The origins of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and of Australia’s relations with it are bound up in the period of the Cold War in East Asia from the late 1940s, and the serious internal and inter-state conflicts that developed in Southeast Asia in the 1950s and early 1960s. Vietnam and Laos were engulfed in internal wars with external involvement, and conflict ultimately spread to Cambodia. Further conflicts revolved around Indonesia’s unstable internal political order and its opposition to Britain’s efforts to secure the positions of its colonial territories in the region by fostering a federation that could include Malaya, Singapore and the states of North Borneo. The Federation of Malaysia was inaugurated in September 1963, but Singapore was forced to depart in August 1965 and became a separate state. ASEAN was established in August 1967 in an effort to ameliorate the serious tensions among the states that formed it, and to make a contribution towards a more stable regional environment. Australia was intensely interested in all these developments. To discuss these issues, this chapter covers in turn the background to the emergence of interest in regional cooperation in Southeast Asia after the Second World War, the period of Indonesia’s Konfrontasi of Malaysia, the formation of ASEAN and the inauguration of multilateral relations with ASEAN in 1974 by Gough Whitlam’s government, and Australia’s early interactions with ASEAN in the period 1974–75.
The Cold War era and early approaches towards regional cooperation

The conception of ‘Southeast Asia’ as a distinct region in which states might wish to engage in regional cooperation emerged in an environment of international conflict and the end of the era of Western colonialism.\(^1\) Extensive communication and interactions developed in the pre-colonial era, but these were disrupted thoroughly by the arrival of Western powers. In the era of colonial intervention, all of the territories of Southeast Asia except Thailand were dominated by six different external countries (Britain, France, Holland, Portugal, Spain and the United States), and most administrative and commercial activities were oriented towards those external authorities. As Amitav Acharya has observed, the colonial authorities had no interest in fostering the development of any regional diplomatic framework.\(^2\) Japan’s invasion and occupation of much of the region interrupted and undermined Western colonial domination and attempted to replace it with a new form of external control.\(^3\) In the aftermath of the Second World War, most areas of Southeast Asia were preoccupied with the challenges of seeking independence (either through peaceful negotiation or violent struggle), and then of attempting to establish new states and political orders. In this environment, not surprisingly, notions of regional cooperation took time to emerge.

In the period immediately after the Second World War nonetheless, some independence leaders displayed interest in the potential for regional associations, including Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam and Aung San in Burma. The idea of cooperation was also stimulated by conferences held in India, whose own transition to independence in 1947 was an inspiration for other peoples still under colonial rule. India sought to take a leading role. An unofficial Asian relations conference, chaired by Jawaharlal Nehru, was held in New Delhi in March–April 1947, and the 31 delegations included representatives from all of the states of Southeast Asia. The tone of the meeting

---

was anti-European, pro-liberation and pro-neutrality. The conference provided a platform for subsequent protests against Dutch intervention in Indonesia, but no regional machinery emerged from the meeting. A subsequent conference in New Delhi in January 1949 (the second Asian relations conference) was again sponsored by Nehru (now prime minister). At the conference, Nehru declared that it would be natural that the ‘free countries of Asia’ should look towards developing an arrangement for consultation and the pursuit of common goals. However, as Acharya has argued, ‘prospects for a Pan-Asian grouping were plagued by differences among the pro-communist, pro-Western and neutrality-minded delegations. They had little to agree upon apart from the end to direct colonial rule’.

The conferences in India did however stimulate Southeast Asian nationalists to consider that a form of cooperation focusing on Southeast Asia was preferable to a ‘Pan-Asian’ model which would be dominated by China or India. At the 1947 meeting, delegates from Burma, Indonesia, Malaya, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam discussed a cooperation group that could focus first on economic and cultural issues and, later on, political cooperation. However, no grouping followed from either the 1947 or the 1949 New Delhi conferences.

An indigenous mode of institutional cooperation did not emerge in Southeast Asia in the 1950s. The states and territories of the area were divided by several factors. While some leaders and peoples were able to pursue independence through negotiation (as in the Philippines and Malaya), Vietnam and Laos were enmeshed in a revolutionary armed struggle against the French. In Indonesia, which had achieved independence after armed struggle and was the largest state in Southeast Asia, President Sukarno had little interest in cooperation with a regional Southeast Asian focus and had wider foreign policy ambitions.

---

5 Ibid., p. 109.
6 Ibid.
President Sukarno hosted a major conference of Asian and African countries in Bandung in April 1955. The Bandung communiqué condemned colonialism in all its forms and set out a number of principles for cooperation and peace including:

respect for the right of each nation to defend itself singly or collectively, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations … abstention from the use of arrangements of collective defence to serve particular interests of any of the big powers and … from the exertion of pressure by one country on another … refraining from acts or threats of aggression or force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any country … settlement of disputes by peaceful means … promotion of mutual interest and cooperation; and … respect for justice and international obligation.

No specific ‘Southeast Asian view’ on possible cooperation emerged at the Bandung meeting but it had an important long-term significance in the evolution of regionalism. Acharya and See Seng Tan have commented that:

[T]he Bandung conference did not end the Cold War polarisation of Asia, nor did it create a standing regional organisation for the management of intra-regional conflict. But it articulated the basis for a normative regional and international order marked by tolerance of diversity, mutual accommodation, and the softening of ideological conflicts and rivalries. This approach to international order subsequently influenced the outlook and approach of ASEAN and could well be the basis for an emerging Asian security community.

