



# CHAPTER 09

## ASEAN's Contribution to Regional Peace and Stability: A Cambodian Perspective

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# CAMBODIA'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS ASEAN: AN INSIDE-OUT VIEW

It has become a tendency among many commentators and pundits to describe Cambodia's approach to ASEAN as ambiguous at best and harmful at worst. This conceived image is perhaps derived mainly from ASEAN's debacle during the Kingdom's Chairmanship in 2012 due to the controversial issue of the South China Sea. The incident has, by and large, pointed out ASEAN's persistent struggle with regionalism and how to manage regional peace and stability with a general tendency of pointing fingers at Cambodia.

To many, the practice of regionalism is seen logically through a conceptual lens as an instrument of a unified strength either for or against something. This strongly prescribes that a country, when becoming a part of a group, must have a shared purpose and that each country's national interest is, therefore, synonymous with the bloc's interest. Indeed, this preconceived idea makes sense for an intellectual discussion but overlooks reality. It finds no common ground to "reconcile between regionalism and the practice of nationalism" (Rajaratnam et al., 2007).

The hard truth is that ASEAN is a collection of nations with diverse domestic political, socio-cultural, and foreign policy orientations. Observably, some members are allies of the West whereas some wish to pursue non-alignment. However, all of them have economically benefited, in one way or another, from their relations with China. With such disparity, the consensus decision-making process might be the only practical road to an eventual satisfactory solution for every stakeholder. The unprecedented non-issuance of the Joint Communiqué of the 45th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, the so-called "2012 Phnom Penh fiasco", is a clear consequence of the conflicting interests between national and regional as well as a breach of the bloc's principle that helps to sustain the momentum of regional peace and stability for decades.

Like other ASEAN Member States, Cambodia also sees ASEAN from the standpoint of its own domestic concerns and its political, security and economic interests. Although Cambodia's approach to ASEAN may be different from those of other Member States, Cambodia, since its entry into this regional grouping, has consistently upheld and even staunchly advocated ASEAN's interests, principles and values. Cambodia's Foreign Minister PRAK Sokhonn explicitly pointed out in his remark on the occasion of the ASEAN's 50th Anniversary, "ASEAN was attractive for Cambodia in terms of joint commitments and collective responsibility for peace, stability and prosperity and the peace that ASEAN has developed so far can only be achieved through trust, dialogue and consultation and not through polarisation or worse still agitation over the already heated tension" (MFAIC 2017).

Cambodia clearly recognises that there is a 'regional interest' that could best serve everyone, and those are peace, stability and prosperity of the region.

Without a doubt, “the maintenance and enhancement of peace, security and stability and the strengthening of peace-oriented value in the region” have been a long-established cornerstone of ASEAN and subsequently codified into its Charter (ASEAN 2008). An attempt to use an open confrontation tactic to pursue a separate national interest was not only seen as an act to destabilise peace and stability in the region but also run counter to both ASEAN’s and Cambodia’s ultimate objective of safeguarding peace and stability.

For Cambodia, its painful past caused by decades of destructive war and a modern-world tragedy has surreptitiously propelled the Kingdom to pursue the peace objective. This might entrench its firm belief that only when the region is at peace can Cambodia concentrate on its own national development and regional integration. Cambodia sees ASEAN as a key platform for interactions, cooperation, and maintenance as well as promotion of peace and stability in the region.

In 2022, Cambodia takes the role of ASEAN Chairmanship. In this regard, this chapter aims to highlight the roles of ASEAN in the evolving regional security architecture since its existence and provide some suggestions of how Cambodia as chair can enhance ASEAN as a catalyst for peace and stability amid emerging regional security threats.

## **ASEAN: FROM A BYSTANDER TO THE DETERMINANT OF REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE**

Southeast Asia during the 1960s was a region overwhelmingly embroiled in tensions, conflicts and, even worse, proxies of competing great powers’ rivalries during the Cold War. There were various formations of short-lived regional organisations, for instance, the South-east Asia Treaty Organisation, which was not genuinely created by the region and often viewed as a pro-Western camp. Such a complex regional security environment had aroused some countries’ sentiment to seek an enduring basis of regional security and cooperation that could possibly prevent war, manage conflict, and promote regional prosperity (Rajaratnam et al. 2007; Acharya 2009). As a result, ASEAN came into being.

