



# SECTION 01

# INTRODUCTION

Following the establishment of the Second Kingdom of Cambodia in 1993, the Cambodian government adopted an “open door” policy through its engagement with the outside world, especially its regional integration into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Since becoming a full member of ASEAN on 30 April 1999, Cambodia has always regarded ASEAN as one of the most important and relevant platforms to enhance peace, stability, and prosperity of the Kingdom and the region at large. Thus, ASEAN has become the cornerstone of Phnom Penh’s foreign policy, as Cambodian foreign policymakers are convinced that the regional grouping provides a strategic window of opportunities for Cambodia to regain its regional role and promote its national interests regionally and internationally.

Economically, Cambodian leaders strongly believed that Cambodia’s participation in ASEAN would pave the way for the Kingdom to spur its economic development by promoting trade, investment, tourism, agriculture, and physical infrastructure development. Diplomatically, Phnom Penh was convinced that ASEAN would enable Cambodia to expand its foreign relations, especially with great powers. ASEAN was considered a regional diplomatic club due to its enmeshment with the great powers in several regional frameworks, including the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Plus Three, and the East Asia Summit. Strategically, Cambodia’s membership in ASEAN was motivated by the belief that ASEAN would safeguard the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

For over the last two decades, Cambodia has viewed ASEAN as a catalyst of regional economic integration and diversification, a shield to protect its sovereignty and independence, and a platform to promote its national identity and prestige. The Kingdom has been fully supportive of the regional architecture and order, particularly the ASEAN Community Building. Thus far, Cambodia has assumed the ASEAN Chairmanship twice in 2002 and 2012. Noticeably, the Chairmanship in 2012 created diplomatic deadlock, as the ASEAN foreign ministers failed for the first time to issue a joint communiqué, widely known as the ‘Phnom Penh Fiasco’.

As the ASEAN Chair, Cambodia had to take responsibility for the Phnom Penh Fiasco. However, the Kingdom should not have been solely blamed for the diplomatic crisis for the simple reason that ASEAN’s decision is based on consensus. The countries that should be held accountable were indeed those that tried to introduce new wordings on the South China Sea. Moreover, the Phnom Penh Fiasco also reflected the fluid security environment in the region, as the US and China were destined to confront in this part of the world after the Obama administration announced the “Pivot to Asia” in late 2009. This strategy was seen, at least in the eyes of Chinese policymakers, as an attempt to encircle China. Controversially, at the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi in 2010, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared publicly that the US had a national interest in the South China Sea, especially the freedom of navigation and overflight.

The COVID-19 pandemic has hindered the regional community-building process, as evidenced by the current negative economic growth throughout the region. Thus, it is increasingly evident that ASEAN would not achieve its key milestones, i.e., the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the Master Plan of ASEAN Connectivity 2025, within the agreed timeframes. Consequently, the upcoming ASEAN Chairs, including Cambodia, may have to do the heavy lifting in the future.

The political crisis in Myanmar will remain as another hot potato for ASEAN. The group is expected to perform a key role in mediating the crisis. Despite ASEAN's considerable efforts in resolving the issue, the Myanmar problem is likely to linger and shows little sign of positive progress. The bloc has been wedged between the respect for the non-interference norm and the promotion of democratic values as enshrined in the ASEAN Charter.

Despite its mammoth efforts to be the good Chair in 2012, Cambodia was criticised for obstructing the issuance of the joint statement on the South China Sea. Although it is not fair to blame Cambodia, the said incident has adversely affected Cambodia's image in the region and beyond. Therefore, the hot issue of the South China Sea will continue to pose a big challenge for ASEAN as a whole and for Cambodia as the next chair.

Even worse, the exacerbating geopolitical rivalry between the US and China has created tectonic shockwaves to the regional order, affecting ASEAN centrality. It will generate tremendous pressure and challenges on Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship. Several outstanding challenges that are likely to cloud the Kingdom's Chairmanship include the increasing tensions over the South China Sea, the politicisation of water management in the Mekong River, the Taiwan Strait, the de-nuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, so on and so forth.

To tackle the above challenges and uphold ASEAN centrality, Cambodia needs to ramp up its diplomatic efforts in coordinating, compromising, and engaging with its ASEAN fellows and dialogue partners in a constructive manner. In other words, the Kingdom needs to act cautiously in managing the differences and interests of ASEAN members and its external partners. Unfortunately, this appears to be an 'easier-said-than-done' task for the Kingdom. Therefore, soliciting policy inputs and insights from scholars, researchers, policy practitioners, and relevant stakeholders is crucial for this small state's assurance of successful chairmanship.

The Asian Vision Institute (AVI) and Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) Cambodia have worked together to produce a timely and relevant policy book entitled, "Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022: Priorities and Challenges", to identify opportunities and challenges ASEAN may face during Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022. In this regard, the book contributors include but are not limited to policy advisers, researchers, analysts, and practitioners in the field.

The book makes the following contributions: (1) identifying opportunities and challenges that may arise during Cambodia's upcoming ASEAN Chairmanship; (2) exploring priorities and key deliverables for Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship; (3) identifying the constraints and challenges that Cambodia may encounter; and (4) soliciting policy inputs for policymakers to enable Cambodia to act as an effective ASEAN Chair in 2022 in enhancing the four main pillars, including the ASEAN Political-Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, and ASEAN's External Relations.

The book, a collection of policy-oriented research papers, is expected to provide a better understanding of Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022 for relevant stakeholders inside and outside the region, as well as the public. In addition, the recommendations on practical policies are drawn upon to assist Cambodian policymakers in successfully hosting the ASEAN Summits and related meetings in 2022. This book also serves as a solid piece of policy-oriented research, which provides diverse perspectives from policy advisers, scholars, researchers, investors, and practitioners.