

The image shows the ASEAN flag (blue with a red circle and a golden emblem) and the Cambodian flag (green, white, and red) flying in front of a modern building with a grid-like facade. The text is overlaid on a teal gradient at the bottom.

# CHAPTER 14

## Opportunities, Challenges and Preparations for Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022

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# INTRODUCTION

After joining ASEAN in 1999, Cambodia has prepared the country's foreign policy and agendas to be in line with those of ASEAN's. As a result, for the past 20 years, Cambodia has benefited from the membership and has significantly contributed to promoting the ASEAN Community building.

As a member of ASEAN, Cambodia has hosted the Chairmanship of ASEAN twice in the past, in 2002 and 2012. The Kingdom assumes this role again for the third time in 2022, which could be a moment of both pride and pressure for Cambodia. This chapter discusses the opportunities and challenges that Cambodia may face during its ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022. It also provides a key summary of Cambodia's preparation for this milestone event.

## CAMBODIA'S ASEAN CHAIRMANSHIP: OPPORTUNITIES

Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022 will provide the countries with more opportunities to advance its foreign policy agenda, promote dialogues on several regional issues, and advance progress on key areas of mutual interest. Those opportunities will contribute to promoting peace, stability, and prosperity in the region and beyond. To be precise, Cambodia could capitalise on its ASEAN Chairmanship next year to (1) promote multilateralism and the rules-based international order, (2) advance its economic diplomacy, (3) mediate the political crisis in Myanmar, and (4) contribute to the ASEAN Community building.

## PROMOTING MULTILATERALISM AND THE RULES-BASED INTERNATIONAL ORDER

The world continues to experience increasing complexity and uncertainty due to the persistence and accentuation of regional tensions, great power competition, unilateralism, protectionism, populism, and non-traditional security threats such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. They have posed significant challenges to multilateralism, the rules-based trading system, global peace, stability, and prosperity. However, over the recent decades, multilateralism and the rules-based trading system have proven to be the driving forces for the international community to cooperate in a mutually beneficial manner and address challenges and matters of shared concerns. Indeed, they are key to the post-pandemic recovery plan. Cambodia wholeheartedly subscribes to these principles.

Cambodia believes that multilateralism and the rules-based international order are paramount to maintaining world peace, promoting shared prosperity, and addressing emerging global issues such as climate change, natural disasters, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Khmer Times 2020). No single country can address interconnected and complex global issues alone.

Therefore, international partnerships and collaborations are required. In this regard, Cambodia will enthusiastically push these agendas forward during its ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022. As the host of the 13th ASEM Summit in November 2021, Cambodia has promoted these principles as reflected by the Summit's slogan, "Strengthening Multilateralism for Shared Growth". Cambodia has also endeavoured to galvanise the solidarity and mutual support among ASEM Partners to advance COVID-19 vaccine multilateralism and an inclusive, sustainable, and resilient post-pandemic socio-economic recovery.

## **ADVANCING ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY**

The Royal Government of Cambodia has identified economic diplomacy as one of the core components of the whole-of-government approach to expand economic opportunities and advance competitiveness. It is an important vehicle enabling Cambodia to realise its development visions as an upper-middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income country by 2050. Advancing economic diplomacy will allow the Kingdom to attract more foreign investment and tourists, diversify investment sources, expand export markets for Cambodian products, and promote Cambodian culture on the world stage (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia).

As the ASEAN Chair in 2022, Cambodia will have the opportunity to further advance her economic diplomacy so that the Kingdom can diversify its sources of growth, amplify economic potentials, and obtain advantages from emerging opportunities. In particular, the ASEAN Chairmanship will allow Cambodia to pursue the path of economic liberalisation, open trade and globalisation, and strive to promote multilateral trade and negotiations for free trade agreements with more countries. The country expects that it will turn the external environment into a source of opportunities for its national development, foster greater international engagement between it and other major economies, and elevate its reputation in the world.

## **MEDIATING THE POLITICAL CRISIS IN MYANMAR**

The ongoing political crisis in Myanmar has thus far caused political instability in the region and beyond. ASEAN is expected to perform a key role in mediating the crisis. The crisis has been a headache for ASEAN and Cambodia, particularly when the Kingdom assumes the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022. Being the only country in the Mekong region that has maintained regular elections for more than 20 years, Cambodia possesses a unique qualification and opportunity to mediate the Myanmar crisis. It has practical experiences, particularly related to peace-making and national reunification, achieved in the late 1990s. Taking this potential role, Cambodia would help address the crisis and enhance its image and interest on both regional and international stages.

