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INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (ISIS) MALAYSIA



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Building bridges: the AANZ partnership

**Could ASEAN's
limitations become
its greatest asset?**

**Celebrating and
strengthening
ASEAN-New Zealand
Dialogue Partnership**

**Partners in crime?
Cooperation against
transnational
organised crime in
ASEAN**



ISIS Malaysia

The Institute of Strategic & International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia was established on 8 April 1983 with a mandate to advance Malaysia's strategic interests. As an autonomous research organisation, we focus on foreign policy and security, economics and trade, social policy and nation-building, technology and cyber, and climate and energy.

For more than four decades, ISIS Malaysia has been at the forefront of evidence-based policymaking, as well as Track 2 diplomacy, promoting the exchange of views and opinions at the national and international levels. We also play a role in fostering closer regional integration and international cooperation through various forums, such as the Asia-Pacific Roundtable, the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic & International Studies network, the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council, the Network of East Asian Think-Tanks, the Network of ASEAN-China Think-Tanks and the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Dialogue.

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Editor's Note

This edition of *ISIS focus* marks the first publication that features the key discussions put forward during the 17th ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Dialogue, the only strategic-focused Track 2 mechanism for ASEAN and its dialogue partners from Oceania.

On behalf of the ASEAN-ISIS network, Asialink and the Asia New Zealand Foundation, the event was convened by ISIS Malaysia on 17–19 September 2025, which saw robust participation from delegates from various backgrounds, including government officials, academia and analysts. It brought together 68 participants from Southeast Asia, Australia and New Zealand to promote understanding and encourage dialogue.

This edition also seeks to complement a key objective of the Dialogue: strengthening understanding and exploring new synergies and areas of cooperation that can contribute to policy discussions across the region. It is especially relevant, given Malaysia's recent ASEAN chairmanship and the seven-decade milestone in both ASEAN-Australia and ASEAN-New Zealand relations.

This is further reflected in the edition's thematic focus of bridges, representing the efforts of building relationships to bridge the aspirations and strengths of Southeast Asia, Australia and New Zealand towards tangible, productive outcomes.

This includes the exploration of the future of ASEAN's role and function, inter-regional cooperation and dialogue partner outreach. It also tackles pressing regional issues, such as the state of AI governance, transnational crime and role-building opportunities in the Indo-Pacific.

The articles were written by the Dialogue's role-players and partners, including emerging scholars and researchers of the NextGen programme. We are immensely grateful to our contributors, who have generously given their time to put their discussions down in writing. We are also grateful to our readers, whose continued support and quality engagement encourage us to keep this publication at a high standard. ■

Foreword



Datuk Prof Dr Mohd Faiz Abdullah

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The Māori *whakataukī* (proverb) of “*waiho i te toipoto, kaua i te toiroa*” – to keep close together, not wide apart – offers a timely reminder of the enduring value of connection. It underscores the importance of sustained dialogue and mutual engagement as a key component for collective progress. In an international environment increasingly shaped by geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions, the principles of openness, trust and continuous engagement are more vital than ever.

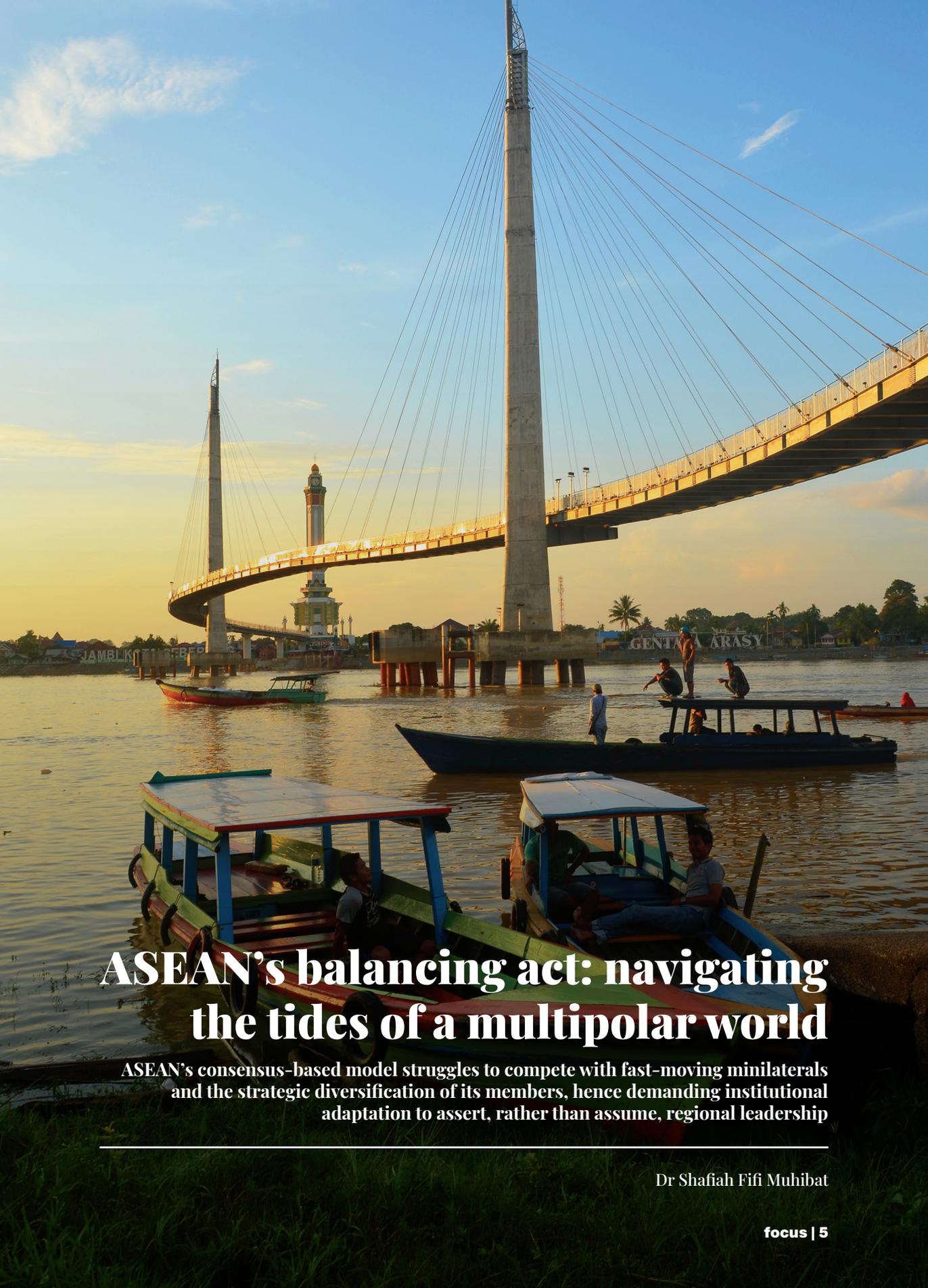
Against this broader backdrop, it reflects upon the belief that, rather than turning inward, Southeast Asia, Australia and New Zealand can continue to draw strength from the commonalities born out of shared interests and values cultivated from more than seven decades of cooperation. As the contributions of this publication demonstrate, sustained and frank engagement at the Track 2 level, though demanding, remains a powerful space for building understanding and fostering positive change.

This edition of ISIS *focus* draws upon the deliberations and insights shared during the 17th ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Dialogue. The Dialogue stands as a tangible expression of the collective commitment to strengthen existing bonds, while building new bridges. It serves as a platform for candid and honest exchange to explore fresh solutions and to address misunderstandings and assumptions before they take root. Crucially, such engagement must be grounded in the realities and capacities we possess, rather than imposed expectations from the outside.

I am pleased that this edition can reflect on this collaborative endeavour. It is a testament to our shared resolve to engage meaningfully with contemporary issues amid rapidly changing global realities. Much like the Dialogue itself, it is a dual commitment to reinforce long-standing partnerships and to offer a space to examine emerging developments and consider how we can draw from our unique tools, perspectives and circumstances.

The *focus* edition further highlights several areas where cooperation can be deepened, including emerging regional threats and inter-regional engagement with partners in the Global South. It serves as a reminder that ASEAN does not operate in isolation, and it invites reflection on whether ASEAN and its dialogue partners possess both the appetite and fortitude to build bridges and act as agents of change. Such considerations necessarily extend to the evolving regional architecture and infrastructure that shape our collective future.

I would like to extend my profound gratitude to the contributors and our partners for their continued support and future opportunities to work together. I also convey my deep appreciation to my colleagues at ISIS Malaysia for their dedication and the high standard of work they consistently uphold. ■



ASEAN's balancing act: navigating the tides of a multipolar world

ASEAN's consensus-based model struggles to compete with fast-moving minilaterals and the strategic diversification of its members, hence demanding institutional adaptation to assert, rather than assume, regional leadership

Dr Shafiah Fifi Muhibat

ASEAN has long been the gravitational centre of Asia-Pacific's diplomatic universe. For decades, it has stood as a successful, unique model of South-South cooperation, proving that ten vastly different nations can forge a common path toward stability and prosperity. However, as the world rapidly reorders into a complex, multipolar structure, the fundamental question is no longer about ASEAN's past achievements but its capacity to maintain its cooperative framework and – critically – its centrality in a crowded geopolitical landscape.

The double-edged sword of the “ASEAN Way”

ASEAN's enduring strength is its convening power. It provides an indispensable forum for dialogue and a robust framework for translating broad international mandates into practical, regional action on shared challenges – from climate change and pandemics to economic instability. This slow, methodical machine has successfully prevented major regional conflict and enabled a period of unprecedented economic growth for its members.

Yet, this very strength is shadowed by significant structural limitations. The guiding principles of the “ASEAN Way” – a rigid emphasis on consensus-based decision-making and non-interference – often act as a decisive brake. This can render the bloc frustratingly slow and, at times, utterly indecisive, particularly on sensitive security or political issues. This structural constraint is further compounded by the institution's resource limitations – a lean secretariat and relatively small budget compared with its ambitions – and the constant need to navigate the divergent strategic alignments of its members, where some lean toward Beijing, others toward Washington.

While the consensus model ensures inclusivity, making every member feel heard, it simultaneously makes projecting a unified voice in inter-regional platforms



The guiding principles of the ‘ASEAN Way’ – a rigid emphasis on consensus-based decision-making and non-interference – often act as a decisive brake.

exceptionally difficult. The challenge is stark: can this patient, consensus-driven model remain sufficient in an era of intensifying global rivalry, or is a degree of institutional adaptation now necessary for ASEAN to maintain its indispensable role?

The rise of minilaterals: complement or competition?

The debate over ASEAN's contemporary relevance is often framed by the emergence of unilateral groups, such as the Quad (the United States, Japan, India and Australia), AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States) and even smaller, targeted mechanisms, e.g., the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation. Do these targeted groups compete directly with ASEAN?

The reality is that they operate in parallel, often highlighting the gaps in ASEAN-led processes rather than directly undermining them. Minilaterals are inherently more flexible and targeted, emerging to address urgent or highly sensitive issues, such as maritime security, critical technologies or rapid infrastructure development. ASEAN, in stark contrast, is broad in scope and deliberately cautious in pace. Minilaterals deliver speed and focus; ASEAN provides inclusivity and legitimacy.

The critical risk is that if ASEAN is consistently perceived as too slow or indecisive in addressing modern security and

economic challenges, external partners may increasingly opt to bypass the established ASEAN-centred mechanisms. This is more than a simple shift in focus; it poses an existential threat to the bloc's centrality by enacting three serious consequences: the erosion of the regional architecture, the marginalisation of finance and standards, and the "bandwagoning" effect.