The ASEAN Declaration on 8 August 1967 unequivocally stated the grouping’s desire “to promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries of the region” (ASEAN 2016). To materialise this noble endeavour, ASEAN had to tacitly take a different course of action from its crumbled predecessor(s). Thus, it is by design that ASEAN has been a truly regional-owned and -led organisation in regional security development. It is neither possible nor feasible for ASEAN to be a self-isolated grouping. If it decides not to lead, it will then be led because there are always intrinsic tensions of great powers’ struggles, as they compete for influence and interests.

Equally importantly, engaging with non-ASEAN countries is crucial to assure the regional grouping's survival; yet it has to be manageable. This would require ASEAN, on the one hand, to stay neutral towards major powers and, on the other hand, address its internal differences. In-between, ASEAN has to strongly place an economic horse before a geopolitical cart because worsening economic conditions would create domestic confusion and chaos. It is increasingly critical given the worsening impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the region. As a result, economic growth constitutes one of "the main foundations for a prosperous and peaceful community of Southeast Asian Nations" (ASEAN 2016).

In its institutionalising process and in reducing security risks, ASEAN has employed a three-pronged strategy which is strongly relevant even today. First, ASEAN has advanced its role as a norm builder and promoter in its engagement with external powers. It is never an intention of ASEAN to opt for a 'hard power approach', since this would entail a disastrous element of arm race and economic ruin for the underdeveloped region (Rajaratnam et al., 2007). Rather, it sets to build a predictable interstate behaviour through shared rules, norms and principles. Within these spirits, ASEAN put into motion a narrative of neutral Southeast Asia through the promotion of the 1971 Declaration of the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality, despite not fully realising it (Natalegawa 2018).

It had later adopted the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in 1976, which was subsequently amended to permit non-regional countries to accede as basic governing conduct of inter-state relations in the region. In order to "promote perpetual peace, everlasting amity and cooperation", TAC renounces the use of force and the threat of using force, while promoting the settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means. With the renunciation of violence as a means of resolving disputes, the idea of building a regional "security community" has normatively emerged (Acharya 2009). Indeed, these TAC's principles have been further codified into the ASEAN Charter. The ASEAN Political-Security Community Council was created, and its blueprint was consequently adopted as a guiding path to "ensure that countries in the region live at peace with one another" (ASEAN 2009).

Second, ASEAN has promoted a strategy of expansion designed to establish itself as the central player in the region. ASEAN would be incomplete generically and pragmatically without encompassing other countries geographically confined within Southeast Asia. By weaving all the Southeast Asian nations into one bloc, the prospects of enhancing security and strategic space have considerably increased. On the one hand, member states have to comply with the organisation's principled conducts while, on the other hand, reducing members' over-dependence on major powers outside the region as security guarantors. As a result, ASEAN's members had expanded from five to ten. Along with this internal expansion, ASEAN had also simultaneously managed its external relations by actively engaging with other countries outside the regional grouping. The number of ASEAN Dialogue Partners has considerably grown since 1973 to include several regional and global players such as Japan, Australia, the United States, China, India, and the Russian Federation, among others.

For ASEAN, the engagement with major powers is not only to ensure the balance of power but also to make it look neutral so that it can acquire more credibility and strategic trust. Geopolitically, ASEAN intends to transform itself from being a proxy object of major powers to being an active player, one that can direct, if not shape, the regional security environment. For external powers, the importance of ASEAN probably lies in its geostrategic location. ASEAN does serve as a potential market, but more importantly, it is on the shipping route of trade and energy from Africa and India to the Pacific and vice versa. For some major powers, Southeast Asia is a geopolitical arena for their quests for supremacy. With these regional characteristics, every country has a higher stake in ASEAN's survival and progress. ASEAN's division or domination by a single power would seriously affect others.

Third, ASEAN has advocated mutual and reciprocal interests among key players. In this regard, ASEAN rolled out various ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM), and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), just to name a few. These overlapping mechanisms accord them venues to foster constructive dialogues, embed a habit of cooperation, and build commonality of regional peace and security outlook. Some fora play special roles of their own. The APT is also implicitly trilateral cooperation designed to improve cooperation among China, Japan and South Korea. The EAS, which is supposed to include countries geographically confined in East Asia, has also included countries such as Russia, India, Australia, and the US (Natalegawa 2018). The ARF also admitted North Korea as a member. From this crisscrossing security apparatus, it would be in ASEAN's foresight that peace, stability and security in Southeast Asia cannot be addressed separately without addressing them in the entire Asia-Pacific region. ASEAN might strongly expect that these multilayer fora can build a synergy of cooperation among the members and, therefore, coalesce their matrix of interests which, in turn, further strengthen an environment of peace and stability in the region.

