



Assessing the ASEAN Outcomes 2022 on Myanmar under the Cambodian Chairmanship: Progress or Deadlock?

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Cambodia successfully hosted the 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits in Phnom Penh from 10-13 November 2022. It is the third time Cambodia has served in this chairmanship position where it was the rotating chairman twice in the past, in 2002 and 2012. We must acknowledge that this was a tough time for Cambodia as a chair of ASEAN in 2022. Not only did Cambodia have to deal with the geopolitics issue of the US and China rivalry, but the regional issue of the Myanmar Political Crisis put even stronger expectations on Cambodia.

In this op-ed, we assess the ASEAN Outcomes under the chairmanship of Cambodia. Since 101 outcome documents are to be adopted, noted, and issued, we focus our attention on each ASEAN pillar's outcomes: political-security, economic, and socio-cultural.

The summit's main subjects within the political security pillar included the US-China competition, Russia's war in Ukraine, and the political situation in Myanmar. Although many skeptics have gloom-ridden views towards ASEAN being impotent in navigating the rivalry between Washington and Beijing, some could argue that ASEAN member states share the same attitude towards the geopolitical rivalry of the two blocs.¹ As a small state to host this year's summits, Cambodia demonstrated its competent diplomacy in managing the great power rivalry by bringing the two powers to the same table to extensively discuss and exchange constructive views on emerging issues facing the region and the world. For instance, following the extensive discussion between President Xi Jinping and President Joe Biden in Bali, the easing tension between the two great powers can be reflected in a meeting on the sidelines of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus in Siem Reap between the Chinese defense officials and its counterpart. Although there are still differences in views towards human rights and the situation in

¹ Lemahieu, Hervé & Connelly, Aaron. 16 November 2022. "Asean is less dysfunctional on geopolitics than it seems." *Lowy Institute*. Available at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/asean-less-dysfunctional-geopolitics-it-seems>

Ukraine, the two sides agreed on the need to keep open lines of communication, engage in more frequent dialogues, and responsibly manage the US-China competition.

Regarding the situation in Ukraine, ASEAN welcomed Ukraine's accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) under the chairmanship of Cambodia.² The accession of Ukraine to TAC, along with the chairman's statement of the East Asia Summit (EAS) issued by Cambodia³ in which most of the EAS countries had condemned the "aggression against Ukraine," illustrated ASEAN's dutifully firm and unwavering commitment to the upholding of international rules and law, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Following the EAS, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov criticized the "absolutely unacceptable language regarding the situation in Ukraine." while addressing the media before leaving for Bali.⁴ Although accepting Ukraine's membership in the TAC will unlikely help to end the war or bring the parties back to the negotiating table, ASEAN has unequivocally stated its support for the international rule of law.

The situation in Myanmar is another high political issue in which Cambodia had to deal with as the chair of this year's summits. It could affect the unity and centrality of ASEAN and could also destabilize the region. Cambodia's approach towards Myanmar can be seen as significant progress toward solving the Myanmar problem rather than a deadlock.

Although there were criticisms against Cambodia, her attitude towards the Myanmar crisis is of more engagement rather than hard-core punishments such as sanctions and shaming. There were ongoing accusations of such an approach, particularly the recent ASEAN's statement regarding Myanmar. For instance, Joshua Kurtlantzick of the Council on Foreign Relations strongly argued that "...ASEAN's Myanmar policy is just disastrous, and the summit did nothing to push it forward."⁵

It is far-fetched for some observers to expect ASEAN, especially Cambodia, as the chair, to draw up a quick solution to resolve the Myanmar crisis. In defense of Cambodia's approach, the Myanmar crisis requires a delicate balance between practicality and appropriateness — an implicit intent to coax Myanmar through proactive engagement while at the same time adhering to the fundamental principles of the bloc. For instance,

² Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. 14 November 2022. "Briefing Note by Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo HUN SEN, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Cambodia on the Outcomes of the 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits and Related Summits." Available at <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/posts/2022-11-14-Press-Release-Briefing-Note-by-Samdech-Akka-Moha-Sena-Padei-Techo-HUN-SEN-Prime-Minister-of-the-Kingdom-of-Cambodi-14-11-38>

