

New Zealand and ASEAN Through 50 Years

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Asia New Zealand
Foundation

Te Whaitau Tūhono

New Zealand and ASEAN Through 50 Years

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Malcolm McKinnon portrait, supplied by author.

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The author wishes to acknowledge the passing of Anthony Reid (1939–2025). A graduate of Victoria University of Wellington, Anthony Reid committed a lifetime of scholarship to Southeast Asia, latterly at Australian National University. His father, John Reid, was an early enabler of New Zealand's participation in the Colombo Plan, which has left such a significant legacy for New Zealand-Southeast Asian relations.



Introduction

ASEAN sits at the centre of Southeast Asia as the convenor of the regional architecture and a bulwark for safeguarding stability.¹

THE TRAVELLER JOURNEYING from New Zealand, whether by sea or air, finds mostly water — the Pacific Ocean, the Southern Ocean — or the deserts of Antarctica and Australia. The eastern Australian littoral, home to over 20 million people, is the only large, populated zone within 3,000 kilometres.

A circumference drawn at 6,000 kilometres from New Zealand takes in a hemisphere — half the planet. Six thousand kilometres south of New Zealand is ocean and ice. To the north are some island groups and more ocean. If you look 6,000 kilometres either east or west there is more ocean still.

But 6,000 kilometres northwest of New Zealand — that's different. Here you will find densely populated and productive island archipelagos, from Japan to Java, and an equally populated and productive slice of mainland Asia, that encompasses Malaysia through to Manchuria. Taken together, their resources, wealth, inventiveness and location make them of critical importance to New Zealand. At the heart of that world lie the countries of Southeast Asia, of ASEAN, with a population of 700 million and a four trillion-dollar economy. If this were a single economy, it would be the world's third largest after the United States and China.

It is therefore unsurprising that New Zealand attaches immense importance to its relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its member states or that the 50th anniversary of the ASEAN-New Zealand dialogue relationship is being so vigorously celebrated. Yet while that importance may be taken for granted in 2025 it was not foreordained, and certainly not in 1975 when the partnership was first established.

The world of 2025 is different in immeasurable ways from that of 1975. At this anniversary milestone, it is timely to revisit the history of the New Zealand-ASEAN relationship as a way of both understanding its current status and considering its future. That history falls into phases demarcated in part by time, but mostly by circumstances.

In the period to 1990, the relationship was inseparable from the postwar history of decolonisation and the Cold War. Both imposed fracture lines on Southeast Asia. Decolonisation put newly independent states at odds with former colonial powers; the Cold War pitted non-communist governments against communist movements in their own countries and with communist states.

At its formation in 1967, ASEAN linked non-aligned and US-aligned states in Southeast Asia. That 'marriage' produced a creative response — a dialogue strategy that sought to engage well-intentioned great powers in the region while also keeping them at arm's length.²

New Zealand supported ASEAN from its inception. In the years to 1990 that meant support for an organisation which would stabilise the region and keep communism at bay. After 1990 it meant support for an organisation crucial to Southeast Asia itself but also for the pathway it provided major powers to engage — the US, China, Japan and India.

Through the decades ASEAN has become more, not less, important to New Zealand. It provides an irreplaceable platform for regional diplomacy, the fostering of regional stability, networking with great powers, and advancing interests and values which New Zealand shares with both ASEAN and its member states. Although ASEAN collectively is the world's third largest economy, it is not a great power; its locus in the wider region therefore approximates more to that of New Zealand itself. The fact that the 2023 National-led government made ASEAN and its member states a priority in New Zealand's foreign relations is testament to its importance.

The remainder of this report comes as New Zealand and ASEAN celebrate 50 years of dialogue relations and builds on the original report published a decade ago to mark the 40th anniversary. Picking up in the aftermath of the Cold War, the following chapters trace the relatively recent evolution of the diplomatic relationship from one born out of perceived geopolitical necessity to one that recognises that New Zealand and the countries of ASEAN have more in common than anyone could have imagined in 1975. While the relationship in one punctuated by shocks and shaped by changing global power politics, history suggests these have only served to make it more important — and more enduring.

After the Cold War: ASEAN and New Zealand 1990-2015

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Introduction

Cranleigh Barton is one of many New Zealanders who have toured extensively in Southeast Asia. His three-month trip took in Java, Singapore, Bangkok, Cambodia (including a visit to Angkor), Saigon, back to Singapore via Bangkok, Penang, Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur and Malacca, a second visit to Java and home via Australia. The prosperous, settled Southeast Asia Barton visited was a world away from the disorder and destruction of World War II and the Cold War years.

BUT BARTON DID not visit in the 1990s or 2010s; he had travelled through Southeast Asia in the last three months of 1930.³ In many ways the end of the Cold War in Southeast Asia saw not the crafting of a new world but the restoration of an old one. Like the colonial regimes of the early 20th century, the post-1990 states of Southeast Asia were (mostly) authoritarian, bureaucratic, capitalist and development oriented. Their boundaries followed with exact precision those of their colonial predecessors (and in the case of former French Indochina and the former British Malay territories some internal boundaries as well). They were open to trade and investment with the rest of the world as those colonial regimes had been.

Of course there were obvious differences between the two eras. The ruling elites were no longer Europeans or Americans but indigenous to the region. And democracy, if rare in practice, was honoured in the breach. Socialism and communism, which had posed a challenge to the colonial regimes and had been the rival claimant to non-communist nationalism between 1945 and 1990, had been sidelined.

Relations with Asia beyond Southeast Asia were even more different. In 1930, China was grappling with intermittent civil war and invasion by Japan. The Indian subcontinent was under British rule. By 1990 the People's Republic of China and India had four decades of independent history behind them and Japan overshadowed Europe and the United States in the economic life of Southeast Asia. In sum, while the post-1990 economic and political order bore resemblances to the pre-1930s, the rulers of that order had changed. Asia and its new leaders had come into their own.

The end of the Cold War had three main impacts on ASEAN and on the New Zealand-ASEAN relationship.

First, it opened the way for the communist states of Indochina to join ASEAN, a step that might realise one promise of the 1967 Bangkok Declaration, ASEAN's founding document — a unified Southeast Asia.

Second, it opened the way for an agenda of broader regional cooperation in economic and security matters far more ambitious than was envisaged before 1990.

Third, while the Soviet Union had ceased to be an actor in the region — indeed it had ceased to exist — China remained a significant centre of power and influence.

China might largely have abandoned socialism as a practical underpinning of its economy and society, but the crushing of dissent in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 made it clear that the dominant faction of the country's leadership had no intention of emulating — or succumbing to — the democratic transition being witnessed in the former Soviet allies in Europe.

It was therefore unlikely to be accommodated readily into a US-led regional order. India too, about to embark on its own economic liberalisation, was also cautious.

None of these developments or circumstances was problematic for New Zealand. Wellington had supported wider regional organisations as well as ASEAN, and if such organisations could be expanded and adapted so much the better. With respect to both China and the United States there were dimensions that reverberated at the time in New Zealand-ASEAN relations. In respect of the former, one New Zealand commentator wrote in 1995 that 'more than any other single factor, the way Asia-Pacific manages the increasing ascendancy of China will influence every country. Individual ASEAN countries are prepared to explore long-term relations with China' and New Zealand needed to 'take a basic cue from this ASEAN disposition'.⁴ With regards to the United States, and in the wake of the 1980s dispute over port visits to New Zealand by US nuclear-powered or armed vessels, new Asia-Pacific initiatives were set to provide ways of reinvigorating New Zealand relations with that country.



ASEAN and New Zealand in the 1990s

THE BANGKOK DECLARATION of August 1967 had opened ASEAN to 'all States in the South-East Asian Region subscribing to the aforementioned aims, principles and purposes'.⁵ But, with the exceptions of Brunei's accession in 1984, the membership of ASEAN was the same in 1990 as at its formation. Change was now possible. In January 1990, the Thai prime minister publicly voiced his support for Viet Nam membership.⁶ Between late-1991 and early-1992, Viet Nam restored relations with several member nations of ASEAN. The Paris Peace Agreements formally ending the Cambodia conflict were signed in October 1991.⁷

New Zealand's endorsement was unqualified. New Zealand was one of 45 countries which committed significant forces to UNTAC, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, which operated in 1992 and 1993. And ASEAN expanded. Viet Nam joined ASEAN as a full member in 1995 followed by Laos and Myanmar in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999. None of these states had democratic regimes — the closest to it, Cambodia, had witnessed in 1997 a de facto coup d'état within the government by which Hun Sen, of the Cambodian People's Party, ousted Norodom Ranariddh of the rival FUNCINPEC from the prime ministership and the government.

New Zealand voiced its criticism through closed diplomatic channels rather than publicly, as a way of not compromising its overall support for ASEAN.⁸ Overall there was a tacit agreement to not publicly criticise the authoritarian regimes in the ASEAN member states.

The behind closed doors approaches were an acknowledgement, never entirely unself-conscious, of non-interference in domestic matters, of the 'ASEAN way', and New Zealand paid heed.⁹

The rapprochement across Southeast Asia made headlines. At a meeting of New Zealand heads of mission in Jakarta 1990 the main issue was economic growth in the region and what New Zealand could do to take advantage of it. The Cairns Group, which included Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia, provided a channel for cooperation in the Uruguay Round of global trade negotiations.¹⁰ But it did not directly address Australia-New Zealand and ASEAN trade relations. Scholars and officials made the case for a closer economic relationship between CER (the Australia-New Zealand free trade agreement) and ASEAN and a dialogue began in the mid-1990s.¹¹

The established pattern of New Zealand support for ASEAN development (and therefore security) survived. The regular dialogues continued (the 32nd took place in April 2025¹²). But New Zealand's main development effort was reoriented to the new member states. For example, it was the principal funder for the Mekong Institute, set up in Khon Kaen, Thailand, to coordinate projects across the 'greater Mekong subregion'.¹³

The Bangkok Declaration of 1967 had spoken firmly of ASEAN states being 'determined to ensure their stability and security from external interference in any form or manifestation in order to preserve their national identities in accordance with the ideals and aspirations of their peoples'.¹⁴ What did that signify in the 1990s? ASEAN states were no longer at direct risk of 'external interference' as that phrase was understood in 1967 and indeed in the crafting of dialogues since the mid-1970s ASEAN had forged a mechanism for engaging outside powers in the region on terms that were acceptable to ASEAN. Why not expand this?

