AASYP REVIEW

Towards a flourishing ASEAN-Australia relationship

2019
Towards a flourishing ASEAN-Australia relationship
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Foreword

The rapid pace of the 21st century and the uncertainty it warrants have resulted in global questioning of the efficacy and feasibility of multinational cooperation. In the face of issues such as environmental degradation, mass migration, and regional instability, few nations continue to espouse the high-minded multinational collaboration that characterised international relations in decades past. The collective voice and abilities of Middle powers, notably Australia and ASEAN countries, is now, more than ever, vital in ensuring a moderate degree of balance in the international arena.

In order to effectively address the complex, and multifaceted challenges of the 21st Century, it is vital that the youth of a nation are sufficiently connected, empowered and enabled. The scope and enormity of the challenges ahead require thinking beyond borders, cultures, and language. However, the question arises; how can the youth of a region, with more than 9 official languages, 700 million people, and a GDP per capita discrepancy of more than $52,561, facilitate meaningful dialogue on such pressing issues? The ASEAN-Australia Strategic Youth Partnership aims to build a platform where the youth of the region can advocate their thoughts, ideas, opinions, and insights on issues of mutual significance in the ASEAN-Australian relationship.

The ASEAN-Australia Youth Partnership publications team brings together more than thirteen young leaders from across Vietnam, Myanmar, Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia and Australia with the view of creating meaningful discussion and providing commentary on such issues. The publications, like the ones featured in this book, communicate the perspectives, ideas and aspirations of regional youth across South East Asia and Australia.

The publications portfolio started initially as a means of providing written and digital content for the ASEAN-Australia Strategic Youth Partnership. However, it was through the collective initiative and drive of the publications team, and through the shared desire to make a meaningful contribution to the ASEAN-Australia policy space, that the AASYP Review came into being.

The inaugural edition of the AASYP Review: Towards a Flourishing ASEAN-Australia Relationship: Youth Perspectives, has three primary areas of focus, all of which were deemed to be of considerable importance in the ASEAN-Australia space. The areas of Political Security Cooperation, Economic Cooperation, and Socio-cultural Cooperation are discussed at length in the following articles. The perspectives and solutions offered in the AASYP Review, we believe are unique, in that they represent those of young people from a myriad of backgrounds, cultures, and languages, coming together with a common cause.

It is the collective ambition of the team behind the AASYP Review that this publication will serve as a number of functions. Firstly, the AASYP Review aims to provide a platform in which the youth can voice their opinions on issues relating to politics, economics and regional collaboration and be heard. Secondly, through mutual discussion and interregional dialogue, the AASYP Review intends to build the mutual knowledge and understanding of ASEAN and Australia throughout the region. Finally, the AASYP Review offers the unique insights and input of young people within the region into the ASEAN-Australia Policy space, whilst advocating for greater regional and interregional cooperation for purposes of mutual advancement.

It is our most profound desire that you, the reader, derive some kind of benefit as a result of reading this book, and come to acknowledge the power, and untapped potential of regional youth in facilitating deeper and more meaningful collaboration in ASEAN and Australia.

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Chapter One

POLITICAL SECURITY COOPERATION

Chapter One explores new analyses and ideas from youth regarding Political-Security Cooperation between ASEAN-Australia, a core pillar of the relationship.

Will becoming a republic help Australia gain acceptance as a country “of Asia”?

How Australia Can Promote Stability in the South China Sea: an Indo-Pacific Perspective

Hein Thant Swe | Myanmar

The South China Sea issue remains one of our world’s intractable problems with many actors implicated in a complex web of geopolitical interests. What role can Australia play amidst growing concerns over the endurance of the rules-based international order? This article examines ways in which Australia can contribute to a stable Indo-Pacific region and what Australia’s position should be regarding the issue.

The South China Sea conflict has become one of the most contentious issues in today’s world. China, Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, and Vietnam have repeatedly affirmed their claims to some islands within the Sea or the Sea as a whole. Four claimants are ASEAN member states; and Indonesia, despite not being a claimant, is also having disputes with China over its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around the Nautana islands which overlap with China’s “nine-dash” line claim. In addition, there are several external actors who share varying degrees of interest and concern about this problem. Given its prominent status in the Indo-Pacific region, Australia is one of them. The South China Sea is of vital geopolitical importance within the Indo-Pacific region, as the geographical area spans crucial maritime territories of both the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. The use of the term “Indo-Pacific region” in recent political discourse has created a 24-nations framework, and proposing a connected multipolar region joined by the maritime space stretching from the Indian Ocean, across the littorals of East Asia, through to the Western Pacific Ocean (in which the South China Sea is situated). Given the increase in geopolitical tension in recent years, and little progress in dispute resolution efforts, Canberra will need to reassess its current position on the South China Sea conflict and take new strategic dimensions into consideration with a view to restoring stability in the region.

SOUTH CHINA SEA PROBLEM: DEADLOCK BETWEEN ASEAN AND THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

The South China Sea is arguably one of the busiest international sea lanes in the world mainly due to maritime trade and navigations. Additionally, there are high expectations over the exploration and exploitation of natural resources, ranging from natural gas, oil and fish stocks (Rustandi C.A., 2016). In recent years,
Beijing’s overt assertiveness in the incremental construction and fortification of artificial features; and clashes between vessels in the Sea have been the cause of great concern for multiple stakeholders throughout the region, who have expressed apprehension regarding the impact such actions will have on the stability of the Indo-Pacific Region (Hill C., 2017). With a wealth of actors already being involved, and each of them possessing significantly different opinions and strategies with regard to conflict resolution, the potential for escalation into armed conflict appears to be accelerating day by day.

The South China Sea, as a geopolitical issue, poses a serious threat to ASEAN, given the bodies’ limited capability to respond and resolve tensions: such limitations are exacerbated by both intra-ASEAN factors and foreign relations factors relating to China (Amer R., 2015). The South China Sea issue has called into question the unity of ASEAN, as internal divisions continue to arise over the matter. ASEAN’s failure to produce a common stance on the issue, as member states failed to reach an agreement on issuing a joint communique following the 45th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Phnom Penh in July 2012, was a dramatic display of disunity among members. Beijing’s pressure on the chair, Cambodia, further derailed efforts to make the issue between China and a unified ASEAN. (Scott D., 2012). This is not surprising given the large amounts of Chinese investment and economic and military aid provided to Cambodia, which has accelerated Cambodia’s economic progress. Beijing has also been a constant source of support for Hun Sen’s government (Hutt D., 2016). In general, China has repeatedly opposed attempts to internationalize the South China Sea issue, and prefers to talk separately with individual countries in the hope of retaining a stronger position (Wong C., 2019).

Despite different approaches, almost all Southeast Asian states, perceptively, have a similar pattern of strategy: a dual strategy of simultaneous engagement and containment in dealing with China. Since it would be absurd to sever ties with their powerful neighbor, states have subtly managed their links with China by applying both engagement and containment. Engagement involves efforts to bridge, bond and build cooperative mechanisms with China for common interests. Containment emphasizes non-confrontational military/security alliances with other powers for deterrence and diversification of economic relations outside China to lessen dependence on it (Ba, A. D., & Beeson M., 2018).

Multilateral efforts constitute a substantial part of their efforts namely through various regional forums and institutions such as ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN. These institutions strengthen both engagement and constrainment processes. Frameworks like the ARF and EAS have provided additional avenues for dialogue and further cooperation with China; however, they also act as containment strategies by way of the inclusion of other major powers, with the supposed intent of lessening China’s hegemonic involvement in Southeast Asia. As for ASEAN, it first became involved in the South China Sea problem in 1992 when China and Vietnam (not yet a member of ASEAN) became embroiled in a dispute over the area. ASEAN reacted to the incident by expressing concern and urging self-restraint of concerned parties. Successive attempts to formulate a Code of Conduct (COC) for the South China Sea resulted in the non-binding “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC)” in 2002. This was a landmark deal for promoting mutual trust and building confidence between contestants despite falling short of any conclusive conflict resolution measure.

After years of struggling to reach a definitive COC for the South China Sea, ASEAN and China could finally commence their first round of formal consultations on the COC in China in 2013 (Thayer C., 2013). The leaked initial draft reflects that some of the disputants are now becoming more firm in opposing China; yet, it is also possible to observe substantial differences in ideas concerning geographical scope, legal status, applicability of international norms, dispute settlement mechanism and the role of third parties (Pradhan S.D., 2018). It is important to analyze the shortcomings of the DOC for a successful COC. Critics expressed that DOC acted only as a reference point when problems emerged without providing any substantial contributions to peacekeeping efforts in the region, primarily as a result of the non-binding nature of the agreement, and lack of specifying the geographical coverage of the articles (Manager S., 2014). COC talks are continuing slowly, with the deadline for finalizing it fixed at 2021 (Quang N.M., 2019).

In spite of such progress however, China appears to show little regard for the concerns of ASEAN states, and continues to provoke key stakeholders within the region. Beijing’s continuation of aggressive actions in the South China Sea such as ballistic missile testing (Greene A., 2019) and military drills between the contested Paracel and Spratly island groups (Chaudhury D.R., 2019), even during ongoing COC negotiations, are denounced as major threats to the stability of the region. These are part of China’s strategy in elevating its power in the region by discarding the principles of self-restraint enshrined in the DOC and relevant legal frameworks.
AUSTRALIA AND SOUTH CHINA SEA PROBLEM: HISTORY AND STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

The rapidly changing nature of the regional environment, and more complicated security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, demand a strategic departure from traditional approaches to the issue for external actors. The 2016 Australian Defence White Paper cited the South China Sea as one of Australia’s foremost concerns; alongside a stable Indo-Pacific region and rules-based global order as part of the three primary Strategic Defence Interests for Australia (Australia’s Defence White Paper, 2016). The continued power dynamics of the external great powers, particularly China and the US; and China’s aggressive activities, were also noted as sources of insecurity within the region. It has become increasingly important for Australia to take a more active role in the region for the sake of assuring a stable rules-based order. But one question exists. Why Australia?

Australia is a middle power, the world’s 13th largest economy in 2019 (London, E., 2018), a major trading partner of both ASEAN and China, and constitutes 10 percent of the Earth’s total landmass. The majority of Australia’s trade passes through the South China Sea, a volume that is likely to increase in the coming years as new energy export terminals and economic partnership agreements begin to materialize. Despite key important strategic interests in the area, Australia has been unusually hesitant to take part in sensitive regional issues until recently. Most of Australia’s regional security policies have been based on self-defense since the epochal release of its 1976 Defence White Paper (DWP). Australia’s posture has progressively changed with the release of every successive DWP, as it attempts to place greater focus on regional security. The most recent 2016 DWP was the boldest in terms of stating security conditions outside Australia, and its emphasis on the importance of language. The term “rules-based order” is mentioned 56 times and, in contrast to previous white papers, and China 53 times (Brennan E., 2017). Canberra has even included expression of particular concern over China’s land reclamation activities in the sea in the document (Australia’s Defence White Paper, 2016). However, Canberra’s interests and concerns over the South China Sea were never new. Declassified memos and documents have records of Canberra’s strategic concern over the islands in the South China Sea throughout history and those reveal Canberra’s long-running desire to see a peaceful resolution to the disputes. The earliest documents show that Canberra was concerned by a possible takeover of islands by communist China for strategic gains and it sought to insist trusteeship of the islands onto the UK and US. However, Canberra’s prescient analysis of the disputes fell on deaf ears which has resulted in exacerbated conditions decades later. Indeed, much of what is documented in the archives is still relevant today (Brennan E, 2017).

Until now, Canberra has repeatedly asserted that it will not take sides on territorial claims in the South China Sea. It has also urged China (both directly and indirectly) and other claimants to refrain from provocative actions that could increase tensions in the region. However, China’s disregard for rules and norms, the most recent example being China’s gas survey ship infringing on Vietnam’s territory and disruption of Vietnam’s exploration activities, is highly concerning (apnews, 2019). Furthermore, China’s 2019 Defence White Paper (officially named “China’s National Defense in the New Era) reasserts the notion that the contested waters of the South China Sea are an inseparable part of Chinese territory, and thus attempts to legitimize its unlawful actions, such as ongoing military patrols around the waters (China’s National Defense in the New Era, 2019). What was once viewed as a trivial source of concern, has become an unavoidable problem for Canberra and its pursuit of stability within the region.

HOW AUSTRALIA CAN PROMOTE REGIONAL STABILITY

In 2015, Australia’s diplomat, Peter Varghese, admitted that Australia has traditionally been more comfortable in the slipstream than in the lead of international order, and mentioned Australia’s ongoing paradox of strategic anxiety and strategic geography (dfat.gov, 2015). Amidst rising tensions and China’s incremental assertive action in the Sea, the question over the relevance of Canberra’s current strategic orientation needs to be asked. What should Canberra do?

Being a prominent external actor, Australia can take a significant role in contributing to the stability of the Indo-Pacific Region by applying these approaches to the issue at the same time: continuing support for multilateral institutions and a rules-based order; clarifying a more confident and definitive stance in the region; and applying a dual strategy of engagement and dissuasion in dealing with China over the issue. Firstly, Canberra should continue to work for the maintenance of a rules-based order in the region. Multilateral institutions are important for a rules-based order. Part of Beijing’s strategy espouses “divide and deal” tactics premised on ulcerative motives to undermine ASEAN’s unified voice over the matter as demonstrated by China’s constant push for bilateral talks and desire for individual negotiation with each individual member state. It is not in Canberra’s interest to see ASEAN divided into different camps by Beijing. That is why Canberra should remain firm on its support on multilateral institutions and solutions to the South China Sea problem. Strengthening multilateralism together with the support of external powers can reduce China’s ability to bully smaller states; bridge...
internal divisions within ASEAN to some extent; and provide a strong, unified voice that advocates for the peaceful resolution of regional disputes. Beijing has taken notice of Australia’s potential role in the South China Sea saga, and has, consequently, been trying to keep the disputants and external powers at arms-length through accusations of undue interference and aggravation on the part of external actors. The further development of regional forums, including the East Asia Summit and other similar assemblies, as mechanisms for supporting security and facilitating transparency and cooperation will be important for future stability.

The erosion of international norms is a major hindrance to the restoration of rules-based order. Until now, Canberra has constantly expressed its support for freedom of navigation and overflight in the region, non-militarization, self-restraint, resolution of disputes by peaceful means and confidence-building measures while highlighting a variety of authoritative sources including the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Nations, United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the relevant standards and recommended practices by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and International Maritime Organization (IMO). The Sydney Declaration, which was brought about after the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit in 2018, has also confirmed Australia’s hopes to successfully draft an effective COC in the South China Sea (Sydney Declaration, 2018). Nonetheless, Canberra should keep an eye on COC and be ready to raise its voice as soon as any hints of Beijing-lead hegemonic deception begin to appear. Although Beijing is against the role of external actors in COC, Canberra should strive to persuade ASEAN claimant states that it is necessary to include external actors as advisory bodies. For the rules-based order to function smoothly, Canberra should continue its support for legal and formal avenues to settle disputes peacefully.

Secondly, Canberra needs to allay its own ambiguities on the matter and outline a clear stance on the South China Sea. Negligence of Beijing’s assertive actions will only allow Beijing to further expand its influence and accelerate its activities in the region. The time has arrived for Canberra to clarify its position in the problem in response to Beijing’s growing power projection in the Indo-Pacific. Rhetoric over respect for international norms and laws should become more powerful and clearer in language. Some might argue that a more assertive Australian stance will produce more instability in the region since it will attract backlash from China. But Canberra remaining reluctant in taking a stronger standpoint is not a satisfactory response to improve stability in the region. Canberra’s predominantly soft approaches in dealing with Beijing hasn’t assisted in watering down hostilities from China; with the region continuing to be subject to destabilization efforts on behalf of Beijing. Therefore, it’s better for Australia to embrace its position as a true defender of rules-based order and be more confident in doing so. Canberra will ultimately win the trust and support of other external players, and realize its potential within the region.

Last but not least, the dual strategy of dissuasion and engagement will be vital in promoting stability within the region. While engagement with Beijing is an essential option for the peaceful resolution of disputes, Canberra should aim to dissuade Beijing that its unilateral provocative actions will bring more costs than benefits. Canberra can do this by applying a variety of tactics at the same time: strengthening existing alliances with ASEAN partners to help equip them with sophisticated maritime defense capabilities to counter Beijing’s maritime coercion; promoting relations and partnership with external players; and deconstructing Beijing’s claims to the Sea by creating counter-narratives in the international sphere together with allies.

These three strategic approaches will require a more proactive Australian presence in the Indo-Pacific Region. If applied subtly on the ground, these recommendations can serve well to restore a rules-based order and stability in the Indo-Pacific Region. The stability of the South China Sea is a vital part of Australia’s interests and thus Canberra should adopt a coherent strategy on the issues surrounding the area as soon as possible.

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Chapter One: Political Security Cooperation


Since the 1970s, Australia has seen a steady increase in waves of human migration into the country; not dissimilar to immigration trends seen in other liberal Western democracies, the inflow of migrants to Australia has been considerable and continuous. More recently, both internal and external tensions have arisen as a result of questions surrounding the obligations of Australia to migrants who are classified as refugees—groups of people fleeing their home countries as a result of fear of persecution or harm. The Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2011) have stated that these refugees come from a wealth of different backgrounds and countries of origin, and that such people come to Australia under different circumstances. For example, as noted by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship of Australia (2011), the first refugees coming to Australia from Southeast Asia in the 1970s were driven primarily as a result of the Second Indochina War happening in the region. Although, when the war finally drew to a close and the end of the Cold War signified a deescalation of regional tensions, a steady stream of refugees from the region still continued into Australia. As the decade neared its end, it became evident that not only were streams of refugees continuing to enter into Australia from South East Asia, but that the increasingly diverse origins and grounds of these refugees signified that Australia had a common meaning to these new migrants; asylum.

In the wake of global changes brought about through transnationalism, migration is no longer limited to the movement of people, but now also extends to the movement of societies, with arriving migrants bringing their identity and culture into their new homes. For many Australians, who have seen a steady increase in Irregular Maritime Arrivals (IMAs) since the 1970s alongside considerable growth in the numbers of both documented and undocumented migrations, transnationalism is increasingly resembling a security threat.
(2015), have faced some of the most immense and challenging refugees crises in contemporary history; with the author giving little to no mention of Australia’s efforts (Turina, 2015). Mitsilegas (2012), however, explains that for less-populous states, such as Australia, waves of refugees, especially those of a considerable size, can create issues. Refugees can be a source of economic burden and social disruption for a state, if not properly managed and integrated. Mitsilegas (2012) goes on to state that, for many, the greatest impact of mass refugee resettlement relates to security impacts, stating that refugees are more than just people, but also bring with them their own values. ‘Values’ in this instance, refers to the norms and cultures that that any migrant group bring to Australia from their home country, that are likely to contradict with the host countries’ values and norms. These overlaps, according to Mitsilegas (2012), could result in security issues within the host country, especially instances where values have been shaped by extremism or identity politics. It is for such reasons, and using such rhetoric devices the Government of Australia decided to launch one of Australia’s most contentious pieces of immigration policy, Operation Sovereign Borders, in 2013.

