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Op-Ed - ASEAN-Australia Special Summit matters to us all

By Jane Duke, Australian Ambassador to ASEAN

When the leaders of Southeast Asia arrive in Australia this week, they will mark a new era in one of the region's most long-standing relationships.

They will be attending the "ASEAN-Australia Special Summit", the first time that the region's leaders have all gathered in Australia.

But while the Summit represents a historic moment, it maintains long diplomatic traditions. Australia and each of the ten states in Southeast Asia have strong relations.

And forty four years ago Australia became the first external partner of the region's club of countries, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN.

We came together at a time when many states in the region were taking their first steps as independent nations to better the lives of their people.

Since then, ASEAN has helped the people of the region enjoy stable times without great wars between states.

This stability has created prosperity, allowing ASEAN members to work closer on trade and economics, life has become easier and prosperous for more families across Southeast Asia than ever before.

Australia has always stood with ASEAN to achieve its goals. Our cooperation today is both deep and wide-ranging. The Australian Government's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper reaffirmed the high priority Australia places on our support for ASEAN, as well as our bilateral relationships in Southeast Asia.

Australia's development assistance program helps tackle issues like human trafficking and supports ASEAN's ambition for more inclusive economic growth.

Our societies are closer.

Southeast Asian migrants and their families have helped Australia become the most successful multicultural society in the world. Today, almost half of all Australians were born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas. ASEAN is a large part of this story, with more than one million Australians claiming ASEAN ancestry in our last national census.

Business and trade ties between Australia and ASEAN have also grown stronger, helping to improve standards of living for people across our region.

Wheat grown by Australian farmers is the main ingredient in noodles served at many family meals.

You can buy Australian-made dairy, quality fresh foods and vitamins in grocery stores across the region.

And in Australia, imports from ASEAN of motor vehicles, telecommunications equipment, computers, machinery and other manufactured products are increasingly sought after.

ASEAN has a trade deal with Australia and New Zealand that remains the region's 'gold standard' for opening up opportunities for trade and investment. To further regional economic integration, ASEAN and Australia (along with China, India, Japan and Korea and New Zealand) are negotiating the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. This is an ASEAN initiative to build on ASEAN's existing FTAs with its partners. Four ASEAN members are also part of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

We also have trade agreements directly with Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and one on the way with Indonesia.

Indeed, for Australia, five out of our top fifteen trading relationships are now with Southeast Asian countries.

In education, for those families who choose to send their children to study abroad, many choose Australia, with almost 100,000 students from the region enrolled to study there. Some 1.4 million visitors from ASEAN came to Australia for work, business or tourism in the past year.

And each year around three million Australians visit countries in the region to see their natural beauty and experience their culture.

Just as Australians come back home with lifetime impressions, the Southeast Asian leaders who will visit Sydney will help forge even stronger ties that benefit us all.

The ASEAN-Australia Special Summit, hosted by Australia's Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, aims to enhance security and prosperity.

An essential role for all governments is to keep their people safe, secure and free. Our region faces threats that can't be dealt with by one country acting alone.

Protecting our people against harm from criminals and terrorists is best done by sharing intelligence, skills and knowledge.

Australia and ASEAN have long worked together against these threats.

The Summit will reinforce these efforts and prepare against threats from new fronts in technology and cyber space.

Finally, the Summit will build on one of Southeast Asia's greatest successes – economic growth.

Both Australia and ASEAN are proof that we become better off as our economies and businesses move closer.

Australia is enjoying its 27th year of unbroken economic growth.

ASEAN's material wealth – its Gross Domestic Product - has quadrupled over the past 15 years, creating a huge new middle class.

The Summit will bring together business people, from multinationals to small firms, to promote even closer trade and commerce.

A secure and prosperous future will not happen by itself. Power is shifting and competition for influence are posing tests for our region.

There will be events our region won't expect.

But we can shape policies that promote economic openness and support rules that make us more secure and more prosperous.

Hosting the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit demonstrates Australia's strong commitment to ASEAN and our enduring ties with the countries of Southeast Asia. It may involve leaders but the issues they discuss matter to us all.



Ms Jane Duke is the Australian Ambassador to the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Ms Duke is a senior career officer with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and was most recently Assistant Secretary, South-East Asia Regional Branch. She previously served overseas as Deputy High Commissioner, Malaysia and as Counsellor (Immigration) at Australia's Permanent Mission to the UN in Geneva.

In Canberra, Ms Duke has served as Assistant Secretary of the Canada and Latin America Branch, and the Northern, Southern and Eastern Europe Branch. Ms Duke has also held senior positions in the immigration portfolio.

Ms Duke holds a Bachelor of Arts (Asian Studies) and a Bachelor of Laws (Hons) from the Australian National University, and a Graduate Diploma in Legal Practice from the University of Technology Sydney.