First, when partners prioritise non-ASEAN forums for high-stakes issues (e.g., critical infrastructure standards and supply chain resilience), they effectively de-legitimise the established regional security and economic institutions. This risks turning the venerable East Asia Summit into a secondary forum, where substantive decisions are merely ratified rather than genuinely debated and forged, diverting the most impactful discussions and resources away from the ASEAN-led track.

Second, major powers and minilaterals possess the financial leverage to rapidly set modern regulatory standards (e.g., 5G security and green economy criteria). If ASEAN does not rapidly establish its own standards for critical and emerging technologies, the region risks becoming a fragmented marketplace. Individual members will be compelled to adopt competing external standards, fracturing

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It must decisively assert itself as the essential hub, where the outcomes of these more focused groups are reconciled, legitimised and integrated for the broader region.

the ideal of a cohesive ASEAN Economic Community and compromising the bloc's ability to shape its own economic rulebook.

Third, the failure of collective action encourages the bandwagoning effect, where individual ASEAN members seek exclusive, short-term bilateral deals or sign defence pacts with major powers because the collective ASEAN framework is seen as unreliable. This further internalises external rivalries within ASEAN, dramatically increasing the difficulty of achieving internal consensus and permanently weakening the bloc's internal solidarity.

BRICS+ engagement: strategic diversification, not decisive abandonment

A crucial test of ASEAN's navigation of multipolarity is the interest shown by some member states in other forums, such as BRICS+. This engagement is often misinterpreted as a decisive turn away from the United States or the West, a misreading that ignores the decades-long principle guiding Southeast Asian foreign policy: strategic diversification.

ASEAN states have always sought to diversify partnerships to avoid overdependence on any single major power. Engagement with BRICS+, especially access to alternative financing via the New Development Bank, fits this established logic perfectly. It is a pragmatic move designed to create more diplomatic, economic and financial options, thereby enhancing a nation's global governance influence.

While this is fundamentally a hedging strategy, we cannot ignore the political context. The turbulence created by a more transactional US approach to alliances and mixed signals on commitment did create palpable unease in the region and may have accelerated the search for alternatives. However, this is not an abandonment of existing partnerships. It is a broadening of bets in a complex, multipolar

landscape, where every major power is seen as a necessary partner, but no single one is accepted as a sole anchor.

Adaptation for grounded centrality

ASEAN is a resilient regional organisation, but its capacity to remain a central player in a multipolar world is precarious. Its future rests heavily on its proven ability to keep all major players engaged and talking without being pulled apart by them.

The challenges it faces – from slow decision-making and the “tyranny of consensus” to the proliferation of minilaterals – are not mere opportunities for growth but existential pressures that demand a more rapid institutional adaptation. By realistically

assessing its structural constraints, embracing the necessity of its members’ strategic diversification and proactively leveraging its Dialogue Partners, ASEAN must work to ensure its centrality is not taken for granted. Instead, it must be actively asserted and earned in a competitive environment.

Specifically on minilaterals, ASEAN must adapt its convening power, not by rejecting these groups, but by encouraging complementarity. It must decisively assert itself as the essential hub, where the outcomes of these more focused groups are reconciled, legitimised and integrated for the broader region. The goal for ASEAN is not to reject the new multipolar world but to become its indispensable, yet fragile, anchor.



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Could ASEAN's limitations become its greatest asset?

In an era where traditional multilateral institutions struggle to make progress during intensifying great power competition, ASEAN's limitations may offer unexpected possibilities for dialogue and security

Emily Mosley

In a recent conference I attended, it was stated: “ASEAN’s future is where it can be most useful.” Where might ASEAN be most useful? The answer requires understanding not just ASEAN’s current capabilities but also its key weaknesses, which must have the capability to evolve.

Paradox of ASEAN’s consensus model

Critics of ASEAN as a body point to its consensus requirement, which allows any single member to pause progress, as well as its deliberative pace of decision-making. In the case of Myanmar, ASEAN’s special envoys, statements and meetings have yet to produce a breakthrough resolution. In the case of Cambodia and Thailand, no resolution was reached without external influence. Yet these limitations must be viewed in context: traditionally relied-upon multilateral institutions (such as the WTO and the UN Security Council) have been in gridlock attempting to adjudicate disputes between major world powers. In this diplomatic climate, where doors for dialogue are increasingly closing, ASEAN’s ability to hold deliberations, where rival parties feel comfortable at the same table, is itself a marker of progress. ASEAN’s framework is worth considering whether its institutional architecture might offer comparative advantages in evolving to possess a monitoring function.

Geography, economics and institutional design

What distinguishes ASEAN from traditional multilateral institutions is threefold: its location, its economic involvement and its consensus requirement.

Geography alone does not substantiate credibility for monitoring functions. However, ASEAN’s very characteristics that are often cited as limitations could provide a level of credibility that other bodies lack. Unlike the UN, which does not share an integrated economy among its members, nor the WTO,

where members compete economically rather than cooperate, ASEAN members share deeply integrated regional supply chains and trade networks. Viet Nam exports to both the United States and China. Singapore connects Western capital with Asian markets. Thailand’s supply chains integrate components across divides. This creates vested interests in maintaining institutional cooperation and in the economic stakes in preventing escalation.

In theory, if ASEAN were to serve in a monitoring capacity, the consensus requirement means attempts to skew monitoring reports toward any single power’s interests would face internal veto. The ideological differences between member states, such as Viet Nam’s socialist orientation, Singapore’s market-driven model, the Philippines’ security partnerships with the United States, and Cambodia’s closer ties with China, all create automatic checks and balances in the monitoring process. If one state’s assessment of maritime activity or trade flows contradicts another’s, reaching consensus requires reconciling competing interpretations. This deliberative process, while slow, could build credibility: reports that survive internal contestation from ideologically diverse states carry more weight than findings from ideologically homogeneous institutions where member positions align predictably.



In this diplomatic climate, where doors for dialogue are increasingly closing, ASEAN’s ability to hold deliberations, where rival parties feel comfortable at the same table, is itself a marker of progress.

It is uncertain whether this pressure would prove sufficient to overcome political pressures toward alignment. However, global institutions designed for monitoring face growing legitimacy deficits in domains where ASEAN's position could provide advantages.

Building on existing capabilities

Consider maritime monitoring: ASEAN member states already track vessel movements through their territorial waters and exclusive economic zones, covering critical chokepoints, such as the Straits of Malacca and areas of the South China Sea. A coordinated ASEAN monitoring mechanism could aggregate this data with identification system tracking, verification of naval buildups, island construction activities or freedom of navigation patterns.

Unlike UN mechanisms, which rely on self-reporting or US surveillance that China contests, ASEAN states are physically present in these waters, conducting routine monitoring for their own purposes. On trade and technology flows, ASEAN customs authorities already process goods moving between major powers. A formalised verification protocol could track dual-use technology transfers, semiconductor supply chains or subsidy-related trade flows where WTO mechanisms have broken down.

It is certainly an ambitious aim, and one that would require substantial institutional development on standardised data collection protocols, secure information-sharing and, perhaps most critically, political agreements on what gets reported and how. The model might draw loose inspiration from the International Atomic Energy Agency's inspection framework, though adapted for fundamentally different regional economic and maritime contexts. Whether member states would accept the sovereignty costs and resource commitments for such system demands remains deeply uncertain, but the technical foundation exists in monitoring

activities already conducted separately by individual states.

Contestation, credibility and comparative advantage

This proposed evolution would undoubtedly face contestation. Major powers may resist regional monitoring of their activities, viewing it as intrusive rather than helpful. Member states themselves may balk at the sovereignty costs and resource commitments required, or their bilateral relationships with major powers may constrain their willingness to report uncomfortable findings. Yet in theory, such a role could serve multiple interests simultaneously. For ASEAN, developing credible monitoring capacity could provide a concrete function that leverages its geographic position and economic integration to provide a useful purpose for neutral institutional relevance amid intensifying great power competition.

For major powers, an impartial regional verification mechanism, however imperfect, might prove preferable to the current system, where mutual suspicion fills monitoring



This deliberative process, while slow, could build credibility: reports that survive internal contestation from ideologically diverse states carry more weight than findings from ideologically homogenous institutions where member positions align predictably.

gaps and competing claims cannot be independently assessed. When neither the United States nor China trusts UN or WTO findings, and when unilateral intelligence claims are automatically contested, a neutral third party with material stakes in accuracy and no capacity to enforce outcomes could theoretically reduce information asymmetries that drive escalation.

While the question of whether ASEAN could evolve to have a central monitoring function is unclear, the central question can

be answered. Where can ASEAN be most useful? It is in finding ways to transform what critics view as institutional limitations into functional advantages. No other regional body occupies a comparable geographic space where great power competition concentrates, and no other international institution moves unanimously despite members' ideological differences. These characteristics, often cited as constraints, may constitute ASEAN's most distinctive assets in an international order desperate for dialogue and consensus.



Emily Mosley
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Australia in Southeast Asia during Trump's second term

Stepping out from America's shadow also means standing
alone in the heat

Max Broad



On Napier Road in Singapore, the Australian High Commission and the US Embassy are so close that they share a driveway. The symbolism, though inadvertent, is conspicuous – Canberra and Washington working side-by-side in Southeast Asia.

But Australian diplomats in the region never want to seem too close to the Americans. In 1999, The Bulletin magazine reported that Prime Minister John Howard had endorsed an idea of Australia as the United States’ “deputy sheriff” in Asia. Five days passed, with much bristling from Southeast Asian leaders (“as I remember from the movies... it’s the deputy sheriff who gets killed first,” one Indonesian think tank director [warned](#)), before Howard [disavowed](#) The Bulletin’s report. At the recent ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Dialogue in Malaysia, it was clear that the episode still hasn’t been forgotten.

With President Trump back in office, though, Australia’s foreign policies have diverged from the United States’ on several fronts.

Going solo

On defence, Canberra has resisted Washington’s call for allies to ramp up military expenditure to 3.5% of GDP. “We determine our defence policy here,” Prime Minister Anthony Albanese [has said](#), “Australia determines our own position as a sovereign nation.”



Even if breaking from Washington on certain issues may win Canberra some kudos in Southeast Asia, the Trump administration’s policy shifts will do more harm than good.

On trade, Australia has opposed President Trump’s tariffs and promised to remain a reliable partner for Southeast Asian states. “Australia opened our economy to the region and the world long ago,” [said](#) Foreign Minister Penny Wong in July 2025, “I can assure you today that this will not change.”

On foreign aid, while the Trump administration has shuttered the United States Agency for International Development, Australia has [maintained](#) aid spending, with a focus on the Indo-Pacific.

On the Middle East, Australia formally [recognised](#) a Palestinian state at the UN General Assembly in September, aligning with nine of the eleven ASEAN states, despite vocal complaints from Trump administration officials.

And on environmental policy, while President Trump has [described](#) climate change as “the greatest con job ever perpetrated on the world”, Australia will [lead negotiations](#) at next year’s COP climate conference.

Deputy sheriff no longer!

Opportunities and risks

On one level, it is good for Australia to chart an independent course in Southeast Asia. Every sovereign nation wants to define its own strategic personality. None wants to be taken for granted or for its policy positions to be assumed by others. Australia’s relationships in the region function best when Canberra is perceived to be acting authentically and of its own volition.

But this is not to say that President Trump’s return is good news overall. Many of his policies still prejudice Australia’s regional interests.

