



Options Paper

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

Effective Security Partner in Southeast Asia

SUPPORTED BY



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You can cite this paper as: Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue, *What does it look like for Australia to be an effective security partner in Southeast Asia* (Canberra 2022): www.asiapacific4d.com

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Why it Matters

Australia's perceived emphasis on traditional state security concerns, particularly strategic competition with China, is one key reason that Australia's security partnership with Southeast Asia falls short of its potential. This is a missed opportunity to find common ground on security. Australia needs an expansive vision of what it means to be a security partner in Southeast Asia.

The three most significant security challenges facing Australia and Southeast Asia today are geostrategic competition, the impacts of climate change and complexities of accountable governance.

Notwithstanding the tough geostrategic headwinds, Australia risks foregoing significant opportunities to be a security partner of choice in Southeast Asia if it overwhelmingly emphasises the first challenge alone.

Instead, its focus should be on finding common ground with regional leaders across a broad spectrum of cooperation, in particular with respect to shared interests between Australia and Southeast Asia in human security and effective governance.

Australia's national security and international engagement strategy in Southeast Asia should see investing in human security and state security as complementary and mutually reinforcing endeavours, not competing paradigms.

Insecurity at the individual level undermines national stability, while fragility and conflict at the state level undermine security for individuals. Neither should be viewed as subservient to the other. Regional examples like Timor Leste, Myanmar and Mindanao in the Philippines highlight how poverty and political grievances that elicit a primarily military response can become trapped in a vicious cycle.

The pursuit of gender equality and addressing gender-based violence is foundational to this conception of individual security as a driver of peace and security.

In both economic and security terms, Southeast Asia matters deeply to Australia. However,

Southeast Asia's progress over the last 30 years is unlikely to be a blueprint for coming decades. As a region, Southeast Asia finds itself described as a geostrategic flashpoint for the emerging great power contestation between the United States and China, vulnerable to climate impacts and suffering persistent governance challenges. These have been complicated by the on-going health burdens and human security concerns – as well as the economic fallout – from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Simultaneously, the region is taking positive steps to determine its future development and security pathways, including through the strategic strengthening of partnerships beyond the region.

Countries' ability to respond to wicked challenges like climate change and pandemics is fundamentally about human security and the extent to which individuals and governments have the resources and structures to respond and recover from shocks. Improving human security and development outcomes at the individual level provide states with the resilience to meet these challenges. Addressing and preventing wicked challenges – or at least mitigating the worst impacts – is about collective regional action that requires countries to look beyond the great powers to build security partnerships among the countries in the region.

With the potential for real conflict in the region, combined with enduring hunger, disease, natural disasters, poverty and inequality that kill more people than war, genocide and terrorism combined, it is timely to examine where Australia and Southeast Asia share comprehensive security interests that recognise the full spectrum of human insecurity.

It is in Australia's national interest to support a secure, stable and prosperous Southeast Asia that supports human flourishing.

“Australia’s vision to implement ‘rules-based order’ should be pursued through extensive dialogue with Southeast Asia counterparts by strengthening force. Southeast Asian countries do not want attention in the region simply to be because of the ‘China factor’, but based on building genuine relations to understand its closest neighbors better.”

Lina Alexandra, “Building Stronger Relations Between Australia and ASEAN”, La Trobe Asia, June 2021



“The economic, security and diplomatic benefits to Australia of moving [the remaining poor] into the Asian middle class locates South East Asian development at the nexus of Australian interests. Despite this, we barely make the top ten development partners in a majority of ASEAN countries.”

Richard Moore, “Rising Risk and Opportunity in Southeast Asia Require Reassessment and Response”, International Development Policy Review Submission, 2020



Aligning Views

For many Southeast Asian states, development challenges, governance issues, public health and the risks associated with climate change rank highest as security concerns. Demographic and generational shifts are impacting on how Southeast Asia sees itself.