Interest in a more distinctly Southeast Asian focus for cooperation increased after Malaya gained independence in 1957. In February 1958, Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman said at a press conference that Southeast Asian countries were:

---

[t]oo much inclined to dance to the tune of bigger nations. They should not concern themselves unduly with the world and Afro-Asian politics when they had problems of their own nearer at hand. An effort should be made to build up their own unity and understanding. If they did not do this, they would have to look outside the area for protection and the full meaning of independence would be lost.\footnote{12}

In February 1959, the Tunku sought to advance these ideas by proposing a Southeast Asian Friendship and Economic Treaty (SEAFET), which could foster regional consultation and cultural and economic cooperation. The proposal attracted some interest from the Philippines, but Indonesia indicated that such a treaty would be contrary to the spirit of Afro–Asian cooperation.\footnote{13} The SEAFET proposal, however, was an early example of interest in Southeast Asian-focused dialogue, a mode of cooperation that would emerge again in the next decade with the formation of ASEAN.

Australia's emphasis in the first two decades of the period after the Second World War was directed principally towards the consolidation of its relationships with its two major power allies, the United States and Britain, and in developing bilateral relations with the emerging non-communist states in Southeast and Northeast Asia. Australia under Ben Chifley's Labor Government adopted a supportive attitude towards the Indonesian struggle for independence against the Dutch. This approach was in contrast to the policies of the US and Britain; Australia's support was a strong element in its subsequent relationship with Indonesia.\footnote{14} The Chifley Government was interested in the 1947 New Delhi conference and provided financial support for the attendance of representatives from two Australian non-governmental organisations: the Australian Institute of International Affairs and the Australian Institute of Political Science. Australia was represented

\footnotesize{12 Quoted in Tarling, \textit{Regionalism in Southeast Asia}, p. 96.
13 Ibid., pp. 98–108.

officially at the 1949 New Delhi conference by the Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, John Burton, and the government affirmed Australia’s support for Indonesia’s independence.\(^{15}\)

After the victory of the communist forces in China and inauguration of the People’s Republic of China (in October 1949), Australia’s foreign policy approaches under the newly elected Coalition Government led by Robert Menzies (in office from December 1949) emphasised support for Australia’s major power allies and opposition to communist movements and armed struggle in regional states. Australia thus gave backing to the British Government in opposing the Malayan Communist Party (which included a military commitment from 1955) and also supported the position of the non-communist regime in southern Vietnam. In this context of Cold War tensions, the Menzies Government did not support the Bandung conference of Afro–Asian nations, which it saw as presenting a challenge to Australian and Western interests, and made it clear that it did not wish Australia to be invited.\(^{16}\) Later in the decade, Australian officials were sympathetic towards the Tunku’s SEAFET proposal but (as noted above) this did not move beyond the discussion stage.\(^{17}\)

Australia and regional cooperation: SEATO and ASPAC

In the environment of Cold War competition and tensions in the early 1950s, the first phase of multilateral institutional cooperation was initiated by external powers. A conference in Manila in September 1954 led to the adoption of the Southeast Asia Collective Defence Treaty (known widely as the Manila Treaty), which was followed by


\(^{16}\) The Menzies Government feared that the conference could see an increase in Chinese influence in East Asia, that it might encourage opposition to the military presence of the US and Britain in East Asia (which Australia strongly favoured), and that it might increase resistance to the newly formed Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. A senior official from the Department of External Affairs, Keith Shann, attended as an observer and Dr Burton, his wife and Professor C. P. Fitzgerald participated on a non-official basis. See Christopher Waters, ‘Lost Opportunity: Australia and the Bandung Conference’, in Derek McDougall and Antonia Finnane, eds, *Bandung 1955: Little Histories*, Caulfield, Vic.: Monash University Press, 2010; and David Walker, ‘Nervous Outsiders: Australia and the 1955 Asia–Africa Conference in Bandung’, *Australian Historical Studies*, 36(125) 2005.

\(^{17}\) Tarling, *Regionalism in Southeast Asia*, p. 103.
the establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). The Manila Treaty was signed by eight states (Australia, New Zealand, France, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand and the United States). While the treaty did not explicitly cite communism as a core concern, the US attached a unilateral statement at the time of signature limiting its commitment to instances of ‘communist aggression’. The specifically anti-communist orientation of the treaty precluded support from non-aligned states such as Indonesia. While SEATO was established as a ‘Southeast Asian’ grouping, its concept of ‘region’ was loose and it in fact included only two Southeast Asian states.

SEATO did not establish a strong presence as a ‘regional’ grouping. It did not attract any further members from Southeast Asia. Its potential relevance to states in Southeast Asia was reduced by the fact that it did not have any mechanism for conflict resolution. A SEATO headquarters was established in Bangkok and some contingency planning pursued, but the US did not commit forces especially to SEATO in advance of a specific requirement. SEATO continued in existence for two decades, but did not maintain coherence and was abandoned formally in 1977.

In the mid-1960s another grouping developed, which from the Australian Government’s perspective seemed to offer some promise as a vehicle for multilateral dialogue and with a scope that encompassed both Southeast and Northeast Asia. The Asian and Pacific Council (ASPAC) was formed in 1966 by the Republic of Korea, the Republic of China, Japan, the Republic of Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand. ASPAC was intended to reflect the ‘urgent need for continuing consultations among participating countries with a view to forging better international understanding, promoting closer and more fruitful regional cooperation and further

---

19 Ibid., p. 38.
strengthening Asian and Pacific solidarity’. The first ASPAC meeting established a standing committee that met in Canberra and advised and made preparations for the main Council.

As its membership suggested, ASPAC was an explicitly anti-communist grouping. Political and security topics were discussed freely in the Council’s meetings. In 1968 the US, under Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration, expressed some interest in ASPAC as a potential vehicle for regional security cooperation. ASPAC’s members, however, did not have an agreed approach towards security issues or on how the Council might serve these. The representatives from the Republic of Korea and the Republic of Vietnam advocated harder-line positions on international issues. However, the Council’s largest member, Japan, was not willing to support any shift for ASPAC towards a more explicit security role. Australia did not favour this either: an official statement in July 1968 said that ‘ASPAC is in no sense a security organisation and in the view of the Australian Government it should not attempt to become one’. ASPAC never attained any major significance as a regional grouping and its relevance declined in the early 1970s in the context of the opening of communications between the United States and China. ASPAC was discontinued in May 1975.

