



**A commentary on the first
ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Dialogue
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The first observation made by many of the participants was that this was the First ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Dialogue and, accordingly, some importance was attached to this. Indeed, the dialogue had that feel to it throughout despite the presence of many veterans among the various moderators, speakers and discussants. Those of us from New Zealand also recognised the significance of, and expressed appreciation for, the fact that we had been invited to participate: it having sometimes been said in official ASEAN circles that it would be more convenient if Australia and New Zealand were dealt with as a single entity (an ASEAN+1 as it would be in the relevant phraseology).

The purpose of the Dialogue was to provide a forum in which some of the central areas of concern in the wider Asia-Pacific could be addressed, along with perceptions of how ASEAN, Australia and New Zealand could enhance regional security and deal with the challenges posed by the involvement of the major powers. The timely issue of the global economic downturn and its impact on the region was to be tackled, too. It was these areas which provided the themes for the first four sessions, with a fifth tackling the sensitive subject of political developments in Myanmar. Within these broad themes, specific areas up for discussion included how the participants perceived the role of the major powers; how any rivalries between these major powers could be moderated; the implementation of the recently agreed ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area; and the Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's call for the establishment of an Asia-Pacific Community and how this might affect existing regional institutions (especially ASEAN itself).

Given the extensive scope of the Dialogue, one might have expected it to have been spread out over two days (as was the Sixth East Asia Congress which

immediately preceded it in the same venue), but it was only an intensive one-day affair.

The intensity of the meeting was such that it was only a few days later that the central features begin to crystallise in one's mind. My reflections, therefore, revolve around the following: ASEAN itself, new regional institutions, the major powers, and practical cooperation.

ASEAN and the regional architecture

Two recurrent and divergent themes emerged concerning ASEAN and ASEAN-derived institutions. First, that ASEAN and ASEAN-created institutions remain central and durable although they need to do more. Indeed, there was some criticism as to ASEAN's effectiveness. At one time this would have been limited to sceptical 'Western' outsiders, but it is now notable that this comes from insiders too. Secondly, that even an improved ASEAN cannot meet the demands for increased regionalism and deal with a range of new and pressing issues including, for example, climate change and nuclear proliferation.

These sorts of concerns about the existing regional architecture were more closely inter-linked with another major theme – whether new regional institutions were now needed and, if so, what form they should take. This topic was certainly one of the most interesting and also one of the few which saw theoretical input from the many academics participating in the Dialogue.

There was a lively debate about the nature of regionalism itself (was it about institutions or identity) and whether regions should be defined more by issues and interests than by geography alone. At the heart of this debate were Rudd's Asia-Pacific Community proposal and the belief that no single regional institution was capable of dealing with the political, economic and security issue areas. It was also suggested that there might need to be different Asia-Pacific institutions to deal with each of these areas in turn. Unsurprisingly, the Australian participants were most positive about the likelihood of something like the Asia-Pacific Community proposal actually coming to pass although it received limited support from some ASEAN participants too. For some, an Asia-Pacific institutional structure was more attractive than simply an East Asian one whilst also support was shown for new configurations such as the G-20.

The idea of new configurations was linked to that of new powers and to the idea of fluidity and pluralism in power relations by one participant, and was made in the context of the debate about the role of the major powers identified as of

being of central importance for the Dialogue (namely China, India, Japan, Russia and the US). The consensus was that of all these powers it was really only the US and China, and the relationship between them, that was crucial.

Views differed over whether or not the US was likely to be more or less involved under the impending Obama administration and over the exact nature of China's attitudes towards the status quo and to its place in the region. Russia and India were regarded as peripheral powers (the former because it's not a multi-dimensional power and the latter because it's not actively involved yet in most major issues). Japan received some attention in respect of economics but it was otherwise almost completely absent from this discussion thread.

Suggestions on how to improve practical cooperation were mainly limited to the areas of economic and defence cooperation. The ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement was regarded as likely to make a useful contribution to economic stability and recovery. In the area of defence cooperation the Five Power Defence Arrangements, perhaps surprisingly, received a good deal of attention. It was proposed that the FPDA could usefully be adapted and expanded to meet some of the needs in this area. In the course of the discussion about the FPDA it was apparent that the scrapping of New Zealand's air combat wing was still not off the agenda as far as the Southeast Asian members were concerned.

The session on Myanmar, because of its sensitive nature and coming as it did right at the end, actually elicited comparatively little discussion though the strength of feeling that it engendered was palpable. To some extent Myanmar is now included in meetings such as this because it acts as a pressure release valve for the other ASEAN members and it should probably be seen in this light.

As is in the nature of these things, the Australian contributors were prominent although the New Zealand team – ably lead by Dick Grant – held its end up very well. ASEAN representation is based on delegations from individual ASEAN-ISIS institutions and thus, although a collective ASEAN response was sometimes sought in regard to specific questions, it was not always forthcoming.

Overall, however, there was a consensus that this had been one of the most successful, if not *the* most successful, of such initiatives and the hope was expressed that this would be the first of many and not the first and only.

Views expressed in this paper are personal to the author and are not to be taken as representing the full delegation or the Asia New Zealand Foundation