Such an approach had two factors in its favour. First, the 'ASEAN way' of cooperation was non-confrontational, seeking commonalities, even if the lowest common denominators, rather than contesting differences: 'consensus is considered to be a common feature of decision-making in many Asian societies, in the ASEAN context, the term is usually traced to a particular style of decision-making within Javanese village society. In its Javanese conception, consensus or *musjawarah* is a way by which a village leader makes important decisions affecting social life in the village'.¹⁵ This had to be an advantage when many conflicts were submerged rather than banished.

Second, beyond ASEAN there were no plausible alternative models of regional cooperation. Relations in North Asia were far too fraught (and had their own highly contested history) and perforce would likely welcome the triangulation involved in bringing ASEAN into the picture. The United States, while not necessarily enthusiastic, was not averse. India would resist a formal arrangement but accept something looser — the spirit of Bandung persisted.



ASEAN and a wider regional economic order

IN PRACTICE THE evolution of regional order was different in respect of economic and security cooperation. Initiated by Japan and Australia, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) was established at the end of 1989, the peak year for Japan's economic influence in the region and included the United States and Canada as well as regional states. ASEAN's support for APEC was based on expectations, as Singapore's trade and industry minister then put it, that it will be a 'useful informal group for the purposes of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) Uruguay Round, of like-minded countries with a common interest in a successful outcome of the Round'.¹⁶ But another potential contribution of APEC was seen to lie in countering some of the uncertainties in the regional investment climate caused by post-Cold War developments in Europe: 'At a time when Eastern Europe was attracting more attention from the developed countries, APEC would provide an extra incentive for Japan and other major regional economies to strengthen their ties with ASEAN'.¹⁷

New Zealand was an enthusiastic supporter of APEC, described by one minister in the 1990s as New Zealand's 'most important economic relationship'.¹⁸ It included all of New Zealand's then major trading partners bar the European Union. With its potential for 'open regionalism', APEC was bound to overshadow the economic ties between NZ and ASEAN given that no ASEAN member state was at that time a leading trading partner.¹⁹

The formation of APEC was not deflected by Malaysian Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir's enthusiasm for his proposed 'East Asian Economic Caucus' (EAEC) taking in the ASEAN states, Japan, China and South Korea but excluding the United States and Canada, Australia and New Zealand.²⁰ Japan, a firm ally of the United States and by far the largest Asian economy at the time, was never likely to agree and did not, whilst in 1991 the three 'Chinese' economies — that is the People's Republic, Taiwan and Hong Kong — were welcomed into APEC (consequent on the necessary diplomacy involved in bringing the Chinese mainland and Taiwan into the same organisation). But the notion touched on a potential tension in regional architecture between Asian and Asia-Pacific schemes. It could be said that while the former drew on ASEAN's anti-colonial antecedents — Mahathir being fervent in this respect — APEC drew on its 'San Francisco' antecedents (the 'San Francisco system' after the city in which a peace treaty with Japan was signed in 1951).

APEC gained added traction from the profile given the organisation by US President Bill Clinton when he hosted a heads of government APEC summit in Seattle in November 1993 — one of a number of summits 'creatively initiated' by Clinton.²¹ It was partly designed to divert attention from the EAEC.²² At this point the relative weight of the United States compared with China in the region was sufficient to ensure an outcome favourable to the former. The leaders' declaration issued at the summit referred to it being 'an unprecedented meeting of ... economic leaders ... In this post-Cold War era, we have an opportunity to build a new economic foundation for the Asia Pacific that harnesses the energy of our ... economies, strengthens cooperation and promotes prosperity'.²³

ASEAN was not able to control the agenda-setting process in APEC — a fact resented by many ASEAN leaders even though ASEAN endorsement had been a prerequisite for the organisation gaining traction.²⁴ ASEAN did however veto an Australian proposal to rename APEC as the Asia-Pacific Economic Community, as it was seen to take the scheme beyond the informal structures which ASEAN preferred.²⁵



President Clinton and Pacific Rim leaders, including Chinese President Jiang Zemin (center, in suit and glasses) on Blake Island during the first APEC summit, November 20th, 1993. Source Barbara Kinney via the William J. Clinton Library/Wikimedia Commons.



ASEAN and a wider regional security order

‘For a long time in the post-Second World War period the network of bilateral security ties between the US and other regional states functioned as the only mechanism to ensure stability in this region’.²⁶

THE OPPORTUNITY TO craft a different or complementary security regime to the San Francisco system had arisen with the end of the Cold War. One model was the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), a product of the 1970s détente. But Asia had more complex conflicts than Europe, and the end of the Cold War had not dissolved all of them. Some ASEAN members were sceptical about its implications for the ASEAN's way of conducting regional relations.²⁷

Moreover, as in the early 1970s some US allies were reluctant to subscribe to any scheme which might weaken their bilateral ties with the United States.²⁸ The United States itself was also reluctant to foster a new arrangement which might weaken its alliances in the region. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific Richard Solomon called the various proposals “solutions in search of a problem”.²⁹

At the ASEAN post ministerial dialogue in 1991 Japan's foreign minister, Taro Nakayama, proposed using the occasion as a forum for a political dialogue on regional security issues to enhance mutual reassurance.³⁰ ‘ASEAN centrality’ provided a way forward. Australian, New Zealand and Singaporean officials and scholars lobbied; the concept of an ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) with multiple tracks was refined, and approved at the 1993 ASEAN post-ministerial meeting.³¹ For ASEAN, such a scheme for multilateral security addressed its wish to engage *all* the powers in its region: to keep the US committed, avoid Japanese unilateralism and avoid the appearance or substance of a ‘containment’ policy towards China.³² It offered a chance for ‘former rivals and potential future antagonists to directly convey to one another their intentions’.³³

A sequence of confidence building, preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution provided at least a pathway for disputants even though it eschewed any enforcement mechanism. A track two organisation, the Council for Security Cooperation in Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) complemented ARF.³⁴ From 1991 China held ‘dialogues and consultations’ with ASEAN foreign ministers and became a full dialogue partner in 1996.³⁵

In the post-Cold War Asia-Pacific ASEAN's principles for inter-state relations provide a relevant model for the wider region.³⁶ For New Zealand the formation of the ARF was a key moment in transforming its relationship with ASEAN from a focus on Southeast Asia itself to this wider regional one.³⁷ New Zealand's ministries of defence and foreign affairs jointly funded the Centre for Strategic Studies at Victoria University to manage New Zealand participation in related track two activities; New Zealand became a full member of CSCAP in January 1994.³⁸ In 1997 defence officials met as a group for the first time at an ARF meeting, albeit very informally, setting the stage for future regular meetings.³⁹



From the Asian financial crisis to the first East Asia summit and beyond

The history of ASEAN (and ASEAN and New Zealand) is an evolution punctuated by shocks.

UNTIL THE 1990s those shocks came in the sphere of power politics — the overthrow of Suharto; the Nixon détente; the fall of Saigon; the invasion of Cambodia; the end of the Cold War. 1997 was different; it was in its origins a financial shock which affected economic activity more broadly in Asian states, and in particular Korea and ASEAN. In terms of the larger structure of relations shaped by and shaping ASEAN, its impact was to create some distance between the Asian and the non-Asian developed economies. The responses of the latter, exemplified through pronouncements or decisions from the United States, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank and even in APEC, were interpreted by many in Asia as evidence of at best indifference and at worst, a wish to hobble economic competitors.⁴⁰

ASEAN's limits were also highlighted at the same time by its only minor role in the East Timor crisis, a product of the 1998 democratic transition in Indonesia, itself a by-product of the financial crisis. The shift of East Timor from Indonesian province to independent state was orchestrated by the international community, in particular the United States and Australia, not ASEAN. Individual ASEAN states, as well as New Zealand, played a role, but not ASEAN itself.⁴¹

At the same time, post-9/11 ASEAN also fretted over the shift of US focus away from Asia to the Middle East. This change in focus was not necessarily compensated for, and indeed was in some ways reinforced by, US preoccupation with Islamist movements and their terrorist sidebars in Muslim Southeast Asia, as elsewhere. In sum, the events of the late 1990s and early 2000s put trans-Pacific ties under stress and energised ASEAN ties with its immediate northern neighbours — China, Japan and South Korea — countries with which ASEAN economies were now as much, if not more, intertwined than with the United States.⁴²

Faced with unprecedented outflows of capital, a collapse in economic activity, and a hesitant response from the wider international community, which probably initially underestimated the severity of the crisis, the leaders of ASEAN and the three northern powers met in 1997 at the first 'ASEAN plus three' or APT meeting (the 26th was held in June 2025).⁴³ It had gained some traction from the requirements of the Asia-Europe meeting which had first brought together ASEAN and the East Asia three (as the Asian side) in 1996/1997, but the financial crisis was a 'game-changer'.⁴⁴

At a meeting of the Asian Development Bank in 2000 the Chiang Mai Initiative was initiated by the APT. This initiative was intended to strengthen the region's financial resources and to protect it from a repeat of the Asian financial crisis.⁴⁵

While New Zealand had focused on economic opportunities in ASEAN (and in Asia generally) in the early to mid-1990s, in the several years after 1997 commentators observed a lack of optimism in the relationship.⁴⁶ The financial crisis was partly to blame but there were other factors. Free trade negotiations amongst the ASEAN countries themselves advanced only slowly and this impacted on opportunities to advance a free trade agreement between Australia and New Zealand on the one hand and ASEAN on the other.⁴⁷ New Zealand and Singapore did however conclude a free trade agreement in 2001 after just a year of negotiations.⁴⁸



Foreign ministers of China, Japan and South Korea with Malaysian foreign minister Mohamad Hasan at the 26th Asean+3 Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Kuala Lumpur. Source Bernama pic.