Regional conflict and Indonesia’s Konfrontasi of Malaysia

The period of serious conflict in Southeast Asia in the early 1960s, particularly that surrounding Indonesia’s Konfrontasi, or ‘confrontation’ of the new Federation of Malaysia, led to the development of a new regional grouping, ASEAN, but this did not emerge quickly or easily. Southeast Asia at the beginning of the 1960s had several serious political and security problems. In Vietnam, the insurgency in the south against the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem was gathering strength under the national direction of the

---

24 Ibid.
communist leadership based in the north, but also with substantial support within the south. Several other states faced challenges from insurgent communist movements, including Burma, the Philippines and Thailand. Indonesia had recently experienced secessionist revolts in Sulawesi, which had included some external support. Malaya had gained independence in 1957 and Singapore had secured internal self-government in 1959, but Britain retained authority over the external relations of Singapore and over the North Borneo territories of Brunei, Sarawak and Sabah. The process of the final decolonisation of the British-controlled territories was to prove highly contentious.

Britain and the newly independent state of Malaya had agreed on a plan for a federation that would encompass Malaya along with Singapore, the British territories of North Borneo (Sabah and Sarawak) and the British protectorate of Brunei. In Malaya, the government led by the Tunku had from 1961 supported the concept of including Singapore into a federation with Malaya. In Singapore, the state’s Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, considered that a union with Malaya was essential to the future economic viability of the island and it had been the policy of his People’s Action Party since 1954. Britain saw the incorporation of the North Borneo territories into a federation both as a way of alleviating concerns in Malaya about a possible dominant position for Chinese citizens, and as a way of facilitating the decolonisation process for the Borneo territories. Britain accordingly sponsored a process of consultation in the North Borneo states that concluded (in a report in August 1962) that the majority of peoples in the territories generally supported the federation proposal.26

For its part, Australia had supported the merger of Singapore with Malaya since the mid-1950s. Australian policymakers feared that if Singapore became fully independent it might gravitate towards China and then become a focus for subversion in Malaya and in the region overall. The Australian Government did not have a strong opinion in relation to the Borneo territories, but it supported Britain’s preference that they be included in a new federation. Australia’s Minister for External Affairs, Garfield Barwick, summarised the government’s position in a conversation with President Diosdado Macapagal of the Philippines in March 1963 when he said that ‘[a]s far as we could see,

there was no alternative to Malaysia. The British could not remain in Singapore and the Borneo Territories. An independent Singapore would fall easy prey to the Communists, while separate British Borneo states had little chance of survival.’27

Indonesia under President Sukarno had a number of reservations about the proposed Federation of Malaysia. It thought that Malaysia might be used as a base by external powers, that Malaysia would be a venue for Britain to continue its influence in the Southeast Asian region to the detriment of Indonesia’s aspiration to regional leadership and that a federation would be susceptible to potential dominance by its Chinese communities, given their numbers, education and economic significance. In January 1963, President Sukarno rejected the Malaysian federation proposal as an artificial construct that was unacceptable to Indonesia. In the same month, Foreign Minister Subandrio characterised Indonesia’s attitude as one of ‘confrontation’. Britain in turn rejected Indonesia’s criticism and portrayed Indonesia’s approach as indicating a desire to dominate Malaya and the Philippines; Britain asked Australia and the US for assistance to help support and defend the federation.28 Australia was thus involved in a potentially serious emerging regional conflict. Some of Australia’s diplomatic efforts in relation to these tensions were to be of relevance to emerging approaches towards regional dialogue in Southeast Asia.

Australia, along with Britain and New Zealand, held talks in Washington with the US Government in February 1963. The US made it clear that the protection of Malaysia was exclusively the responsibility of the British Commonwealth: the US declined to assume any responsibility towards Malaysia beyond attempting to persuade Indonesia and the Philippines to accept the proposed new state. After the Washington talks, the Australian Government adopted a cautious approach towards the Malaysian issue, supporting the concept of Malaysia without as yet making a commitment to defend it, and seeking regional, and particularly Indonesian, endorsement of the new federation.29


29 Lee and Dee, ‘Southeast Asian Conflicts’, p. 267.
In the first half of 1963, Barwick sought to promote reconciliation among Indonesia, Malaya and the Philippines. These efforts were pursued against Britain’s wishes and in the face of US scepticism. Barwick sought to advance his policy at a meeting in Manila in March 1963. In talks with Subandrio, he encouraged Indonesia to accept a proposal by the Philippines for a three-way meeting with Malaya. Barwick also offered to use his contacts with the Tunku to advance this proposal with Malaya. Tensions were rising within the region, and in April 1963 Indonesian ‘volunteers’ crossed the border from Indonesia into Sarawak. Nonetheless, in June 1963 a meeting of the foreign ministers of Indonesia, Malaya and the Philippines took place in Manila and the ministers decided to set up a loose grouping called ‘Maphilindo’.30 The Indonesian Government agreed to accept the establishment of Malaysia if an authority such as the United Nations Secretary-General ‘ascertained’ that the Malaysia proposal was supported by the peoples of North Borneo. The leaders of the three states went on to issue a joint statement in which they declared that foreign bases should not be allowed to subvert the independence of any of the three countries. They also agreed to ‘[a]bstention from the use of arrangements of collective defence to serve any particular interests of the big powers’. These declarations were a significant precursor to the viewpoints that would be included in ASEAN’s foundation declaration in 1967.31 David Lee and Moreen Dee have argued that this period marked a significant phase in Australia’s policies towards Southeast Asia:

