

Speech
Dr Steven Barraclough

Lunch Address
Asia Pacific Roundtable
10 August 2023

We have heard throughout this event the distinguished views of esteemed leaders from across our region.

It's a great honour to speak to you today about Australia's perspectives.

We've been discussing our 'Age of Strategic Uncertainty'.

And while it is a challenge, we shouldn't view it as turning into the norm.

We all have agency, and we all have a role to play.

Which is why I want to focus on what is in all of our control to help create certainty.

Listening.

Understanding.

Openness.

Transparency.

Respect — for each other and for international law.

When we look at it through this lens, the history between Australia and Malaysia speaks for itself.

We share a friendship that has endured regional challenges over the many years — from the Second World War to the COVID-19 pandemic.

And our friendship continues to grow.

Not only with Malaysia, but with the countries of Southeast Asia.

We are invested, engaged and committed to the region at the highest levels.

We are listening to and understanding the views of our friends in the region.

In just over 12 months, Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong has visited every Southeast Asian country, except for Myanmar.

This represents part of more than 40 visits in the last year between Southeast Asia and Australia by senior Ministers, including four by our Prime Minister.

This level of engagement is a clear statement of Australia's intent and priorities in the region.

We want to meet our partners where you are.

And what we have heard is that countries of the region want growth, opportunity and prosperity.

Australia has much to offer as a trusted and reliable partner.

We are already taking steps to grow and modernise our economies together.

Australia's Special Envoy for Southeast Asia Mr Nicholas Moore AO has been busy visiting the region...

... listening to what more we can be doing to capitalise on emerging opportunities and to take our economic engagement to the next level.

The Special Envoy visited Malaysia in March this year and the valuable insights he received will help inform Australia's forthcoming Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040.

Side-by-side with the strategy, we have heard from our partners the need to do more...

... in sectors such as climate change and clean energy transition, gender equality, health, rapid digitalisation, knowledge and skills development, and infrastructure.

And along with our economic investments, we are working to ensure our development program is effectively delivered and responsive to changing needs, pressures and priorities.

This will all be informed by our new international development policy, which outlines how we play our part to shape an open, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

We have increased Official Development Assistance (ODA) to an estimated A\$1.24 billion in 2023-24 to Southeast and East Asia.

This includes an additional A\$470 million to Southeast Asia to deepen our engagement.

But turning up and listening is only one part of creating certainty.

Openness and transparency are crucial.

We need to engage openly and transparently, and as equals, from common ground.

Malaysia and Australia are longstanding close partners, both fellow parties of our Five Power Defence Arrangements.

We engage closely and share insights and updates. Australia values this type of relationship.

Earlier this year Australia took significant steps to engage regional counterparts about AUKUS ahead of the optimal pathway announcement.

Across the region, including here in Malaysia, Australian ministers and officials have talked frankly and openly with counterparts on AUKUS.

Our Chief of Defence Force visited Malaysia just days before our most recent AUKUS announcement, to share the latest updates and discuss the future outlook.

Through this engagement, Defence Minister Hasan was able to brief Malaysia's parliament on our non-proliferation approach on AUKUS—correcting misinformation—and reaffirming these submarines will carry conventional weapons and only be nuclear-powered, NOT armed.

Malaysia has called on all countries to promote transparency and confidence building, refraining from provocation.

These are sentiments Australia shares.

This commitment to transparency was also highlighted by our Prime Minister Anthony Albanese earlier this year during his IISS Shangri-La Dialogue keynote.

He reflected as the threats and challenges facing our nations have evolved and multiplied, we have held to the common understanding that we achieve far more together than we do alone.

That is our approach — AUKUS will allow Australia to be a stronger partner and more effective contributor to stability in the region.

And we will continue to keep our partners in the region up-to-date with developments.

This is how Australia wants our region to engage – openly and through dialogue.

And while we do have differences with countries in the region, we discuss them.

Australia and China have worked together to stabilise our relationship over the past year.

