

Australia-ASEAN summit held amid US-China tensions

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From March 16 to 18, a second biennial summit between Australia and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) took place in Sydney, hosted by Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop.

ASEAN is made up of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar (Burma). Each head of government attended the Sydney summit, apart from the volatile, right-wing president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte. It was the first such ASEAN meeting in Australia.

Australia, a key ally of the United States in the Asia-Pacific, has pushed for closer relations with ASEAN in direct proportion to the steady rise of US-China rivalry over hegemony in the region.

Economically, China is now the largest export market and trading partner of most ASEAN countries, as well as Australia. Strategically, however, four ASEAN members—Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei—have territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. Militarily, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore have longstanding ties with the US. Vietnam has also moved closer to Washington in response to mounting tensions with Beijing.

Prime Minister Turnbull, within the context of promoting ASEAN, focused his efforts during the summit on shoring up existing ties and drawing other members toward the anti-China orientation of the more openly US-aligned states.

Turnbull paid the greatest attention to Indonesia, the most populous country in the association and an increasingly important market for various Australian business sectors. Turnbull feted Indonesian President Joko Widodo with a private dinner on March 16. They discussed expanded cooperation to combat alleged

terrorist threats, providing the pretext for closer Australian military and intelligence ties with Indonesia, as well as Malaysia and the Philippines.

Turnbull also gave considerable time to talks with Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. Under the terms of a 2016 agreement between the two countries, thousands of Singaporean troops train for 18 weeks per year in northern Australian military zones. Singapore, for its part, hosts American littoral warships, which are specifically designed for operations close to the islands and reefs in the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean.

Previous ASEAN summit communiqués have downplayed territorial disputes in the South China Sea to avoid antagonising Beijing. This was done largely on the insistence of Cambodia and, to a lesser extent, Laos, which have no claims and are particularly dependent on Chinese investment and markets.

The Joint Statement issued at the conclusion the Sydney summit, however, included overtures to Washington and implicit criticisms of China.

Firstly, it expressed “grave concerns” over North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, and declared “support” for the US demand of “complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.” The Trump administration has vowed to launch war if North Korea rejects those terms.

Secondly, against Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea, the statement declared Australia and ASEAN upheld the “importance” of “freedom of navigation and overflight” in the region. It declared mutual adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS), which was cited in the 2016 UN Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling that rejected China’s assertions of sovereignty in the South China Sea. The former Philippines government, with direct US backing, took the case against Beijing.

On repeated occasions since October 2015, the US military has used the pretext of “freedom of navigation” and “freedom of overflight” to provocatively enter the 12-mile “exclusion” zones claimed by China around islets and reefs that it occupies. Washington rejects China’s claims. Since the 2016 UN ruling, figures such as US Pacific Command commander Admiral Harry Harris have referred to them as “illegal.”

It is possible that provocative new intrusions will be carried out by the US or its allies after the ASEAN summit gave at least tacit endorsement to such operations. The US Carl Vinson aircraft carrier battlegroup is operating in the Pacific. A British warship, the HMS Sutherland, has left Australia and, according to its commander, intends to assert “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea before it returns to Europe.

At the same time, both Australia and ASEAN condemned the Trump administration’s protectionist economic policies. The statement vowed support for “free and open markets.” It committed to supporting the “swift” establishment of the Chinese-initiated Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). This is a trade agreement aimed at further integrating China, Japan, India, South Korea, the ASEAN states, Australia and New Zealand, while excluding the US.

The Australian government is also aggressively pursuing the establishment of the Trans Pacific Partnership trade bloc (TPP). The Trump administration overturned American involvement in the TPP, which the Obama White House envisaged as a trade and investment bloc excluding China, as it ramped up its geostrategic conflicts with China. As Trump moves towards trade war with China, Japan and Australia are determined to continue with the TPP.

Turnbull is particularly pushing for Indonesia to join the now 11-member TPP. Thailand had also expressed interest, though that was when the US still intended to join. Of the ASEAN countries, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam and Brunei are currently signatories to the TPP.

A glaring feature of all Australia-ASEAN talks is the willingness of the Australian political establishment to abandon its occasional rhetoric about “human rights” or “democracy.”

Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam and Laos are one-party authoritarian states. Brunei is a monarchy. Thailand is under military rule. The Cambodian government is persecuting political and media opposition. Myanmar is presiding over a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Muslim Rohingya minority. In Indonesia, a corporate-military elite rules behind a parliamentary façade.

At the Sydney gathering, however, such matters were not allowed to interfere with pursuing strategic alignments against China or trying to secure economic advantages for Australian business interests. Nor did any ASEAN states raise any concern over Australia’s illegal and brutal treatment of refugees, or question the motives behind Canberra’s largest expansion of its armed forces and military capabilities since World War II.



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