THE SECURITIZATION THEORY: CONNECTING SECURITY AND MIGRATION

Securitization, in summary, is the process of transforming an issue faced by a society into one which relates to security; and is by actors, mostly states (Soesilowati, 2014). Buzan et al. (1998) defined securitization as a condition when “an issue is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure”. The theory of Securitization itself is mainly founded from the thoughts of Ole Waever (1995) on the practice of securitization by states around the world. The theory mainly is based on the writing of Buzan et al. (1998), Security: a New Framework for Analysis, while also taking account of the ideas of Waever (1995) on Securitization and Desecuritization. Wilkinson (2011) mentions that the theory of Securitization is often misinterpreted as the concept of Human Security—a modern conception of security where the object of security is human with its humanity, instead of state/national security as the focus (extracted from Buzan and Hansen, 2009; Baldwin, 1995; Baldwin, 1997; Mathews, 1989; Pugh, 2004). This theory is used in this paper as a means of explaining Australia’s attitude towards irregular maritime arrivals (IMAs), specifically in the case of Operation Sovereign Borders.

Buzan et al. (1998) state that security is a ‘speech act’—which means that a state’s understanding of security issues are often implied through the nature of their speech and discourse regarding a certain issue. This means that a state’s perception of a potential security issue—particularly with regards to whether the state perceives that issue as a security threat or not—could be ascertained by analyzing official speeches or publications by the state. This is done, according to further explanations made by Stritzel (2011), by using the method of discourse analysis towards a certain states’ publications over a certain period of time—as attempted to do throughout the course of this paper. There are three crucial elements on this theory that Buzan et al. (1998) outline as the conditions for a securitization process: (1) the speech act; (2) the securitizing actor; and (3) the audience. In this process, a securitizing actor would perform a securitizing move by making speech acts that label a certain issue as a security threat, therefore it would be legitimised to take ‘extraordinary means’ to tackle the threat. This is reflected through the Government of Australia’s speech acts, with the securitizing actor itself being the government, especially under the administration of Tony Abbott. For example, Tony Abbott (2013, in Pilbersek, 2013), mentioned that “The recent stand-off on asylum seeker boats is a very practical manifestation of that, but it is just one example of the deteriorating relationship”. In the same year, Tony Abbott (2013, in Kenny, 2013) also mentioned how refugees are endangering and threatening the security of Australia in general. The audience, in this case, is the general public of Australia and the world.

Therefore, in order for an issue to be securitized, the issue must first be politicized (Buzan et al., 1998). In this case, the politicization refers to the process where an issue becomes part of public policy objectives, therefore requiring government decision, resource allocation, or even some form of communal governance. Once the issue is framed as a political issue and is in the sphere of the government’s work, it may then be securitized; and framed as an issue which poses a threat to the security of a nation, in such a way that legitimises a government to respond with extraordinary measures.

MIGRATIONS TO AUSTRALIA: A HISTORICAL SURVEY

Reports submitted by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship of Australia (2011) noted that it was Indo-Chinese refugees in the 1970s who started the ‘trend’ of irregular immigration policy, Operation Sovereign Borders, in 2013.
Chapter One: Political Security Cooperation

The prominence of Maritime migration to Australia for many refugees was a popular choice for a few reasons. Firstly, the geographic position of migrants’ origin states, and considerable distance from Australia, impedes the affordability of land or air-based migration methods. Furthermore, migration to neighbouring countries was not an option, given the political conditions in the neighbouring countries of affected states. Second, maritime migration is often an easier way for undocumented migrants to migrate, given the fact that maritime border are less guarded than land borders. Although there is a large number of maritime arrivals to Australia each day this paper will focus on what are considered as ‘irregular maritime arrivals’ (IMAs). IMAs, in practice, have become a transnational problem due to two major reasons. First, IMAs have the capacity to serve as a gateway for transnational crimes that can seriously threaten the national security of a state. A wide array of crimes, including but not limited to human smuggling, illegal drugs trafficking, illegal fishing, dumping, and even piracy may use IMAs in order to operate. The second reason is due to the fact that most IMAs, especially in the case of Australia, are largely constituted by refugees. This paper will therefore focus on the second context, as it was the primary driver for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship of Australia (2011) to bring IMAs into national security discourse.

Figure 2. Waves of Irregular Maritime Arrivals to Australia, 1976-2011

The report (2011) highlights that since 1976 in Australia, there have been at least “580 direct boat arrivals carrying some 29 000 passengers”, and that there were at least four waves of refugees which came to Australia prior to Operation Sovereign Borders, with most immigrants coming from East and Southeast Asia.


The report (2011) posits that the first direct boat arrival was made on 27 April 1976, carrying five Vietnamese asylum seekers. This would later be followed by an additional 204 asylum seekers that year, with the peak of the first wave occurring during 1977-1978, when 1432 people were recorded as having entered into Australia. This wave served as a major turning point in Australian migration due to the sheer quantity of arrivals, and the conflict which was taking place within Indo-China. Detention while entering Australian territory was carried out by the Australian Federal Police (AFP).


Under 100 arrivals were recorded during this period, with most being asylum seekers from Cambodia, Vietnam, and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). However since 1971, no more Cambodian IMAs are recorded due to the presence of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) mission.

THIRD WAVE: 1999–2001

A demographic shift of asylum seekers is observed in this wave, with most of the asylum seekers in this period coming from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Sri Lanka, and other Middle Eastern states. The Department of Immigration and Citizenship of Australia (2011) stated that, in total, there were an estimated 12,272 arrivals in Australia during the third wave.

FOURTH WAVE: 2009–2011

A sharp increase in boat arrivals is recorded in October 2009, with a major increase in IMAs in the summer between 2009 and 2010. The majority of origin-nations are about the same as the third wave. A peak in both IMAs and quantity of persons arriving is recorded in 2011. The first official response by the Government of Australia towards these asylum seekers was made in 1980 with the amendment of the Migration Act 1958 to the Immigration (Unauthorised Arrivals) Act 1980. This is also the first point at which the government began securitizing migrants of this nature; justified as a form of immigration control to prevent security threats. The prior legislation stipulated a seven-day term limit for authorising the detention of those who had arrived via IMAs—an integral component of the Australian government’s control measures during the first wave of migrations. This limit was removed through an amendment, which established that an asylum seeker or any individual that arrives through an IMA is able to be held in detention either until they were ‘conveyed from Australia’ or ‘granted an entry permit’ (Department of Immigration and Citizenship of Australia, 2011). This process is further strengthened by the Migration Amendment Act 1991 which, as the Australian Government (1991, in Department of Immigration and Citizenship of Australia, 2011) stated, “sought to address the complex processing needs of unauthorised arrivals, particularly IMAs”. It was as a result of this amendment that the status of ‘uprocessed person’ was created and given...
to the refugees held in detention. This practice however stopped in 1994, as the term was subsumed by ‘unlawful non-citizen’ under the Migration Reform Act 1992. It was only in later years, when overcrowding of detention centres became an issue and knowledge of asylum seekers became more common place, that the term ‘boat people’ started to emerge. Strong emotive responses to IMAs, either in favour or against, in addition to a nation-wide debate on Australia’s immigration policies, also started to emerge during this period. The next, and final turning point of immigration control policy of Australia was in 2013, when the strict immigration control policy, Operation Sovereign Borders came into effect.

**OPERATION SOVEREIGN BORDERS: SECURITY OR SECURITIZATION?**

It was under the administration of Prime Minister Tony Abbott that the Australian Government first began work as part of Operation Sovereign Borders. The comprehensive and coordinative policy sought to reduce and eliminate the rising number of asylum seekers piling up in its detention centers. Previously, as noted by the Global Detention Project (2008), in response to the third wave of refugees coming to Australia, the government started to implement a policy—the “Pacific Solution”—under the administration of Prime Minister John Howard, in which detention facilities could be built in the smaller, neighbouring states of Nauru and Papua New Guinea (Manus Island). Although this policy was later dismissed, a detention center for IMAs on Australia’s Christmas Island remained. In these detention centers, a number of human rights violations alleged against the Australian Government have emerged over the years. For Soesilowati (2014), the Australian Government failed to take a meaningful stance on how to treat these asylum seekers, and what has resulted is continued structural and process violations. In the structural sense, Pugh (2014) reported that much of the available infrastructure in Australia’s detention centers could described as “unproper” and unfit for use, including facilities of sanitation and health. While in the process dimension, problems come from the lengthy and uncertain bureaucratic process of migrant documentation and registration. These alleged human rights violations have been analyzed by many scholars (Soesilowati, 2014; Wiranata, 2017; Lee, 2017; Pugh, 2014) and found to be the source of the spilling-over problem of refugees in Australia. In the case of Australia, this phenomenon has created political, economical, and social turmoil that has created divides within the country. The debate, according to Soesilowati (2014), is continuing to separate Australian society into three main groups: (1) those who say the government needs to work towards sustainable and open migration, based on human security values; (2) those that prefer a strict migrant entry process; and (3) those who do not want any form of favourable treatment to be extended to undocumented immigrants. This division mainly revolves around varying stances of the Australian society on whether or not the government should provide asylum to the refugees. Furthermore, beyond the humanitarian concerns raised, for many Australians with a view towards harshening migrant entry processes, concerns have been raised about the inability of refugees to naturally diffuse into Australian society, as well as the economic burden and social impact of large refugee populations (which some suggest lead to rising crime rates, violation of vulnerable groups’ rights, and cultural clash). Much of this sentiment has been echoed among certain Australian groups, and formed the main body of discourse used to validate the establishment of Operation Sovereign Borders. As outlined by Prime Minister Tony Abbott (2013, in Murphy, 2013), these security concerns of the Australian people became the foundations and philosophical bedrock on which the operation rests.

Soesilowati (2014) underlines that these attitudes of mainstream Australian society represent a major step backwards from its open-door policy during the first and second wave of migration. Over the course of history, the negative effect of human migration, particularly large scale mass migrations, have been emphasised as threats to both a nation’s domestic security and national identity. Therefore, in the case of the securitization of immigration, the domestic discourse of a state is a key driving factor. Pugh (2004) mentioned that the securitization of IMAs, notably in the case of Australia, is first done with “powerful imaging and discourse in the media and political forums of destination communities”. Pugh (2004) adds that discourse surrounding the issue, as created by IMA-opposing parties within the Australian political landscape were used to control or ‘confuse’ Australian policies by: (1) framing the asylum seekers as ‘stateless wanderers’; (2) dehumanizing asylum seekers; (3) using the metaphor of ‘natural disaster’ to reflect the waves of immigrants; (4) using dramatic economic-related imagery; and (5) exaggerating massive immigration risks. Therefore, in the framework of Buzan et al.

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**Table 1. Arrivals of Boats and IMAs to Australia, 1975-2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of boats</th>
<th>Number of arrivals</th>
<th>Financial year</th>
<th>Number of boats</th>
<th>Number of arrivals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1975-76</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
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<td>7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1996-97</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>689</td>
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<td>1977-78</td>
<td>40</td>
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<td>1998-99</td>
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<tr>
<td>1978-79</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1999-00</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979-80</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2000-01</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980-81</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2001-02</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981-82</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982-83</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2003-04</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983-84</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2004-05</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>2005-06</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985-86</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2006-07</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986-87</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987-88</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2008-09</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988-89</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989-90</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2010-11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>532</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>2011-12</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>532</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991-92</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2012-13</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>1992-93</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
<td>57</td>
<td>2756</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Department of Imigration and Citizenship of Australia (2011)
(1998), the IMAs issue in Australia has been both politicized and securitized. Meanwhile, as later stated by Pugh (2004), the acceptance of refugees would not negatively impact Australian society, culture or the economic, so long as the state are able to manage the refugees effectively.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: INDONESIAN AND ASEAN PERSPECTIVES

The work of the government of Australia as part of Operation Sovereign Borders is inevitably, by its nature, devoid of justified and legitimate practice. This paper has concluded that in spite of all the arguments made, there has been no evidence that there are considerable negative impacts made by multiple consecutive waves of immigration into Australia, as has been suggested by some political proponents within contemporary Australian society. Compared with the previous waves of immigration, there has been a recent and radical shift in Australia’s immigration policy and subsequent treatment of those seeking asylum. Australia has changed its perspective on IMAs, and now views them as a considerable threat to national security—a new rhetoric within popular discourse on immigration, which has only recently emerged. Under the lens of Securitization theory, this shift has had a considerable impact on Australia’s domestic political dynamics, that as concluded, have shifted changing societal norms and perceptions of national security. However, it is vital to remember that as a part of the global community, Australia still has a commitment to uphold international standards relating to human security. Therefore, there needs to be reconciliation of the clashes occurring between the desire of Australians to protect national identity, and the global norm of human security and resettlement. Movement towards such a reconciliation, in order to prevent a “boomerang effect”, has already begun—taking the shape of critiques of Australia’s immigration policy. Indonesia is one of Australia’s closest geopolitical neighbours, and enjoys a good relationship with Australia. Additionally, the two are engaged under the framework of ASEAN Regional Forum which upholds both regional security obligations and national security interests. Indonesia may function as an effective negotiator, to shift Australia’s stance on the issue. However, at the end of the day, it is up to the people and government of Australia to change the discourse within their own political system, and bring about meaningful change to its immigration policy.

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A Republic Australia: Potential Foreign Policy Implications for Australia’s Engagement with ASEAN

Jamie Spiteri | Australia

Australia has long struggled to realise its identity as an Asian nation - rather than as a white colonial outpost of England situated geographically in Asia. Australia would do well to dismiss its own colonial heritage by becoming a republic in order to work closer with Southeast Asian states that have a long history of colonisation. This article argues that Australia becoming a republic is a crucial yet often overlooked development that will help Australia to forge new, altruistic relationships with ASEAN member states.

That Southeast Asia as a geopolitical region is of the utmost importance for a strong, prosperous Australia is not news to contemporaries of Australian international relations. In fact, such sentiments have been voiced from both sides of politics, commentators, and academics since the early 1990’s. As the Asian century dawns, with the added onus of the rise of China, the discussion is arguably, more important than ever. This essay adds to the growing body of literature asserting that Australia needs to increase its ties with both the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and bilaterally with its member states. However, this essay will go one step further in outlining an achievable way to do so. By becoming a republic, Australia would go a long way to overcoming its colonial heritage. In a region that has a long, tumultuous history of colonialism and importance on the way one is perceived, this is an overdue suggestion. This essay applies a foreign policy lens to republicanism in Australia and walks away with a stark conclusion: that the benefits of Australia becoming a republic far outweigh the negatives. While it is true that ASEAN as a regional bloc faces its own challenges, the profound shift underway in Southeast Asia offers Australia many unique opportunities to shape and safeguard its own region. In addition, factoring Australia’s growing Asian population, ASEAN style diplomacy which favours intra-regional relationships, the added onus on the rise of China, the discussion is arguably, more important than ever.

The Asia Pacific is witnessing a regional shift in great-power politics. As China rises and attempts to influence both the international order and its own region (as all states do), it naturally challenges the US hegemonic model known for so long in the Asia Pacific (Wesley 2018: 19). Very few states, Australia included, neither welcome nor advocate a complete withdrawal of US presence in the Asia Pacific. While that occurrence seems highly unlikely, states in the region must grapple with the reality that the great-power paradigm in the Asia Pacific is shifting away from US hegemony, and towards an increasingly powerful China (White 2019: 9). States that hold apprehensions about Chinese coercion in the region can enhance their own ability to navigate geopolitical shifts situations through both inter-governmental organisations, like ASEAN, and with greater regional multilateral diplomacy. ASEAN consisting primarily of middle powers and rapidly developing states adds to the onus that must be put on successful multilateralism (Carr 2013: 73). Enhanced Australian engagement in ASEAN benefits all member states. ASEAN would gain another willing middle power abundant in natural resources, experience in combating international terrorist organisations and an interest in the secure Asia Pacific; all of which is true regarding Australia. Also, multilateralism in Asia benefits Australia vis-à-vis economic opportunities and common security perceptions posed by the Rise of China, transnational terrorism and Climate Change. Australia, as a part of the Asia Pacific, along with ASEAN and its member states, would therefore, be better armed to tackle common regional problems caused by a shifting paradigm with enhanced cooperation.

THE VIEW FROM ASIA

Simply put, Australia is not perceived as part of Asia. Rather it is seen as having a very close cultural affinity to Europe (Evans 1990: 3). This reality is present against the backdrop of a region that not only has a history of colonialism, but also in a region where perceptions matter and have very real implications for foreign policy. Sarah Teo has noted that “in Asia it matters how one is perceived...whether Australia is viewed as Asian or non-Asian by its neighbours affects how Asian countries approach it and their response to its foreign policy” (2019, p. 78). One of the most outspoken critics of Australia’s push to be included in Asia is the Malaysian Prime Minister again Mahathir Muhamad. He openly challenged Paul Keating’s attempt to be included in Asia in the early 1990s leading to an ongoing feud of ‘recalcitrance’ (Dobell, 2011). In addition, Professor Wang Gungwu, speaking at a symposium at the UNSW, answered: “Asian for who?” when questioned about how Asian Australia was (Walker, 2019, p. 17). Wang went on to add that he had never met someone he considered Asian who included Australia as part of Asia.

More recently, in 2018, after Indonesion President Joko Widodo broached for Australian inclusion in ASEAN, Mahathir denigrated the move stating that “Australia needed to prove itself more Asian than European” (Massola, 2018). He further invoked the racist White Australia Policy as evidence of Australian anti-Asian affinity, adding saliently that once Australia began to treat Asian people as well as white people, then it could be included in ASEAN (Dobell, 2018). Considering the high level of regional consciousness propagated in Southeast Asia (Dosch, 2004, p. 49), Australia would do well to heed the words of ASEAN statesman when they suggest ways to build mutual trust that is vitally important for positive, constructive diplomacy. In this vein, the words of Mahathir and
Teo should be noted. To not do so is emblematic of the arrogance and ignorance which feeds into the narrative of Australia as a colonial European outpost. Australia cannot change its geography, and so needs to focus on being seen as increasingly friendly to Asia, at least from Asia. This argument echoes the words of former Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who said: “It is not enough for us to be just neighbours. We have to be strong partners” (quoted in Taylor, 2007, p. 109).

