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Australian Strategic Cooperation in Southeast Asia: Challenges and Opportunities

By

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Thanks to my parents,

Donald and Anne

Abstract

Southeast Asia has become the epicentre of United States (US)-China geostrategic competition in the Indo-Pacific. Nations in the region are attempting to navigate an environment whereby China acts as their largest trading partner and the US is viewed by many as a security guarantor. Regional instability as a result of Chinese coercion and territorial encroachment has led to increased defence spending and militarisation by Southeast Asian nations looking to increase their own individual security. The region also acts as a security gateway for Australia and holds key maritime trading routes. Australia's own place and influence in the region has been in decline, but the current environment offers opportunities for the nation to engage with Southeast Asian partners. This dissertation outlines strategies for cooperation that Australia can take to address threats and challenges facing its regional neighbours. This includes addressing Chinese encroachment, maritime piracy and slavery, and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. An ongoing Australian maritime security program engaging regional coast guards could address maritime threats, along with supporting Southeast Asia's ambitions for naval capability and Australia's need for regional deep-water port arrangements. The Defence Cooperation Program, military partner training and joint exercises, and the development of Northern Territory basing offer further opportunities, along with strategic cooperation through public service diplomacy, clean energy development, cybersecurity and space.

Contents

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ADF – Australian Defence Force

ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations

AUKUS – Australia-United Kingdom-United States Security Pact

COVID-19 – Coronavirus Pandemic 2019

DCP – Defence Cooperation Program

DFAT – Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

EEZ – Exclusive economic zone

FONOPS – Freedom of navigation operations

GDP – Gross domestic product

IMB – International Maritime Bureau

PCMP – Pacific Maritime Security Program

PLAN – China's People's Liberation Army Navy

PRC – People's Republic of China

IUU – Illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing

RAAF – Royal Australian Air Force

ReCAAP-ISC – Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combatting Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia's Information Sharing Centre

SEZ – Special economic zone

UK – United Kingdom

UN – United Nations

US – United States

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Introduction

Australia's strategic landscape is undergoing realignment described by the Australian 2020 Defence Strategic Update as the most significant shift since the end of World War II. The 2023 Defence Strategic Review warns that Australia is experiencing the most challenging circumstances in decades with contest taking place across economic, military, strategic, and diplomatic levels (Australian Government 2020; 2023). Geostrategic competition between the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China (PRC; China) has exposed the Indo-Pacific to challenges with no clear path to security for its participants to navigate and within which traditional methods of warfare are increasingly being supplemented with or replaced by hybrid tactics, such as cyberattack and foreign interference (Bilal 2021; Hurst 2021; Jaipragas 2021).

Nations across the Indo-Pacific have increasingly looked towards building military capacity due to what strategist Hugh White (2022a) has described as a world experiencing a deterioration of good order because of US-China great power competition. Australia's own strategic environment has been described as being characterised by expanding cyber capability, grey zone activities, and great power competition (Australian Government 2020). This shift towards security and military modernisation is nowhere as apparent as in a region described by Le Thu (2022b) as Australia's 'near abroad' and that Bland (2022) writes sits in the geopolitical and strategic centre of the Indo-Pacific: this region is Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia is experiencing a rising focus on security and defence spending. Vietnam raised its defence budget from US$5 billion in 2018 to $US7 billion in 2022, and the Philippines increased defence spending by a record 7.87 percent in 2022, before proposing another 8 percent increase in 2023 (Grevatt and MacDonald 2022a; "Philippine Defence Budget" 2021; The Phuong 2021). Thailand increased its proportional defence spending from 6.5 percent in 2021 to 6.6 percent in 2022, but this figure will see a marginal decrease in 2023 from THB201.66 billion to THB197.26 billion ($US5.86 billion) (Grevatt 2021b; Grevatt and MacDonald 2022b).

Malaysia's own defence budget grew by 1.8 percent in 2022, with an additional nominal 10 percent increase proposed in 2023, while Indonesia is seeking $US125 billion in loans for long-term military modernisation (Grevatt 2021a; Grevatt and MacDonald 2021; 2023). Contributing to this focus on security, nations across the region face territorial encroachment and coercion within their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the South China Sea from a larger power in China that seeks dominance over the Sea and its energy resources and trading routes ("Territorial Disputes" 2022).

Nations with histories of direct coercion at the hands of China in the maritime domain, such as the Philippines, or who face continental military threats via shared land borders, such as Vietnam, have looked towards military capability to ensure security (Grossman 2021c; 2022; Shang-su 2018). Alternatively, it could also be that this increased regional focus on defence is the result of long overdue military modernisation or domestic issues such as the insurgency in Thailand's south (Guild 2022). Regardless of motives behind rising defence spending, Le Thu (2022a) writes that Southeast Asia has become the epicentre of US-China competition in the Indo-Pacific.

This region is of strategic significance for Australia because of close trade, security, geopolitical links, as well as potential diplomatic and defence relationships. Southeast Asia is a security gateway to Australia and is a growing $US3 trillion economic market of 650 million consumers (AP4D 2022b). Pre-COVID-19, Indonesia alone was developing to become the world's fourth largest economy by 2050 behind only China, the US, and India, and was well-placed as a possibility to fill the security vacuum from any US withdrawal from the region (Khong 2017; White 2018). Australia's future security and prosperity can be significantly influenced by its relationships with the nations of Southeast Asia. This dissertation will outline the opportunities for Australia to engage a strategy of cooperation with Southeast Asia to address security risks to the region, benefiting both Australia and its partners. Chapter one will review relevant literature on Southeast Asia, while chapter two will describe the strategic circumstances facing Southeast Asia in the current post-COVID-19 environment and its experience in navigating US-China competition. Chapter

three will present cooperation as an effective strategy with an Australian example and chapter four will outline maritime security threats facing Southeast Asia before presenting potential avenues of maritime cooperation. Chapter five will discuss opportunities in other areas, such as land and air.

The conceptual framework guiding this dissertation is based upon the proposal that cooperation between nations leads to increased peace and security. Cooperation can be defined as states working together through avenues including strategic partnership or alliance on mutually beneficial military, trade, investment, and diplomatic agendas. Theories such as liberalism and realism have viewed cooperation as producing superior outcomes either in comparison to states competing with one another to maintain individual security or through forming alliances to balance against larger powers (Glaser 2018; Morgan 2018). Utilising cooperation as a lens of analysis or general conceptual framework is not uncommon, with writers such as Cameron (2022c), Page (2022), Donellon-May (2023), and Tan and Acharya (2004) using cooperation as a basis to explore security challenges in varying regions.

An empirical lens will further be applied in data-driven analysis and in the presentation of practical recommendations. Research relying only on theory can be vulnerable to confirmation bias or can be inadequate when applied to the contemporary environment of interconnected human, ecological, and economic security concerns (Eriksson and Giacomello 2006; Kedourie 1989; Roselle, Spray, and Shelton 2020). Kang (2003) and Thomson (1995) write that applying the empirical lens alongside theory can provide more accurate analysis, particularly in the post-Cold War environment where nations other than great powers, such as those in Southeast Asia, can still have an impact on international relations.

As such, rather than applying a configuration of differing theories or attempting to explain complex interconnected variables relying on single theory, an empirical approach will be primarily taken to analysis with the use of cooperation as an overarching guide.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

This chapter will provide a review of relevant analysis and academic literature on how Southeast Asia has navigated great power competition and the COVID-19 pandemic. Further literature and debate on how China, the US, and Australia have engaged Southeast Asia will be discussed, as well as how this dissertation can add to the body of literature.

Literature in any field often offers varying viewpoints, but regarding Southeast Asia there has been consensus on at least one salient point. The region is caught in a balancing act between maintaining ties and trade with their largest economic partner China, and in sustaining a security relationship with the US to ensure regional stability (Cooper III and Chase 2020; Cosar and Thomas 2020; Grossman 2020; L. Lee 2021; McCarthy 2022). This complexity is evident in results from a 2021 survey of representatives from academia, government, business, media, and non-government organisations in the 10 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states (Seah, Thi Ha, Martinus, and Thao 2021). When provided a binary choice between the US and China, 61.5 percent preferred to side with the US, but on a separate response 76.3 percent also stated that China was the most influential power in the region.

This is despite China being a divisive actor. China has not complied with the Law of the Sea Convention or accepted tribunal rulings over their behaviour in challenging the maritime sovereignty of Southeast Asian nations in the South China Sea, including Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines (Jibiki and Hadano 2021; Kumar 2021; “Philippines Flags Incursions” 2021; Tiezzi 2022; “Vietnam Tacks Between Cooperation” 2021). Maude and Fraser (2022) write that this coercive attitude, along with under-delivery on regional infrastructure projects and an ingrained wariness of China has undercut the nation’s influence.

Katsumata and Nagata (2019), Lai and Kuik (2021), Mazarr et al. (2021), and Strating (2020) have written that the approach Southeast Asian nations have taken to geostrategic competition is one of hedging between the US and China. Smaller nations with weaker governance mechanisms such as Laos and

Myanmar are more vulnerable to erosions of sovereignty through Chinese investment deals, as opposed to nations such as Vietnam and Thailand who have been able to maintain relative autonomy (Raymond 2021).

Consensus among authors such as Valencia (2020), Laksmana (2021), and Blank (2021) is that Southeast Asian nations do not wish to be forced to align themselves between the US and China. Patton (2021) writes that regional countries are at risk of becoming irrelevant through this neutral standpoint, and Le Thu (2021) outlines how this neutrality may also reflect a lack of defined strategy and that attempting to focus on economic development while avoiding geostrategic competition may not work in the current fast-paced reality. This was particularly true during the 2019 COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature has investigated the impact of the pandemic on Southeast Asia, as well as its influence on great power competition in the region. Although the COVID-19 virus did not spread as rapidly in Southeast Asia as in other parts of the world, the United Nations (UN) (2020) described the health, economic, and political impacts as significant in the region. The pandemic pushed 4.7 million people into poverty in Southeast Asia in 2021, 9.3 million jobs disappeared, and the region's economic output in 2022 remained more than 10 percent below a no-COVID baseline (Asian Development Bank 2022). Responses to the pandemic were hampered by response systems developed primarily for natural disasters and inadequate healthcare and governance systems (Hidayana and Maude 2021; Trias and Cook 2021). Democratic regression and authoritarian governments have further increased throughout the region during the pandemic (Gomez 2020; Regilme 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen the implementation of vaccine diplomacy strategies in Southeast Asia by the US, China, and other powers such as Russia (Byrne 2021; Cameron 2021a; Murphy 2021). In this battle for influence, Fraser and Maude (2022) write that Beijing overcame the US through a strategy combining medical assistance, propaganda, providing economic growth, and continued in-person regional visits from ministers and senior officials. This has likely only built upon what He (2018) labelled 'strategic interdependence' pre-COVID-19 whereby Southeast Asia offers Beijing a stable

external environment to facilitate its peaceful rise, while China offers ASEAN economic growth and autonomy.

In the post-pandemic environment, Southeast Asia may even benefit from the effects of great power competition. K. Lee (2021) has described how US-China trade tensions have led major manufacturers from the US, Japan, South Korea, and Europe to move production to Southeast Asia, and Pongsudhirak (2022) wrote that the pandemic blocked China from reopening its economy. This climate offers Southeast Asia an opportunity to gain from international supply chain diversification (Jongwanich 2022; Maude 2021; Roughneen 2020).