If Australia's main focus is on geostrategic dynamics, it risks paying inadequate attention to the substantial human security challenges that the region faces. Although some Southeast Asian states share Australia's geostrategic concerns, this overlap is not universal. Misalignment with Southeast Asia's broader human security priorities will undermine Australia's real and perceived status as a regional security partner.

Southeast Asian states have a clear strategic preference for maximising their room for manoeuvre and flexibly accommodating the responsible presence of superpowers. This is due to the significant public goods—in the form of infrastructure, investment, development finance — that this can bring.

Southeast Asian states reject any perceived fatalism that views the region as the site of an impending great-power clash. Fatalism does not align well with a region eager to maximise choice and which is cautiously optimistic about its potential to moderate US-China tensions and sustain a peaceful path towards prosperity.

Southeast Asian states recognise and value the agency they wield in shaping the regional order.

Australia's perceived preoccupation with great-power contestation is a significant barrier to enhancing effective regional partnerships.

Australian investment in external partnerships such as the Quad and AUKUS, which are intended to supplement rather than displace engagement with ASEAN, can instead fuel anxieties in some Southeast Asian capitals that Australia is working around the region rather than with it. Prioritising cooperation with Washington, New Delhi, Tokyo and London may alienate some of the resident states with the largest stake in regional security outcomes.

On the positive side, Australia has a strong, established network of significant regional and bilateral relationships in Southeast Asia: each uniquely shaped by history, geopolitics, trade and more. From Cambodia to Timor Leste, Australia has solid experience to point to where it has thought in both national security and human security terms.

While there are occasions where diverging goals emerge between Canberra and its Southeast Asian counterparts, there are real and practical ways that Australia has been, and can be, an effective security partner in pursuit of both Southeast Asian and Australian interests.

“Australia is the anchor of ASEAN, hanging down there as a steadying force in the rising and ebbing geopolitical tides; rounding out our geographical distinctiveness, security, and the felicity of Southeast Asia.”

*Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro L. Locsin Jr,
Philippine Intervention at ASEAN Post-ministerial
Conference Session with Australia, August 2021*



“The top three pressing national security issues were the COVID-19 pandemic, terrorism and violent extremism, and the communist insurgency. The fact that terrorism is still high on the list indicates that the focus of the Australia-Philippine security cooperation is where it should be.”

*Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby, Australia and the
Philippines – Prospects for Engagement, La Trobe Asia,
June 2021*



Barriers

Australia's ability to act and be seen as a partner of choice for Southeast Asia is challenged by the region's heterogeneous interests, values and priorities. This complicates a uniform partnership agenda across the region. Australia cannot treat Southeast Asia as a monolith and must approach each country in the region with a tailored and graduated approach, attuned to the overlapping but often different constellations of interests in each context.

At the same time, a regional partnership that is greater than the sum of its bilateral parts requires strategic emphasis on the interests and priorities that are broadly shared within and with the region. This includes maritime security, countering interference and securing economic growth. Each of these elements provide fertile ground for effective and broad-based cooperation.

Many countries in Southeast Asia have different conceptions of human rights and responsibilities to Australia, placing value in different areas especially in regards to individual versus collective rights. In extreme scenarios of genocide and crimes against humanity, it may be untenable to continue to pursue security cooperation. Yet it would be premature to entirely preclude cooperation on the basis of diverging political systems and values alone. Pursuit of interests and values is not necessarily zero-sum. Australia has a strong history of balancing advocacy on abolition of the death penalty – a central part of the justice system in many Southeast Asian countries – with other objectives in its relationships in the region. This can be extended to other issues such as freedom of the press, strengthening civil society and advancing women's rights. For the same reason that the region's pragmatism can generate actions and policies that jar with Australia's values, so too it gives the region the bandwidth to cooperate with Australia on areas of shared interest.

Australia's declining relative power weakens its capacity to be an influential and attractive partner. Part of the decline in Australia's relative power stems from structural factors, such as the faster growth of some Southeast Asian countries and Australia's comparatively small population. But Australia's diminishing influence can be partially attributed to an underinvestment in its development cooperation program and diplomatic capabilities. There is the need for greater coordination and rebalancing of investment between Australia's defence, diplomacy and development.