Although these arrangements are ASEAN's unfinished businesses, the regional transformative security outlook speaks considerably of ASEAN's success and its resilience within the spanning time of its existence. ASEAN has transformed from a once-divided region into a region that fosters trust, cooperation, and collaboration with a remarkable degree of unity. It is by far the most durable design of the hub of regional multilateral diplomacy made up of all great powers. It is not by luck but by a long and careful process of deliberation, consultation and consensus among its members, as can be obviously seen from its numerous meetings each year. How ASEAN maintains this positive momentum will be strongly tested by its capacity to handle the emerging, unfolding regional security environment.

# NEW REGIONAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT: COOPERATION OR CONFRONTATION?

Regional peace and security in Southeast Asia are currently under threat from forces originating from within and outside the grouping. Those forces acutely present a magnitude of challenges to ASEAN and regional peace, stability and prosperity. There are two fundamental compounding factors that have occupied ASEAN at present and within the foreseeable future.

First and foremost, regional strategic stability has stupendously evaporated due to intensifying competitive interests among major powers. From the US, the UK, and the EU to regional countries such as Australia, Japan and India have, one way or another, crafted their respective strategies to promote their interests which all mingle in the Indo-Pacific, a newly coined geopolitical term. Their strategies possess both 'soft' and 'hard' dimensions, which have apparently defined the power relationship in the region as an interaction between intensifying competition and cooperation. While major powers' competition provides benefits to the region, they may also bring dangers. It is this latter characteristic that could potentially put the region at great peril, and the most alarming consequence of all is the strategic competition between China and the US.

For decades, regional stability has been substantiated by a cooperative relationship among great powers and muted competition for 'hard power' superiority. However, these two main pillars of strategic stability have been starkly turned into opposing each other. Both great powers are now locking horns in stiff geo-strategic competition from the Pacific to the Indian Oceans. This is so because China's continued ascendancy has changed the threat perception and assessment of both the US and regional countries (Pei 2021). From the American point of view, China's fast-growing power has been perceived as affecting the US's position and power in the region and the world. From Beijing's perspective, Washington is seen as working to undermine its national interests from the South and the East China Seas to its domestic territorial integrity, such as Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Taiwan.

At the time of this writing, it is hard to anticipate that each side will take a step back to accommodate each other or work out their *modus vivendi*. For China, a gesture of compromise made to the US would mean kowtowing a foreign power, a reversal to its so-called 'century of humiliation', which is unbearable and might even be impossible due to its strong nationalist impulse. It would be a Chinese 'nightmare', not a 'dream' as President Xi has captivantly projected it. For the US, invoking competition might be a commanding tool for the White House to summon bipartisan support, crucial for a comprehensive rebalance policy towards the Asia-Pacific region with an overriding focus on China, currently being viewed as its strategic challenge. Moreover, to restore its credibility among its regional allies, Washington has to step up its assertive position against Beijing.

Such contradictory outlooks have spurred them to take a hostile stance, and Washington seems to run out of its philosophical development by choosing to organise its foreign policy around zero-sum competition instead. On the economic front, building on top of the trade war, Washington has strongly advocated economic decoupling as one of its foreign policy toolkits to counter China's economic heavyweight. Many initiatives such as the Blue Dot Network, Supply Chain Task Force, and Build Back Better World are either unilaterally or collectively established to jolt with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (White House 2021). Washington also imposes technological transfer and export restrictions as well as a sanction on Chinese companies (VoA 2021).

On the security front, both great powers seem to place a high priority on military advancement over non-proliferation. China's continued development of what it called anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) has been perceived by the US, especially among its defence planners, as America's diminished military advantage in the region. The US Secretary of Defence Office's 2020 annual report to Congress stated, "China has already achieved parity with or even exceeded the United States in several military modernisation areas...and the main objective for Chinese People's Liberation Army is to become a world-class military by the end of 2049." Under this perception, Washington has launched a multi-layer tactic. Unilaterally, the US has been working to enhance its military edge and modernising integrated defence capabilities (Garamone 2021). The Pacific Deterrence Initiative is also part and parcel of its wholesale military statecraft, with the main defence perimeter anticipatedly centred around the first Island chain (Moriyasu 2021). Hardly a day goes by without alarming reports of the US's defence and security plans aimed at the region.