For example, though Australia may gain some prestige by filling gaps left by US trade and aid reductions, it is not in Canberra’s interest for Washington to downgrade its

presence in Asia. Even if officials spurn the “deputy sheriff” label, Australia’s objectives in Southeast Asia – trade liberalisation, international development, security cooperation and more – have regularly overlapped with the United States’ in the past. Australia does not win when it loses an important diplomatic partner.

Relatedly, Australia prefers a region in which states have diverse partnerships with a range of powers. [Lowy Institute research](#) shows that China has the greatest influence in Southeast Asia, though the United States is a close second. The region’s other external partners – Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, the United Kingdom and others – lag far behind. Were the United States’ presence in Southeast Asia to disappear, the region’s centre of gravity would shift towards China. This would not be in Australia’s interest.

An additional risk is that the imperious Trump administration may push Australia in directions it does not want to go. For example, in July 2025, the *Financial Times* [reported](#) that Elbridge Colby, US Under Secretary of Defence for Policy, had pushed Australian officials to make clear what role they would play in the event of a war over Taiwan. Canberra resisted, and wisely so. Even the United States maintains a policy of strategic ambiguity over Taiwan. Neither Australia nor its partners in Southeast Asia want tensions in the region to needlessly escalate.

Balancing interests

So, Australia finds itself in bittersweet circumstances. It has stepped out from the United States’ shadow but must weather the heat on its own. To make the best of the situation, officials in Canberra should keep two objectives in mind.

First, Australia should remain ambitious in its engagements with Southeast Asian states, even without the United States by its side. In the past, Australian diplomats have shown they are up to this challenge, including



Australia’s relationships in the region functions best when Canberra is perceived to be acting authentically and of its own volition.

when President Trump quit the Trans-Pacific Partnership trading agreement in his first term, and Australia helped transform it into the CPTPP. Australia’s recent treaties with Indonesia and Papua New Guinea also demonstrate an entrepreneurial ambition.

Second, Australia should nudge the United States in positive directions, where it can. Australia’s status as a US ally, and its countless daily working-level interactions with Washington, mean it has a level of purchase with US policymakers – even during a Trump term. Just as Prime Minister Albanese recently solicited a vote of confidence from President Trump in the AUKUS arrangement, Australia should shore up the United States’ investment in other regional initiatives, including in ASEAN forums and the Quad.

Even if breaking from Washington on certain issues may win Canberra some kudos in Southeast Asia, the Trump administration’s policy shifts will do more harm than good. Australia must respond to these changes. As the saying goes, you can’t choose your neighbours.



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Multilateralism and minilateralism: how Australia strengthens defence partnerships with Southeast Asia

Australia steps up its engagement through ASEAN frameworks and defence partnerships to build regional trust, boost maritime security and strengthen collective resilience in the Indo-Pacific

Dr Abdul Rahman Yaacob



In line with strategic priorities outlined in the 2023 [Defence Strategic Review](#) and the 2024 [National Defence Strategy](#), Australia has significantly deepened its defence engagement with Southeast Asian states. These documents underscore Southeast Asia’s centrality to Australia’s security, and Canberra has backed this with tangible investment and sustained defence-related activities with ASEAN members at multilateral and unilateral groupings.

Australia’s strategic reorientation toward Southeast Asia

A recent Lowy Institute research titled [Southeast Asia’s Evolving Defence Partnerships](#) confirms that Australia remains one of the most active external defence partners in Southeast Asia, reflecting not just rhetoric but a clear shift in policy and resource allocation.

This strategic push reflects more than just geography. It acknowledges that stability in Southeast Asia is integral to Australia’s national defence posture in an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific. Through expanded military exercises, increased defence

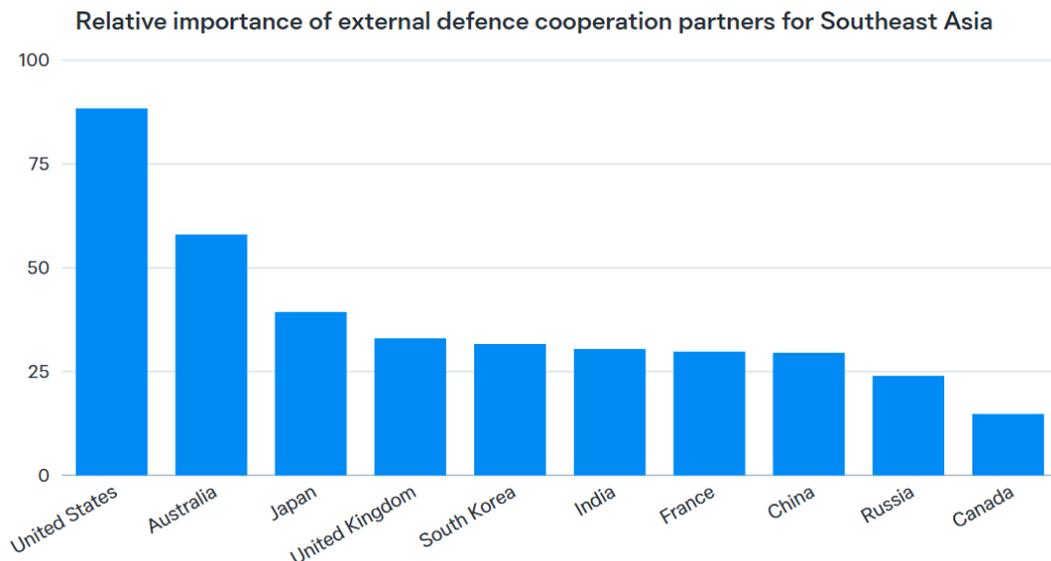
dialogues and establishing cooperation through defence agreements, Australia has moved to strengthen strategic trust with its neighbours.

Importantly, defence partnerships with Southeast Asian states are not framed as alliances against any one power but as mutual efforts to support sovereignty, maritime security and regional resilience. Australia’s sustained, multilateral engagement will be critical in bolstering collective deterrence and ensuring Southeast Asia remains a stable, independent and prosperous region.

Overall, Australia has expanded its presence and partnerships with Southeast Asia through multilateral ASEAN-led frameworks and smaller, flexible unilateral groupings.

Multilateral engagements

Multilaterally, Canberra remains a strong supporter of ASEAN’s central role in regional security. Australia became ASEAN’s first Dialogue Partner in 1974. In 2021, ASEAN and Australia signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, cementing further closer relations.



Source: Yaacob, R., Patton, S., and Sato, J. (2025). [Southeast Asia’s evolving defence partnerships](#). Lowy Institute.

Australia actively participates in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), the region's premier defence cooperation platform. Through ADMM-Plus, Australia engages in capacity-building and defence dialogues with ASEAN members. It is now working with Cambodia as the co-chair of the ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Group on [Cyber Security](#).

Furthermore, Australia is actively strengthening ASEAN members' human resource capacity through the [ASEAN-Australia Postgraduate Scholarship Program](#). Here, the program participants undertake courses that focus on issues of leadership in defence and ASEAN contexts. Beyond academic advancement, the program facilitates direct engagement between ASEAN officers and the Australian Defence Force, fostering long-term professional networks and deepening military-to-military ties between Australia and ASEAN states.

Cooperation in the maritime domain has been a key defence engagement between Australia and ASEAN. Southeast Asia is vital to Australia's defence and security, as it serves as both a strategic buffer and a gateway to the broader Indo-Pacific.

The region sits astride key maritime trade routes, including the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, through which much of Australia's trade and energy imports flow. Most of Australia's energy supplies – diesel, petrol and jet fuel – are [imported](#) from Singapore and South Korea. Over [99%](#) of Australia's international trade is carried by sea. Therefore, the stability of Southeast Asia's maritime domain directly impacts Australia's national interests.

Similarly, maritime security is important for Southeast Asian states that rely on the maritime domain for their economic survival. About one-third of crude oil is transported through the [Straits of Malacca and Singapore](#), and one-third of global trade traverses the South China Sea.

To improve Southeast Asia's maritime security, Australia announced in 2024 that it is investing US\$40 million over a four-year period to enhance the [Australia-ASEAN partnership](#) in the maritime domain. The initiatives under this funding include activities relating to law enforcement and environmental protection.

Minilateral approach

In addition, Canberra embraces the minilateral format in pursuit of closer defence engagements with Southeast Asia to complement broader multilateral efforts. These targeted groupings allow for more agile, operationally focused cooperation on shared concerns, such as maritime domain awareness, counterterrorism and grey zone threats.

This minilateral format includes the [Five Power Defence Arrangements \(FPDA\)](#). The FPDA is a key minilateral security framework involving Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom. It commits members to consult one another in the event of an armed attack on Malaysia or Singapore. Beyond its consultative role, the FPDA facilitates regular joint military exercises, which enhance the operational capabilities of Malaysian and Singaporean forces through engagements with more

**“
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Australia’s dual-track approach of balancing multilateralism and unilateralism demonstrates its commitment to an inclusive, rules-based order, while pragmatically addressing Southeast Asia’s shifting security dynamics.

experienced Western partners. The [joint military exercises](#) also foster interoperability and mutual trust and contribute to broader regional stability and security in Southeast Asia.

The Philippines is another key partner in Australia’s unilateral defence engagement in Southeast Asia. In recent years, Australia, alongside the United States and Japan, has intensified defence cooperation with the Philippines. Notably, in 2026, Australia and Japan will join [Exercise Salaknib](#) for the first time, an exercise traditionally conducted bilaterally between the United States and the Philippines. This marks a significant step in expanding military collaboration with a Southeast Asian state and reflects Australia’s growing strategic commitment to regional security through unilateral defence partnerships.

Australia’s dual-track approach of balancing multilateralism and unilateralism demonstrates its commitment to an inclusive, rules-based order, while pragmatically addressing Southeast Asia’s shifting

security dynamics. As strategic competition intensifies, Australia’s strategic use of both frameworks is crucial for deepening trust, strengthening regional resilience and maintaining the Indo-Pacific’s strategic equilibrium. In this context, Australia’s engagement with ASEAN remains central not only for promoting a stable and cohesive regional order but also enhancing military cooperation and fostering enduring trust with its neighbours.



Dr Abdul Rahman Yaacob
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Celebrating and strengthening ASEAN-New Zealand Dialogue Partnership

**Marking five decades of collaboration, New Zealand and ASEAN renew their
commitment to security, prosperity, people-focused cooperation and a sustainable,
resilient future**

HE Joanna Anderson

Fifty years of partnership is a significant milestone for New Zealand and ASEAN's dialogue relationship. New Zealand is ASEAN's second-oldest dialogue partner, and New Zealand has been working together with ASEAN on issues of mutual importance since 1975.



A look back

Since the formation of ASEAN in 1967, during another turbulent global and regional period, ASEAN has grown from five to eleven member states, with Timor-Leste, its newest member, acceding in 2025. Over the past decades, ASEAN's focus has expanded from economic cooperation and regional security to include the promotion of regional peace and socio-cultural development.

New Zealand has valued its partnership with ASEAN from the very beginning, supporting ASEAN-led initiatives and building ties and understanding through people-to-people connections and practical development cooperation. Since the first East Asia Summit in 2005, New Zealand has actively engaged in this premier leaders-led forum, supporting ASEAN Centrality and working collaboratively on key regional political, security and economic issues.



As a forward-looking partner, New Zealand recognises that the partnership must be agile and respond to new and emerging needs in the region: New Zealand knows that being strategic goes hand in hand with tangible outcomes.

50 years of partnership

The 50th anniversary logo reflects this warm, long-standing relationship through rich symbolism: the *purapura whetū* (seeds of the stars) honours the shared history; the layered *koru* symbolises strength and renewal; the branching *koru* reflects growing connections in people-to-people and business links; the blue circle represents oceanic ties and a shared vision for an inclusive, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific; and the ASEAN emblem at the centre reaffirms New Zealand's support for ASEAN Centrality.