There can be tensions between these different arms of statecraft. For example, development cooperation programs need to engage with systemic drivers of inequality to be effective in the long term – which may include global economic systems and trade arrangements. Closer cooperation between different aspects of statecraft, including analysis of the gendered development impacts of Australia's foreign policy choices, is critical to ensuring that efforts in one space are not undermined by another.

Although state security and human security are ideally mutually reinforcing, these dimensions of security can work at cross-purposes. Australian efforts to support state security risk strengthening governments that do not adequately attend to the human security needs of their citizens. Equally, moves to improve human security can be politically fraught in some contexts, leading these governments to be less likely to accept Australian support to bolster state security.



Cambodian Mine Action Centre landmine team at work (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade)

The Vision in Practice

What does it look like for Australia to be a security partner in Southeast Asia?

Australia's Southeast Asian regional engagement will be animated by areas of shared interest, with Australia's development, diplomacy and defence policy agendas aligned towards the pursuit of a secure, stable and prosperous Southeast Asia.

Australia is willing to invest in the necessary resources to maintain its status as a trusted and influential partner to governments, civil society and business in the region.

A PARTNER FOR BOTH STATE SECURITY AND HUMAN SECURITY IMPERATIVES

Australia de-emphasises the focus on Southeast Asia as a stage for great power contestation in its foreign policy approach. Australia's regional presence and engagement becomes a force that reduces the risk of intra-regional conflict and, where necessary, responds in a way which promotes rapid and sustainable returns to peace.

Australia acknowledges the synergistic relationship between state and human security goals, and identifies and addresses where these may come into conflict.

Australia will recognise the opportunities to promote an expanded conceptualisation of human security in context-specific ways and pursue collaboration where the human security goals of Australia and Southeast Asia align. This includes actively promoting inclusive human security, including beyond urban centres, that addresses gender inequality and gender-based violence. Australia delivers investment in targeted Women, Peace and Security forums and initiatives designed in collaboration with relevant counterpart agencies in each country.

Defence will play a role in championing human security: explaining it and talking about it publicly. Defence will also play a leadership role advocating development and diplomacy as important elements of foreign policy, recognising that it is in Defence's self-interest for Australia to use a range of tools to shape its international environment. This will be supported by opportunities for agencies to understand each other better through

greater cross-pollination and training across the sectors.

STRENGTHENING LINKAGES WITH, WITHIN AND BEYOND THE REGION

Australia will further utilise ASEAN's access and agency as key means of propagating new cooperative approaches to human and state security. It will maintain and strengthen bilateral linkages, including through second track dialogues and broader civil society engagement. It will signal its commitment and common interests with Southeast Asia in actions and in messaging.

Australia elevates the Annual Australia-ASEAN Women, Peace and Security Dialogue to one of the central arms of its security engagement within Southeast Asia. The dialogue demonstrates Australia's leadership in strengthening regional security partnerships and emphasises the importance of women's full and meaningful participation to lasting peace and security.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's human fragility analysis function will be revived.

Trade and foreign investment will be promoted as a driver of human security. Australia will continue to promote trade liberalisation for Southeast Asia as well as pragmatically responding to China's significant economic role in the region. Free trade agreements with and within the region will be activated and applied towards the promotion of a broad and inclusive regional prosperity.

Australia blends official development assistance with other funding to support modern development initiatives. Development and defence look for opportunities to integrate to promote human security. There is recognition of the link between people's basic needs (food, water, shelter, energy, safety and respect for human rights) and national security. The security and regional development agendas of superpowers and middle powers in the Indo-Pacific have merged and are integrated into national security strategies and bilateral partnerships in the region.

Australia uses its diplomacy and development cooperation program to promote positive relationships between Southeast Asian states and their citizens, regardless of the form of government. It will enhance existing initiatives to support civil society and strengthen connections across the region as a critical strategy for building resilient and open societies, and ensuring governments are informed by and accountable to citizens. Central to this is the enhancement and maintenance of links with Southeast Asian civil society and addressing areas where structures of governance are 'broken' in how they relate to citizens.