This has meant a resumption of dialogue, including at leader's level.

Dialogue better enables both countries to manage our differences wisely.

These include consular matters, trade blockages, human rights and international law and norms that underpin our security and our prosperity.

Our relations with China are also marked by very close economic ties.

China is our largest trading partner.

We depend on each other.

And we recognise that by stabilising our relationship, it sends a signal to our partners in the region that we want certainty.

Australia seeks a predictable region operating by agreed rules, standards, and norms, where no one country dominates, and no country is dominated.

Our region is being reshaped and we have to navigate this period of change together.

All those who operate in our region should seek to engage with countries in the same way—a way that promotes certainty.

ASEAN, and ASEAN-led institutions are the anchors that foster certainty in our region.

As a regional organisation that brings together intrinsically diverse states, ASEAN has helped bring stability, security and prosperity.

Its rules-based approach to managing relations between its diverse members is one of its strengths.

ASEAN centrality means that Australia will always think about our security in the context of Southeast Asia's security.

For more than half a century, ASEAN has centred on the ideals that promote certainty...

...economic, social, cultural, technical and educational cooperation...

...the promotion of regional peace and stability

...and respect for justice and the rule of law, including international law and the principles of the United Nations Charter.

Malaysia, as a founding ASEAN member knows this too well.

And so too does Australia.

We recognised the invaluable contribution of ASEAN from the start, becoming its first dialogue partner.

And as Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong has said,

'each week, somewhere in Southeast Asia, Australians and their ASEAN counterparts are using our extensive network of dialogues and forums to weave together our collective interests and purpose.'

Next year will mark 50 years of our dialogue partnership.

During this time, we have achieved a great deal together, and we are honoured to be a Comprehensive Strategic Partner of ASEAN.

This provides an even greater opportunity for us to work together on priorities such as climate change, health security, and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

We have been making strong progress on implementing the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with A\$204 million of Aus4ASEAN Futures Initiative.

Education and skills development is a priority for our collaboration with ASEAN, and a way in which we are making our actions count in our region.

We are pleased that we have supported 100 Australia for ASEAN scholars, including offering 10 new masters scholarships to Malaysians.

These scholars are studying in fields that support ASEAN priorities and advancing the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

And the Aus4ASEAN Digital Transformation and Future Skills Initiative will provide opportunities in vocational training on digital transformation and job readiness to 350 citizens of ASEAN countries.

We are also tackling pressing issues with our ASEAN friends on climate change.

We are proud to be leading the way, including support to develop the ASEAN Strategy on Carbon Neutrality.

And later this year, we will co-chairing an ASEAN-Australia High Level Dialogue on Climate Change and Energy Transition with Vietnam and Laos.

These initiatives show the tangible actions Australia is taking in support of our commitment to ASEAN.

And we look forward to expanding our cooperation further during the ASEAN-Australia Commemorative Summit next year.

Because we know ASEAN is central to maintaining certainty in our region for the next 50 years.

The Commemorative Summit will be hosted in Australia and represents an opportunity to reflect on our historical engagement with ASEAN, and to further enhance our cooperation through the practical implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

The Quad is deeply invested in the future prosperity and stability of our shared region.

We see the Quad working alongside ASEAN to bring enduring benefit to the region by providing options that build resilience and create choices – not force them.

And Quad partners, all long standing ASEAN Dialogue Partners, are steadfast supporters of ASEAN centrality, the ASEAN-led architecture and ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

We will act together as a force for good to find common solutions for region-wide benefit.

And we will work transparently to implement a practical agenda that responds to the region's priorities and needs — including on health security, connectivity, infrastructure, climate change and clean energy supply chains.

It has never been more important for ASEAN to play this convening role, setting an agenda for engagement and cooperation in the region.

Myanmar remains an issue of deep concern, to Australia, ASEAN, and the wider region. The ongoing crisis directly affects regional security and prosperity.

The military coup in Myanmar has reversed years of democratic, economic and development gains and plunged the country into a deep political and humanitarian crisis.

