



and political benefits to Asean. Australia is its seventh-largest trading partner. Australia is a source of investment, technology and expertise.

Australia is helping Asean to educate and train many of its young people. It shares many of Asean's values, principles and objectives.

Australia supports the central role that Asean plays in the region's architecture.

There are some divergent interests between Asean and Australia. One example is our relationship with the US.

Australia is a treaty ally of the US. In any dispute between the US and another country, Australia would be expected to support the US.

In contrast, Asean's policy is to be close to all the great powers but not be aligned with any of them.

The second difference is cultural. South-east Asians tend to be more patient than Australians. South-east Asians value face more than Australians do.

South-east Asians favour mutual accommodation and consensus over clarity and majority rule.

South-east Asians tend to favour compromise over confrontation. They are generally more conservative than Australians and do not share the liberal values that are dear to Australians.

Sometimes, misunderstandings occur between Asean and Australia because of these cultural differences.

#### CONVERGENT INTERESTS

Asean and Australia enjoy more convergent interests than divergent interests. We believe in free trade, open economies and economic integration. We believe in the reality of climate change and will implement our responsibilities under the Paris Agreement conscientiously.

We believe in the United Nations, World Trade Organisation, International Civil Aviation Organisation, International Atomic Energy Agency, and other multilateral institutions of global governance.

We believe that the South China Sea is part of the global commons and is governed by Unclos.

We support the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. We wish to make the Asia-Pacific a region of peace, stability and prosperity. We support a regional architecture that is open, inclusive and led by Asean.

The theme of the Sydney Summit was security and prosperity. The theme overlaps with Asean's priorities for this year, which are to strengthen our resilience and our capacity for innovation.

At Sydney, the two sides agreed to enhance cooperation to combat terrorism, threats to cyber security, human trafficking and other transnational crime.

We also agreed to work together to promote the digital economy and smart cities. We seek to conclude the negotiations for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership this year.

Asean and Australia are determined to forge a bright future for themselves and for the Asia-Pacific region.

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By Invitation

# Asean and Australia: From friends to partners

There are many more areas of shared interests between Asean and Australia, even if cultural differences sometimes lead to misunderstandings.



**Tommy Koh**

For The Straits Times

Last month, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull invited the leaders of Asean to attend a Special Summit in Sydney. Nine of Asean's leaders attended the summit, which was held successfully and ended with the adoption of the Sydney Declaration.

A memorandum of understanding on cooperation to combat international terrorism was signed. At the same time, an Asean-Australia Business Summit and a Conference on Counter-Terrorism were also held in Sydney.

Australia is Asean's oldest dialogue partner. The dialogue

began in 1974. In the past 44 years, both Asean and Australia have been transformed. The relationship has also changed in some fundamental ways.

What is the value of Asean to Australia? What is the value of Australia to Asean? What are the areas in which they have convergent and divergent interests? What is the future of the relationship?

Many Australians, including some members of the media, are not well informed about Asean. I am told that some younger Australians do not know what the acronym, Asean, stands for.

#### VALUE OF ASEAN TO AUSTRALIA

As for older Australians, they may see South-east Asia more as a threat than an opportunity, remembering that in World War II, Japan attacked Northern Australia from bases in Indonesia.

What is the value of Asean to Australia?

The first value of Asean is economic. Asean has a single market of 635 million consumers. Australia has more trade with

Asean than it does with the United States and Japan. In 2016, Australia invested over US\$73 billion (S\$95 billion) in Asean.

Asean's economy (US\$2.6 trillion) is twice as big as Australia's (US\$1.39 trillion).

Asean's economy is already the sixth largest in the world and is projected to become the fourth largest by 2030.

Australia – and New Zealand – has a free trade agreement with Asean. There are over 100,000 Asean students studying in Australian universities; 1.4 million Asean citizens visited Australia last year.

The second value of Asean to Australia is political.

Asean has kept the peace in South-east Asia for over 50 years. As a neighbour, Australia benefits when the region is at peace.

Australia also benefits from the fact that Asean upholds international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Unclos).

Asean supports the freedom of navigation and overflight. It is in favour of a rules-based

international and regional order.

In order to promote peace and cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, Asean has created such regional institutions as the Asean Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, and has included Australia in both of them.

Australia has a population of only 25 million, smaller than that of Malaysia. Some people in Asean hold negative views of Australia. Such perceptions are based on the old Australia, an Australia which had a protected economy and a white immigration policy.

#### VALUE OF AUSTRALIA TO ASEAN

In the past 44 years, Australia has been transformed. Today, it has an open economy and champions multiculturalism. In fact, there are a million Australian citizens with South-east Asian ancestry.

The new Australia embraces its diversity as a strength. The people-to-people links between Asean and Australia add strength to the relationship.

What is Australia's value to Asean?

Australia brings both economic