

# Australia and Malaysia: Partners for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

By

**Fahmiya Mohamed Ismail**

*Intern, ISIS Malaysia;*

*MA Candidate, American University, Washington, DC*



Julie Bishop

Australia and Malaysia have been regional partners for many years, cooperating in strategic, economic and cross-cutting issues of mutual concern and interest. In an increasingly globalised world and a more prosperous region, this cooperation seems set to grow even more. In 2015, the two countries celebrate a six-decade relationship that spanned before Malaysia declared its independence.

Today, Australia and Malaysia have a multifaceted security partnership that works to maintain security in a more dynamic environment. They work together to develop strategies for combating non-traditional threats like terrorism, human and drug trafficking, natural disasters, violent extremism, as well as transnational crimes. The disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 and the downing of flight MH17 were a turning point in Australian-Malaysian relations. Australia was a key ally in the search for the missing flight MH370. Australia was also a partner to Malaysia with its support of the creation of a United Nations tribunal tasked with investigating the shooting down of flight MH17. Australia and Malaysia's joint response on these two tragedies exemplifies their close relationship, as well as their ability to work together towards positive results.

One major test of Australian-Malaysian relations has been the issues stemming from the South China Sea. Since 70 per cent of Australia's trade passes through the waters, stability in the region is closely linked to Australia's prosperity. Australia remains concerned over the unnecessary increase in tensions due to land reclamations and construction work by claimant states. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) plays a critical role in working towards a peaceful and stable resolution. Conflict resolution and a peaceful settlement could also be achieved through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit (EAS) and bilateral dialogues.

Since the 20th century, when the trading ports of Malacca assisted in industrialising Australia to today's robust trading relationship — where both countries are among each other's top ten trading partners — both have greatly benefited from this relationship. The recent increase in Malaysia's protectionist policies has therefore



Participant poses a question

been concerning. Australia would like to promote the increase of economic integration and liberalisation in order to continue its mutual trade and success with Malaysia. At the 26th ASEAN Summit earlier this year and recent EAS Foreign Ministers' Meeting, Australia renewed its support for the ASEAN Economic Community and the free trade agreement with Malaysia. It is imperative for both countries to work towards simplifying access to one another, not building new barriers.

*The new Colombo Plan is dedicated to expanding the people-to-people relationship in education ... designed to increase understanding and foster relationship that will last for generations.*

Despite the importance of trade and security, education has been the key pillar of Australian-Malaysian relations. Going back to the Colombo Plan in the 1950s, Malaysia has been exporting scholars to Australia for decades. Over time, the total Malaysian student enrollment in Australian educational institutions has grown exponentially, especially in the past few decades. The launch of a new Colombo Plan in Kuala Lumpur — an initiative of the Australian government — is dedicated to expanding the people-to-people relationship in education. The Plan was designed to increase understanding and foster relationship that will last for generations.

Australia and Malaysia have worked together on multiple issues for decades. As natural partners with mutual interests, Australia is committed to bolstering its relationship with Malaysia. The two countries still have plenty to offer to one another; the opportunities for growth in trade, security and education are endless.



Participants at the forum

*On 7 August 2015, we were privileged to host the Hon Julie Bishop MP, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, at our ISIS Malaysia International Affairs Forum. The event, held at Intercontinental Hotel in Kuala Lumpur, was jointly organised with the Australian High Commission. Bishop offered her take on why a closer partnership between Australia and Malaysia will benefit both countries as well as the region. The points highlighted in this article were taken from her talk.*