

ASEAN-in-Practice Podcast Episode 14 Transcript

Denis: Good day and welcome to the 14th episode of the ASEAN in Practice podcast series. I'm your host, Denis Hew, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre on Asia and Globalisation at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.

We are recording this episode at a time of mounting uncertainty in the regional and global order where Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region are confronting intensifying geopolitical pressures from heightened US-China rivalry and geoeconomic fragmentation to technological competition and rising trade protectionism. At the same time, ongoing conflict in the Middle East has pushed up energy prices, fuelling inflation pressures and creating secondary spillovers that could dampen global growth and even raise the prospects of a global recession.

Against this backdrop, Canadian institutions such as the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada (APF Canada) offer an important example of how middle powers can engage Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region, supporting regional cooperation, technical assistance, and capacity-building that can contribute to a more stable and inclusive economic order. To help us unpack this issue, I am delighted to be joined by Barrett Bingley. Barrett is the Asia Regional Director at the APF Canada, where he leads the Foundation's work across Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region, advancing Canada's engagement through policy research, business facilitation, and strategic partnerships. Prior to joining the foundation, Barrett held senior roles at The Economist Impact and served as a policy advisor to Canada's foreign and trade ministers, focusing on Asia's policy, trade, and security. Barrett, it's great to have you at our show. Let me just start off. Could you briefly explain what the APF does and how does it support Southeast Asia?

Barrett: Good morning, Denis. Thank you for having me on. I am happy to tell you a little bit more about APF Canada. The Foundation was created by an Act of Parliament in 1984, with the goal to develop more effective, durable, and impactful engagement and ties between the peoples and institutions of Canada and the Asia-Pacific region. We are an independent foundation with an independent board of governors, but we work closely with the Canadian provincial and federal governments, businesses, academia, civil society, and media to provide policy-relevant research convening and we manage a number of networks such as the APEC Business Advisory Council (ABAC) network.

Under Canada's 2022 Indo-Pacific strategy, we received a multi-year Global Affairs Canada grant to stand up our Asia Regional Office in Singapore and to run a suite of programs including Strategic Dialogues, Visiting Scholars, the Indo-Pacific Young Leaders Network, and our flagship and annual Canada and Asia conference. So that puts us at the intersection of Track 1.5 and

Track 2 policy dialogues and business facilitation. So, we are not quite a pure think tank nor are we a trade or investment promotion agency.

Denis: So how do you engage bilaterally with different Southeast Asian countries and also regionally with the ASEAN Secretariat?

Barrett: Bilaterally, we have quite a large program that is ongoing and you can look to things like our Track 1.5 Dialogues that I had mentioned there. We have just hosted Track 1.5 Dialogues on the broader swath of economic security sub-topics including critical minerals, digital infrastructure and AI governance, energy security, and secure supply chains. And we have done that most recently with the Philippines. We did from there, go North up to Taiwan. We have another plan with the ASEAN Secretariat actually in Jakarta in July, that we are working with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Jakarta, to deliver that. And we are looking at a Canada-Vietnam Forum in July—although this one will be focused on the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific partnership (CPTPP)-EU Dialogue, which has really become an important topic for us. Now, in terms of engaging ASEAN, ASEAN as a body, and the Secretariat directly. Beyond that, [as part of] the Track 1.5 that I mentioned last year, I was at the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) ASEAN Think Tank Summit in the ASEAN headquarters, where I moderated a session on energy security in the ASEAN power grid. We look to be doing more of that, and through our Young Leaders Program, we have appointed a couple of ASEAN Secretariat people to that Program. And we have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for cooperation with the Canada-ASEAN Business Council, which is an officially credited body of the ASEAN Secretariat. We work with them on their annual conferences as well as some joint research. So, there are quite a diversity of ways that we engage with the ASEAN secretariat.

Denis: Yes, it sounds like you have done a lot of very broad and very impactful initiatives and projects for ASEAN Secretariat and with the individual member states. Let's talk geopolitics, right? Your [Canadian] Prime Minister Mark Carney delivered a powerful speech, I believe, earlier this year at the World Economic Forum annual meeting. And he argues that the global order has ruptured and that Middle Powers such as Canada, Japan, and Australia, need to step up and work together and essentially help to repair an increasingly fractured global landscape. So, how does Canada conceptualise its role in the Indo-Pacific region today, particularly amidst all the great power rivalry between the US and China? And we are seeing a much more hostile economic environment. So, how does Canada position itself to support the kind of coalitions that they are planning to do with other middle powers in the region?

Barrett: Yes, well this is stated quite clearly in Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy from 2022 where Canada is positioning itself as a committed Pacific nation rather than a sort of distant North Atlantic power with episodic Asian interests right? And the Carney government, when they come into power in Spring 2025, they sharpened that posture significantly throughout the year.

