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Beyond the „Wordy Statements“, What’s Next for ASEAN?

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ASEAN Foreign Ministers gathered here in Phnom Penh for the 55th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting and Related Meetings. The world casts its eye on the meetings’ outcomes, while many ASEAN observers closely monitor how major powers, including the US, China and Russia, utilize the platform for either constructive dialogue or so-called “walk out” from the meeting room. Intense meetings are taking place at a time in which the region is experiencing unprecedented challenges, increasingly intense great power rivalry, and the fall out of the recent visit of Speaker of the US House of Representative Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan despite Beijing’s warning not to do so. This is not to mention the issues of ASEAN’s position on Russia’s war in Ukraine and the hot-potato-turned-hot-stone Myanmar Political Crisis. All of these issues serve to question not only the leadership of Cambodia as a small state, but also ASEAN’s relevance and centrality in shaping its own rule-based regional architecture at large.

The final Joint-Communique (JC) of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting was released just a day after concluding the Foreign Ministers Meeting on the 4th of August at the Sokha Phnom Penh Hotel. This speedy release following the reaching of a consensus yesterday was relatively

unexpected by many observers and serves to demonstrate Cambodia's astute leadership during its ASEAN Chairmanship this year. It also illustrates an enhancement of Cambodia's diplomatic efforts in coordinating, compromising, and engaging with its ASEAN counterparts in a constructive manner. This has in turn restored the country's reputation following the well-known "Phnom Penh fiasco" back in 2012, during which ASEAN failed to issue a Joint Communique for the first time in its history.

Given that the Joint Communique is widely known as the most significant annual policy document for ASEAN, it is important to assess how much progress the regional bloc can make in responding to pressing regional and international issues, especially when it comes to its role as a promoter of regional peace and stability and the building of its own centrally focused regional architecture. Besides giving an update on the ASEAN Post-2025 Community Vision and external partnership opportunities, the Foreign Ministers reached common ground in expressing regional concerns over the increasingly intense geopolitical landscape.

On Regional and International Issues

Many observers shone a spotlight on the "Regional and International Issues" part of the communiqué, as it touched upon the intense security challenges the world is currently facing. As expected, the South China Sea dispute, developments on the Korean Peninsula, the Myanmar crisis, and the situation in Ukraine were frequently mentioned in the JC.

This year, the South China Sea issue has been a less controversial topic, an outcome Phnom Penh is likely very pleased with, as it has put much diplomatic effort into avoiding a repeat of the "Phnom Penh fiasco" back in 2012 where the South China Sea issue was top of the agenda. Cambodia has made its position on the South China Sea dispute clear by indicating that using the ASEAN platform to convey strong words against China is not on Phnom Penh's agenda. The language used in the "South China Sea" paragraph highlights the importance of the Declaration of the Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in 2002, as well as ongoing progress in the negotiations for the Code of Conduct (COC). To this end, the Kingdom will do its best to facilitate substantive progress in the COC negotiations, as the conclusion of such a code would significantly enhance mutual trust and confidence when it comes to conflict prevention and management in the region. If possible, Cambodia seeks the COC to be concluded this year in time for the regional grouping to mark the 20th anniversary of the DOC.

The situation on the Korean Peninsula, though perhaps not as pressing as the current Ukraine crisis, is one of ASEAN's major concerns, especially with regard to the recent testing and launches of international ballistic missiles by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), ASEAN calls for a contrastive and peaceful dialogue for the region to be facilitated through the confidence building efforts of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