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. 17 November 2022. "Chairman's Statement of The 17th East Asia Summit." Available at <https://asean2022.mfaic.gov.kh/posts/2022-11-22-Summits-Chairman-s-Statement-of-The-17th-East-Asia-Summit-10-55-14>

⁴ Storey, Ian. 1 December 2022. "Setbacks for Moscow, Progress for Kyiv: The Russia-Ukraine War and its Impact on the ASEAN, G20 and APEC Summits." *Fulcrum*. Available at <https://fulcrum.sg/setbacks-for-moscow-progress-for-kyiv-the-russia-ukraine-war-and-its-impact-on-the-asean-g20-and-apec-summits/>

⁵ Kurtlantzick, Joshua. 15 November 2022. "Reflections on the ASEAN Summit and the ASEAN-U.S. Summit in Cambodia." *Council on Foreign Relations*. Available at <https://www.cfr.org/article/reflections-asean-summit-and-asean-us-summit-cambodia>

the Special Envoy of the ASEAN Chair undertook two working visits to Myanmar to carry out his duty as provided in the Five-Point Consensus, guided by the ASEAN Charter and ASEAN founding principles.⁶ Despite the lack of willingness of the junta to fulfill their duties, the working visits demonstrate Cambodia's pragmatism in coordinating a peace process that sets the tone for inclusive dialogues in the long run. Therefore, one cannot disregard Cambodia's tactful approach in addressing the crisis, which is in accord with ASEAN's long-standing rules and principles. Any hasty attempts to use economic leverage to increase pressure on the military junta could potentially create division within the bloc and risk derailing ASEAN's centrality.

This continuous engagement at least created a positive result. A small action taken today adds up to a more significant impact tomorrow. For a whole year, Cambodia has made many efforts to engage and involve different actors in Myanmar. One of the recent news is the release of 6,000 prisoners. Although this release was not the first time the international community witnessed positive progress⁷, one could still consider this move by the Military Junta as a logical step towards peace, considering that more than 13,000 political prisoners were being held in Myanmar⁸.

One should give some credit to the work of ASEAN and its chairman Cambodia for the release of various political prisoners by the military junta. It is not coincidental that the military junta released these prisoners at this time shortly after ASEAN adopted a new solution for Myanmar. It is also important to note that Samdech Prime Minister Hun Sen never failed to bring up the subject of political prisoners, especially foreigners, with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing throughout the visit and the two video conferences⁹. Among the Western countries, Australia was quick to congratulate Cambodia on its efforts to persuade the military junta to release these prisoners, including an Australian academic Sean Turnell.

Even with this positive news, the Myanmar crisis does not end with just releasing these prisoners. There is more work that needs to be done, especially under the chairmanship of Indonesia next year. Indonesia has undeniably been a big brother who has helped other ASEAN member states to deal with specific hot issues, from Cambodia-Thai border dispute to Rohingya crisis. In a similar manner, Indonesia has been vocal and active in easing the tension in the Myanmar crisis. Before recommending the next path for Indonesia to deal with the Myanmar crisis as it resumes its chairmanship from Cambodia

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. 17 November 2022. "Report of the Special Envoy of the ASEAN Chair on Myanmar to the 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits." Available at <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/posts/2022-11-17-Press-Release-Report-of-the-Special-Envoy-of-the-ASEAN-Chair-on-Myanmar-to-the-40th-and-41st-ASEAN--Summits--17-51-09>

⁷ CNN, (2022). Myanmar to release former British envoy, Australian economist in prisoner amnesty, state media says. Retrieved from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/17/asia/myanmar-prisoners-foreigners-freed-intl-hnk/index.html>

⁸ VOA, (2022). Myanmar Releases Nearly 6,000, Including 4 Foreigners in Prisoner Amnesty. Retrieved from: <https://www.voanews.com/a/myanmar-releasing-nearly-6-000-prisoners/6838277.html>

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (2022). Report of the Special Envoy of the ASEAN Chair on Myanmar to the 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits. (pp 16). Retrieved from: <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/posts/2022-11-17-Press-Release-Report-of-the-Special-Envoy-of-the-ASEAN-Chair-on-Myanmar-to-the-40th-and-41st-ASEAN--Summits--17-51-09>

in 2023, it is crucial to highlight Indonesia's constructive engagement in dealing with the issue.