Barwick’s initiative was important both in the history of Australia’s engagement with Asia and for the history of Southeast Asia itself. It resonated with the earlier Australian approach to Indonesian independence in the 1940s since Barwick, in pursuing a negotiated solution to a regional dispute, acted against the inclinations of the United States and Britain. The importance, in historical terms, of Barwick’s initiative was that it encouraged the process of regional Southeast Asian dialogue that would culminate some four years later in the establishment of ASEAN.32

30 Acharya, The Making of Southeast Asia, pp. 154–5; Tarling, Regionalism in Southeast Asia, pp. 115–23.
32 Lee and Dee, ‘Southeast Asian Conflicts’, p. 268.
The discussions between the Maphilindo states did not succeed in alleviating the rising crisis over the Malaysia proposal. The new federation was inaugurated formally on 16 September 1963. On 25 September, President Sukarno stated that he would ‘gobble Malaysia raw’.33 By the end of the year, Australia was committed to supporting Malaysia in the face of Indonesia’s Konfrontasi. In 1964, tensions rose further as Indonesian forces staged some incursions into Malaysian territory and Britain contemplated the potential for strikes against Indonesia. In February 1965, Australia deployed military forces to Borneo to support Malaysia and Britain.34

In August 1965, an additional focus for stress in Southeast Asia emerged when Singapore was abruptly expelled from the Malaysian federation. Pressures had been rising between Singapore and the leadership of the federation over differing priorities for the future of the country, communal strains in Malaya and ethnic riots in Singapore. With tensions rising, the Tunku and Lee met secretly on 7 August and it was then announced the next day that Singapore would leave the federation and become an independent state: Australia and Britain learned of the decision only a few hours before the formal announcement. When publicly announcing the news of Singapore’s departure, the normally controlled Lee shed tears. The region now had another independent state, whose economic and political future seemed highly uncertain.35

The establishment of ASEAN

The regional impasse involving Indonesia and Malaysia was transformed by events within Indonesia. A period of conflict between the Indonesian army and the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia or PKI) from September to October 1965 was followed by mass killings of PKI members and alleged supporters by military units and vigilante groups. By March 1966, Sukarno was replaced as the dominant figure in Indonesia by General Suharto, who assumed the office of president in March 1967. Indonesia’s new

33 Quoted in ibid., p. 270.
34 Ibid., p. 276.
Foreign Minister, Adam Malik, and Malaysia’s Deputy Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, negotiated an end to *Konfrontasi* in Bangkok in May 1966 and a formal agreement was signed in Jakarta in August.³⁶

The ending of *Konfrontasi* saw interest in establishing a new multilateral group that might help ease inter-state relations, although the prospects for a new cooperative association were not necessarily favourable. Two recent attempts at regional association had not succeeded. In 1961, Malaya, the Philippines and Thailand had come together to form the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA). The proposal for ASA had come from Malaya’s Tunku Abdul Rahman in the wake of his efforts to seek support for SEAFET: he envisaged a grouping to help combat communist insurgency by targeting what he considered to be its major cause, poverty. While Malaya gained support from the Philippines and Thailand, Indonesia refused to join a grouping it considered pro-Western and a front for SEATO. Rising tensions over the Malaysia proposal and the Philippines’ claim to North Borneo (Sabah) and then Indonesia’s declaration of *Konfrontasi* rendered ASA unviable.³⁷ The Maphilindo grouping had provided another precedent for Southeast Asian cooperation, but it too had failed in the face of intense disputes over Malaysia and *Konfrontasi*.

While these efforts had not succeeded, by 1966 there was renewed interest and increased motivation for another attempt at regional cooperation. The period of *Konfrontasi* had left Southeast Asia with a high degree of inter-state tension, particularly among Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines. Thailand had not been involved in any of these conflicts but felt vulnerable to other threats, including the conflicts in neighbouring Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia; Thailand also faced an internal communist insurgency. At the same time, as Rodolfo Severino has commented:

> China posed a broader strategic threat, with the convulsions of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the Chinese propaganda organs’ strident denunciations of the non-communist Southeast Asian regimes, and China’s at least verbal support for the communist insurgencies.³⁸

³⁶  Ibid., pp. 308–24.
In this highly uncertain environment, the foreign ministers of Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand and the deputy prime minister of Malaysia met in Bangkok to make a new attempt at regional cooperation. Rather than try to adapt ASA, it was felt desirable to establish a new grouping, because Indonesia preferred to join a new association as a founding member rather than enter an existing group consisting entirely of Western-aligned states. As a result, ASEAN was inaugurated on 8 August 1967. The Bangkok Declaration called for joint efforts to ‘accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development’ of members; to promote ‘regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law’; to advance ‘collaboration and mutual assistance … in the economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific and administrative fields’; to foster ‘educational, professional, technical and administrative spheres’; and to ‘promote South-East Asian studies’. To carry out these goals, the Declaration set up what Severino has called a ‘rudimentary mechanism’. The member foreign ministers would meet annually and ASEAN would be managed by a Standing Committee comprising the foreign minister of the country chairing ASEAN in that particular year along with the ambassadors of the other members in that country. Committees of ‘specialists and officials on specific subjects’ would operate as necessary.

The formation of ASEAN did not initially attract substantial international attention. However, Australia, as an interested neighbouring state, immediately welcomed the inauguration of the new Association. In a statement on 9 August, a day after the Bangkok Declaration, the Minister for External Affairs Paul Hasluck:

expressed satisfaction at the announcement from Bangkok [and] … noted that the member nations of the new Association, who have a number of special interests in common and with all of whom Australia enjoys close and friendly relations, had undertaken to cooperate to accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development of the region, and to promote regional peace and stability. These were objectives which had Australia’s full support.