First, with the goal set in October 2025 to double non-US exports over the course of the next decade, generating more than 300 billion USD in trade, and most of that growth is expected to come from the Indo-Pacific. This was followed by the Prime Minister's China trip in January, which yielded a number of new agreements and really thawed that relationship. And this had preceded the famous Davos rupture speech that you referenced. Then came the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Japan, signed in Tokyo in March of this year, as well as the Canada-India Strategic Energy Partnership—which is the most ambitious energy partnership Canada has ever signed with any nation, certainly with any Asian nation. And now the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) negotiations with India have also been launched or relaunched.

In Southeast Asia specifically, Canada has sharpened that posture as I mentioned, signing the CEPA deal with Indonesia, and is close to finalising the Canada-ASEAN FTA, and has launched bilateral negotiations with the Philippines and Thailand. The second negotiating round with the Philippines just wrapped up, I think just 24 hours ago in Toronto. All of this has occurred at the same time that Canada has made a commitment to 5% spend of GDP on defence and security by 2035. Those are very big numbers by 2035; we are talking 160 billion USD plus. The launch of the new Canadian Defence Industrial Strategy, which names a number of Asian countries as preferred partners. So, all of this is about, interest-based, middle power diversification, reducing dependency on any single partner, and positioning Canada in Asia as a reliable supplier of core goods like oil, Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), and Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), nuclear, and renewable technologies, as well as kind of what I would call sovereignty technology and plurilateral governance initiatives. A lot of Asian partners want to avoid strategic entanglements or at least create additional optionality. There seems to be quite a bit of openness to this, from our partners that we are engaging this year.

Denis: Right, so how deep is Canada's economic footprint in Southeast Asia today, whether it's in trade or the digital economy, and how do you see some of the biggest opportunities for growth?

Barrett: Right, I should say our economic footprint in Southeast Asia is real, but its uneven. Canada is ASEAN's 16th largest trading partner and the ninth largest source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). In 2024, the Canada-ASEAN bilateral merchandise trade reached 42 (and a

bit) billion. Although this number is contested because ASEAN and Canada use different methodologies. In our methodology, it is an increase of nearly 10% compared to the year before. To put that in context, Australia's trade footprint is roughly double that right? And also, Canada absorbs a lot more imports, especially from places like Vietnam, than we manage exports rights? That said, merchandise trade with the CPTPP Asia-Pacific partners has significantly outpaced the bloc's Latin American signatories, and I do think that the Canada-ASEAN FTA, might lift these numbers further. And is possibly the reason why Australia's trade for instance, is much further ahead as they have the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (ANZFTA). On the investment side of things, out investment monitor work shows that there is a reasonable stock of FDI from both countries that has been building over the last 20 years, especially in things like LNG, real estate, and financial services. But the flows have actually gone down and have really been quite negligible in the last 2 years. There's serious work to be done on this. You can say this is where the opportunity lies. The Canadian corporate presence, other than in niche sectors like insurance and aerospace, the corporate presence really lags behind Japanese, Korean, European, and Australian firms in most markets. And this is a core diversification challenge that we'd like to highlight.

Where are the biggest opportunities? Probably in the same areas that we highlighted in our recent Canada and Asia conference in Singapore. Energy security, certainly Southeast Asian nations, need to be looking at what Petronas and the Royal Golden Eagle (RGE) have done in LNG and looking at signing on to major offtake agreements with LNG Canada too and Ksi Lisims to secure that supply. And I think the Iran war has made that, you know, really clear. Food security and agri-food, this is where Canada has scale is already doing a lot in the region and can be doing more. On digital and AI-enabled trade, we actually had a report come out in July 2025, the Goldfarb-Suominen report, identified this as Canada's and ASEAN's biggest under-the-radar opportunity. There is enormous trade between ASEAN and other parts of the world, between Canada and the US and Europe on digital and AI-enabled trade, and we have very little trade between ourselves. So, there is a big opportunity there.

Denis: All right, great, especially now, we have a big energy crisis that is going on and you know there's a close nexus between energy security and food security that is going on. We have seen food prices are also beginning to rise so you are right, there is a lot of opportunity to see how Canada can provide that support and technical assistance.

Let me ask you a question, which is well, it is a question more for International Relations scholars, but I'd like to get the view from a practitioner like yourself as well. So, there is an ongoing debate whether middle powers still have meaningful agency in shaping the regional order, and that is the point that we were discussing earlier. And from your point of view, or your

vantage point, do countries like Canada, Japan, Australia, and countries in the middle powers in the Indo-Pacific region, do they still have that strategic influence or are they increasingly constrained by great power competition?

