



CAPI ROUNDTABLE ON SOUTHEAST ASIA IN GLOBAL CONTEXT

Trust-Building in Canada and Thailand / Industries of the Future in ASEAN

23 October 2025 | University of Victoria

Summary of the Discussion by **Hibah Tul Hussain Jaffry**, University of Victoria

INTRODUCTION

The roundtable, consisting of two themes, Industries of the Future in ASEAN and Trust Building in Canada and Thailand was held on 23 October 2025 at the University of Victoria (Uvic) hosted by the Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives (CAPI) as the 18th instalment of its roundtable series. The event featured two panels: Panel 1 addressed trust-building in an age of uncertainty from Thai and Canadian perspectives, while Panel 2 examined Canada-ASEAN engagement in a changing world with particular focus on industries of the future.

WELCOME AND OPENING REMARKS

The roundtable conference opened with remarks from Victor V. Ramraj, Director of the Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives (CAPI) and Professor at the University of Victoria Faculty of Law. He introduced CAPI, welcomed participants and acknowledged the ləkʷəŋən peoples and the Songhees, Esquimalt, and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples, on whose traditional territories the roundtable was held. He highlighted the recent inauguration of the Indigenous wing at the UVic Faculty of Law, a facility supporting the world's first transsystemic JD/JID program, which integrates Indigenous and non-Indigenous legal traditions and invited participants to tour the space. Professor Ramraj then introduced and thanked Dr. Phil Calvert – CAPI Senior Research Fellow and former Canadian Ambassador to Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos – as a co-founder of the roundtable series. He noted that the format of the roundtable varies annually and emphasized this year's collaboration with the Canadian Council for Southeast Asian Studies, whose 2025 conference was held concurrently at UVic.

Dr. Phil Calvert introduced the first theme: the evolution of domestic politics and the shifting public trust in government in Canada and Thailand, noting that declining trust in institutions is a global phenomenon. He discussed how the erosion of trust intensified by social media and digital communication. In this sense, the first theme provides a foundation for the second panel's discussion second panel – a distinct but linked discussion on Canada – ASEAN engagement in a changing world particularly considering Southeast Asia's emergence as a center of technological innovation. Professor Ramraj then concluded the welcome and opening remarks by outlining the roundtable format.

PANEL 1: Trust-Building in Canada and Thailand

The panelists came from backgrounds in academia, public administration, political development, and institutional research. The first panelist, Dr. Kowit Kangsanant, presented an analysis of public trust in Thailand using the OECD government driver of trust model, highlighting low to moderate levels of trust across key institutional dimensions. He emphasized that Thailand's trust-building challenges are deeply rooted in its complex historical and cultural transitions and stressed the need for development of democratic values, proactive anti-corruption reforms, promotion of integrity based and good governance for public institutions, civic education reforms etc. to rebuild public trust in Thai institutions. The second panelist, Dr. Stithorn Thananithichot, examined Thailand's democratic challenges, highlighting 20 constitutions in 93 years and frequent military interventions. Using unpublished survey data, he revealed complex relationships between institutional trust and democratic support: trust in parliament correlated positively, while trust in the civil service and military correlated negatively. He emphasized that bureaucracy, long used by military governments as an administrative tool, complicates efforts to build public trust and strengthen democracy. The final panelist, Associate Professor Patrica Cochran, explored the complexities

of defining “the public” through administrative systems, using Indigenous child welfare in Canada as a case study. She discussed how bureaucracies can marginalize populations and undermine democratic principles. She noted that while bureaucracies can erode trust by generating meaningless processes, they can also foster democratic engagement when designed to support meaningful, community-centered decision-making.

The panel discussion then delved into the fundamental dynamics of democratic governance, exploring critical intersections between service delivery, institutional trust, and citizen engagement. A central theme emerged around the role of basic services in post-conflict or developing democratic contexts, challenging the panelists to consider whether meeting fundamental societal needs preceded or parallels democratic development. Drawing from the Thai context, panelists noted that while strong service delivery can enhance trust, trust also depends on public expectations – particularly perceptions of fairness, neutrality, and consistency in decision-making.

The panelists explored the complex mechanisms of political participation, particularly in contexts where electoral processes involve implicit transactional relationships. Vote-buying practices were examined as a nuanced form of reciprocal service delivery, highlighting the intricate social contracts between local politicians and constituents. Generational polarization emerged as a significant factor in institutional trust, with distinct ideological fractures evident between older and younger generations. These divisions were contextualized through international influences, particularly the geopolitical tensions between global powers and their ideological impacts on local political landscapes.

The panel then reflected on potential levels of institutional reform, recognizing the necessity of multi-dimensional interventions. The discussion suggested that meaningful transformation requires simultaneous engagement at local, national, and systemic levels, rather than pursuing a linear, hierarchical approach to institutional change. Global technological and political trends were acknowledged as influential forces reshaping democratic engagement. The conversation highlighted how international dynamics, technological disruptions, and transnational ideological currents increasingly complicate traditional understandings of governance and institutional legitimacy. The dialogue ultimately emphasized democracy’s intrinsic value, arguing that citizen participation holds inherent worth beyond mere administrative efficiency – effective democratic practice requires both functional institutions and meaningful public engagement, grounding legitimacy not only in efficiency but in participation itself.