Countries such as Cambodia and Indonesia continued to benefit from closer relationships with Beijing throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Grossman 2021d; Sothirak 2020). On the other hand, Shastry (2022) has suggested that Indonesia should be more open with trade and foreign investment aside from relying on Beijing. Yeoh (2022) supported economic governance reform to reduce corruption, and Basri (2022) argues for moving away from an economic focus on low-wage labour, more investment in research and human capital, and strengthening trade and industrialisation. Meanwhile, Mafira (2022) advocated for a shift away from industrialisation and into renewable energy, and Ang (2022) supported trade diversification to support climate resilience.

The literature has further discussed how Southeast Asia still faces other ongoing complex threats. Osborne (2019; 2020) described how Chinese dams on the Mekong River have halted water flows causing droughts impacting Southeast Asian nations downstream. Countries in the region rely on this major river for food and employment, and overdevelopment, overfishing, and the effects of climate change have reaped havoc on crop yields, water security, and on a developing hydroelectric industry (Haefner 2020; Tilly 2021; Trias 2021). Other challenges facing the region include sea piracy, maritime human trafficking and smuggling, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing (Anh 2022; Edwards 2022; Koh 2022).

Throughout ongoing US-China geostrategic competition, White (2022b) has written that US power and primacy in the Indo-Pacific region is in decline

due to its distant geographical proximity to the US, an unassailable economic gap between the US and China, and the unlikely proposition that the US can defend Taiwan against potential Chinese invasion. Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (2022a; 2022b) rejects this conclusion, while Shambaugh (2018b) and Singh (2020) write that the US maintains significant cultural, diplomatic, security, and economic ties in the region.

Despite this, Grossman (2021a) and Taylor (2020) outline a lack of coherent US Southeast Asian strategy, while Choong (2020b) and Grossman (2021b) suggest US neglect. Anwar (2021) sees opportunities for the US to boost foreign direct investment (FDI) in Southeast Asia and for further engagement on stability in Myanmar, and Choong (2020a) suggests infrastructure investment and continued attempts to push back a coercive China in the South China Sea. Capie (2020) and Marston (2017) put forward defence cooperation as an effective tool of US engagement and Shambaugh (2018a) outlines how Beijing provides no defence protection to the region and is one-dimensional in its economic engagement.

Le Thu (2019) and Zhang (2018) outline Chinese strategies of coercive behaviours in some situations, and reassurance or inducement in others to achieve goals of regional influence and economic outcomes. Ayson and Pardesi (2017) and Lin et al. (2022) write that this strategy, along with grey zone activities, has supported Beijing's rise to prominence in the region. China has also developed influence through arms sales and exporting private security contractors to protect its economic interests, as well as building naval power to support coercive activities and project military power (Fanell 2019; Weinbaum et al. 2022).

Another example of this form of "carrot and stick" Chinese diplomacy includes assisting Southeast Asian nations with disaster response, while at the same time competing with regional institutions on Mekong River development (Gong 2021; Po and Primiano 2021). Gong (2019) further writes that Beijing's influence in Southeast Asia will in fact reach a plateau due to the nation's concurrent geoeconomic competitive behaviours, and its questionable ability to fulfil Belt and Road Initiative investment and infrastructure promises.

Investigation and debate have further focused on Australia's place in Southeast Asia and how the nation can engage and cooperate in a region described by the Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy and Defence Dialogue (AP4D 2022b) as a security gateway to Australia. Rather than taking advantage of Southeast Asia's potential as a growing $US3 trillion economic market of 650 million consumers, only Singapore and Malaysia currently rank in Australia's top 10 two-way trading partners and Australia has more FDI in New Zealand than all 10 ASEAN members combined (AP4D 2022b; McCawley and Tyler 2022).

Patton (2022a) has suggested Australian investment in infrastructure in the region, and Tyler and Vandewerdt-Holman (2019) put forth investment in and resourcing of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) as a strategy for advancing Australian diplomacy. Prakash (2022) writes that development assistance will not win influence by itself and should be provided as a part of a wider diplomatic strategy, with Dewanti (2022) adding that aid should not be provided with the expectation of regional alignment between powers. Partnering with Southeast Asia to facilitate renewable energy transition, either directly or in partnership with other nations such as South Korea, Japan, and Germany, has also been suggested by Cameron (2022a), Tyler (2022b), and AP4D (2022a).

Le Thu (2022b) recommends partnering with the US to address priorities stipulated by Southeast Asia itself, and Le Thu and Hogeveen (2022) strategise working with the United Kingdom (UK) on Southeast Asian maritime security. Australia can work together with India on regional digital transformation and could also offer leadership on anti-corruption initiatives, engagement with Myanmar, and police training (Curtis et al. 2022; Ghazavi 2022; Jardine 2020; Lemahieu and Bland 2020). Tyler, Gardiner, and Nabbs-Keller (2022) outline how Australia can act as a guide for Southeast Asia on civil-military cooperation and good governance, while Sang and An (2021) put forward the prospect of Australia partnering with other naval powers on Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) in the South China Sea.

Cook (2021) suggests Australia assist Southeast Asian nations in negotiating stronger maritime codes of conduct for the South China Sea rather

than conducting FONOPS, and Djalal (2021) advocates for consulting with the region before security decisions and alliances such as AUKUS are devised. Laksmana (2018) writes how maritime security cooperation can assist in addressing risks in Southeast Asia such as maritime piracy, while Raymond (2017) describes how nations such as Thailand often divert defence funding from naval capability into their army to support domestic political control. Searight (2020) and Llewelyn (2017) outline how Western civil maritime agencies such as coast guards can be utilised in cooperating with Southeast Asian counterparts, and Tyler (2020) writes that Australian defence cooperation and strategy must be implemented in equal measure with traditional diplomatic and development efforts.

Alternative viewpoints come from White (2020; 2023), who has questioned Australia's shift in strategic defence focus away from Australia and writes that AUKUS implicitly commits Australia to aid the US in any potential US-China conflict. Laksmana (2020) wonders why Australian attention on Southeast Asia is more US-centric and China-driven, rather than on regional nations themselves. Glasser (2021) suggests the Australian Defence Force (ADF) needs to rapidly build capability to respond to disasters due to climate change in Southeast Asia, and Chang and Jenne (2020) raise the argument that defence cooperation often involves competition and demonstrations of military power, undermining cooperative goals. Mahbubani (2022) and Strangio (2022a) have also warned that cooperation can lead to nations being disadvantaged through one-sided foreign investments, relying on larger powers for foreign aid, or when facing other difficulties in remaining neutral in navigating great power competition.

Australia could partner with or draw inspiration from the efforts of other outsiders in the region. Bradford (2021), Singh (2021), and Kim (2021) describe how Japan has taken an increasing focus on Southeast Asia with efforts on regional development and maritime security cooperation. These forms of strategic partnerships can help prevent weaker partners, such as Laos and Cambodia, from becoming over-reliant on strategic rivals for economic and security outcomes (Koga 2022). India, the UK, and European nations are also

renewing their focus on Southeast Asia in areas of cultural, security, and economic diplomacy (Bland 2022; Haacke and Breen 2019; Odgaard 2019; Singh and Sarwal 2017).

The literature has investigated varying aspects of Southeast Asia and its interactions with other nations and during US-China competition. While research has investigated opportunities for Australia to engage and cooperate in Southeast Asia, much of this has been focused on investigating one aspect or domain, such as diplomacy or defence, without potential appreciation of links to other possible avenues of cooperation or aggravating and mitigating influences. There is an opportunity for research to incorporate an understanding of the strategic circumstances within Southeast Asia and its experience in navigating great power competition and to apply that to pathways for Australian cooperation in the region. This cooperation can take forms supporting grander Australian security, diplomatic, and trade strategies, as well as offer suggestions that are innovative and unique to the strategic landscape within Southeast Asia.

Chapter 2: Contemporary Circumstances in Southeast Asia

An understanding of the contemporary circumstances confronting Southeast Asia is essential before discussion of potential actions Australia can take to cooperate and engage in the region. The most recent Australian 2020 Defence Strategic Update (Australian Government 2020) outlines a complex security and diplomatic environment of emerging technologies that will be translated into weapons capability by foreign actors and expanding cyber capabilities that may be utilised for malicious purposes. This includes 'grey zone activities' of coercion and actions falling just short of military conflict being integrated into strategy. Navigating such an environment requires an understanding of the landscape involved and so this chapter will outline the present strategic circumstances within Southeast Asia. This includes how the actions and strategies of great powers US and China have influenced the region individually as well as in their competition with one another. Analysis of Australia's place in Southeast Asia will further be presented and discussed as a precursor to strategies of cooperation presented in later chapters.

China and the US in Southeast Asia

China has integrated varying forms of coercion and grey zone activities into its own diplomatic and military strategy in the Indo-Pacific, including foreign interference, misinformation campaigns, electronic warfare, and the misuse and abuse of international law for strategic ends, known as lawfare (Chellaney 2021; Funaiolle, Bermudez Jr, and Hart 2021; Tang 2021). These grey zone activities are increasingly being utilised outside spaces of traditional conflict (Douse and Bachmann 2019). Beijing views these forms of activities and tactics of coercion as natural extensions of regional diplomacy and will likely continue their use considering their efficacy in providing strategic outcomes (Lin et al. 2022).

Examples include China leveraging tourism in attempting to influence the tiny Pacific nation of Palau into cutting diplomatic ties with Taiwan and against South Korea after it allowed the US to move part of its anti-missile defence system into the country (Cameron 2021b). Beijing has further withheld rare

earth exports to Japan because of territorial disputes and to the US to test military supply chains (Cameron 2022d). Peck (2020) has written that these types of actions form a Chinese strategy to ‘win without fighting’ in seeking victory through incapacitation rather than annihilation of an enemy.

This approach avoids outright kinetic warfare and further aligns with the ‘attack by stratagem’ of Sun Tzu (2014, 79): “supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting.” While Beijing’s present actions may not be classed as open hostilities, intentions of hegemony and influence over other states by utilising aggressive tactics may be essentially the same if the result is kinetic territorial incursion and coercive gain. Such tactics have already been implemented during disputes in the South China Sea.

China has militarised several artificial islands that the nation constructed in contested maritime territories in the South China Sea, arming them with anti-ship and anti-aircraft missile and technology systems along with garrisoned fighter jets (“China has fully militarized” 2022). This disputed environment is showcased in Figure 1, which outlines not only competing maritime territories in the South China Sea, but also China’s far-reaching claims and positions of the militarised Paracel and Spratly Islands.

Figure 1. Map of territorial claims in the South China Sea[1]

[1] Mann, Tony. 2023. “What has been happening in the South China Sea and what do Experts Predict for 2023?” ABC News, February 3, 2023. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-02-03/south-china-sea-beijing-china-taiwan-gas-fishing-military/101843870.

Beijing has concurrently implemented an economic strategy in the region labelled by authors such as Kleven (2019) and Tsang (2020) as economic colonialism for its imposition of trading terms favourable to China, exploitation of the natural resources of host countries, and the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZ) as a part of the Belt and Road Initiative that favour Chinese investors. Examples include the casino-city of Sihanoukville in Cambodia, the Laos-China railway investment infrastructure, and the Myitsone Dam in Myanmar (Strangio 2020).