This was a comment on the greater openness of Singapore compared with other ASEAN economies and the close ties between officials and others of the two countries. But for a time, it was an isolated accomplishment. Arguably New Zealand's (as Australia's) absence from the Chiang Mai initiative was a misstep.⁴⁹

The implications but also the limitations of APT were realised in 2005 when ASEAN organised the first East Asian Summit (EAS). Malaysian Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir had advocated an exclusively East Asian membership but other APT countries, notably Japan, Singapore and Indonesia, strongly disagreed.⁵⁰ However, Mahathir retired from the prime ministership at the end of 2003. At the ASEAN meetings in 2004 the organisation agreed to host the summit, to which India, Australia and New Zealand would also be invited: the EAS would be kept 'open, outward-looking'.⁵¹

The invitations to Australia and New Zealand echoed earlier ways in which ASEAN kept open lines of communication with the United States.⁵² The invitation to India was an important new departure.

New Zealand policy makers had been keen to join the East Asia Summit as part of the overall strategy of engagement with Asia maintained by the Labour-led government elected at the end of 1999.

That government subsequently launched a 'Seriously Asia' programme in 2003, building on the work of the Asia 2000 Foundation (now the Asia New Zealand Foundation) that had been established in 1994.⁵³

New Zealand and Australia signed up to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which stressed the importance of state sovereignty and non-intervention.⁵⁴ This paved the way for their participation in the first EAS meeting — and in the process acknowledging that ASEAN would manage the process, something the 'plus three' powers had also agreed to.⁵⁵ Minister Jim Sutton, who addressed a symposium on New Zealand and ASEAN in Singapore in 2007, described the EAS as "the most exciting development in the region's architecture for many years and New Zealand is delighted to be part of it".⁵⁶

What direction did ASEAN itself take after 2005? One obvious answer was integration. In 2006 ASEAN defence ministers held their first ever meeting. The project of an ASEAN community was decided on in 2003 and timetabled for inauguration in 2020. At successive meetings in 2004 and 2005 leaders agreed to draw up an ASEAN charter.⁵⁷ It was released at the end of 2007 and came into effect in December 2008.⁵⁸

The charter contained 'unprecedented articles concerning democracy and human rights and good governance' but it retained decision-making by consensus with only weak implementation and enforcement provisions.⁵⁹

The goal of an Australia-New Zealand-ASEAN free trade area (AANZFTA) was announced at the commemorative summit in 2004 and came into effect in 2010.⁶⁰ This was a significant achievement in the wake of the 2008-09 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) which had a major effect on many ASEAN economies and might have been expected to make them cautious about such liberalisation. But unlike the financial crisis of nine years earlier, the GFC left Asia relatively unscathed.

New Zealand and ASEAN Through 50 Years

Rough seas?

New Zealand and ASEAN 2015–2025

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Introduction

The decade spanning 2015 to 2025 in ASEAN-New Zealand relations saw the establishment of new structures, followed by advances on several fronts which deepened ties at a variety of levels. But relations also faced a suite of challenges, some incipient before 2015, others, notably the 2020–22 Covid-19 pandemic, unanticipated in 2015.

NEW ZEALAND ACCREDITED a dedicated ambassador to ASEAN for the first time in 2014.⁶¹ Steph Lee held the position, to be followed by Pam Dunn, Stuart Calman and, since February 2025, Joanna Anderson. New Zealand followed the US (2011) and other leading ASEAN partners in taking this step (most missions at that time cross accrediting their ambassadors to Indonesia, Jakarta being home to the ASEAN secretariat). The New Zealand mission to ASEAN was established in 2015, the 40th anniversary of the ASEAN-New Zealand dialogue, and New Zealand was recognised by ASEAN as a 'strategic partner'.

The goal of an ASEAN community of three pillars — political and security; economic; and socio-cultural — also came into effect in 2015, ahead of the originally projected 2020 date.⁶² Those pillars were mirrored in New Zealand's 'partnerships' — for peace, prosperity, people, with the addition of a fourth — for the planet. Taken together they provide points of reference for analysing the entire spectrum of the ASEAN-New Zealand relationship.

From 2015 the ASEAN secretariat provided more support to the relevant ASEAN chair in arranging the political and security diplomacy calendar.

This included meetings in Jakarta of the ASEAN and EAS ambassadors' groups and of senior officials, to craft the agendas for the foreign ministers' and leaders' summits, plus ongoing exchanges and negotiation working towards outcomes for the end-of-year summits.⁶³ "This cycle accounted for much of the New Zealand ASEAN mission's work," explained former New Zealand ambassador to ASEAN, Stuart Calman. The ASEAN secretariat also played a role in the diplomacy which had led to AANZFTA and which shaped what became the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), although unlike the political and security diplomacy calendar this was managed through the relevant ministries in the member state capitals.⁶⁴

The status of strategic partner both formalised and sharpened ASEAN expectations of what New Zealand would bring to the relationship under successively agreed 'plans of action', with the first (under the rubric of 'comprehensive partnership') spanning 2010–15 and the second (the first under the 'strategic partnership') spanning 2016–20.⁶⁵ The rhythm of crafting, agreeing on, implementing and monitoring and evaluating the plans of action shaped New Zealand's relationship with ASEAN especially in the socio-cultural or 'people' pillar. Plans of action were not ends in themselves. They also aimed to demonstrate New Zealand's value as a 'reliable and relevant partner', and its 'commitment to implementing our shared ambition for a deeper, stronger, and mutually beneficial ... strategic partnership'.⁶⁶ In its 2019–20 annual report, MFAT reported that New Zealand had completed delivery of 100 percent of the 'action lines' in the 2016–2020 Plan of Action.⁶⁷ The same objective was on track to be realised for the 2021–25 Plan of Action.⁶⁸

In 2021, ASEAN's strategic partnerships with Australia and China were elevated to the status of 'comprehensive strategic partnership'. The relationships with several other dialogue partners followed suit and in 2025 New Zealand also sought to elevate its relationship with ASEAN to a 'CSP'.⁶⁹

The extent of dealings New Zealand has had with ASEAN has 'seriously plugged' the South Pacific country into this Asian regional grouping.⁷⁰ It has been an intertwining and unique strand in the country's diplomacy, ranging as it has from 'grand strategy' debates addressing the tensions which informed the East Asia Summit; to schemes of practical assistance in the region, for example support for 'climate-smart' horticulture projects in Cambodia; to programmes bringing dynamic young civil society leaders to New Zealand.⁷¹

The challenges which ASEAN, the wider region and therefore the NZ-ASEAN relationship faced did not always map neatly onto either the three pillars or the different elements in the ASEAN-centred architecture. The discussion which follows first considers the impact of China-US strategic competition on ASEAN and on New Zealand's relationship with it. Second, it considers challenges that bear on New Zealand's relations with the grouping — the Covid-19 pandemic, the military coup in Myanmar (an ASEAN member state) and human rights issues more generally. This section also examines continuities in defence cooperation, non-traditional security and in economic relations. Finally, it explores the dense and varied bilateral ties, which are most prominent in the socio-cultural pillar but are also embedded in the other two and play out both within the region and in New Zealand.



ASEAN, New Zealand and US-China competition

ASEAN CHAIR STATEMENTS now routinely refer to the impact of geopolitical competition and hostility on the organisation and its relationships with dialogue partners.⁷² ASEAN's deliberate channelling of major powers into a regional architecture managed, if not constructed by ASEAN, was an adaptation of the way ASEAN had sought to overcome the threefold Cold War division of communist; anti-communist and non-aligned.

The formation of the East Asia Summit in 2005 had underlined ASEAN's preference for multiple forms of involvement by outside powers in the region — 'omni-enmeshment' in Evelyn Goh's words⁷³ — and this was reiterated in the ASEAN Charter, which stipulated that one of the purposes of ASEAN was to 'maintain the centrality and proactive role of ASEAN as the primary driving force in its relations and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture which is open, transparent and inclusive'.⁷⁴ In the last ten years centrality has been most challenged by the intensified rivalry between the United States and China, both in the wider region, and globally.

The Obama administration's 'Asia pivot' in 2009, the advent of a forceful new Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, in 2012, China's rejection of the Court of Arbitration ruling on the status of claimed islands in the South China Sea in 2016 and the first Trump administration's labelling of China as a strategic competitor, were all indicative of a more challenging relationship. 'Resolutions agreed on at the East Asia Summit', recalled Steph Lee, 'were usually crafted at successive meetings through the months prior, not least through the

EAS ambassadors' group, which gave non-ASEAN missions more scope for influence'. Deciding on exact wording became increasingly challenging as differences between the powers widened.⁷⁵ In 2014, for example, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-plus (a gathering of ASEAN and non-ASEAN defence ministers, better known as 'ADMM-Plus') could not agree on wording (if any) on the South China Sea and no statement was issued from its annual meeting.⁷⁶

During the 2017 East Asia Summit, the only one President Trump attended in his first term, the United States, Japan, Australia and India agreed to reinvigorate the 'Quad', a collaborative arrangement in effect designed to counter balance China and partly triggered by China's activities in the South China Sea. Japan and Australia were both longstanding US allies; having historically non-aligned India active in the arrangement was a new development, in part a by-product of China-India border tensions. 2017 was also the year 'Indo-Pacific' was adopted as a usage by US policymakers, often in place of 'Asia-Pacific', after being first promulgated by Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe some years earlier. In May 2018 the US's Pacific Command was renamed (although without any change in its zone of responsibility) the Indo-Pacific Command. China talked critically of the United States attempting to create an 'Asian NATO'.⁷⁷

What were the implications of these changes for ASEAN and for New Zealand, whether of language or substance?