As a forward-looking partner, New Zealand recognises that the partnership must be agile and respond to new and emerging needs in the region; New Zealand knows that being strategic goes hand in hand with tangible outcomes. New Zealand looks forward to enhancing the practical cooperation under the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

The partnership encompasses a wide range of sectors and activities, distributed across four pillars: peace, prosperity, people and planet.

Partnership for peace

Peace in the region requires a robust regional security architecture and an open dialogue. New Zealand, like ASEAN, remains committed to the rules-based order and promoting regional security, and New Zealand sees ASEAN Centrality as key to achieving this. New Zealand is actively engaged in ASEAN-led regional security architecture, including the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus, the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime Consultation, and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum.

New Zealand supports the Women, Peace and Security agenda in the region through the AMPLIFY initiative with the Asia Foundation. This five-year programme is designed to address the disproportionate impact of armed conflict and human security threats on women in Southeast Asia.

Partnership for prosperity

In a time of global economic uncertainty, it is more important than ever for New Zealand and ASEAN to be able to respond to emerging challenges; New Zealand must be able to identify and seize opportunities to promote stability, growth and shared prosperity across the region.

The economic relationship is built on strong foundations. The recent upgrade to the ASEAN–Australia–New Zealand Free Trade Area, which entered into force in April, is a major achievement that reflects the shared commitment to open, rules-based trade. As a member of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, New Zealand is also committed to working with ASEAN to ensure that the world’s largest plurilateral trade agreement lives up to its promise.

Beyond these, New Zealand looks forward to deepening digital economy cooperation through the ASEAN Digital Economic Framework Agreement.

Partnership for people

People-to-people cooperation has been a cornerstone of New Zealand’s partnership with ASEAN for over five decades.

The Manaaki New Zealand Scholarships have enabled thousands of ASEAN citizens access to world-class education, equipping them with the tools to lead, innovate and contribute to regional development. These scholarships are underpinned by the principles of inclusive and equitable quality education. These and other initiatives, such as the Young ASEAN Diplomats and Young ASEAN Trade and

Economic Officials study tours, the Young Business Leaders Initiative, and the English Language Training for Officials, reflect the value New Zealand places on close cultural ties, on strengthening people-to-people and government-to-government links across the region and on building a strong platform for the next stage in the relationship together.

Partnership for planet

How we respond to environmental and climate change pressures is the defining global challenge of our time, one where New Zealand sees both responsibility and opportunity to work with the region on these issues.

New Zealand values its relationships with ASEAN centres of excellence, particularly in areas where New Zealand has specific experience and expertise, including the ASEAN Centre for Climate Change, the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity and the ASEAN Centre for Energy.

Like many ASEAN member states, New Zealand is exposed to a wide range of natural hazards. Since 2017, New Zealand has partnered with the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management, with a focus on



New Zealand, like ASEAN, remains committed to the rules-based order and promoting regional security, and New Zealand sees ASEAN Centrality as key to achieving this.

strengthening the centre's organisational capacity, and New Zealand will continue to actively advance the next phase of support to further enhance regional disaster preparedness and response. As the current co-chair with Singapore of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus Experts' Working Group on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief, New Zealand is deepening its engagement on disaster management and climate change, a shared priority with ASEAN.

Cross-pillar cooperation

One of the defining strengths of the ASEAN-New Zealand relationship is the ability to work across sectors and national boundaries. Cross-sectoral collaboration remains a defining feature of how ASEAN and New Zealand work together. In today's challenging global environment, it is especially important that ASEAN and New Zealand continue to collaborate in this way rather than in silos.

Looking forward

The relationship with ASEAN remains a key priority for New Zealand. New Zealand fully supports ASEAN's bold and forward-looking

vision in ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future. New Zealand sees this as not just ASEAN's roadmap but a shared call to action.

New Zealand will continue to champion open dialogue, trust-building and preventive diplomacy through ASEAN-led mechanisms. New Zealand also brings to the table its strengths in trade, innovation and digital transformation. New Zealand will invest in education and scholarships and champion climate adaptation and green growth.

The ASEAN-New Zealand dialogue partnership going forward is made stronger by the past 50 years and how these have helped shape where we are now. There is a Māori saying that captures this: "*Titiro whakamuri, kōkiri whakamua*", which means "Reflecting on our past, so that we can step into our future".

The partnership is guided by the principle that when ASEAN thrives, the region thrives. The establishment of the ASEAN-New Zealand Comprehensive Strategic Partnership marks a new chapter. This will not only reflect ASEAN and New Zealand's shared ambition but also the intent to deliver real, tangible outcomes for the people.



HE Joanna Anderson
Ambassador of New Zealand to ASEAN

People-to-people connections in ASEAN-NZ relations

For 50 years, informal exchanges and cooperation have strengthened ASEAN–New Zealand’s strategic partnership, advancing shared regional goals

Hon Dame Fran Wilde



This year marks the 17th ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand (AANZ) Dialogue, and the latest in what has been a long tradition of Track 2 think tank exchange between ISIS Malaysia, Asialink and the Asia New Zealand Foundation. We are also commemorating 50 years of ASEAN-New Zealand Dialogue Partnership – an opportunity for New Zealanders to reflect on what we have achieved together over the last five decades of engagement.

When New Zealand first became a dialogue partner to ASEAN in 1975, its interests were primarily security-related. There was also a growing awareness that Southeast Asia could become increasingly economically important for New Zealand, with the United Kingdom's entry into the European Economic Community two years earlier. As ASEAN-New Zealand's security and economic links evolved, so too did our people-to-people connections. While governments negotiated trade agreements and security frameworks, the steady flow of students, scholars, officials, entrepreneurs, artists and civil society leaders created some of the most enduring connections of all. Today, they form the human architecture that sustains diplomacy, deepens understanding and anchors cooperation between New Zealand and ASEAN across culture, geography and generations.

People flow: from legacy to innovation

Around three and a half thousand students came to New Zealand from Southeast and South Asia on Colombo Plan scholarships from 1957 to the 1970s. These students studied subjects related to the development needs of their countries. Many went on to hold senior positions in government and business after returning home. This helped create not only a deep reservoir of goodwill towards New Zealand across ASEAN but also an enduring admiration from Kiwis towards the region.

Today, we have regular flows of ASEAN students through programmes into New Zealand, such as the Manaaki New Zealand Scholarships, the English Language Training for Officials and other academic exchanges. The NZ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade runs annual ASEAN Young Diplomats and Trade Officials study tours. These programmes introduce visitors to different parts of New Zealand's economy and help connect our experts with the region. The Asia New Zealand Foundation helps New Zealanders undertake fieldwork for postgraduate research, internships for career development and residencies for artists, as well as media, sports and cultural exchanges throughout Asia. It is through these kinds of experiential projects that we build up shared expertise and knowledge.

ASEAN has a relatively young, skilled and ambitious population keen to map out their future pathways in enterprise. The Asia New Zealand Foundation's ASEAN Young Business Leaders Initiative (YBLI) promotes and cultivates reciprocal exchange between emerging entrepreneurs in the most exciting and cutting-edge sectors – digital, agri-tech, food and beverage, fashion and others, even pet care. The YBLI programme



Today they form the human architecture that sustains diplomacy, deepens understanding and anchors cooperation between New Zealand and ASEAN across culture, geography and generations.

not only facilitates business connections and deals but, perhaps most importantly, opens participants' eyes to a new world of possibilities and potential – whether in New Zealand, in Southeast Asia or in markets beyond.

Value of Track 2 dialogue and exchange

Much of our people-to-people exchange occurs in the Track 2 space – meetings of experts through unofficial channels, forums and platforms that can help foster mutual understanding, trust and confidence-building. By encouraging a more open, candid and constructive dialogue, Track 2 discussions help participants traverse a broad range of national and regional interests and play a vital role in supporting official government-to-government (Track 1) diplomacy.

Over the last three decades, the Asia New Zealand Foundation has engaged with top think tanks across Southeast Asia, including the ASEAN-ISIS Network, for high-quality exchanges. Our longest-running Track 2 activity is the AANZ, held each year in Kuala Lumpur. This year, we have also held a special ASEAN-NZ Dialogue at the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta to celebrate our 50th anniversary of dialogue relations and to acknowledge the friendships built over more than five decades, as well as a fourth Mekong Dialogue in Vientiane to discuss environmental and geo-political impacts along the Mekong River with



We are able to do these activities – often touching on sensitive issues – because of the mature and trusted relationships that we have built over years of engagement.

our CLMTV partners and our 16th bilateral exchange with the Diplomatic Academy of Viet Nam in Hanoi, where we tackle anything from tensions in the South China Sea to supply chain resilience. We are able to do these activities – often touching on sensitive issues – because of the mature and trusted relationships that we have built over years of engagement.

Growing the pipeline for intergenerational impact

Another aspect of Track 2 work is growing a sustainable pipeline of emerging voices and up-and-coming talent. At regional gatherings, such as the AANZ, along with ISIS Malaysia's annual Asia Pacific Roundtable, the Asia New Zealand Foundation has taken the opportunity to bring together our next generation of thought leaders, policy analysts, diplomats and regional commentators for deep-dive workshops and roundtables – serving to lift understanding of common issues of interest, broaden connections and build confidence for Track 2 engagement and beyond.

These examples show the value of long-term investments in capacity building and in our communities – investments that are not transactional but support mutual objectives and work to build better societies in a partnership for peace, prosperity and the planet. By targeting young people, these connections are particularly enduring and often career-changing – creating a true intergenerational impact in shaping bilateral and regional diplomacy. This is an area where New Zealand and ASEAN can co-invest to build the next generation of leaders.

Stronger NZ ties bolster future ASEAN cooperation

The [2025 New Zealanders' Perceptions of Asia and Asian Peoples \(Perceptions of Asia 2025\)](#) survey shows increasing warmth towards Southeast Asia among New Zealanders.

The role of Track 2 diplomacy, together with broader people-to-people engagement, helps translate this sentiment into deeper, institutionalised connections. Together, we

look forward to fostering deeper connections with ASEAN and supporting shared goals for a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and a new Plan of Action for 2026–2030.



Hon Dame Fran Wilde
Chair
Asia New Zealand Foundation



Shared challenges and common interests: deepening PIF-ASEAN cooperation

A deeper ASEAN-PIF cooperation offers a practical way to safeguard agency and advance shared priorities for focused collaboration on climate resilience, disaster response and the blue economy

Caleb Hoyle

The Pacific and Southeast Asian regions face a confluence of challenges that highlight the need for enhanced inter-regional cooperation. These include pressures of strategic competition, weakening multilateralism, and the ill effects of climate change. A greater collaboration between the regions' primary inter-governmental organisations, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and ASEAN, can provide benefits to both regions, reinforcing each grouping's centrality and boosting regional agency.

Growing inter-regional ties

The PIF has a membership of 18 diverse countries and territories from across the Pacific and 21 external dialogue partners, five of which – Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore – are in Southeast Asia. It serves as a hub for regional action on critical issues and advancing joint efforts toward mutual goals. The PIF's approach is grounded in the "Pacific Way", emphasising mutual respect, dialogue and consensus-based decision-making, which in many respects is complementary to the "ASEAN Way". As set out in its 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, PIF seeks to shape its future by engaging with partners "from a position of strength, unity and solidarity on matters of collective interest."



The PIF's approach is grounded in the 'Pacific Way', emphasising mutual respect, dialogue and consensus-based decision-making, which in many respects is complementary to the 'ASEAN Way'.