There is an expanded scope for international volunteering, New Colombo Plan scholarships and regional language learning to strengthen linkages with the region.

Australia plays an important role on cyber security, helping to counter disinformation and its effect on democratic backsliding, as well as addressing the misuse of technology for human rights abuses.

RESPECTING SOVEREIGNTY AND DIVERSITY

Australia's strategic policy, practice and communications maintain respect for the sovereignty that states have over their own development and security goals. Australia recognises the constructive role that Southeast Asian partners can play in conditioning US-China rivalry and regional order. Australia partners constructively with the region in support of its stability and burgeoning prosperity, including in areas such as maritime security cooperation.

Australia will be flexible and nuanced in its approach to its security partnerships with each Southeast Asian state, avoiding the pitfalls of uniform treatment in a diverse region. Australia's engagement with each nation will account for the significant diversity of economic, political and social contexts with the Southeast Asian region.

Australia avoids methods of statecraft which simply seek to 'win over' Southeast Asia to Australia's view of the world. It will seek to promote and expand the agency of Southeast Asian states to pursue their own human security goals responsive to the needs of their citizens.

“Australia supports a peaceful, stable, resilient, and prosperous region, with ASEAN at its heart. A strong, united, and resilient ASEAN is vital to our region’s success and supports Australia’s own security and prosperity.”

Joint Media Release, Australia-ASEAN Leaders’ Summit 2021



“What Australia needs to do is to expand its understanding of security to include the management of climate change, pandemics, international criminality, pollution and environmental degradation, the creation of human and social capital, the expansion of institutional and other arrangements that enhance social equity, and the recognition that resilience and social inclusion are of greater significance in maintaining and enhancing national security than are defence and law enforcement systems of themselves.”

Allan Behm, Rethinking National Security in the Age of Pandemics and Climate Change Catastrophe, 2020



“So far Australia has been eerily silent on what is transpiring in Thailand. Worse, it comes across as being insensitive to the domestic audiences.”

Yawee Butrkrawee, Thailand Protests While Australia Watched from the Side-lines, La Trobe Asia, May 2021



“The ASEAN Leaders... were pleased to note the steady progress achieved in the dialogue relations between ASEAN and Australia over the past forty-two years and looked forward to enhancing the ASEAN-Australia strategic partnership encompassing the areas of political-security, economic, socio-cultural and development.”

Laos PDR Chairman’s Statement, First ASEAN-Australia Biennial Summit, September 2016



Pathways

There are numerous complementary and competing policy options to position Australia as an effective security partner in Southeast Asia, ranging from the pragmatic and incremental to the ambitious and transformative. While some policy competition is natural and unavoidable, seeking consistency across Australia's development, diplomacy and defence policies should be seen as an overarching strategic objective.

Immediate

Aligning with the recent commitment to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with ASEAN, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade can build upon existing dialogues to develop a suite of **strategic and economic dialogues** with both ASEAN as an institution and individual Southeast Asian states to share concerns about the security dimensions of economic developments in the region. This would include a high-level ministerial component, associated working-level collaboration and knowledge-exchange among relevant departments and agencies to facilitate shared understanding.

Australian Border Force and Australian Federal Police can build on existing collaboration with Southeast Asian counterparts, especially maritime Southeast Asia, on **non-traditional security threats**, including humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR), piracy and counterterrorism. Department of Defence can build on existing relationships to find areas of practical cooperation.

There is also scope to build on existing initiatives on **cyber security** with additional capacity-building support. This could include working together with Southeast Asian countries to agree on and build regional systems, standards and protection mechanisms in line with a shared commitment to open, secure platforms that enable the exchange of social, political and economic information, including those of citizens about their governments. A cyber security strategy for development cooperation could be included in a new development strategy or hybrid national security-development fund. As well as improving state security by helping Southeast Asian states protect themselves, this would have beneficial human security outcomes such as protecting privacy.