ASEAN, an association of sovereign states jealous of their sovereignty, was neither in a position nor likely to take sides, because member states varied widely in their stances on US-China tensions. Moreover, ASEAN could point to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), also known as the Bali Concord, from 1976, which bound all ASEAN members to peaceful settlement of disputes. All dialogue partners have signed up to it, indeed as of October 2024 there were 55 international contracting parties.⁷⁸

But there remained concern about the implications for ASEAN centrality. ASEAN responded by issuing an 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific' (AOIP) in 2019. ASEAN explained that the outlook was 'not aimed at creating new mechanisms or replacing existing ones ... [it] envisage[d] ASEAN Centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, with ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit as platforms for dialogue and implementation of the Indo-Pacific cooperation'.⁷⁹

New Zealand officials wrestled with the same problem — how could 'Indo-Pacific' add value to New Zealand and not simply be the mimicking of a neologism? The two benefits identified were multiple issues bearing on the maritime domain, and the value of bringing India and the eastern Indian Ocean into regional thinking, which 'Asia-Pacific' did not. This latter element also aligned with Australia and ASEAN preoccupations, as both had Indian Ocean littorals. New Zealand adopted Indo-Pacific as the 'broadest expression of its home region', but continued to use 'Asia-Pacific', for instance in respect of APEC, and 'Pacific' (in dealings with the South Pacific states).⁸⁰



In July 2023 ASEAN and New Zealand released the Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, a rare instance of an ASEAN-New Zealand joint ministerial initiative.⁸¹

For New Zealand more than ASEAN there were shifts of substance as well as vocabulary. The Labour-led government elected in October 2017, which might have been expected to be more cautious than its National-led predecessor on fostering defence ties with the United States and its allies, took significant steps towards a closer alignment (whilst seeking to sustain the beneficial economic relationship with China).⁸² It also spoke up, sometimes in conjunction with other governments, on matters such as the suppression of the democracy movement in Hong Kong in 2019–20 and reports of persecution of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang.⁸³

In August 2021, New Zealand set out its legal position on the South China Sea disputes which was explicit in its rejection of expansive claims to sovereignty over parts of the continental shelf, and therefore of China's position on the South China Sea.⁸⁴

This statement was released just prior to the ASEAN plus dialogue partners annual foreign ministers' meeting. While the new statement aligned New Zealand with significant ASEAN member states it did not necessarily accomplish the same with ASEAN as a whole, which, since at least 2012, had found itself stymied on South China Sea matters on account of the sharply different stances of claimant and non-claimant states.

The announcement in September 2021 of AUKUS, a collaboration between the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom to enhance Australia's defence capability, but widely seen also as a measure to contain growing Chinese influence, was challenging for ASEAN again, both because of its implications for ASEAN centrality and because member states had divergent views about it, with the result that the organisation was again unable to produce a consensus statement.⁸⁵

As a state statutorily committed to an anti-nuclear policy and a strong advocate of nuclear non-proliferation, New Zealand could not have participated in the initial formulation of AUKUS (even if invited), as it involved the United States providing Australia with nuclear-powered submarines. And indeed disarmament, and in particular nuclear disarmament remained an area where ASEAN and New Zealand were aligned: New Zealand's Nuclear Free Zone, Arms Control and Disarmament Act (1987), its adherence to the Treaty of Rarotonga (1985/86) and to the global Treaty to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons (TPNW, 2017/2021) conform with ASEAN's Treaty of Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone of 1995.⁸⁶

ASEAN signatories have participated regularly in TPNW meetings and have shared with New Zealand the disappointment that the nuclear weapons states have not adhered to any of these instruments.

The ongoing possibility of participating in technological (but non-nuclear) exchanges under a proposed 'pillar II' of AUKUS remained but other developments in which New Zealand was involved had more implications for ASEAN centrality. The Asia-Pacific, later Indo-Pacific Four, a grouping of Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand, arose in 2022 from a new NATO initiative to address geopolitical tensions in Europe — the Russian attack on Ukraine (see below) — and East Asia, with China's assertiveness in the South China Sea but also North Korean actions. It aimed to tip the balance against both powers.⁸⁷

The New Zealand government released a 'slew of national security documents' in August 2023, which painted a more sombre picture of the wider region; all the documents were critical of China's 'assertive pursuit of its strategic objectives'.⁸⁸ New Zealand's participation in naval and air exercises with the US, Japan, Australia and the Philippines — itself an ASEAN member state — also clearly positioned New Zealand on one side of the US-China strategic rivalry, although it could also point to the Five Power Defence Agreement exercise that took place in April 2025 as confirmation of a longstanding history of defence engagement in the region.⁸⁹ That was reinforced by ongoing defence cooperation through ADMM-Plus. Strengthening bilateral defence ties with some member states would always be one way forward but raised the recurrent issue of balancing multilateral and bilateral diplomacy in New Zealand-ASEAN relations.⁹⁰



New Zealand increasingly saw ASEAN as able to play a role in the insular Pacific, as concerns about China's actions in that region garnered concern.⁹¹

The chair of the Pacific Islands Forum — New Zealand and Australia were the two ASEAN dialogue partners who were members — briefed the 2023 East Asia Summit.⁹²

New Zealand's shift was part of the larger picture of intensified geopolitical competition with which ASEAN continued to grapple. At the Vientiane summit in November 2024, EAS leaders reinforced their support for ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.⁹³

The chair's statement 'acknowledged the importance of increasing strategic coordination between the EAS and other ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ARF and the ADMM-Plus, including through the submission of reports and information-sharing by the ASEAN Chair, where deemed necessary, for the EAS's information.'⁹⁴

Paragraphs on the South China Sea in the chairman's statement at the 44th/45th leaders' summit in November 2024 stressed the importance of self-restraint in the conduct of all activities by claimant states and looked forward to an effective and substantive Code of Conduct that was in accordance with international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).⁹⁵

Such wording could not hide the fact that ASEAN had not been able to agree on positions owing to major differences among member states.

Similarly, the ASEAN-New Zealand statement from the 32nd ASEAN-New Zealand dialogue held at Da Nang in April 2025, while it referenced the commitment of both sides to 'peace and stability' provided no specifics on traditional security matters, on the ARF or the ADMM-Plus, both long-established parts of the security architecture. The closest the statement got to addressing 'traditional' security was in recording that the two sides 'exchanged views on regional and international issues of common interest and concern [and] reaffirmed their commitment to upholding multilateralism and strengthening the ASEAN-led regional architecture, including through the implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)'.⁹⁶

On a visit to New Zealand in May 2025, ASEAN secretary-general Dr Kao Kim Hourn, who stressed he was speaking in a personal capacity, criticised the United States for attempting to contain China as it had tried to contain the Soviet Union during the Cold War.⁹⁷ In the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's latest *State of Southeast Asia* survey, which looked at the views of over 2,000 respondents across ASEAN and Timor Leste, 52.3 percent of ASEAN-10 respondents favoured the United States over China if the region was forced to choose, but 47 percent favoured China.⁹⁸

Arguably the difference in emphasis between ASEAN and New Zealand on the impact of the US-China contest on the region was not fundamental.⁹⁹

A majority of those surveyed in ASEAN believed that the grouping should enhance its resilience and unity to fend off pressure from both major powers.¹⁰⁰ And more than half the respondents indicated the South China Sea as a top geopolitical concern.¹⁰¹ Southeast Asian opinion also favoured the EU and Japan, both taking an increasingly hard line against China, as preferred partners and the most trustworthy of the major powers.¹⁰² In 2025, Japan was also the country outside their own region in which Southeast Asians would most like to live and work (=2; US=3; Australia =4; NZ=5).

For its part, New Zealand wished to maintain a relationship with China, which in the present foreign minister's words, was one that benefitted 'from our mutually beneficial and significant trade and economic relationship and the comprehensive, regular two-way exchanges by our people ... and from a resilient bilateral architecture that has been built up over many years of hard work and commitment by both sides'.¹⁰³



Other challenges

The geopolitical contest between the United States and China has had the biggest impact on the region and on the evolution of the New Zealand-ASEAN relationship. But there have been other challenges.

Covid-19

THE PANDEMIC BROKE out early in 2020 and by the end of March most countries had imposed domestic and external restrictions on travel and were grappling with the health and related consequences. Indonesia, the most populous ASEAN state, recorded 162,000 deaths, which equated to a rate of 581 per million, Singapore a rate of 358 per million and 2000 deaths.¹⁰⁴ New Zealand recorded a rate of 834 per million and 4284 deaths.

