

Speech
High Commissioner HE Dr Justin Lee

Ambassadorial Session
ISIS Asia Pacific Roundtable
Tuesday 5 July 2022

Acknowledgements

Introduction

I'm delighted to be able to speak to you today and to participate again in this premier event.

Australia values very much our participation in these regional conferences, as opportunities to learn and understand perspectives from across the region, and to guide our future engagement together.

Related to that, I'm very pleased to see the numbers of Australian speakers and participants joining today.

And we look forward to hearing the views of other esteemed speakers from Malaysia and around the Indo-Pacific.

As many of you know, our Foreign Minister, Senator the Hon Penny Wong, visited Malaysia last week.

It was a fabulous, very productive visit over three days in Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu and demonstrates the new energy Australia is bringing to its regional relationships.

It is an energy that emphasises respectful dialogue and a process of engagement. And all great dialogues start with listening.

Minister Wong came to hear what Malaysians have to say.

She heard views on current challenges —such as economic recovery from the pandemic, food security, and on energy, health and cyber security. And perspectives on regional and global issues.

And to find new ways of working together to face these challenges.

Minister Wong is of course no stranger to Malaysia.

Her father from Sabah, was an original Colombo Plan scholar who went to Australia for education, where he also met her mother. Minister Wong spent her early years living in Kota Kinabalu.

She moved to Australia at a young age, but has retained strong family connections here in Malaysia.

As our Foreign Minister she also represents the face of modern Australia, which has now become home to more than 7.6 million migrants.

A place where nearly half of all Australians were born overseas or have at least one parent who was born overseas.

In the High Commission alone, my team of Australian diplomats consists of officers with immediate families in China, India, Vietnam, Indonesia, Timor-Leste, and of course Malaysia. Reflecting that Australia very much is

a part of this region, and I would argue always has been. My own Chinese family came to Australia in the 1870s.

More broadly, Australia is a successful multicultural society, filled with people who come – or whose family came – from almost all areas of the globe to call Australia home.

Including our unique First Nations people, Australians speak more than 260 languages and identify with more than 270 ancestries.

The cultural connections between Australia and Malaysia and Australia and the region are extraordinary.

Australians know our future is tied to the future of the region we share.

It's more than geography that ties us together - we have genuine links: family, business, education and tourism.

But what sort of region are we living in? And how can we work together to make our region the best it can be?

We are diverse nations, but we all agree that we want to live in a region that is stable, prosperous and respectful of sovereignty.

At this point I'd like to turn to regional cooperation.

Australia is deepening engagement with Southeast Asia.

Our Government has already outlined plans to boost development cooperation activities in the region by \$470 million to provide long-term support as we recover from the pandemic.

We will prepare a Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040, to map Australia's current and future export and investment directions across key ASEAN markets.

And the Government has committed to appointing a dedicated high-level roving regional envoy.

Australia recognises that ASEAN and ASEAN-led institutions hold the centre of the Indo-Pacific.

Australia supports the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, and its vision for a free, open and resilient Indo-Pacific.

We want a region that is peaceful and predictable.

We know there is strategic competition in the region.

Australia's focus is on building a stronger and more resilient region.

We want to support the countries of Southeast Asia to exercise their own agency in how the region is being reshaped.

As Minister Wong said last week "achieving this requires a strategic equilibrium in the region."

She said strategic equilibrium enables countries to make their own sovereign choices – rather than having their future decided for them.

ASEAN is the foundation of this equilibrium – it is the centre of the Indo-Pacific region.

ASEAN's strength lies in its ability to speak for the region and to balance regional powers.

All countries that seek to work with the region have a responsibility to engage constructively and respectfully with it.

Which is why it is such an honour for Australia to be a Comprehensive Strategic Partner with ASEAN.

But there's always more we can do.

At the High Commission in Kuala Lumpur, our role is to be a stronger partner for Malaysia, as other Australian missions perform similar roles in their countries of accreditation.

So at this point I'd like to turn to our bilateral relationship with Malaysia.

Australia and Malaysia are close friends and have always supported each other – from our long historical defence relations, right through to our health and economic collaboration during the pandemic. Our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreed last year, is built upon these broad and deep historical ties.

A foundation of our relationship has been education ties. Malaysians formed the largest number of original Colombo Plan participants (4,000).

Since then, more than 300,000 Malaysian students have studied at Australian education institutions and are valued alumni.

In 2020 (even during COVID), over 20,000 Malaysian students were studying in Australia, and we hope we can get back to and beyond the pre-COVID number of 24,000 soon.

Malaysia also hosts the largest overseas Australian university presence in the world. Four Australian universities have a significant presence in Malaysia: Curtin, Monash, Swinburne, and the University of Wollongong.

In the other direction, Malaysia is one of the most popular destinations for Australian undergraduate students supported by the New Colombo Plan (NCP).

Around 2,000 Australian undergraduate students have undertaken study and internships in Malaysia under the NCP since 2015.