Due to the absence of a potential and credible mediator, Cambodia has certain advantages to mediate the political crisis in Myanmar, particularly when the Kingdom becomes the ASEAN Chair. It is known as a small country with a big heart. Besides, the Royal Government of Cambodia is a close friend to the disputed parties in Myanmar. Therefore, Cambodia may be welcomed by all parties in Myanmar as a trusted, honest mediator. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Cambodia's mediation role in the Myanmar political crisis is enhanced by its success story of peace-making, national reconciliation, stability, and socio-economic development through the government's "Win-Win Policy", as well as the establishment of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC).

If Cambodia could successfully shoulder the mediating role for a peaceful resolution in Myanmar, the Kingdom is expected to gain regional and international recognition. As a result, Cambodia can promote its roles, national interest, and image in regional and international arenas. Therefore, Cambodia should take a proactive role in helping address the Myanmar crisis.

## **CONTRIBUTING TO ASEAN COMMUNITY BUILDING**

ASEAN has always been an integral part of Cambodia's foreign policy. Four main factors had pushed Cambodia to join ASEAN in 1999, including the principle of non-interference, the community spirit based on consensus, the positive advantages from ASEAN integration, and the expansion of Cambodia's relations with the ASEAN dialogue partners (Samdech Prime Minister Hun Sen 2016). Despite being a latecomer, Cambodia has proven to be an active and constructive supporter of the ASEAN Community building.

In 2022, Cambodia will promote the goal of the ASEAN Community building by exercising its leadership role responsibly in moderating and mediating all concerned parties to solve regional and international issues. Cambodia aims to realise a "people-centred ASEAN" with an emphasis on narrowing the development gap, linking economic integration with poverty reduction, and creating an environment for the security and safety of ASEAN citizens (Chheang 2012). Cambodia has demonstrated a strong political will and unwavering commitment towards regional integration. Such commitment remains unchanged but even more resolute (Sim 2021).

## **CAMBODIA'S ASEAN CHAIRMANSHIP: CHALLENGES AND PREPARATIONS**

While Cambodia will gain opportunities as illustrated above during its ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022, the Kingdom could also face many challenges. Four major factors could considerably challenge Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship.



## THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has been disrupting the world since 2020. Although many governments worldwide are becoming more effective in fighting the pandemic and many people have been vaccinated, the impact could potentially extend until Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022 or beyond. Moreover, newer pandemic variants continue to appear in different parts of the world and have made existing anti-pandemic mechanisms less effective, if not obsolete (Roberts 2021). In this regard, it is possible that the world will not return to normal in 2022 if this trend continues.

There would be at least two main challenges for Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship. First, the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic would make it difficult for Cambodia to bring attention and solidarity from all ASEAN members and dialogue partners. Depending on the actual situation of the pandemic in their countries, some ASEAN members or dialogue partners might be focusing more on the urgent fight against the pandemic at home rather than on regional issues. For instance, at the time of writing, a new variant of COVID-19 called the Delta-variant was found in India and has infected more than 200,000 and killed not less than 4,000 Indian people daily (Mehta and Mishra 2021). Prime Minister Modi's plan of exporting millions of COVID-19 AstraZeneca vaccines to 190 countries worldwide through the COVAX scheme has been paused (BBC 2021). Instead of prioritising regional issues, Modi's government is spending more energy and resources addressing immediate domestic crises. Similarly, several cities of ASEAN members such as Lao, Thailand, and Cambodia have been under lockdown and curfew due to the pandemic (Reuters 2021a; Bangkok Post 2021; Xinhua 2021). Besides, the prolonging COVID-19 pandemic could cause either a nationalist environment or unfavourable momentum in ASEAN meetings, preventing the regional leaders from concluding meaningful agreements. Comparatively, the pandemic has already undermined regional cooperation in the European Union despite its comprehensive regional integration. The nationalist sentiment, triggered by the pandemic, takes hold in medical nationalism, the domestic politics of EU members, border closures, and racial discrimination, which have undermined the EU's regional cooperation (Bieber 2020, 7–9).

Second, Cambodia would have to host the ASEAN Summit and related meetings virtually if the pandemic remains a serious threat in the region until 2022. Notably, it is already challenging to negotiate physically with ten regional leaders or more with diverse interests for a consensus, let alone do it virtually. Moreover, various aspects such as international organisations' bureaucracy, the complexity of the issue at hand, and actors involved in the negotiation process could potentially undermine any successful negotiation outcome (Meerts 2015, 1–7). In this sense, the online meetings would make it even more challenging for Cambodia as the ASEAN Chair. Each country has a different time zone, internet reliability, information technology expertise, and other qualities which, at any moment, could disrupt the online coordination and negotiation process.