During the audience Q&A, panelists addressed questions on minority trust in Thailand. They explained that while Malay Muslims are national minorities, they are local majorities and therefore hold meaningful electoral representation, although daily service gaps and long-standing tensions persist. Other questions focused on whether institutional distrust or political polarization is Thailand’s central challenge; the panelists emphasized that both are intertwined, shaped by generational and ideological divides. The discussion also examined corruption within technical agencies and how inconsistent judicial decisions undermine trust. Questions on technology highlighted growing concerns about AI-generated political speech and debates over AI’s role in decision-making.

The moderators then thanked the panelists and audience for their engagements and agreed to reconvene for the Panel 2 after a break.

PANEL 2: INDUSTRIES OF THE FUTURE IN ASEAN

Following the break, Professor Ramraj briefly recapped Panel 1 before former Dr. Calvert introduced Panel 2: Canada–ASEAN Engagement: Industries of the Future. He highlighted Canada’s long relationship with ASEAN and the dramatic technological transformation of Southeast Asia – from e-commerce and digital economies to green tech and AI. He posed the central question: how should Canada engage, adapt, and benefit within this evolving landscape? The session then moved into the panel discussion.

The panelists represented diverse backgrounds in technology, international relations, and academic research, focusing on digital transformation, software engineering, and international trade. The first panelist, Professor Merlyna Lim, analyzed the technological transformation in Southeast Asia, highlighting the region’s dynamic digital ecosystem. She emphasized that technological developments are not merely imported but locally adapted and invented, creating a unique digital landscape. She explored emerging digital asymmetries, platform economies, and the complex relationship between technological adoption and human agency. She critically examined

how governments negotiate digital technologies, balancing economic potential with control mechanisms, and discussed the paradoxical nature of digital sovereignty and surveillance in the region. Crucially, she positioned Canada as a potential ethical partner for Southeast Asia, advocating for reciprocal research partnerships and people-centered technological development, rather than traditional extractive approaches. The second panelist, CEO David Wynne, explored Canada's engagement opportunities with ASEAN, emphasizing the region's significant digital economy potential projected to reach \$300 billion by 2026. He noted Canada's potential comparative advantage as a trusted, non-hegemonic partner amid U.S.–China competition. He also highlighted challenges for Canadian SMEs entering Southeast Asian markets, including cultural barriers, complex business practices, and difficulties establishing trust. Wynne advocated strategic market intelligence, partnerships with regional accelerators, and collaborative consulting approaches. He stressed the importance of understanding local business ecosystems, providing after-sales support, and developing sophisticated market entry strategies tailored to the unique technological and cultural landscapes of ASEAN countries. The final panelist, Professor Daniela Damian, explored technological development through the lens of diverse international collaborations, focusing on Nepal and Singapore. She highlighted the technical capabilities of Nepalese developers and the challenges of local innovation, contrasting this with Singapore's mature digital ecosystem. She emphasized the importance of design thinking, user-centered approaches, and cultural understanding in technological development. Through her Inspire program, she demonstrated how experiential learning and community partnerships can bridge technological gaps, advocating for inclusive software engineering that prioritizes empathy, cultural sensitivity, and collaborative problem-solving across diverse technological landscapes.

The panel went on to explore digital technology's potential as an integrative force in Southeast Asia, examining the complex technological landscapes across the region. They discussed the nuanced challenges of digital integration, recognizing that while technological platforms offer connectivity, fundamental barriers persist. The discussion revealed that technological development in ASEAN is not uniform, with each country navigating digital transformation differently. Panelists highlighted the intricate balance between economic opportunity and governmental control, noting how digital technologies simultaneously enable innovation and potential surveillance. The conversation critically examined the role of platform economies, transnational citizen networks, and emerging digital ecosystems as potential unifying mechanisms. They unpacked how different nations strategically approach technological innovation, revealing layers of complexity beyond simple technological adoption. A significant thread of the discussion centered on trust-building mechanisms in digital spaces, exploring how governments and societies negotiate technological integration. The panel delved into the paradoxes of digital sovereignty, where countries seek technological independence while remaining interconnected through global platforms. Crucially, the discussion positioned Canada as a potential ethical partner in technological collaboration, advocating for approaches that prioritize reciprocal research partnerships, cultural understanding, and inclusive technological development over extractive models. Panelists emphasized that Canada's strengths lie not in commercial dominance but in fostering knowledge solidarity: multidisciplinary dialogue, co-learning, and partnerships that bridge research, civic tech, and public-interest digital innovation. They argued that Southeast Asia's disciplinary silos create gaps between academic knowledge and industry needs, enabling Canada to contribute by helping build problem-driven, interdisciplinary research ecosystems and supporting autonomous digital infrastructures such as open-source platforms, community networks, and public-interest media. The conversation also underscored Canada's uneven historical engagement with the region specifically keeping in view the disadvantages compared to countries like India, China, and Japan, whose diasporas and commercial ecosystems are deeply embedded across ASEAN. Overcoming this requires trusted intermediaries, culturally informed partnership models, and support mechanisms that help Canadian SMEs navigate regional business practices, avoid predatory intermediaries, and build credibility. The audience Q&A session explored Canada's digital engagement strategies in Southeast Asia, focusing on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and technological partnerships. Participants critically examined Canada's trade approaches, diaspora networks, and competitive positioning against other economies like India and China. Key discussions centered on the challenges of market entry, the importance of local intermediaries, and the potential for collaborative innovation. The panelists highlighted the need for cultural understanding, strategic market intelligence, and leveraging diaspora knowledge to facilitate successful technological and business exchanges in the ASEAN region, emphasizing the potential of ethical and inclusive technological development.

Moderators thanked the panelists and audience for their engaged participation.