

ASEAN-AUSTRALIAN COOPERATION: BUILDING ON ACHIEVEMENTS

Statement by Senator Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, at the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference, 6 + 1 Session, Manila, 26 July 1992.

In the dramatically-changing post-Cold War world, Governments and institutions must be more flexible than ever if they are to be able to take advantage of the opportunities that these changes can bring about and avoid the related risks. The accent now is on cooperation, not just ad hoc arrangements covering one or two sectors but across a broad spectrum of issues.

One of ASEAN's greatest strengths is that it has never sought to go it alone. As both its own processes and these Post Ministerial Conferences show, the habit of dialogue and cooperation is already deeply ingrained in the ASEAN collective psyche. We have always welcomed that, and this annual opportunity to review the state of play across such a broad sweep of regional issues.

Australia has from the outset been ready and willing to cooperate with ASEAN across the whole spectrum of its activities. We already enjoy a large degree of cooperation in a number of fields, including science and technology, the environment, telecommunications and education which, taken together, have given greater substance to our relationship. But what I want to suggest to you today is that there is still considerable scope to both consolidate and build on these existing areas of cooperation and to broaden our cooperation into other areas.

This in fact will be one of Australia's real external priorities in the coming years. In his "One Nation" statement in February this year, Prime Minister Keating emphasised Australia's commitment to integrate more fully into the Asia Pacific region. The need to link our economy in particular more closely with Asia's growth, has in any case been one of the assumptions underlying Australia's vigorous program of domestic economic reform under the Labor Government. Within this context, the Government has been able to take large strides towards improving Australia's competitiveness in recent years. The change in attitudes - by our trade unions, business community and the general public - has been impressive. As I said when we met in Kuala Lumpur last year, we want to build into ASEAN-Australia economic cooperation the results of both our economic re-structuring and your impressive economic dynamism.

We are increasingly succeeding in moving our dialogue agenda into new areas of

cooperation, focusing on more than just the familiar issues of market access and development assistance. In terms of process, I regard the ASEAN-Australia Forum as an important instrument in identifying areas of cooperation that we can develop to our mutual benefit. Australia places a high premium on utilising this forum effectively, including through regular and frequent meetings to ensure that momentum is maintained.

In terms of substance, one area of common concern to us all, both regionally and globally, is that of the environment. The success of the recent UN Conference on Environment and Development demonstrated very clearly the high degree of commitment we all share in the principles of sustainable development. However, implementation of UNCED outcomes will require the development and transfer of environmentally sound technologies. We should thus be looking jointly to identify areas for possible further cooperation between Australia and ASEAN in this area. Further dialogue between Australian officials and the ASEAN Senior Officials on the Environment (ASOEN) group might be one way of achieving this.

Cultural exchange is another area in which we see considerable potential to expand existing cooperation with ASEAN as an institution. This kind of cooperation not only has an immediate and wide public impact, but it could have long-term reach. It is, I think, fair to say that what the Australian public gets to know or hear of Asian countries is frequently negative, depressing or exotic - and all too often, simplistic. Equally, there is no doubt that in the conduct of its relations with the region, Australia still carries some baggage from the past. Stereotyped images die hard. I thus believe that exchanges of people and works in the arts and information fields can help to break down the stereotypes that we might have of each other.

Australia already engages in substantial cultural exchanges with individual ASEAN countries: since 1987, 35 visual artists from all over ASEAN have been brought to Australia for the biennial Artists' Regional Exchange in Perth. In 1993 the Queensland Art Gallery will be hosting the inaugural Asia Pacific Triennial of Art. Its selection team is currently completing visits to each ASEAN country to make final selection of artists and works to be exhibited.

ASEAN of course already has a developed cultural and information circuit which includes the ASEAN Theatre Festival, ASEAN Radio Cultural Program exchanges, and exchanges of ASEAN Librarians. These sorts of activities point the way to possible future association by Australians, or at least the possibility of analogous exchanges between Australia and ASEAN countries.

In this regard, I note that the meeting of ASEAN's Committee on Culture and Information in December last year charged Thailand with making an informal inquiry of Australia's preparedness to organise a study tour of Australian information agencies by ASEAN

representatives. My department has responded positively to this approach and such a tour is planned to take place some time in 1993.