The idea that Australia treats Asians worse than white people is one that will sit uncomfortably with many Australians. Yet this is one aspect of the stubborn white Australian legacy Paul Keating referred to as the “ghost of empire” (Walker, 2019, p. 6). There are an increasing number of Australians either born overseas in Asia, first-generation Asian, or who identify strongly with their Asian heritage (Khanna, 2019, p. 129). China and India represent the fastest growing diaspora’s in Australian society, while the Vietnamese, Malaysian and Filipino diaspora all continue to grow (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Despite this, Asians are difficult to find in the top levels of Australian politics, in any party. High level executives and top-level representatives coming out of Australia are overwhelmingly white as are the top levels of its bureaucracy and military. In short, the growth in Asian population has not translated to Australia being represented internationally by people with Asian heritage (Patten, 2019). This observation is often taken as a sign that while the White Australia Policy is domestically dead, it still has a stubborn legacy and that racism is alive and well in Australia (Bayuni, 2018, p. 50). Regardless of whether that is a true representation of Australian society at a grassroots level remains to be seen. However, the idea of a racist European Australia still permeates throughout Asia and therefore shapes how Asian states will react to Australian foreign policy.

Australia does need to remedy the fact that so few of their representatives have Asian heritage for two main reasons. First, diversity in background often proliferates diversity of thought which is healthy for policy debates. Second, Australia’s status as a representative democracy means that its representatives reflect Australian society internationally. As the population continues to grow increasingly more Asian, and as Australians are continually exposed to more Asian culture, history and language, representation should start to reflect the diversity that composes Australian society (Megalogenis, 2017, p. 73). Asian representation is different from republicanism, however dispelling the ‘ghost of empire’ buttresses the idea that Australia is willing to accept the society that it is becoming. This will help realise a better perception from Asia which will help in Australia’s endeavour to engage diplomatically with ASEAN.

AUSTRALIA PARTICIPATING THE ‘ASEAN WAY’

In addition to perception, understanding the ASEAN style of diplomacy will further support the idea that Australia needs to be seen as increasingly Asian in order to improve ties with ASEAN. State individualism is a strong pillar of the institution and all members are keen to preserve their differences; this works in Australia’s favour as a unique state within Asia. Moreover, the ‘ASEAN way’ regional guiding normative principles - primarily non-interference in other states internal affairs (i.e. a respect for sovereignty), as well as decision making by consensus - are bedrocks of ASEAN diplomacy (Dosch, 2004, p. 55). In addition, Mark Beeson has noted the regional proclivity to accept intra-regional proposals as opposed to extra-regional ones (2015: 11); considering the long, tumultuous history of colonialism in Southeast Asia, that is not surprising. The ‘ASEAN way’ is not without contest and has been challenged by contemporary scholarship arguing it is more symbolic than effectual (Yukawa, 2018, p. 312). However, it is worth noting that from the view of ASEAN, it is still an important way of conducting diplomacy. In short, Canberra will be ineffectual in its attempts to influence the processes of ASEAN from the political periphery, and needs to be seen as an included and active participant.

While Australia exists on the political periphery in Southeast Asia, that should not be the case. Proximity has ensured that Australia has, for better or worse, shared experiences with ASEAN member states: Australia was an inaugural signatory for the now defunct Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO); spearheaded the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC); fought in the Malayan emergency; helped kickstart the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC); hosts a permanent military base in Butterworth, Malaysia; has helped combat terrorism in Indonesia; and is home to numerous not-for-profit organisations - such as Cufa and Cambodian Kids Can - dedicated solely to improving the lives of disadvantaged people in ASEAN countries. All of this points to a shared historical engagement indicating that Australia can indeed participate in ASEAN diplomacy if only it were to increase its soft power in the region.

Unfortunately, a stage has now been reached where many Asians no longer believe that Australia is as important for them as they are for it (Rayner, 2018, p. 35; Ward, 2015, p. 13). This highlights a clear lack in Australian Asia-Pacific soft power which will frustrate Australian-ASEAN diplomatic attempts.

In truth, it may not be a foreign policy prerogative for Australia to actually join ASEAN as a regional bloc, as advocated by President Widodo in 2018. The rise of China has created factions within ASEAN. Cambodia and Laos have already accepted Chinese funding in exchange for unwavering strategic support and they will not question Chinese motives or actions, even to the anguish of other ASEAN member states (Bower, 2012; Davism 2019; Khanna, 2019, p. 122). In contrast, Vietnam openly challenges Chinese encroachment in the South China Sea. Also, Indonesia has grown sufficiently confident in the international arena to claim the North Natuna Sea, which is also claimed by China despite residing in Indonesia’s 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone. Additionally, environmental degradation including forest fires, land clearing and ocean pollution will all be exasperated as climate change worsens (Nesadurai, 2018, p. 205).
It is a fair question to wonder if, in light of these challenges, ASEAN can exist deep into the 21st century in its current form. Still, these challenges should not deter Canberra from attempting to improve its perception from the Asian perspective. As the region grows, Australia does itself a political and economic disservice by trying to engage ASEAN states from the outside.

THE VIEW FROM AUSTRALIA

The idea of becoming a republic in Australia does not enjoy bipartisan support, nor is the amount of public support for the idea clear. Previous public votes have rejected it. Some cite the profound difference in values between western and Asian societies as reason for preserving the western status quo and therefore challenging republicanism. This is a weak argument when put into context. Firstly, it is almost exclusively framed around China, especially in the Australian media. While it is principally true that Chinese and Australian societies enjoy a vast gulf in values centred around arbitrary, democratic and spoken freedoms which will be unlikely to transcend easily, if ever, it must be remembered that China is an Asian state, not Asia itself. This is too often presumed in error. Secondly, the concept of Asia itself is a very pliable, morphing, diverse idea which is hard to concretely define. Consequently, Asian values as an umbrella term is equally difficult to define (Subramaniam, 2010, p. 23). Furthermore, when one considers the diversity of Asia, Australian diversity only proposes to enhance and enrich that multiplicity. Considering that Southeast Asia (and the rest of Asia) is undergoing a period of extreme growth and prosperity, never before have the foreign policy implications for becoming a republic been so profoundly positive.

There are further economic benefits to be had. That most states in Southeast Asia are still developing amid burgeoning populations, and that the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative is driving new infrastructure expansion in the region is a gift for Australia. Indonesia’s steady 5% GDP increase is modest compared to Cambodia and Vietnam, both growing at over 7% per year (Kim 2018). The region is currently home to 700 million people made up of a young, growing, population (Khanna, 2019, p. 121 & 148) who could demand Australian natural resources to fuel their increasingly ambitious infrastructure and development projects (Ba & Beeson, 2017, p. 5). If Australia negotiates this potential future pragmatically, it would create a boon for the Australian economy.

Overall, as Australian society continues to morph, closer resembling the geographic area in which it is situated, a rethink of the political landscape becomes necessary. The very notion of ‘representative’ democracy requires politics to mirror a society. Further, advanced and mature societies have an obligation to question the status quo, to accept things because ‘that is the way it has always been done’ is never an academically acceptable answer. Australia’s demographic trajectory makes it increasingly relevant to ask: Is a constitutional monarchy with the Queen of Britain, or any future British monarch, as head of state an appropriate system for Australia, a country in which a growing number of the population identify as Asian? Furthermore, the very notion of pre-determined hereditary lineage, dictating who is going to be Australia’s head of state, is antithesis to the free democracy that Australians often cite as one of the key differences between Australian and Asian values. Being a republic and having the freedom to choose a head of state rather than having one dictated is therefore highly consistent with Australian democratic values. Finally, as a state’s foreign policy is a de-facto projection of a state’s values onto the international community, becoming a republic to project increasing demographic diversity requires additional onus from Canberra.

CONCLUSION

Thus far, positive Australian engagement in Southeast Asia has been slow to materialise, despite successive Government administrations’ promises to do just that. Australia is still perceived as having a colonial European legacy which it needs to dispel by becoming a republic. In so doing, Australia will remove a great impediment to beneficial Southeast Asian and ASEAN engagement. This suggestion comes at a crucial time considering the shifting geopolitical paradigm in the Asia Pacific region and the economic trajectory and growth of Southeast Asian states. Furthermore, Australia and ASEAN member states have a long history of engagement, which although not always positive, proves that proximity will continue to be a big factor in the future.

Australia is an advanced democracy with a changing demographic society. Becoming a republic will help Australia cast off any notion that it remains entrenched in the days of the White Australia policy. It will also ensure that Australia no longer has any undue affinity towards Europe and is therefore accepting of the diverse, increasingly Asian society that it is becoming on a political level. These points amalgamate to help Australia be perceived as an Asian country which can therefore better engage with ASEAN, or bilaterally with its member states, which is essential for Australia to ensure it is safe and prosperous in a shifting geopolitical region.

Jamie is in his final year studying a Bachelor of International Relations at La Trobe University. He is interested in the politics of Southeast Asia and hopes to promote Australian engagement in Asia.

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Refugees in Southeast Asia: Avenues for Action in ASEAN and Australia

Adeline Tinessia | Australia

Countries in ASEAN host hundreds of thousands of refugees each year, many of whom were en route to seek a better life in Australia. Yet Australia’s abrupt change in refugee policy and its staunch refusal to accept no one who comes in boats have left many people in limbo, with limited rights and living in fear. What can ASEAN do to protect them? Is there room for collaboration with Australia?

Beneath the glitzy, modern towers of central Jakarta, with the sun reflecting its heat upon the ground, a handful of tents are perched on the side of the road, right next to the UNHCR building in Kebon Sirih. These tents however are not temporary; they are the permanent homes for many refugees stranded in Jakarta.

Mahmood is a 40-year-old Afghani refugee who has resided in Indonesia for over five years. Out of fear of being persecuted, he ran away from his home, leaving his wife and eight kids, searching for a safe place to call home. He paid people smugglers US$8000 to smuggle him out of Afghanistan. His journey so far has been difficult to say the least, and is still far from over. In 2013 he left Afghanistan in the hopes of coming to Australia. He first went to India for 12 days, on to Malaysia for 4 days, and then he took a boat to Medan, and then to Jakarta. Here, he registered his name to UNHCR, before making his way to Australia.

“In January 2014, I came to Australia by boat. Then 12 days with the immigration, border protection of Australia in the big boat. After that they send me back to Jakarta, in the orange boat. My boat was demolished,” he said.

Australia has a policy of returning boats carrying refugees before they reach its shores. In the process, boats carrying refugees are intercepted by Australia’s border force before entering Australia’s waters, and refugees are ultimately transferred into a small and cramped orange boats to be sent back to Java. Mahmood was officially deemed a refugee by UNHCR 20 months after he first registered.

“I’m hopeless now,” he said when asked of what hopes he has.

Refugees in Southeast Asia

Mahmood is just one case amidst many refugees who are stuck in transit countries, in danger of returning back to their homes yet unable to go to their intended destinations. In Southeast Asia alone, countries such as Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia have been the host of many refugees from Somalia, to Rohingya to Afghanistan among others, many of whom embarked on their journey for a better life, in the hope of reaching and resettling in Australia.

UNHCR indicated the number of refugees in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, from November 2018. Source: (UNHCR, 2014)
Chapter One: Political Security Cooperation

According to the UNHCR, in Southeast Asia alone, there are a total of 2.7 million people of concern, including those who are stateless and those who are internally displaced (UNHCR, 2014). However, this number is likely to not encapsulate the total number of people of concern as not all people who require international protection from persecution are registered with UNHCR.

In ASEAN, refugees are living in dire conditions in their host countries. In Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia, refugees are held for 24 hours a day, seven days a week with over-crowding, or living on the streets in a tent. Both living conditions present inadequate hygiene and a lack of access to adequate medical treatment (Save the Children, 2017, p. 2). The adverse impact of immigration detention on the physical and mental wellbeing of refugees is well documented – mental illness, poor physical health and susceptibility to illness, developmental impairment, self-harm, exposure to violence and even death are all sadly predictable outcomes (Save the Children, 2017, p. 2). Save the Children research suggests that asylum seekers will often make choices, some of them which adversely impact on the access of their children to education, healthcare, and recreation, in order to minimise the risk of being detected by authorities.

The biggest problem however is that refugees in these countries ultimately have no rights. As neither Thailand, Malaysia or Indonesia have signed or ratified the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugee Rights, refugees have no rights within the country, nor do they have any rights to citizenship. They not only live in poor conditions, but are unable to receive education or proper health care, unable to work and risk being deported due to their legal status as “illegal aliens.”

All the items that the refugees possess

The biggest problem however is that refugees in these countries ultimately have no rights. As neither Thailand, Malaysia or Indonesia have signed or ratified the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugee Rights, refugees have no rights within the country, nor do they have any rights to citizenship. They not only live in poor conditions, but are unable to receive education or proper health care, unable to work and risk being deported due to their legal status as “illegal aliens.”

ASEAN AND AICHR REMAINS INEFFECTIVE

Between ASEAN states themselves, victims of religious or political violence seeking refuge in neighbouring countries are not fully protected according to the international standard on refugee protection as legal protection frameworks are hardly existent or severely insufficient. As a result, undocumented migrants such as refugees are vulnerable to exploitation, with no stable means of income, no access to education or timely health care, and many are prone to involuntary repatriation (AsiaDHRRRA, 2017, p. 7). This issue should be paramount for ASEAN, and should be seen as a marked social failure of the ASEAN Economic Community. Thousands of people are searching for safety and livelihood throughout this emergent community, but have been left vulnerable to state coercion and various forms of exploitation, with little to no access to basic necessities (Palmgren, 2015). Refugees staying in ASEAN countries remain ad hoc and temporary, and are offered no prospect for permanent settlement and integration.

While ASEAN has a number of regional frameworks, including those that protect the rights of forced migrants, the implementation of policies and laws on migration are left to the will of national governments. As a result, these frameworks hardly protect the rights of refugees, as many countries do not comply with international human rights standards. This can be exemplified by the fact that only two ASEAN Member States, namely Cambodia and Philippines, are signatory to the UN Refugee Convention, yet other member countries are not (Petcharamesree, 2015, p. 173). Overall, ASEAN is more concerned with upholding its principles with regarding the respect of state sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, rather than upholding international standards for human rights. While consultation, consensus and non-confrontation are applied for the cases of refugees, they have yet to manifest in significant changes to policies within individual member states.

AICHR or the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights is intended to assist ASEAN and its states in conforming to the ‘purpose and principles of the ASEAN charter relating to the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms’ (Petcharamesree, 2015, p. 184). It deals with all categories of human rights, including hypothetically that of non-citizens and refugees. It also promotes and protects the human rights of all groups within the people of ASEAN. AICHR however remains somewhat of a paper tiger, as it does not have any capacity to enforce decisions upon member states (AsiaDHRRRA, 2017, p. 5). The issue of statelessness has already found its way onto the AICHR’s agenda. The activities that are organised by AICHR remain focused on awareness raising, on sensitisation of the issues and more concrete actions being taken by AICHR (Petcharamesree, 2015, p. 184). Article 16 of the ASEAN Declaration on Human Rights (ADHR) recognises the ‘right to seek and receive asylum in another state,’ the same provisions make it clear that asylum is to be granted ‘in accordance with the laws of such state and applicable international agreements (Petcharamesree, 2015,
AHRD also recognises the right of nationality. However, Article 34 of the AHRD states very clearly that the member states ‘may determine the extent to which they can guarantee the economic and social rights found in this declaration to non-nationals, with due regard to human rights, the organisation and resources of their respective national economies’ (Petcharamesree, 2015, p. 185).

That being said, several member states recognise the need to act on the issue of refugees. Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia realise that regional cooperation is necessary to tackle the root problem that causes displacement in the first place. It was during this time that ASEAN was suggested to be the appropriate place to discuss the issue and to come up with an agenda to assist countries of origin in limiting the number of people needing to leave the country (Harley & Mathew, 2014, p. 5). However, in these three countries, refugees are treated by the national legal framework as ‘illegal aliens’ and are subject to arrest, detention and repatriation. It is also important to note that these countries have extremely porous borders which permit significant levels of irregular immigration (Save the Children, 2017, p. 6).

Overall, The AICHR is not a good vehicle to discuss refugee issues, as its mandate - which is regional - differentiates from what the national human rights mechanisms do. That said, all ASEAN mechanisms (as do other regional mechanisms in the EU, AU, and the UN) refer to sovereignty and non-interference, as well as consensus agreement for important decisions. This “compromise” resulting from the closed-door discussions that ASEAN members engage in, can be very robust and frank. There is an opportunity within ASEAN Member States to engage in such discussions and in Track II diplomacy, or backchannel diplomacy involving non-governmental institutions, when it comes to refugees.

ASEAN AS AN INSTITUTION CAN TAKE MORE RESPONSIBILITY TO HELP REFUGEES

AICHR is rightly positioned to leverage its mandate to develop a regional strategy to encourage member states to ratify the Refugee Convention. A cooperation plan of action for the protection of refugees should be developed, and commitment to guarantee the right to seek asylum should be strengthened (AsiaDHRRRA, 2017, p. 14). Because AICHR holds meetings every year, it should establish a permanent agenda on forced migration, which should be mainstreamed as a program and developed into a plan within a timeframe. The protection mandate within AICHR’s Terms of Reference should also be operationalised and strengthened, so AICHR can address key human rights issues within the region (AsiaDHRRRA, 2017, p. 5).

There is also a need to acknowledge and address the push factors behind forced migration and why refugees are being forced to leave their home countries and seek international protection. In the case of ASEAN, there is a need to address the case of the persecution of Rohingya people by the government of Myanmar (Pocock, 2018, p. 2). This risks to be difficult due to the charter of non-interference, therefore ASEAN countries are less able to meddle in the internal issues of Myanmar. But if ASEAN member states want to limit the number of refugees they would have to host in their countries, dealing with the root cause of the problem is the clear solution. Member states must develop a refugee policy that includes guidance for actions to be taken when a member states’ internal issues cause people to flee to neighbouring states (Shivakoti, 2017, p. 77). Further, the expansion of non-ASEAN refugees in the region suggest that it is no longer an issue that can be tackled exclusively within the region. ASEAN and AICHR should explore ways to establish strategic cooperation and partnership with different bodies and frameworks from various different regions. This should include collaboration with civil society organisations, which have direct access to information and refugees themselves.

Other than AICHR and within ASEAN’s regional bounds, the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR) may offer a slightly more promising avenue, in terms of helping bring about dialogue and reconciliation in post-conflict situations. This is particularly beneficial when it comes to the case of the Rohingya Refugee Crisis, which occurred within the bounds of ASEAN. It is hoped that within AIPR’s mandate a peaceful negotiation can take place in Myanmar, addressing the root-cause of the refugee crisis there, that stems from the persecution of the Rohingya. Similarly, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Management (AHA Centre) can aid in post-disaster humanitarian issues. There is trust that has been built between ASEAN and Myanmar over twenty years of interaction, and dialogue provides a link for ASEAN to take on a mediating and coordinating role.

