



## Options Paper

What does it look like for Australia to be a ...

# Catalyst for Southeast Asian Civil-Military Cooperation

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# Why it Matters

Australia has an important role in promoting civil-military collaboration to strengthen effective whole-of-nation responses to humanitarian and security issues.

Australia has a declared commitment in the 2020 Defence Strategic Update to engage with regional security forces in both traditional and non-traditional military activities.<sup>1</sup> This is expressed in the Australian Defence Force's Regional Presence Deployments, defence attaché network and annual Indo-Pacific Endeavour activities.

Pressing security challenges will be exacerbated by climate change and the magnitude of humanitarian and disaster events will require an expanding role for military forces. If not guided and managed proactively, this could weaken civil society capabilities and distort the role of military institutions and priorities.

Enhanced civil-military integration and interoperability is a priority to meet complex emergencies. Australia has a direct interest in working in partnership with Southeast Asian nations to support the strengthening of their own capacity to manage crises and security challenges requiring integrated whole-of-government response.

Australia as a development cooperation partner is well-positioned to address these challenges with the region and model effective civil-military engagement. While Australia has sometimes been cautious about emphasising liberal values of democracy and human rights in its foreign policy, Australia's strong civil-military collaboration and governance framework represents an avenue through which Australia can enhance and expand its engagement in Southeast Asia.

Rising authoritarianism is challenging governance in the region and causing increased civil unrest and instability. In Myanmar, the recent military coup has limited media freedoms and weakened civil society. In 2021 Freedom

House ranked four Southeast Asian countries partly free (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore) and six countries not free (Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam). Only one country, Timor-Leste, was free.<sup>2</sup> In light of these trends, it is important that civil society continues to be supported as a key part of promoting a stable and inclusive region.

Australia has a shared interest with Southeast Asia to protect and promote human rights. Australia views democratic values and vibrant civil societies as crucial to human rights. The weakening of democratic governance, civil society and human rights poses a challenge to Australian interests in preserving a secure and prosperous region that supports human freedoms and social and economic flourishing.

Australia's interest is in an open and stable region with a strong civil society alongside justice and policing. Civil society and civil society organisations are strategic to efforts to deliver outcomes in development programs and policy frameworks to which Australia is committed over the coming decade.

Australia and Southeast Asia are deeply connected at the community level. Individual connections provide a unique opportunity that can be leveraged to pursue Australian policy objectives in Southeast Asia. Australia-based Southeast Asian community members are conduits in creating linkages of development and business collaborations. A policy approach focusing on civil society collaborations will enable Australia to more effectively engage in the region.

Significant numbers of Australians work within civil society organisations, alongside local civil society counterparts in Southeast Asia. They have established long-lasting and trusted relationships with current and emerging social and political leaders. A systematic and coherent approach to leveraging such influential connections should be central to Australia's Southeast Asia policy.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Defence, *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, 1 July 2020: <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/publications/2020-defence-strategic-update>

<sup>2</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom in the World Report, 2021*: <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

# Aligning Views

## SOUTHEAST ASIAN VIEWS

Southeast Asian states want Australian interventions to be aligned with the priorities of the region. In addition to the prospect of a regional armed conflict between major powers, there are a range of other pressing security challenges. The COVID-19 economic recovery remains a priority, a shift reflected in Australia's development response.<sup>3</sup> Climate change, illegal fishing, maritime security, counter-terrorism, cyber security, critical technologies and supply chain security are also high priorities and highlight the importance of enhanced civil-military coordination in responding to complex emerging issues.

Southeast Asian states have questioned the commitment of Australia to the region given the expansion of extra-ASEAN mechanisms, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and AUKUS. Australia's programs and policies will only be effective if they align with the defence, diplomatic and development priorities of Southeast Asian states, rather than being perceived as modalities for containing Chinese influence.

The climate change outlook for many parts of coastal Southeast Asia is dire with ASEAN describing climate change an 'unprecedented regional challenge'.

