



SECTION IV

Conclusion

“Cambodia’s ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022: Priorities and Challenges” has given voice to diverse perspectives from policy advisers, scholars, researchers, investors, and practitioners to provide a better understanding of Cambodia’s ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022 to relevant stakeholders inside and outside the region as well as to the public. Cambodian policymakers can draw upon practical policy recommendations in this book to prepare for the Kingdom’s ASEAN Chairmanship and successfully host ASEAN Summits and related meetings next year.

ASEAN COMMUNITY BUILDING

While proceeding to the post-2025 vision, ASEAN is embarking on a challenging journey to accomplish the goal of the ASEAN Community 2025. In this regard, upholding solidarity, unity, and mutual assistance, and especially maintaining its centrality as well as position pertinent to its strategic interests are the bloc's main priorities. The political and security realm requires this regional grouping to reinforce its centrality as a driving force to advance dialogue processes; build trust for regional peace, security, and stability; and offer more proactive and effective responses to tackle the challenges. Economically, it requires ASEAN to be closely dependent on economic linkages to other sub-regional entities. For the socio-cultural domain, it requires ASEAN to attach great importance to enhancing a people-oriented and people-centred approach so that it can have the citizens of ASEAN at the centre of its agenda. Apart from further raising awareness regarding the ASEAN Community building, ASEAN needs to further develop the ethos of compliance focusing on capacity building and harmonising the legal systems of each member state respectively as well as augmenting not only human but also financial resources necessary for carrying out and coordinating agencies and mechanisms.

While the national politics of member states have decelerated the ASEAN community-building progress, more complex and contested regional environments have further put pressure on those efforts. The fate of ASEAN thus relies on how this regional grouping deals with these challenges in order to revitalise its community-building project. Undoubtedly, greater economic integration within ASEAN, together with further integration with the world's economy, is perceived as the means to realise the full economic potential of ASEAN.

ASEAN AND CHINA

ASEAN and China are committed to upholding an open and inclusive regional architecture, an open and free trade system, inclusive multilateralism, and utilising dialogues and consultation to manage the divergences. In this regard, China has actively supported ASEAN's function by strengthening third-party cooperation in Southeast Asia and working with more partners, specifically those being reluctant to endorse China's mega-project, the BRI. On the other hand, China and parts of ASEAN remain locked in the South China Sea conflict that will undoubtedly play a role during Cambodia's upcoming chairmanship. In more years to come, both sides need to further deepen the spirit of cooperation in tackling common problems and maintaining regional peace and prosperity.

ASEAN AND JAPAN

China and Japan have made huge efforts in bolstering their presence and influence in ASEAN, respectively. ASEAN must find a balance between itself and these powers. Furthermore, as the next Chair of ASEAN, Cambodia will have an opportunity to balance the economic relations between the two countries, thereby enabling ASEAN to narrow its economic differences, while promoting regional connectivity and inclusive growth. Therefore, it may be significant for Cambodia to form minilateral or multilateral platforms to engage these regional powers.

ASEAN AND THE US

Cambodia, as the Chair of ASEAN in 2022, will face a myriad of challenges, including the US-China competition, the political turmoil in Myanmar, COVID-19 and post-pandemic economic recovery, and particularly its strained relations with Washington. The difficult relationship between Cambodia and the US could negatively impact the Kingdom's Chairmanship. The poor relations have been exacerbated by Cambodia's close ties with China, whom the US, under Joe Biden's administration, considers its main rival. Therefore, Cambodia's success in the chairmanship will hinge upon several factors, including the country's ability to advocate for practical dialogues between and among actors from within and outside the region, its balanced and flexible way in addressing the above-mentioned contentious problems, and its inclination to place the country's and the bloc's interests at the core.