Covid-19 had a massive impact on diplomacy. Nanaia Mahuta, appointed foreign minister after the October 2020 election, did not visit the region until the end of 2021.¹⁰⁵ Face-to-face meetings were on hold for two to three years and many negotiations and exchanges went online. For New Zealand officials working on the 45th anniversary it was disappointing that the anticipated series of events did not take place. There was virtual attendance at the five-yearly summit with ASEAN leaders in November 2020, when the 45th anniversary was finally marked, and the refreshed 2021–25 Plan of Action was officially launched.¹⁰⁶

In 2020–21 New Zealand committed funding to the worst affected countries — Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste; the \$36.79 million in Covid-19 response support for ASEAN countries provided by mid-2022 was a modest contribution to regional solidarity.¹⁰⁷

Despite the ongoing border restrictions some scholarship programmes were maintained: short term training scholarships for 98 ASEAN participants were provided, themed on public health management, public sector leadership, trade policy, and good governance, while a refresher course was provided for 160 alumni of the English Language Training for Officials programme. In-person classes resumed in 2023.¹⁰⁸

New Zealand's own four-year ASEAN development cooperation plan, released in December 2021, focused on the challenging impact of Covid-19 in the region, including on the attainment of the UN's sustainable development goals in the region: 'in late 2020 the International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicted that the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on ASEAN economies would be a contraction of 3.4 percent. The IMF also predicted that tourism and sectors relying on external demand such as agriculture and garment manufacturing would collapse.'¹⁰⁹ Current assistance programmes were to be supplemented by 'new activities designed to address immediate needs arising from the impacts of the pandemic.'¹¹⁰

There was the personal challenge of handling pandemic conditions. For example, the strong Covid-19 wave which hit Jakarta in July 2021.¹¹¹ Shannon Ward, who had been posted to the ASEAN mission in Jakarta 2016–19, recalled that the 'legal scrub' of RCEP took place mostly online, meetings would run from 2pm to 11pm New Zealand time every day — if on the one hand there was an incentive to finish work having to be done in such uncongenial circumstances there was also the loss of the personal touch that came with in-person meetings. One curiosity was that the usual modes of consensus building could not operate in online meetings, as for example ASEAN and AFP members might caucus or hold side-meetings before, and individual country positions were stated more explicitly through the meeting chat.¹¹²



All staff were pulled out of the New Zealand mission in Yangon, Myanmar in May 2020; the ambassador did not visit again until March 2022; the mission itself was back in action in August and officially re-opened, with a new ambassador in March 2023.¹¹³ For other posts, like the New Zealand Mission to ASEAN, business was conducted virtually under local lockdown conditions. The pandemic's impact also meant that some staff and families opted to return to New Zealand, meaning staff had to be deployed from Wellington and within the region to support and maintain the post network during what was a very challenging time.¹¹⁴

For one cooperative endeavour, the Good Regulatory Practices Network (GRPN), the first return to in-person meetings was not until 2023; some other OECD programmes fell away, never to return but the GRPN survived. New Zealand representative Mark Steel commented that 'a continuity of personnel may have helped and when there was a return to in-person meetings, the demand was for more activity, not less.'¹¹⁵

This was echoed more generally as the region recovered: post-pandemic economic recovery support for an estimated 186,834 people in five countries through vocational training, income generation opportunities, employment on community infrastructure projects, financial support, agricultural goods and training, and business skills training.¹¹⁶

The new normal. Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro L. Locsin Jr. as seen on screen with US Secretary of State Michael D. Pompeo and other ASEAN Foreign Ministers during the ASEAN-US Special Foreign Ministers' Meeting on Covid-19. Source Wikimedia Commons/Department of Foreign Affairs (Philippines).





Myanmar and beyond

THE COUP IN Myanmar in February 2021 triggered conflict, as opposition forces challenged the military regime, and an escalating human tragedy — deaths, displacements and massive ongoing social and economic costs — in its wake (and overshadowed and compounded the violence-triggered 2017 flight of at least 750,000 Rohingya people from Rakhine state in western Myanmar).¹¹⁷

ASEAN defined the situation in Myanmar as a 'regional issue', linking it thereby with ongoing tensions in the Korean peninsula and the South China Sea.¹¹⁸ But it was a much bigger test for ASEAN than either: the Korean peninsula was outside the region, whilst the South China Sea, despite ongoing frictions and the ever-present possibility of conflict becoming more lethal, was 'uninhabited'.

The Five Point Consensus (5PC) which ASEAN agreed in April 2021, three months after the coup, has remained the 'main reference point'. But it was a compromise negotiated with the Myanmar coup leaders, who then returned to implement their own plans which did not conform to the 5PC. Coup leader Min Aung Hlaing and other leading figures in the so-called State Administrative Council (SAC) were subsequently barred from ASEAN summits.¹¹⁹

Four years on, the Five Point Consensus's calls for an immediate cessation of violence and constructive dialogue (two of the five points) rang hollow, nor have successive special envoys (two further points) had any success in resolving the conflict.¹²⁰

Humanitarian aid was delivered through the ASEAN's AHA Centre (the fifth point) but only in SAC-controlled areas.¹²¹ It was possible that the March 2025 earthquake, the social, humanitarian and economic effects of which at time of writing continue to be serious, might have triggered some political momentum as happened after Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, but no such opening has arisen so far.¹²²

Myanmar being a member state and ASEAN being highly respectful of state sovereignty, ASEAN devised a complex series of arrangements whereby regime representatives participate at official level in ongoing endeavours but not at the political level. New Zealand having adopted a policy of non-recognition of the military regime, this involved complex manoeuvres when it had meetings with ASEAN at which representatives of the regime were present. New Zealand also stopped the entry into force of the RCEP as between New Zealand and Myanmar.¹²³

The charge d'affaires in Yangon — the New Zealand government was not prepared to present credentials to the military regime¹²⁴ — was aware that some in ASEAN thought countries like New Zealand should engage more with the regime, certainly at the official level. On the other hand, New Zealand's position was arguably buttressed because only a minority of ASEAN respondents to the ISEAS 2025 *State of Southeast Asia* survey supported reinstating SAC attendance at ASEAN meetings.¹²⁵

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 and the Israel-Hamas conflict from October 2023 both also exposed a difference in the stances of New Zealand and ASEAN as an organisation.

In 2022 New Zealand diplomats and other dialogue partners tried to get forceful statements from the East Asia Summit on Ukraine, Myanmar and the South China Sea and failed in all respects.¹²⁶ 2023, when Indonesia was in the chair, saw results more acceptable, although not without compromise, to New Zealand.¹²⁷

New Zealand aligned with the United States, Japan, Australia and others in unqualifiedly opposing Russia's attack on Ukraine as a breach of the UN charter and international and humanitarian law. ASEAN upheld the principle of territorial integrity, which had been overridden in the invasion, but nonetheless Russia remained a dialogue partner and senior officials from both sides met, for example, in February 2025 and 'reaffirmed their commitment to advancing cooperation and strengthening strategic ties'.¹²⁸

In respect of the Hamas-Israel War positions were not so at odds, with both ASEAN and New Zealand making calls in a variety of forums for a ceasefire, humanitarian intervention and/or a ceasefire, and repeating their support for a two-state solution. But Washington's unquestioning support for Israel is contentious in the region.¹²⁹ In the ISEAS 2025 *State of Southeast Asia* survey, the Hamas-Israel War was the top geopolitical concern for Muslim-majority Indonesia and Malaysia at 75.7 percent and 64.7 percent respectively, outranking the South China Sea. It likely influenced the preference of over 70 percent of respondents in those two countries for partnering with China (which has historically aligned itself with the Palestinian cause) and not the United States if forced to choose.¹³⁰



Citizenship, culture and society

THIRTEEN YEARS AFTER the winding up of the Colombo Plan in 1978, the English Language Training for Officials (ELTO) programme got underway at Victoria University of Wellington's English Language Institute (ELI). Long time peace activist and unionist Cath Kelly was a key driver behind its creation. Cath and her contacts had been asking themselves: 'What's next? The war has ended, so what can we do to help now?' They saw English language training as a "good launching pad for the war-affected countries of Southeast Asia to rebuild and get on a more even playing field with other world nations", not least because many Vietnamese, Cambodian and Lao officials were fluent in French and/or Russian, but not English. Cath and other supporters of the programme invited the students to their houses or to local community events, initiating a practice of hospitality or *manaakitanga* which continued thereafter. Cath and others, Jean Arnold recalled, were "active in other initiatives to help women, ethnic minorities and others in Viet Nam and Southeast Asia. With members of the Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos Support Network that Cath founded, they sent a shipping container full of medical equipment to Southeast Asia."¹³¹

Whereas ELTO students were officials — the 'O' in the acronym — the young leaders' programmes run by UnionAID selected from individuals active in civil society organisations, including those addressing indigenous, worker, women's, youth or LGBTQ rights or campaigning for sustainability, environmental protection or government and corporate transparency. Those from indigenous rights organisations or communities (but also others) have engaged extensively with Māori.¹³² This new generation of activists was committed to diverse civic causes — antimilitarism, educational reorganisation, indigenous rights, marriage equality, and a more open political order.¹³³

The preamble to the ASEAN charter of 2007 spelled out ASEAN's adherence to the 'principles of democracy, the rule of law, good governance, and respect for and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.'¹³⁴

And 90.8 percent of ASEAN-10 respondents in a 2025 survey believe a democratic political system, characterised by free, fair, and frequent elections, independent media, and freedom of association and opinion, to be the best form of governance for their country and the region.¹³⁵

But the charter itself qualified, in article 1 clause 7, that advocacy of the principles spelled out in the preamble must be done 'with due regard to the rights and responsibilities of the Member States of ASEAN'. That caveat may not fully exempt the SAC in Myanmar from harsh criticism but possible implications for the region were addressed in a special issue of the *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* (December 2023) which explored the phenomenon of 'democratic recession' in articles on relevant developments in Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia.

