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ASEAN is an open door for Canada

By Tommy Koh and David Malone

When we think about Asia, we focus on China and India, and seldom think about Southeast Asia – but the region deserves a high priority

Foreign Minister John Baird, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and their leading international counterparts are converging on Phnom Penh this week to engage with Asian colleagues under the aegis of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The world economy is undergoing a paradigm shift. Its centre of gravity is moving from the West to Asia. China has become the world's second-largest economy and a strong engine of world growth. Japan remains the world's third-largest economy. India is seeking to catch up. South Korea, a powerhouse in its own right, is championing the transition to a low-carbon economy.

When Canadians think about Asia, they focus on China and India, not least because of the many Canadians whose families originated there. They seldom think about Southeast Asia. But the region deserves high priority in the agendas of Ottawa, Canada's provincial capitals and its corporations, universities and civil society.

Southeast Asia has 10 independent countries. They range from the small Sultanate of Brunei to Indonesia, the world's third-largest democracy. The people of Southeast Asia were, with the exception of Thailand, ruled by different colonial masters. From them, they have inherited different traditions. They speak different languages, worship different gods and have different customs and cultures. Yet, despite these differences, they have bonded within one of the world's most successful regional organizations, ASEAN, soon to constitute a more closely knit community. By 2015, the ASEAN economies will become a single market and production base.

ASEAN has a combined population of 600 million people. It includes several of the world's most successful economies. Its membership forms the third-largest economy in Asia, after China and Japan. ASEAN welcomes foreign investment and champions free trade. The ASEAN economies remain robust in spite of the negative international economic environment. They provide tremendous scope for investment by Canadian companies, which enjoy a comparative advantage in sectors such as, infrastructure, clean energy, clean technology and water management. Canada is only ASEAN's ninth-largest investor (\$1.6-billion U.S.) and 13th-largest trading partner (\$9.8-billion in 2010). The ASEAN and Canadian private sectors, supported by their governments, should target a doubling of trade in five years.

Perhaps most importantly, Canada is viewed favourably by the governments and peoples of ASEAN, seen by them as a peaceful, prosperous, pluralistic and well-managed country. Canada was not a colonial power and carries no baggage from a troubled past. On the contrary, Canada's first involvement with Southeast Asia was in the role of a peacemaker. In 1954, Canada, India and Poland were appointed to the international commission that oversaw compliance with the 1954 Geneva agreements on Indochina.

In 1977, ASEAN and Canada established a dialogue relationship. This month, Singapore will assume the role of the ASEAN Country Co-ordinator for this relationship. Over the years, Canada has made many contributions to the ASEAN countries. This includes scholarships to study at Canadian universities and helping the ASEAN countries to enhance their capacity in forestry, human resource development, fisheries, energy, agriculture, transportation and communications. The Canadian International Development Research Centre is funding the ASEAN-Canada Regional Research Program, in which many scholars from each side are engaged in mapping out fields of shared interest. For many years, the Canadian International Development Agency funded the sensitive and important Indonesia-led informal workshop on the South China Sea. For Canada, the ASEAN region is an open door.

Canada, keen to boost the international student influx to its shores, has both much to offer and much to gain from engaging ASEAN through knowledge diplomacy. Asian students are attracted by Canadian colleges and universities, but Canadian students also need to engage much more with Asian universities, a number of which are rising very fast in the international university league tables. They need to be sensitive to where high-end international jobs are most likely to be located in decades ahead.

Canada has been very dependent on the U.S. market. In the recent past, its orientation has been focused primarily on the Americas. As Canada is seeking to expand its economic and political space, it should view ASEAN as an attractive and congenial partner.

Canada is both an Atlantic and a Pacific country. As a Pacific power, Canada shares ASEAN's commitment to peace, stability and prosperity. Through the ASEAN-Canada dialogue, we can work together to achieve that vision. Each has much to gain therefrom.

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