Beyond crises that begin within the territory of ASEAN, ASEAN nations’ involvement in the Bali Process can help. The Bali Process is a state-led policy-formation mechanism that was created due to the common concerns of irregular migration in the region,
especially through people smuggling, human trafficking and related transnational crime. In the last few years, their works included the issues surrounding refugees (Petcharamesree, 2015, p. 185). The Bali Process is co-chaired by Indonesia and Australia, however its members come from various Asia-Pacific and Middle-East nations. The actors and the process which have emerged at state-level are dominated by Australia under the Bali Process. That being said, under that process, refugees are constructed within securitized discourse of irregular migration.

The main focus of the Bali Process in regards to refugees is orderly migration in a mixed-migration nexus. As it contextualises refugees within a mixed-migration nexus, it avoids the language of human rights in regards to asylum seekers. Further, the discourse is heavily influenced by Australia and its restrictive policies, and thus it has arguably exported such policies into neighbouring countries such as Indonesia and other countries within the region. The result of the Bali Process makes it seem as though it is the region's responsibility to protect Australia from an incoming of refugees (Betts, 2009). Other states have adopted a more restrictive stance on refugees as well, such as Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia who now classify migrants as legal vs illegal.

DOES AUSTRALIA BEAR RESPONSIBILITY?

Refugees who are transiting within Southeast Asia are primarily intending to reside in Australia. This is because of Australia’s multicultural society, which historically has tended to be open to people seeking opportunities. Australia is rightly positioned as a country that is capable of supporting refugees, due to its good work opportunities, as well as medical treatments available. Australia is also one of the only countries in the region, bar Cambodia and Philippines, that have signed the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. Australia’s policy however has categorized and procedurally handled boat arrivals as ‘security threats,’ rather than a humanitarian issue. The widely publicized poor handling of refugees by Australia, as well as the closing of sea water routes, have meant that refugees are now stuck in Indonesia, Malaysia or Thailand, unable to return home due to the risk to their safety, yet unable to follow their journey to Australia in order to obtain a better life. Those who do seek refuge to Australia via water will risk having their boats returned, like the case of Mahmood. Previously, Australia had a policy of placing refugees in offshore detention on Manus Island, Papua New-Guinea, or Nauru. In the region, Australia is the most equipped to allow refugees to seek a new life. With a relatively strong economy and a multi-cultural society, Australia can ensure that refugees have a better life.

It is true however, that Australia cannot simply receive all refugees attempting to flee their homes, so what Australia can do is to help the journey of refugees. Australia can help contribute to UNHCR stationed in Southeast Asia in order to help accommodate refugees accordingly. It is also important for Australia to investigate what the root causes of people fleeing their homes are, and develop strong policy accordingly to ensure that people’s safety in other countries is not in danger. Working with relevant frameworks, such as convention and treaty, are possible. Australia can also work together with ASEAN and ASEAN nations to help legislate laws to protect refugees. Australia is in a position where it can carry out meaningful dialogue with its ASEAN neighbours, whilst providing training centred around refugee rights. The intention of such is to develop a comprehensive plan, and subsequently policy, on how to deal with the problem that intersects the region.

But what is important is that Australia must lead by example. Australia is a signatory of the UN Refugee Convention, and by virtue it must protect those who are deemed to be refugees in their plight to seek a better life. Australia’s policies today are far from that, and instead, put at risk the physical and mental health of refugees. Australia’s first priority is to develop legislation that follows the commitments made in the UN Refugee Convention.

YOUTH CAN TAKE THE LEAD TOO!

While the problem is indeed a large one, the role of youth, both in Australia and ASEAN countries, is important. Youth have the ability and responsibility to educate themselves, and subsequently others, of the plight of refugees. This begins with understanding why mass migration happens, understanding the history and politics of where conflict is happening and the impact it has. Through understanding the experiences of refugees, it is hoped that more will feel sympathetic to the journey that refugees must take.

Youth can also rally to help refugees within their local area, city, or nation. Refugees are in need of basic necessities, including ready to eat meals, clothing, hygiene products, and bedding. Items like this need not to be purchased new; Organising a donation...
drive amongst friends and family of necessary items is extremely beneficial. Such processes would also help educate others of the hardships that refugees face. To know the location of refugee camps, liaise with local NGOs working on the issue of refugees. Such NGOs are useful in knowing specifically what is needed.

It is also important to know refugees on a personal basis. It is easy to view the issue of refugees in numbers, but easy to forget that those figures signify lives. Like any human, connection is important and having a chat with them will make refugees feel more welcomed. This way, you would also discover other ways to help them. Refugees have interesting backgrounds and stories to tell, and having such avenues for discussion will help release some stress.

Lastly, but most importantly, it is important to make your view be known to your government. Writing letters to your government, articles for blogs or news websites, or letting your dissent be known on social media is an important step. What the youth of today can do is to engage in a conscious and continued dialogue with different office-holders, so that the policy realities and constraints can be communicated both ways and discussed. The government needs to know of the public’s anger and disappointment about the treatment of refugees. Through this process, it is hoped that the government will feel more pressured to reassess their refugee policy, and will pressure governments involved in conflict and oppression of their people to cease, in order to stop people for fleeing. At the same time, it is hoped to inspire the development of more socially responsible enterprises for refugees and their dignity, such as Suzanne Lim, a Young Southeast Asia Leader Initiative (YSEALI) from Malaysia, who has set up an enterprise that employs Rohingya and other refugees in Malaysia in her catering services (SIIA, 2018).

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Chapter Two

ECONOMIC COOPERATION

Chapter Two sheds light on youth perspectives addressing dynamics of the ASEAN-Australia economic partnership. Can Australia and ASEAN work together to ensure equitable and sustainable digital transformation in the region?

US-China Trade War: Not the Endgame for ASEAN and Australia

Andrea Chan | Singapore

Trade wars are often motivated by protectionism and occur when one country retaliates against another’s trade restrictions. Although the tension occurs between nations, the impact is often felt on an international level. This article analyses the battle for power in the US-China trade war, a seeming endgame, and considers future growth opportunities that ASEAN and Australia can explore to hedge against the effects of the trade war.

Figure 1: Illustration by Craig Stephens depicting how ASEAN’s survival in the trade war is akin to walking on a tight rope, risky but possible if carefully navigated.

A SUMMARY OF THE US-CHINA TRADE WAR AND AN EXPLORATION OF THE FUTURE POSSIBILITIES FOR ASEAN AND AUSTRALIA.

It’s the battle of the ages in Avengers: Endgame, the fight against Thanos, a superhuman Titan mutant, who threatens to wipe out half the world’s population with a single snap of his fingers. Two of the strongest superhero leaders in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), Captain America and Ironman, have been part of a long standing battle for power and are known for disagreeing with each other. Their conflicting ideologies in Captain America: Civil War resulted in half of the Avengers having to escape an underwater prison.

Coming back down to Earth from the inter-galactic battles in Avengers: Endgame, we find ourselves caught in a comparably brutal battle for power between US and China, our own terrestrial equivalents of Captain America and Ironman. The ongoing conflict between the incumbent and emerging superpowers of the US & China continues to have far-reaching negative impact on the global economy, with the Association of Southeast
Chapter Two: Economic Cooperation

Nations (ASEAN) countries at the epicenter. Countries that are heavily dependent on exports to the US and China, such as Malaysia and Vietnam, and countries that have manufacturing sectors integrated into global value chains, like Singapore and Thailand, are likely to be most exposed to the negative effects of the trade war (Reynolds, 2019).

While each of the individual countries, much like standalone Avengers, are strong and come with their unique strengths, together they are much stronger. But they need the Captain America and Ironman, of the US & China, to put their differences and pride aside to bring the Avengers together. In the film’s denouement, we see Captain America and Ironman combining forces to draw on and harmonize the strengths of each of the Avengers, which ultimately leads to victory over the seemingly undefeatable superpower Thanos is. Although not a new concept, the movie serves as a reminder of the power of putting aside one’s differences and individual glory. We are also reminded, like the Avengers, that by focusing on a common goal and working together to overcome the insurmountable, everyone wins.

"War does not determine who is right - only who is left."
- Bertrand Russell

Back on Earth, amidst all the trade war negativity, however, there is a hidden jewel of hope; the potential for countries in the Asia-Pacific (APAC) to leverage on growth opportunities and regional collaboration to hedge the effects of the trade war in APAC. Just as the Avengers banded together to stop the superpower Thanos from destroying half the world, perhaps the secret to survival lies in the regional cooperation of these APAC countries in establishing their own free-trade agreements and leveraging on each of their country’s strengths for the combined growth of the region.

Figure 2: Illustration by Rodrigo depicting how US tariffs on imported washing machines have backfired as Americans now have to bear higher prices.

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While the impact of the US-China Trade War has been undeniably damaging, the

Figure 3: Infographic summarising products affected by US-China Trade War, effective July 2019. Source: Republica

AN OVERVIEW OF THE US-CHINA TRADE WAR

It is clear that the US-China Trade War is largely motivated by protectionism and competition, as both countries compete to establish themselves as the greater economic power.

The trade dispute first started back in April 2017 during the Mar-a-Lago summit where Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Donald Trump agreed to implement a 100-day plan to resolve trade differences. In May 2017, as part of the 100-day plan, US and China agreed on a trade deal that would give certain US firms in agriculture, energy and financial industries increased access to China’s markets (Wong & Koty, 2019).

In response to the agreement, in August 2017, the United States Trade Representative (USTR) launched a formal investigation into China’s intellectual property (IP) policies in relation to counterfeit goods, pirated software and stolen trade secrets, which allegedly resulted in an estimated annual cost of $600 billion to the US economy.

"War does not determine who is right - only who is left."
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Figure 3: Infographic summarising products affected by US-China Trade War, effective July 2019. Source: Republica
In March 2018, Trump signed a memorandum to impose tariffs on Chinese products, as well as to restrict investments in key technology sectors (Wong & Koty, 2019), as penalties on China for their theft of US intellectual property, which allegedly affected billions in revenue and thousands of jobs in America (Landler & Rappeport, 2018). Following the USTR investigation, Trump also filed a World Trade Organisation (WTO) case against China for discriminatory technology licensing practices that resulted in unfair treatment for US companies in China due to less favorable contract terms for imported foreign technology (‘US drags China…’, 2018).

In late March of 2018, after both the US and China imposed retaliatory tariffs on products such as steel, aluminium, soybeans, sorghum and automobiles, the trade war began. In spite of two rounds of intensive trade talks hosted in Beijing, during May and June of that year, the US and China failed to come to a mutually satisfactory agreement. Throughout August and July of 2018, the US announced China-specific tariffs worth an approximated $200 billion, wherein China retaliated with an additional $60 billion worth of tariffs on US products. China also filed a WTO claim against the US, on the premise that US tariffs obstructed China’s trade interests (Wong & Koty, 2019).

After almost 4 months of failed negotiations, cancelled trade talks and retaliatory tariffs, a temporary truce was agreed upon in December 2018; with China agreeing to purchase more US products and to temporarily lower tariffs on US auto parts for three months, and the US agreeing not to impose additional tariffs on Chinese goods (Wong & Koty, 2019).

**WHEN TRADE TALKS TURN INTO THREATS**

The initial trade disputes of 2017 began as a result of the US’s response to China’s IP policies, that it claimed were unfair to US companies operating in China. Consequently, one of the US’s most insistent demands during trade negotiations has been for Beijing to strengthen the protection of foreign companies’ IP rights, and to remove the forced transfer of technology requirements for US firms wishing to undertake joint-ventures within China. However, Beijing remains reluctant to strengthen its IP laws according to professor David Ahlstrom at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, due to concerns that it may slow economic growth (Yeung & Leng, 2019).

Following another 4 months of failed negotiations in early 2019, Trump threatened to further raise tariffs on $200 billion worth of Chinese products effective 10 May 2019. China then retaliated with additional tariffs on $60 billion worth of US products effective from 1 June 2019, with tensions escalating once more. Today, there exists a total of $250 billion US tariffs exclusively applied to Chinese goods, and a total of $110 billion Chinese tariffs exclusively applied to US goods (Wong & Koty, 2019).

With no resolution in sight, the trade war tensions continue to escalate between the World’s two largest economies, with China accusing the Trump administration of committing ‘economic terrorism’ and Chinese state media sending Washington an ominous “Don’t say we didn’t warn you” (Westcott, Wang & Picheta, 2019).

**THE TRADE WARS IMPACT ON ASEAN AND AUSTRALIA**

Although the impact of the US-China trade war has a detrimental impact to the global economy, not all hope is lost. The trade war has created opportunities for ASEAN and
A Australian producers who are now being considered as alternatives to US and China products in the global market.

**INDIVIDUAL STRENGTHS**

**Import substitution opportunities**

In the short-term, while the US and China implement tariffs on each other’s imports, they will quickly need to find more affordable substitutes from either domestic producers or neighbouring countries. Countries like Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines stand to benefit, offering affordable substitutes in liquefied natural gas, automatic data processing units and electronic integrated circuits (Subbaraman & Varma, 2019). Furthermore, with China and Hong Kong accounting for 40 percent of Australia’s fruit and nut exports, Australia stands to gain from growing demand as an affordable alternative compared to the increased prices of US fruit exports into China (Neuman, 2018).

In particular, being China’s largest trading partner (Neuman, 2018), Australia also sees opportunities in the wine industry with Australia’s wine exports to China totalling nearly $767 billion (Subbaraman & Varma, 2019). According to Tony Battaglene, the CEO of the Winemakers Federation of Australia (Nakano & Matsumoto, 2018), production relocation opportunities

**In the medium term, the trade war is likely to result in a realignment of global supply chains that may be beneficial to Southeast Asia, especially in the information technology equipment and electronics manufacturing sectors in Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia who have much lower operating costs (Tobin & Power, 2019).**

Additionally, there are increasing opportunities for countries in the ASEAN region as manufacturing of both high-tech goods, such as mobile phones and vehicles, and simple products, like bicycles, continues to move away from China (Lauria, 2019).

**Rare Earth Opportunities for Australia**

In May, China threatened to withhold rare earth minerals, a key component in mobile phones, from the United States. This is significant because China holds 90% of global rare earth processing capacity and a quarter of the world’s reserves compared to Australia’s 2.8%. Although Australia accounts for more than half of the new projects in the global pipeline, these projects are slowed down by difficulty in securing financing due to China’s dominance in the rare earth industry (Burton, 2019).

However, alternative sources of financing have recently revived the commercial viability of such projects for Australia, including the Australian government’s Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility’s (NAIF) interest in providing funding support (Grigg & Ker, 2019).

**REGIONAL COLLABORATIONS**

More importantly, we have seen increasing efforts in APAC to work together to maintain regional order amidst the international repercussions of the trade war. Southeast Asian countries have been working to streamline tariff rates and customs procedures across the region through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to strengthen positive regional trade initiatives. Australia has also signed an investment agreement with ASEAN in joint efforts to attract public and private investment by developing high-quality infrastructure projects (Heydarian, 2018).

**LOOKING INTO THE LONG-TERM: A MULTILATERAL COOPERATION**

Considering that the tariffs might remain, in order to benefit from the impacts of these changes in the global trade climate, ASEAN and Australia should take on a longer-term perspective in investing in production capacity. Michael Taylor, Chief Credit Officer for Asia at Moody’s in Singapore noted that “The factor which limits the extent to which countries can benefit from the trade tensions is infrastructure”, areas in which Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia have made major investments (Tobin & Power, 2019).

Furthermore, as many of the benefits might take a long time to come into full-effect (Lauria, 2019), it is important that ASEAN and Australia takes measures to bolster against lower trade volumes and a lack of investor confidence in the shorter term. Perhaps the secret lies in the exact opposite of the US’s unilateralism and protectionism that is driving the US-China Trade War; the multilateral cooperation that China and many other nations have called for. Even if the US remains protectionist, ASEAN can still build their resilience against the negative effects of the trade war through strengthening economic cooperation in the region through multilateral trade agreements.
Does the battle of the superpowers in the US-China Trade War equate to a bleak economic outlook for the rest of the world? In the short-term, possibly. But even more possibly, the combined strength of countries in APAC might be enough to ensure it’s not the Endgame anymore.

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The digital economy has great power to transform the ASEAN region and to supercharge regional growth, however, it is important not to chase the possibility of rapid economic growth at the expense of inclusivity, safety and sustainability.

Artificial Intelligence (AI). Machine Learning (ML). Internet of Things (IoT). These technology buzzwords are increasingly used in business and policy as the world shifts its focus towards building a digital economy. ‘Technology is the future” we are often reminded, and in many ways, it is true. Although technology may not completely replace our jobs, it significantly changes the skills society needs to add value to the economy as well as the way we learn and interact with each other. While this essay does not dive into the details of AI, ML and IoT, it will consider what a future driven by technology looks like and what that means for ASEAN and Australia’s digital economy given the digital disparity within the region.

DIGITAL ECONOMY AND ITS IMPORTANCE

The digital economy refers to economic processes, transactions, interactions and activities that are based on digital technologies (“What is the Digital Economy? – Definition from Techopedia). These technologies enable the production and consumption of products and services via digital platforms and business activities.

A closer look at ASEAN

In particular, the ASEAN Digital Economy is projected to grow by 500 per cent to be worth over US$200 billion by 2025, with the collective ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) harnessing the potential of becoming the fourth largest economy in the world by

Figure 2: The SEA internet economy is projected to grow from $72 billion in 2018 to $240 billion in 2025. Source: 2018 e-Conomy SEA Report

The digitization of these activities has changed how the world interacts with one another as businesses, consumers and even in our social relationships. According to Datareportal (Kemp, 2019), following a 9 percent growth from 2018, there are now 4.39 billion internet users, with the Asia Pacific accounting for 55 percent of the annual growth figure. In particular, the latest data from Alexa shows that e-commerce sites have been growing steadily with key players like Amazon, Taobao and Tmall being positioned in the Top 10 most visited websites in the world (Alexa – The top 500 sites on the web, n.d.).

More importantly, digital technologies are, and will continue to remain, at the core of commercial and social interactions across the world. Given the rapid growth and ever-changing nature of the online marketplace, there is a pressing need for countries and businesses to stay relevant by riding the wave of technological advancements in order to fully harness the power of a digital economy.

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Figure 1: Customer purchase prediction algorithms depicted in real life. Source: Rinna Piccolo

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2050 (Feldman, 2018). Within the 2025 digital economy growth projection, e-commerce alone is expected to grow to US$88 billion as seen in the growing number of ASEAN-based e-commerce companies like Singapore-based Lazada and Indonesia’s Tokopedia (Tang, 2018).