Barrett: Well, happily for your listeners Denis, I am a Commonwealth Scholar in International Relations, so I will answer both from a practitioner as well as a scholar's standpoint. Middle powers still have meaningful agency, but the nature of that agency has shifted and it's continuing to evolve. And I would say evolve at a fast pace. In the 1990s, this was about norm-building and multilateral institution creation and global governance. Today, it's really about coalition maintenance and preserving specific pockets of rules-based order where the great powers have either lost interest or become actively disrupted. I think more controversially, it is about middle powers building areas of leverage where they can control specific goods flows, technologies, or some other sort of tools of national power, often in niche ways. Australia's Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, dabbled in this two weeks ago, where he said, and this is quoted in the Financial Times (FT), he said that our gas exports are very important for the region. Australia is a reliable supplier. We expect reciprocation in our economic relations. That is actually an implicit threat. It is a quiet one, but it is a threat all the same, and it is meant to ensure the flow of diesel and jet fuel to Australia. There is no doubt that South Korea, Japan, and Singapore were watching and PM Albanese shows up in Singapore 72 hours after saying that. But a lot of the world missed that, *realpolitik* foray by the Aussies. It might also be quite controversial to say this, but Iran, seeking to control the Strait of Hormuz, is a middle power seeking to create globally important leverage. And I think that the strategists in every middle power right now are thinking hard about what their own opportunities are. But in terms of the contributing to the global rules-based order that I mentioned in the beginning, the evolution of the CPTPP is the clearest case of this, I think, where Canada, Japan, Australia, Singapore, New Zealand, and others have kept a high standard trade architecture—one which can be built on and evolved, alive and growing without the United States and China. And as I mentioned, now exploring the CPTBPP-EU convergence, which we will be doing a number of events on this year. We had February 2026 work done by Ari Van Assche, a scholar from Canada, on strategic interdependence, making the point that while middle powers can't reshape the overall system, they can preserve functioning pieces of it and offer smaller states alternatives to the binary US-China choices.

Denis: Yes, I think you know that we have just done a seminar looking at how middle powers can shape the regional architecture, and I think there is scope there in terms of whether its free trade agreements or minilaterals, or kind of very issues-based coalitions or that could, you know, kind of help to revitalise the trade and economic architecture.

Let's go back to ASEAN. So, how can middle powers like Canada support ASEAN centrality in the sort of very contested Indo-Pacific region. I think you know that increasingly, even ASEAN member states are being forced to choose a side, right? Is it US or China? Particularly amidst all this sort of supply chain disruptions and industrial policies are increasingly securitised, so how can Canada help?

Barrett: Well. I will just reframe that a bit, in the sense that I am not sure that ASEAN countries are yet being forced to choose a side. I think there's maybe pressure for them to do so, but I have actually seen them you know, fairly nimbly avoid making the hard choice yet, right? Showing they still do have some agency, and they have maintained their options. ASEAN centrality, I think, is best supported by outside middle powers, you know, showing up consistently at the ASEAN-led processes, rather than building parallel architectures or where there are parallel architectures, looking to ensure that there are good bridges and harmonisation with them. So, for Canada, this means showing up at the ASEAN post-ministerial conferences in the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) as we are interested in the defence side of things now, and also for us, continued delivery on the Canada-ASEAN Strategic Partnership, which was established in 2023. That seems relatively new, because actually next year will be Canada's 50-year anniversary of relations with ASEAN, which is something that we will be looking at, how do we properly commemorate and celebrate that. The APFC, have been looking at how to show up operationally and not just diplomatically with things like our Canada and Asia Momentum series, where we actually went last year to Manila to Ho Chi Minh and to Jakarta, with more states planned this year to be able to look particularly at food security which is a top topic of interest in ASEAN, and we will be looking this year, I think, more at energy security. So, showing up in various ways and being present in the region in a long-term way, which is partly why we established our Singapore office here right, to show that commitment.

Denis: Yes, I think let us look ahead for the next couple of years. I mean, what should the key priorities of Canada and the Foundation's work should be for Southeast Asia and the region? I'm pretty sure one of them should be energy security, but what are the other priorities you think Canada should focus on?

Barrett: Yes, I do not think we would even have a choice whether or not energy security is a priority or not, right? It has become a front burner issue for everyone. That being said, we do need to ensure consistent institutional delivery, and kind of inside baseball here, this means that making sure that the Indo-Pacific strategy and its funding trajectory continues right, beyond the initial envelope to show ASEAN and its member state, the think tanks in the region that we are, long-term committed to the region, and that we will resist the pressure, kind of to return to the

trans-Atlantic sphere only, and also resist the pressure that comes from the Canada-US relationship absorbing a lot of political oxygen right?