Southeast Asia needs assistance for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), such as through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre).<sup>4</sup> Importance should be placed on capacity-building through joint training to ensure that the military, security and policing sectors and civil society organisations are prepared. HADR is an area where Southeast Asian governments are potentially open and inclusive of civil society actors. For example, faith-based organisations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama are key actors in humanitarian response and climate

change mitigation and adaptation, working with the AHA.

There is marked variation across Southeast Asia in terms of the region's politics. Myanmar has no civilian oversight by contrast with Indonesia and the Philippines which have far greater civilian oversight of their security forces. This variation needs to be taken into account in Australia's engagement and the design of its programs.

Australia's interest is in shaping a region where a vibrant civil society supports good governance. Civil society actors can be viewed as critics and opponents by regional governments, thus Australia's commitment to democratic and human rights values need to be communicated with sensitivity and diplomacy when engaging such actors in defence, diplomatic and development programs.

## AUSTRALIAN VIEWS

Australia's Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with the ASEAN reflects Southeast Asia's importance to Australia.<sup>5</sup> This Partnership reflects the Australian Government's recognition of the region's centrality and relevance to the political, technological, economic, security and environmental futures of the Indo-Pacific region.

The 2020 Defence Strategic Update also reaffirms the importance of Southeast Asian states to Australia's defence planning. Defence has a focus on strategic alignment with the region and fostering close relationships with defence organisations in the region, including through the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus platform. Likewise, international engagement and capacity building by law enforcement strengthens partnerships with ASEAN states to combat transnational crime and security issues in the region.

There are a range of views concerning the military's role in HADR, and concerns have been

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<sup>3</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Partnerships for Recovery: Australia's COVID-19 Development Response*, 29 May 2020: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/aid/partnerships-recovery-australias-covid-19-development-response>

<sup>4</sup> AP4D Southeast Asian Voices Dialogue, 31 August 2021  
<sup>5</sup> Prime Minister of Australia, "Press release: Australia-ASEAN Leaders' Summit and East Asia Summit": <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/australia-asean-leaders-summit-and-east-asia-summit>

raised whether an increasing role as a result of the prevalence of climate-induced natural disasters will come at the expense of war-fighting capabilities.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALIGNMENT

Australia and Southeast Asia face a fundamental question regarding the role of the military in governance, society and social order and its relationship with citizens, communities and non-military institutions. Civil-military cooperation provides an opportunity for closer interaction, discussion and debate on this issue.

There will be a range of views between Australia and Southeast Asia, and within countries. HADR can become a principal mechanism for these discussions to occur, with Australia and Southeast Asian civil-military cooperation creating new opportunities for consensus-building.

Australia and Southeast Asia countries have a shared experience of complex domestic disaster response. There are shared concerns across the region that increasing disasters due to pandemics and climate change will demand more effective civil-military response.

Australia and regional partners are committed to development goals in improved socio-economic, technological and public policy outcomes where a strong civil society plays a critical enabling role.

Australians working within local civil society organisations in Southeast Asia build personal connections that are significant for Asian engagement. Leveraging such connections is valuable for Australia's foreign policy.

Australia's utility to Southeast Asian states lies in its provision of development cooperation, educational opportunities and technical expertise; its close coordination with Southeast Asian states on pressing regional security, health, law and justice, environmental and economic challenges; and its commitment to international legal norms, particularly in the maritime domain. These provide influence Australia should capitalise on. Australia can develop mechanisms for closer diplomatic cooperation as part of education and training partnerships.

To promote alignment, Australia's engagement should not be framed through the dynamics of great power competition but through regionally-

appropriate diplomatic strategies and a framework of local partner development priorities.