Besides, some ASEAN related meetings, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which involves as many as 27 countries from inside and outside the region, would require extensive coordination and negotiation efforts from the host.

Despite the above challenges, there are some preparations, which Cambodia should consider when it assumes the Chairman of ASEAN. The Cambodian government could learn from the experience of Brunei's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2021. Brunei has hosted the ASEAN Summit and related meetings virtually (Bandial 2020). By observing the upside and downside of Brunei's performance as ASEAN Chair, Cambodia will be more prepared for virtual coordination and negotiations. Besides, the Cambodian government should be fully aware of ASEAN members' and partners' COVID-19 situation. By doing so, Cambodia could put forward agendas of common interests. Finally, Cambodia needs to strategically minimise the nationalistic and unfavourable environments by prioritising agenda items that generate solidarity momentum rather than division. To build solidarity momentum, Cambodia could also consider promoting and enhancing the existing ASEAN's proposed mechanisms in responding to the pandemic, including, but are not limited to, (1) the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund, (2) the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF), (3) the ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement (TCA) Framework, (4) the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED), and (5) the ASEAN Public Health Emergency Coordination System (APHECS).

## THE ONGOING POLITICAL CRISIS IN MYANMAR

It is unforeseeable whether Myanmar's political crisis would end before Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship. Although the political crisis could be an opportunity for Cambodia to showcase its capability in resolving the issue through its role as a mediator, it will be a major challenge for Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship and Cambodia's mission to advance the ASEAN Community building and to sustain ASEAN's role as an important hub for global trade, investment, and supply chains, as reaffirmed by the Cambodian prime minister (Khmer Times 2021). Regardless of ASEAN's non-interference principle, the political crisis in Myanmar is a common challenge for the region, which Cambodia would inevitably need to address in 2022. Myanmar's crisis would challenge Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship in two ways.

First, if the political crisis remains until Cambodia becomes ASEAN Chair, the legitimacy and validity of any ASEAN agreement involving Myanmar's military government could be contested in the future. As of today, the legitimacy of General Min Aung Hlaing's government is controversial. There are still protests and violence in Myanmar and calls for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and the return of her government (Aljazeera 2021; Guardian 2021).

However, despite the contested leadership in the country, General Min Aung Hlaing is keen to lead Myanmar's delegation to attend the ASEAN Summits and other related meetings in 2021 and 2022. ASEAN leaders met him during the ASEAN's Special Meeting on Myanmar (Paddock 2021). In this respect, potential international legal disputes under the principle of *Pacta Sunt Servanda* could arise if the post-crisis government of Myanmar decides not to recognise the agreements made by General Min Aung Hlaing during ASEAN meetings in Cambodia. Consequently, the advancement of ASEAN Community building, at least concerning regional agreements, would be affected.

Second, prolonging Myanmar's domestic conflict could potentially invite great power interference into the politics of the country and Southeast Asia. The region has been prone to great power political competition since the 15th century because of its geographical significance (Shambaugh 2018, 89–95). The involvement of great powers' competition in any country's domestic affairs or any region would complicate the situation and destabilise those places. In some cases, great powers' involvement would make a country become a failed state. Consequently, regional economic development would be disrupted. For example, great power competition in Syria has caused the prolongation of the Syrian political crisis, with the whole country almost being destroyed (Chughtai 2021). Worse, the conflict has resulted in millions of refugees, which put more burden on the region and the international community (Reid 2021). The destruction by war has undermined the Syrian authority to effectively combat regional terrorism and organised crimes (Zulfqar 2018, 138; Steenkamp 2017, 7–10).

Although Myanmar's political problem is domestic, it does not exist in isolation from the region or ASEAN. Without any effective solution to Myanmar's political problem, the country could risk following the same footsteps of Syria. Hence, the extension of Myanmar's political crisis and the possibility of great powers' interference in the country would disturb peace and stability in the region and affect regional trade, investment, and supply chains. In this sense, the political crisis in Myanmar could be a major obstacle preventing Cambodia from fulfilling its mission in ASEAN Community building.

To prepare for such challenges, Cambodia should consider these aspects. As ASEAN Chair, it should continue to support the implementation of the Five-Point Consensus, which ASEAN leaders agreed in Indonesia in April 2021 (Reuters 2021b). The proposal from ASEAN could contribute incrementally to the de-escalation and the ending of Myanmar's political crisis and prevent the internationalisation of the problem. After all, no leaders in the region would want to see great power interference in their domestic politics (Aizawa 2019, 412–415). Furthermore, while Cambodia must observe the Myanmar situation closely, it should also watch and learn how Brunei did perform as ASEAN Chair in 2021. Lastly, although Myanmar's domestic problem could spread into a regional issue, Cambodia has to uphold the ASEAN Way. Therefore, Cambodia could carefully consider the application of quiet diplomacy in combination with sharing its peacebuilding experience with Myanmar during its chairmanship.