Australia continues to strongly support ASEAN's leadership as a critical element in responding to the Myanmar crisis, including the 5-Point Consensus.

ASEAN's security is the region's security, and Australia supports and deeply values ASEAN's efforts in helping to resolve the Myanmar crisis.

Which brings me to ASEAN's key strength in underscoring certainty — embracing diversity and diverse views.

By its very nature ASEAN sets the example for regional diversity.

It incorporates diverse cultures, religions and levels of economic development.

It's home to diverse languages — more than 1,200 different voices speaking with a collective voice.

ASEAN is not about homogeneity or compulsion. It is not dominated by any one of its members.

It creates a shared space for each of its member states to exercise their agency.

And just like diversity is part of ASEAN's identity, so too is it part of Australia's.

It's part of our story — and we are proud of it.

Of the 25 million Australians, nearly half of us were born overseas or have a parent born overseas.

And we are fortunate to be home to the oldest continuous culture on the planet — that of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In the High Commission alone, my team of Australian diplomats boast family heritage from Indonesia, Vietnam, China, India,

Afghanistan, and of course Malaysia. My wife migrated from Vietnam.

Our team reflects the region's diversity.

And this extends to Australia as a whole. More than one million people have ancestry from Southeast Asia, including almost 180,000 from Malaysia.

This includes our Foreign Minister, the Hon Penny Wong, who was born in Sabah and spent her early years living in Kota Kinabalu.

The latest Australian census showed that more than 17 per cent of Australians are of Asian heritage.

If current trends continue, that figure is going to increase.

Diversity matters to Australia because it is part of who we are.

Part of what we are proud of.

Diversity, and all it brings, is why listening to and understanding each other creates certainty.

Which brings me to the final piece of creating certainty.

Respecting and upholding international law and norms creates certainty.

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

Where disputes are guided by international law and norms, not by power and size.

A region that is peaceful and predictable.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shown what happens when sovereignty and international law are discarded...

...an unmitigated disaster which is creating economic shocks and impacting everyday citizens through the painful increase in food and energy prices including in our region.

It reinforces the importance of international laws and norms and for our region.

It reinforces the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to maintaining peace, stability and sovereignty.

Australia was one of the first countries to ratify UNCLOS.

And we are a strong and consistent advocate for its importance as the comprehensive legal framework for all activities in the oceans and seas.

UNCLOS creates certainty in our global system and ensure sovereign rights and resources are protected.

It is possible to resolve maritime boundaries in accordance with UNCLOS and it has happened.

Just last month, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong visited our friends in Timor-Leste.

She spoke of how Australia and Timor-Leste worked together to resolve our own serious dispute over our shared maritime boundaries.

She didn't shy away from truth or fact, but acknowledged that our relationship continues to grow because of the way we approach our friendship with the elements of certainty I have outlined.

And as we look ahead, we are firmly committed to helping Timor-Leste to join ASEAN — in this regard, I also thank Malaysia for their support in this endeavour.

It is our collective responsibility to create certainty in the region.

As Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong said earlier this year,

“...viewing the future of the region simply in terms of great powers competing for primacy means countries’ own national interests can fall out of focus.

...It diminishes the power of each country to engage other than through the prism of a great power.”

Australia consistently talks about a region that is stable, prosperous and respectful of sovereignty and international law.

We place emphasis on countries protecting their ability to exercise agency.

Malaysia often expresses sovereignty as a civilisational concept – as Madani.

As core values enshrining sustainability, prosperity, innovation, respect, trust and compassion.

I’d like to thank Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim for expanding on those views earlier today.

Each country has its own way of describing what is essentially sovereignty, and the way nations should interact.

But it’s not just how it is said that matters, it is what you do.

Let’s be open about what works and what doesn’t.

For giving us the opportunity to have this conversation about certainty, let me thank ISIS, including Chairman Prof Dr Faiz Abdullah and other distinguished guests including Ambassadors from the EU and China who have helped contribute to our dialogue.