Regionally, Indonesia has been active and committed to initiating and enabling ASEAN-related meetings among leaders to discuss and create the five-point consensus. It has been under numerous debates and observations lately about its effectiveness.¹⁰ Bilaterally, Indonesia has adopted "Shuttle diplomacy" in gathering support from Brunei, Singapore, and Malaysia to block the Myanmar Junta's representation in ASEAN-related meetings to punish the military for not giving in for the five-point consensus.¹¹ Indonesia has continuously condemned Myanmar's military for its failure to abide by the solutions provided by ASEAN and has called out the Junta for the casualties it has caused.¹² The action has been consistent in Joko Widodo's press release after the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting in April 2021. Therefore, Indonesia's effort and commitment should be acknowledged for the past years since the eruption of the coup d'état in Myanmar.

In terms of the economic pillar, one main progress of the implementation of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint 2025 is the release of the 19 Priorities Economic Development (PEDs) that contribute the 4 strategic thrusts including: (1) the enhancement of digital connectivity, science and technology, (2) bridging the development gap to enable ASEAN's competitiveness, (3) promotion of more integrated, inclusive, resilient and competitive ASEAN, and (4) reinforce global ASEAN for development.¹³ In the fifty-fourth ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM) Meeting, the leaders applauded the economic rebound contributed by a high rate of vaccination rollouts, the reopening of the countries, and the normalization of economic activities. As a result, the region witnessed trade and investment activities returning. Nevertheless, the leaders also acknowledged that the situation in Ukraine disrupts the global value chain and fuels inflation, exacerbating the existing vulnerability in developing countries.

The leaders also recognized the digital economy as an important driving force in fostering commitment for regional growth.¹⁴ Based on the national representative of the AEC, 19 priority economic deliverables (PED) are on schedule to complete by the end of 2022; the progress for the second phase of AEC Blueprint 2025. By September, 5 out of 19 PEDs were completed.¹⁵ Upon the commitment to complete the 19 PEDs, ASEAN Economic

¹⁰ Drajat, Gibran. 21 May 2021. "The Indonesia factor in ASEAN's response to Myanmar". East Asia Forum. Available at <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/05/21/the-indonesia-factor-in-aseans-response-to-myanmar/>

¹¹ Azis, Aswin. 15 September 2022. "Myanmar: What can Indonesia do as ASEAN chair to help end overshadowed conflict?". THE CONVERSATION. Available at <https://theconversation.com/myanmar-what-can-indonesia-do-as-asean-chair-to-help-end-overshadowed-conflict-181259>

¹² Strangio, Sebastian. 04 November 2022. "Indonesian FM Says Myanmar Military to Blame for Country's Crisis". THE Diplomat. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2022/11/indonesian-fm-says-myanmar-military-to-blame-for-countrys-crisis/>

¹³ Anna D. Rebeniol and Alexander C. Chandra. June 2022. "ASEAN Economic Integration Brief". No.11. Available at <https://asean.org/latest-issue-of-asean-economic-integration-brief-covers-atiga-upgrade-and-aec-post-2025/>

¹⁴ ASEAN. September 2022. THE 54th ASEAN ECONOMIC MINISTERS' (AEM) MEETING. Available at <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/JMS-of-the-54th-AEM-Meeting-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁵ Kunmakara, May. September 2022. "Kingdom's 19 PEDs done 'by end-2022'". The Phnom Penh Post. Available at <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/kingdoms-19-peds-done-end-2022>

Community Council Ministers, ASEAN Agriculture and Forestry Ministers, ASEAN Transport Ministers and ASEAN Energy Ministers met at the Interface Meeting to discuss the drive for sustainable development goals and address the climate change issue in every aspect of economic activities.¹⁶ With all the commitment to the goals in AEC, ASEAN 2022 expects to ensure the efficient implementation of ASEAN Community Vision 2025.¹⁷