In 2023, the PIF signed a broad, non-binding memorandum of understanding (MoU) with ASEAN on the sidelines of the 43rd ASEAN Summit in Jakarta. This was followed, in 2024, by the ASEAN-Indian Ocean Rim Association and the ASEAN-PIF Dialogue, part of which focused on furthering ASEAN-PIF cooperation. As recorded in the joint communiqué of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in July 2025, the ASEAN Secretariat has been tasked to work with its PIF counterpart to develop a cooperation plan in accordance with the MoU. Taken together, these developments signal encouraging intent for greater inter-regional collaboration.

Regional agency under pressure

Southeast Asia and the Pacific have become front lines of strategic competition. In the Pacific, China has grown more confident and capable of projecting power and influence, prompting renewed engagement in the region by traditional partners, such as Australia, New Zealand and the United States. This has resulted in the region experiencing an expansion of diplomatic engagement, security arrangements and flows of aid and development contributions – often on a bilateral level. For many Pacific Island countries and territories, this has often failed to seriously consider their interests and agency, challenged the PIF's centrality and tested the region's "friends to all" approach to foreign policy.

Southeast Asian states have long had to navigate great powers' interests. In recent years, contending with rising United States-China competition, many governments have sought to avoid binary choices between great powers, while broadening ties with partners, including Japan, Australia, India and South Korea. An increasing number of bilateral, minilateral and multilateral arrangements now sit alongside, and sometimes test, ASEAN's centrality. Internal tensions over issues, such as territorial claims and behaviour in

the South China Sea, further complicate ASEAN's position. In addition, growing pressure on the multilateral trading system looms over a region deeply embedded in global supply chains.

Geopolitical and geoeconomic trends of competition and fragmentation sit uncomfortably with the PIF's and ASEAN's ways and interests. By diversifying their engagement with each other, the PIF and ASEAN can increase their agency and resilience through a widened network of partners.

Avenues for greater cooperation

Southeast Asia and the Pacific would benefit from greater cooperation in managing the impacts of climate change and natural disasters – shared areas of vulnerability emphasised in both ASEAN's Community Vision 2045 and the PIF's 2050 Strategy. The Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific, endorsed by PIF leaders in 2016, provides a strong model for an integrated response to the effects of climate and disaster risks, a model which can benefit ASEAN. The latter's expertise in member state coordination on disaster management and technical expertise would be valuable to the PIF. As developing regions with climate and disaster vulnerabilities, the two regions could coordinate to better amplify each other's voices in international forums where interests intersect.

Southeast Asia and the Pacific have valuable maritime resources. The PIF's 2050 Strategy and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific highlight the importance of an inclusive, sustainable blue economy. Building on the ASEAN-PIF MoU, which lists the blue economy among cooperation areas, both sides can progress practical, low-cost pilots that connect sustainability with livelihoods. The ASEAN-Australia Indo-Pacific Workshop on the Use of Technology for Sustainable Aquaculture, held in Bali in 2024 and attended by representatives from

PIF members, shows an avenue of future cooperation on the sustainable use of their rich marine resources. The next steps could include extending aquaculture cooperation and greater coordination on combating illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing practices, while improving trade and connectivity for blue economy goods and services.

There are constraints to ASEAN and the PIF progressing tangible cooperation. This includes vast differences in scale and increasingly crowded landscapes of potential partners competing for ASEAN and the PIF's attention. The very limited resources of the PIF Secretariat may also slow or limit progress.

Despite this, the MoU, the shared challenges and the common need to maintain agency amid a turbulent strategic environment provide impetus for ASEAN and the PIF to build a stronger partnership. If translated into practical action, such cooperation could strengthen both regions' capacity to shape their own futures.



Caleb Hoyle

Adviser (Research and Engagement)
Asia-New Zealand Foundation

Beyond hard power: cultivating trust and solidarity through cultural diplomacy in ASEAN–Australia–New Zealand partnership

From education to Indigenous initiatives, AANZ cultural diplomacy shapes goodwill, resilience and shared regional identity

Dr Wannapa Leerasiri



Cultural diplomacy, often categorised as a “soft” or benign aspect of international relations, has actually become a strategic necessity for building trust and strong partnerships in a global environment that is increasingly volatile, fragile and uncertain. Culture plays a significant role in today’s world because it provides a way for people and societies to connect beyond politics and economics. Unlike military or economic power, culture influences through attraction and shared values. Food, art, language and traditions can create understanding between societies that might otherwise be divided by political differences. This shows that culture is not something extra or secondary; instead, it is an important way of communication that can continue even when political relations are tense.

Strategic connectivity

For this reason, culture can play a key role in ASEAN–Australia–New Zealand (AANZ) cooperation, alongside traditional diplomacy. Within the AANZ framework, cultural diplomacy is conceptualised as a strategic initiative aimed at sharing ideas, artistic expressions and informational content to foster mutual understanding. Although traditional security and economic concerns constitute the foundational structure of state relations, culture endows the essential fabric of empathy and interconnectedness. Governments and non-state actors promote cultural exchange to shape positive perceptions and strengthen long-term partnerships. In a time of global uncertainty, cultural diplomacy can help reduce tensions and open channels of dialogue when formal diplomacy is difficult.

Cultural diplomacy is by no means a one-way road. Across the AANZ region, it plays a strategic role in shaping positive images, nurturing goodwill and building solidarity. By sharing culture through food, arts, education and festivals, nations project values of openness and creativity that enhance their reputation and create



For ASEAN, cultural initiatives serve as a platform for reinforcing collective identity, embodying the vision of “unity in diversity” and strengthening solidarity among its member.

emotional connections beyond politics. For ASEAN, cultural initiatives serve as a platform for reinforcing collective identity, embodying the vision of “unity in diversity” and strengthening solidarity among its members. Australia highlights its First Nations heritage in international forums to project inclusiveness and authenticity, while New Zealand grounds its diplomacy in the Māori principle of *manaakitanga* – hospitality and care – to position itself as a genuine partner. These examples show that cultural diplomacy goes beyond symbolic gestures: it builds solidarity, supports collective identity and contributes to regional and global cooperation.

Soft power in practice

Thailand offers a compelling illustration of the link between cultural assets and national strategy through its soft power policy, which centres on the 5Fs: food, film, fashion, fighting (Muay Thai) and festival. These cultural assets are both symbols of national identity and major sources of revenue. By promoting the 5Fs, Thailand not only boosts its economy but also cultivates goodwill and friendship, making soft power an essential pillar of national development. Shared abroad, these cultural goods communicate narratives of creativity, hospitality and shared values that help foster trust and strengthen Thailand’s reputation even when

political relations are strained. In this way, the 5Fs move beyond economic benefit: they function as instruments of connection, dialogue and trust-building that lay the foundation for long-term partnerships.

There is a significant opportunity for ASEAN, Australia and New Zealand to use education as a cultural bridge. The impact of this engagement is already visible and carries lasting implications. Education diplomacy is especially important, as Australia and New Zealand are the top study destinations for Southeast Asian students. Scholarship initiatives, such as the Australia Awards and the Manaaki New Zealand Scholarships, have supported thousands of students, fostering long-term goodwill and skills transfer. I suggest that we build on existing programs, particularly the ASEAN University Network, by expanding it to include more partner universities in Australia and New Zealand. This would create greater opportunities for ASEAN students to gain valuable short-term study experiences. Such exchanges are not temporary; they can establish enduring alumni networks, whose members return to their home countries as leaders, policymakers and intermediaries. These networks provide a strong foundation of trust and solidarity, capable of transcending short-term political disagreements and deepening regional cooperation.

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Australia and New Zealand, both leading in promoting Indigenous rights, offer valuable experiences from which ASEAN countries – rich in their own Indigenous heritage – can learn.

Another very promising avenue for cooperation lies in the engagement of Indigenous peoples. Australia and New Zealand, both leading in promoting Indigenous rights, offer valuable experiences from which ASEAN countries – rich in their own Indigenous heritage – can learn. Australia’s recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, together with New Zealand’s incorporation of the Māori identity, resonates strongly with the cultural diversity of ASEAN. Within ASEAN, several member states are also working to safeguard their ethnic communities, such as Thailand, which recently passed the Bill on the Protection and Promotion of the Way of Life of Ethnic Groups. Building on such efforts, collaborative recognition and exchange programs between Indigenous groups in AANZ and ethnic communities in ASEAN could be invaluable. These initiatives would encourage the sharing of knowledge – from ecological practices to artistic expression – while promoting inclusivity and reinforcing ASEAN’s foundational principle of “unity in diversity”.

Cultural bridges

Looking ahead, the key to strengthening AANZ cultural diplomacy lies in enhancing existing cooperative mechanisms rather than constantly creating new ones. Within ASEAN, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025 can be more fully utilised to fund and institutionalise cultural projects. Partnerships with Australia and New Zealand should also be integrated into these frameworks. For example, the Mekong-Australia Partnership, currently focused on various issues, such as water security and capacity building, could be expanded to include a cultural dimension. This would allow for joint Indigenous-led initiatives that share traditional knowledge on climate resilience across the Mekong region, Australia and New Zealand, adding ethical and cultural depth to developmental goals. Additional opportunities include establishing trilateral AANZ arts festivals and using

digital platforms for collective storytelling. Thailand, with its growing creative economy and initiatives, such as Pride diplomacy, is well-positioned to serve as a cultural bridge in these dialogues. Ultimately, investing

in cultural diplomacy is an investment in empathy – ensuring that AANZ relations are built on mutual understanding and solidarity resilient enough to withstand the challenges of the Indo-Pacific era.



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Scam industry is thriving, we must fight back

Escalating in scale and complexity, cross-border scam syndicates are draining billions from Malaysia despite enforcement at home and abroad

Aizat Shamsuddin



As of August 2025, the Royal Malaysia Police's Commercial Crime Investigation Department recorded RM1.5 billion in scam-related losses – almost matching the total [reported](#) loss of RM1.57 billion for the entire year of 2024.

Yet, the true economic impact is likely far greater. The State of Scam Report 2024 by the Global Anti-Scam Alliance [estimated](#) that scams may have cost Malaysia up to RM54.02 billion, or roughly 3% of the national GDP. This figure is more than 30 times higher than official police statistics, reflecting unreported cases and wider economic damage.

Despite intensified enforcement, the scam economy continues inside and outside Malaysia, and Malaysia's financial losses keep mounting.

Trends within Malaysia

Scam syndicates in Malaysia are growing more sophisticated and transnational, often led by foreign kingpins and backed by multinational criminal networks. Despite intensified [crackdowns](#) – including nearly 10,000 operations and 11,864 arrests linked to 31,949 fraud cases as of August 2025 – Malaysia remains a target for these crimes. The methods include:

- Using local fixers to register front companies, manage PR and liaise with corrupt officials.
- Building advanced infrastructure using virtual private networks, burner devices, forged documents and AI-generated identities.
- Hiding behind legitimate business fronts, especially fintech companies.
- Abusing visas and permits to enter and operate in the country.
- Operating from commercial offices and luxury residences to blend in and avoid detection.

In 2020, the “Macau Scam” networks were exposed. One involved Addy Kana and Alvin Goh, who allegedly worked under the Chinese fugitive Chen De Wei, defrauding Malaysians and foreigners of millions, while flaunting their wealth online. Another involved the



ASEAN governments have mainly relied on individual or bilateral operations to shut down select facilities or rescue their citizens, but these efforts do little to address deeper governance failures that allow these crime zones to thrive.

gang leader Nicky Liow, who leveraged his status to build “friendly ties” with authorities and political elites. He was linked to Wan Kuok Koi, or “Broken Tooth”, a fugitive wanted by the United States, Australia and Malaysia. Wan is believed to run the scam centre KK Park in Myanmar's Saixigang Zone, a hub for forced labour scams and human trafficking.