Due to the changing balance of power in the region as well as its geographical distance from the Far East, the US would need to be supported by platforms of regional countries that can offer the necessary infrastructure to forcefully project its power. Within this calculus, the US has begun coaxing its core allies and strengthening partnerships not only regionally but also internationally to build a united front to oppose China (Bade 2021). Washington is also enticing and pressuring other countries such as Cambodia, which is, to its wary eyes, seen as moving closer to China.

Minilaterally, the US has exclusively advanced a coalition of like-minded countries to advocate the so-called anti-China narrative. The convening of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) Summit is an illustration of an emerging regional security environment, one that excludes and deter China's increasing influence and dominance in the region. Dangerously, the US has also displayed its geopolitical resolve to deter China by recently forming a trilateral security alliance with the UK and Australia. AUKUS, as the pact is known, mainly aims to equip Australia with nuclear-powered submarines in order to boost their grouping's competitive edge in maritime power in the region vis-à-vis China's. At the systemic level, Washington's continued condemnation and imposed sanctions on China's alleged violation of human rights in Xinjiang Autonomous Region have added another layer of complexity to their competition.

As the two great powers are competing for power and influence, other regional countries, both middle and small power nations, are struggling to recalibrate their strategic alignment and variably strengthen their defence and deterrence capability. This is somewhat potentially dangerous, since it would heat up the tension as well as bolster an arms race and arms build-up in the region. If Beijing seriously comes to a desperate conclusion that there is no place for its leading role in regional governance, a scenario of an all-out confrontation is likely viable. Regional hotspots such as the South East and East China Seas and Taiwan will be the arenas where threats of conflict are greatest.

For ASEAN, as it geographically sits in the middle of this geostrategic competition, any passive stance will render its centrality and relevance obsolete. Even worse, if great power competition further turns into outright hostility, the region might inevitably be polarised along the line of their competing interests. ASEAN will be ultimately forced to make a binary choice with a possible consequence of division among the members, a nightmare scenario that ASEAN and each individual member state would rather not wish to see. Therefore, it is imperative for ASEAN to remain both at the forefront and centre of regional coordination and actions to assuage and possibly de-escalate the tensions from drifting further.

The Myanmar political crisis is another crucial factor that further complicates ASEAN's situation for two main reasons. To deal with external factors, ASEAN has to first put its house in some sort of order so that it can foster collective regional strength. ASEAN will have to spend its energy to stabilise, if not completely, return to the pre-crisis situation in Myanmar. This means that ASEAN has to convince the Tatmadaw government and its opposing group to soften and reconcile their positions by offering each other some political concessions. Reaching a common ground for both sides is a big challenge. For the Tatmadaw, accepting the conditional demands from the opposition group, such as calling for the release of the elected political leaders as well as restoring the country back to a democratic path, might strongly delegitimise their political measures. From the opposing group, the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, a body of elected lawmakers of the ousted civilian government, has already announced and gradually institutionalised the formation of the new National Unity Government (NUG) to challenge the Tatmadaw (The Irrawaddy 2021).

Moreover, in the context of geostrategic competition, a protracted political crisis in Myanmar would offer an opportunity for interested great powers to infiltrate and establish their foothold in the region. This will further complicate the situation. There is an open question as to who is the legitimate government of Myanmar. There are already voices calling for support and recognition of the so-called NUG based on its democratic appeal (VoA 2021). The bifurcated support made for each political camp will further split Myanmar. Consequently, this would hamper ASEAN's credibility and centrality, as it requires more cohesion and less division to deal with regional challenges. Despite its harsh criticism, ASEAN has already filled out the leadership vacuum to provide good offices in fine-tuning solutions to suit this political condition (ASEAN 2021).

The ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar might be the best possible hope to resolve the crisis and prevent another regional flashpoint of great power competing interests. What remains to be seen is how speedily and effectively ASEAN translates it into actions.

These situations seem to paint a dark picture of the region and that its future is gloomy. Indeed, whether ASEAN will enter an era of more progress and durable peace or derail into decades of uncertainties and turmoil depends on the choices it will make and the trajectories it will take.

## **CAMBODIA AND ITS ASEAN CHAIRMANSHIP: A HOPEFUL FUTURE**

Cautious of its past history, Cambodia has crafted a foreign policy of “engaging more actively in the cause of peace and stability” as one of its five main pillars (MFAIC 2018), and the country has not just talked its talk but also walked its walk. Cambodia's peacekeeping forces have been deployed under the UN peacekeeping and humanitarian frameworks to several hotspots globally. At the regional level, despite being a latecomer in ASEAN, Cambodia has relentlessly contributed its share in the pursuit of ASEAN Community building as well as peace and prosperity in the region. Being an ASEAN Chair twice, Cambodia has played a crucial role in setting the agenda for peace and prosperity in the region. A milestone document, namely the Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), was signed in Phnom Penh to prevent confrontation among regional countries and to promote peace in the region.

