Digging in its backyard: Why Australia should deepen engagement with Southeast Asia

See Seng Tan is Associate Professor, Deputy Director of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Executive summary

- Reasons for why Australia should deepen defence engagement with Southeast Asia outweigh those against it.
- Southeast Asia is important to Australia as a buffer and hedge against a potential China threat and as a region of import to its key ally, the United States.
- ASEAN and its suite of regional arrangements allow Australia to engage the great powers in high-level security dialogue and defence cooperation beyond what it can do on its own.

Questions are being asked today about the feasibility and effectiveness of Australia’s continued defence engagement with Southeast Asia. Defence budget cuts and a new Defence White Paper which the Coalition will publish in 2015 are encouraging uncertainty. Coming on the heels of the region’s collective handwringing over whether US rebalancing to Asia could be sustained due also to defence cuts, the Australian debate about DWP2015 has a hint of déjà vu about it.

No matter the merits of arguments against the continuation of Australia defence diplomacy towards Southeast Asia, I suggest they are far outweighed by the reasons why Australia should not only continue but deepen its engagement in the region. If anything, Southeast Asia has grown in importance for Australia in recent years and that trend will not be reversed any time soon. In economic terms, the region to be sure pales in comparison to China, the top trading partner of Australia since 2007.1 In security terms however, Southeast Asia has arguably risen in prominence in Canberra’s strategic outlook and not simply because of Indonesia’s perennial importance to Australia.

Buffering and Hedging

Five decades ago, Sir Shane Paltridge, the former defence minister, argued that Australian strategic thinking on Southeast Asia has long been defined by Canberra’s acute awareness of the region’s relative weakness, an imbalance in economic and security resources, and its uneasiness over China’s strategic ambitions vis-à-vis Southeast Asia, both of which hold implications for Australia’s security.2 With the ending of the Cold War and China serving notice on its rising power, an Asia from which Australia had sought previously to protect itself had become the region where Australia can best guarantee its future prosperity and ‘seek security with... rather than from it.’3

From a security perspective, Southeast Asia has figured in that paradigm shift as reflected in Australian Defence White Papers of the past three decades. While DWP1987 stressed self-reliance in the direct defence of Australia, DWP2000, mindful of the prospect for rising instability in Australia’s near abroad (e.g. East Timor in 1999), rationalised and urged the expansion of Australia’s defence diplomacy in the Asia Pacific while maintaining its peacekeeping commitments globally.4 Crucially, the ‘concentric circles’ approach of DWP2000 placed Indonesia (together with Timor Leste, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and the South Pacific islands) within the second priority circle, but ‘relegated’ Southeast Asia to the third or next outer circle.

Although the concentric circles approach has more or less been retained within DWP2009 and DWP2013, the place of Southeast Asia however has been ‘upgraded’ in Canberra’s strategic thinking. If anything, Southeast Asia looms large in DWP2013 and has in fact become central to Australia’s defence diplomacy efforts.5

While its sister document, the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper, has been criticized for its relative silence on Southeast Asia and ASEAN,6 the same cannot be said about DWP2013. Furthermore, DWP2013 highlights a key challenge for Australia’s so-called ‘outgoing maritime strategy’, for which China’s recent assertiveness in regional waters

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and its formidable Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2AD) capability have understandably proved worrisome. ‘Australia is thoroughly enmeshed in a global sea-based trading system, not least as a major supplier of commodities to China’, as maritime expert Geoffrey Till has argued. ‘A threat to the system’s operation represents an indirect threat to Australia’s interests’.7

With Southeast Asia standing between it and its largest trading partner, Australia cannot afford to ignore Southeast Asia. Deepening ties with ASEAN states – and not just with Indonesia, as Huxley has cautioned 8 – has been critical not only to maintaining the region as a buffer against untoward Chinese ambitions should they manifest, but providing Australia an economic alternative or hedge. As one commentator has acerbically put it, Australia’s ‘newly found love of regional engagement is all about winning over the half billion souls that live between [it] and China over to [its] way of thinking’.9

Walking Among Giants

Australia played key roles in the formation of region-wide arrangements such as the APEC and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Recent policies have indicated strong continued support for the ARF and the East Asia Summit (EAS) and Canberra’s intention to ‘take a leading role’ in the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+).10 Despite its awkward ‘multi-multilateral’ character, ASEAN’s suite of regional arrangements furnish ample regular opportunities for Australia to engage the great powers in high-level security dialogue and defence cooperation beyond what it can do on its own. ‘In no multilateral fora would our Prime Minister sit with the leaders of the United States, Japan, China, Indonesia or any of the states of South East Asia. The leadership of those countries occupied a world beyond us’, as Paul Keating once conceded in the context of Australian participation in Asia’s evolving regional architecture.11

If anything, involvement in the ARF, EAS and ADMM+, no matter how flawed those bodies are, allows Australia to ‘walk amongst giants’.12 In this regard, Australia’s partnership with ASEAN and other stakeholder countries becomes even more crucial as they work to render those institutions into ‘effective mechanisms to manage regional and transnational security issues and risks arising from rivalries and the possibilities of miscalculation’.13

Region’s Importance to America

Finally, Southeast Asia and ASEAN are critical to Australia because the region and the organisation have grown in significance for the United States, Australia’s key ally. As US support for Japan’s military normalisation has underscored, enhanced burden-sharing among allies has become an expectation from which no one, not least Australia, is exempt.14

In a recent study on Australian defence diplomacy prepared by a team of respected analysts, what stood out among a host of policy recommendations on how the Australian Defence Forces (ADF) could enhance its military-to-military engagement with Southeast Asian countries were proposals to enhance ADF contributions in areas where US forces might draw down in the future. For example, counterinsurgency assistance to the Philippines.15 While such readiness to plug gaps left by the Americans could encourage allegations that Canberra is again playing as Washington’s deputy sheriff or poodle in the Asia Pacific,16 it is clearly in Australia’s interest to assist the region and deepen its ties with it.

Arguing that Australia needs Asia more than the other way round, Ramesh Thakur believes that regional engagement is Australia’s ‘path to salvation from economic marginalization, political loneliness and, ultimately, strategic irrelevance’.17 Much as Australia should deepen its defence engagement with Southeast Asia and ASEAN for its own purposes, there is no doubt the region also needs Australia’s partnership.

Policy recommendation

Australia should actively seek to deepen security ties and defence cooperation with Southeast Asian countries both bilaterally and multilaterally. To that end, the anticipated 2015 Defence White Paper should build on the relevant recommendations called for by its predecessors.

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Endnotes

7 Geoffrey Till, ‘Outgoing Australia?’, Centre of Gravity series paper 14, February 2014 (Canberra: Strategic Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, 2014) p. 4.
13 2013 Defence White Paper, para. 6.5.
15 Sam Bateman, Anthony Bergin and Hayley Channer, Terms of Engagement: Australia’s Regional Defence Policy, Strategy, July 2013 (Barton, ACT: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2013), p. 5
17 Ramesh Thakur, ‘Is Australia Serious About Asia?’ Global Brief, March 5, 2013, pp. 1-6, on 6 (http://globalbrief.ca/blog/2013/03/05/is - australia-serious-about-asia/print/)

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