

By Invitation

New Zealand – a strong and steady friend to Asean

The country may be small but it is a trusted ally in these uncertain times



Tommy Koh

For *The Straits Times*

New Zealand is a small country. It has a population of only 4.6 million. It is, however, a country which punches above its weight in many respects.

It has been ranked by Transparency International as the least corrupt country in the world. It is also ranked first by the World Bank for ease of doing business.

It is a highly creative society. Sir Peter Jackson has won several Oscars for his directing work on *The Lord Of The Rings* and *The Hobbit*. Other famous directors include Jane Campion and Taika Waititi. Authors Keri Hulme and Eleanor Catton are both Man Booker Prize winners. Singer-songwriter Lorde hails from Auckland.

New Zealand also excels as a world-class sporting nation. The national rugby team, the All Blacks, have won the World Cup three times. Their haka chant, performed before each match, strikes fear in the hearts of the opponents.

At the 2016 Summer Olympics, New Zealand won 18 medals (including four gold). That would have placed it third on the medal table on a per capita basis. By comparison, the 10 Asean countries won 15 medals, with three gold.

I can also say from my experience at the United Nations, that New Zealand has a world-class foreign service. The New Zealand diplomats I worked with were intelligent, knowledgeable and honourable.

A STURDY RELATIONSHIP

New Zealand made an early commitment to Asean, becoming a dialogue partner in 1975, second only to Australia. Over the past 43 years, the relationship has matured, growing in breadth and in depth.

The relationship is trouble-free, with leaders on both sides enjoying a high comfort level. Let me briefly review the different areas in which they cooperate.

Economic cooperation

In 2009, Asean's first free trade agreement outside of Asia was concluded with Australia and New

Zealand. The Asean-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement entered into force in 2010.

Two-way trade between Asean and New Zealand reached US\$12 billion (S\$16.6 billion) last year. New Zealand's cumulative investment in Asean was NZ\$4.6 billion (S\$4.2 billion) last year. Asean's investment in New Zealand, in the same year, amounted to NZ\$8.1 billion.

New Zealand is participating actively and constructively in the ongoing negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The RCEP involves the 10 Asean member states and six other countries (Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea).

When concluded, it will be the world's largest free trade area. The collective ambition is to conclude substantively the negotiations before the end of this year.

Political and security cooperation

In the political-security sector, New Zealand cooperates with Asean bilaterally, as well as through the East Asia Summit, the Asean Regional Forum and the Asean Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus.

Areas of cooperation include

counter-terrorism, transnational crime, preventive diplomacy, cyber security and maritime security.

New Zealand shares Asean's objective in promoting peace and security in the region, through dialogue and cooperation. It is a strong supporter of Asean's vision to build a rules-based, inclusive regional order, with Asean at the centre.

It has appointed a dedicated ambassador to Asean, based in Jakarta.

Social, cultural and development cooperation

New Zealand has excellent universities. Education and training are very important areas in which it has helped and continues to help Asean.