ASEAN AND THE EU

The EU and ASEAN have shared and implemented the related international norms and standards. On the security front, the EU has demonstrated its ability to offer an indispensable contribution to non-traditional challenges, such as violent extremism and climate change prevention. The cooperation between the two parties entails coordinated confidence-building measures, capacity building and preventive diplomacy, and multi-layered cooperation and the rules-based international order. It has been noted that a decision to upgrade their relations to Strategic Partners will need both the EU and ASEAN to display constant commitment and enlarged communication and investments. Looking ahead, besides the commitment, both sides will need to enact coherent measures, trade flows, and cooperation that lead to the promotion of sustainable and green growth as well as the dissemination of rules-based multilateralism with the placement of the upgraded status at both regional multilateral cooperation framework.

CAMBODIA'S ASEAN CHAIRMANSHIP IN 2022

Promoting regional peace and security

As the Chair, Cambodia, together with the other ASEAN members, will need to invest more resources, both effort and time, in promoting regional peace and security. In particular, the Kingdom should encourage 'peaceful competition', if not 'cooperation' in the region, through several possible measures. First, Cambodia could suggest a proposal to deal with the ambiguity concerning aspects of legal constraint of the TAC and further formalise it to enhance regional security. Second, the EAS mechanism can be utilised to promote dialogues or consultation at a comprehensive strategic level, supportive of forming an acceptable rule of conduct that governs all major actors in the Indo-Pacific. Third, it may be important for the chair to synergise and find the complementarity of different Indo-Pacific strategies with ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific to enhance a peaceful environment in the region. Fourth, reaffirming trust and understanding and tackling emergency incidents require Cambodia to focus more on the promotion and enhancement of defence-to-defence channel of communication and expansion of the scope of cooperation to include military-to-military level. Fifth, Cambodia may have to foster cooperation in the maritime realm, including coastguard cooperation, to minimise discrepancies and promote maritime safety and security. Sixth, Cambodia could attach more importance to economic cooperation and integration. This connection pushes for a resumption of negotiation on the ASEAN-EU Free Trade Agreement by tapping the opportunity from the newly established EU's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Seventh, Cambodia may put forward the idea to create an Indo-Pacific FTA which is "inclusive" by capitalising on the related agreements, namely RCEP and CPTPP. Finally, fostering programmes and proposals to substantially enhance the bloc's institutional capacity building should be prioritised to resolve the gap between decision-making approach and its reality.

Promoting ASEAN's network of innovative villages

It is important to consider the formation of the "ASEAN's Network of Innovative Villages" to revitalise the functions of rural villages, which will support national development, urban growth, poverty reduction, employment, food security, cultural conservation and development, and social and climate resilience, and address the notion of ASEAN Connectivity.

Specifically, the "ASEAN's Network of Innovative Villages" will (1) build a digital platform for sharing best experiences and drawbacks about rural development, (2) demonstrate a good model of innovative village development, (3) encourage the grassroots, including youth and women, to participate in innovative village development, (4) advance public-private-people partnership and multi-stakeholder engagement for innovative village development, and (5) offer chances for village cultural exchanges and people-to-people connectivity through face-to-face dialogue.

Promoting ASEAN digital transformation

Cambodia, as the next Chair of ASEAN, will need to foster regional digital transformation and connectivity. However, handling the advancement of digital transformation region-wide involves addressing many issues, including the digital gap within ASEAN Member States and between their neighbouring countries, laws to catch up with the fast-evolving digital transformation, and data governance. Moreover, the fact that COVID-19 is not subsiding soon will exacerbate the above challenges.

Promoting a people-oriented and people-centred ASEAN community

One of the key tasks for ASEAN and Cambodia is to build a people-centred and people-oriented community to accelerate regional integration. This requires more political will and efforts from the member states. Since its inception, ASEAN has been a top-down organisation, which is why it is time to revive the function of bottom-up diplomacy offering a greater role and contribution to the community-vision. Indeed, the two defining factors enabling the realisation of a people-oriented and people-centred ASEAN community are the complementary roles between top-down and bottom-up approaches and closer cooperation between state and grassroots institutions. As the bloc is currently encountering multiple emerging non-traditional security challenges, the COVID-19 crisis, and the rapidly evolving US-China geopolitical tension, attaching importance to the complementary roles of different types of diplomacy, namely track I and II mechanisms and especially youth diplomacy, should be a priority.