In a similar manner, the framework of the Code of Conduct (CoC) in the South China Sea was another landmark document, following the meetings in Bali and Siem Reap (MFAIC 2017). The ASEAN Regional Mine Action Centre (ARMAC) was also established in Cambodia to serve as a centre of excellence aiming to collectively address landmines and explosive remnants of war in the region. As a country coordinator of ASEAN's various dialogue partners, Cambodia has actively worked to support the regional peace and stability ecosystem as well as ASEAN's centrality by increasing engagements with external partners. Most importantly, the Kingdom's constant and consistent denial of the allegation of it hosting a foreign military base is a solid manifestation of its coherent commitment to the region.

Cambodia is going to assume the role of ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022 amid an uncertain strategic environment in the region. It is both a pressing and up-hilled task because Cambodia has to navigate ASEAN through the great powers' competition and out of the COVID-19 pandemic for regional recovery. However, there are reasons for optimism for Cambodia. If the anti-communist sentiment was the main driver of ASEAN solidarity in the past, anti-great power rivalry sentiment could be the main driver of ASEAN unity in the future.

It would be unthinkable for ASEAN Member States to find an alternative regional forum that can substitute ASEAN. To opt otherwise, its future will be perfectly described by Benjamin Franklin's famous quote: "We must all hang together, or most assuredly, we will all hang separately". Therefore, fostering ASEAN's concerted efforts to deal with the external challenges is highly within reach.

Although ASEAN cannot dictate the agenda of great powers, it can shape their direction. There are some built-in stabiliser conditions for ASEAN and, for that matter, Cambodia. For China, ASEAN's weakness would not be in its interest. Economically, ASEAN is an actual and potential market for China. ASEAN-China trade has already exceeded China's trade with the US and the EU (The Global Times 2021). Geopolitically, ASEAN's backwardness would roll back its efforts to strengthen its Eurasian foothold, especially its Belt and Road Initiative. This would seriously affect China's domestic development and with that the credibility of its Communist Party. Under these circumstances Beijing really needs a peaceful environment in Southeast Asia and, for this reason, it has to refrain as much as possible from a fatal clash with the US. Thus, Beijing is highly in favour of strengthening cooperation with ASEAN.

For the US, the current administration has placed 'diplomacy' at the centre of its foreign policy (White House 2021). Furthermore, Washington also faces a policy dilemma. If it takes too forceful a stance towards China, it would invoke a fear of entanglement among the regional countries. Many regional countries will ask why they have to sacrifice their interests to do the American bidding. If it opts for this approach, Washington will risk creating an image of itself as a war-mongering nation. Contradictorily, choosing a modest and softer approach towards China would mean that Washington implicitly recognises Beijing as the dominant regional power, if not an equal peer. Whatever scenario Washington chooses, it poses risks. Regional countries will try to hedge and look for a feasible peaceful solution because the price of winning would equally mean the destruction of both the victors and the losers in this deeply interconnected world. ASEAN will loom large on their policy radar.

Furthermore, American policy towards the region, particularly China, is mostly channelled through its regional allies, and Japan is the most important of all. How Tokyo reacts towards Beijing would greatly shape the US's policy in the region, and how Washington handles its relations with Beijing would also considerably determine Tokyo's attitude (Brzezinski 2001). Japan's assertive effort to break out from its traditional security pattern is more of an answer to its concern about the US's credibility and commitment towards the region. Surprisingly, Japan has strong trade and investment ties with China (Harris 2021). A scenario of 'cooperative competition' relationship might be seen within a foreseeable time between China and Japan. Japan can possibly play a role as a bridge for ASEAN to help diffuse this tense situation. In this regard, promoting American joint efforts with Japan or perhaps with Australia in supporting ASEAN's projects or initiatives might help ASEAN enlarge its roles.