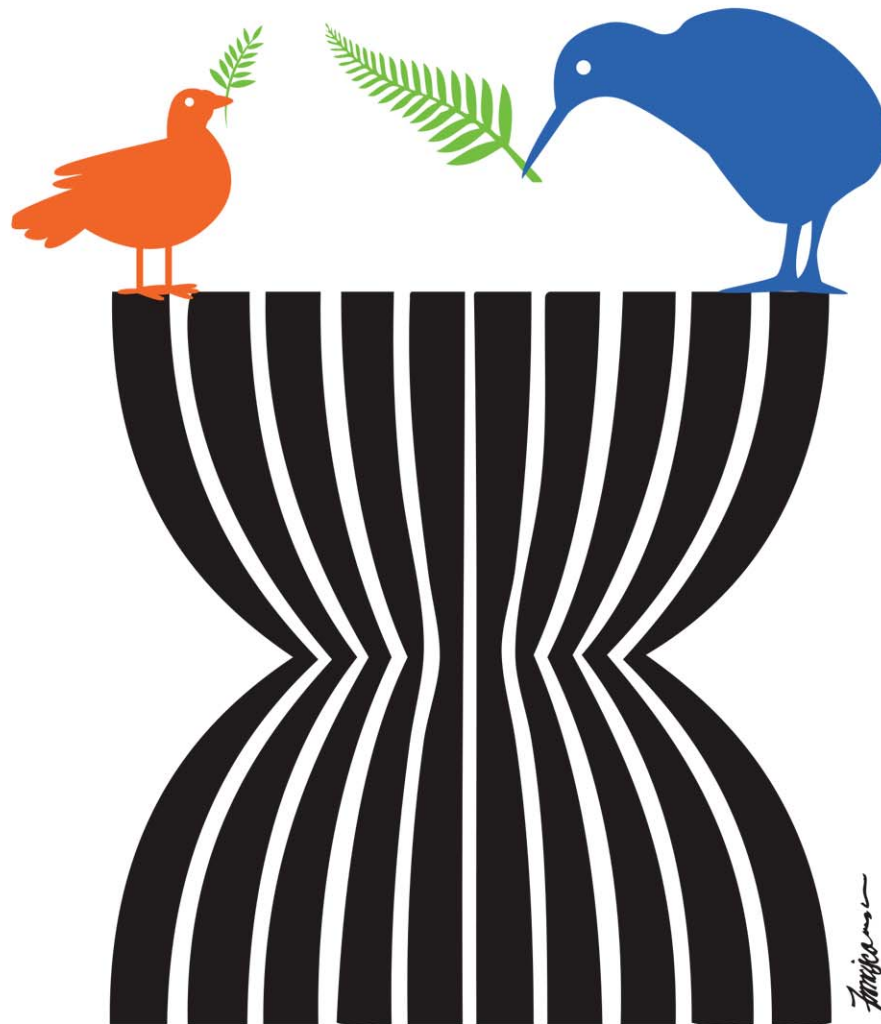
New Zealand's development assistance programme to Asean is its second-largest in the world, after the Pacific. This year, the government announced a 12 per cent increase in funding, totalling NZ\$224 million over three years.

This funding includes more than 500 scholarships each year to Asean students and officials, including 225 places for master's and doctoral degrees at New Zealand universities. There are scholarships focused on advanced

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English language training for officials from Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. Short-term training scholarships for officials cover public-sector leadership, agriculture, renewable energy and disaster risk management.

New Zealand is no stranger to major earthquakes. It therefore has experience in dealing with natural disasters and risk management.



That expertise is shared with the Asean Committee on Disaster Management and the Asean Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management.

In the field of human rights, New Zealand has focused its efforts on helping the Asean Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children.

It is helping Asean to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. It has allocated a sum of NZ\$200 million for this purpose for the period from 2016 to this year.

A particular priority is supporting Asean's efforts to narrow the gap between the newer and older members. Singapore had taken the lead to initiate a programme to assist Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam to catch up with the rest. The programme is called the Initiative for Asean Integration. New Zealand provides NZ\$100 million to assist those four countries in capacity building.

As a champion of renewable energy, New Zealand provides technical assistance to Indonesia, Laos and Myanmar in this sector.

New Zealand has a world-class agricultural industry – famous for its high quality and safe food – and is assisting rural communities in several Asean states in animal husbandry and food safety. There are specific support programmes involving the five Mekong riverine countries in horticulture and food safety.

Focusing on the young

New Zealand has launched two programmes targeted at the young leaders of Asean. One brings promising young Asean diplomats to visit and learn about New Zealand's governance and other systems. The other involves young business leaders from Asean visiting New Zealand and reciprocating with young Kiwi entrepreneurs visiting Asean states.

CONCLUSION

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Its long history with Asean and willingness to work closely with Asean in practical ways demonstrate its commitment to our region. Together, we will continue to support free trade and oppose protectionism. We will defend open economies and regional economic integration and oppose economic autarchy.

We will defend multilateralism and multilateral institutions, such as the World Trade Organisation, and oppose unilateralism.

We will defend the rule of law and oppose the rule that might is right. We will work for a transparent, inclusive and rules-based regional order with Asean at the centre.

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