

# AU-in-ASEAN

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## Preface

This is my submission to the DFAT Foreign Policy White Paper 2016 call for public submissions. In this submission, which I'm making in my personal capacity as a Malaysian citizen and Australian Permanent Resident (and I do consider myself a part of the Australian community), I am arguing for Australia to pursue ASEAN membership.

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## Introduction

The original definition of Oceania stretched from Australia to the Strait of Malacca. The popular contemporary definition draws a sharper line between Australia and South East Asia, but it is worth noting that a more scientific (ecogeographical) definition of Oceania excludes New Zealand - point being, it is not that useful to fixate on some imaginary continental boundary between Australia and South East Asia as a region. Regardless of how these boundaries are defined, in many respects, Australia neatly fits within the context of South East Asia. ASEAN is a very diverse grouping (even more diverse than the Eurozone), and it is correspondingly plausible to consider Australian membership into ASEAN.

This submission makes two contributions:

- 1) Highlighting several reasons why Australian membership in ASEAN would be to Australia's benefit.
- 2) Presenting some evidence suggesting that securing an invitation for Australia into ASEAN will not be as difficult as it may seem at the outset.

## How ASEAN Membership Would Strengthen Australia

Being a member of ASEAN would help ensure Australia is better positioned to seize opportunities and manage risks for many reasons, but this submission only discusses three points that may typically fly under the radar.

## South East Asian Cyberspace

As one of the last remaining regions of economic dynamism in the world this generation, ASEAN is an increasingly important market for Australian businesses, including tech startups such as Seek and REA Group which have substantial user-bases residing in ASEAN countries.

In the context of technology and in particular Internet-based businesses, there are several important policy matters that receive uneven thinking in the region, such as data sovereignty, censorship, and net neutrality. "Great firewall" style thinking (already taking hold in Thailand as the "single gateway") could be highly detrimental to Australian economic interests. Cyber-privacy is another issue which, if handled through ASEAN, may yield an EU "safe harbor" style solution, which would benefit Australian consumers and businesses, as well as consumers and businesses from all other ASEAN member countries.

Beyond these point-issues, more generally, cyberspace is an inter-generational issue that is going to become even more important in the future. Much is made of the "global" nature of cyberspace, but the fact remains that fiber and IP packets actually do cross borders in a very real sense, and experience has shown us that, practically, political boundaries matter, even in cyberspace. The adage that "the Internet routes around censorship" has turned out to be aspirational, rather than a true characterisation of the Internet as it is practically experienced by the majority of people.

Therefore, Australia needs a forum from which it can drive discussion and harmonisation of cyber issues within the context of specific regional concerns. ASEAN could be that venue.

## Grant-Making

As an immediate (and relatively uncontroversial) quick-win, there is an opportunity for Australia to promote prosperity and stability by leveraging the expertise of AusAID towards developing grant-making apparatus within ASEAN, e.g. injecting some vibrancy into the ASEAN Foundation.

## Economic Migrants and Track Two Diplomacy

Australia is a migration focal-point for ASEAN. Many economic migrants in Australia come from ASEAN countries and still maintain business and cultural/political links with their country of origin. This base provides a "track two diplomacy" lever that could be better utilised. Creating an additional political forum for engagement with these countries through ASEAN would allow Australia to better leverage economic migrants as a two-way force for positive change and enlightened influence.

## Baseline support for Australia to join ASEAN

It is plausible to consider Australian membership into ASEAN - the basis for this claim is some research I have conducted recently [1]. From some initial polling, there is indication that a significant segment of the population in ASEAN would welcome Australian membership into

ASEAN. As illustrated in Figure 1, a majority of respondents in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and The Philippines answered “Yes” to the question “Should Australia join ASEAN?”. Of the countries polled, only Indonesia and Australia had a “No” majority response. More details, such as response rates, are available on the original post [1].