As mandated by article 14 of the ASEAN Charter, ASEAN established an Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) in 2009, which duly adopted an ASEAN declaration on human rights in 2012, the likely efficacy of which was questioned within and beyond the region.¹³⁶ Ongoing criticisms of the efficacy of AICHR came from regional organisations such as ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights.¹³⁷ But state sovereignty is a bedrock of ASEAN (if at times a shackle) and dialogue partners had to tread carefully, venturing into the human rights space.

Practicalities could be a focus. In 2023–24 the Improving Access to Legal and Social Services for Women Facing Violence in Papua initiative funded by MFAT and delivered by the Asia Foundation provided training that enabled 684 people, men and women, to increase awareness of such violence and how to stop it. In Viet Nam projects have targeted people with disabilities and ethnic minority students.¹³⁸



New Zealand has also participated in and supported the Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions (APF), which is a coalition of 27 national human rights institutions from across the region that works to strengthen regional human rights mechanisms such as AICHR.¹³⁹

There were other pathways to mutual understanding. Economic historian Gary Hawke has long advocated for understanding the different diplomatic style of Southeast (and other) Asian diplomats compared to at least Pākehā New Zealanders, with their focus on outcomes, not processes.¹⁴⁰ But perhaps the exposure of New Zealand policymakers to taha Māori has made them more attuned to the importance of process.¹⁴¹

ASEAN permanent representatives in Jakarta were very keen to meet Foreign Minister Mahuta when she visited Jakarta in November 2021, and there was strong interest in the way the minister saw Māori values playing a key role in New Zealand's foreign policy.¹⁴²

Reciprocally, Mahuta also pointed out that Aotearoa could be seen as the Austronesian (Malayo-Polynesian) world's most southerly outlier, the heartland of which is in ASEAN: 'Centuries ago, Māori tūpuna ... voyaged through the region on their way to Aotearoa. Māori belong to the Austronesian language group which holds deep connections to Southeast Asia.'¹⁴³

The ASEAN-New Zealand joint statement on cooperation on the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific noted New Zealand's "unique approach to partnerships which draws on the values of indigenous Māori culture, including: connectedness to each other and the natural environment (whanaungatanga); kindness and the reciprocity of goodwill (manaakitanga); working for a collective benefit (mahi tahi and kotahitanga); and acting as guardians for the people and the planet (kaitiakitanga)".¹⁴⁴

And 14 years on, Robert Ayson's 2011 exploration of values that New Zealanders and people across Asia might have in common — accommodation, respectfulness, peacefulness, lawfulness, generosity, responsibility, sustainability and restraint — remains an excellent starting point, one which reaches into New Zealand life and into the most creative part of the ASEAN endeavour.¹⁴⁵

Secretary-General of ASEAN Dr Kao Kim Hourn meeting with Minister of Foreign Affairs of New Zealand Nanaia Mahuta on the sidelines of the 56th ASEAN Meetings in Jakarta. Source ASEAN.





Defence, security and economic cooperation

Defence and non-traditional security

THE LARGER POLITICAL issues cast shadows over the region in the decade after 2015, with implications for the ASEAN-New Zealand relationship. At a more prosaic level, opportunities for cooperation and advancing common interests remained, channelled through both the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the more recently established defence ministers' forum, ADMM-Plus.

The ARF continued 'to play a role in reducing tensions in the region including on important issues for New Zealand, such as territorial disputes and freedom of navigation',¹⁴⁶ but the scale of the membership made it unwieldy. Its meeting schedule recorded an extremely diverse range of subjects, ranging from disaster preparedness, information and communications technology and women, peace and security.¹⁴⁷ New Zealand co-chaired the ARF Inter-Sessional Support Group Meeting on Confidence Building Measures and Preventive Diplomacy and the ARF defence officials' dialogue in May 2024.¹⁴⁸

New Zealand had been admitted to ADMM-Plus on the basis of meeting criteria set in 2009: that not only was it a dialogue partner but that it had significance interactions and relations with the ASEAN defence establishment and was able to work with the ADMM to 'build capacity so as to enhance regional security in a substantive way in order to promote capacity-building in the region in the fields of defence and security'.¹⁴⁹

On the basis of these criteria Canada was not admitted at the inception of ADMM-Plus. That the 'box office' has not re-opened since has arguably underlined the value of membership to New Zealand.

ADMM-Plus's expert working groups (EWGs) were more action oriented. To the original five areas of focus — maritime security; peacekeeping; military medicine; counterterrorism, and humanitarian and disaster relief — were added cyber-security and humanitarian mine action.¹⁵⁰

Ongoing collaboration in the EWGs by mid-ranking officials made for a relatively non-political environment which New Zealand defended in the face of occasional targeted interventions.¹⁵¹ Each EWG had one ASEAN and one 'plus' chair and worked on three-year project cycles.¹⁵² In the 2014–17 three-year cycle, when New Zealand was co-chairing maritime security with Brunei, a combined exercise was organised with the counterterrorism EWG which involved 3,500 personnel, with a Singapore naval facility made available. Russia and China both participated.¹⁵³

Relations with Myanmar, not to mention Russia, were hugely complicated by the Ukraine invasion — New Zealand did not permit Russian officials or military to participate in ADMM-Plus meetings held in New Zealand, but New Zealand officials and military could meet them in a multilateral setting (though not on the occasion when Myanmar and Russia co-hosted a counter-terrorism ADMM-Plus meeting in Moscow). Similar issues did not arise with China, whose representatives were relatively straightforward to deal with in such settings.¹⁵⁴

"Although New Zealand was far from being the biggest player in ADMM-Plus," New Zealand delegate Mike Thompson commented, "its commitment was unquestioned, and it could at times play an emollient role, as it did not come with baggage."¹⁵⁵

Cooperation in countering terrorism and trans-national crime was strengthened through the framework of the ASEAN-New Zealand Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism.¹⁵⁶ The mosque attacks and killings in Christchurch on 15 March 2019, although the attacker proved to be a lone white supremacist, not linked to any group, triggered ministerial visits by the foreign minister to Muslim-majority Indonesia (and also Muslim-majority Turkey) immediately after the attacks, in part to emphasise New Zealand's intolerance of Islamophobia. Five years later Winston Peters, as New Zealand's foreign minister, visited Istiqlal Mosque in central Jakarta in commemoration of the March 15 attacks.¹⁵⁷



In the year after the mosque attacks, New Zealand co-chaired a work stream with ASEAN on counterterrorism and transnational crime, with a new focus on countering terrorism and violent extremism online in accordance with the Christchurch Call. The New Zealand-Indonesia Cooperation Arrangement on Counter Terrorism and Violent Extremism was renewed in December 2023.¹⁵⁸

New Zealand also participated in the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC) and engaged with Aseanapol, the regional iteration of Interpol, headquartered in Kuala Lumpur.¹⁵⁹ MFAT's global security fund enabled New Zealand Customs and Police to deliver law enforcement training to agencies across Southeast Asia and training in investigative interviewing to the Royal Thai Police.¹⁶⁰ The two agencies partnered with Thailand's Office of the Narcotics Control Board (ONCB) for that latest endeavour.

New Zealand also cooperated with national law enforcement authorities in ASEAN through the Bali Process (co-chaired by Australia and Indonesia and with member states also in other parts of Asia and globally) on people smuggling, trafficking and related transnational crime.¹⁶¹ The establishment of the Bali Process in 2002, the same year as the 'Bali bombings', was a reminder of the tourist and traveller pathways that link New Zealanders to the region, and especially to resorts such as Bali, Phuket and Pattaya. The ongoing New Zealand Police and Customs presence in the region is testimony to those links, and to some of the negatives that have come with them.

Police leadership students from Indonesia in New Zealand for a comparative study on policing and security issues. Source Wellington Uni Professional.





Economic architecture

THE ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIP was another strand marked by evolution rather than disruption. The ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (AANZFTA) had come into effect in 2010. By then ASEAN had also made similar agreements with China, South Korea, Japan and India. Negotiations began in 2013 on a 'regional comprehensive economic partnership' (RCEP) that would link all the agreements, with ASEAN at the centre of the architecture. These negotiations were nearing completion when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out at the beginning of 2020 and were concluded online. The signing ceremony was held virtually in November 2020, with RCEP coming into force (though without India's participation) at the beginning of 2022.¹⁶² New Zealand had assisted in the establishment of an interim RCEP support unit in the ASEAN secretariat until the parties to RCEP formally agreed to establish the RCEP secretariat in 2024.¹⁶³

RCEP did not supersede AANZFTA, however, and negotiations on an upgrade of the latter began in 2021. AANZFTA had been a success with two-way trade having grown by 30 percent (as of 2025). Embarking on an upgrade was partly a reflection of the passage of time since the start of the agreement but also sought to address specific concerns, including clearance procedures, non-tariff barriers, rules of origin, e-commerce, and ensuring the speedy movement of essential goods in humanitarian emergencies, such as a pandemic, which had not been anticipated in 2010. New annexes also addressed professional and educational services.

In its briefing, New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained that it had engaged with Treaty of Waitangi partners throughout negotiations on specific areas of trade that were of interest to Treaty partners such as e-commerce, services, and investment.

The Treaty of Waitangi exception remained unchanged from the existing FTA and stated that the Crown would be able to adopt measures considered necessary to accord more favourable treatment to Māori, including under the Treaty of Waitangi.