Nations within Southeast Asia are caught in balancing between the potential for trade with and foreign investment from Beijing and ensuring their own sovereignty and security. This reliance on Chinese trade has lead states around the region to become overly dependent upon and vulnerable to China for their prosperity. Regional actors have been forced to navigate acts of Chinese coercion in a non-aggressive manner that does not impact their economy and security. Australia has itself been in the crosshairs of Chinese economic coercion after calling for an inquiry into the origins of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 (Herscovitch 2021).

This climate of economic vulnerability within Southeast Asia has only been heightened during COVID-19. The 2022 State of Southeast Asia Survey found that from 1,677 respondents in 10 Southeast Asian countries working in academia, think tanks, business, non-government organisations, media, government, and regional or international organisations, the primary challenge facing the region was the threat from the pandemic to public health (75.4 percent) and economic recession and unemployment (49.8 percent) (Seah et al. 2022). The region is economically vulnerable, but another salient result from the survey was related to trust.

The survey reported that 58.1 percent of participants expressed distrust in China and believed that the nation could utilise its military and economic power to threaten their country's interests and sovereignty (Seah et al. 2022). On another question, 64.4 percent responded that they were concerned about Beijing's growing economic influence and 76.4 percent worried about China's

increasing political and strategic influence. Japan and the US were the most trusted to do the right thing (54.2 percent and 52.8 percent, respectively).

While Southeast Asia is depending upon Chinese trade and investment for its economic recovery post-COVID, these survey results show the region's elite still distrust the power. This feeling appears to extend to the regional populace: anti-China protests have broken out in states across Southeast Asia. Examples include protests in Thailand criticising the relationship between Thai generals and Beijing, in Indonesia regarding fears new jobs will go to Chinese migrant workers, and in the Philippines over Beijing's coercive actions in the South China Sea (Temby 2021).

Regardless of Beijing's efforts to boost foreign assistance through the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as influence the region through mass media messaging and ongoing cultural and public diplomacy, China's soft power and image are in decline due to its ongoing coercive actions (Kurlantzick 2022; Raby 2019). The Pew Research Center surveyed over 24,000 citizens from 19 countries and discovered that a median 79 percent considered China's human rights policies a serious problem, while 72 percent viewed their military power as a very serious issue (Silver, Huang, and Clancy 2022). A further 66 percent saw economic competition as very serious, and 59 percent perceived Beijing's involvement in politics in their own country as very serious. While participants from the US, Japan, and Australia held significantly unfavourable views of China (82 percent, 87 percent, and 86 percent, respectively), it should be noted that the only Southeast Asian states surveyed, Singapore and Malaysia, held the lowest negative views regarding China: 34 percent and 39 percent, respectively (Silver, Huang, and Clancy 2022). These findings were not explained, but respondents from these nations did report that economic ties were more important than human rights policies and thus this may illustrate the trade and investment priorities of at least some regional nations.

Despite the potential for economic opportunities, China has proven itself to be a belligerent neighbour and has not respected the territorial rights and sovereignty of nations in Southeast Asia. Beijing has shown what Luttwak (2012) has described as 'great state autism' in that Chinese strategies of

coercion and manipulation in Southeast Asia, primarily in the maritime domain, have been implemented concurrently with regional relationships developing an economic reliance on Beijing. ‘Great state autism’ relates to negative reactions from nations coerced by China being viewed with surprise and eliciting such responses as that of former Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi to assembled ASEAN representatives: “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that’s just a fact.” (Lowsen 2018). The potential for prosperity in ongoing trade with China for developing and developed nations is salient in the current climate where countries are working to overcome the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on regional public health, human capital, and their economies.

The Southeast Asian neighbourhood has been forced to balance and hedge against such coercive behaviours to avoid the wrath of the regional bully in China. While US presence is maintained in the Indo-Pacific as an active security buffer against Beijing crossing red lines, such as an invasion of Taiwan, other territorial intrusions such as those occurring within the South China Sea have not represented the same impetus for action on the part of the US. This attitude was likely only confirmed during the Trump administration as key diplomatic positions such as ambassadorial posts to Singapore, ASEAN, Cambodia, Thailand, and Indonesia were left vacant for significant periods of time, sometimes years (Strangio 2020). As a result, it may be that Southeast Asian leaders have concluded that during times of crisis with China, they must find their own diplomatic, economic, and security solutions.

Southeast Asian nations have seen that the US cannot provide a consistent security buffer in responding to territorial incursions and ASEAN has remained neutral during such actions. The grouping’s integrity in non-alignment has been eroded through Beijing’s bilateral targeting of individual nations such as Cambodia and Laos, particularly in offering trade and investment opportunities the potential of which is too hard to resist. Such offers come with the unspoken directive that Beijing’s statements and actions should be supported or acquiesced to. These bilateral ‘divide and rule’ tactics have

resulted in ASEAN failing to deliver agreements on how to refer and respond to Chinese maritime coercion in the South China Sea (Strangio 2020).

The US remains as a counterweight to Beijing's regional hegemonic designs, but a lack of coherent US strategy in Southeast Asia has resulted in increased Chinese influence. While the US has longstanding ties in Southeast Asia and is unlikely to explicitly withdraw from the region, ASEAN states may still consider that they must position themselves favourably on their own terms to adapt to or adopt increasing regional influence from China.

Australia in Southeast Asia

The current geostrategic climate in Southeast Asia offers opportunities for Australia to engage, not only in building links towards prosperity for regional nations, but also for its own security and growth. Regional instability, negative impacts of great power competition, and a China practicing coercion on Australia's neighbours are risks that will not be contained and that Australia can play a part to influence. Gyngell (2021) outlined how Southeast Asia has been a foreign policy priority for Australian Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers since World War II, and the most recent 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper (Australian Government 2017) singled out Southeast Asia for its geostrategic importance. Despite this, Australia's relationship with Southeast Asia has been in decline with Patton (2022b) and Gyngell (2022) describing a relationship of divergence and neglect on Australia's part.

Australia failed to support Southeast Asia during the pandemic, cutting development assistance to the region by 30 percent and Indonesia specifically by 50 percent in the five years leading up to the COVID-19 outbreak in 2019 (Middleton 2020). Development assistance was diverted to the Pacific and in late 2021 DFAT had a third of the staff working on Southeast Asia as it did on the Pacific (AP4D 2022b).

With the election of a new Australian government in 2022, Southeast Asia is experiencing renewed attention, with the Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong visiting nations such as Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Thailand in the months after taking the role (Tyler 2022a; Wong 2022). The

Minister for Defence Richard Marles has also spent time in Thailand, the Philippines, Cambodia, and Vietnam, and a Special Envoy for Southeast Asia was announced by Prime Minister Albanese in 2022 (Albanese 2022; Marles 2022; 2023).

Despite this shift, Australia's capacity to re-engage is compromised by a historic decline in funding to the nation's primary source of official diplomacy: DFAT, which has been further critiqued for a lack of diversity, for being insular, and requiring restructuring (Broadbent et al 2009; Brown 2022; Jiang 2022). Whitwell (2022) has also outlined that the strategy behind an Office of Southeast Asia is still vague and that DFAT may need restructuring to accommodate it.

This chapter has described how Southeast Asia is facing increasing pressure in a climate of great power competition between the US and China and nations have attempted to hedge through economic and security cooperation. Beijing has continued to attempt to gain influence but has been hampered by its own coercion of regional states. The US is still viewed positively, despite a possible deficit in strategy and attention, but the region has looked to build its own security. Australia can seize this opportunity to cooperate with Southeast Asia, despite needing to overcome challenges including ongoing neglect of the region and declining funding for diplomatic apparatus.

Chapter 3: Australian Strategic Cooperation with Southeast Asia

Southeast Asian nations are looking to build their own capability and security alone to navigate US-China great power competition in the region, but it may be that cooperation is the key to collective regional security. As outlined by Cameron (2022c), nations throughout the region offer stronger resistance and deterrence against larger coercive powers such as China when they cooperate and collaborate, as opposed to continuing to face security and economic threats alone. Just as the strength of the wolf can only be maintained when it lives as a part of the pack, so too can the nations of Southeast Asia along with Australia become stronger when they work together. This chapter will build upon the understanding provided on the region's circumstances and further outline how Australia has an opportunity to not only engage, but to encourage and facilitate cooperation as a better strategy in bolstering security. This potential strategy of cooperation and engagement in the region will be illustrated using an initiative already taking place called the Australian Defence Cooperation Program (DCP).

The current strategic climate in Southeast Asia offers not only an opportunity for Australia to engage but is also a requirement for its own security. The region is the security gateway to Australia's north and holds significant geostrategic significance for Australia's maritime trade. The Australian Naval Institute (2020) outline how around 40 percent of Australian trade travels via the South China Sea, making Australia's exports vulnerable to maritime blockade and disruption. Captain Michael Beard (2021) of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) has further described how Australia's lack of maritime trade strategy in protecting important sea lines of communication produces risks to Australia's shipping routes from foreign interference or aggression.

Forming strategic relationships and influence with partners in the region will be essential to maintaining Australia's security and prosperity in the future, particularly with large neighbours such as Indonesia. Pre-COVID-19, Indonesia was building into a well-developed economy and was well-positioned as a possibility to fill the security vacuum from any US withdrawal from the region

(Khong 2017; White 2018). The rise of neighbours such as Indonesia will not only impact Australia's influence throughout the rest of the region but may impact its own security in how these growing states view Australia.

A primary concern in building Australia's influence and position in Southeast Asia is a historic decline in Australia's focus on and diplomatic capability in the region. This has occurred through funding declines for DFAT, and neglect of Southeast Asia. The 2022 elected Australian government have put forward a plan for deeper engagement with Southeast Asia, but this may still be hampered from historic under-resourcing on diplomacy in the region and a lack of support during the pandemic.

Neglect has not only been a result of a shift in focus to the Pacific region but can be seen in the last bilateral visit by an Australian Prime Minister to Thailand and the Philippines being John Howard in 1998 and 2003, respectively (Patton 2022). Australia's traditional diplomatic capital in Southeast Asia has deteriorated and the methods of revitalising Australia's relationship in the region have been hamstrung through declining funding and capacity to reengage. One possible solution to rebuilding Australia's influence in Southeast Asia involves capitalising on the DCP.

The Defence Cooperation Program

The DCP is an Australian military program that was allocated over $AUD300 million in the most recent federal 2023-24 May Budget for a range of cooperative engagement activities, an increase from $AUD249 million from 2022-23 (Australian Department of Defence 2023). The program has made significant contributions to Australia's international defence engagement through improving cooperative development capability and Australia's ability to work with partners on common security problems. The program further develops strong people-to-people links with partner militaries at the operational, tactical, and strategic levels. The DCP fulfils this directive through a suite of activities including education courses, training, personnel exchanges, infrastructure support, military secondments, and varying bilateral and

multilateral exercises and engagements (Australian Department of Defence 2022).

