

## THE CHALLENGES TO AUSTRALIA'S ASEAN MEMBERSHIP

by Lloyd Alexander M. Adducul

In an interview a few days ahead of the 2018 ASEAN-Australia Special Summit, Indonesian President Joko Widodo responded approvingly to the question of Australia's membership to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). While some analysts consider it as a gracious response to recognize the contributions of Australia as an important bilateral and regional diplomatic partner, others regard it merely as a characteristically Javanese reaction to pass up further probe. Still others regard the idea as a welcome development in regionalism, particularly ASEAN integration. In any case, Pres. Widodo's reported remarks once again put the limelight on the issue of expanding ASEAN membership.

### *Old idea, renewed interest*

The idea of Australia joining the ASEAN is not new. It has been contemplated by Australian politicians and think-tanks since Canberra became ASEAN's dialogue partner in 1974. For instance, former Prime Minister [Paul Keating](#) in 2016 strongly made the case for membership to prevent regional power conflict. Joining the organization can be considered as the culmination of Keating's [proposition](#) in 1992 that Australia should associate more with Asia as its future lies in the region. Also, the [Australian Strategic Policy Institute \(ASPI\)](#) regards that the evolution of Australia's perspective about ASEAN has mustered enough certitude for it to consider integration. ASPI's fellow Graeme Dobell suggests that amidst new Asian geostrategic and economic pressures, ASEAN needs the support of other middle powers like Australia and New Zealand.

The perception on Australia's possible ASEAN membership has been mixed among Southeast Asian leaders. Former ASEAN Secretary-General Rodolfo Severino had earlier expressed reservations over the initiative as Australia is "not Southeast Asian"<sup>1</sup>. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad once dismissed the possibility of an ASEAN consensus on Australia's membership,<sup>2</sup> but now implies that Canberra might have earned a right to join the organization.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, former Singaporean Foreign Affairs Deputy Secretary Kishore Mahbubani saw the benefit of aligning Australia's foreign policy with the organization apropos of a global balancing agenda. He then recommended ways to integrate Australia into the ASEAN such as understanding Asian norms and learning its languages,<sup>4</sup> clustering with the ASEAN vote at the UN, and signing up to ASEAN agreements.<sup>5</sup>

### *Within the realms of possibility*

The proposal for Australia's ASEAN membership can be construed as a sound consequence of its consistent engagement in Southeast Asia. As ASEAN's global importance increases, Australia embraces the organization for a wide range of interests. Strategically, Australia may provide Southeast Asia a strong defence across the Indo-Pacific region. ASEAN's engagement with major powers may complement Australia's desire to play a more active role and contribute to stability and order in the region. Canberra's membership may also aid ASEAN's community-building efforts. While the ASEAN Way renders a rather slow-paced progress in reaching at an agreement, Australia's unrelenting drive for results, especially in economic terms, may speed up efforts for regional integration. Economically, ASEAN presents Australia vast trade, investment, tourism, and employment opportunities, which is further enhanced by the region's move toward an economic community. Based on [2016-17 trade data](#), ASEAN is Australia's third dominant trading partner with compelling growth prospect. The region's two-way trade with Canberra accounts for AUD93 billion, trailing behind China and the European Union, and making Australia

ASEAN's 10th largest principal import source and 7th export destination.<sup>6</sup> The magnitude of this economic achievement and the potential for its further increase should Australia become a member cannot be underestimated.

Notwithstanding these benefits of membership expansion, can Australia legally join ASEAN? Article 6 of the [ASEAN Charter](#) states that prospective members must satisfy four requisites: 1) geographical location in Southeast Asia, 2) recognition by all member-states, 3) agreement to be bound and to abide by the Charter, and 4) ability and willingness to carry out membership obligations. The proposed membership of Australia merits an examination vis-à-vis each criterion.

### *Geographically disconnected?*

It is clear that at the outset, the definition of Southeast Asia largely depended upon the geopolitical situation and preferences at a given period. As an illustration, possibly the first documented use of the term "South-Eastern Asia" referred to Hindustan, Malay, Siam and China in 1839.<sup>7</sup> The official western use of "South East Asia" came to fore in 1943 with the creation of the South East Asia Command, which initially included only the peninsular countries. Following the 1954 Geneva Agreements, the South East Asia Treaty Organization was organized with an anti-communism tenor, with Thailand and the Philippines as the only South East Asian participating countries.