For us, we are going to be doing things very soon, coming up. The Canada-Asia-Arctic Dialogue will be held in Singapore next week. We will be running an economic security symposium on May 6, featuring our John A. MacArthur Fellows. ASEAN will feature as a topic there. And the Canada-ASEAN Security Alignment Symposium will be one month from now in Ottawa on May 26. So, we have a whole suite of fairly immediate things lined up to focus on, and as I said, our Canada and Asia conference will be in February of next year in Singapore. It will be held in the same year that Singapore is hosting ASEAN, and it is the 50-year anniversary of relations so we will be tying all of those threads together. Thematically there is no doubt energy security, I think, is going to top this year's focus. The biggest thing for Southeast Asian nations now will be how to access Canadian resources and get that guaranteed offtake because right now, on the LNG side, there are a number of projects coming online, where Southeast Asian nations are not necessarily at the front of the queue to get those resources and probably have not really thought about it as an issue until this year. And now they are saying that they do need to diversify this supply. They certainly need the LPG right, coming out of the Prince Rupert and the Ridley Island Propane Export Terminal (RIPET) project. And increasingly, there needs to be optionality on crude oil as well, which is Canada's oil is generally heavy crude oil, quite different from the light and sweet that you get out of the US Gulf or Saudi Arabia. More similar to what the Iraqis provide with their Basrah Heavy, right? But Canada only has the one pipeline, Trans Mountain, right now. So, to what degree are the Southeast Asian nations willing to engage in conversations with Canada to push for them to get another, at least another pipeline out to the West Coast, probably to Prince Rupert, and lift that large tanker ban because right now Very Large Crude Carriers (VLCCs) can't go in. So, there are some you know, very serious government discussions to be had to enable private sector investment. Something similar can be said on food security, where Canada is already quite a large supplier into the region. But Canada is actually structurally held back from it by an infrastructure deficit. And if Southeast Asian countries, express an interest in helping with that infrastructure deficit, there could be a lot to be done. This, I think, will all come to a head in September. Denis, I am not even sure if you were aware, it was only 48 hours ago, that Canada will host a major investment summit in September, mid-September in Toronto, inviting a hundred of the world's largest investors to come. The Canadian Pension Plan is the host, along with Invest Canada and I am certainly hoping Southeast Asia is represented there in a big, big way. I think there is going to be some serious announcements coming out of that.

Denis: Since you talk about these business partnerships, Business-to-business (B2B), what are the kind of emerging sectors? It could be Artificial Intelligence or it could be advanced manufacturing, where do you see opportunities to deepen that partnership between Southeast Asian companies and Canadian companies?

Barrett: Right, so I am not going to belabour the energy and food elements of it right? So, you know looking at other elements, I think the kind of sovereign technology side of things that I mentioned, that is really interesting. The whole world is watching the kind of AI and chips race right between the US and China. And the related data centre build-out etc. Well, a country like Canada, we have companies, globally respected ones like BlackBerry, like Cohere, we have our AI institutes. We offer like a third optionality here for Southeast Asian nations to partner and to build not just technical but also human capacity in doing joint university partnerships. Because if you do not have cyber sovereignty going into the 2030s, can you really say that you still have agency as a middle power? Because everything else that you are going to try and do might be compromised, right? There is an area where governments need to, at a minimum, you know show enthusiasm for this, and let the private sector know that there is an interest to build this kind of sovereign stack.

Denis: So, one last question Barrett, so if you had to identify one area where Canada and middle powers more broadly can make the most meaningful and most impactful contribution to the regional and global economy, what would that be, you think?

Barrett: It is a big question, but if I try to narrow it down to one specific thing right? Because you could choose from climate and other environmental concerns, and there is a whole lot happening in the digital world, as we just talked about. But I think we should probably focus on the rules-based trading system, which has been a great success to many countries and is crucial for Southeast Asian countries and for Canada. And I think the continuing to champion the evolution and growth of CPTPP with things like the EU harmonisation and convergence, right? ASEAN had a statement on this and supporting the growth of the CPTPP last year, supporting the World Trade Organization (WTO) dispute settlement function. Maybe that is the growth of the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA) and backing ASEAN as the kind of integrative core of the Indo-Pacific that links India and China, and Northeast Asia. This is probably the area of the most leverage, where the most can be accomplished. And Canada has a genuine national interest in doing this, and I think so do the Southeast Asian countries. So rather than having solely a number of interested officials and think tank people, the business community really is behind this. I would probably put that up there at the top of the shelf.

Denis: Yes, I agree. Thank you so much for sharing your insights and for highlighting the important work of the Asia Pacific Foundation in this region. It's been a great pleasure speaking with you. To our listeners, thank you for tuning into this episode of ASEAN in Practice. Do join us for more conversations with leading thinkers and practitioners shaping Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. So, stay tuned. Thank you.

***This episode was recorded on April 23, 2026.**