A review of the DCP by Australia's Auditor-General (Australian National Audit Office [ANAO] 2001) reported it to be highly valued by participants who see it as making a positive contribution to the overall work of Australia's overseas missions and in helping advance Australia's interests. The 2016 Defence White Paper (Australian Government 2016) singled out the DCP for enhancement to build the capacity and confidence of regional military partners. The program offers a unique opportunity for Australia to build strong people-to-people links throughout the region, particularly as the Australian military represents a relatively unthreatening presence and partner. This is a useful variable in engaging with Southeast Asian states who are hedging between larger US-China powers and explicitly value a strategic position of neutrality.

The program has enjoyed ongoing funding support since its inception in the 1960's, with a 1972-73 budget of over $AUD10 million increasing to over $AUD57 million by 1987-88, a figure equating to over $AUD151 million in 2022 real dollar value (Department of the Parliamentary Library 1993; Hellyer 2022). Funding trend lines from the early 2000's were generally inconsistent from around $AUD100 million delivered in 2022 real dollar value, to $AUD126 million in 2008-09, and then down to $AUD89 million by 2011-12 (Hellyer 2022). It was in 2017-18 that funding began to steadily increase each year to the current estimate of $AUD301 million that was delivered in the federal 2023-24 May Budget (Australian Department of Defence 2023; Hellyer 2022).

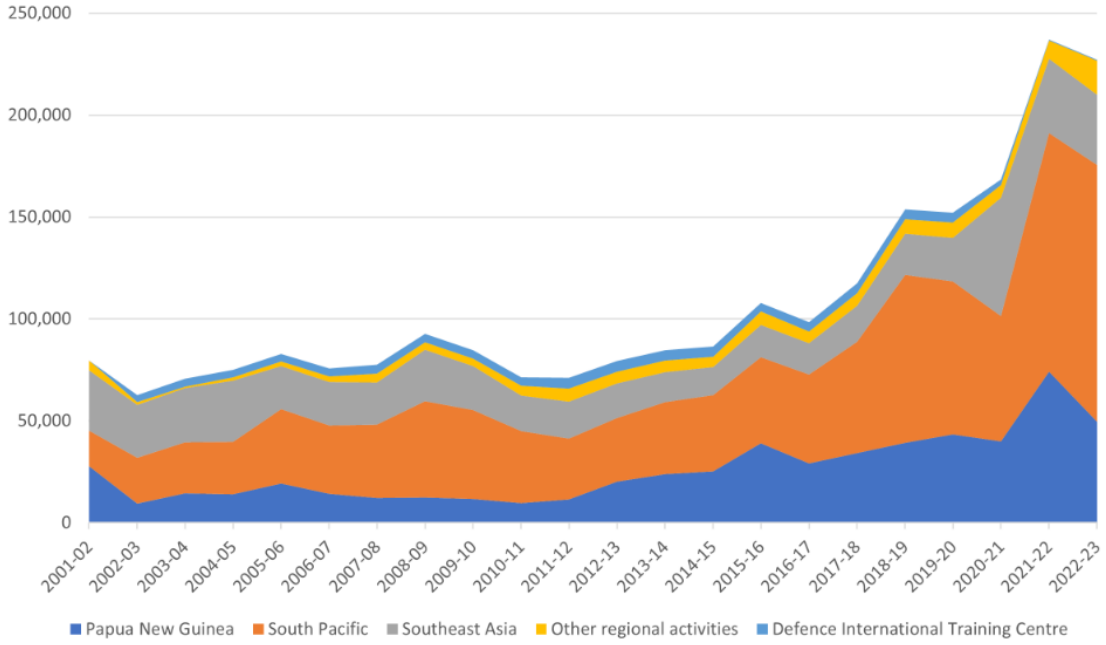

Figure 2. DCP funding from 2001-02 to 2022-23[2]

Despite overall increases, in 2023-24 only $AUD34.9 million has been allocated to Southeast Asia, decreasing from $AUD37.8 million in 2022-23 (Australian Department of Defence 2023). DFAT (2022) outline a further $AUD104 million spent towards supporting regional security needs, such as the DCP and expanding Australia's Defence Attaché and Advisor network across Southeast Asia, but this contribution may be historic as details were not covered in the 2023-24 Portfolio Budget Statements for foreign affairs and trade (DFAT 2023).

In Southeast Asia, the DCP has allowed for cooperation between Australia and nations such as Vietnam, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Thailand on coalition operational deployments, senior officer visits, maritime security building, cooperative exercises, and training opportunities for officers in partner countries or within Australia (Cameron 2022b). The program was utilised in the normalising of bilateral relations with Myanmar following 2011 political and economic reforms, although this avenue of cooperation was suspended after

[2] Hellyer, Marcus. 2022. "The Cost of Defence Public Database." Australian Strategic Policy Institute, May 2, 2022. https://www.aspi.org.au/cost-of-defence-database.

the *Tatmadaw* (Myanmar military) seized power in a 2021 coup and used lethal force on protesting citizens (Hill 2017; Jenkins 2021).

Over 2,000 Thai military officers have attended training in Australia since 1991 (Australian Embassy Thailand n.d.). The King of Thailand was a participant in Australian defence cooperation through receiving training at the Royal Military College, Duntroon, with the current Governor-General of Australia David Hurley, the former Governor-General Sir Peter Cosgrove, and the former Director-General of the Australian Secret Intelligence Organisation Major General Duncan Lewis (Ford 2021). These forms of historic people-to-people links not only enhance the capability of partners in Southeast Asia but illustrate unique and sincere relationships that cannot be replicated through ties arising from the simple provision of aid or transactional trade.

At face value, the DCP is ostensibly apolitical and has little strategic value in the traditional military sense, but the Australian Auditor-General's review (ANAO 2001) found that historic ties between DCP participants and their Australian counterparts has allowed for speedy and sympathetic hearings during foreign policy discussions and in advancing Australia's interests. The people-to-people links developed have helped decrease tensions between Australia and other nations at key junctures and has allowed Australian military personnel to familiarise themselves with the Southeast Asian strategic environment and the operating procedures of participating countries, as well as the individual cultures and capabilities of member states. This type of non-threatening military presence in Southeast Asia's security environment offers an alternative to Beijing's coercive and one-sided relationships or the alternative in deepening ties with the US, which will likely trigger negative responses from China and throw regional hedging strategies off balance.

The program is not without its limits. Defence cooperation becomes untenable in situations whereby ongoing engagement leads to domestic political consequences within Australia, usually due to partner actions. Australia has faced ongoing criticism for defence collaboration with Myanmar while the ruling military were alleged to have engaged in ethnic cleansing against Rohingya Muslims, despite cooperation being focused on training Myanmar military on

subjects such as disaster management and human rights law (Cochrane 2017; Dziedzic 2021). Similar critiques of the program have resulted from actions by Papua New Guinea in allegations donated Australian equipment was used offensively during the Bougainville Civil War in the early 1990's, and that the Tongan military used DCP-provided weapons to intimidate domestic critics (Australian Department of the Parliamentary Library 1993; May 1997). Baldino (2018) has also written that defence diplomacy must remain transparent to avoid being ensnared in great power competition and that comments by Australian defence personnel overseas may be misconstrued as representing official Australian government policy. Further, the metrics for measuring DCP performance, achievements, and cost effectiveness are not straightforward.

The DCP and Australian defence diplomacy in general offers great potential for advancing Australian interests and influence in Southeast Asia. The program may offer unique capability in engaging within a region that is becoming increasingly authoritarian and where militaries in nations such as Thailand and Myanmar can control power explicitly or implicitly within the country. Military leaders and officers in these nations are likely to hold significant political and diplomatic influence now and in the future. Authoritarian governments may also be more receptive to diplomacy through defence channels over traditional diplomatic engagements, which often must begin under the premise that Australia does not fully support their practice of authoritarian government.

Despite this, cooperating militarily with countries in Southeast Asia represents significant risks in a somewhat murky geopolitical environment whereby questions on how and when to engage are subjective and engagement may not be able to keep up with rapidly escalating domestic events. Australian defence officials engaging with and investing in regional militaries may be left without the capacity to rapidly pivot collaboration during situations such as forced changes in government through military coup. Answering questions as to whether Australia should provide military engagement to nations with historic or ongoing allegations of human rights abuse, such as Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia, offer no easy solutions. What is true is that where Australia and

other nations do not engage, countries such as Russia and China will fill the vacuum for influence, as they have already done in continuing to supply arms to the *Tatmadaw* in Myanmar (“Chinese companies supplying arms” 2018; Kapoor 2021).

Beijing have implemented strategies of grey zone activity and territorial encroachment on nations in Southeast Asia that rely on the great power for economic prosperity through trade. The US has been seen as a strategic counterbalance and security partner in the region, but a lack of engagement, strategy, and explicit action to combat Chinese coercion of Southeast Asian partners has seen nations question that US support. This chapter has outlined how cooperation offers potential in allowing the region to work together to build security and rebuff coercion and encroachment from great powers, and Australia can take this opportunity to engage. The DCP offers one primary example of the benefits of Australian cooperation in building long-lasting ties and facilitating knowledge-sharing in a manner that supports ASEAN neutrality while increasing collective security. As this chapter has argued, cooperation offers a valuable strategy to engagement and security building for Australia in Southeast Asia.

Chapter 4: Cooperation in the Maritime Domain

Security and defence cooperation offers an opportunity for Australia to engage with Southeast Asia to bolster prosperity and good order in the region. This form of cooperation allows Australia to build upon the links and relationships that it has developed through diplomatic and defence initiatives to meet the needs of regional partners with tailored responses to security challenges. One potential avenue of strategic cooperation is in addressing maritime security threats in Southeast Asia. This chapter will outline how Australian strategic cooperation can be focused on the maritime domain, whereby Southeast Asia faces ongoing security threats such as maritime piracy and slavery, IUU fishing, and territorial incursion from greater powers.

Beijing has implemented strategies of 'divide and rule' in targeting individual nations in Southeast Asia for territorial encroachment. Regional security pacts such as AUKUS between the UK, the US, and Australia, and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between the US, India, Australia, and Japan have formed as alliances to counter China's growing hegemony and coercion, but smaller nations in Southeast Asia do not possess the same ability to develop such powerful security groupings.

The primary multilateral grouping in the region, ASEAN, maintains a stance of neutrality in response to evidence of coercion from China in the South China Sea and does not hold the will to form a security grouping capable of consistently sustaining the sovereignty of member nations. The grouping further lacks the ability to form a cohesive front due to Chinese political and economic influence in member nations such as Cambodia. Australia has an opportunity to act as a security and strategic partner for nations within Southeast Asia, as well as in potentially acting as a bridge between them, without the potential tension associated with the deepening of ties by a larger power such as the US.

Maritime Piracy in Southeast Asia

Australia can engage and cooperate in the maritime domain with Southeast Asian nations in varying ways, both in civil and military spheres. One

ongoing maritime threat to Southeast Asia that Australia may help address is piracy. The International Maritime Bureau (IMB) reported that of the 115 reported piracy incidents in 2022, 60 occurred in Southeast Asia, with 38 of which being reported within the Singapore Straits in particular (International Maritime Bureau [IMB] 2023). Although the IMB (2023) write that this is the lowest level of worldwide piracy and maritime armed robbery in three decades, Storey (2022a) points out that ship masters may underreport piracy due to the resulting rises in company insurance rates and delays to shipping journeys. The significant progress in reducing reported incidents of piracy off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden may further have skewed worldwide piracy data and provided an inaccurate impression of diminishing sea piracy in Southeast Asia ("Counting the cost of piracy" 2022).