#### **CASE STUDY:** Regional Consultative Group for Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination for the Asia and the Pacific

The Regional Consultative Group (RCG) on Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination for Asia and the Pacific was formed in 2014 to act as a multi-stakeholder, regional forum that brings together humanitarian, civilian and military actors involved in planning for and responding to disasters in the region.

The RCG was formed to discuss response preparedness planning, with a focus on the coordination of operational planning between civilian and military actors in priority countries in the region.

It serves to facilitate the exchange of information and innovative ideas to enable well-coordinated and needs-based effective disaster responses, and strengthen linkages with other relevant platforms with an emphasis on the relationship with Regional Organisations and the Global Consultative Group on Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination.

#### **CASE STUDY:** Australia Awards Women in Leadership short course

In October 2021, the Australia Awards program in Indonesia released a Request for Tender for a short course entitled: 'Women in Leadership in the Security Sector'. The course is designed to include participants from the armed forces, police, coastguard, intelligence agencies, civilian ministries, legislature universities and civil society organisations.

This model should be emulated and rebadged as a unique and prestigious type of new award program designed specifically to support Southeast Asian partners to enhance crisis coordination and whole-of-government management of security challenges.

“Australia’s defence cooperation with ASEAN will be guided by six core principles: Mutual Respect. ASEAN centrality. Supporting sovereignty. Addressing areas of shared priority. Transparency. Respect for international law and norms.”

*Minister for Defence Linda Reynolds, “Australia’s 2020 Vision for Defence Engagement with ASEAN”, February 2020*



“Australia should identify priority investments to scale-up the capability within Defence, Foreign Affairs, the intelligence agencies, Home Affairs and other key agencies to recognise and respond to emerging regional climate impacts, including by supporting our regional neighbours to build their climate resilience.”

*Robert Glasser, The Rapidly Emerging Crisis on our Doorstep, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, April 2021*



“Civil society is clearly making an important contribution to delivering basic supplies, essential services, and vital information to citizens but often that is when governments fail to do so.”

*The Asia Foundation, “Civil Society in Southeast Asia during Covid-19: Responding and Evolving Under Pressure”, September 2020*



# Barriers

There are many areas where the region needs to improve capacity to manage crises and security challenges requiring integrated whole-of-government response. Climate-induced disasters will increase in prevalence and magnitude, as will the need for emergency response. Southeast Asian states also face a range of other challenges including Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing; maritime security threats; illegal trafficking of people, wildlife, and narcotics; terrorist attacks and terrorism financing; cyber-attacks by both state and criminal actors; unregulated crypto currency; and dissemination of online hate speech and disinformation threatening national resilience.

As HADR requirements grow, there is a risk that response will become overmilitarised. Southeast Asian armed forces remain the first responders to natural disasters due to their C4 abilities, air and maritime strategic lift. This is not unique to Southeast Asia. In Australia, the Australian Defence Force (both personnel support and command elements) is increasingly used in response to the COVID pandemic and devastating bushfire and precipitation-related natural disasters. Australia will need to work closely with neighbours to ensure the right frameworks are in place to facilitate balanced civil-military engagement in responding to increasing humanitarian crises.

Southeast Asian states require support to strengthen coordination and operational familiarity between the various key stakeholders responsible for crisis management. These stakeholders comprise four categories:

- Armed Forces Personnel;
- Police and Paramilitary Personnel, including Coastguard and Aviation Security personnel;
- Civilian Government Agency personnel at both national and subnational levels of government; and
- Civil Society Actors including NGOs, faith-based organisations, local community-based organisations, private citizens and volunteers.

Strengthened coordination is required between Australia's various capacity-building programs. Australia offers a range of short course programs to Southeast Asia under the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Australia Awards program. The Department of Defence runs training programs for regional armed forces' personnel through the Defence Cooperation Program (DCP). There are also additional short course training programs focussed on security, immigration and border control implemented by other Australian agencies such as the Department of Home Affairs. Each do great work, but consultations with those involved suggest that they don't collaborate to a great degree. This is a barrier to a whole-of-government approach.

