

Australia hails ASEAN summit success

Joint declaration sees mutual benefit, prosperity and sustainable development among key factors of strategic partnership

By **KARL WILSON** in Sydney
karlwilson@chinadailyapac.com

Australia's Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull declared the first ASEAN-Australia Special Summit "a resounding success".

Speaking on the last day of the March 17-18 event in Sydney, Turnbull said the summit came at a "critical time for the region".

"The pace and scale of change is without any precedent in human history," he said.

"Our vision is optimistic and born of ambition, it's for a neighborhood that is defined by open markets and the free flow of goods, services, capital and ideas."

He said that over the past 50 years, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations has used its influence to "defuse tension, build peace, encourage economic cooperation and support to maintain the rule of law".

The summit at Sydney's International Convention Centre was held amid tight security, with air space over the city closed and a warning that drones would be shot down.

Of the leaders of the 10 ASEAN nations — Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam — only Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte did not attend.

Despite threats of human rights protests against the Philippines, Cambodia and Myanmar, the topic was hardly broached during the summit.

Australia has supported ASEAN since its inception in 1967 and became the association's first dialogue partner in 1974.

This, however, was the first time that Australia has hosted an ASEAN heads of government summit and it was a major diplomatic coup for the Australian government.

"The summit restores ASEAN's centrality in Australian foreign policy," Professor Tony Milner, fellow and director of Asialink at the University of Melbourne, said.

He told *China Daily Asia Weekly* that Australia had neglected ASEAN in recent years as it was preoccupied with the US alliance and the rise of China.

He said geographic proximity and the size of Australia's trade with ASEAN are vital factors; effective relations with ASEAN also boost Australia's influence in both Washington and Beijing.

One of Australia's leading experts on Southeast Asia, Milner said



Dionisius Narjoko, a senior economist with the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia.

a strength of the summit was the opportunity for "real dialogue — often informally, between meetings — and this has been sobering".

"In our new-found enthusiasm, we have talked of Australia being ASEAN's 'leading partner', and even of joining ASEAN," he noted.

Turnbull has struck the right tone in insisting that "ASEAN matters are matters for ASEAN" and that we respect the way ASEAN "reaches its own conclusions", in Milner's view.

He said Australia has much in common with ASEAN countries — but there are also important differences in both objectives and style.

"The summit was important for Australia and its standing in the region," said Dionisius Narjoko, a senior economist with the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia.

"Australia does a lot of work within ASEAN, especially in the area of capacity building," he said.

"I think the economic relationship between ASEAN and Australia is quite good, and Australia has a lot to offer the region in areas such as healthcare, especially for the aged, and education."

Australia's economic and people-to-people linkages with the ASEAN region are extensive.

The ASEAN countries, with a combined population of more than 637 million and a total gross domestic product of \$2.5 trillion, are important economic partners for Australia.

In 2016, trade between Australia and ASEAN members was worth



Munir Majid, chairman of the CIMB ASEAN Research Institute.

A\$93 billion (\$71.6 billion), more than Australia's trade with the United States or Japan.

Australia also provides development assistance to a number of ASEAN members (A\$730 million in 2017-18) and contributes assistance to ASEAN itself, particularly to its Secretariat.

People-to-people ties are substantial: In 2016 there were more than 1.3 million visitors from ASEAN countries to Australia and around 100,000 students from ASEAN members enrolled to study in Australia — nearly 18 percent of all international students, according to Australian government data.

But analysts and commentators agree that the summit, despite its buildup, probably achieved very little in real terms.

The foreign editor of *The Australian* newspaper, Greg Sheridan, wrote on March 19: "Malcolm Turnbull's excellent ASEAN adventure was a roaring success in the best traditions of ASEAN."

"That is to say, it more or less did nothing and made no serious contributions to solving any of the region's pressing problems."

Graeme Dobell, a journalism fellow of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, said: "Southeast Asia is where Australia's geography collides with our future. And Southeast Asia acts as the threshold for what Australia faces in the Asian century."

He said that although the summit was the first on Australian soil, it was based on a "lot of shared history over



Tony Milner, fellow and director of Asialink at the University of Melbourne.

ASEAN's 50 years".

"Australia has always thought ASEAN a good thing. The hard question, always, is what good Australia can do with ASEAN."

Dobell said that as with any summit communique, the Sydney Declaration "serves as both paper vision and wallpaper covering, stating what can be agreed and gliding over differences."

"The declaration of 'a new era in the increasingly close ASEAN-Australia relationship' is summit-speak with a basis in fact."

The declaration acknowledged the Special Summit marked a new era in the ASEAN-Australia relationship, which was elevated to a Strategic Partnership in 2014.

"This summit reaffirms that we are partners with a vital stake in a dynamic region undergoing major changes. We commit to intensify our shared work to shape a secure and prosperous region for our people," the declaration said.

Apart from sharing a strong commitment to regional peace and security, the declaration also affirmed the commitment to the "peaceful resolution of disputes".

The declaration said: "We reaffirm our mutual respect for the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, equality, noninterference and political independence of all nations as espoused in the Charter of the United Nations, the ASEAN Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia."

"The principles of mutual benefit,

shared responsibility to promote peace and security, prosperity and sustainable development are central to further strengthening our strategic partnership."

The declaration condemned terrorism "in all its forms and manifestations" and reiterated the joint commitment to suppress the flow of foreign terrorist fighters in the region.

A day earlier, on March 17, the Australian government and ASEAN signed a memorandum of understanding strengthening cooperation to fight terrorism in the region. It was described as an "historic agreement that reflects and enhances our commitment to confront violent extremism and counter terrorism financing".

Munir Majid, chairman of the CIMB ASEAN Research Institute in Malaysia, said Australia wants to deepen its relations, particularly economic, with ASEAN.

"ASEAN is Australia's third largest trade partner and Australia ASEAN's ninth," he told *China Daily Asia Weekly*.

Majid said two-way investment is healthy, but with more ASEAN investment in Australia than vice versa.

"The ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement, signed in 2009, underpins the economic relationship, but there is a feeling in Australia that more can be done, given the strong links in education and people-to-people connections and with opportunities thrown up by digitization and Industry 4.0," he said.

Majid said that while strong overall, Australia's relations with ASEAN member states are not even.

"The economic links are stronger with some, like Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, than with others, like the Indochina states, the Philippines and Myanmar," he said.

"Australia also runs into problems with some ASEAN states, like Cambodia, when it pronounces on domestic policies deemed unsavory and against Australia's commitment to liberal democracy and the rule of law."

"As expressed in Australia's foreign policy white paper published last year, it is not likely that Australia will compromise on taking this kind of stand. It will be a problem Australia will always have to manage in its relations with ASEAN states which are all not wedded to the political principles that inform Australia's views on state conduct and responsibility."