Piracy events can also be labelled as occurring in areas such as the South China Sea or the Strait of Malacca, rather than being attributed to the maritime zones of individual countries, further limiting accurate data reporting (Storey 2022a). Varying maritime boundaries are under dispute within Southeast Asia, and there has been a lack of consensus between nations in the region on what legally constitutes acts of piracy and who should respond to incidents, as well as conflicts on definitions of piracy under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (Anh 2022; Forbes 2011). The definition of piracy can further include a wide variety of criminal acts, from opportunistic petty theft of supplies from a ship in port to the theft of an entire vessel on the open seas, potentially distorting data (Bateman 2011).

Independent analysis by Storey (2022a) of varying data measures of maritime piracy in Southeast Asia, including that of the IMB's Piracy Reporting Centre and the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combatting Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia's Information Sharing Centre (ReCAAP-ISC), found that reports of piracy in the Singapore Strait in 2021 were actually the highest recorded since 1992. The Southeast Asian maritime domain, and in particular the Singapore Strait, the Strait of Malacca, and Indonesian territorial waters, are historically overrepresented in reported piracy incidents and continue to represent dangerous waters for vessels (Anh 2022). Reasons for

increased risks of piracy in Southeast Asia include poor socio-economic conditions in coastal communities, significant gaps in welfare and income between regional nations, heavy maritime traffic and dependency on narrow chokepoints, and corruption and collusion with pirates within the regional maritime industry (Anh 2022; McCauley 2014; Storey 2022a).

Regional coast guards, navies, and other maritime law enforcement agencies have limited resources to patrol and monitor illegal activities within their sovereign littoral and archipelagic waters, and within larger EEZs (Storey 2022a). A lack of inter-state cooperation and the influence of petty regional politics and disagreements over maritime borders have further hampered collaborative responses in Southeast Asia to piracy (McCauley 2014; Storey 2022a).

Piracy represents a significant threat to the worldwide economy, a threat that has been estimated by the IMB to cost up to $US16 billion per year due to theft, ransom, increased insurance costs, anti-piracy measures, and shipping delays (Chalk 2008). Analysis by Bensassi and Martinez-Zarzoso (2012) further found that maritime piracy reduces trade in that an increase of 10 acts of piracy upon sea lines of communication between two nations led to a reduction in bilateral trade value of 11 percent. Piracy in Southeast Asia also poses a direct threat to Australia in that the nation relies on free and open maritime trading routes throughout the region.

The alternative for Trans-Indian trade to bypass the Strait of Malacca would be to navigate the Sunda Strait, which is too shallow for most container ships and would add 1.5 days travel time for docking in Singapore (Page 2017). An alternative in the Lombok Strait adds 3.5 days of travel time (Page 2017). These trading routes are exhibited in Figure 3. Australia must further consider the danger of piracy shifting to areas less equipped with anti-piracy capabilities with any renavigation of trade routes.

Figure 3. Shipping routes through Southeast Asia[3]

Approximately 60 percent of the world's seaborne trade sails though the Strait of Malacca and the Strait can see more than 150 large ships and tankers navigate these waters a day (Seyedi 2022). This number increases to 1,000 vessels for the Strait of Singapore, and while global maritime trade declined sharply by 3.8 percent in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, shipping rebounded by 3.2 percent in 2021 to 11 billion tons (Maritime & Port Authority Singapore 2020; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD] 2022). Disruption to trade and regional stability and cohesion through piracy represents a significant threat to the security and prosperity of nations throughout Southeast Asia, but also offers an opportunity for security cooperation with the region by Australia.

[3] Center for Strategic and International Studies. 2016. "Tensions in the South China Sea explained in 18 Maps." Business Insider, March 12, 2016. https://www.businessinsider.com/tensions-in-the-south-china-sea-explained-in-18-maps-2015-1.

An Australian Maritime Security Program

One cooperation initiative that has reported success in another region is the Australian Pacific Maritime Security Program (PMSP). This program is a commitment of $AUD2 billion over 30 years for enhancements to maritime capability for Australia's Pacific neighbours and includes provision of patrol boats that then act as the assets of receiving nations, along with long-term training, maintenance, advice, infrastructure, and other support (Australian Embassy Timor-Leste n.d.). The PMSP also supports smaller nations in the Pacific to participate in large multilateral naval operations, such as Har'i Hamutuk, whereby Timor-Leste engaged with larger nations such as the US, Japan, and Australia on the maritime exercise (Tupas 2021).

The PMSP facilitates region-wide integrated aerial surveillance networks to support intelligence-driven maritime patrols that contribute to regional maritime security. The program has further allowed for enhancements to regional coordination and improved operability between nations in the Pacific to meet challenges and take advantage of opportunities in the maritime domain. The implementation of a PMSP with a focus on Southeast Asia may offer an opportunity in security cooperation that will assist Australia in securing important waterways and in developing ties with regional nations. It could further support Southeast Asian partners to improve their own maritime capability in responding to maritime piracy.

Australian maritime cooperation in Southeast Asia has been directed mostly into avenues supporting the DCP or through the Five Power Defence Arrangement and has focused on addressing potential conflicts in the South China Sea or around Taiwan (Graham 2020; 2022). Precedence for a PMCP in Southeast Asia exists in actions such as the gifting of Landing Craft Heavy Vessels to the Philippines by Australia in 2015, and the US delivering 24 high-speed patrol boats to Vietnam, along with establishing four centres for training personnel and ship and drone maintenance (Australian Embassy the Philippines 2015; Tam 2022). Examples also exist of intraregional maritime security cooperation that can be modelled or built upon, such as the Malacca Strait Patrol between Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore, and the Sulu-

Celebes Sea Trilateral Maritime Patrol between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines (Saipongwanya 2021).

Sea Slavery in Southeast Asia

The formal and ongoing provision of patrol vessels and infrastructure such as training centres will assist nations in Southeast Asia enhance not only their anti-piracy capabilities, but also address other maritime challenges facing the region. One of these includes sea slavery, whereby an estimated 17,000 workers on fishing vessels around Southeast Asia could be classified as slaves, in that they are trapped on ships with debts that never diminish and can work long shifts without pay (Dow 2019; Rose 2018). Regional nations face challenges in developing the determination and capability to make real progress in combatting this challenge, and the blight of sea slavery exposes how maritime issues in Southeast Asia are multi-dimensional.

Sea slavery in Southeast Asia is often the result of changes in profitability in the fishing sector, with interrelated economic factors such as declining fishing stocks caused by climate change and overfishing, along with rising oil prices creating conditions ripe for crew exploitation (Yea 2022). Declines in locally sourced crews due to increasing standards of living in nations such as Thailand and the rising perception of fishing work as high-risk with low pay and harsh conditions have increased the demand for low-cost and low-valued fishing crews of migrant workers from less advanced Southeast Asian nations (Yea 2022). Other factors such as COVID-19 and the 2021 military coup in Myanmar have further created poor working rights and conditions for migrant workers in the regional fishing industry (The Freedom Fund 2022).

The simple provision of patrol boats, training, and infrastructure under Australian security cooperation with Southeast Asia is unlikely to address some of the underlying economic and governance issues associated with sea piracy and slavery in the region. Jurisdictional issues and legal loopholes along with a lack of state commitment to addressing sea slavery have allowed the scourge to continue. Any maritime security cooperation Australia engages in with

Southeast Asia on these challenges will likely require wider Australian government support in developing legal and governance infrastructure and policy to assist regional governments (The Freedom Fund 2022). Applying political pressure and supporting related non-government organisations are likely required, as well as the consideration that nations such as Japan, the US, and Australia have historically been amongst the top markets for Thai fishery products, products that may have been harvested via sea slavery (Rose 2018).

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing

IUU fishing is another maritime security issue facing Southeast Asia that offers an opportunity for Australia to assist and support the region. IUU fishing has led ASEAN countries to experience a reported economic loss of over $US6 billion in 2019, with Indonesia in particular experiencing losses of around $US201 billion as a result of illegal fishing from 2013-2018 (Malik 2022). The most frequent illegal fishers originate from China, as well as Thailand and Vietnam, with violations covering small-scale fishing by locals to large-scale open factory trawlers conducting massive IUU fishing enterprises (Chalk 2017).

IUU fishing further has the potential to significantly impact regional economies through a lack of maritime governance, as Thailand experienced in 2015 with a trade ban threat on seafood from the European Union due to inaction on IUU, a threat only lifted in 2019 (European Commission 2019). Illegal fishing can strain regional relationships and exacerbate territorial disputes between Southeast Asian neighbours, and Australia has faced its own threat from IUU fishing in the form of Indonesian fishing vessels entering Australian maritime boundaries to fish illegally (Mansour 2021; Phan 2019).

IUU fishing is intimately connected with forced labour and sea slavery, as well as a variety of other crimes such as drug and human trafficking and maritime piracy (Lindley, Percy and Techera 2019). Just as with sea slavery and piracy, IUU fishing is often caused and exacerbated by local poverty, weak regional governance and regulation, and consumer demand for seafood (Chalk 2017; Mansour 2021). IUU fishing represents a significant threat to regional maritime security in the environmental domain as a result of the intensive use of

harmful drift nets that cause damage to fragile marine ecosystems and topography (Chalk 2017). IUU fishing was further described as the leading global maritime security threat by the US Coast Guard (2020) in its 2020 Strategic Outlook due to its eroding effect on security and rules-based good order, its destruction of legitimate maritime economies, and its jeopardising of local food security.

IUU fishing, sea slavery, and sea piracy represent interconnected threats to regional maritime security, as well as regional cohesiveness, economic prosperity, and good order at sea. The implementation of a PMSP in Southeast Asia has the potential to not only draw Australia closer to its neighbours, but also to affect a meaningful impact on the prosperity and future of the region.

Coast Guard Security Cooperation

The implementation of a Southeast Asian PMSP could take the form of coast guard or maritime law enforcement capacity building to empower regional nations to bolster their maritime security and confidence. This could be complemented with negotiations for new bilateral maritime security agreements and minilateral coast guard or maritime security groupings between Australia and regional states. It may potentially also take form in the bolstering of existing arrangements through improved governance, maritime legislation in individual Southeast Asian states that complements that of neighbouring countries, and improved direct maritime security capability through training, regional exercises, and potentially the sale or donation of vessels and equipment.

Existing mechanisms may not be able to address current security challenges. Von Hoesslin (2016) provides the example of ReCAAP being unable to harmonise relations between the largest Southeast Asian littoral states of Malaysia and Indonesia, while The Economist (“Malacca Buccaneers” 2015) writes that the ReCAAP-ISC has been accused of downplaying piracy numbers to spare some regional partners embarrassment. Malaysia and Indonesia remain apart from the agreement in 2023 (Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combatting Piracy and Armed Robbery [ReCAAP] 2023). Potential restructuring, reforming, or bolstering of these forms of agreements

could improve inter-governmental legislation, governance, and regulation in the maritime domain.