In August 2025, Malaysian police [arrested](#) 404 people – 308 Malaysians and 96 foreigners – in a major raid on a scam and online gambling syndicate spanning five floors in Kuala Lumpur's Bangsar South. The group had posed as a fintech firm [linked](#) to the Singapore-based Doo Group, and police also [uncovered](#) this case's link to another case in Cheras, also in Kuala Lumpur. The case sparked public outrage: how did such a large operation run for nearly a decade despite repeated JobStreet complaints and warnings?

Trends outside Malaysia impacting Malaysians

Scam networks have rapidly expanded across Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, operating with impunity in special economic zones and militia-controlled areas. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the US Institute of Peace have reported that

these syndicates exploit weak governance, corruption, conflict and political fragility to run large-scale criminal operations that scam, traffic and coerce victims across the region.

ASEAN governments have mainly relied on individual or bilateral operations to shut down select facilities or rescue their citizens, but these efforts do little to address the deeper governance failures that allow these crime zones to thrive.

As of March 2025, Malaysia [recorded](#) 994 citizens trafficked or trapped by overseas scam syndicates in Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. A total of 750 have been repatriated, while 8 await return and 236 remain missing, with most victims from the economically active states of Johor, Selangor and Sarawak. The numbers continue to grow, with at least 50 new cases reported between April and August 2025. Malaysia also faces a difficult reality: some individuals join these syndicates voluntarily, attracted by higher pay.

Other countries have begun taking tougher action. The United States and the United Kingdom have sanctioned key figures behind scam and trafficking networks in Myanmar and Cambodia. China has also intensified enforcement – deploying police to Myanmar since the start of the Myanmar rebel coalition’s [Operation 1027](#) offensive in

2023 and, in September 2025, [sentencing](#) 11 members of the Ming mafia family to death for running overseas scam centres – signalling a harsher accountability on its “misbehaved nationals” abroad.

Recommendations to strengthen law enforcement coordination

First, ASEAN must treat the disruption of scam syndicates as a regional, not merely domestic, priority.

A dedicated regional task force is needed to enable real-time intelligence sharing, joint investigations, cross-border prosecutions and rapid repatriation of victims and organised criminal fugitives without bureaucratic delays.

Recent events prove this is workable. The arrest and extradition of the Philippine fugitive [Alice Guo](#) – through coordinated action by the Philippine and Indonesian police forces with Interpol support – shows that regional cooperation can deliver results.

To sustain momentum, ASEAN should formalise cooperation under the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Police (ASEANAPOL), which is best placed to coordinate enforcement in the region. With syndicates operating across borders – and diplomatic constraints in some places, such as Myanmar – ASEAN also needs a regional mechanism capable of overcoming political barriers and closing enforcement gaps.

Second, the Malaysian government must strengthen financial crime agencies to detect scams and recover stolen funds.

Malaysia established the National Scam Response Centre (NSRC) in 2022, allocating RM20 million annually in 2024 and 2025 to coordinate various agencies, such as the Royal Malaysia Police, Bank Negara and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission. The NSRC has delivered notable gains: the 24/7 multilingual 997 hotline improved reporting, and by mid-2025 it had flagged over 46,000 scam ads and detected nearly 5 billion scam attempts.



In the first half of 2025, Malaysians lost RM193 million, but authorities froze only RM12 million. Detection is rising, but Malaysia still lacks the capacity to trace, seize and return stolen assets at scale.

Yet, recovery remains dismal. From 2022 to Q3 2024, only RM510,000 – about 1% of RM46 million in frozen funds – was [returned](#) to victims. In the first half of 2025, Malaysians [lost](#) RM193 million, but authorities froze only RM12 million. Detection is rising, but Malaysia still lacks the capacity to trace, seize and return stolen assets at scale.

To close this gap, the NSRC needs stronger financial intelligence, specialised investigators and clearer legal channels for asset recovery. Otherwise, Malaysians will continue reporting scams – but rarely recover their hard-earned savings.

Third, the Malaysian government must strengthen anti-trafficking capacity – especially in victim identification and network dismantling.

The surge in job-scam trafficking demands a coordinated anti-trafficking response. First, frontline agencies, such as embassies, immigration and police, must fully enforce the National Guidelines on Human Trafficking Indicators 2.0 to ensure accurate victim

identification, particularly in cases where victim and perpetrator roles may overlap.

Second, repatriation must be better resourced and coordinated. The government [allocated](#) RM10 million to KWARM (*Kumpulan Wang Amanah Rakyat Malaysia Di Luar Negeri*, or Trust Fund for Malaysian Citizens Abroad) in 2024 to assist Malaysians trapped abroad, but civil society groups, such as the [Malaysian Humanitarian Organisation](#), have largely filled the rescue gaps, based on reports from families and friends. Their work should be supported – not sidelined – through formal cooperation to ensure seamless rescue, return and reintegration.

Third, survivors must be protected and empowered to participate in justice efforts. Their firsthand knowledge is crucial for identifying recruitment chains, trafficking routes and coercive methods, making their testimony essential for both prosecution and public awareness. A victim-centred approach is key to dismantling networks and ending the cycle of exploitation.



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Transnational organised crime and the erosion of the nation-state: making a case for reclaiming sovereignty

As digital-driven crime expands, states face erosion from within, where illicit networks influence governance and undermine authority

HE Dr Bhanubhatra Jitthiang



Transnational organised crime (TOC) has emerged as one of the most significant security and human rights challenges of the 21st century. Once regarded as a marginal law-enforcement issue, the problem of smugglers or gangs operating beyond state control has now evolved into a systemic threat that penetrates governance itself. Criminal networks today are technologically adept, globally connected and embedded in digital ecosystems that outpace regulation and oversight.

In Southeast Asia, for example, these networks are estimated to generate more than US\$43 billion annually, accounting for nearly 40% of the combined GDP of Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. The scale of profit has blurred the boundary between crime and politics. In some contexts, officials tolerate, sanction or even protect these operations for personal or institutional gain. Thus, TOC no longer exploits weak states but coexists with, and sometimes constitutes, them. It is also reshaping the nature of sovereignty itself, transforming the nation-state from a guardian of citizens into a broker of illicit power.

From complicity to capture

The interplay between transnational organised crime and state authority has long been a subject of observation. In conflict and post-conflict zones, power vacuums are often filled by militias, cartels and syndicates. The Golden Triangle, once the centre of the global heroin trade, is a historical and continuing



In Southeast Asia, many of these networks began as casino-lined operations that, during the pandemic, reinvented themselves as transnational scam hubs.

reminder of how criminal economies flourish where states are fragile.

What is new is the digital turn. The spread of online scams, cyber fraud and what some call digital slavery, linked to the TOC networks, marks a shift of the criminality zone from territorial to virtual. In Southeast Asia, many of these networks began as casino-linked operations that, during the pandemic, reinvented themselves as transnational scam hubs. They now combine physical coercion with digital manipulation, enslaving victims both onsite and online.

Technology, including AI, crypto-finance and encrypted communications, has expanded its reach, while state capacity has lagged behind. Facing economic strain and political instability, some governments have come to view these criminal economies as survival tools. The result is not merely state weakness but state capture, where illicit activity sustains political power rather than threatening it.

Spectrum of state involvement

A research article titled "[*The state as a transnational criminal organization: a North Korea case study*](#)" outlines four escalating forms of state involvement with TOC:

- **Passive complicity:** the state turns a blind eye due to corruption, fear or limited capacity.
- **Encouragement:** the state quietly benefits from criminal activity without formal endorsement.
- **Sponsorship:** the state provides material, logistical or political support.
- **Operation:** the state itself directs or runs criminal enterprises through proxies or agencies.

These levels are fluid rather than discrete. Recent investigations in parts of Southeast Asia reveal official indifference, or even tolerance, toward large-scale scam compounds, where torture, forced labour and trafficking persist. Victims remain

unprotected, while some high-profile perpetrators often hold official or diplomatic passports, which grant them immunity.

When states prioritise the protection of criminals over that of citizens, sovereignty becomes distorted. It ceases to function as a social contract and becomes a mechanism of impunity. This arguably marks the emergence of a new form of sovereignty, one defined not by state authority but by the criminalisation of authority itself.

Criminal networks in borderless world

Transnational crime is inherently contagious. A hub in one country triggers ripple effects across others, creating criminal corridors that exploit porous borders, weak enforcement and economic desperation. A report by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime titled *“Inflection point: global implications of scam centres, underground banking and illicit online marketplaces in Southeast Asia”*, launched in April 2025, indicates that

some of these corridors run along Thailand’s northern, western and eastern frontiers, connecting to broader trafficking routes in the Mekong subregion (see Map 1).

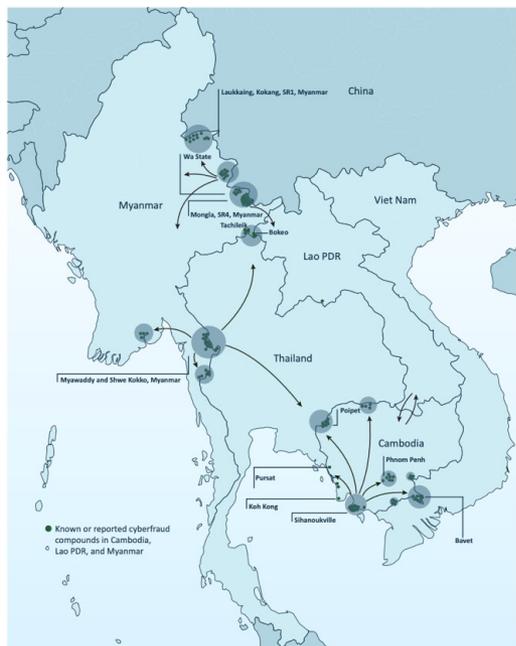
However, the threat now extends far beyond geography. In the digital realm, criminal syndicates operate with speed, scale and anonymity that surpass the reach of state control. The internet has become a space of digital anarchy, where sovereignty is fragmented among states, corporations and criminal actors. Thus, power resides not in territory but in control over networks, data, platforms and digital infrastructure. The traditional balance of power among states is giving way to a balance of actors, where legitimacy depends less on law and more on control of information flows. TOC groups, in effect, behave like non-state sovereigns in cyberspace.

Reclaiming sovereignty

For nation-states to withstand the erosion brought about by the rise of transnational organised crime, sovereignty must be reimagined as responsibility, especially since the threats posed by transnational organised crime are no longer confined to law enforcement but are political, digital and transnational in nature. Confronting this challenge, therefore, requires regional and cross-sectoral cooperation, particularly in Southeast Asia. An effective response also demands real-time intelligence sharing, joint investigations, coordinated enforcement and, above all, the eradication of corruption, which remains the oxygen that allows these criminal networks to thrive.

In addition, the principle of non-interference, long central to state affairs, especially in ASEAN, must evolve into non-indifference. Sovereignty cannot be invoked to excuse complicity in crimes against people. True sovereignty demands accountability to protect citizens from both external threats and internal predation. If a state fails in that duty, regional and international mechanisms must step in.

Map 1. Locations of known or reported scam centers in the Mekong region 2023–2026



Online operation and workers move both within and across borders in the Mekong region. Source: UNODC

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Finally, TOC should no longer be viewed as a symptom of weak governance. It has evolved into a new mode of governance. By infiltrating the state, capturing its legitimacy and exploiting digital spaces, TOC challenges the very concept of sovereignty, effectively turning the state into a criminal entity. The battle ahead, therefore, is not merely about policing or prosecution. It is about reclaiming the moral and political foundations of the state and the very essence of what sovereignty truly means.