Cambodia can capitalise on these favourable conditions and, through ASEAN, work to further institutionalise regional cooperation. The stronger the regional cooperation is, the stronger ASEAN is politically and economically. In terms of the political-security domain, shaping regional powers to place more emphasis on diplomacy and rules of acceptable conduct and less on hard power as the cardinal principles in the state-to-state relations should be strongly promoted. Cambodia can leverage ASEAN's existing platforms, such as the EAS, to seek the common ground of acceptable conduct among all powers, reducing risk while promoting crisis management in the region. Although the TAC is a fundamental guiding principle in the relationship between parties, the agreement only governs the TAC parties' relations with the Southeast Asian states but not between the TAC parties outside Southeast Asia (Manyin et al. 2009).

On the economic front, working to improve economic conditions in the region as well as among major powers would assist member states in dealing with the current economic recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This could produce a spillover effect, since economic prosperity can considerably enhance states' capacity to cope with the security issue. Besides, deepening entanglement of the stakeholders' economic interests could present a high prospect for stability and security. Peace and stability can thus piggyback economic prosperity to the region.

To achieve these aspirations, it would need patience and consume both time and immense efforts from ASEAN and Cambodia as the chair. However, promoting them should be viewed as a priority in this complex circumstance. In this regard, there are a few main priorities for Cambodia as the Chair of ASEAN. In terms of the political-security realm, Cambodia can work to promote ASEAN's solidarity and centrality and strengthen the cooperative spirit in order to further foster peace, security and stability in the region. In so doing, Cambodia can muster up efforts to enhance relevant ASEAN-led security dimensions such as expediting the conclusion of the CoC negotiation, promoting the confidence-building and preventive diplomacy measures, constructively deepening dialogues with external partners, and building synergy and complementarity among various regional initiatives by advocating their functional cooperation to be in line with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).

Economically, Cambodia can potentially work to reboot ASEAN's economy from the COVID-19 impacts and build its resilience through the implementation and capitalisation of the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework and the various free trade agreements so as to optimise intra-trade and investment. Assisting and strengthening the micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) can also be taken into account as one of the keys in accelerating regional post-COVID-19 economic recovery.

In line with the above priorities, there are some additional thoughts for Cambodia in particular and ASEAN in general, which should be considered a catalyst for a 'peaceful competition', if not 'cooperation', in the region:

- Putting forth an initiative to address the loophole of the TAC's legal frontier and further institutionalise it as one way to promote regional security.
- Fostering a comprehensive strategic dialogue or consultation through ASEAN-led mechanisms with an aim to establish some sort of a region-wide rule of acceptable conduct, governing all powers in the Indo-Pacific. Southeast Asia regional security would be unpredictable and extremely prone to conflicts if there are no guiding rules. It would be incomplete if it does not cover the entire region.
- Building synergy and complementarity of the various Indo-Pacific strategies with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific to deepen their matrix of interests in the region, thus boosting a peaceful regional environment.
- Further promoting and enhancing defence-to-defence channel of communication and extending it to include military-to-military level and the plus-eight countries so as to inculcate trust and understanding and address any emergency situation.
- Promoting maritime cooperation such as coastguard cooperation to mitigate frictions, while enhancing maritime safety and security.
- Further strengthening economic cooperation and integration. In this context, Cambodia should thrust for a resumption of ASEAN-EU Free Trade Agreement negotiation by capitalising on the recent EU's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.
- Aspiring for a possible formation of an 'inclusive' Indo-Pacific FTA by leveraging on both RCEP and CPTPP. It should be mindful that the US will unlikely enter a major trade deal that is not strongly in line with its new 'foreign policy for the middle class'.
- Further promoting projects and initiatives that will improve ASEAN's institutional capacity building. This is to address the disparity gap between fast-growing decision-making adoption and its actual implementation. This is to mainly avoid misperception that a decision made is equally identical with the solution achieved.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, since its inception, ASEAN has panoramically made tremendous progress in transforming the region into one of the world's most promising regions. If ASEAN's performance has so far failed the expectations of some, it is not because it has failed to accomplish its milestone projects and programmes but because it has failed to reconcile and balance between the individual national interests and collective interests. This tussle will remain more so since it is an inherent characteristic of institutionalising regionalism.

As the protracted COVID-19 pandemic is socio-economically ravaging the region, both individually and collectively, and as great powers' competition is gradually gaining steam, the region is at risk of losing peace, stability and prosperity. However, these shared challenges will, for the better, reignite a sense of unifying purposes and, therefore, unity. One can remain hopeful that ASEAN can harness its collective strength and make a bigger strike in addressing those challenges. In this regard, Cambodia, as ASEAN's Chair next year, will play crucial roles in promoting a peaceful and prosperous regional environment for all.

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