The exception applied in respect of matters covered by the entire FTA, as amended by the upgrade.¹⁶⁴ The upgrade came into effect in April 2025.¹⁶⁵

Commercial interest in such an upgrade could be inferred from the executives who accompanied the prime minister to Southeast Asia in April 2024: among the business agreements concluded were a multi-million-dollar deal between NZ Aero and Thai Aviation Industries to supply parts to the Royal Thai Airforce; an Air New Zealand agreement to purchase nine million litres of sustainable aviation fuel from Singapore company Neste; a Massey University enhanced partnership with PSB Academy in Singapore; Plant & Food Research securing a contract with Quezon City to support development of traditional markets; and a multi-year deal between product verification company Oritain and Singapore-based Ramatex.¹⁶⁶ Alongside the AANZFTA upgrade, New Zealand and ASEAN also concluded long-standing negotiations for a regional air services agreement that would replace the agreements between New Zealand and each ASEAN member.¹⁶⁷

AANZFTA and RCEP were part of ASEAN's economic architecture, but they were not the only elements in the region's network of commercial and financial arrangements. The Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), established in 2007, and to which New Zealand was a party, remained an important contributor to research and analysis on topics such as energy transition and sustainability.¹⁶⁸



Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) had received strong New Zealand support since its inception in 1989, and in November 2021 New Zealand hosted the annual APEC summit virtually. Seven of ASEAN's ten members participate in APEC, and indeed ASEAN tends to think of APEC as an ASEAN institution, although it was increasingly hampered, as other trans-Pacific entities, by China-US hostility.

US scepticism about the benefits of trade liberalisation first became evident at the outset of the first Trump administration, in January 2017. One attendee recalled the hostility that greeted Trump at the APEC leaders' meeting held in Da Nang in November 2017. The United States had already withdrawn from the negotiations for the then-Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that produced the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) to which four ASEAN states — Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia and Viet Nam — belonged as well as Australia, New Zealand and four other states.¹⁶⁹ Ruling out returning to a TPP, the Biden administration launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) in 2022, which New Zealand and seven out of ten ASEAN member states participated.¹⁷⁰

The second Trump administration, which commenced in January 2025, sought to rebalance trade relations with countries that ran big trade surpluses with the United States by imposing what were intended to be trade-creating tariffs designed directly or indirectly to advantage US industry.

Amongst the ASEAN member states Viet Nam, accounting for 4.2 percent of US imports, was the most affected, but all other ASEAN members were 'served notice' pending the subsequently announced 90-day pause during which only an across-the-board 10 percent tariff would be applied (to all countries except China). It would be difficult to find markets for the substantial output which might need to be diverted. And the composition of exports to the United States from each country was broadly similar, so there was little incentive to cooperate; all sought to negotiate bilaterally with Washington.¹⁷¹ That Indonesia, the Philippines and Viet Nam secured bilateral agreements with the United States ahead of other ASEAN members was indicative. All Southeast Asian economies also faced the possibility of being flooded with goods from China, as that country, still subject to punitive tariffs, tried to offload surplus output.¹⁷²

What were the implications for New Zealand? New Zealand Prime Minister Chris Luxon aligned with Singaporean Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and other leaders in defence of the rules-based global economic order.¹⁷³ One possibility canvassed was to link the CPTPP and the EU.¹⁷⁴ Another pathway likely to be of greater significance to ASEAN would be for the CPTPP to act on the applications of China and Taiwan for membership: Fifteen years prior commentators had seen TPP as a logical first step towards an FTAAP — a free trade area of the Asia-Pacific encompassing all the APEC economies.¹⁷⁵ Absent the now insuperable obstacles to both China and Taiwan entering the agreement, their membership would have brought that objective closer.

The ASEAN Geoeconomics Task Force convened for the first time in May 2025, attended by senior officials and experts from ASEAN member states and Timor-Leste.¹⁷⁶ While New Zealand pursued a free trade agreement with India, US-China economic warfare had strengthened some ties between ASEAN and the three East Asian economies, managed through ASEAN plus three (APT). In May 2025 APT central bank governors and finance ministers authorised a rapid finance facility using eligible currencies, to strengthen the capacity of the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralisation of 2010 (CMIM) to act as a regional financial safety net.¹⁷⁷



The legacy of Colombo — people and the planet

New Zealand's engagement with the politics, security and economies of the region were critical parts of the New Zealand-ASEAN relationship but in terms of sinking roots into ASEAN countries and New Zealand, the socio-cultural pillar of ASEAN, which New Zealand framed as people-to-people ties, was just as important. New Zealand invested more into such initiatives in Southeast Asia or into bringing people from Southeast Asia to New Zealand, than into any world region except the Pacific.

THIS CONFIRMED THE distinctive place Southeast Asia held in New Zealand's worldview, one that can be traced back to the establishment of the Colombo Plan development assistance programme in the 1950s.¹⁷⁸ In the last ten years many such initiatives had a climate and environmental face, consistent with the prominence of such matters in shaping — or threatening — the region's future.

International development cooperation

THE UNITED NATIONS Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015.¹⁷⁹ Work on climate change, environmental protection, disaster management, and narrowing the development gap were all relevant.¹⁸⁰

'Vision 2025' was a hallmark of the announcement of the ASEAN communities in 2015, highlighting as it did complementarity with the SDGs in aiming to improve living standards. It envisioned a peaceful, stable and resilient community; with enhanced capacity to respond effectively to challenges. However, ensuring more inclusive, equitable and environmentally sustainable growth was a challenge.¹⁸¹

The Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) focused on the least developed and newer ASEAN members. As part of its support for the IAI's Work Plan III in 2016–20 the New Zealand Aid Programme funded a project on simplifying business registration in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar. To help micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) reduce the time and cost of registering their business, the New Zealand Companies Office reviewed current legislative settings, staff capability, size and complexity of the registry, and the technology available in the three countries.¹⁸²

New Zealand's strategic goals for 2021–25 focused on strengthening stability, resilience and economic integration and on advancing the SDGs in the region.¹⁸³ The first translated into areas of economic and climate resilience, governance, peace and security, and knowledge and skills, particularly to the region's least developed countries.¹⁸⁴

Climate finance was accordingly a major new pathway to resilience 2021–2024 and absorbed \$90 million, with almost that much again allocated to smart agriculture and geothermal projects.¹⁸⁵

New Zealand supported the establishment of an ASEAN Centre on Climate Change.¹⁸⁶ Two of the ELTO (see below) 'intake themes' in 2024 were renewable energy and sustainable agriculture.¹⁸⁷ Support for UNEP/UN Women EmPower was especially targeted at business women and at enhancing the climate-resilience of their enterprises.¹⁸⁸ In the Philippines, urgent responses to acute pandemic and natural disaster-related needs were followed by a scaling up provision of climate resilient and sustainable water infrastructure and nutrition service delivery.¹⁸⁹



The second goal translated less directly: the metrics included poverty, per capita growth and human development index rankings, for none of which there would be a strong cause-and-effect link from New Zealand interventions but improvements in all such measures were considered important benchmarks.

Heads of mission had modest budgets that were used to fund small-scale projects. In the Philippines access was provided to renewable energy in three un-electrified indigenous communities.

Indigenous B'laan leaders in front of the new solar power grid. For the first time, their community can access electricity. Source Center for Energy, Ecology, and Development (CEED) Philippines.

The B'laan indigenous community lives next to a coal-fired power plant in their ancestral domain but never benefited from access to electricity. The new off-grid solar photovoltaic system has provided the community with much needed, and transformative, access to electricity.¹⁹⁰

In Viet Nam a kitchen and canteen were constructed in a primary and secondary school, providing a safe and caring environment for 60 boarding students from marginalised ethnic minority communities. As a result, the students could have three cooked meals a day with improved meal quality, and decreased health risk from cooking on open fires.¹⁹¹

And in Indonesia an activity to promote empowerment for the indigenous communities of Tau Taa in Central Sulawesi was supported. The community increased food security through the development of new crops and an expanded variety of vegetables and fruits into their crops. Installation of fishponds has provided an increased protein intake, particularly benefiting children and the elderly.¹⁹²

This focus has proved timely. In 2025, for the first time since the *State of Southeast Asia* survey was conducted in 2019, 'at an ASEAN-10 aggregated level, a majority of Southeast Asians (55.3 percent) said that climate change and extreme weather events were now the region's biggest challenge.'¹⁹³





Education

FROM SOON AFTER its establishment in 1950 until 1978 the Colombo Plan funded students from Southeast Asia to study in New Zealand. The students mostly returned to their home countries and as they advanced in their professions and careers ensured an enduring link between those countries and New Zealand. Among Malaysian Colombo recipients, Leo Moggie, who studied history and economics at Otago, became a state and federal cabinet minister; Hashim Yaacob, who studied dentistry, became a vice-chancellor; Nancy Ho became the first East Malaysian President of the National Pharmaceutical Society of Malaysia. Kamal Quadra became Sabah state's first Director of Education.¹⁹⁴ Dr Mazlan Othman, another Otago graduate, is Malaysia's most distinguished astrophysicist.¹⁹⁵ Businessman Tan Sri Halim bin Saad, a Victoria alumnus, has been a generous benefactor to his alma mater.¹⁹⁶

What might be called the 'Colombo philosophy' — the lifetime returns from those student exchanges — underpinned the variety of educational and leadership programmes that New Zealand has run since 1990, now under the umbrella of Manaaki New Zealand scholarships. These programmes foster New Zealand's goals in Southeast Asia in part through the enduring personal ties forged, just as happened through the years of the Colombo Plan.