Domestic action to **tackle international corruption**, specifically the flows that come to Australia from parts of Southeast Asia where illicit profits are generated from drugs and other transnational organised crime. These illicit flows grossly undermine development objectives and systems of governance. Australia can play an important role by closing bank accounts and disrupting flows of money-laundering. Greater transparency requirements around local company ownership and the real estate industry is also important to disrupting illicit money flows. A hands-off approach is at odds with Australia's international obligations in this space. Australia can leverage domestic financial regulation for international impact to foster greater security in the region.

The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation in partnership with the Department of Home Affairs can strengthen existing programs of outreach and capacity-building on **political interference and influence operations**. These grey zone activities are a threat to both human and state security and adversely impact all Southeast Asian states to varying degrees. As well as building the political, social and institutional resilience of Southeast Asian governments and societies, such an initiative would provide Australia with an opportunity to engage with governments in the region as a supportive partner. It would allow Australia to learn from Southeast Asian experiences, while also providing Australia an opportunity to share its lessons learned.

Promote **climate adaptation and resilience** regionally. A proof-of-concept initiative would be to leverage the ARC Centre of Excellence for Climate Systems Science, which supports research into Australian mitigation and adaptation strategies, to be more regionally focused. Australia's research base and university sector is a key asset of power and influence which can partner with Southeast Asian governments and regional partner organisations to support collaborative research with clear public policy benefits. Australian-funded research into actionable regional resilience, adaptation and mitigation strategies is practical and mutual benefit.

Promote greater **renewable energy exports** to meet Southeast Asia's rapidly rising energy demand and concern for energy security. Beyond the significant economic benefits this will bring to Australia, it will also help the region meet its energy needs without locking-in long-term emissions. This has the double benefit of supporting Southeast Asia's stability and growth while reducing collective exposure to climate risk.

Support ASEAN efforts to position itself at the core of **critical technology value chains**. A proof-of-concept initiative would be to use blended finance to support investment into Indonesia's emerging car battery industry to help it become a global electric vehicle (EV) manufacturing hub. Australia would secure a key critical-tech supply chain and help expand export markets for Australian lithium. This will reduce climate risk for Australia and the region by accelerating the transition to EVs and deepen two-way investment and business-to-business links. This would also build on existing initiatives like the Cyber and Critical Technology Cooperation Program.

The Foreign Investment Review Board in partnership with Treasury could develop a series of dialogues and workshops with **investment review bodies** in Southeast Asian states. Foreign investments and economic connectivity are a key vector for security threats and vulnerabilities where a two-way exchange of knowledge and expertise would benefit Australia and Southeast Asian. The aim would be to support Southeast Asian states to enjoy the human security benefits of investments and infrastructure while avoiding the potential state security risks associated with some investments. This initiative would empower Southeast Asian states to negotiate deals that best serve their development needs, including on gender equality.

Expand the use of Australia's updated **autonomous sanctions regime**. The aim would be to promote good governance and disincentivise democratic backsliding regionally by targeting regime figures guilty of corruption and human rights abuses while sparing citizens from the negative impacts of uniform sanctions. This could involve greater cooperative partnerships with civil society organisations across the region, helping to maintain human security partnerships with peoples across Southeast Asia especially in countries where governments are not representative of their citizens.

Announce a comprehensive **investment in civic space** involving increased funding directly to civil society individuals and entities, strengthening free media and supporting actors in Southeast Asia that foster open states and free and fair elections.

As a strategy to harmonise an approach to state and human security which recognises the way both are underpinned by gender equality, Australia works with Southeast Asia to co-create a **feminist foreign policy agenda** that identifies common goals and priorities that are relevant to the region. This should build on Australia's track record in Women, Peace and Security and extend and deepen the focus on transforming systems of inequality across all arms of statecraft.

Work with the region to develop **robust de-escalation mechanisms and communication channels**, including at the military-to-military level, that can help deconflict crises when they arise.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Thank you to those who have contributed their thoughts during development of this paper. Views expressed cannot be attributed to any individuals or organisations involved in the process.

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