There are structural and practical reasons that lead to a lack of integration of military and security force personnel with their civilian agency and civil society counterparts in Australian training and capacity building programs. Reasons for this include military posting cycles, deployments and the fact that Official Development Assistance (ODA) cannot be directed to active military personnel unless they are in civilian roles. Southeast Asian public servants and civil society representatives are not familiar working alongside security force actors, although they recognise the need to include military and police personnel on HADR-related courses.<sup>6</sup>

It is not productive to have military and civil society institutions disconnected from each other. Different institutions need to connect, understand and influence each other's thinking and behaviour. Within Government, taskforces and cross-agency work need the support of senior decision-makers.

Australia needs to engage carefully with regional governments and civil society actors, which can be perceived as critics and opposition. Some of the work it does in this area will not be branded. A nuanced approach is needed to engage with local versus international NGOs in humanitarian response scenarios to effectively support efficient interoperability on the ground at the time of a disasters.

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<sup>6</sup> Participant feedback from the Australia Awards in Indonesia Humanitarian Assistance short course, Post-course workshop, Jakarta, July 2019.

“Over the past two decades, governments have repeatedly taken opportunities during crises to deepen their authority.... As COVID-19 subsides, the inexorable heightened state surveillance will be the latest authoritarian residue to afflict Southeast Asia. Civil society needs to prevent these authoritarian ‘residues’ from building up in order to reverse the regression of democracy in Southeast Asia.”

*James Gomez, COVID-19 Accelerates Democratic Regression in Southeast Asia, Australian Outlook, December 2020*



“Before the pandemic, many observers discussed and debated the illiberal turn in Southeast Asia... Covid-19 will exacerbate this trend.”

“Australia should identify priority investments to scale-up. This crisis of democracy presents a serious challenge, and Australia must support those in the region working to reverse the decline.”

*Melissa Crouch, “Southeast Asia Democracies in Declining Health Amid Covid-19”, The Interpreter, July 2020*



“The focus must be less on shared values and more on ‘shared principles’ on which cooperation in the Indo-Pacific should be based.... The right narrative needs to be matched with more of the patient, long-term work that will build Australia’s influence, diversify trade and forge genuine partnerships in developing Asia.”

*Richard Maude, “The Transformation of Australian Foreign Policy: Reflections on Prime Minister Morrison’s Perth Speech”, Perth USAsia Centre, July 2021*





# The Vision in Practice

*What does it look like for Australia to be a catalyst for Southeast Asian civil-military cooperation?*

Australia will be a positive force in shaping a region where effective and engaged civil society supports good governance.

Australia will be a leader in HADR partnerships in Southeast Asia with well-developed and organised mechanisms in place to support effective whole of government response. Australian NGOs will continue to play a critical role both as partners to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade through the Australian Humanitarian Program as well as the independent resources they bring to regional crises including humanitarian and disaster response.

Australia will have a balanced approach between civil capacity to respond and the military's role as first responder in humanitarian assistance and disaster response. Military capabilities such as platforms, logistics, training, communications and equipment will continue to play a crucial role. Building civil society response capability will also be important to strengthen and elevate the role of civil society in humanitarian assistance. Despite the necessary involvement of the military as a first responder, HADR will be civilian-led where possible. It should follow the maxim: "as civilian as possible; as military as necessary".

The ADF will model an appropriate culture of the military moving in and out of partnerships with civilians. Strong legal frameworks will be in place to support the governance of crisis response

situations where military and civilian actors are engaged. Australian civil society organisations will be encouraged to promote civilian oversight and allow local civil society organisations to leverage their connections with Australia through common platforms and strong development partnerships.

Australia will be an important development partner that enhances civil-military cooperation through capacity-building programs focussed on crisis coordination. Australian short courses and training programs will integrate all categories of stakeholders and build familiarity between security force actors, civilian government agency personnel, including police, and civil society organisations, promoting empowerment for all civil society representatives.