Australia has an opportunity to take advantage of a regional shift towards building coast guard capability in supporting these efforts for Southeast Asian states to empower themselves, as well as drawing in other supporting non-regional nations as partners. Countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia have rapidly expanded their coast guard capability through increased numbers of vessels and recruits, along with nations such as Vietnam enacting new legislation in 2018 allowing their coast guard to open fire on ships operating illegally in sovereign waters (Parameswaran 2018b; Searight 2020). The Philippines have further communicated a clear intent on coast guard capability with aims to increase their recruiting to reach a goal of a 30,000 strong coast guard by the end of 2023, intent further illuminated by the fact that the Philippine Navy only has 24,500 sailors in comparison (International Institute of Strategic Studies 2023; “Philippine Coast Guard” 2023).

Australia could take advantage of this shift through increased security engagement in coast guard capability via establishing ongoing bilateral and multilateral training opportunities bringing together regional partners with Australia providing facilitation and coordination support, and potential leadership. This could be achieved via the already established DCP, through developing a Southeast Asian PMSP, or through defence attaches and Border Force representatives already working in the region. These efforts could be bolstered by existing parallel and complimentary initiatives taken through the Australian government’s under-development Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040 and by the Special Envoy for Southeast Asia.

Economic initiatives working in conjunction with security cooperation in the coast guard sector will be essential in addressing causal issues related to maritime piracy and slavery, and IUU fishing. Without targeted fiscal policies working to alleviate regional poverty and provide support in building strong regional governance and maritime jurisdictional arrangements, any form of security cooperation is destined to come up against the same intractable challenges currently facing the region.

The head of the National Security College at the Australian National University, Rory Medcalf (2023), has proposed Australia working together with its partners to bolster security in the Pacific and rebuff potential Chinese domination of the region. A similar strategy could be implemented in Southeast Asia in the maritime security domain, with Australia leading cooperation as the closest geographic partner.

Partners such as New Zealand, Japan, and the US have existing defence or coast guard cooperation arrangements with nations within Southeast Asia and could likely be brought into a minilateral or multilateral arrangement to further empower the region through maritime security cooperation, along with the implementation of economic strategies (Searight 2020; Seng 2015; Sinclair 2015; Singh 2021). This form of cooperation may provide the opportunity for Quad partner India to build deeper ties in the region, as well as the UK and European partners such as France. The time for this form of cooperation may be ripe considering many nations are looking to buffer the dominance of China in varying geopolitical regions of the globe. One example of such a state according to Bradford (2021) is Japan, which is moving into a peak phase of maritime security cooperation in Southeast Asia.

Naval Cooperation

Hard maritime power capability offers Australia further opportunities for cooperation with ASEAN nations. Countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia have procured submarines from South Korea, Russia, and France respectively (Parameswaran 2018a; 2018c; 2019). The Philippines is pushing for submarines of its own, and Thailand has a stalled deal with China for submarines that has been held up due to the Chinese manufacturer's inability to source German-made engines (Cabalza and Espena 2022; Strangio 2022b).

Submarine acquisition has been on the increase throughout Southeast Asia due to their value as a deterrent and as a force multiplier for smaller navies in counter-intervention and area-denial against larger navies, such as that of China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) (Till 2015). The impetus for submarine acquisition has increased in recent times in response to tensions

arising from US-China great power competition in the region (Siow 2022). Regional navies view submarine capability as a growing norm in Southeast Asia and without these vessels nations such as Thailand have stated that they will not be able to keep up with their neighbours (Storey 2022b).

Australia has an opportunity to take on this regional demand in construction and support of conventionally powered submarine capability in Southeast Asia. Australia's own 2017 Naval Shipbuilding Plan and 2020 Force Structure Plan laid out a potential investment of up to $AUD183 billion to establish a secure, sustainable, continuous Naval Shipbuilding Enterprise ("Naval Shipbuilding Plan" n.d.). With the announcement of AUKUS and the shift towards nuclear submarine capability for the RAN, the Attack Class Submarine Program for the acquisition of 12 conventionally powered submarines was cancelled. While the Australian government believes the gap in industry and job creation will be covered by enterprise arising from AUKUS, shipbuilding unions have been critical of whether that will come to pass and have urged for construction of six interim conventionally powered submarines before a complete switch to nuclear capability (Knott 2023).

Australia could potentially acquire submarine construction contracts for several Southeast Asian partners, taking advantage of contractual problems in procuring submarines from China, as well as taking away those procurements from Russia. In such an example, Australia will gain contracts for the Australian naval shipbuilding industry and benefit from the resulting domestic job and wealth creation, which may lead to further contracts into the future for construction of other vessels such as frigates. Australia could further potentially sell surplus conventionally powered Collins Class submarines to Southeast Asian navies once Australian nuclear-powered submarines take to the sea.

Increasing numbers of conventionally powered submarines in the region will not only empower security partners to deter entry into their maritime borders by foreign navies, but also increase the collective security and good order of the region. Former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating (Keating and Curran 2023) stated that conventionally powered submarines are ideal for deterrence, as opposed to hunter-killer class nuclear submarines which are acquired only to

hunt and sink other nuclear capable submarines at longer ranges from Australia and to deny nuclear second-strike capability from states such as China. Increased maritime deterrence capability in Southeast Asia will secure vital maritime trading routes, improve the ability of regional partners to safeguard their sovereign waters and the resources contained within, and build security, trade, and investment relationships between Australia and the region.

Consideration of the region's capacity to rebuff potential naval blockade of or control by foreign powers over strategic maritime chokepoints throughout the region are essential facets of any Australian maritime strategy (Cocking, Davis and Norwood 2016). The control over linking end-to-end maritime trading systems that travel through such chokepoints has been described as crucial by Griggs (2013), which could be facilitated through increasing security and good order throughout Southeast Asia. This can be achieved after improving partner coast guard and naval capacity, in particular submarines.

Such capability further extends to sea denial, a strategy outlined by the RAN (2017) as often being implemented by smaller navies such as Australia and those in Southeast Asia. This strategy denies enemy assets access to sea lanes and maritime infrastructure, involves taking action against bases and staging areas to make them unusable, as well as utilising maritime blockades to prevent the movement of navies and deny trade. Such a naval strategy would be effective for relatively smaller forces such as Australia and those in Southeast Asia, particularly through regional maritime chokepoints and littoral and archipelagic waters.

Empowering Southeast Asian navies with this capacity to control important sea lines of communication for trade and vessel movement, as well as deny hostile parties from functioning in these spaces, is an important tool in their security development. Improving regional capability and that of strategic partners, rather than relying solely upon Australian maritime capability, could be a useful naval strategy and also address what Captain Michael Beard (2021) of the RAN described as a lack of Australian maritime trade strategy. This lack of strategy refers to important sea lines of communication for Australian shipping routes that navigate strategic chokepoints being open to aggression or

interference by foreign actors, without appropriate actions to mitigate such events being considered or implemented.

There is a danger that Southeast Asian partners may potentially become those naval aggressors in the future, but nations in the region have a vested interest in maintaining peace and security. The latest figures from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (“How much trade transits the South China Sea?” n.d.) reported $US3.37 trillion of global trade transiting the South China Sea in 2016, with the waterways further hosting a significant amount of the world’s energy (“Almost 40% of Global Liquefied Natural Gas Trade” 2017). A regional conflict or blockade that halted international shipping would contract Singapore’s economy by 22 percent, while nations such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia would suffer economic declines of 10-15 percent (Cosar and Thomas 2020). These figures also do not consider the potential consequences to human life or destruction resulting from kinetic warfare. China would face similar trade and energy security ramifications from conflict in a region that sees 80 percent of its maritime oil travel the chokepoints around the Strait of Malacca, likely a major factor in the nation’s militarisation of the area to achieve control as a contingency against conflict (Mastro 2020; Songwanich 2018).

Deep-Water Ports

Another avenue for strategic and security cooperation between Australia and partners in Southeast Asia is in naval infrastructure and in particular deep-water ports. China has already instituted a strategy of deep-water port development domestically and in other countries from the South China Sea into the Indian Ocean and onto the Middle East (Russel and Berger 2020). Beijing has labelled these ports ‘strategic strongpoints’ and has situated them in close proximity to maritime chokepoints and critical sea lanes to support Chinese military logistics and impede US power projection. This includes ports in Southeast Asia in Myanmar and Cambodia.

In Myanmar, Chinese state-owned firms have been approved to build a $US7.3 billion deep-water port and $US2.7 billion industrial area in a

Kyaukphyu Port and SEZ at Kyaukphyu on the Bay of Bengal (Songwanich 2018). This port would be 70 percent owned by China for a lease of 50 years and represents Myanmar debt equivalent to 40 percent of its annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Russel and Berger 2020). The Myanmar constitution forbids the basing of foreign troops on sovereign territory and so this port cannot necessarily host Chinese military personnel, but the Chinese PLAN already docks at other ports in Myanmar (Russel and Berger 2020). With the Kyaukphyu Port due to begin construction in 2023, it offers Beijing a strategic strongpoint to secure the Strait of Malacca, as well as safeguarding $US1.5 billion oil and gas pipelines running from Kyaukphyu to Yunnan, China ("Activists Claim China-Backed Kyaukphyu Deep Sea Port" 2023; Russel and Berger 2020).

These forms of ports with dual-use potential as civil-military infrastructure represent significant risk and concerns for stability and good order in the region due to Beijing's unequal influence over nations that can likely ill-afford such infrastructure development. Another example is the port development on the island of Koh Rong in Cambodia on the Gulf of Thailand, along with the nearby Ream Naval Base and Dara Sakor Airport. The Ream Naval Base can already accommodate smaller PLAN surface combatant ships and the Cambodian government refused offers by the US to conduct repair work at the base, with reports of a secret agreement between Beijing and Phnom Penh allowing the PLAN to utilise the naval base for decades into the future (Russel and Berger 2020; Thul 2019).

This base could be supported by the 2650-metre-long runway at Dara Sakor Airport, the same length as Chinese airstrips built on islands in the South China Sea and more than is required for commercial cargo aircraft (Dunst and Savino 2020; Russel and Berger 2020). The port at Koh Kong is said to be for tourism but has been designed in a manner that supports the docking of Chinese Destroyers. Dunst and Savino (2020) further outline that building a 6000-guest capacity resort on an island with a population of 1,400 that lacks unique tourist attractions and is largely undeveloped raises questions on whether its purpose is tourism. The development of Koh Kong is being

undertaken by a Chinese entity which has a 99-year lease at 70 percent ownership, and the Koh Kong Port represents a debt of 22.4 percent of Cambodian annual GDP (Russel and Berger 2020).

Capitalising on Geography

These developments in a region of close geographic proximity to Australia, which holds several of Australia's strategic partners, and that Australia relies upon for stable and secure maritime trading routes is of concern. Australia could potentially look for opportunities for its own deep-water port and infrastructure investment in Southeast Asia as a strategy of building ties and cooperation with regional states, but also in potentially acquiring deep-water base capabilities for RAN surface vessels and submarines. Australia could take an investment approach divergent from Beijing's inequal fiscal relationships with nations such as Cambodia and Myanmar, whereby Australia's regional partners would be empowered to improve their economic prosperity and security without inter-generational debt or contracts.