## CHINA-US STRATEGIC RIVALRY

Also related to the preceding factor, the increasing tension between China and the US is another major factor that would affect Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship. The strategic rivalry between great powers is not new in international politics. The famous Peloponnesian War and World War I are just a few examples showing how much instability and destruction great powers could create for a region (Joll 2006; Allison 2015). For Southeast Asia, the competition between China and the US has become more tense since the Trump administration and has continued under Joe Biden's administration (Zengerle and Martina 2021; Kuik 2021, 158–160). Against this backdrop, it would be challenging for Cambodia to negotiate and coordinate all ASEAN members and dialogue partners, including China and the US, to reach a consensus, while preserving ASEAN centrality and unity.

It is important to highlight that, amid the growing strategic rivalry between China and the US, each ASEAN member and dialogue partner has different and complex foreign policies toward the two great powers. For example, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) countries are ASEAN's important dialogue and trading partners. On the other hand, the QUAD members are also important allies of the US. They have revitalised the group to counter the rise of China's influence in the region through various aspects, including regional trade and infrastructure development, COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy, and the Open and Free Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) (Sharma 2021).

ASEAN members have also benefited greatly from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The initiative has spurred Southeast Asia regional economic integration and contributed to the realisation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 (Cheok and Chen 2019, 18–20; Bi 2021, 89–97). Similarly, the Philippines and Brunei are more accommodating toward China for domestic interests although they are two of the claimants in the South China Sea disputes. Differently, Vietnam is more hedging toward the US for soft balancing against China (Lawrence 2021; De Castro 2020; De Gurung 2018, 14–6). Thus, such dynamic and complex relationships between ASEAN members and dialogue partners vis-a-vis the rising China-US rivalry could potentially hinder ASEAN from reaching any meaningful decision in 2022.

Considering the experience and recent developments involving China-US strategic rivalry, Cambodia could consider the following aspects. On the one hand, Cambodia could negotiate and coordinate ASEAN related meetings based on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and the ASEAN Way principle. On the other hand, according to its core foreign policy of neutrality stipulated in the 1993 Constitution, Cambodia must avoid forming an alliance of any form against any ASEAN member or dialogue partner during its 2022 chairmanship and beyond. The Singaporean prime minister said in 2020, "Asia-Pacific countries do not want to choose between the United States and China; they want to cultivate good relations with both."



Besides, Cambodia has both customary rules and institutional power under ASEAN Chairmanship, allowing it to set an agenda to avoid causing more tensions in great powers' strategic rivalry (Suzuki 2020, 6–8). Nonetheless, Cambodia needs to remind all ASEAN members and dialogue partners that all the countries need to take collective responsibility for the success and failure of ASEAN meetings. All the members and partners have their parts to play in ASEAN's progress.

## HOSPITALITY AND HOLISTIC ARRANGEMENTS

The organisation of ASEAN's meetings is another major factor that would cause challenges to Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship. One of the challenges would be about finance if the 2022 ASEAN Summit and related meetings are conducted physically. The pandemic has negatively impacted many countries' economic performance, including Cambodia. At the same time, due to several episodes of COVID-19 lockdown in the country from 2020 to 2021, the government has reduced the national budget to cope with the economic impact derived from the pandemic (Phoung 2020). Besides, the country has already faced the loss of about 15 per cent of domestic income from taxation in early 2021 compared to last year (RFI 2021). The trend will likely continue considering how the new wave of COVID-19 is still infecting Cambodian people. It is important to emphasise that Cambodia is also scheduled to host two other major events, namely the 13th ASEM Summit in November 2021 and the commune elections in 2022. Those two important events would require a significant amount of state budget in addition to the financial burden of Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship. Undoubtedly, Cambodia has the experience of chairing ASEAN twice, in 2002 and 2012. However, ASEAN activities have also grown much bigger than a decade ago. Thus, the financial difficulty could be a real challenge for Cambodia in 2022.