On the Myanmar issue, it was considered perhaps a "hot potato" issue with an initially optimistic view from Cambodia. With the worsening of the situation however, as seen through continuing violence and the execution of political activists, as well as a disregard for ASEAN's reconciliation efforts by Myanmar's Tatmadaw, the "hot potato" issue has turned out to be a "hot stone" one. No one wishes to touch this stone even though they are left with no choice but to do so, creating significant pressure for the rotating Chair each year. ASEAN is "deeply disappointed" by the limited progress at implementing the 5PC made by the Junta. The JC appears to give a 3-month deadline for the State Administration Council (SAC) of Myanmar, as

the group's foreign ministers have agreed to elevate the Myanmar issue to the ASEAN Summit level which will take place in Phnom Penh in November this year. By then, the Leaders will have assessed the progress of 5PC and will take further steps on the issue. Foreign Ministers highlighted Article 20 of the ASEAN Charter, which says "In the case of a serious breach of the Charter or non-compliance, the matter shall be referred to the ASEAN Summit for decision." The paragraph on Myanmar however is still not demonstrating a bold move on the part of ASEAN, though there does appear to be some progress when compared to previous statements. This is understandable, as Myanmar is precluded from the Ministerial and Summit level meeting, but not the draft text-negotiation process. The question which should be asked here is "what will it be for the Summit level? As the group remains ASEAN 9 not 10 given the fact that the Junta is being excluded from the Ministerial and Summit level".

The situation in Ukraine was laid out in a short paragraph and, interestingly, "Russia" was not mentioned once in the statement. This is probably one of the most challenging paragraphs, particularly given the close ties some member states maintain with Russia. Back in February and March of 2022, the Foreign Ministers' Statement on Ukraine failed to mention either "Russia" or "invasion", despite statements expressing the grouping's concern, such as being "troubled, and deeply concerned by military hostilities". Cambodia, widely known as the bloc's closest ally to China, co-sponsored the UN Resolution against Russia's aggression, taking an important step towards favoring its West counterparts and gaining many immediate diplomatic applauses.

It also is worth noting that when US speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi met with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen on the 03rd August, ASEAN issued a separate statement on the Taiwan issue without mentioning the word "Taiwan" even once, instead using the term "cross-strait development". Nothing about this is surprising however, as not mentioning any state's name directly in official documents is the nature of ASEAN's statements when it comes to sensitive issues. Indeed, US-China tensions have overshadowed the meetings in Phnom Penh, including Wang Yi's "walking out" from the gala dinner in the Sokha Hotel and the cancellation of a planned bilateral meeting with Japan. ASEAN member states have no choice but to keep calling on both sides to exercise restraint and refrain from escalating the Taiwan Strait situation. None of the ASEAN members wish to take a side, though in some cases they are forced to do so. Being friends with both major powers allow them to maximize their economic and security interests, yet this depends on how smartly they play the great power chessboard.

Moving Beyond Wordy Statements: A Stronger ASEAN

We often see ASEAN produce many official documents, filling up to one hundred pages with fancy words that require much reviewing and debating, clause by clause, to finally achieve a consensus for adoption (on a non-binding basis). If regional interests are clearly defined and common values upheld by all member states, ASEAN can achieve more. If ASEAN is completely driven by different individual interests, its internal disunity will become increasingly clear to others, while the relevance and so-called "centrality" of the regional grouping will also become more fragile. As demonstrated already when it comes to how ASEAN responds differently to pressing global issues, it is difficult to imagine that ASEAN will reach a common voice and carry out bold moves in the face of significant challenges. In terms of the Myanmar issue, it has been one year and a half since the military coup that took place in February 2021. Tatmadaw has shown no sign of commitment when it comes to implementing the 5PC which he had earlier agreed to. Despite the efforts of the Special Envoy during its visit, we have seen little

progress on significant issues such as the “meet all parties concerned” and “immediate cessation”. Now that it has come to the Foreign Ministers’ meeting, they have deferred the case to the ASEAN Summit Level, citing Article 20 of the ASEAN Charter.

The claim that “ASEAN can achieve more” is not an exaggerated statement. If member states could clearly define what the real threats to the region are as a whole, instead of prioritizing the interests of the “individual state”, then ASEAN could indeed achieve more. The theme of “ACT: Address the Challenges Together”, illustrates the region’s common values and interests, as well as common efforts in addressing regional problems. To achieve these common goals, most importantly, all member states must put ASEAN at the core, not their own individual interests.

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