---

39 ASEAN Secretariat, ‘The ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration)’, Bangkok, 8 August 1967.
40 Severino, Southeast Asia, p. 3; see also Roberts, ASEAN Regionalism, pp. 41–6.
ASEAN’s inauguration was also noted favourably by Whitlam, the Leader of the Opposition. In a speech on 17 August 1967, Whitlam stated:

All these countries are neighbours. With four of them we have political and defence arrangements. With all of them we have trade arrangements. Quite clearly, looking at the map, it is the most natural development in our part of the world. It is the first occasion on which Indonesia has been associated with all her immediate neighbours. It is the first occasion on which Singapore, a Chinese State as we are a British State, has been associated with Malay nations or other people in the region.\(^{42}\)

At the time of ASEAN’s formation, there was some discussion about the possibility of Australian membership in the new group. The Bangkok Declaration had stated that ‘[t]he Association is open for participation to all States in the South-East Asian region subscribing to the aforementioned aims, principles and purposes’. While this implied that the membership would include the five participants and, potentially, the Indochina states and Burma, Ceylon made a short-lived effort to be considered as a member but this did not lead to a formal application.\(^{43}\) At the time of ASEAN’s formation, Malaysian officials raised with Australian Government representatives the possibility of Australia joining. Some elements in the Indonesian Government were also considered by the Department of External Affairs to favour the participation of Australia and New Zealand in ASEAN, but others ‘perceived Australia as too closely aligned with Britain and the United States and as needing to make up its mind about whether it wished to become part of the Southeast Asian area before it could join a Southeast Asian regional organisation’.\(^{44}\) Lee and Dee have noted that:

There are no indications that the Australian government sought membership of ASEAN, whose future might not have seemed to Australian policy-makers at the time to be especially promising. For one thing, it was a strange mixture of aligned and non-aligned states. For another, two of its signatories, Malaysia and Indonesia,

---

44  Lee and Dee, ‘Southeast Asian Conflicts’, p. 280.
had recently ended a bitter three-year-long confrontation and another, Singapore, had undergone a difficult separation only two years earlier from Malaysia.45

As ASEAN consolidated its identity, it became clear that Australia was not likely to be considered to be a potential member. In 1971, at the time of the ASEAN foreign ministers’ meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysian officials indicated that membership for either Australia or New Zealand in the Association was out of the question, and also that neither country would be welcome as observers.46

ASEAN of necessity developed in a cautious manner and its first priority was to try to develop contacts and communication among its members in the uneasy aftermath of Konfrontasi. The Association faced some major difficulties in its early phase of existence. Sensitivities continued to be high between Singapore and both Indonesia and Malaysia, with the former keen to demonstrate its capacity for independent decision-making.47 Relations were also tense between Malaysia and the Philippines, given that the latter had not renounced its claim to the state of Sabah. The Sabah issue was a particular focus for contention after April 1968 until tensions were eased at the end of 1969. ASEAN concentrated on attempting to develop cohesion and to assert the desirability of minimising the influence of external powers.48

While in ASEAN’s early years there was little scope for any formal interaction on the part of Australia, the Australian Government continued to express support for the Association and its cooperation efforts. In November 1971, ASEAN sought to increase its profile by declaring that Southeast Asia should be a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). The ZOPFAN Declaration represented a desire by ASEAN to affirm the goal of a regional order free from outside interference and it included an aspiration for the removal of foreign bases from the soil of ASEAN members. The Declaration, however,

45 Ibid.
47 For example, tensions in Singapore–Indonesia relations were raised in October 1968 when Singapore executed two Indonesian marines who had been convicted of sabotage and murder for actions during Konfrontasi; see Tarling, Regionalism in Southeast Asia, p. 142.
48 Roberts, ASEAN Regionalism, pp. 46–8.
was limited in scope: ASEAN did not move beyond an expression of interest in the concept, it was not binding on members, and it did not involve any timetable for implementation.49

With Australia committed firmly to its alliance with the US and to an ongoing association with the UK in Southeast Asia (which was formalised through the Five Power Defence Arrangements in 1971),50 the Liberal–Country Party Coalition Government led by Prime Minister William McMahon was initially concerned about the ZOPFAN concept, which was seen as an unwelcome endorsement of neutralism and as a potential challenge to Australia’s defence relations with Malaysia. However, in 1972, with a greater awareness of the long-term nature of the proposal, the government endorsed the ZOPFAN Declaration.51

The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Nigel Bowen, in an annex to his statement on foreign affairs on 9 May 1972 entitled ‘ASEAN and the Declaration on Neutralisation of Southeast Asia’, said:

All five signatories made it clear subsequently that they would retain present security arrangements until the neutralisation proposal became a reality … The Declaration does not ask the Great Powers to guarantee the proposed neutralised zone. Rather it seeks to secure recognition and respect for the concept of neutrality and freedom from interference by outside powers … Despite the practical difficulties involved in working for neutrality as a long-term solution for stability in South-East Asia, Australia welcomes the Declaration as a regional initiative directed toward peace, and stability in Asia.52

At the conclusion of the visit to Malaysia by Prime Minister McMahon in June 1972, in a joint communiqué between McMahon and Tun Razak, McMahon reaffirmed that Australia ‘welcomed the declaration as a regional initiative directed towards peace and stability in Asia’.53

---

53 Ibid., p. 504.
The Whitlam Government and the inauguration of multilateral relations with ASEAN

The election of the government led by Gough Whitlam in December 1972 brought a new phase of Australian interest in regional cooperation and in ASEAN. Whitlam came to office at a time of substantial change in the international and regional environment for Australian foreign policy. At the international level, the United States had begun a process of détente with China, which had included President Richard Nixon’s historic visit in February 1972. The period of direct US military involvement in the conflict in Vietnam was drawing to an end and a US withdrawal from Vietnam followed the signing of the Paris Agreements in February 1973. These developments created a climate in which Whitlam was able to change the emphasis and direction of Australian foreign policy.54

In a statement just after his election, Whitlam noted that:

the general direction of my thinking is towards a more independent Australian stance in international affairs, an Australia which will be less militarily oriented and not open to suggestions of racism; an Australia which will enjoy a growing standing as a distinctive, tolerant, co-operative and well regarded nation not only in the Asian and Pacific region, but in the world at large.55