The related field of education is also of major importance to Australia's efforts to expand its cooperation with ASEAN and other countries of the region. It is also an area which clearly shows that benefits can be truly mutual. You may be interested to know that the Australian Government is currently aiming, through its National Policy on Languages, to increase the proportion of Australian students in their final high school year studying a language other than English to 25 per cent nationally by the year 2000. In seeking to meet this target, the government has given special encouragement to the development of national curriculum material in six Asian languages of major importance to Australia, including Thai and Malay/Indonesian. We want to have thousands of young Australians speaking those languages.

In addition, proposals for cooperation in education, research and training between ASEAN and Australia have already been developed following a visit by an Australian Fact-finding Mission on education to ASEAN nations. These proposals which focus on the teaching of regional languages, institutional links and other areas of mutual interest have met with a favourable ASEAN response and, with ASEAN's input, appear to offer a sound basis for future cooperation. We are hopeful that progress may be achieved in these areas at the earliest possible time.

ASEAN and Australia have actively collaborated in the area of science and technology, and we look forward to continuing this in a mutually beneficial way. Australia looks forward to hosting in November this year the 12th Meeting of the Association for Science Cooperation in Asia (ASCA) to which all ASEAN Science and Technology Ministers have been invited to participate.

Australia also strongly supports the impressive work being done in telecommunications. Useful progress was made at the first ASEAN-Australia Specialist Group Discussions on Telecommunications. We strongly support the continuation of this forum.

It is, however, perhaps economic cooperation which is of greatest interest to us all and which illustrates so well both the cooperation that already exists and the opportunities for future expansion.

We in Australia regard the ASEAN-Australia Economic Cooperation Program (AAECP) as a particularly important area of current cooperation. While focusing on science and technology cooperation, the program has the potential to evolve into a program of wider mutual benefit, particularly if the private sector could become involved. The way the AAECP has developed to date is a reflection of the maturity of the ASEAN-Australia relationship. I am very pleased to hear that our officials are informally in agreement that

the current review of the AAECF presents an opportunity for building on past achievements and extending cooperation further. We look forward to that review also enhancing the mutual benefits of the Trade and Investment Promotion Program (TIPP).

In this context, I would be remiss if I did not mention the decision taken at the successful ASEAN Summit in January to implement an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). This sent a strong signal to the international community of ASEAN's maturity and of the region's economic success and dynamism. Australia welcomed the AFTA initiative since it appears to be outward looking and consistent with a commitment to a free and open multilateral trading system. We look forward to seeing the proposed schedule of AFTA's Common Effective Preferential Tariff when it comes out early next year.

It is our hope that AFTA will lead to a general reduction in trade barriers. The introduction of AFTA could be an important first step in considering the potential for wider liberalisation measures in the region. You will all be aware that Australia has been pursuing, with your valued cooperation, the subject of regional trade liberalisation in APEC. We are happy with progress to date, and we look forward to your continuing support in making regional trade liberalisation a key theme for APEC in 1993.

Although we have already discussed security issues during the 6+7 sessions, I would nevertheless like to make special reference to the related issue of piracy. This is a matter of concern to all present, not least because of safety issues and possible environmental hazards flowing from such attacks, but also to longer term effects on the shipping industry and trade.

Australian civil shipping has been the victim of some half a dozen attacks this year alone. This may not be many compared to attacks on other shipping, but nevertheless remains an issue of serious concern to the Australian Government. We would be happy to cooperate in a bilateral or multilateral arrangement to seek ways of curtailing this scourge.

In conclusion, I believe it is clear that, between us, we have already woven an extensive tapestry of cooperative initiatives. As ASEAN as an institution has developed, so has the relationship between ASEAN and Australia. Equally clearly, however, the tapestry we have woven can be enlarged and rendered even stronger in quite a number of ways. As Australia's future becomes more inextricably linked with that of the Asia Pacific region in which ASEAN plays such a dynamic and central role, new areas of cooperation will continue to emerge. We should all be prepared to draw on the rich experience we have gained to date in other areas of cooperation, and seize these new opportunities for our mutual prosperity and security.

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