According to the 2018 Google-Temasek e-Conomy Southeast Asia (SEA) report, the SEA internet economy alone is projected to grow from $72 billion in 2018 to $240 billion in 2025 (Anandan et al., 2018). This suggests huge potential for ASEAN to grow as a regional economy especially in sectors like e-commerce, ride-hailing and the overall startup landscape as investor confidence in the region continues to rise.

DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND REGIONAL COOPERATION

The potential for the region to succeed as a digital economy lies in the fundamental goal of ASEAN, which was to accelerate economic (as well as social and cultural) growth through intergovernmental cooperation and partnerships between nations instead of operating as silos.

In recent years, ASEAN have seen enhanced regional cooperation within the economy as well as with Australia. The potential for ASEAN to grow as a digital economy and the efforts of the ASEAN region have also won support from a coalition of companies through public pledges.

The ASEAN Digital Skills Vision 2020, launched by the WEF in April 2018, is a public pledge open to all companies to show their commitment to helping ASEAN move towards a digital economy. The pledge includes goals to train 20 million people working in ASEAN Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) in digital skills and to raise $2 million for scholarships for ASEAN technology students by 2020. The initiative garnered early support from technology companies, like Google and Microsoft, through internships for ASEAN university students and training for SME employees (Digital ASEAN, n.d.).

The Australian Government also recently launched a Digital Economy Strategy that focuses on developing Australia’s digital aptitude at an individual and government level and strengthening IT infrastructure and security (Department of Industry, 2017). Although not part of ASEAN, Australia has also taken an active role in supporting ASEAN nations in their development as a digital economy. In particular, an AU$10 million initiative called the Aus4Innovation program was designed to deepen the collaboration between Australia and Vietnam to strengthen Vietnam’s innovation systems in preparing to grow as a digital economy. The blueprint is guided by seven megatrends, including new export markets for Vietnam, the impact of emerging digital technologies and changing consumer behavior (Umali, 2019).

As part of a longer-term cooperation program, ASEAN and Australia are currently on Phase II of the ASEAN-Australia Development Cooperation Program (AADCP), which was formed to support ASEAN’s goal of establishing an ASEAN Economic Community. As part of Phase II, the AADCP launched various frameworks to help improve infrastructure productivity and connectivity in ASEAN by 2025.

However, while these initiatives involve ambitious goals and commendable effort to come together as a region, these efforts tend to focus on rapid technological advancements both in innovative systems and in up-skilling people as the region strives towards maximizing growth as a high-potential digital economy.

Although economic growth is crucial, it is essential to remember that working towards growth as a region requires ASEAN to take into account the different stages each country is starting at, the varying rates of development in each country and the existing social and political issues a country might be facing that economic growth alone cannot compensate for.

DISRUPTION AND THE ASEAN-AUSTRALIA RESPONSE

Economic growth is both developmental and disruptive. In order to effectively tap on the region’s potential, ASEAN and Australia need to find the balance between rapid development and digitalization and managing the effects of disruption.

Although disruption has a negative connotation to it, disruption is unavoidable in a period of growth and can still be beneficial if managed properly. Amidst the allure of becoming a fast-growing economic power through digitalization, ASEAN and Australia need to strive for inclusive and sustainable growth that protect the safety of its users in order to succeed in becoming a fully charged but not over-charged region.

Inclusivity

The three pillars of the ASEAN Community are the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community
(ASCC). Although the economy is a key driver of growth and it is tempting to focus on the economy over political security and social welfare, it is important to recognise that within ASEAN, the countries are all at different stages of stability and growth. Not all developing countries are at a suitable stage for transformation into a digital economy as their basic infrastructure and social needs have not yet been met. For example, ASEAN countries like the Philippines and Myanmar still need to resolve basic social issues such as proper sanitation and securing internet access for all, before they can consider developing digital technologies like AI and IoT.

Based on the ASEAN Investment Report 2018, Australia’s Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into ASEAN is focused on services such as banking and insurance and is concentrated in certain countries like Singapore, Indonesia and Thailand, which accounted for more than 90% of Australia’s cumulative FDI in ASEAN between 1995 to 2017 (ASEAN Investment Report 2018). However, focusing FDI on countries that are considered higher-potential digital economies within ASEAN might worsen the growing development gap between ASEAN countries.

One possible way to achieve inclusive growth could be to continue to develop plans using a similar framework to the ASEAN Smart Cities Network, where digital solutions are used to address development challenges that arise due to rapid urbanisation like pollution and traffic congestion, and to improve regional connectivity (Das, 2018). Addressing a nation’s underlying political and social challenges as a first step is important because they may ultimately limit a country’s potential economic growth in the long run. In countries with more development challenges, using digital solutions to address these challenges can be the priority, while countries that have achieved more political and social stability can focus on up-skilling people and technological advancements.

Stronger digital economies like Australia should also remain open to lower cost products and services from less-developed digital nations rather than focusing investments only in more traditional banking and insurance sectors in certain ASEAN nations. This would not only support developing digital economies, but would also allow Australia to benefit from greater insight into alternative innovations and development opportunities they may not have considered before (Meltzer, 2018).

Safety

ASEAN’s potential as a digital economy is not only being recognized by foreign direct investors. ASEAN’s relatively new and insecure technology infrastructures have also been a vulnerable target for cyberattacks, especially because a single point of attack allows hackers to gain access to the global network (Lago, 2019). Kearney’s report (“Cybersecurity in ASEAN: An Urgent Call to Action”, 2018) found that Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam are global operational bases for up to 3.5 times the standard ratio of major blocked suspicious web activities. This makes them even more attractive for malware attacks.

Even more technologically advanced countries, like Singapore and Australia, have been targeted. In Jan 2019, Singapore faced its second major health breach of confidential information belonging to 14,200 people diagnosed with HIV, following the largest data breach in Singapore’s history in July 2018, which affected 1.5 million patients. Toyota’s subsidiaries in Australia, along with Thailand and Vietnam, also faced a string of cyberattacks in 2019. (Lago, 2019)

These small data breaches in Southeast Asia and Australia highlight the region’s weakness in cybersecurity and the pressing need to implement regulations to protect user data from future cyberattacks. The rapid digitization of the region needs to be accompanied by safeguards in the form of regulations and security to ensure that the digital landscape remains safe for users. There is currently no clear direction for the ASEAN cybersecurity strategy apart from discussions held at the ASEAN Ministerial Conference on Cyber Security (AMCC), which was held in Singapore during International Cyber Week in September 2018. While achieving consensus amongst the member states is important, it is also crucial not to delay the execution of cybersecurity measures, both in terms of stronger security and also knowledge transfer to less digitally advanced countries, to mitigate the risk of further cyberattacks across the region.

Beyond the region, ASEAN and Australia can look to the United States of America (USA), one of the more established digital economies, in planning for a regional regulatory framework (Meltzer, 2018). The USA has relevant regulations, such as the Digital Millennium Copyright Act and their Digital Economy Agenda, which may serve as useful points of reference for the up-and-coming ASEAN-Australia digital economy. The Centre for Strategic and International Studies also recommends that the USA and Australia cooperate to support growth in ASEAN and also strengthen their positions in

![Figure 4: ASEAN 50 Years On.](source: Paresh Nath)
the Indo-Pacific region. Specific recommendations include developing comprehensive market and cybersecurity regulations to encourage open yet secure cross-border data flows, strengthening digital infrastructure as well as supporting small businesses and individuals in developing alongside technological advancements (Goodman, Brouwer, Armstrong, & Triggs, 2019).

While cybersecurity laws, digital trade regulations and upskilling are essential in forming the foundation of a digital economy, it is also important to teach safety from the ground-up through media literacy trainings tailored to youths, working adults and elderly. Youth and elderly, in particular, must be trained to use the internet and social media carefully and to be able to recognize online scams and fake news.

**Sustainability**

ASEAN was formed with the goal of pursuing economic integration within the region and also between ASEAN and the world. While ASEAN’s economic integration strategy might have proven successful when encouraging free trade, growing as a digital region might need a different strategy.

ASEAN’s digital economy is expected to grow exponentially over the next few years. However, growing at such a fast pace as a region may not be sustainable for all the countries as certain member countries are still struggling with other developmental challenges that may slow down their growth. While it is commendable that ASEAN has been engaged in talks of cooperation through different initiatives such as the ASEAN Digital Integration Framework and ASEAN Innovation Network, it is important for ASEAN to recognize the underlying differences and unique needs of each country instead of being overly focused on growing together as one. Unity for ASEAN does not necessitate aiming for impressive pace of growth for all member states, but rather unity can be found in growing at the best pace and tailoring the strategy for each country.

In particular, the 2018 Recommendations Report on the ASEAN-Australia Digital Trade Standard Cooperation Initiative (DTSCI) includes 10 recommendations, which were presented to ASEAN and Australian Governments and other stakeholders, about a long-term cooperative program between ASEAN and Australia. The recommendations centred around collaboration through working groups, raising awareness and alignment of digital trade standards, sharing of Australian ICT expertise and implementing a long-term program to strengthen infrastructure (“ASEAN-Australia Digital Trade Standards Cooperation Initiative: Recommendations Report December 2018”, 2019). These recommendations are all important in ensuring standardisations and adoption of the regulatory standards across the region and in sharing expertise with less-developed nations.

However, given the different stages of development each ASEAN member state, each country has a different capacity for growth. Adoption of consistent standards and implementation of core infrastructure are important but in a fast-moving digital landscape, there is a need to prioritise the implementation of these recommendations. Perhaps, the first step to sustainable growth as a region should be through the integration of knowledge and education rather than the integration of technology infrastructure, systems and standards. Infrastructure requires a large amount of funding and time, while awareness of digital standards will be less relevant if businesses and society members do not have a foundational understanding of what a digital economy entails and the skills sets needed to stay relevant. As a first step, knowledge is an intangible, lower-cost asset that can be easily shared even if member states are at different stages of growth and more digitally-developed countries can help to support less developed countries through various means of knowledge transfer and training.

**TOWARDS A FULLY-CHARGED, NOT OVER-CHARGED, FUTURE**

Ultimately, ASEAN and Australia have clear potential to be a major player in the global digital economy. However, their growth must be kept at a rate that the region can manage, not over-charging beyond what they can handle. The first consideration would be to ensure that basic social and political issues, like internet access for all, are addressed in certain ASEAN member states, before they can focus on growing their digital economies at a pace that they can sustain. Although different countries may be growing at different paces, more digitally advanced countries like Australia and Singapore can take the lead in sharing their expertise and in implementing regulations to safeguard the upcoming plans to develop the digital economy. It is only in striving towards inclusive, sustainable and regulated growth ASEAN and Australia would then be able to fully-charge their potential as a digital economy.

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Chapter Two: Economic Cooperation


AANZFTA - A Motive of ASEAN-Australia Economic Relationship

Linh Thuy Phung | Vietnam

For a long time, regulators of Australia and ASEAN strongly encouraged globalization and commitments to upgrade free trade agreements. In fact, until now, the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand FTA has brought about many positive results for all involved parties. According to the General Review of AANZFTA, “Australia’s total two-way goods and services trade with ASEAN has increased by 16.4 per cent since 2010. Collectively, ASEAN accounted for 13.8 per cent of Australia’s total two-way goods and services trade in 2016”. However, there are some barriers preventing the success of free trade agreements. And as the current and future working force, it is undeniable that youth play an important role in tackling these issues to achieve mutual benefits for all participating countries.

LONG LASTING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ASEAN AND AUSTRALIA

Of all the neighbours of the ASEAN region, Australia is, perhaps, the closest in many aspects. From its geographic location to enduring cultural connections, Australia has been an important partner of ASEAN for decades. With regards to political affairs, Australia has a long history of active involvement in regional forums initiated and led by ASEAN, such as EAS (East Asian Forum), ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum), and EAMF (Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum). Moreover, Australia has also been instrumental in their cooperation with ASEAN in the field of disaster management - a serious issue in developing countries. Furthermore, as a developed country with high-quality education, Australia is welcoming an increasing number of international students from ASEAN with attractive financial-aid packages and study opportunities. The political, cultural and social connections that exist between ASEAN and Australia are strengthened through mutually beneficial economic interaction. Historically, for Australia it has been a long journey towards greater engagement with the Asia-Pacific, through four “waves of trading”. If the first wave involved the establishment of an economic agreement with Japan, the second wave established a lucrative trade deal with China, the third wave served to break down Australia’s previously impenetrable tariff wall, and then finally, the fourth wave; which brought ASEAN into the spotlight; the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (AANZFTA).
**OVERVIEW OF AANZFTA**

Australia is a trading nation and committed to open markets. The economic wellbeing of the Nation Continent depends on a competitive economy and open avenues to international export markets. “As East Asia continues to grow, the primacy of the Asia Pacific in Australia’s foreign and trade policy will become even more evident” (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1997). According to a survey conducted by the Lowy Research Institute (2017), 78% of Australians believe globalization is beneficial to Australia and 67% affirm that opening trading is good for them. On the other side, ASEAN also considers globalization as the momentum driving regional economic development. In fact, the official roadmap “ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together” clearly states that the ASEAN Economic Community, by 2025, shall be enhanced through greater connectivity and sectoral cooperation. This push towards the future was one of the prime motivations for the creation of the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (AANZFTA), which was signed on 27th February 2009. The FTA represented a new milestone in the relationship between ASEAN, Australia and New Zealand. According to Article 1, Chapter I of this agreement, AANZFTA includes 5 primary objectives:

- Progressively liberalise and facilitate trade in goods among the Parties through, inter alia, progressive elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers in substantially all trade in goods among the Parties
- Progressively liberalise trade in services among the Parties, with substantial sectoral coverage
- Facilitate, promote and enhance investment opportunities among the Parties through further development of favourable investment environments
- Establish a co-operative framework for strengthening, diversifying and enhancing trade, investment and economic links among the Parties
- Provide special and differential treatment to ASEAN Member States to facilitate their more effective economic integration

**Figure 1: AANZFTA objectives**

*Source: Article 1, Chapter I of AANZFTA*

The FTA represents ASEAN’s first inter-regional agreement, and the first FTA that Australia and New Zealand have made jointly. Simultaneously, the document serves as the most comprehensive trade agreement that ASEAN has ever participated in (FTA Joint Committee, 2017), and includes a wealth of trade commitments on goods and services (including financial services and telecommunication), investment, e-commerce, movement of natural persons, intellectual property, policy on competition and economic cooperation between the two regions. Moreover, AANZFTA enables the participants to establish inter-regional cooperation mechanisms that ensure non-tariff measures, such as licensing mechanisms, quality standards, food hygiene and safety, are not conducive to unnecessary trading barriers between the regions. Therefore, until now, in addition to being the most comprehensive FTA signed with a dialogue partner, AANZFTA also has the most complex economic regulations. In fact, AANZFTA prescribes all of the most important aspects of international economic relations, goes beyond the WTO Agreements, as well as most of the free trade agreements (FTAs) of Australia. The agreement consists of 18 chapters with 4 appendices on tariff reduction roadmaps, rules of origin, commitments to open markets, and commitments related to moving natural persons.

**BENEFITS OF AANZFTA**

One of the foremost benefits of AANZFTA is the liberalization of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). According to the General Review of AANZFTA (FTA Joint Committee, 2017), ASEAN’s foreign direct investment (stock) in Australia increased from AUD 25.8 billion in 2010 to AUD 43.9 billion in 2016, after the advent of AANZFTA. Over the same period, Australia’s foreign direct investment (stock) in ASEAN increased from AUD 16.8 billion to AUD 37.8 billion. Clearly, these figures show that AANZFTA has provided the motivation needed to encourage investors to finance projects and companies across national boundaries. The agreement creates a more open and favorable investment environment through tariff regulations and high standard criteria for production, thereby attracting FDI.

AANZFTA enhances the interregional value chain, through greater access to international production and manufacturing options, with a focus on leveraging each country’s competitive advantages and natural endowments. The agreement promotes export growth, in addition to changes in the structure of exports. Australia’s total two-way trading goods and services with ASEAN has increased by 16.4 per cent since 2010, and collectively, ASEAN accounted for 13.8 per cent of Australia’s total two-way goods and services trade in 2016. Petroleum is one of the major commodities exchanged between the two regions, however, as a result of being subject to significant fluctuations Australian imports of petroleum from ASEAN reduced from AUD 15.9 billion in 2010 to AUD 9.2 billion in 2016; and exports of petroleum from Australia to ASEAN also decreased by AUD 1 billion in the period from 2010 to 2016 (FTA Joint Committee, 2017).

Moreover, through the strict rules of origin in this agreement, the quality of outputs is significantly improved. AANZFTA promotes mutually beneficial collaboration between the two regions, and fosters conditions favourable for learning, transfer of technology, management and collaborative business models among members. As a result, it is hoped that participating countries are able to effectively produce the products and
services needed to meet the sophisticated demands of consumers in the 21st Century.

AANZFTA provides a wealth of international trade opportunities for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). SMEs are considered as the engine of economic growth, and account for a considerable proportion of economic activity in ASEAN countries. However, for many SMEs, export opportunities are relatively small. Tariff and procedural barriers serve to complicate and impede export opportunities, while the resources of SMEs are limited. Therefore, the FTA will help remove such barriers, and provide SMEs of both regions with greater access to potential new markets.

The AANZFTA is a comprehensive and high-quality FTA; and consequently, includes a wealth of complex, but highly rewarding benefits for its participants. This agreement sets a solid foundation for the development and establishment of new FTAs in the region. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) between ASEAN and the six partners who have signed FTAs with ASEAN including China, South Korea, Japan, India, Australia and New Zealand, officially commenced on May 9th, 2013, with negotiations ongoing. If the RCEP is successful, it will stand to be the largest trading agreement in the world, with a market of about 3.6 billion people accounting for one-third of the world’s GDP.

NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF AANZFTA

As always, Free Trade Agreements of this magnitude are not without their pitfalls. As international demand increases, production volumes increase, and so do labor costs, raw material and energy consumption, all the while pushing against the limitations of the natural endowments of the producing nation. As these variable costs increase and become increasingly difficult to manage, business owners will find measures to reduce costs in other ways - namely employee salaries. Most businesses will look for the cheapest labour available from other countries in ASEAN and seek to outsource to or hire migrants from these nations, which leads to unemployment for native people in developed countries (such as Singapore, New Zealand and Australia). Singapore serves as a cautionary tale for the impact that severe migrant labour pools can have on a developed nation; Malaysians are the largest immigrant group in Singapore constituting 44% of the total Foreign-born population residing in the country (United Nation, 2015). Moreover, nearly 40% of the Singapore workforce are temporary migrants, and this has steadily increased over time.