One potential opportunity could be with Australia's strategic partner in Thailand and the Kra Canal. This Canal refers to the dream of a vast waterway being excavated through the narrowest path of the Malay Peninsula, known as the Kra Isthmus, a dream that has periodically been raised by Thai governments since it was first suggested in 1677 by the Thai monarch Narai the Great (Chongkittavorn 2020). The Canal was originally viewed as a means to open a direct trading route between ancient Siam and Burma, but in modern times it has been proposed as a way of bypassing the longer and more congested maritime trade route through the Strait of Malacca, exhibited in Figure 4. In 2020, the vision of a waterway connecting the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea became a Thai Land Bridge, whereby road and railway networks would be utilised to transport goods between deep-water ports on either side of Thailand at the Kra Isthmus ("Govt Mulls Southern Bridge Spots" 2021).

According to the Chairman of Thailand's Committee on Economic Steering ("Controversial Thai Canal" 2020), a potential land bridge could be

developed within a combined infrastructure budget alongside 35 other large-scale projects at $THB1.22 trillion, far less and more reasonable than the $US55 billion projected for the digging of a canal alone (“Conference Urges Feasibility” 2017). The Land Bridge further avoids major drawbacks associated with a canal, such as the potential environmental waste produced as a result of construction or the cutting off of a southern part of Thailand embroiled in insurgency (Phaicharoen 2020).

Figure 4. The Kra Canal[4]

Australia’s investment in such a development could offer Australia and Thailand an opportunity to deepen ties, create a new trade route and decrease pressure on the maritime chokepoint in the Strait of Malacca, and potentially allow for deep-water port access for the two navies in the two seas on either side of the country. The utilisation of ports for civilian and military use in this way could potentially draw criticism, but without the decidedly unequal

[4] Cameron, Shaun. 2021. “By Land or Sea: Thailand perseveres with the Kra Canal.” *Lowy Interpreter*, September 22 2021, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/land-or-sea-thailand-perseveres-kra-canal.

relationship between Australia and Thailand and Australia's relatively neutral military engagements in the region, this criticism may be neutralised.

Australia could potentially lead investment considering the potential for a Kra Land Bridge to strengthen its own trading routes, but may also draw in Quad partners Japan, India, and the US. The US and Japan would likely appreciate further engagement in the region as well as the potential of utilising the ports for their own navies, while India may view the opportunity of using a deep-water port in the Andaman Sea for docking its own naval vessels as a boost to its maritime security in a region becoming increasingly contested.

This chapter has outlined how Southeast Asia faces maritime security challenges in the form of sea piracy and slavery, IUU fishing, and territorial incursion into EEZs. Opportunities for Australia to engage directly with partners to address these risks have also been provided, including through a security initiative similar to the PMSP and coast guard cooperation. Support in establishing shared legal frameworks between ASEAN states can be provided, as well as financial investment to address economic inequalities. Supporting the region's ambitions for maritime hard power capability is another mutually beneficial initiative, along with port and docking agreements and development around key areas of geography to ensure stability and good order and counter steps already taken by China to secure strategic ports.

Chapter 5: Other Avenues of Cooperation

A strategy of cooperation offers ongoing opportunities for engagement between Australia and Southeast Asia in varying domains through multiple means. This chapter will build upon the work of previous chapters and will outline how strategic cooperation can take place in the land and air domains between Australia and Southeast Asia through defence training and joint exercises to build mutual capability. The further development of the Northern Territory can facilitate these opportunities, and other avenues of cooperation will be discussed, such as through the Australian Public Service (APS), clean energy development, and cybersecurity.

Cooperation in the Land Domain

Opportunities exist for strategic and security cooperation between the ADF and partners in Southeast Asia through training and capability building. One primary example is Australia's Indo-Pacific Endeavour, an annual activity coordinated by the ADF involving bilateral and multilateral engagement, training, and capacity building with partners in Australia's near region ("Indo-Pacific Endeavour 2023" n.d.). In 2022, the program involved five ships, 11 helicopters, and around 1800 personnel from Australia and 14 other nations, including Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam (Defence Media 2022b). Engagement in this program is not limited to security, but also includes training and workshops in areas such as humanitarian assistance and disaster response (Rocamora 2023).

The Australian Army conducts similar forms of training and exercises in Southeast Asian host countries such as the Philippines and Thailand (Barona 2023; Pegg 2022). This form of engagement also takes place within Australia on exercises such as Exercise Predators Run 2022 in the Northern Territory, which involved over 2,400 army troops from Australia, the US, Malaysia, and the Philippines (McDermott 2022). Large scale exercises and programs such as Indo-Pacific Endeavour and Exercise Predators Run provide opportunities for Australian personnel to not only work with current and potential military leaders

around the region, but to improve their interoperability and working knowledge of varying military systems, processes, and cultures of nations Australia may come to rely on in a contested geostrategic environment. These types of engagements can be further targeted to build relationships with nations other than the Philippines and Malaysia, who Graham (2022) has described as already being Australia's closest partners in the region.

Australian Army engagements could complement cooperation in the maritime domain and that taking place as a part of the DCP and capitalise on the shifting of spending focus in Southeast Asian militaries towards their armies, as described by Raymond (2017). Armies and their leaders hold particular places of power in political and societal realms across Southeast Asia, with Thailand and Myanmar having been ruled by military leaders who took power as a result of coup. The region has generally become more authoritarian post-COVID-19, which supports the influence of army leaders due to their capacity and use in domestic populace control. Deeper engagement with ASEAN armies may allow for Australian influence and capability to extend beyond security and be leveraged into diplomatic, trade, and strategic cooperation. This form of engagement offers an alternative to the simple supplying of land-based military assets, which may be utilised against a domestic populace during protests and thus represent significant Australian political risk. This contrasts with the gifting or selling of naval and coast guard vessels that can be utilised against external threats such as sea piracy and IUU fishing.

The Strategic North

The development of the Northern Territory into a strategic defence cooperation area offers further opportunities for Australia to engage with the region and may draw foreign investment from partners such as the US and Japan. The upgrade and development of northern bases and ports was further described as a priority in the 2023 Defence Strategic Review (Australian Government 2023). Australia's north is a security gateway to the country, with the Northern Territory offering prime position for basing and ports to support not only military cooperation with Australia's partners from Southeast Asia and

elsewhere, but also in facilitating the power projection of powers such as the US and for use in the event of potential conflict.

This form of investment involving larger partner nations could support existing plans for $AUD1.5 billion in port infrastructure development in the Northern Territory, and $AUD500 million to develop rail and road supply chain infrastructure and clean energy capture and storage facilities (Coyne 2022). Ongoing investment will be key to ensuring this area of northern geography does not lose capability as a result of decaying infrastructure or lack of modernisation and can take advantage of advantageous positioning in areas such as critical orbital mechanics for launching assets into space (Davis 2022). Hanks (2021) has identified Northern Territory development as a key component of expanding Australia's industrial base while securing supply chains, increasing US army force posture, increasing multilateral training opportunities, and allowing for an expansion of Australia's defence relationship with Indonesia. A further benefit could also come in the form of including other Southeast Asian nations within these plans for engagement.

Public Service Diplomacy

While there are significant opportunities for strategic cooperation between Australia and Southeast Asia in security, there are other avenues that can be pursued to build cooperation benefitting each participant. One of these is through what could be described as public service diplomacy. Jiang (2022) and Brown (2022) have suggested DFAT might collaborate with the APS through the Department of the Treasury or through multi-agency taskforces, but there is also potential for Australian public servants not usually engaged internationally to work directly with their civil service counterparts on policy and programs throughout Southeast Asia.

If DCP cooperation between Australian and regional militaries can lead to significant benefits in knowledge, skills, and capacity for Australians and partners and enable speedy and sympathetic hearings in policy discussions then public service cooperation can surely provide similar benefits. Examples of potential engagements include collaborating on reforms and policy in the early

childcare sector in Indonesia or on boosting innovation and prosperity as a part of the Thailand 4.0 strategy.

Quality early childcare has been recognised by the Australian Government as enabling workforce participation for parents, particularly for women, and supporting child development (Bray et al. 2021). Only 53.5 percent of working-age women in Indonesia are in the workforce, a rate well below the East Asia and Pacific region average of 67.7 percent and Halim, Johnson and Perova (2017) have recommended a review of Indonesian childcare policies to improve these figures. Australian public servants could work directly with their Indonesian civil service counterparts on early childcare policy and programs to improve Indonesia's capability to offer quality education and care.

Such an endeavour could improve child development in Indonesia and allow more Indonesian women to participate in the workforce, while also forming potential long-lasting relationships between the public servants and departments involved. Additional international people-to-people links beyond the traditional diplomatic or defence avenues could build further relationships that can be called upon in future engagements and negotiations and allow for further diversity and expertise not only in the policies of partner nations, but also for Australia.

Thailand 4.0 offers another example and opportunity for public sector collaboration. This initiative involves Thailand implementing a number of policies aimed at transforming the nation into a value-based and innovation-driven economy to promote an annual GDP growth rate of around 5 percent ("Industry 4.0 for Inclusive Development" 2021). The initiative is hoped to build economic prosperity, improve social well-being, transform the nation's social welfare system, improve the Thai tertiary system into a world leader, and improve environmental protection and response to the effects of climate change ("Thailand 4.0" n.d.). The potential dividends from the initiative are significant, but it has been hampered by a need for skilled human talent, a lack of effective policies in digital transformation, and further faces the challenge of policy implementation (Kohpaiboon 2020; "Promoting Thailand's Digital Transformation" 2021).

This initiative offers an opportunity for Australian public servants to collaborate on social, economic, industry, and infrastructure policy implementation with one of Australia's strategic partners. Australian public servants working together with their Thai peers could not only allow for success in an initiative that will raise the prosperity of Thailand significantly, but also improve ties between the nations and capability and experience for the APS.

Cooperation in Clean Energy

Strategic cooperation can also take place on the front of clean energy transition. All ASEAN nations have committed to carbon neutrality by 2050, other than Indonesia which aims for 2060, and the Philippines and Laos (Bocca and Singh 2023; "Laos PDR National Green Growth Forum" 2022; Simamora 2021). To meet these targets, the rapidly industrialising nations in the region will require significant investment and support to transition their developing economies. The World Bank ("Vietnam needs extra" 2022) estimates that an additional $US368 billion will be required by Vietnam alone to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. This lack of clean energy capability combined with the ongoing effects of climate change further leads to a vicious cycle, whereby Vietnam lost 3.2 percent of its GDP to climate effects in 2020, further limiting it from investing in net-zero measures to halt these losses into the future (World Bank 2022).

Australian cooperation and investment could assist in supporting the clean energy goals of Southeast Asian nations through energy and clean energy FDI. According to the International Energy Agency (2022), of the $US70 billion invested annually in the region's energy sector, only 40 percent was directed towards clean energy technology. Based upon current ASEAN energy policy settings there is a potential investment window of up to $US130 billion, which then increases to $US190 billion if regional policy settings shift towards a sustainable development-oriented policy scenario (International Energy Agency 2022). Australia could cooperate with and support Southeast Asia in meeting its goals in clean energy and net-zero emissions by taking advantage of these

opportunities for FDI itself, as well as in encouraging other partners such as the US, Japan, South Korea, and those in Europe to assist.