Whitlam pursued this overall direction in a number of ways. Australia established diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China. The government also moved to deepen relations with Japan, including through negotiation of a friendship treaty. In Southeast Asia, as well as emphasising relations with ASEAN and its members, Australia also extended recognition to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (in February 1973). Australia’s policies towards Asia overall were

55 Quoted in ibid., p. 103.
enhanced by the final official termination of racial discrimination in Australia’s immigration policies, thus removing a long-standing focus of discord in Australia’s international and regional relationships.56

After assuming office, Whitlam moved quickly to assert the importance for his government of Southeast Asian relations and multilateral cooperation. In a speech on 27 January 1973, Whitlam stated that the government in its approach to Southeast Asia wished to look beyond the former emphasis on ‘forward defence’. Australia did not see Southeast Asia as a frontier ‘where we might fight nameless Asian enemies as far to the north of our own shores as possible – in other people’s backyards’. Whitlam said that ‘[t]o meet the new realities and our perception of them we shall be seeking new forms of regional co-operation.’ Regional cooperation, he said, ‘will be one of the keystones of Australia’s foreign policy for the 70s’.57 Whitlam argued that ASPAC in its present form no longer reflected the new realities in the region and that Australia was interested in exploring bases for a new and wider cooperation forum in the Asia-Pacific (see below).58

In his first overseas visit as prime minister, to Indonesia in February 1973, Whitlam said that his government regarded ASEAN as ‘a model of regional co-operation’. He also reaffirmed that Australia supported ASEAN’s concept of ZOPFAN for Southeast Asia.59 Whitlam continued to praise ASEAN’s value and relevance for Australia. In an interview with the New York Times in March 1973, he said he considered the SEATO pact to be moribund and irrelevant and that the ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, United States) alliance and ASEAN were the only groupings which were still vital: ‘All other arrangements are either transitory or belong in the past.’60

56 Ibid., pp. 102–3. The Whitlam Government’s actions followed important steps taken by the Coalition Government led by Prime Minister Harold Holt (1966–67) which had liberalised access to residence and citizenship rights for non-Europeans and provided for an increased intake of skilled migrants from non-European backgrounds; see Tom Frame, The Life and Death of Harold Holt, St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2005, pp. 158–61.
Whitlam gave further emphasis to ASEAN in February 1974, during a regional visit that included Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand, along with Burma and Laos. Brian Johns noted at the time that:

The present tour, taking in as it does four of the five ASEAN nations, points to Mr Whitlam’s emphasis on the importance of this regional grouping … [I]n his speeches Mr Whitlam has lauded ASEAN as had no other Australian Prime Minister. The previous Australian Government gave ASEAN attention but did not show Mr Whitlam’s positive enthusiasm for it.  

In a speech in Bangkok, for example, Whitlam described ASEAN as ‘unquestionably the most important, the most relevant, the most natural of the regional organisations’.  

After returning from this regional visit, Whitlam indicated that he saw ASEAN as likely to be of long-term interest and significance for Australia and said that as the Association consolidated, Australia might develop political links with the ASEAN Secretariat. He said in March 1974 in a prescient comment: ‘Looking ahead and depending on the views of the ASEAN countries, we could consider the accreditation in the future of an ambassador to ASEAN as an organisation, as we have done with the European Economic Community and the OECD.’ 

At the time of this heightened interest on Australia’s part, the ASEAN members were moving to advance their own cooperative activities with other states. ASEAN’s decision in 1973 to establish a small secretariat to be based in Jakarta enhanced the potential for joint cooperation with external parties. In 1973, ASEAN engaged in discussion with Japan about economic issues, particularly on the problems perceived
to be posed by Japan’s production of synthetic rubber.\textsuperscript{64} ASEAN also took steps to develop discussions with the European Economic Community, particularly on economic issues.\textsuperscript{65}

In this environment, discussion began in the latter part of 1973 between ASEAN and Australia on the possibility of Australian assistance to ASEAN joint economic cooperation projects, and the Australian Government supported this idea strongly.\textsuperscript{66} In December 1973, ASEAN issued an invitation for Australia to participate in consultations in Thailand in the next year.\textsuperscript{67} Talks duly took place in Bangkok in January 1974 to advance these proposals and led to an invitation by Australia for ASEAN representatives to meet in Canberra.\textsuperscript{68}

On 15 April 1974, talks were held between the ASEAN members’ secretaries-general and Australian officials. The meeting was notable as the first gathering of the ASEAN national secretaries-general to be held outside an ASEAN member.\textsuperscript{69} Australia’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, Don Willesee, announced that Australia would provide A$5 million for joint ASEAN–Australia economic projects. Richard Woolcott, Deputy Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs, in addressing the opening of the talks, said that the forging of a new link with ASEAN was ‘novel’ and ‘an appropriate new step in terms of our joint aims and interests’. Woolcott said that the Australian Government:

welcomes the possibility of forging a cooperative link between Australia and ASEAN … Australia is conscious that there are differences in character between itself and the ASEAN countries. For that reason we do not think of ourselves as potential members of ASEAN. On the other hand, we see the success of ASEAN as very important to our hope for the future of South East Asia. We wish to make a practical contribution to its success in terms that are welcome to ASEAN.\textsuperscript{70}

\textsuperscript{64} Michael Richardson, ‘Asean Warns of Trade Reprisals’, \textit{The Age}, 23 April 1973.
\textsuperscript{65} Harvey Stockwin, ‘The Europeans Lack Vision’, \textit{Financial Times} (London), 3 May 1973; see also Acharya, \textit{The Making of Southeast Asia}, pp. 171–2. Severino notes that the European Economic Community can be considered to have become ASEAN’s first dialogue partner (in 1973) but that Australia was the first individual country to become a dialogue partner (in 1974); see Severino, \textit{Southeast Asia}, pp. 309‒10.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., p. 95.
\textsuperscript{70} Richard Woolcott, ‘Opening Remarks by Mr Richard Woolcott, Deputy Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs, to Meeting with ASEAN Secretaries General’, Canberra, 15 April 1974.
ENgAgING THe NEIghBoURs