Additionally, under the influence of AANZFTA, increases in production coupled with an unrelenting desire to tap into newly available foreign markets will result in a greater consumption of resources, potentially leading to overexploitation, and in turn, the degradation of natural resources in developing countries. Simultaneously, to produce more products, the number of manufacturing plants, especially hazardous industrial plants, will increase and inevitably lead to a large amount of industrial waste being released into the environment. While AANZFTA might benefit developed nations in the exportation of hazardous production and environmental destruction, developing nations who partake in the AANZFTA risk becoming the dumping ground for wealthier, developed countries. Not to mention a growth in exports may severely impact the air quality of developing nations, as carbon dioxide emissions increase, as a result of industrial activity. These effects will result in the destruction of the fragile ecosystems we are living in. In fact, according to the Global Climate Risk Index, four of the countries facing the worst impacts from climate change are based in Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam). These nations may, consequently, be vulnerable to the runaway effects of a chain of subsequent negative phenomenon that may result; extreme weather, unpredictable and unseasonable natural disasters, rising sea levels, the rise of infectious diseases.
As a result, authorities face many difficulties in finding new sources to replace taxes as well as budget management methods.

Increases in competition may pose a significant threat to many small enterprises, given that AANZFTA allows for products and services to be imported from more developed countries. These products are high quality, have strong brands and competitive prices. If small businesses with limited resources do not change to be more flexible within an increasingly internationalized competitive landscape, the impacts will be considerable, and the loss of customers unavoidable.

**CHALLENGES OF AANZFTA IMPLEMENTATION**

The first obstacle of ensuring the successful adoption of the AANZFTA is the considerable degree of incongruence in the legal systems of participating countries. Every member has its own distinct legal system, thus posing a subsequent threat to the compliance of AANZFTA regulations. The agreement contains mechanisms to ensure the implementation of its provisions, including dispute settlement, however, inconsistent domestic laws and regulations can lead to countries not fulfilling the required commitments. As a result, lawbreakers could be easily sued in accordance with the established dispute settlement mechanisms. For instance, the lack of accurate information, delays and inconsistencies in the issuing of Certificates of Origin (COO) can be time-consuming and cause compliance problems. This COO issued by the exporting country and can only be obtained from local government authorities in some countries, while approved institutions or organisations such as Chambers of Commerce or business associations may be authorized to issue them in other countries. To avoid this problem, some companies may seek illegal ways to obtain a COO by providing false information or bribing government officials.

The second challenge is the lack of high-skilled human resources. According to the report "The future of ASEAN – Time to Act" (PwC Growth Market Centre, 2016), “leading ASEAN markets recorded much lower figures than their global emerging and developed market counterparts in 2016” in terms of labour productivity.

In the age of industry 4.0, considerably more emphasis is placed on human capabilities and capital, therefore, the country that has better skilled workers will ultimately be more competitive. Countries must possess the talent required to respond effectively to ever increasing market cycle intensity, and must ensure they are able to use technology to solve problems effectively. The gap in education quality between members creates a significant challenge, as low-income countries typically have less highly-qualified education institutions. In fact, according to QS rankings, while both Singapore and Australia have a plethora of universities in the top 50 of the world, their institutional counterparts in developing countries like Thailand or Malaysia are more likely to be placed in the top 150-500, and for other countries such as Cambodia, Laos or Vietnam, top national institutions are typically absent from high-positions in international rankings.

Low rates of digital adoption also create considerable issues that many ASEAN countries must tackle in the coming decade. AANZFTA opens up new regional markets, but under the influence of the industry 4.0 movement, those countries which cannot adopt and integrate new and emerging technologies will be left behind. Despite being the world’s largest internet user, there is a big gap in terms of digital transformation among ASEAN members and Australia. They range from top to bottom on the global Digital Adoption Index (DAI) generated by the World Bank and Microsoft Corporation. In the report (World Bank and Microsoft Corporation, 2016), Singapore is in the first place out of 180 countries, followed by Australia at 33rd and Malaysia at 41st, whereas Brunei is at 58th. Thailand at 61st, Vietnam at 91st, the Philippines at 101st, Indonesia at 109th, and at the bottom is Cambodia (123th), Lao PDR (159th) and Malaysia (160th). Again, the issue of digitalization is connected to a human factor, as the top hindrances are the lack of access to digital experts (64.7%) and difficulties for existing staff to reskill and transition toward a digital-first culture (62.5%) (EY, 2019). Additionally, high implementation costs, and lower comparative income create substantial barriers to digital adoption for many SMEs in developing countries.

The fourth challenge relates to generating awareness of AANZFTA amongst members of the SME community. Since AANZFTA goes beyond the traditional parameters of an FTA, which are typically limited to the trading of goods and services, many businesses are unaware of it or have insufficient knowledge of the potential benefits. The General Review of AANZFTA (FTA Joint Committee, 2017) highlighted the concern of multiple
participant nations in regards to the knowledge and understanding of local business communities surrounding existing trade agreements, including AANZFTA. In a survey jointly conducted by The Singapore Business Federation (SBF) and HSBC, it is reported that “a lack of awareness and understanding of the ASEAN FTAs remains the biggest challenge that hampers the majority of companies (67%) from using them”. In the end, without the informed and proactive participation of the private sector, the objectives of AANZFTA will not be achieved.

THE ROLE OF YOUTH IN PROMOTING AANZFTA

Living in a world of globalization and accounting for approximately one-third of ASEAN population (213 million out of the total of 628.9 million) (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2016) and 12.8% of all Australian residents (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016), it is undeniable that young people in the region will come to inherit the task of the continuing the meaningful implementation of AANZFTA. When fully implemented, it is expected that AANZFTA will be instrumental in the creation of greater wealth and more job opportunities for people throughout the region. The Youth of today, as the future workforce of emerging economies, will become the direct beneficiaries. However, implementation will not be easy, even for the young beneficiaries, especially given the increase in employee expectations that typically result from a more competitive labour market. The youth must be equipped with the technical knowledge, soft skills and experience necessary to compete in a post-AANZFTA labour market. This competitive labour market will eventually enhance the quality of workers in the region, and will serve to add more value to the regional economy as a whole.

The AANZFTA opens up labour markets beyond the boundaries of national borders. In addition to the intensifying the competition for employment, the AANZFTA creates challenges around cross-cultural management, especially given the enormity of cultural differences between participant countries. For ASEAN members, a history of engagement and considerable similarities by the way of culture, history, natural characteristics, human resources, politics or even legal system, means that such obstacles are comparatively lesser. Real issues, however, arise when consideration is given to differences that exist between ASEAN members and Australia and New Zealand. The distinct Western culture of the latter nations may create considerable difficulties in effective management and coordination within multi-national operations. However, such issues are not beyond the abilities of regional youth, who have the potential to play a pivotal role in building enduring, cross-cultural connections between members of the AANZFTA. The inherent connectivity of the youth of the 21st century allows us to easily reach out, connect and communicate with people across the globe. There is also an ever-increasing amount of cultural exchange opportunities and international youth forums in which students and young people can participate in. Therefore, it is through their abilities to understand and communicate with others across international borders, as a result of technologically-enabled connectivity, that young people will be instrumental in the adoption and success of AANZFTA.

The aforementioned lack of a high-skilled workforce in developing nations creates issues for many participants of AANZFTA. However, in spite of the historic imbalance of skills between regions, these circumstances will not persist. There is an undeniable increase in students in otherwise disadvantaged countries being afforded greater access to world-class education. Although the benefits of education are not materialized immediately, it is undeniable that many high school leavers from South East Asia are choosing to study overseas. Of all the destinations, both Singapore and Australia are among the top choices. According to research conducted by the ICEF Monitor, Australia has historically occupied either the first or second position, in terms of destinations for Malaysian and Indonesian students seeking education outside their home countries. With access to better education, it is believed that such young people may help to build the high-quality workforce needed to close the gap among countries in the region.

In the age of 4.0 revolution, students are also required to master other skills beyond traditional academic abilities. According to the survey of ASEAN youth to examine attitudes to jobs and skills and the impact of technology on the future of work (World Economic Forum, 2019), three skills emerged as being vital to future employment: creativity and innovation; language skills; and the ability to use technology. Positively, “most respondents are particularly confident about their ability to use technology such as social media platforms, e-commerce and e-payment and other applications” (World Economic Forum, 2019). Young people also rank themselves highly in terms of creativity and innovation. With these skills, it is no surprise that today, 31.4% young people in the region are either entrepreneurs or work for a start-up and 16% want to work in the technology sector in the future. With an increasing preference for technology based and start-up companies, AASEAN is emerging as a hub for start-ups and disruptive businesses; the majority of which are founded by young people. Among these youngsters, many have achieved success and become promising technology tycoons in the world, such as Ferry Unardi (Traveloka), Anthony Tan (Grab) and Achmad Zaky (Bukalapak). Along with AASEAN, Australia is also a hotspot for tech disruption and digitalization. According to a report from Oxford’s Reuters Institute in 2015, Australians are the most likely people in the world to use a digital device to obtain their news and the International Institute for Management Development ranked Australia 15 out of 63 nations when it comes to digital competitiveness. The 2017 Employer Satisfaction Survey found that, from 4000 participating employers, businesses are also changing to value a new set of skills from graduates, with collaborative (86 %) and adaptive skills (90 %) ranking as some of the most important. By combining such skills with technical capabilities, young Australians will form a highly-skilled workforce that is able to make considerable contributions to the development of Australia and to the region as a whole.
Finally, the youth also play an integral role in protecting our environment. In the same way that the economic benefits of AANZFTA will be inherited by the youth, so too will the negative impacts of climate change affect future generations. Hence, maintaining sustainable development is both a responsibility and obligation of young people. AANZFTA has the capacity to potentially accelerate or worsen environmental degradation of participant members, and it is the youth who can help alleviate such impacts. On Friday 20th September 2019, millions of people across nearly 185 countries including Australia and ASEAN took part in the biggest climate protest that has ever taken place; most of the participants were young people. The protests demanded that government officials and large corporations take immediate action to cut emissions and slow the effects of climate change. Whilst the outcomes of the protests are still uncertain, such an act serves to demonstrate the passion of the youth on climate change issues. Moreover, as future leaders, young people are passionate about putting their knowledge into practice, and coming up with new initiatives to reduce carbon emissions, energy consumption, and push for both businesses and governments to become more environmentally friendly.

**SUMMARY**

We must remember that nothing is perfect. Although the benefits from AANZFTA are considerable in number and impact, negative repercussions still exist and, in some cases, are even unavoidable. Whilst steps must be taken, in collaboration with the youth, to curtail negative outcomes, for the AANZFTA positive impacts still largely exceed the negative consequences. Hence, for the sake of successful international integration and prosperity, it is necessary that members of the AANZFTA seek to take advantage of the opportunities and favorable conditions on offer. Whilst members must be proactive when facing the challenges inherent to a free trade agreement of this magnitude, it must be acknowledged that the AANZFTA, if nothing else, represents a significant opportunity for participant members to collaboratively build meaningful solutions, using the strengths of other members, to the issues of the 21st century.

After college, Linh is now working as a consultant. She loves writing and sharing her ideas about many issues, with particular interest in economics, data science and environment.

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Chapter Three

**SOCIO-CULTURAL COOPERATION**

Chapter Three examines socio-cultural issues that heartily relates to the young generation across the region.

Do barriers to work-integrated learning for ASEAN students compromise the value of Australian degrees?

**Learning Beyond Borders: Educational Exchanges in ASEAN-Australia Relations**

Ankush Wagle, Adhelia Ebert | Singapore, Australia

Cross-border educational exchanges are a critical plank in the growing education cooperation bridging ASEAN and Australia. Underpinned by the logic of tapping into the youth potential on either side, Australia in particular provides a unique educational destination for ASEAN students. However, despite the progress made to date, more can be done on both sides to improve the quality of and learning from such exchanges.

**EDUCATION IN ASEAN-AUSTRALIA RELATIONS: AN OVERVIEW**

Looking at the bigger picture of the various youth linkages between Australia and ASEAN, it is obvious that education is the primary connection. This is clearly reflected by the number of ASEAN-origin students studying in Australia, which has grown exponentially over the last few decades. In 2017, there were over 100,000 Southeast Asian students in Australia, making up a sixth of all international students in the country (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2019). Being globally recognized and highly ranked, Australian universities are natural choices for the burgeoning ASEAN student population. The geographical nearness further enhances the appeal. In a 2019 survey conducted by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, Australia ranked as the third most popular choice for tertiary (university level) education, with over 20% of the respondents ranking it their top choice (Tang, Thuzar, Ha, Chalermpalanupap and Qian, 2019).

In turn, a number of recent initiatives have encouraged Australian students to undertake exchanges in Southeast Asia rather than the more ‘traditional’ study destinations of Europe and the US. These include the Australian government’s New Colombo Plan (NCP) launched in 2014 which encourages Australian students to undertake exchanges and mobility programmes in the Indo-Pacific, and the Asian Mobility Grants. Collectively, these initiatives have rendered the Asia-Pacific a more economically and logistically viable exchange destination for Australian students. While institutional support for such exchanges in Southeast Asia was erstwhile lacking, programmes like the NCP have provided more standardised mechanisms (along with funding), thereby making the region a more attractive choice for Australian students. This has in turn has led to a growing number of Australian students undertaking educational endeavours in the region. From 2014 to 2018, over 14,000 Australian students completed scholarship...
and mobility programs in Southeast Asia (Ferguson, 2018). Meanwhile country-specific programs, such as ACICIS (Australian Consortium for ‘In-Country’ Indonesian Studies), also attract Australian students to individual ASEAN member states.

**BOOSTING EDUCATION TIES**

Given the scale of educational interaction, youth cooperation has been flourishing between the two partners. In 2014, they signed a bilateral strategic partnership and adopted a four year ‘Plan of Action’ (2015-2019). The plan includes several action points related to youth and education such as expansion of internship programmes, regional collaboration on technical and vocational training, and qualification recognition (Centre for International Law, National University of Singapore, 2015). In 2019, a new four-year plan (2020-2024) was agreed upon, which largely reiterates the objectives and action points of the previous plan concerning youth and education.

Educational cooperation has also been promoted through other cooperative frameworks. At the special summit last year, the Australian government announced fifty ‘Australia Awards- ASEAN’ Scholarships. The government’s flagship NCP initiative has also introduced a new ASEAN Fellowship in 2018. In 2015, the Australian government created the Australia-ASEAN Council which aims to boost cooperation and interaction through ‘stronger business, science, education, arts and cultural links’ (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2019). Since its inception, the Council has initiated educational programmes to connect schools, young social entrepreneurs, and Muslim youth. It has also provided grants for several youth-focused initiatives such as the 2019 Australia-Vietnam Young Leadership Dialogue, the Australia-ASEAN Youth Summit 2018, Australian Thai Youth Ambassadors Program and the inaugural ASEAN-Australia Young Leaders Forum in 2019.

**THE LOGIC AND VALUE OF EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGES**

Beyond the obvious economic value, there are convincing arguments for Australia and ASEAN to focus on educational exchanges as a medium of public diplomacy. The first is the soft power rationale for improving cross-border understanding among the youth, which is prefaced by the existing ‘youth bulge’ or demographic dividend in ASEAN. The five largest ASEAN economies by population (Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines and Myanmar) alone have over 90 million young people in the age group of 15-24 years (i.e. the age group for youth as defined by the United Nations). That is more than three times the entire population of Australia. Among these youth are the future leaders of their respective countries. Given the linkages between the two sides, there is an evident soft power impetus for Canberra to imbibe these future leaders with knowledge of Australia and a positive outlook towards the country. To this end, along with ‘outbound’ programmes such as the NCP (which aim to improve the Southeast Asian outlook of Australian students), ‘inbound’ mechanisms like the Australian Awards should also be ramped up.

Secondly, such programs are proven to help students. For example, studies of the experiences of Australian students on mobility programmes in different ASEAN countries have shown that they help to develop better interpersonal skills, cultural understanding, and confidence (Bretag and van der Veen, 2017). Hayley Winchcombe, the inaugural NCP ASEAN Fellow and Director of AASYP, expressed that her experience working at think tanks, institutions, and commercial bodies in both Jakarta and Singapore, ‘exposed her to high-level policy issues in ASEAN and developed her skills in stakeholder management, an essential skill for success in the Asian Century’ (Winchcombe H, 2019, personal communication). Similarly, Jesse Elias Christian, an Australian business student stated that his time in China and Singapore as an NCP 2017 scholar helped him develop knowledge of ‘international relations, languages, culture, and business management practices in the region’ (Christian J, 2019, personal communication).

Finally, cross-border educational ties help to build critical understanding and sustain relationships, in both the near and long term. In the disruptive, mobile, digitally connected environment of today, people-to-people connectivity has become critical for countries and regions to see each other as cordial partners. As Jesse puts it, the NCP experience ‘opened my eyes to the Indo-Pacific as a vital part of Australia’s future and motivated me to join organizations such as AASYP, so as to continue to foster mutual understanding between Australia and ASEAN’ (Christian J, 2019, personal communication). The importance of this cross-cultural understanding has been recognised by Australian policymakers, who are increasingly embracing Australia’s geographic, rather than historical, identity. For example, since the 1990s, Asian studies have become integral components of the Australian school curriculum (Erebus Consulting Partners, 2002), which now considers ‘Asia and Australia’s Engagement with Asia’ as a priority across all curriculum subjects (Australian Curriculum, 2019).

**WHY AUSTRALIA?**

It is not without reason that Australia has experienced such significant popularity as an education destination for Southeast Asian students. Apart from the obvious geographic advantage, Australia’s quality of life has been cited by students as a key attraction (Alavi, 2017). Melbourne regularly achieves the title of ‘most liveable city’; meanwhile Australia is home to four out of twenty-five of the world’s ‘best student cities’ (Quacquarelli Symonds, 2019). Meanwhile, studying in Australia is relatively affordable when compared to destinations such as the UK and the US. Thus, students may choose to forfeit the more prestigious institutions of the UK and US, in order to enjoy the improved lifestyle offered by Australia’s (equally world-class) universities (Alavi, 2017).

Australian universities also offer a number of scholarships for international students, such as the University of New South Wales’ International Academic Excellence Scholarship...
Program. Some scholarships are specifically aimed at Southeast Asian students. These include the University of Technology Sydney’s South East Asia scholarships, as well as the Australian National University’s South East Asia Merit Scholarship. Australian universities have also partnered with ASEAN universities for exchange agreements. For example, the University of Sydney has agreements with institutions in Singapore (National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore Management University), Thailand (Chulalongkorn University, Mahidol University), Malaysia (Universiti Malaya), and Indonesia (Universitas Gadjah Mada, Universitas Kristen Satya Wacaya, and Universitas Indonesia). Australian universities are also seeking to expand their outreach in Southeast Asia. In 2018, the Australian National University established a Southeast Asia Liaison Office in Singapore to ‘interlink research and academic partnerships’ (Australian National University, 2018).