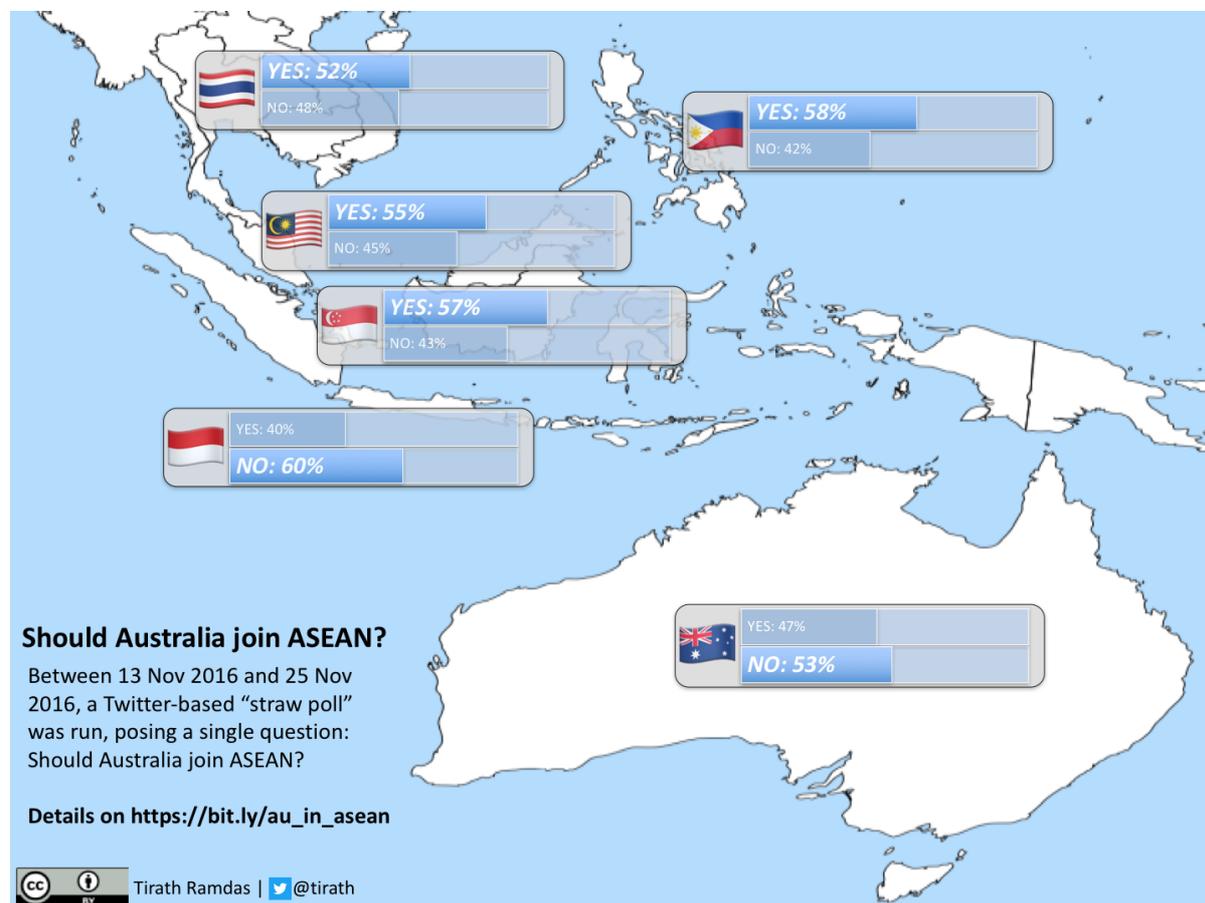


Figure 1: Responses to the question “Should Australia join ASEAN: Yes/No” by target country.

These findings are by no means conclusive, and furthermore one may question the importance of grassroots support on a question such as this, but for what it’s worth these findings suggest that the door is at least ajar, if not open, for Australia to pursue ASEAN membership if she wishes to do so. With this baseline grassroots support, achieving ASEAN membership for Australia would not require as hard a push as one might imagine. I believe a major segment of the ASEAN populace holds values that overlap significantly with Australian values, and this forms a strong foundation from which one may cultivate an “AU-in-ASEAN” movement.

## References

[1] <https://tramdas.wordpress.com/2016/11/30/should-australia-join-asean/>