sky optimism. The 'will' declaration draws on the long history of Australian involvement in Southeast Asia. Often, in the past, that Australian effort has been ambitious—on occasion, adventurous. Time for new ambition, even at the risk of some thrills, spills and bruises along the way.

The Australian leader who has pushed the hardest for Australia to join ASEAN is Paul Keating. Here's the argument he offered in 2012 about Australia's [natural place in ASEAN](#):

From now on we have to concentrate on where we can be effective and where we can make the greatest difference. I believe that is fundamentally in South East Asia. South East Asia occupies the fulcrum between South West Asia and North East Asia; the fortunes of the Indian Ocean and the sub-continent vis-a-vis those of continental Asia, China and the western Pacific. In a geopolitical sense, this region is a place of amity, a zone of peace and cooperation, perched between the two most populous neighbourhoods on earth: broadly, Pakistan and India and their ocean, and China and Japan and their ocean. Northern Australia is adjacent the fulcrum point. It is completely natural therefore, that Australia be engaged there; certainly, with Indonesia but preferably, with the wider ASEAN. This grouping represents the security architecture of South East Asia, the one with which we can have real dialogue and add substance. In the longer run we should be a member of it—formalising the many trade, commercial and political interests we already share. This is the natural place for Australia to belong; indeed, the one to which we should attribute primacy. The utility of such a foreign policy would be to distil the essence of our primary national interests, such that the naturalness of it gave it a self-reinforcing consistency.

Joining ASEAN is the logical culmination of decades of Australian regional engagement. ASEAN membership would be an embrace of the region in the service of our deepest interests.

In the defence realm, Australia seeks a united, stable Southeast Asia that acts as a strategic shield across the north of the continent. Economically, the Australia – New Zealand – ASEAN Free Trade Agreement can be the departure point for further Oz–Kiwi integration in the new Economic Community.

History teaches that very little is historically inevitable, yet the history of Australia's approach to ASEAN is a consistent trend. Australia draws ever closer as ASEAN grows in importance and power.

In Asia, Australia must be all-in. More than aligned, we must be committed. Our strong alliance with the US is no bar to shifting from being aligned to ASEAN to ASEAN membership/partnership. And nor do alliance and ASEAN insidership prevent Australia from building ever-closer partnerships with Japan, South Korea, China and India—ASEAN has the same aspirations.

Membership of ASEAN along with our alliance with the US and close partnerships across Asia are the endowment of a nation with its own continent—a country as much at home in the Indian Ocean as in the Pacific Ocean. Australia must express diverse geography and multiple interests. In the 21st century, Australia must be all-in in Asia: we must be a smart and vibrant nation that's always engaged and always present, ever ready to be in the mix and help with the fix.

The all-in line asks for more than transactional competence and business as usual. Asia is shifting too fast: ASEAN membership is only one part of much that will confront Australia in our region(s). We'll seek change and be changed in turn.

ASEAN membership seems a long way off only if you ignore the distance Australia and ASEAN have travelled in the past 50 years. In the journey of convergence, the hardest miles are done and fading into memory. The greatest changes are things already changed—certainly in the make-up of Australia's community and the way the nation thinks of itself. To me, as a child of the 1950s who came of age at the end of the 1960s, these great shifts are also part of my life as an Australian.

The great Oz Asiaphile, [Stephen FitzGerald](#), speaks of a kind of Australian 'Enlightenment', a remarkable story of change in the significant turning or maturing of attitudes to Asia:

If we're open to Asia in a way we never were in the 1950s, there is yet ambivalence, often indifference, sometimes resistance and, paradoxically, more so now than in the mid 1990s. It's been a struggle of two goods, the good of our European inheritance and the good of our natural region. It's not resolved because it's not that kind of struggle. But Australia now has these two streams in its prevailing identity, where once it had one. It's a great story.

It is, indeed, a story with a lot more chapters to be written. Membership of ASEAN will be a major strand of that grand narrative.

Australia's Asian future will be shaped by ASEAN's success or failure. We have fundamental interests in ASEAN. If the ASEAN Community project is a success—in its social, political and strategic dimensions—Australia will want to be deeply involved in that vibrant community.

Equally, Australia's interests would be deeply compromised if ASEAN stalls or fails. As the geostrategic and geo-economic pressures build in Asia, ASEAN, as a middle-power grouping, needs the extra middle-power heft offered by Australia and New Zealand.

Australia knows the Southeast Asia it wants to live with. Joining ASEAN is the best way to give full expression to our future in Southeast Asia and in Asia more broadly.

# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
EU	European Union
TAC	Treaty of Amity and Cooperation

# WHAT'S YOUR STRATEGY?

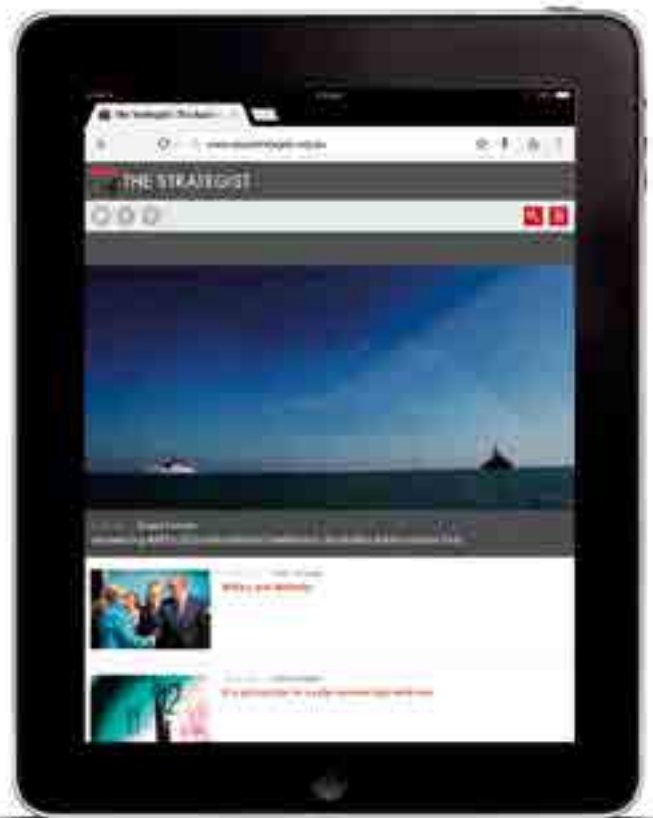


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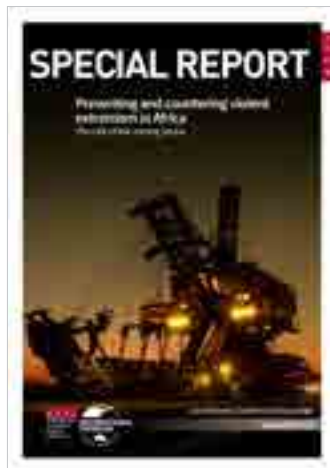


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