

## **Australia in the Region: Dialogue, Transparency and Trust**

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A decade or two ago, readers may have wondered why the Australian High Commissioner to Malaysia would write an introduction to an edition of the *International Journal of China Studies*. But our region has changed rapidly since then and Australia's place in and vision for the region has changed along with it.

Today, Australia recognises that having a deep understanding of our region matters. And more than ever, it matters how we work with regional partners, including China, to shape a peaceful, prosperous and secure region.

### **Australia, ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific region**

Australia has longstanding connections across the Indo-Pacific – through geography, trade, and people – and a shared vision for a peaceful, stable, and prosperous region. In March this year, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese publicly affirmed “Australia is committed to being an exemplary partner... – we will continue to be constructive, and to engage with respect, honesty and trust, and, importantly, to listen.”

Working with Southeast Asia, we can – and we want to – play a bigger role in the region's pursuit of economic opportunity, development, and growth. We have launched *Invested: Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040* – which outlines a practical pathway to boost two-way trade between Australia and Southeast Asia – to maximise the potential of our economic ties. We are supporting inclusive and sustainable growth across Southeast Asia, while maintaining quality support and a longstanding commitment to local employment and shared prosperity.

ASEAN is central to our shared vision for the region. As ASEAN's first dialogue partner, and a Comprehensive Strategic Partner, Australia is committed to working together to pursue a region where differences and disputes are settled through institutions, and mutually agreed rules and norms. Australia sees ASEAN and its architecture as indispensable for

dialogue—to enable cooperation, build strategic trust and guard against conflict. We are a transparent partner, and we respect ASEAN principles and its shared goals.

In the face of new and growing challenges, it is vital that across the region we all find common ground, build resilience and encourage open communication. And that is where platforms such as this journal help us to understand the region better, and to identify shared solutions to emerging challenges in the economic, political, cultural, and scientific realms.

### **Australia's Relationship with China**

As Australia has learnt from, and changed with, our broader region, so too has our relationship with China changed. A stable and constructive Australia-China relationship is in the interest of both countries. Our current relationship is based on strong economic and trade complementarities and longstanding community and cultural links. We are Comprehensive Strategic Partners, reflecting the breadth and depth of our relationship.

Economic ties are a keystone of the Australia-China relationship. China is Australia's largest two-way trading partner and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Total two-way goods and services trade between Australia and China reached a record AUD\$327 billion in 2023. In 2022-23, our trade with China accounted for 26 per cent of our goods and services trade with the world.

In recent years, Australia and China have taken significant steps to stabilise our relationship for the benefit of both countries and the broader region. Australia's approach will remain patient, calibrated and deliberate. Australia cooperates with China where we can, disagrees where we must, and engages in our national interest.

We know that others in our region are looking at how we manage our relationship with China, as we in turn look to and learn from our regional partners' relationships. While Australia and China have many shared interests, we also have differences to manage. In our engagement with China, we work in support of the welfare of our citizens, the rights and freedoms of those who live in Australia, and our strategic, security and trade interests. Yet our relationship with China should not be defined by our differences – we recognise they are there, yet also recognise the mutual benefits that flow from our engagement. We will manage differences wisely.

## **Australia's Chinese Diaspora**

Established in 2010, this journal has published many articles on the role of Chinese diaspora in Malaysia, Southeast Asia and further abroad. To contribute to this discussion, I would like to elaborate on the role of this important community in Australia.

Australia today is a modern and multicultural nation. We are home to people of more than 300 ancestries and the oldest continuing culture on earth. We are a nation where half our population was born overseas or has a parent who was born overseas. When Australians look out to the region, we see ourselves reflected in it and equally, the region can see itself reflected in Australia.

Australian Chinese communities have contributed immensely to our society. They form the largest migrant group in Australia, with more than 1.4 million people of Chinese heritage living in Australia today. Their experiences are as diverse as their views. Many were born in Australia, with lineages that span generations of Australian history. Others have migrated more recently from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, including Malaysia.

We are proud of the many contributions Australians of Chinese heritage have made to our nation – from Dr Victor Chang AC, who was a pioneer of modern heart transplant surgery, to Professor Wang Gungwu AO CBE, an eminent historian previously based in Malaysia specialising in China and Southeast Asia. We have award-winning media personalities and celebrity chefs, such as Malaysian-Chinese-Australian, Poh Ling Yeow, and business leaders such as Malaysian-Chinese Ming Long AM, who is Chair of Diversity Council Australia and the first Asian-Australian woman to lead an ASX200 company. These leaders have shown what it means to draw on a rich cultural heritage, and create something even stronger for Australia and our region.

## **Looking to the Future: Trust and Transparency in Our Regional Partnerships**

It is an important time to reflect on our key relationships within the region, including those with ASEAN and China. In 2024 Australia is celebrating 50 years of cooperation with ASEAN. To commemorate this milestone, we hosted the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit in Melbourne in March

hosting leaders of all ASEAN countries and Timor-Leste. The Summit was a concrete demonstration that Australia is invested in and committed to the region. It demonstrated how we listen to and understand partners' perspectives on our shared challenges, and how we exchange ideas and expertise to meet these challenges together. In the spirit of the Summit, Australia will continue to strengthen not only our political, security and economic connections with ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific region, but also the deep ties between our people.

We look forward to working with Malaysia, as ASEAN Chair in 2025, to take our relationship to new heights. 2025 will be a particularly special year for Australia and Malaysia, as we will also commemorate 70 years of Australia's diplomatic presence in Malaysia.

Australia has always been committed to building relationships based on trust. We do this through our open and practical relationships with other countries, including China, ASEAN Members States such as Malaysia, and with regional and global institutions such as ASEAN and the United Nations. While these relationships are upheld and developed through official channels, they are also supported in other ways – such as setting out Australia's views and vision for the region in a journal article such as this.

As we look to the future, Australia will continue to engage with transparency and trust. And we will continue to engage in dialogue, and to encourage others in the region to do likewise. Because it is only through dialogue, transparency and trust that we can all contribute to making our region more peaceful, stable and prosperous.