The prevailing use of the term "Southeast Asia" commenced with the creation of the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) in 1961, which consisted of the Philippines, Thailand, and the Federation of Malaya. ASA's charter suggested that these states were on the threshold of real economic and cultural cooperation in the region.<sup>8</sup> In 1963, a pan-Malayan region was envisioned by the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. Though short-lived, the Maphilindo group instituted a mechanism for consultation (musyawarah) and consensus (muafakat), which was later adopted when Indonesia and Singapore eventually joined the ASA states to form the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 1967. Out of security and geopolitical concerns, ASEAN was established to engage the member-states in a limited regional cooperation. Subsequently, ASEAN has expanded not only in its focus and agenda, but also in terms of membership as it included Brunei (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997), and Cambodia (1999). The current ten ASEAN member-states, along with Timor-Leste, comprise the United Nations' Southeast Asia geographical grouping. The UN's designation of these eleven countries to this sub-region, however, does not denote their political, cultural, or any affiliation.<sup>9</sup>

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Considering the evolution of Southeast Asia – how it was defined and which countries it constituted through time, and how ASEAN membership expanded with reference to the term, the argument that Australia is not and cannot be geographically part of the region falls short in considering the political aspect of defining the sub-region. Geography may still be invoked as a basis for Australia's membership due to its contiguity with Indonesia, just as Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea also seek membership based on the same circumstance. However, the real challenges go beyond geographical qualification as Australia must gain the unanimous approval of all ASEAN member-states and must accept ASEAN as an institution that will represent its interests in the global discussion table. These challenges are rooted in questions of Australia's sharing an Asian identity and sense of regional belonging.

### *Back to the wall*

ASEAN is fundamentally premised on consensus-based cooperation, which often yields conservative decisions and gradual decision-making processes. An application for new membership may thus entail extensive deliberation and ample time. Considering this and all other challenges, it can be said that Australia's ASEAN membership is imaginable but difficult to realize. Although the proposal is not yet on the table, the bloc's attitude may turn toward the affirmative if Canberra develops a genuine ASEAN "we-feeling".<sup>10</sup>

The admission of a country that is not considered part of ASEAN's recognized zone demands a radical shift in mindset. Populated by Europeans by accident of history, Australia ought to dispel uncertainties in identifying itself with Asia in general, and Southeast Asia in particular. An Asian consciousness among Australians must emerge prior to ASEAN membership. As former ASEAN Secretary-General Rodolfo Severino averred, joining the regional bloc entails professing Asian identity and feeling that it is part of the region.<sup>11</sup> A full sense of "ASEAN-ness" may then require Australia to be more deeply engaged with the ASEAN people, to share the same concerns and interests with them. This fundamental change in thoughts, understanding, and attitudes would be just as significant among ASEAN nationals. As Benedict Anderson emphasized in

conceptualizing social collectives, each person, despite not knowing the other, must live in the image of their communion in their mind.<sup>12</sup>

ASEAN's influence throughout Southeast Asia is just as important as Australia's contribution to the organization's transformation. In the face of contemporary major global changes, Australia and ASEAN must develop new pragmatic approaches to promote and ensure peace, security, stability and prosperity in the region, regardless of Australia's standing in the Association. 🌸

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Dobell, Graeme. *Australia into ASEAN: The ASEAN 'No', The Strategist* 14 December 2015, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australia-into-asean-the-asean-no/>, (accessed 4 April 2018)
- <sup>2</sup> Baker, Mark, **Mahathir Frustrates Australia's ASEAN Bid**, 6 November 2002, <https://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/11/05/1036308311326.html> (accessed 12 April 2018)
- <sup>3</sup> Massola, James, **Australia Still an 'Outpost of Europe' says Malaysia's Mahathir**, 23 March 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/australia-still-an-outpost-of-europe-says-malaysia-s-mahathir-20180322-p4z5si.html> (accessed 12 April 2018)
- <sup>4</sup> Australia Broadcasting Corporation's Geraldine Doogue interview with Kishore Mahbubani, 26 January 2013, [http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rn/podcast/2013/01/sea\\_20130126\\_0730.mp3](http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rn/podcast/2013/01/sea_20130126_0730.mp3) (accessed 6 April 2018)
- <sup>5</sup> Dobell, Graeme. Australian Strategic Policy's Special Report: Australia as an ASEAN Community Partner, February 2018, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/australia-asean-community-partner> (accessed 4 April 2018)
- <sup>6</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Government of Australia, **ASEAN Economic Fact Sheet 2016-17**, <http://dfat.gov.au/trade/resources/Documents/asean.pdf> (accessed 5 April 2018)
- <sup>7</sup> Malcom, Howard. **Travels in South-Eastern Asia: Embracing Hindustan, Malaya, Siam, and China**. <https://archive.org/stream/travelsinsouth04malcgoog#page/n10/mode/2up> (accessed 10 April 2018)
- <sup>8</sup> Pollard, Vincent K. *ASA and ASEAN, 1961-1967: Southeast Asian Regionalism*, *Asian Survey*, Vol 10, No 3 (March 1970), pp. 244-255, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2642577> (accessed 3 April 2018)
- <sup>9</sup> United Nations Geographic Regions, <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49/>, accessed 13 April 2018
- <sup>10</sup> The examination on states' groupings at a theoretical level was pioneered by Karl Deutsch (1957), who emphasized common identity and social relations as important binds. It was echoed by Amitav Acharya in his work, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*.
- <sup>11</sup> Dobell, Graeme. *Australia into ASEAN: The ASEAN 'No', The Strategist* 14 December 2015, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australia-into-asean-the-asean-no/> (accessed 4 April 2018)

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