The personal ties established through the ADMM-Plus expert working groups often survived the three-year programme cycle.¹⁹⁷ The ASEAN-OECD good regulatory practice network first met in 2016 and still functioning today, had fostered relations with officials in those countries most involved, namely Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines.¹⁹⁸ A Malaysian delegation has visited New Zealand while there have also been virtual sessions with the Anti-Red-Tape-Authority (ARTA) in the Philippines.¹⁹⁹

From 2015, the public sector leadership programmes brought officials from across ASEAN to attend two-to-four-week courses at Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka.²⁰⁰ Other programmes were the young diplomats study tours of New Zealand and the defence policymakers course for ASEAN partners. The ASEAN Young Business Leaders Initiative (YBLI) is managed by the Asia New Zealand Foundation.²⁰¹ Young ASEAN trade and economic officials made study tours of New Zealand in 2023, 2024 and 2025. The ASEAN-New Zealand Trade Academy first convened in 2023 to upskill junior trade negotiators. A second session took place in April-May 2024 followed by an in-person session in Jakarta in June.²⁰²

UnionAID has run its own young leaders programme, with support from MFAT and Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka, including the latter's English Language Institute, since 2010. Initially the annual cohort (first six, then eight, then twelve) came entirely from Myanmar. The programme was so successful that MFAT asked UnionAID to offer parallel programmes from eastern Indonesia (2016-), Mindanao (2018-) and Cambodia and Laos (2024-).²⁰³

Exchanges have been reciprocal. In 2014 and 2015 cohorts of students from Victoria University undertook study tours in Southeast Asia funded by the Prime Minister's Scholarships for Asia (PMSA) programme. From 2018 the Southeast Asia Centre of Asia Pacific Excellence (SEACAPE) advanced educational and business familiarisation with Southeast Asia.²⁰⁴

AUT (Auckland University of Technology) has had a lengthy record of engagement with Southeast Asia, especially Thailand and Viet Nam. In 2025, the 19th cohort of Thai officials will arrive for a four-week collaborative English language training programme at both AUT University and Victoria University of Wellington-Te Herenga Waka (VUW).²⁰⁵ VUW has also operated a split degree programme (50 percent in Ha Noi, 50 percent in Wellington) with the Diplomatic Academy of Viet Nam and has collaborated with other universities in Viet Nam.²⁰⁶ Since 2024 Massey University has offered courses in collaboration with PSB Academy in Singapore.²⁰⁷ Waikato University had programmes in Viet Nam in conjunction with the National Economics University, in supply chain management and digital business.²⁰⁸



In 2024, a symposium in Thailand for alumni of New Zealand's English Language Training for Officials (ELTO) programme assembled 57 officials from across ASEAN for professional development and English language practice, representing a key contribution to building strong communities of practice within the region.²⁰⁹

A second symposium gathered 157 alumni at Hanoi in February 2025. At that gathering, Nguyen Tam Chien, an alumnus from the first ELTO intake in 1991 and a former ambassador to Viet Nam, recalled that he could "still feel the strong Wellington winds that shook our plane as we landed in the capital of New Zealand".²¹⁰

Such events, as the officialise put it, 'helps to ensure that Manaaki alumni contribute positively to their communities and look to New Zealand for trade, development and other forms of cooperation and connection'.²¹¹

In remarks in Wellington in February 2025, Viet Nam deputy foreign minister, Do Hung Viet, suggested a number of ways the educational arm of the relationship could be expanded: an ASEAN centre of excellence for emerging technologies, to be based in one or other country; a young innovators or young scholars exchange programme; and an ASEAN-New Zealand Centre, to be located at either Victoria University or in the Diplomatic Academy of Viet Nam.²¹²

ASEAN delegation in New Zealand. Source Asia New Zealand Foundation.





Closing comments

THERE HAVE BEEN many ASEAN sceptics, inside as well as beyond the region, although encouragingly in 2025 the organisation is held in favourable regard by many of its member states. There is strong support by opinion-leaders in three major member states (Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia), with just short of 70 percent of respondents welcoming its influence in a recent poll, buttressed by wider if softer member state support generally.²¹³ In mid-2025 ASEAN chair Malaysia speedily brokered a peace deal after fighting broke out between member states Thailand and Cambodia.²¹⁴ The commitment of ASEAN in Vision 2045 (adopted in 2025) to connectivity as a new pillar of the ASEAN community is indicative of its capacity to grow.²¹⁵

Even critics of ASEAN admit that it is better for it to exist than not.²¹⁶ It has provided the longest and most widely accepted forum for collaboration among the states of Southeast Asia. Accordingly, it has remained the preferred channel for the involvement of outside states in the region. That has been especially the case for New Zealand, which had neither the economic nor military heft (or the inclination) to act unilaterally in Southeast Asia, but which needed to nurture the relationship, not least on account of political and economic challenges in the wider region.

Except for the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), which operates on a very different scale, ASEAN, and its affiliated endeavours, has been the regional organisation with which New Zealand has engaged most intensively. APEC and the CPTPP are others, but they are far more diverse and geographically extensive in membership and do not cover the full gamut of state-to-state relations. It is not surprising that New Zealand has repeatedly voiced its support for ASEAN centrality and ASEAN-centred architecture. Further, ASEAN's 'open regionalism' suits a relatively small state like New Zealand that could too readily be excluded from tighter regional associations. And Australia aside, Southeast Asia is the closest 'world region' to New Zealand.

Much has been accomplished in the last decade. One New Zealand diplomat recalled the growth in New Zealand engagement compared to his first visit to the region in 2014: "Over the past decade, the importance to which we attach to ASEAN has grown significantly, and the examples of what New Zealand is accomplishing are much stronger".

The unveiling of the official logo for the commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of ASEAN-New Zealand dialogue relations. Source MFAT.





“Over the past decade, the importance to which we attach to ASEAN has grown significantly, and the examples of what New Zealand is accomplishing are much stronger.”

New Zealand diplomat

New Zealand engagement nonetheless faces three main challenges, two distinctive to New Zealand, the other affecting the whole region.

First, despite consistent and long-standing engagement with ASEAN, on any measure of relevance New Zealand has lagged behind other dialogue partners, suggesting that its strategic footprint remains small. Southeast Asia abuts North and South Asia, two other of the world's most populous regions. It may be ‘close’ to Aotearoa, but it is as close to (or far from) Moscow, Cairo and Johannesburg. It would be odd if New Zealand's footprint was larger than Australia or South Korea but therein lies the challenge. That New Zealand ranks with Australia as a country which ASEAN is confident will uphold a rules-based order is at least testament to a grasp of New Zealand's foreign policy.²¹⁷

Second, conversely, or perhaps not, the partnership is still not yet deeply embedded in New Zealanders' worldview. ‘An overwhelming majority of the participants in an online qualitative survey’, one scholar reported from a decade back, ‘had not heard of the term ASEAN or knew very little about its meaning.’²¹⁸ In the most recent Asia New Zealand Foundation survey of New Zealanders' attitudes towards Asia, while there were generally favourable attitudes to several Southeast Asian countries, with the exception of Singapore, none had anything like the salience of China, Japan, South Korea, let alone Australia.²¹⁹ Informal enquiry while preparing this report in 2025 suggested that ‘ASEAN’ itself was still imprecisely identified, even among the news-reading New Zealand public.

That said, it was striking that two major people-to-people initiatives originated with New Zealand civil society — first, what became ELTO language training; second, the young leaders programme which arose out of a request from the Myanmar trade union movement to its New Zealand counterpart.²²⁰ Committed scholars — such as James Ockey and Naimah Talib at the University of Canterbury — have also played an important role. The entire population of a country did not need to be engaged for something to be accomplished.

Third, global politics, and particularly the US-China strategic competition, has placed acute stress on both the region and on ASEAN's place in it. Rhetorically the positions of ASEAN and New Zealand on the competition aligned but there were marked differences in emphasis, with ASEAN being in the generality more ‘even handed’ than New Zealand. Statements from the secretary-general of ASEAN, or from the leaders of member states, Singapore and Indonesia for example, often stressed a reluctance to ‘choose’ between China and the United States.²²¹

Such a stance has been rarely voiced in official statements in New Zealand since 2019, although the determination to maintain a stable and productive relationship with China remains unchanged.²²² That stance has aligned New Zealand closely with Australia and Japan. The three were ASEAN's first dialogue partners, a useful reminder of a commonality of interest that still benchmarks ways for New Zealand to add value to its own engagement with ASEAN and its member states: Japan indeed was by far the most warmly regarded of major powers by ASEAN opinion makers.²²³

New Zealand, ASEAN and Southeast Asia have come a long way from 2015, let alone 1990, 1975 or 1945. A relationship once based on securing a region both for (or against) itself and for New Zealand became a relationship important in its own terms. It provided pathways to multiple patterns of regional order, was not at odds with New Zealand's desired goals in global order, and contributed to coexistence rather than collision in the regional space. At a time of heightened geopolitical conflict, ASEAN remains a crucial building block for New Zealand diplomacy and foreign relations in an uncertain world.



Abbreviations

AANZFTA	ASEAN-Australia and New Zealand Free Trade Agreement
AFP	ASEAN free trade agreement partners (the non-ASEAN members of RCEP)
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
APT	ASEAN plus three (China, Japan, South Korea)
ARTA	Anti-Red-Tape-Authority in the Philippines
AUT	Auckland University of Technology
ADMM-Plus	ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting plus (ASEAN's eight dialogue partners)
CER	Australia-New Zealand Closer Economic Relations
CPTTP	Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership
CSCAP	Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific
EAS	East Asia Summit
ELTO	English Language Training for Officials
ELI	Victoria University of Wellington's English Language Institute
ERIA	Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia
EWG	Expert working group
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GDS	Global development and scholarships division, MFAT
IAI	Initiative for ASEAN Integration
IPEF	Indo-Pacific Economic Framework
ISEAS	ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute
MFAT	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (New Zealand)
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
PMSA	Prime Minister's Scholarship for Asia
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership
RCEP	ASEAN+5 Regional Comprehensive and Economic Partnership
SDGs	United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
SEACAPE	Southeast Asia Centre of Asia Pacific Excellence
SEARI	Southeast Asia Research Initiative (University of Canterbury)
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia
VUW	Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka
YBLI	Young Business Leaders Initiative



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Endnotes

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