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ASEANFocus

Special Issue on
ASEAN 2025:
FORGING AHEAD TOGETHER



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Views

from Outside ASEAN

Over the past 48 years, ASEAN has worked with many external partners to advance common interests in sectors as varied as development, security, and skills transfer. ASEANFocus invited six voices from some of these valued external partners on the future of relations with ASEAN.

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Southeast Asia, Meet Mr. Trudeau

BY PAUL EVANS

The surprise Liberal victory on October 19 ended a decade of Conservative rule. Though little was said about Asia during the election campaign, expectations are high that the new government will take a fresh and more ambitious approach.

Its style and orientation differ starkly from its predecessor. The inclinations and instincts are liberal internationalist, the Cabinet younger, half women, and with considerable international exposure. It has a “sunny ways” optimism and promises transformational rather than incremental change.

Justin Trudeau is cosmopolitan, telegenic and charismatic, drawing rock-star attention while thrown into the deep end of four international summits in his first six weeks in office. In Manila at APEC he was mobbed by adoring fans. “Hot and intelligent” concluded one Filipina journalist.

The first Prime Minister with a Southeast Asian blood line, he is a descendant on his mother’s side from William Farquhar (the first British Resident and Commandant of Singapore), and his Eurasian/Malay wife.

Trudeau has described Canada as “the first postnational state” and identified climate change as the most pressing international issue. A symbolic first step was renaming the foreign ministry “Global Affairs Canada.”

His government is just settling in, finalising appointments, and responding to immediate domestic issues and the Syrian refugee crisis. What can be expected in its policies and priorities as it turns to Southeast Asia?

No one in Cabinet has strong Eastern Asian connections, but there is widespread understanding of the importance of diversification of markets and partnerships across the Pacific. The TPP is likely to be endorsed after it is clear that Washington will as well. Deeper relations with China, including a move towards a bilateral FTA, are strong possibilities even as the government begins to position itself more publicly on how to respond to Beijing’s more assertive regional role.

It will almost certainly build on existing efforts to expand trade and consolidate the diplomatic scaffolding through representation in all 10 ASEAN countries and the appointment of a dedicated Ambassador to ASEAN.

Infrastructure investment is high on the domestic agenda and may connect to projects on the Western side of the Pacific.

On security matters in Southeast Asia, the focus may shift from the Conservatives’ emphasis on counter-terrorism, non-proliferation, and transnational crime to areas including the energy-environment nexus, and marine aquaculture.

Instinctive and avowed multilateralists, the team will probably push even harder to see Canada admitted to the East Asia Summit and the ADMM Plus processes.

En route, the bigger question is whether Ottawa will provide leadership and resources (the fiscal situation is not positive) for something bolder along the lines of the initiatives in the 1990s that included the Canada-ASEAN Centre, the workshops on the South China Sea, and the regional security dialogues that prepared the ground for the creation of the ARF.

Ambition, optimism, and respectful consultation are distinctive parts of the new government’s style. With liberalism under siege around the world and widening scepticism about the prospects of regional and global institutions, some “sunny ways” might just be welcome. ■

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“... the focus may shift from counter-terrorism, non-proliferation, and transnational crime to areas including the energy-environment nexus, and marine aquaculture.”