Supporting Southeast Asia's clean energy ambitions aligns with Australia's own whole-of-economy plan for a zero-emissions target of 2050 (Australian Government 2021). One example of where Australia could potentially lead FDI in Southeast Asia involving partners is with South Korea on a hydrogen economy in the region. South Korea shares Australia's vision for energy and has directed efforts towards their own clean energy strategies, including the 2020 Korean Green Deal which includes $US135 billion for investment in decarbonising technologies (Thurbon et al. 2022). This Green Deal is supported by a 2019 Hydrogen Roadmap, as well as investment from domestic conglomerates such as Hyundai bolstering the South Korean government's plans with $US18.2 billion of investment towards hydrogen power (Jaewon 2022; Korean Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy 2019). South Korea aims for hydrogen to become the nation's largest source of power by 2050 but lacks the natural resources to achieve this goal by itself (A. Lee 2021; "Energy" n.d.). This is where Australia with its natural hydrogen resources can not only assist South Korea, but also partner with the nation to support the clean energy ambitions of Southeast Asia.

South Korea is the third-largest market for Australian resources and energy exports and the Australian Government has already signed a shared $AU100 million partnership with the nation on critical minerals and clean energy technology ("Australia and Korea partnering" 2022; Price 2021). Australia and South Korea can not only partner together, but also combine in supporting Southeast Asia with their own clean energy technology and infrastructure needs, potentially through a hydrogen strategy, FDI, and policy, technology, and implementation support. South Korea has already implemented a New Southern Policy to boost engagement in Southeast Asia and has standing free trade agreements with ASEAN and bilateral agreements with nations such as Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines (Botto 2021; Falak 2022; "Free trade agreement" 2016; Standen 2022). These links could complement those of Australia, which has bilateral trade agreements with Singapore, Malaysia, and

Thailand, and the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand free trade agreement (“Australia’s free trade agreements” n.d.).

Southeast Asian nations are unlikely to be able to reach their clean energy goals alone, and Australia can potentially lead engagement by linking with partners such as South Korea and focusing investment and engagement into the region. Such support will likely only continue to be required into the future, with Southeast Asian energy demands increasing by 3 percent each year for the last two decades due to their ongoing aims for development and industrialisation, with this energy consumption rate forecasted to grow after 2022 to 5 percent until 2030 (International Energy Agency 2022).

Cooperation in the Air

Australia has and continues to build ties with Southeast Asia through cooperation in the air domain. One example is the biennial Exercise Pitch Black that last took place in the Northern Territory in 2022 (“Exercise Pitch Black” 2022). This operation is a three-week exercise taking place from Australian air bases involving training, engagement, and responses to simulated threats. In 2022, approximately 100 aircraft and 2,500 personnel from 17 nations participated, including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand (Defence Media 2022a). Australia further undertakes maritime surveillance patrols and FONOPS in the South China Sea as a component of Operation Gateway (“Australian aircraft” 2015). These forms of exercise and preservation of regional security are a continuation and interrelated support to other forms of cooperation between the ADF and Southeast Asian partner militaries. This form of engagement not only increases the interoperability of Southeast Asian nations with Australia in the air domain, but also around the geography of Australia’s north.

These efforts will be essential should conflict come to Australia and the security gateway of the Northern Territory, whereby partner nations near to Australia may be able to assist in Australia’s defence and in ensuring regional supply chain security. Developing cohesive security architecture around key points of Australia’s geography will ensure capability into the future. Improving

air power operational capacity with international security partners to develop trust and transparency was also identified as a main goal in the Royal Australian Air Force's ([RAAF] 2017) Air Force Strategy 2017-2027. This intent on deepening relationships and strengthening engagement was reiterated in the 2020 Air Force Strategy (RAAF 2020). These forms of exercises and engagement with Southeast Asian partners assist Australia in reaching these strategic goals in cooperation and improve the security skillsets of participating nations.

The use, upkeep, and further development of Northern Territory air power infrastructure likely rests on ensuring the facilities are used. Examples of use and utilisation include multilateral exercises like Exercise Pitch Black around RAAF Tindal, as well as the modernisation of this base to allow hosting of nuclear-capable B-52 bomber aircraft (Booth 2022). Ensuring that air force infrastructure is capable of facilitating multilateral exercises, as well as allowing for potential use by Southeast Asian partners, will be useful not only in ensuring air power capability over Australia, but also in allowing for deeper engagement with partners.

Just as regional states have looked to acquiring maritime defence assets and naval modernisation as a deterrence against Chinese grey-zone activities in the South China Sea, the International Institute of International Studies (2023) outline how Southeast Asian nations such as Indonesia and the Philippines have looked to aircraft acquisition to improve their capability. Thailand is further looking to acquire assets such as F-35 stealth aircraft ("Thailand has a 50-50 chance" 2023). These efforts towards air power modernisation in Southeast Asia are opportunities for Australian strategic cooperation in air power that can be taken advantage of through continued multilateral and bilateral exercises and engagement. This improvement in capability and interoperability will also aid and strengthen strategic partners in the air domain and in securing their own airspace from foreign intrusion.

Cybersecurity and Technology

Cybersecurity and technology offer further opportunities for strategic cooperation between Australia and Southeast Asia. In 2021, Southeast Asian companies spent $US3.2 billion on cybersecurity services and software and organisations in the region are expected to be spending $US6.1 billion annually by 2026 (Sivalingam et al. 2022). Nations such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand have implemented cybersecurity legislation to develop national oversight and frameworks around cybersecurity ("Cyber-attacks" 2022). Cybersecurity and resilience are an important and evolving aspect of national and trade security that represents an ongoing challenge for Australia as well as for other nations (Manuel 2020). Cooperation and diplomacy in the cyber domain may offer Australia an opportunity to engage with Southeast Asia to improve regional partners' capability as well as that of Australia's.

Other aspects of technology that offer avenues for strategic cooperation include partnering with nations such as India to take advantage of emerging digital economies in Southeast Asia (Curtis et al. 2022). Digital transformation and information and communications technology-enabled growth provides an opportunity for regional nations to reduce poverty, support sustainable growth and build social cohesion in a manner that maintains cybersecurity and resilience to cyber threats. Australian government and industry can collaborate with ASEAN partners to improve their cyber capacity, as well as link with other nations such as India, the US, and Japan for additional expertise, knowledge-sharing, and support.

Southeast Asian nations have also taken an interest in space, with countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Laos, and Malaysia each having satellites in orbit (Conklin 2020; Union of Concerned Scientists 2022). Indonesia and the Philippines further have established space agencies ("Worldwide space agencies" n.d.). Space programs in Southeast Asia have generally focused on addressing environmental challenges, such as deforestation and crop failures, as well as generating socio-economic benefits through enhanced connectivity and digitisation (Hisham 2022; Pennington 2020). Thailand has also introduced ambitious legislation that covers a wide

range of space activities, including space mining and tourism (Lohatepanont 2020). As Southeast Asian nations look towards space technology and capability, Australia can take the opportunity to engage. These potential relationships and engagements with regional partners also address one of the four pillars of the Australian Government's Civil Space Strategy: 2019-2028 (Australian Government 2019) in establishing ties internationally.

This chapter has outlined additional opportunities for and strategies of cooperation between Australia and Southeast Asia. This has included via bilateral and multilateral military training and exercises, which can be facilitated by and supported through continued infrastructure investment in the Northern Territory. Opportunities exist for cooperation between Australian public servants not usually engaged in international work and their counterparts in Southeast Asia, as well as in working towards goals for net zero emissions and improving cybersecurity.

Conclusion

Southeast Asia sits in a place of geostrategic and economic importance for Australia, but this potential has not been grasped. Rather than taking advantage of Southeast Asia's potential, Australia's funding in the region and for its avenues of cooperation have declined.

Great power competition between the US and China has placed the region in the uncomfortable position of trying to hedge between their largest trading partner in China and a valuable security partner in the US to maintain regional peace, security, and prosperity. This is despite an increasingly coercive China utilising grey-zone strategies of territorial incursion into the sovereign territories of ASEAN states and dismissing their concerns and outcry. The US represents a security partner but has itself been accused of a lack of strategy and attention to the region, generating anxiety and insecurity. Southeast Asian states have viewed these shifts in geostrategic competition and looked towards building their own security individually as a strategy to navigate these challenges in a post-pandemic landscape.

The trials and tribulations of a region holding key Australian partners should generate prompt responses and support, but Australia has neglected its neighbourhood for a significant amount of time. While the 2022 elected Australian government has taken steps to remedy this situation, it will take dedication and ongoing support to build trust in Southeast Asia once again. This lack of engagement is particularly salient given not only the potential of the region in trade, investment, and defence linkages, but also for its geography in resting at the direct north of Australia and holding key sea lines of communication for Australia's maritime trade.

This research has viewed the path towards security and prosperity for Australia and Southeast Asia as being through strategic cooperation. It has attempted to lay out strategies of engagement in varying domains and in utilising creative and novel solutions to addressing challenges in the region in a manner that benefits the people and governments of Southeast Asia. In each of these avenues of cooperation, Australia is also on the receiving end of benefit

and advantage and thus when the hand of friendship is extended it provides opportunities and dividends that the insular approach does not.

These opportunities have been illuminated already in the form of links and benefits arising from the DCP, but similar security cooperation can be extended into the maritime domain to address key regional security threats in sea slavery, maritime piracy, and IUU fishing. Supporting regional coast guard capability not only develops Southeast Asian capacity to rebuff these threats, but also puts it in a position to challenge the incursions of Chinese maritime militia and improves the security of key sea trading routes. Australia benefits as a result of this security, as well as from potential shipbuilding industrial links in the region.

The Northern Territory rests in a key area of Australian geography for land and air security cooperation, which can again benefit Australia and its Southeast Asian partners through capability building and interoperability and allows Australia opportunities to modernise and upgrade key basing and infrastructure. Public service diplomacy allows for cooperation between Australian public servants and their Southeast Asian counterparts across social, infrastructure, technology, and industry policy and their implementation. Clean energy investment and cooperation could allow for deeper ties not only with Southeast Asia, but also with other partners such as South Korea and the resulting advantages such ongoing partnerships provide. In these areas too, Australia benefits only after first extending the hand of cooperation to its partners to address their own concerns and support their ambitions.

Cybersecurity and technology offer new and emerging opportunities for Australia to engage with Southeast Asia, but this dissertation has not outlined such avenues to their full potential and future research could provide deeper analysis of the topic and offer potential avenues of cooperation.

Future research should also delve deeper into the potential of strategic cooperation between Australia and Southeast Asia in the domain of space, an area that will likely only grow in importance and attention into the future. Defence and security challenges and opportunities do not exist within a bubble and are deeply interconnected with and influenced by all aspects of

international relations. Future thinkers could delve deeper into these types of interrelated aspects, such as opportunities for cooperation in humanitarian aid and development.

While both Australia and Southeast Asia are experiencing rapid changes, risks, and turmoil in their respective environments, this research outlines that the path forward is not to proceed into the future alone. For Australia to prosper it must build relationships with friends and partners to overcome challenges and take advantage of opportunities together. Southeast Asia is a region offering many avenues for cooperation and mutual success that can only be unlocked and taken advantage of once the genuine hand of friendship is extended and maintained, regardless of Australian political change. Nations will always weigh up their own needs in engaging with other countries, but cooperation and engagement offers a guiding path and strategy towards a shared future for Australia and Southeast Asia that leads to prosperity, security, and good order for the region and the varying peoples who call it home.

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