Promoting the cultural corridor and tourism development in Southeast Asia in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era

Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022 will need to focus on building cultural corridors and promoting post-pandemic tourism development, which are one of the key drivers for regional development. Many unique festivals related to cultures and religions have been held in Southeast Asia, thereby attracting millions of local and foreign tourists to come to the region. Moreover, the natural conditions of the member countries encompass not only diversity in cultures but also world heritage spots which have appealed to an influx of regional and international tourists. However, during the pandemic, the tourism and business travel industries encountered extraordinary drops due to the region's deep integration in the global economy, including trade and international movement.

The recovery of the tourism sector aids the formation of a regional cultural corridor. In connection, the industry in the post-pandemic world needs to go through four phases to recover:

(1) promoting domestic tourism, (2) offering incentives like tax exemption or tax depreciation to attract investment, (3) implementing the ASEAN Readies Regional COVID-19 Vaccine Certificate, and (4) re-permitting international tourism after the recovery of mobility within the region.

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

In the capacity of the ASEAN Chair, Cambodia will get the chance to advance the country's core foreign policy principles, such as multilateralism and the rules-based international order. In addition, the 2022 mandate enables the Kingdom to have a platform to bolster its economic diplomacy, thus finally boosting the country's economic development. The third ASEAN Chairmanship will also present a huge opportunity for Cambodia to realise ASEAN Community building. This is imperative for the integration and connectivity in the region.

Despite these opportunities, there will be numerous challenges for Cambodia in handling the upcoming chairmanship. Cambodia will find it hard to garner the bloc's solidarity amidst the global COVID-19 crisis. ASEAN members and dialogue partners will be more occupied with their domestic efforts to battle the pandemic. Although the continuing political crisis in Myanmar constitutes another hurdle for Cambodia and ASEAN, the Chair could grasp the opportunity to become a mediator, since the country has gained unique qualifications and experience in this regard. Another problem pertinent to its chairing-role is the competition between the US and China. Upholding ASEAN centrality and safeguarding the interest of the grouping is important for the Chair.

The China-US rivalry could also generate more complexities and challenges to peaceful resolution on the South China Sea issue. Therefore, as ASEAN Chair, Cambodia will need to advance trust-based cooperation, functional cooperation, and the rules-based regional order among all parties concerned. A success in concluding the CoC will serve as another vital phase to build trust and confidence, prevent conflict, and manage and settle the disputes around the South China Sea.

Lessons learnt from Brunei's ASEAN Chairmanship 2021

To prevent a recurrence of the "Phnom Penh fiasco" in 2012, ASEAN member states must accept the fact that being able to conclude a substandard agreement is better than having no agreement at all. Therefore, Cambodia could take the lessons learnt from Brunei on having a preferential balancing distribution to conclude the related agreement efficiently. In addition, the Kingdom could take notes from Brunei on how to successfully chair ASEAN and host related meetings during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, Cambodia could take advantage of its outstanding performance on containing community outbreaks, encountering a relatively less severe situation when it comes to the Delta variant, and being ranked as the country with the second-best inoculation-rate in ASEAN in a bid to boost the bloc's recovery in the post-COVID-19 period as well as to help other member states that are still struggling with new outbreaks. On another front, Cambodia could learn from Brunei how the then Chair handled the crisis in Myanmar. Indeed, the political situation in Myanmar will offer Cambodia the chance to recover lost momentum in helping the country through its role in mediating intra-ASEAN conflicts, appealing to the Tatmadaw, while engaging with an international community that is growing increasingly intolerant of ASEAN's approach to the Myanmar crisis.

Preparations

Cambodia will shoulder the huge task of the ASEAN Chairmanship next year. Despite huge expense for organising this historic event, Cambodia is well prepared by having ample human resources and logistic arrangements to embark on the journey to convene the ASEAN Summits and other related meetings under its mandate. The Kingdom will double down on efforts to perform its tasks, showcasing Cambodia's responsible and constructive leadership as the ASEAN chair.



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