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Partners in crime? Cooperation against transnational organised crime in the ASEAN region

Rising state-linked scam and human trafficking compounds challenge ASEAN's commitments, testing regional resolve to confront organised crime

Dr Marika McAdam

On the 14 October 2025, the United States and the United Kingdom [announced coordinated actions](#) against Cambodia-based criminals responsible for scamming over US\$16.6 billion from American citizens. A key target of these actions, [Chen Zhi](#), chairman of the Prince Holding Group, is considered by experts against transnational crime as a state-embedded criminal actor in Cambodia, but regarded by the authorities of Cambodia as a *neak ohnka*, or “prominent tycoon”, worthy of Cambodian citizenship. The warm welcome he and other powerful criminals have received in some countries in the region speaks to the complexity of the challenges facing ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners in their efforts to cooperate against transnational crime.

It is now beyond dispute that the ASEAN region is the epicentre of what Interpol described as “[human trafficking-fuelled fraud](#)” in the global threat warning it issued in 2023. That same year, US\$64 billion was scammed globally, [US\\$44 billion of which from activities in Mekong countries](#). Profits generated for the perpetrators – including complicit state officials who fuel and feed on corruption at every level – has created insatiable demand for an exploitable workforce to carry out the scams. Much of that demand is supplied by human trafficking, transforming the region from a source of victims of sexual and labour exploitation into a destination for hundreds of thousands of people trafficked from around the world into [forced criminality](#) in Southeast

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Indeed, ASEAN has a legal personality. It has a flag, an emblem and even an anthem. But what it lacks is a mechanism to meaningfully bind states to their obligations.

Asia, where they are [subject to extortion, threats, extreme violence and torture in conditions that amount to slavery](#).

Hidden in plain sight

The identities of the perpetrators involved and the locations they use are not hidden. Once-sleepy villages along the Mekong have been transformed into thriving hubs of criminal commerce that continue to be built beyond Special Economic Zones. This is not ASEAN’s people-oriented economic vision. Between the blingy buildings and flashing lights is a dark reality in which people [risk their lives trying to escape compounds](#) and are violently dragged back by armed guards in plain view of the passing public. Some of the most notorious criminals at the apex of these activities need not evade authorities but occupy a seat beside them in official settings. [Zhao Wei](#), the president of the notorious Kings Romans Group in the Bokeo province in Lao PDR, even opened an [international airport](#) in 2024 to service the [Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone](#) he chairs.

The contradiction of ASEAN member states doubling down on the sacrosanctity of [sovereignty](#) on the one hand, while relinquishing their power to organised crime groups on the other, may prove to be the Achilles’ heel of [ASEAN](#) legitimacy.

Cooperative commitment

And yet, there is a robust framework in place to call ASEAN to cooperative action against organised crime. Human trafficking was first recognised as a serious transnational crime in an ASEAN Declaration in 1997, followed in 1999 by a Plan of Action creating an institutional infrastructure to lead and implement cooperation against organised crime in line with the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime and its supplementary Trafficking in Persons Protocol. Since then, ASEAN leaders have repeatedly reaffirmed their commitment to cooperate against

this convergence of criminality, most recently through the adoption of the Melaka Declaration on Combating Transnational Crime and the ASEAN Plan of Action on Combating Transnational Crime (2026–2035) on 10 September 2025, as well as the ASEAN Leader’s Declaration on Enhancing Cooperation in Locating and Arresting Criminal Fugitives on 26 October 2025.

This legal architecture suggests that ASEAN is proactively postured to confront the serious crimes being blatantly and brutally committed by organised criminals against citizens of ASEAN countries and countless others around the world. Indeed, ASEAN has a legal personality. It has a flag, an emblem and even an anthem. But what it lacks is a mechanism to meaningfully bind states to their obligations, including under the ASEAN Convention against Trafficking in Persons.

The length of the shadow cast between the intentions expressed through ASEAN instruments and their implementation in practice is perhaps best measured by the following fact. When reports first emerged about large-scale trafficking of people from around the world into forced criminality and slavery in Southeast Asia, it was not ASEAN sectoral bodies or ASEAN member states that sounded the alarm, but civil society organisations and media. And yet the environments that are most hospitable to organised crime are the [least hospitable to civil society and press freedom](#).

Cooperative action

What role then for ASEAN Dialogue Partners? While countries in the region contend with how to [act in response](#) to US and UK sanctions, another ASEAN Dialogue Partner, the Republic of Korea, [has banned its citizens from travelling to parts of Cambodia](#) in the wake of the abduction, torture and murder of one of its young citizens, and the thousand more trapped in scamming compounds. Australia – ASEAN’s oldest Dialogue Partner – has been a steadfast investor in the region’s

efforts to cooperate against organised crime, including through its AUD\$30 million Mekong-Australia Program on Transnational Crime (2021–2029) and its AUD\$80 million ASEAN-Australia Counter-Trafficking programme (2018–2028). Yet [Australians lost AUD\\$2 billion to scams in 2024](#), much of which can be traced to activities in the ASEAN region. Australian taxpayers defrauded of their retirement savings may reasonably come to question why they should continue to invest millions in countries whose governments are complicit in scamming them of billions.

For ASEAN Dialogue Partners to continue to put their money where ASEAN’s mouth is, they are perhaps right to require a return on their investment through the decisive disruption of the trafficking, torture and scamming of their citizens. If partnerships within the region and beyond are not only to survive but to succeed, ASEAN sectoral bodies and member states must demonstrate that they can implement their own commitments by rising to the challenge of this crisis of criminality.



Dr Marika McAdam

Independent international law and policy adviser



Can ASEAN assume a credible role in building a stable Indo-Pacific?

Great-power rivalry challenges ASEAN to rethink its Indo-Pacific vision and strengthen mechanisms essential for regional peace and cooperation

HE Pou Sothirak

ASEAN was created nearly six decades ago to promote regional peace and stability by collectively leveraging its members' economic and political standing to ensure a more peaceful and cooperative Southeast Asia rather than facing challenges individually during the volatile Cold War tension.

The biggest threat to ASEAN then had been regional instability from communist expansion. Today, however, ASEAN faces different types of threats, born out of destabilising forces deriving from geostrategic confrontations in the Indo-Pacific among great powers, especially the United States and China.

Hence, supporters and detractors alike have asked: can ASEAN assume a credible role in building a stable Indo-Pacific?

Shifting Indo-Pacific landscape

To answer, we must glance over the mega trends that affect the Indo-Pacific marked with complex strategic competition, where China's growing influence is persistently contested by the US concept of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" with a rules-based order, free trade, freedom of navigation and the rule of law.

ASEAN is confronted with enduring crises: the weakening of the rules-based international order, persistent territorial disputes in the South China Sea among claimants, the crisis in Myanmar and the recent border disputes between Cambodia and Thailand, just to name a few – all of which can undermine the hard-earned peace not only in Southeast Asia but the whole world.

Addressing these challenges, the regional bloc adopted the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 (ACV 2045) at the 46th ASEAN Summit in 2025, which aims to be "visionary, inspirational, robust, comprehensive, inclusive and forward-looking" and to



The ACV 2045 should strategically leverage existing frameworks to encourage constructive cooperation between the two major powers and avert direct confrontations, which would be disastrous for the region.

"address current and future challenges" both within and beyond the region, while reflecting ASEAN's "spirit of unity in diversity and cooperation".

The ACV 2045 should strategically leverage existing frameworks to encourage constructive cooperation between the two major powers and avert direct confrontations, which would be disastrous for the region.

ASEAN's guiding vision

A standout of this framework clearly expresses ASEAN's position in the wider Indo-Pacific. Paragraph 18 states that the future ASEAN will be a "Community that pursues the implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) through concrete projects and activities."

What exactly is the AOIP made of?

The unanimous adoption of the AOIP at the 34th ASEAN Summit in 2019 demonstrated a common position in expanding the "ASEAN Way" beyond the traditional domain. It was adopted amid proliferating and confrontational Indo-Pacific power contestation by ASEAN's external partners.

The adoption depicts renewed solidarity in ASEAN amidst rapid geopolitical shifts and codifies a vision that embodies unity, centrality and leadership in the evolving regional architecture.

The AOIP offers five forward-looking points: emphasis on the connections between the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean, focus on cooperation and dialogue rather than rivalry, advancement of development and prosperity for all, recognition of the maritime domain's importance, and momentum generation for future initiatives based on appropriate frameworks.

Strengthening ASEAN Centrality

However, for the AOIP to reshape the existing regional politico-security architecture to ensure peace and stability and deepen the institutionalisation of ASEAN Centrality, ASEAN needs to rethink the AOIP.

With regard to shaping ASEAN's economic and security architecture beyond Southeast Asia, AOIP's Paragraph 2 needs to clearly articulate how ASEAN intends to approach threats deriving from great-power competition. This requires a bolder leadership that is more than simply convening dialogues and promoting cooperation.

Paragraph 4 states that the AOIP intends to be inclusive regarding ideas and proposals. While lacking neither, ASEAN lacks the ability to meet the aspirations of its domestic constituencies and external partners.

Paragraph 5's reference to "promoting cooperation" using ASEAN Centrality via regional and sub-regional mechanisms is apt, given the Sino-American rivalry. However, ASEAN Centrality must command greater respect from major powers, earned through ASEAN's bold actions as a credible driver for Indo-Pacific peace and security.

Paragraph 6 states "the importance of the maritime domain and perspective in the

evolving regional architecture". What this means in practice is uncertain. What is the nature of the South China Sea Code of Conduct? When will it be adopted? Is ASEAN's role a facilitator of cooperation or a credible manager of a maritime domain safe and free from escalating tensions?

Key gaps in operational framework

On strengthening ASEAN-led mechanisms, Paragraph 8 lacks explicit mention of what needs to be improved, nor measures to improve them. In addition, Paragraph 11 offers no suggestions on ensuring full compliance with the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), be it confidence-building measures, preventive diplomacy or conflict resolution.

Paragraph 12 states that the AOIP will generate momentum for building strategic trust and win-win cooperation in the region, yet it is unclear how this is done, given deepening maritime-vs.-mainland divisions, ASEAN's inherent institutional structure weakness and the lingering trust gap among major powers.



AOIP'S Paragraph 2 needs to clearly articulate how ASEAN intends to approach threats deriving from great power competition. This requires a bolder leadership that is more than simply convening dialogues and promoting cooperation.

Maritime cooperation, as stated in Paragraphs 14 and 15, seems to be the core issue. While the document notes relevant issues, it is a mere laundry list of less-relevant cooperation. Maritime threats are real and require enforcement to prevent escalation. Hence, the question remains: how is this achieved with the existing ASEAN architecture?

On connectivity, Paragraphs 16 and 17 state various mechanisms for cooperation, yet omit the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Whether an oversight or deliberate, the omission of LMC and BRI downplays ASEAN's reliance on these initiatives to meet connectivity targets.

Paragraphs 21 to 23 offer important but vague attributions on the AIOP's role as a

“guide to ASEAN's engagement” and neglect to mention how ASEAN intends to manage its external partners' various modalities. The AIOP lacks serious consideration of enhancing cooperation and mechanisms to manage important Indo-Pacific issues.