Finally, an undeniable attraction of studying in Australia is the potential for Permanent Residency status. Graduating from an Australian degree and finding graduate employment provides international students with various pathways to attaining permanent residency status.

WHAT CAN BE DONE BETTER?

As already discussed, there are considerable efforts already underway to bolster education ties between Australia and the ASEAN region. However, more certainly can and should be a priority, particularly on the quality and learning from exchanges and interactions. At such a time Australia should seek to increase awareness with regards to the diversity and intricacies of ASEAN member states among young Australians. In engaging ASEAN, it is vital to not miss the trees for the forest. While ASEAN is certainly more than the sum of its member states, those states themselves can vary vastly in indicators such as economic size, levels of development, education, and even aspirations. As such, a more nuanced and culturally sensitive approach is required as opposed to ‘one size fits all’.

Another focus area for Australia should be the ‘work training’ aspect of degrees and related issues, for Southeast Asian students. It is increasingly recognised in the contemporary job market that a degree alone is an insufficient education. Employers place significant value on a graduate’s relevant work experience, not just their academic achievements. Consequently, it is unsurprising that ‘work-integrated learning’ has become the latest buzzword. Unfortunately, research suggests that international students from Asia are considerably less likely to engage in work-integrated learning than their domestic counterparts (Jackson, 2016). The reasons for this trend are varied but include employer perceptions of international students lacking a ‘culture fit’ and language deficiencies; additionally international students may be impeded by visa restrictions and a lack of professional Australian networks (Jackson, 2016). This has consequences for Australian universities, businesses and ASEAN students. In the Australian job market, work-integrated learning is generally highly regarded by employers and increasingly a prerequisite for graduate positions. Without this, Southeast Asian students in Australia face the prospect of reduced employability. This in turn compromises the value of an Australian degree, especially for those Southeast Asian students who see study in Australia as a pathway to employment in the country. Australian businesses lose the opportunity to engage with students whose connections, insights and understandings of Southeast Asia are invaluable considering the burgeoning ASEAN market. The students themselves miss the opportunity to put their education into practice and forge connections in the Australian market. Given the mutual benefits of engaging ASEAN students in work-integrated learning, it is essential that universities and other stakeholders address the barriers that inhibit student participation. These barriers include students’ lack of pre-existing networks, employer perceptions of students’ poor language and cultural skills, and misunderstandings around visa restrictions (Jackson, 2016). There are a number of relatively straightforward solutions to these problems. Universities could implement programs to specifically assist international students in securing work placements – a practice which remains woefully rare among Australian universities. Meanwhile, combating perceptions of poor language and cultural skills needs to begin at university before it can reach the workplace.

This brings us to another challenge compromising Australian-ASEAN educational diplomacy: discrimination. Despite the cultural benefits of educational exchanges, there remains an unfortunate bias against Asian international students (Guillem and Ji 2011). A lack of integration between Asian international students and domestic students also remains a problem (Volet and Ang, 2012). These challenges can be attributed to mutual preferences for cultural familiarity, differences in lifestyles, negative stereotypes (from both Australian and international students) and language barriers (Volet and Ang, 2012, p. 25). However, it is not all bad news. Research suggests that when students do integrate, whether without or within the classroom, mutual negative perceptions decrease (Volet and Ang, 2012). Moreover, integration with domestic students is proven to improve students’ English skills to a very high standard (Yu, 2013). Thus integration contributes towards a beneficial cycle by addressing the very barriers to further integration. It is also a highly achievable goal for universities. Numerous steps could be taken to encourage integration, such as strategically organising assignment groups, mentoring programs, and orientation events.

While the above steps mainly relate to Australia, there is also much that can be done on the ASEAN side. The most important step is for ASEAN (collectively) and its member states (individually) to build institutional linkages between local and Australian universities. At the multilateral level, Australia is currently a dialogue partner of the ASEAN University Network (AUN), an umbrella body consisting of over 25 universities from ASEAN. ASEAN could explore the possibility of further involving Australia in a
potential ‘ASEAN+4’ grouping (currently China, Japan, and Korea are part of an ASEAN+3 university network). This would enhance tertiary educational cooperation across the board. At the individual state level, ASEAN members lacking in institutional linkages should seek to develop and nurture them. This would change the nature of exchange programmes between their local and Australian students from ad-hoc to more formalized in the long run. Here, the problem of capacity will need to be addressed. Universities in developing ASEAN countries such as Laos and Cambodia may face resource constraints in expanding and systematizing such programmes. However, even incremental steps would be of considerable benefit. Furthermore, ASEAN countries which have more educational resources such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, can assist with technical know-how in developing and sustaining long-term educational exchanges. Beyond the structuralization of exchanges, the ASEAN countries should seek to build the understanding of Australia as an important partner among their respective youth populations. This will then set the stage for more Southeast Asian youth to consider Australia positively in their educational outlooks and aspirations.

CONCLUSION

Given the overwhelming benefits of educational ties, their improvement should remain a priority for our respective governments, universities and businesses. The achievements in this regard to date are positive and deserve to be recognised as key Australia-ASEAN diplomatic achievements. Admittedly challenges do remain, however they are neither overly difficult nor burdensome to address. In conclusion, borrowing another sporting analogy, youth and education relations have for the most part been a slam dunk for both ASEAN and Australia so far. Here’s hoping that both sides keep scoring.

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The rise of social media has seen the emergence of myriad new forms of individual and group expression. Arguably the most noticeable of these new forms of media is the inescapably ubiquitous cultural phenomenon that is the ‘meme’. While still widely regarded as frivolous internet guff, memes are proving to play a powerful role in the construction of online identities and communities. Testament to this is the cultural phenomenon, ‘Subtle Asian Traits’.

The rise of social media has seen the emergence of myriad new forms of individual and group expression. Arguably the most noticeable of these new forms of media is the inescapably ubiquitous cultural phenomenon that is the ‘meme’. While still widely regarded as frivolous internet guff, memes are proving to play a powerful role in the construction of online identities and communities.

**SUBTLE ASIAN TRAITS: AN OVERVIEW**

Testament to the capacity of memes to create online identities and communities is the Facebook group, ‘Subtle Asian Traits’. Subtle Asian Traits is a page that was started in late 2018 by a group of nine Chinese-Australian students as a forum to share meme content they found to be ‘relatable’ (Mao 2018). With over a million members across six countries, posts to the page often receive tens of thousands of likes. Content is highly varied and covers a host of different ‘subtle asian traits’, with posts concerning everything from Tiger Mums and study habits, to Bubble Tea and Mi Goreng. All are united by a common thread, however – namely, the many subtle traits of life as a next-generation Asian migrant living in the West.

It is unsurprising that Subtle Asian Traits has experienced significant popularity. The page is undeniably hilarious. Its thousands of pictures, videos and statuses provide endless procrastination potential for young audiences. The page receives over 3000 submissions each day, only a handful of which are approved by administrators (Kwai 2018). Consequently, the memes posted are of a very high standard and often chosen specifically for their humour, positivity and inclusivity.
Chapter Three: Socio-Cultural Cooperation

THE MEANING BEHIND THE MEMES

The significance of Subtle Asian Traits can be attributed to more than its entertainment value. The page also acts as a powerful tool to construct a subculture identity. The last decade has seen comprehensive research conducted into the ability of memes to construct and perpetuate identities. It is currently accepted that memes allow individuals in online spaces to accept or reject the attributes of a group and validate or shape the identity of the community in which they’re involved (Wiggens 2019, pp. 118-120). Subtle Asian Traits clearly showcases this phenomena. For many migrants, there can be considerable complexity and difficulty in reconciling the identities of where they live and where they come from. Subtle Asian Traits embraces this challenge as the basis of its own distinct identity. Teachers mispronouncing their names, being asked ‘where do you come from?’; eating ethnic food at school – all are experiences unique to this group and all are subjects of popular memes. By sharing experiences common to migrant communities living in the West, those experiences are normalised and even championed in a way that is humorous, reassuring and engaging. Thus, the Asian migrant identity is validated as its own subculture, creating a sense of belonging for this marginalised group.

Memes are particularly important for the identity formation of minority groups (Gal et al. 2016). Subtle Asian Traits is a forum where Asian-Westerns are no longer the ‘other’, despite being a marginalised group within the dominant culture of where they live. The traits which individual migrants may perceive as differentiating themselves from their offline peers are celebrated and normalised. As aptly described by Chinese-American Nathan Louie, the page is a space where being Asian is the norm (Louie 2018). Consequently, Subtle Asian Traits gives rise to a sub-culture wherein comparatively marginalised Asian-Westerns assert their own unique identity vis-a-vis the dominant mainstream culture.

The creation of collective identity naturally translates into a sense of community. Individual page members are not isolated, but rather recognise their place in a larger whole. Subtle Asian Traits has actively constructed this by hosting meet-ups in cities around the world. The members themselves also acknowledge that it is a perhaps rare chance for them to build their own subculture and create a sense of belonging for marginalized people like them. As one girl told the page’s creators, ‘[Subtle Asian Traits] was the first time she felt a sense of belonging’ (Mao 2018).

Figure 1: Memes use humour to acknowledge shared experiences.
Source: Mashable, 2018

Figure 2: Memes acknowledge the unique experiences of migrant communities.
Source: ABC News, 2018

Figure 3: Subtle Asian Traits is a space where Asian migrants are no longer the minority. Source: The Yap Native

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Subtle Asian Traits embraces every culture as members, and memes, come from all
Chapter Three: Socio-Cultural Cooperation

over the world. Not only does Subtle Asian Traits bring together individuals, it also brings together diasporas. With memes about the idiosyncrasies of the Chinese languages, the food of the Philippines and the pop icons of Korea – the page is a space where many Asian diasporas interact. Here some acknowledgement must be given to the facilitative role of the digital age. In an era when much of the world’s population has access to the internet, physical distance can be overcome by online proximity.

DRAWBACKS AND LIMITATIONS: EXCLUSION

Despite Subtle Asian Traits’s formative influence over identities and communities, it is not free from controversy. In fact, the page has a number of flaws that render it an imperfect forum for the representation and integration of Asian groups.

As the name suggests, Subtle Asian Traits is intended to represent all subsets of the Asian community. It is envisioned as a place to share laughter over the experiences of Asians living abroad and to reconcile the cultures of their ethnicity with the cultures of their place of living. However, when the posts are almost exclusively targeted towards a particular community, it creates a sense of othering for those that are not included. When the majority of content is targeted towards and for a specific subculture, such posts can “often be done negatively via expressions directed at the ‘other’, often as a way to maintain the ‘in-group’ identity or curb anxiety about that identity changing (Wiggins 2019,117).” In a sense, when the posts are almost exclusively about the East Asian experiences, it may alienate the experiences of other subcultures or diasporas. Its intention is to serve as a representative platform for smaller groups within mainstream society, being Asian diasporas. Yet the process of content creation now results in the marginalization of other subcultures by more dominant and populous groups, as seen in the under representation of South Asian and Southeast Asian diasporas. This remains an ongoing challenge for Subtle Asian Traits.

Subtle Asian Traits has been criticized for being too East Asian centric. This is important particularly as internet groups have become a site for collective identity formation (Gal et al. 2016). If the current degree of East Asian representation is maintained within the Facebook group, it may continue the othering of non-East Asian diasporas, in addition to the continuing the skin colour hierarchy that exists within many Asian cultures, which is typically to the detriment of South Asians and Southeast Asians. Furthermore, evidence of racism towards other ethnicities, including Africans and Caucasians, is beginning to emerge.

TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

Moderators of the Facebook group have acknowledged the siphoning of content towards the East Asian community and away from other Asian cultures. “We have noticed that, we’re not going to deny that,” said Ms Kang, one of the developers of the group (Kwai 2018). Moderators admit that most of the posts they receive tend to focus on the Chinese and Vietnamese communities, however, they are encouraging other communities to participate. The moderators actively look through over 3000 posts daily, ensuring that unwanted sentiments are not published. Alternatively, a way to tackle issues pertaining to overrepresentation could perhaps be the approval of less East Asian centric content. The administrators of the group could also proactively promote the submission of content related to other subcultures, to ensure that there are post-able content of various subcultures.

Such exclusivity has not gone unnoticed by the 1.4 million followers of Subtle Asian Traits. Splinter groups have emerged to focus on specific subcultures that follow the same themes as Subtle Asian Traits. For example, a Facebook group called Subtle Indonesian Traits started in 2019, with posts focusing on experiences that are commonly shared by Indonesian diasporas. Other groups have also emerged focusing on other Southeast Asian subcultures, such as Subtle Vietnamese Traits and Subtle Malaysian Traits.

But the question remains, can there be a group that collectively unites sentiments shared by all Southeast Asians? Are Southeast Asians too diverse and different for such a forum, as suggested by the burgeoning of splinter groups dedicated to specific
Chapter Three: Socio-Cultural Cooperation

subcultures? The aftermath and splintering of the Subtle Asian Traits page suggests that such a page would not be possible. There are innumerable nations, ethnicities, cultures, and religions throughout the Southeast Asian nations, which would render the creation of a cohesive and unified identity among the countless diaspora around the world near impossible.

REMAINING CHALLENGES

Furthermore, negative behaviours that have emerged from Subtle Asian Traits, including perpetuation of negative stereotypes towards Asian diasporas in western countries, continue to plague the Facebook page. Additionally, other stereotypes such as high-expectation Asian fathers and the ‘nerdy’ and ‘high achieving’ Asian students tend to generalize and in fact exaggerate stereotypes, reinforcing the perception of model minority in western countries respectively (Zhao 2015). The model minority fallacy is a dangerous concept that inhibits the breaking down of stereotypes and the provision of equal opportunities for minority groups. Perceptions of Asians as ‘model minorities’ degrades the achievements of individuals and does not assist in the alleviation of discrimination and institutional racism.

THE FRAGILE BALANCE BETWEEN IDENTITY CREATION AND IDENTITY CRISIS

Subtle Asian Traits has many positive aspects, including the unification of Asian diasporas and the sharing of common experiences. The platform has provided an avenue, in which users may derive a sense of belonging in an increasingly globalized world, where identity formation is of critical importance. However, the page has also encountered

a series of community management issues which must be addressed to ensure the sustained success and longevity of the platform. Firstly, posts and comments on the page exhibit which exhibit racist or exclusionary messaging, be that against Caucasians, African-Americans, South Asians and Southeast Asians, must not be accepted. Secondly, the page need to seek to address current behaviour that serves to reinforce negative stereotypes and self-deprecation. Lastly, the group’s East Asian-centricity, which tends to alienate other Asians, including Southeast Asians, must be managed.

The issues that arise with such page beg the question of whether it is possible to unite diaspora through a collective Asian, or Southeast Asian, identity when the experiences shared by those people are so different and diverse. What could be a key to solve this problem? Send your ideas to us!

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Return to Sender: ASEAN Nations Refuse Australia’s Contaminated Waste Crisis

Ali Smith | Australia

After serious environmental and labour concerns emerged, one after the other ASEAN countries have followed China’s lead in restricting or altogether stopping scrap waste imports. The message is clear: Southeast Asian nations are no longer willing to be dumping grounds for overseas waste.

In 2018, China, the world’s largest importer of scrap paper and plastic, threw the international recycling industry into chaos after it suddenly imposed restrictions which effectively stopped the flow of scrap imports. Following China’s step back, many ASEAN nations welcomed scrap plastic imports, hoping to capitalize on growing global demand. Yet, after serious environmental and labour concerns, one after the other ASEAN countries have followed China’s suit in restricting or altogether stopping scrap imports. The message is clear: Southeast Asian nations are no longer willing to be dumping grounds for overseas waste.

The global trade in plastic scraps is an industry which generates around US$200 billion every year (Allan, 2019). It is generally understood that scrap materials have value and have the potential to be reused or reprocessed. On the other hand, waste has little to no value and likely has harmful environmental and health effects. Therefore, scrap can be capitalized on and can create a profit for importers, whereas, waste is viewed as a burden. Globally, around half the plastic intended for recycling is traded overseas (Hook, 2018). Many countries choose to export plastic and paper materials to Asia as it is easier than dealing with it locally and it is often far cheaper to process. For this reason, 75% of globally exported waste ends up in Asia. Australia, for example, sends 50-60% of plastics collected for recycling to Southeast Asian nations (Dominish, 2019).

"Globally, around half the plastic intended for recycling is traded overseas."

The major problem with the global trade in scraps is that wealthier countries who are arguably better equipped to process waste and recycle scraps choose to pass on responsibility to countries with fewer resources. This leads to mismanaged waste: when plastics are disposed of in open landfills or dumps, burnt, or discarded in ways which can spill out to the surrounding environment. Mismanaged waste is significantly higher in low-to-middle-income countries.

WHY HAS CHINA STEPPED AWAY FROM THE INDUSTRY?

After joining the World Trade Organization in 2001, China became a manufacturing powerhouse and the world’s largest importer of recyclables, importing over half of the world’s paper and plastic scrap exports during the height of its imports (O’Neill, 2019). Once materials were recycled and re-processed they could be re-incorporated into the manufacturing supply chain (Minter, 2019). As China was ramping up global exports, it was cost-effective to return containers filled recyclable materials instead of returning them empty. Additionally, as the Chinese manufacturing sector was not producing enough virgin plastic there was demand for recycled plastic. Not only was China paid premiums for importing scraps, but it was also able to turn a profit and meet domestic manufacturing demands.

However, all this changed in 2018 when China introduced “Operation National Sword” and effectively shut its doors on recycling scrap materials through stringent import restrictions. It can be viewed as a ban as it has set the bar extremely high in terms of the cleanliness of materials allowed in. While no one is sure of the exact reason for the policy shift, some point to the large amounts of contaminated and hazardous materials imported, rising labour costs, and a drop in the prices of plastic and paper scraps (Hook, 2018).

The increased media scrutiny over environmental and health issues caused by informal recycling plants, as well as the exposure of corruption in the industry, made the issue one of national pride. Domestic waste systems were neglected and under-managed whereas the facilities that managed imported recyclable scraps thrived (Minter, 2019).

The government has since cracked down on informal recycling plants in an effort to build newer, safer, and more efficient recycling systems. The move shows that China is trying to clean up its environment and assert its position as a major power in the world. “Operation National Sword” has fundamentally altered the global waste market and how we perceive international recycling processes. The industry has finally been exposed for what it truly is; mired by smuggling, corruption, and detrimental environmental and health effects.