Going forward we see enormous opportunity to work with Malaysia on other education offerings that meet Malaysia's needs for a highly skilled, productive workforce.

This includes not just traditional degree programs in Australia, but short courses, micro-credentials, fellowships and exchanges delivered here in Malaysia through partnerships with Malaysian and Australian institutions.

Trade and investment are also mainstays of our relationship.

Australia and Malaysia are both trading nations, and the free and predictable flow of international commerce matters to us both very much.

Malaysia was Australia's 11th largest trading partner in 2020, and 3rd largest in ASEAN, with two way trade worth over \$19 billion (around MYR 60 billion).

We are also significant investment partners. Malaysia is Australia's second largest source of, and destination for, foreign investment in Southeast Asia. Our current stock of two-way investment is over A\$31 billion (around MYR 93 billion).

Last week Minister Wong and Minister Azmin discussed ways to further deepen our economic cooperation, including in the areas of SME capacity building, supply chains and regional trade frameworks.

With the pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine, we have all experienced the impacts of pressures on global supply chains. We are pleased that Australia and Malaysia can work together to address these issues. For example, Australia is a reliable supplier of agricultural products to Malaysia and the region, and have stepped up our wheat exports here recently. And we think we can do more through complementary trade to benefit both our economies, for example by value adding to some of our raw materials in Malaysia and other countries of the region.

Australia and Malaysia have been strong supporters of rules-based trade agreements in the Indo-Pacific region.

We are parties to the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area (AANZFTA) and now the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). We look forward to Malaysia ratifying the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in the near future.

We also have the bilateral Malaysia-Australia Free Trade Agreement (MAFTA), and we have begun preparatory work on a general review of this agreement to take up

more opportunities in the digital economy and face issues like cyber security.

Cyber security is also a priority under our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. This week, right now, relevant Malaysian officials are participating in an Australia-supported Digital Cyber Bootcamp in Putrajaya, which builds capacity in issues like: critical infrastructure, global cyber governance and the application of international law in cyberspace.

Our more traditional defence and security engagement also remains a priority.

Under our bilateral Malaysian Australian Joint Defence Program, Malaysian and Australian defence officers regularly participate in training and professional exchanges. Of course, Australia and Malaysia are also part of the Five Power Defence Arrangements, formed in 1971.

Officers from the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency and the Australian Border Force also continue to cooperate on Operation REDBACK exercises which combat maritime crime and prevent vulnerable people from risking their lives at sea.

As agreed in our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, we are strengthening dialogue on bilateral maritime cooperation and shared maritime interests, and further exploring and enhancing maritime capacity building.

We have worked with Malaysia to share expertise on maritime domain awareness. We are cooperating regionally on responses to combating illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. And we've been pleased to

work with Malaysia to build expertise on law of the sea matters.

Australia has been a strong and consistent advocate for the importance of adherence to international law and particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea – UNCLOS – now 40 years old.

We have also funded the University of Queensland to work with Malaysia to tackle the environmental challenge of marine plastics.

All of this cooperation is built on our shared and mutual priorities. We also want to continue to foster dialogue that provides a platform for Malaysian perspectives.

As part of this, we are also supporting increased academic exchanges on maritime issues. Two Malaysian academics recently completed Australian-funded virtual maritime fellowships based at the Australian National University.

Their research examines the legality of foreign military activities in maritime highways like the Straits of Malacca and the Indonesian archipelagic sea lanes, as well as how best to boost civil maritime coordination.

Two more academics will commence their maritime fellowships shortly.

Going forward we know that issues like climate change are also of mutual interest.

Australia is lifting its ambition on climate change. The Government has set a new target to reduce Australia's emissions by 43 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030.

Our plan will see the proportion of renewables in Australia's National Energy Market increase to 82 per cent by 2030.

We congratulate Malaysia on its commitment to reach net zero by 2050 – a commitment Australia shares.

As raised by our Foreign Minister last week, Australia is committed to supporting enhanced climate action in our region through increased climate finance and new partnerships in the Pacific and Southeast Asia.

We see opportunities to work with the region in the transition to net zero, working together to build resilient clean energy sectors and at the same time delivering next generation jobs and growth.

We look forward to Roundtable discussions tomorrow on the impact of climate change and COP26 in our region – these are important issues.

In conclusion, Australia's deep relationship with Malaysia reflects our broader approach and ties to the region.

We have been longstanding, close and reliable partners.

We are now looking forward to a new era of even greater momentum and energy.

There is much we are doing together and there is much more to be done.

We are focused on the future, on creating a region which is stable and prosperous, and underpinned by rules and norms where each nations' sovereignty is respected.

Diversity is important – harnessing both Australia’s diversity and the region’s.

We will continue to listen to your diverse views.

And we will use Australian diversity to seek to better understand the region.

Because we share common ground. And a common vision for our region.