Recalibrating ASEAN

To sum up, the AOIP smartly projects ASEAN's vision into the wider Indo-Pacific, capitalising on the ASEAN Way to withstand pressures from the Sino-American competition. However, to assume a credible role in building a stable Indo-Pacific, ASEAN needs fundamental readjustments. The AIOP must provide clearer indications on how ASEAN can implement projects and activities and provide new momentum to existing ASEAN-led mechanisms, be it the TAC, ASEAN Plus One, EAS or ADDM-Plus.



HE Pou Sothirak

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Turbocharging economic engagement and building political resilience key to future ASEAN-Australia partnership

Australia aims to step up in Southeast Asia, balancing geopolitical pressures with opportunities for deeper economic and strategic alignment

Martine Letts



In 2024, to mark 50 years of partnership, Australia and ASEAN, via a “Vision Statement”, reaffirmed a mutual commitment to their relationship, which highlighted collaboration to promote a rules-based regional architecture.

The conventional wisdom today is that the international rules which underwrite this regional architecture are under severe strain, and that a new set of standards needs to be created to reflect a changed global order: an increasingly fractured world characterised by an “everyone for themselves” philosophy, whose prime advocate sits in the White House.

Alternative arrangements, such as minilateral or special-purpose arrangements, have been touted as more fit for purpose. These include strategic- and security-related groupings, such as the Quad and AUKUS, as well as economic-related groupings, such as the



It is also the case that serious regulatory challenges remain in Southeast Asia, undermining confidence for Australian investment. The challenges differ from country to country, but work needs to be done to simplify regulatory processes, modernise bilateral trade agreements and reduce barriers to foreign competition.

Australia-India-Japan Trilateral Supply Chain Resilience Initiative and the BRICS, which are initially for emerging economies but now with increasingly broad ambitions.

We should not lose sight, however, of the opportunities within the region of Southeast Asia to forge a resilient and collaborative regional ecosystem based on respect for the rules-based architecture.

Despite being the first country to sign a Comprehensive Security Partnership with ASEAN four years ago, deeper ASEAN-Australia engagement – especially economic engagement – has been slow.

The confusion surrounding the future US role in the Indo-Pacific region (particularly as a trade, security and development partner) has further encouraged Australia to reimagine its role and relationships in the region.

The question is whether Australia (and other middle powers) can step into the vacuum left by the United States. Do its strategic interests sufficiently align with those of the individual countries in ASEAN, and with those of ASEAN as a whole, to offer a new and reliable way of managing a contested Indo-Pacific? And how does Australia find space to do so when so many countries already collaborate with ASEAN, amid a growing queue for ASEAN’s attention?

Reimagining Australia’s role

Two key touch points for Australia in the region are increasing economic engagement and collaborating for political resilience.

A greater economic engagement with Southeast Asia is a top priority for the Albanese government. Canberra recognises that Australia’s economic future is intrinsically linked to the prosperity of Southeast Asia. Released in 2023, the *Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040* (the “Moore Report”) continues to be strongly promoted by the Prime Minister as the



Australia can also learn from ASEAN's historic and current experience of managing economic growth and security within the ambit of great power competition.

template for closer Australian engagement with this region, and it includes an exhortation for Australian businesses, government and the broader community to become more Asia-capable. This sentiment is not yet fully shared, especially in the world of business, which continues to undervalue international and Asia experience for its workforce.

When the Australian Minister for Industry Tim Ayers recently pronounced at an Asialink gathering that “our geography, along with the capacity and ambition of our regional partners, means a future made in Australia is also a future made in the region together,” considerable scepticism remains, including within the Canberra bureaucracy.

In the meantime, the growth of Southeast Asian economies has outpaced Australia's economic engagement, and the competition for ASEAN's attention grows.

Economic engagement: from strategy to reality

The Moore Report found that Australia's two-way trade and investment in the region is woefully inadequate, comprising only 3.4% of Australia's total outbound investment.

Two years on from the release of the report, the Australian government is continuing to commit significant resources to the Southeast Asia Economic Strategy, including a Free Trade Agreement modernisation

agenda and Austrade's landing pads and deal teams providing support to businesses on the ground.

The Australian Business Champions have been appointed for different Southeast Asian markets, in a program run by Asialink Business, leveraging the experience and influence of CEOs and C-suite executives from leading Australian organisations to promote greater trade and investment between ASEAN and Australia in areas identified by the report (such as food security, green energy transition, education, healthcare and digital economy, among other sectors).

Even so, business engagement and investment remain underdone - partly because the business community is quite risk-averse and prefers to stick with familiar markets, such as China.

It is also the case that serious regulatory challenges remain in Southeast Asia, undermining confidence for Australian investment. The challenges differ from country to country, but work needs to be done to simplify regulatory processes, modernise bilateral trade agreements and reduce barriers to foreign competition. This is especially important for SMEs but also for larger enterprises.

Australia's large diaspora populations and alumni networks in Southeast Asia provide unique advantages and opportunities. The diaspora's cultural dynamism, entrepreneurship and risk appetite needs to seep into Australia's business community. It is a resource Australia ought to leverage more in its economic engagement strategy.

Political resilience and regional security cooperation

Security and prosperity in ASEAN align with Australia's broader national security objectives. In addition to greater economic engagement, Australia has an interest in

political resilience among ASEAN member states to help ensure the shared goal of a free and open region.

In a very practical way, Australia can work with ASEAN countries to manage great power pressure and the perception of being forced to choose sides. Australia can also learn from ASEAN's historic and current experience of managing economic growth and security within the ambit of great power competition.

Multilaterally, there may be scope for deeper engagement by Australia joining certain forums, such as the ASEAN Plus Three group (ASEAN plus China, Japan and South Korea). Australia's membership in a group that encompasses key nations in East Asia and Southeast Asia would certainly be a major step forward – if they would have Australia.

Sharing insights on other global threats – perhaps via a Track 2 process, such as the ASEAN–Australia–New Zealand dialogue on real and emerging nuclear threats in the Indo-Pacific outside the politically constrained ASEAN Regional Forum – is another idea. Such a process might also help mitigate regional concerns about AUKUS.

Finally, via Australia's US\$1.3 billion in development assistance package to Southeast Asia and via sharing relevant expertise, Australia and ASEAN member states can collaborate to consolidate a sustained partnership, co-creation of norms and joint investments in areas of common interest, such as climate resilience, pandemic response, food security and education.

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New Zealand and the emerging multiplex order in the Indo-Pacific

Amid a shifting world order, New Zealand draws on flexible coalitions and its layered national identity to foster an open, inclusive and globally linked Indo-Pacific

Dr Manjeet S Pardesi



The passing of the US-led liberal international order has shifted the locus of global-order-making to regions. Among these, the so-called Indo-Pacific – linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans – has become central to the strategic lexicon of policymakers, analysts and scholars alike. Aotearoa New Zealand, however, was initially hesitant to embrace this concept. Unlike Southeast Asia, which lies at the geographic core of the Indo-Pacific and hosts the vital sea routes that connect the two oceans, New Zealand does not border the Indian Ocean.

Nevertheless, given Wellington’s long-standing commitment to a regional strategic architecture anchored in ASEAN, i.e., “ASEAN Centrality”, New Zealand began to actively adopt the Indo-Pacific framework following the release of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific in 2019. New Zealand’s 2023 Defence Policy and Strategy Statement outlines three overlapping circles that define its strategic geography: the Pacific, encompassing the South-West Pacific; New Zealand’s region, including the Pacific, Australia and New Zealand (and its Antarctic territories); and the wider Indo-Pacific region. This layered approach reflects both geography and diplomacy, situating New Zealand as a bridge between multiple strategic spheres.



Furthermore, New Zealand envisions “several centres of power and influence”, including not only China and India but also Southeast Asia, whose institutions provide the scaffolding for regional cooperation.

From unipolarity to multiplex order

New Zealand’s understanding of the Indo-Pacific is shaped by three broader transformations in the global order. The first is the movement away from the US-led post-Cold War unipolar order. Yet Wellington’s interpretation of this trend is more nuanced because the United States will continue to remain important even as other great powers rise through the international order. Furthermore, New Zealand envisions “[several centres of power and influence](#)”, including not only China and India but also Southeast Asia, whose institutions provide the scaffolding for regional cooperation. This vision resonates with the international relations scholar Amitav Acharya’s notion of a *multiplex world*—a world characterised not merely by multipolarity or multiple great powers but by multiple forms of order and agency, where smaller and middle powers also shape outcomes.

The second trend concerns the strain on multilateralism. The rise of populism and growing distrust of institutions in established Western democracies, as well as the emergence of multiple centres of power and authority, have weakened global cooperation. New Zealand has therefore emerged as a consistent advocate of multilateral reform, urging that institutions evolve to reflect “[current political and economic realities](#)”. For Wellington, renewed multilateralism is essential to address pressing global issues, such as trade governance, climate change, and technological regulation.

The third trend lies in the recognition that the world cannot be divided along ideological lines. While New Zealand rightly takes pride in its democratic political system, it has been careful not to frame world politics as a binary contest between democracy and autocracy. Wellington upgraded its Free Trade Agreement with China in 2022 and elevated its relationship with Viet Nam to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2025. Notably, then Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern also [did not frame](#) Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine as democracy vs. autocracy.

Three-part role for New Zealand in the Indo-Pacific

Against this shifting backdrop, New Zealand is striving to play three key roles in the Indo-Pacific. The first is a belief in collective agency among small and middle powers. The weakening of traditional multilateralism has prompted New Zealand to deepen collaboration within progressive, flexible groupings of like-minded states. This tradition runs deep: the P4 Agreement between Brunei, Chile, Singapore and New Zealand laid the foundation for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which later evolved into the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in 2018. New Zealand has since continued to innovate, partnering with Singapore and Chile on the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement to set regional standards for digital trade. These initiatives reveal that small and middle powers are not passive recipients of order but active participants in shaping it.

The second role is New Zealand's desire to keep the Indo-Pacific connected to other regions rather than enclosed within a single great-power sphere. Wellington understands that security and economic developments in the Indo-Pacific reverberate globally (and vice versa). North Korea's involvement in Russia's war in Ukraine, for example, has underscored the interconnectedness of security theatres, prompting New Zealand to engage closely with its Indo-Pacific Four partners – Australia, Japan and South Korea. Similarly, in trade policies, New Zealand advocates strengthening ties between the CPTPP and the European Union to ensure that regional integration does not devolve into global fragmentation. By positioning itself as a connector state, New Zealand contributes to an inter-regional world order that remains “open” and globally linked.

The third role – and perhaps the most distinctive – is New Zealand's prioritisation of the Pacific. Within the broader Indo-Pacific construct, the Pacific region remains

the heart of Wellington's strategic and moral commitments. New Zealand seeks to amplify Pacific voices, recognising that while these states are small in landmass and population, they are large maritime nations with long histories and deep-rooted cultures. In addition, New Zealand aims to shape how external powers engage with this strategically vital region. While most Indo-Pacific debates fixate on major power rivalries, the Pacific's most urgent challenges are different: rising sea levels, climate change, sustainable economic development and transnational crime. Addressing these issues is not only a question of policy but of justice and morality.

Identity at the heart of strategy

Ultimately, New Zealand's approach to the Indo-Pacific is inseparable from its national identity. The country is both Western and Pacific – a bicultural polity grounded in the Treaty of Waitangi. Furthermore, New Zealand is increasingly multicultural in composition, with a rapidly growing population of Asian descent. This layered identity informs a foreign policy ethos that seeks to bridge divides, respect differences and uphold the *mana* – the dignity and authority – of all partners. Such an approach embodies *whanaungatanga*, the Māori principle of reciprocal relationships built on mutual respect and shared purpose.

In a world defined by contested norms and shifting hierarchies, New Zealand's approach offers a quiet but powerful model of constructive agency.



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