WHY THE GLOBAL NORTH RELIES ON SOUTHEAST ASIA TO DEAL WITH ITS WASTE

There has been a long historical pattern of wealthier countries sending scrap plastic to poorer countries to be recycled. The United States routinely shipped dead car batteries, mercury-laced concrete and other toxic materials to under-regulated Southeast Asian nations in the past (Bengali, 2019). Unfortunately, these practices continue today as contaminated and dangerous waste, such as electronic waste, find their way into the countries that are the least able to deal with them safely. The wealth disparities and lack of legal remedies have enabled these dangerous trades in the past, however, there appears to be a shift due to rising nationalism and changes in trade practices.
China’s decision has consequently shifted the flow of waste to Southeast Asia, diverting over 3 million tons annually to countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines (Marks, 2019). However, even when Southeast Asian countries are considered collectively, they cannot match the efficacy or scale of China’s recycling plants and industrial base, leading to a global plastic waste crisis (Bengali, 2019). As Southeast Asian countries do not have the same capacity as China to handle a large amount of foreign scrap material, it has led to a vicious cycle of waste mismanagement. The influx of falsely labelled non-recyclable scraps or contaminated waste has placed undue pressures on already weak systems and created resentment towards the countries who produced the waste.

**ASEAN NATIONS FIGHT BACK: RESTRICTIONS AND RETURNS**

Southeast Asia’s shift to the forefront of plastic imports has seen the accumulation of containers of trash and the proliferation of informal and illegal recycling facilities. This has contributed to severe pollution on top of an already dire plastic litter problem in the region.

In Vietnam, more than half of the imported plastic is sent to “craft villages” and other informal sites. At a household level, there are even greater environmental impacts from waste processing as more energy and water are required. After plastic piled up at ports in Vietnam over 2018, the country found itself at its limit and declared it would not “become the landfill of the world” (Hook, 2018). The Vietnamese government has since stopped issuing licences for imports of paper, plastic, metal and other waste. There are similar scenarios throughout the region.

In Malaysia, a string of illegal factories set up by Chinese businesses, who previously relied on China’s imports, created significant pollution as a result of substandard practices. In addition, what was believed to be imported scrap was actually found to be household and electronic waste, imported under false declarations from several countries, including Australia. Following such discoveries and the deluge of hazardous and non-recyclable waste, Environment Minister Yeo Bee Yin called time on Malaysia’s role as “the plastic rubbish bin of developed countries” earlier this year (Massola & Rosa, 2019). In June Malaysia sent 3,300 tons back to source countries (Minter, 2019).

Countries including Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam have now refused to take in certain materials for recycling. In addition, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia have begun to send waste back to their shores of origin, including Australia, due to hazardous contents and a lack of informed prior consent. The move is a combination of unfair trade practices and the realisation of countries that the current system is no longer beneficial.

**ASEAN member states are among the world’s biggest sources of plastic pollution.**

According to a 2017 Ocean Conservancy report, China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand, contributed to more than half of the plastic waste in the ocean (Ocean Conservancy, 2017). Awareness of the scale of the issue has only grown, with ASEAN members recently vowing to tackle domestic pollution through the “Bangkok Declaration” at an ASEAN conference earlier this year. As Southeast Asian nations have momentous domestic waste challenges to contend with, foreign imports are losing their appeal. Why import scraps and waste to little economic benefit and at the cost of quality of air and water and the health of citizens?

**A POTENTIAL TRASH TRADE WAR?**

As more and more countries push back and shut their doors to scrap materials upon discoveries of toxic and hazardous imports, source countries may no longer be able to depend on Southeast Asia to process their waste. This trend can, in part, be associated with rising nationalist sentiments and brewing trade wars in the Asia-Pacific region. Countries conceptualize the waste issue as a matter of sovereignty and national pride. To accept hazardous waste on misleading claims is to submit to greater powers.

There are significant potential knock-on effects if the global trade in waste and scrap comes to a halt, which would require Australia, among other countries, to build up domestic facilities rapidly or incur major fallouts. If they fail to find alternatives in time, materials that are potentially recyclable will be left in stockpiles or sent to landfill.

The Philippines has perhaps seen the most bitter diplomatic dispute with Canada. Canada sent dozens of containers falsely labelled as plastic scrap which were revealed to contain household waste, plastic bags, bottles, newspapers, and even adult diapers (Bengali, 2019). The Philippines demanded the containers be sent back, though Canada maintained it could not intervene in private commercial transactions between Canadian and Filipino companies. President Rodrigo Duterte intervened and threatened to “declare war” over the issue, removing diplomats from Canada in the process. Eventually, the Canadian government agreed to return the containers. This example shows the potential for breakdowns in diplomatic and trade relations.

**THE EVOLUTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL WASTE REGULATORY FRAMEWORK**

The Basel Convention was adopted in 1989 to prevent shipments of hazardous waste from wealthy to less-wealthy nations and to introduce a liability protocol which assigns financial penalties in such incidents. Though, until this year, these goals appeared to be a pipe dream. The Norway Amendment to the Convention was proposed in May 2019 at a UN conference to address gaps in the treaty and to gain better control over the flow of “problematic waste” (Hook, 2018). Over 180 countries agreed to expand hazardous material to include plastic waste and the requirement of “prior informed consent” of importing countries (Cossar & Sangaralingam, 2019). This allows countries in the Global South to send back waste on the basis of false or misleading declarations and prevents dumping.
While all Asian countries approved the move, not everyone was pleased with the outcome. The proposal has been opposed by the United States (the largest plastic exporter in the world), the petrochemical industry and scrap traders. They believe that the policy would stifle trade and could potentially worsen the world’s plastic problem (Cossar & Sangaralingam, 2019). Yet, this action will force exporting countries to take responsibility for their own plastic problem, rather than simply exporting pollution. Additionally, as the United States is not a party to the Basel Convention it has no voting rights and will still be banned from trading contaminated waste to most of the Global South – a significant victory for the environment.

**HOW DO WE SOLVE THE PLASTIC WASTE CRISIS?**

Arguably the solution lies in creating a global circular economy and investing in green growth solutions. A circular economy extracts the maximum value from materials and finds innovative solutions so that they stay in the supply chain for the safest and longest period possible. This can be achieved through long-lasting design, maintenance, repair, reuse, remanufacturing, refurbishing, and recycling (Circular Economy Crucial for Paris Climate Goals, 2019). Circular principles could enable vast reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and contribute significantly to meeting Paris Agreement targets. At present, only 9% of the global economy is circular, yet global use of materials continues accelerating (Ibid).

"A circular economy extracts the maximum value from materials and finds innovative solutions so that they stay in the supply chain for the safest and longest period possible"

Curbing plastic waste requires broad global action and building up relevant international law to safeguard and not stifle green growth. A circular economy requires strong national waste legislation and processes that elevate individual efforts to recycle. It encourages a culture of reuse and remanufacturing: creating industry opportunities and enabling consumers to make informed purchasing decisions. Scrap material can be either a resource or a burden, depending on how it is dealt with. In a circular economy, we all stand to gain from the waste trade. It should not be a matter of passing on the burden to the poorest countries with the least means to deal with the problems.

While ASEAN nations, in enforcing international regulations and refusing hazardous waste, are sending an important message to countries to take more responsibility for their waste, nationalism and protectionism are ultimately counter-productive in addressing global environmental issues. Without collective action and a circular economy, we will not be able to meet the targets of the Paris Agreement and solve the global plastic pollution problem. Furthermore, we cannot reduce pressures on global recycling systems unless the global production and consumption of plastic are dramatically reduced.

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There’s absolutely no doubt that you have heard about recent movements in the realms of international trade and defense cooperation. After all, trade and defense form the basis of one of the most important and highly regarded aspects of international statecraft and diplomacy. However, there exists yet another form of international cooperation that has been instrumental in the protection of the human race from certain doom; health cooperation. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the concept of health cooperation originated during the first International Sanitary Conference in Paris on 23 July 1851. From such humble origins, international health cooperation has evolved considerably, and is now represented by peak bodies such as the World Health Organization (WHO). But, in the 21st Century, what is health cooperation and why does it matter for regional blocs like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)?

There is currently no formal definition of health cooperation, although it is, diplomatically, considered as a fundamental aspect of development cooperation, which in turn, is part of the broad umbrella of foreign policy, with terminology such as development cooperation even being employed by the WHO in official communications. Whilst it may seem insignificant, such terminology speaks volumes about the current state of global health cooperation. Nevertheless, increased cooperation in Health is gaining traction among the international community due to the threat of recent pandemic such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003, Influenza A H1N5 (bird flu) in 2007, H1N1 (swine flu) in 2009, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2012, and Ebola in 2014. Cooperation among countries typically emanates from transnational health challenges, inter-country commonalities, and the increased engagement in regional
or global processes. For the purpose of this article, health cooperation will be defined as cooperation which pertains to any action taken by two or more sovereign states to promote and achieve the complete physical, mental, and social well-being of societies.

While the WHO is more concerned about containing the spread of deadly diseases and setting global standards, regional blocs such as the European Union (EU) and ASEAN are integrating an increasing number of mechanisms to tackle health issues specific to their region. While the EU’s major disease burdens are non-communicable diseases (NCDs), mental health, and injuries (1), ASEAN is placing greater emphasis on lightening the triple burden of diseases, whilst waging unceasing war against communicable diseases (2). The clarification of shared ambitions amongst regional blocs makes it easier for policymakers to jointly identify priorities, allocate resources accordingly, and deliver targeted interventions.

The International Health Regulations provide a legally binding framework among more than 194 countries that assists in fostering cooperation on health matters with serious implications, typically infectious diseases (3). However, it is a different story for NCDs, which are mainly lifestyle diseases. The complex, non-linear, and multifactorial nature of NCDs calls for a comprehensive approach that involves all sectors—health, education, agriculture, transportation, finance—in controlling the risks and preventing NCDs. Hence, there is a need for a coordinator within the government, usually subsumed by the health ministry. The role becomes daunting in an international setting where the state’s foreign policy takes precedence in bilateral and multilateral dialogues. The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control is a glaring example of the blurring boundaries of trade and health in the execution of foreign policy. Health cooperation is often acquiescent in its alignment with the state’s political and economic interests.

In ASEAN, issues relating to health fall under the Socio-Cultural Community, one of the three pillars alongside the Political-Security Community and Economic Community. The three pillars are co-equal in theory but the latter two hold more cachet in practice. The ASEAN Post-2015 Health Development Agenda (APHDA) encapsulates the shared goals, strategies, priorities and programs of the health sector from 2016 to 2020. Four clusters were individually tasked to (a) promote a healthy lifestyle, (b) respond to all hazards and emerging threats, (c) strengthen the health system and access to care, and (d) ensure food safety (4). These priorities were negotiated by the health ministers of ASEAN Member States (AMS) operating by consensus. As public expenses increase due to the expansion of health benefits, the oversight shifts from the hands of public health officials to economic managers and politicians. Health can be regarded in monetary terms however not the other way around, stifling the health sector to manage extraneous factors such as those contributing to NCDs.

Health cooperation works two-ways. Domestic policies serve as a competitive advantage of a state in advocating for a global intervention, utilizing the state’s niche expertise and technologies. Conversely, international health cooperation reinforces national health initiatives and further improves it with the best practices from around the world. Thus, it would be rational to look at how each AMS fares in terms of health cooperation and how it is communicated to the international community. The information presented in this article is limited to publicly-available online documents.

Brunei Darussalam
In July of 2019, the Ministry of Health Brunei Darussalam entered into a joint working group on health cooperation with Indonesia, specifically discussing the exchange of information on public health services, health promotion, traditional and complementary medicine, and health regulations (5). Exchange programs for health professionals and NCD research were also included in the agenda. Brunei is invested in the ASEAN Plus Three (AMS including China, Japan, and Korea) in addressing aging populations, disaster management, universal health coverage (UHC), and pandemic response (6). The country hosted the 13th ASEAN Health Ministers’ Meeting (AHMM) in 2017, with the theme “Improving Health Throughout the Life Course” (7).

Cambodia
The WHO identified four strategic priorities for the country in the areas of public health leadership, universal health care (UHC), health security, and multi-sectoral collaboration (8). In a recent study, it was found that economic and health developments in Cambodia primarily benefited the urban residents (9). China, keen on developing its bilateral relations with AMS, has provided medical and infrastructure support to the rural areas of Cambodia (10). The Ministry of Health signed an agreement with Thailand to control communicable diseases at the borders (11). The 14th AHMM was held on 29 August 2019 in Cambodia where the Prime Minister raised the issue of counterfeit and poor quality medicines (12).

Indonesia
According to the WHO, the Indonesian health sector relies heavily on both the government and private sectors (13). Development partners provide technical advice and program innovations to supplement the efforts of the health sector. The United States and Australia are its two major partners in health with disease control and maternal and child health (MCN) as foci, respectively. Development banks have minor roles in health project implementation but continue to provide loans for water and sanitation. Strategic priorities are communicable diseases, NCDs, UHC, MCN, and health emergencies.

Laos
The WHO Country Cooperation Strategy within Laos focuses on UHC, health service delivery, health security, policy advocacy, and active partnership in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and ASEAN (14). Major donor countries support Laos in different
health areas —Korea for health-focused human resource development (15); Japan for MCN and UHC (16); the United States for disease control (17); and the European Union for nutrition (18). The Asian Development Bank committed a USD 30 million policy-based grant to the Lao government to improve health sector governance (19).

Malaysia

The strategic priorities within Malaysia are multisectoral collaboration, the strengthening of health systems, NCDs, and sharing of Malaysian expertise (20). The Ministry of Health signed a memorandum of understanding with the Philippines on 31 July 2019 “to address cross-border health concerns amidst the rapidly changing global environment” with a focus on primary health care (21). Malaysia is venturing out to be a hub for medical tourism, pharmaceuticals, and research. It has agreed with Cambodia to set up a specialized team to promote Malaysia’s health tourism sector (22). The country is attractive to the Dutch for collaboration on medical devices, e-health, and mobile health solutions (23).

Myanmar

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is among the many international organizations working to improve health care in Myanmar. It has been involved in projects related to health system reform, disease control, MCN, and traditional medicine. A study found that there is an overlapping of functions among the donors and a dire need for facilities and human resources for health (24). On 22 March 2018, JICA signed a grant for the construction of the New Yangon Specialist Hospital (25). The country is also a beneficiary of technical assistance to improve health cooperation in the GMS (26).

Philippines

The five strategic priorities for WHO collaboration are to save lives, promote well-being, protect health, optimize health architecture, and use platforms for health (27). The action-oriented and cross-cutting nature of the priorities reflects the paradigm shift from medico-centric to a systems approach to health. The European Union contributed from 2006 to 2018 in the Philippine Health Sector Reform Agenda (28) that has evolved into Universal Health Care Law after twenty years of iteration. On 23 July 2019, the Department of Health launched a public-private partnership platform with Singapore (29). According to a health official, the United States and Japan remain the Philippines’ major development partners. The health ministry is currently formulating a global health policy agenda as the country is poised to become an upper-middle-income economy.

Singapore

As a small state, diplomacy is the only choice for Singapore. Its strong central government makes sure that health is not only done right; but excels at it. On 22 May 2019, Singapore signed a memorandum of understanding with Indonesia on health promotion, disease control, and human resource development (30). The Ministry of Health is also taking its cooperation with China to greater heights in the areas of health system reform, traditional medicines, and healthy aging (31). Earlier this 29 April 2019, the Singapore-Shanghai Comprehensive Cooperation Council was established and health is one of the areas of collaboration under people-to-people exchanges (32). In 2015 and 2016, Singapore partnered with the United States Environmental Protection Agency to train Southeast Asian officials on how to estimate the health impacts of poor air quality (33). The country is also a proponent of the Global Health Security Agenda (34) and offers training to partners through its Singapore Cooperation Programme.

Thailand

Thailand is the only AMS to have its own development agency, suitably named the Thailand International Cooperation Agency. It reports official development assistance (ODA) data to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) despite being not a member of the Development Assistance Committee. Public health is one of the key themes of its annual international training courses. Five priority programs were selected for its country cooperation strategy: antimicrobial resistance, global health diplomacy, migrant health, NCDs, and road safety (35). The country is recognized for NCD control (36), family planning, HIV/AIDS, malaria, avian influenza, food safety, nutrition, and health promotion (37). In 2016, Thailand became the second country in the world to eliminate mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis (38). It has bilateral health cooperation with Kenya (39), Japan (40), Taiwan (41), and trilateral cooperation with Myanmar and the United States (42), and with Bhutan and Lao PDR (43) among others. A study pointed out that Thailand’s success in health management can be attributed to the knowledge exchange brought by international students (44).

Vietnam

The Ministry of Health in Vietnam should seek further opportunities to cooperate with the WHO on health systems strengthening, disease control, health service delivery, health financing, and pharmaceutical regulations (45). Health is one of the three objectives of the USAID’s Country Development Cooperation Strategy for Vietnam with programs focusing on HIV/AIDS, pandemic response, and disabilities (46). Korea has listed Vietnam as a key partner for the former’s New Southern Policy on health cooperation (47). Cuba planned to share its world-class healthcare system with the country (48) following the Vietnam-Cuba friendship hospitals (49). In terms of NCD control, particularly tobacco and alcohol, it partnered with Argentina to learn best practices (50). Vietnam also has health agreements with Belgium (51), Denmark (52), France (53), Japan (54), and the Netherlands (55).

Health cooperation in ASEAN remains unstructured and largely driven by individual member’s foreign policy. As a result, the health priorities mirror those of the
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donor countries’ priorities, which may not be in the best interests of the recipient states. While there is a growing appreciation of South-South cooperation, traditional aid (i.e., financial transfer) will persist to be the preferred modality of development assistance. The problem with grants and loans is the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) that come with aid, which are fundamentally based on neoliberal economic models. Essentially, such aid presumes fiscal austerity measures, whilst additionally assuming money will be used to buy goods and technologies from donor countries. A systematic review of 1,931 studies in 2017 found that SAPs adversely affect vulnerable populations by undermining access to quality and affordable healthcare (56). If ASEAN will continue to veer away from discussing upstream approaches to health, most AMS would be dependent on donor countries and not achieve industrialization.

ASEAN has the cachet to redefine health cooperation that is truly responsive to the health needs of the region. Aside from the ASEAN Summit, the AMS can leverage the ASEAN Plus Three, East Asia Summit, and ASEAN Regional Forum as political platforms to advance health systems reforms that focus on health protection for the whole population. The public health sector must embrace politics as a force for social change beyond the technocratic approach. As global health involves state and non-state actors at different levels of governance, it is important for anyone working in the field to understand the political, economic, and social contexts of the environment they are operating. This calls for building regional and national capacity for global health diplomacy. The APHDA is a bellwether of the unison of health and foreign policies and it will be replaced by a new version after 2020. The ultimate challenge for ASEAN is a framework convention on regional health that would hold AMS accountable to a set of targets.

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Chapter Three: Socio-Cultural Cooperation


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