Willesee said after the meeting that ‘Australia is honoured that ASEAN should have singled it out as the first country for discussions of this kind. We think that ASEAN’s action denotes its confidence in Australia and the Australian Government will do what it can to justify that confidence’.\(^\text{71}\) The inauguration of the multilateral relationship was given bipartisan support: just after the Canberra meeting, the Opposition’s Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, Andrew Peacock, said that the Opposition supported the move.\(^\text{72}\)

Whitlam, ASEAN and the ‘Asia-Pacific forum’ proposal

While the Whitlam Government pursued the enhancement of relations with ASEAN, it also had ambitions to try to develop a basis for wider cooperation in the Asia-Pacific. This effort was advanced with enthusiasm by the government but was met with some caution and disquiet by its neighbours in ASEAN. This proved to be an early example of ASEAN sensitivities over Australia’s interest in pursuing a conception of ‘region’ encompassing countries beyond Southeast Asia.

The concept of a cooperative group or forum for the Asia-Pacific was advanced by Whitlam soon after his government came to office. The idea was discussed by Whitlam in meetings with New Zealand’s Prime Minister Norman Kirk (also a newly elected leader of a Labour Government) in January 1973. In a speech on 27 January 1973, Whitlam said that he foresaw a grouping ‘genuinely representative of the region, without ideological overtones’. Such a forum, he suggested, could ‘help free the region of great power rivalries that have bedevilled its progress for decades and [was] designed to insulate the region against ideological interference from the great powers’.\(^\text{73}\)

The proposal was not subsequently defined in any substantial detail. In comments in January 1974 in Kuala Lumpur, Whitlam suggested an analogy of the Commonwealth of Nations. His concept was ‘not a body where decisions are made and then [made] binding, but where it is possible for heads of government regularly to exchange views

\(^{71}\) ‘$5m. to Aid Asian Ties’, \textit{Courier Mail}, 17 April 1974.


\(^{73}\) Whitlam, ‘Opening Address’.
which are of mutual interest’. 74 No precise envisaged membership was provided by Australia – it was understood that Australia, New Zealand and the ASEAN members should be included, along with China, India and Japan, but probably neither the United States nor the Soviet Union. 75

The Asia-Pacific forum proposal reflected the Whitlam Government’s strong interest in regional multilateral cooperation as a potential contribution towards enhanced security and economic development. Henry Albinski has argued that ‘[t]he government’s investment of time and energy in sponsoring the idea was demonstration that Australia under Labor was capable of initiatives, of exercising an “independent” foreign policy’. 76

The Asia-Pacific forum concept, however, met with a cool response both from Australia’s ally the US and among the ASEAN members. The US under the Nixon administration was unenthusiastic about the Whitlam concept, principally because it did not wish to see any disruption to the United States’ existing pattern of bilateral relationships and alliances in the Asia-Pacific. The administration also felt that recent developments had shown that relationships between the US and its allies with China and the Soviet Union could be improved without altering regional multilateral arrangements. 77

When Whitlam raised the proposal with President Suharto in February 1973, Suharto responded by saying that there were not sufficient common interests within Asia for such a grouping to be practicable. Suharto said, ‘he doubted the usefulness of a formal conference or organisation. This would only aggravate conflicting interests. ASEAN also needed to be consolidated beforehand’. Suharto opposed participation by India and said there would be questions about China’s participation. 78 Singapore’s attitude was also negative:

---

75 Ibid., p. 93.
76 Ibid.
Prime Minister Lee criticised the Whitlam proposal in May 1973 as ‘lacking in sensitivity’.\(^7\) The concept continued to be discussed by the Australian Government but did not gain any significant traction.

Part of the problem with the Whitlam proposal was the manner in which it was seen to have been advanced. The proposal was introduced in Whitlam’s speech at the end of January 1973 and it was evident that there had been no substantial consultation in regional states (including among the ASEAN members) and that there was little supporting detail available on it. In a commentary written in 1974, David Solomon and Laurie Oakes argued that ‘[t]he flurry of activity was counter-productive given the lack of detail available. ASEAN ministers in mid-February informally discussed the proposal, but rejected it as it stood.’\(^8\) Graeme Dobell later wrote:

> Whitlam’s 1973 attempt to create an Asia Pacific forum was killed off by ASEAN’s objection that such a body would be a threat to the Association’s own importance. It was an early demonstration of the veto that ASEAN could wield in dealing with regional initiatives from Canberra.\(^8\)

As Dobell suggested, the question of how Australia pursued ideas about regional cooperation could easily arouse some concerns and tensions in relations with ASEAN. This was later to be evident in discussion about the proposals at the end of the 1980s for economic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific and over regional security dialogues. There are also some notable parallels between the debate over Whitlam’s Asia-Pacific forum concept and the ‘Asia Pacific Community’ proposal advanced by Kevin Rudd in 2008, as discussed in Chapter 5.

The changing security environment in 1975

The Whitlam Government had been pursuing its regional policies since 1973 with a substantial degree of optimism about the future prospects for Southeast Asia. However, two developments in 1975 had significant and potentially problematic implications for the politics

---

\(^7\) Curran, *Unholy Fury*, p. 239.
\(^8\) Quoted in Albinski, *Australian External Policy under Labor*, p. 97.
\(^8\) Dobell, *Australia Finds Home*, p. 79.
and security of the region and for Australia’s relations with ASEAN. They were the end of the Second Indochina War and Indonesia’s invasion and subsequent incorporation of East Timor.