Another challenge is perhaps human resources. Comparatively, human resources are less problematic for Cambodia now than in the past. Compared to Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2002 and 2012, Cambodia's human resources have increased notably. The number of public and private educational institutions in the country is increasing, and more Cambodian students have access to higher education (Rana, Ardichvili, and Taing 2017, 137; MoEYS 2019, 65–71). In addition to graduates from local universities, more Cambodian students have received scholarships to study abroad annually (Boken and White 2020; Phnom Penh Post 2020). As a result, many of them return to work for government's ministries and private institutions such as think tanks, research institutions, and universities. Furthermore, more young people with skills and higher education degrees have been given opportunities to take leadership roles in various government bodies. Therefore, Cambodia will not face severe challenges in terms of human resources like before, as long as the government is willing and able to mobilise the existing human resources to help organise the 2022 ASEAN Summit and related meetings.

Lastly, some may argue that logistic arrangement could be another challenge for Cambodia in 2022. However, Cambodia has enough hard infrastructure necessary to host the ASEAN Summit and related meetings. The government has constructed new buildings with cutting-edge technology. For example, the new buildings of the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction, and the Ministry of Public Works and Transport, are both capable of hosting international meetings. The government could also utilise the existing buildings such as the Peace Palace, which was used for the ASEAN Summit in 2012. Cambodia also has many luxurious hotels in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, and Sihanoukville, which are accessible by roads and planes.

Considering the possible challenges mentioned above, there are some preparations that Cambodia could consider. Cambodia could learn from Vietnam's ASEAN Chairmanship back in 2020. Vietnam had prepared for the chairmanship one year and a half in advance. It established a national organising committee consisting of several sub-committees covering content, protocol, logistics, communication and culture, security and healthcare, and secretariat work (Toan 2019). Besides, Cambodia must closely follow the development of the ASEAN Travel Corridor in 2021 (Syakriah 2020). If phase one of the ASEAN Travel Corridor could be implemented, Cambodia should start mobilising human resources and arranging logistics and venues necessary for conducting physical ASEAN Summit and related meetings in 2022. Although physical meetings demand more spending, it would also reduce online diplomacy, negotiation, and coordination challenges.

Nonetheless, Cambodia could also seek assistance from development partners. For instance, Japan has promised Cambodia financial support for purchasing cars and equipment for ASEM and ASEAN related meetings (Torn 2020). In the same vein, Cambodia could also seek assistance from other key development partners such as Australia, China, South Korea, the US, and the EU. However, the government should be aware that there could be strings attached upon receiving assistance from foreign countries (Chheang 2021, 387–391). Those attached conditions might go against the core interests of Cambodia and ASEAN. Other than that, the Cambodian government needs to seek support from relevant public and private institutions, domestic and international experts, scholars, volunteers, and other stakeholders to effectively prepare for the 2022 ASEAN Chairmanship.

Overall, Cambodia will need to redouble its efforts in coordinating and chairing the ASEAN Summits and other related meetings to demonstrate to the region and beyond that it can act as chair responsibly and constructively. Furthermore, Cambodia will need to be ready and willing to address problems with diplomacy and leadership. However, as the world and the region become more complex and unpredictable, Cambodia should act cautiously in managing differences by considering the motivations and interests of individual member states and partners. However, to accommodate and harmonise all these different interests is a huge challenge for the Cambodian Chairmanship.

# CONCLUSION

The chapter has illustrated the opportunities, challenges, and preparations for Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022. The conclusion is that Cambodia as the Chair will have the opportunities to promote the principles of multilateralism and a rules-based international order, considered as the Kingdom's core foreign policies. The ASEAN Chairmanship could serve as a platform for Cambodia to advance its economic diplomacy for promoting national economic development. Furthermore, through its ASEAN Chairmanship, Cambodia will have a huge opportunity to contribute to ASEAN Community building, critical for regional integration and connectivity.

Meanwhile, Cambodia would face several challenges for its ASEAN Chairmanship next year. First, the global COVID-19 pandemic will put Cambodia in a difficult position in gathering solidarity from ASEAN member states and other dialogue partners who may focus on fighting against the pandemic at home. Second, the ongoing political crisis in Myanmar will be another headache for ASEAN and Cambodia. However, this could also be an opportunity for Cambodia to take the role of mediator in the Myanmar crisis, thanks to its unique qualification and experience. Finally, the US-China rivalries would be another challenge for Cambodia's role as ASEAN Chair, particularly in preserving ASEAN centrality and serving the bloc's interest. ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022 will be a major task for Cambodia. Although the country is expected to use much of its budget for organising big events in 2021 and 2022, the Kingdom has been well prepared to take on this challenge. Cambodia also possesses enough human resources and logistic arrangements necessary to host the ASEAN Summits and other related meetings. Overall, Cambodia will need to redouble its efforts in coordinating and chairing the ASEAN Summits and other related meetings to demonstrate to the region and the world that the Kingdom can act as chair responsibly and constructively.

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