In terms of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, Cambodia has greatly fostered more engagement among Southeast Asian youth. 2022 is the year of ASEAN Youth. This year, Cambodia proposed not only ASEAN Youth Debate 2022¹⁸, but Prime Minister Hun Sen of the Kingdom of Cambodia, along with other heads of state and heads of government, also met representatives of ASEAN Youth¹⁹. These actions showed the importance of youth, and their engagement is strongly supported by ASEAN member states. Moreover, as ASCC chair, Cambodia and related partners also focused on empowering youth and sports, developing human resources, empowering of women, mainstreaming gender, green recovery, equal accessibility to digitalization, reduction of poverty, and sustainable development²⁰.

Recommendations for Indonesia

We propose some recommendations for Indonesia as the next chair of ASEAN.

On the Myanmar issue, a few more steps could be carefully taken as Indonesia receives the gavel to be the chairman of ASEAN for 2023. Firstly, Indonesia could further strengthen the monitoring indicators and mechanisms to boost the effectiveness of the five-point consensus's implementation progress. Despite hopeless scholarly reactions to the failure of five-point consensus, observing close to what should be improved with evidence-based evaluation would inform more sound and comprehensive decision-making for a range of options.

Secondly, Indonesia could continue to promote, practice, and enable human rights through lessening human rights violations in Myanmar, just like what Cambodia has

¹⁶ ASEAN. November 2022. Joint Media Statement of the Ministerial Interface Meeting 2022 on Sustainable Development Agenda under The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Available at <https://asean.org/joint-media-statement-of-the-ministerial-interface-meeting-2022-on-sustainable-development-agenda-under-the-asean-economic-community-aec-9-november-2022-phnom-penh-cambodia-and-videoconference-hy/>

¹⁷ ASEAN. 2022. STATEMENT OF THE 40TH and 41ST ASEAN SUMMITS. Available at <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/01-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-40th-and-41st-ASEAN-Summits-2.pdf>

¹⁸ Sam, S. (2022). Cambodian and Malaysian Youth Debate the FDI's Impact on Nutrient Deficiency. *Cambodianess*. Retrieved from: <https://cambodianess.com/article/cambodian-and-malaysian-youth-debate-the-fdis-impact-on-nutrient-deficiency>

¹⁹ ASEAN (2022). Having the Interface with the Representatives of ASEAN Youth. Retrieved from: <https://asean2022.mfaic.gov.kh/posts/2022-11-12-News-Having-the-Interface-with-the-Representatives-of-ASEAN-Youth---10-November-2022---16-17-02>

²⁰ ASEAN (2022). ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Council expresses strong support for Cambodia's 2022 priorities. Retrieved from: <https://asean.org/asean-socio-cultural-community-council-expresses-strong-support-for-cambodias-2022-priorities/>

achieved this year in the release of mass prisoners. However, one should be realistic about the complicated condition of the conflict of interest in Myanmar to further understand how much ASEAN and its member states should do to help mitigate the crisis's impacts. For the crisis is complex, blaming ASEAN solely for its ineffectiveness would be deemed biased and not practical. All in all, Cambodia's efforts on the Myanmar crisis during the ASEAN chairmanship should be an applaudable step forward.

Third, even though the Southeast Asian region managed to mitigate the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in an orderly manner through effective containment of the virus and the implementation of economic recovery plan, Indonesia should continue to prioritize efforts in assisting the developing ASEAN members such as Cambodia, Laos and, Vietnam to fully implement the Covid-19 Economic Recovery Plan. As discussed above, all plans agreed upon during the ASEAN Summit need to be actualized to assist all ASEAN members, particularly the least-developed members.

Fourth, to enhance ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, there should be more opportunities for youth to express their view and concerns as youths are the future leaders of the countries and the region. Not only should there be a debate competition, but a writing competition, video competition, and ASEAN Youth Camping Program should also be introduced. These aforementioned opportunities could also strengthen people-to-people relations among ASEAN youth. By empowering youth, we are empowering the future of our countries and the future of ASEAN.

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