The conflicts that had engulfed Indochina since the late 1950s culminated in 1975 with the collapse of the non-communist regimes in Cambodia and southern Vietnam in April 1975, and the assumption of full control by communist forces in Laos by the end of the year. The developments in Cambodia and southern Vietnam in April 1975 were followed by new concerns about security, especially among the ASEAN members. In the immediate aftermath of April 1975, the prospects for détente between ASEAN and the new regimes in Indochina were not promising. Both Thailand and the Philippines had been involved militarily in the Vietnam War and the regime in Hanoi had made some highly critical comments about their roles in supporting US policies. There were widespread concerns among ASEAN members about the capture of large supplies of arms by the victorious communist forces in Vietnam and at the potential that these could be deployed to assist communist-led resistance movements in ASEAN members. The ASEAN members moved to take actions to consolidate their own coordination and began to prepare for their first heads of government summit meeting (held in Bali in February 1976, see Chapter 2).

In this new environment, the Whitlam Government expressed the hope that all states in Southeast Asia would be able to co-exist peacefully. In comments in Japan in June 1975, Minister for Foreign Affairs Willesee urged Southeast Asian governments to ‘face up’ to the existence of the new governments in Indochina and live together with them in ‘peace, neutrality and friendship’. Willesee noted that Australia’s approach towards Asia overall was to ‘show our concern for developments in the region and to try at all times to be helpful, without ever becoming meddlesome’. The issue of how Australia

could approach the issue of relations and interactions between ASEAN and the regimes in Indochina, particularly Vietnam and Cambodia, was to be one of the dominant themes in Australian policy concerns over the next two decades.

A second set of political and security issues arose in late 1975 when Indonesia invaded and then assumed control of East Timor, a Portuguese colonial outpost. After securing independence in 1949, Indonesia had not pursued any claim in relation to the territory, which had been under Portuguese rather than Dutch control since the seventeenth century. However, the collapse of Marcelo Caetano’s dictatorship amid political and economic turmoil in Portugal in April 1974 was followed by rapid change in Portugal’s colonies, including in East Timor where there was a rise in pro-independence sentiment at a time when Portugal had lost the will and capacity to maintain its rule. The Suharto Government began to view developments in East Timor with increasing interest and concern. Against the background of Cold War global tensions, and with the fall of Saigon in April 1975 seeming to presage a possible rise in communist influence throughout Southeast Asia, the Suharto Government feared the establishment of a radical regime in East Timor.86

In this environment, the weight of opinion in Jakarta, particularly amongst the dominant military, was that East Timor should be integrated into Indonesia. To this end, Indonesia launched Operasi Komodo, which comprised a campaign to win international diplomatic support for its position, an intelligence and propaganda operation against pro-independence groups and, from mid-1975, a series of military actions in East Timor. After the pro-independence party Fretilin (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) gained dominance in the territory in September, Indonesian forces launched an invasion and seized control in Dili on 7 December 1975. Indonesia subsequently incorporated East Timor as a province.87 While the state of Indonesia after 1949 had accommodated many different areas and peoples, it became clear over the following years that much of the population in East Timor did not accept the imposition of Indonesian rule, which resulted in prolonged internal conflict and the loss of as

---

87 Ibid.
The status of the territory continued to be an issue for Indonesia in its foreign relations for the next two and a half decades. The invasion and incorporation of East Timor into Indonesia became a highly sensitive and controversial issue in Australia. Controversy was heightened by the deaths of five Australian journalists at Balibo on 16 October 1975 and of another journalist in Dili on 8 December at the hands of Indonesian forces. The Whitlam Government had supported the right of the people of the territory to decide their own future but it had also supported its ultimate incorporation into Indonesia, while urging that this be done peacefully. Whitlam and his government came under substantial criticism over East Timor. Nancy Viviani has commented:

Whitlam suffered continual attack for his policies on Timor – that he had helped foreclose the independence option, that he had not protested strongly enough on the use of force by the Indonesians before the invasion, and that he had not protested the journalists' deaths at Balibo.

The incorporation of East Timor into Indonesia was subsequently granted *de facto* and *de jure* recognition by Malcolm Fraser's government, in 1978 and 1979 respectively (most states internationally did not recognise Indonesia's incorporation; 31 other governments did extend such recognition). However the circumstances and direction of Australian policies in 1975 remained highly controversial in Australia, with many observers arguing that Australia had made insufficient efforts to affirm and protect the East Timorese people's right to self-determination. In the years that followed, the status of

---

88 Ibid., p. 53.
91 The 31 other countries recognised Indonesia's sovereignty, either expressly (through direct statements or by explanation of their votes in the United Nations General Assembly) or by implication (by signing treaties with Indonesia which contained clauses that defined Indonesia's territory as including East Timor); see Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *East Timor in Transition 1998–2000: An Australian Policy Challenge*, Canberra: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2001, p. 12.
East Timor continued to be a source of controversy and contention in Australia–Indonesia relations and this in turn affected the climate for Australia’s ASEAN relations.

Conclusion

By 1975, ASEAN had gained a significant profile in Australia’s policies towards Southeast Asia. After the highly disruptive period of Konfrontasi, the Coalition Government had shown interest in ASEAN’s establishment and emerging role in Southeast Asia. Australia’s interest had heightened after 1972 when the Whitlam Government saw ASEAN as an important indigenous effort at cooperation that could help stabilise relations among its members and could begin to contribute positively to regional security. This led to the inauguration of a direct multilateral connection in April 1974, ASEAN’s first with an external partner. While the relationship had begun auspiciously, there had already been signs that Australia’s interactions with ASEAN as a corporate identity would have elements of discord and tensions. The sensitivity shown by ASEAN from early 1973 over the Whitlam Government’s proposal for a wider Asia-Pacific cooperative forum had indicated that ASEAN had the potential to be a factor to be reckoned with in Australia’s regional diplomacy.
This text is taken from *Engaging the neighbours: Australia and ASEAN since 1974*, by Frank Frost, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.