Australian short course programs will develop leadership skills, networks and communities of practice and will create connections to be leveraged in support of HADR and management of complex security challenges. Short courses will address command and control, information-management and sharing protocols, hand-over and hand-back protocols, common technical applications and IT platforms and appropriate mechanisms for coordination and consultation.

Australia will actively coordinate its defence, diplomatic and development agencies' activities in Southeast Asia in support of common strategic objectives.

## **CASE STUDY: Mekong-Australia Partnership on Transnational Crime (MAP-TNC)**

MAP-TNC is an example of Australia's forward-leaning practical collaboration to strengthen partner engagement in Mekong countries and to reinforce a collective response to transnational crime and border security. MAP-TNC was launched in 2020 as a \$30 million, 8-year initiative to promote cross border co-operation between Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos on crime threats including child sexual exploitation, drug trafficking and financial crimes.

The program is implemented by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and co-ordinated out of the Australian Embassy Thailand to maximise the availability and sharing of the technical expertise by the Australia Public Sector agencies that work towards hardening the transnational crime environment offshore.

Managing contractor support ensures a maximised Australian effort to co-ordinate the delivery of capacity-building activities. This partnership will deliver programs that capitalise on and showcase expertise across related sectors and highlight the benefits of interoperability across responsible departments to combat transnational crime.

# Pathways

## Immediate

Develop a **flagship civil-military-focused short course program** designed for participants from military, security, civil society organisations and civilian agencies to enhance crisis coordination and whole-of-government management of security challenges. The program will implement a monitoring and evaluation framework that includes an objective to ensure that the Australia Awards (or another professional development vehicle) is achieving greater civil, military and security force integration. It will be predicated upon closer coordination between Australian Government agencies with respect to achieving common defence, development and diplomatic outcomes in Southeast Asia.

This could build on the Australia Awards Women in Leadership in the Security Sector program as a model that includes a comprehensive range of participants from across the security, defence and civil society sectors.

## Medium-term

Implement a **Regional Military/Civil Society Framework (RMCS)** framework to manage HADR across the region. Australia has played a significant role in providing HADR in Southeast Asia through the ADF. Australia could significantly enhance its role in the region, the ADF's general engagement of regional security forces and the ADF's development of interoperability with regional security forces through proposing and co-resourcing the development of an integrated RMCS framework to better manage HADR across the region.

The ADF has well-developed, up-to-date policy and operational guidance for military assistance to civil authority domestically. The ADF would be well-placed to work with partners to develop a regional framework of national, bilateral, and multi-lateral policies, operational guidelines, and, importantly, capabilities. These activities would be conducted in close co-ordination and complement the work that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Federal Police, Department of Home Affairs and other public sector agencies are already doing.

A RMCS program would entail:

- Collaborative HADR scenario development, simulations, and risk assessment
- Identification of multi-service and whole-of-government operational requirements for proactive capability development and deployments
- Enhanced annual ADF Regional Presence Deployments focused on regular RMCS HADR training and exercises
- Capacity-building partnerships for regional government, military, police and civil society personnel in both policy development and integrated HADR operations
- consideration of an RMCS Liaison Officer network to support the program

The RMCS would explore collaboratively with regional partners the possibility of pre-formed regional capability with the ADF and Australian Public Sector Agency partners playing a key role as part of that joint capability. In all RMCS program development, consideration would be given to ensuring primary roles for civilian capability-development and military complementarity as 'last resort'. RMCS would prepare the ADF and regional military partners for future humanitarian and disaster relief. RMCS promotes a model and culture for a defined role for regional militaries within their civil societies.

Finally, Australia can build on regional structures already in place to create a **predictable model for coordination on HADR** in Southeast Asia, such as the Regional Consultative Group. Australia can harness the potential of work already done by this group to build stronger civil-military engagement across the region.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

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