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Chapter 1 | ASEAN

Han Phakdeypanhaboth, Khan Menghok, Loeung Chetha, Moeung Cheery, Nou Seihak, and Him Raksmeay

Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) strives to build a more sustainable, developed, and resilient ASEAN society and ASEAN Community, based on three pillars of the ASEAN Community – namely the ASEAN Political-Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. From July to September 2023, this quarter report briefs key developments in relation to sectoral and communal updates of these three pillars of ASEAN, especially this year’s Indonesian Chairmanship.

ASEAN Political-Security Community

Political and security cooperation and development are among the important key aspects of a peaceful and harmonious regional society. ASEAN with the common acknowledgment of the importance of peace and stability is envisioned by ASEAN member-states to be a “rules-based Community of shared values and norms; a cohesive, peaceful, stable and resilient region with shared responsibility for comprehensive security; as well as a dynamic and outward-looking region in an increasingly integrated and interdependent world”.¹

On 12 July 2023, Saudi Arabia became the 51st country to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). The accession signing ceremony was carried out by Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud and witnessed by ASEAN Foreign Ministers and the ASEAN Secretary-General on the sideline of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting in Jakarta.² It shows a strong commitment of Saudi Arabia to adhere to ASEAN values and principles of friendly cooperation and peaceful co-existence as enshrined in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, adopted in 1976, including non-use of force and non-interference. By signing the TAC, Saudi Arabia has become an ASEAN family member, and it has committed to cooperating and collaborating, upholding international law, and contributing to peace and stability in Southeast Asia and beyond. These values and principles are very important factors in addressing the current geopolitical tension in the Indo-Pacific.

On 13 July, ASEAN and China agreed on the Guidelines to accelerate the negotiation on the Code of Conduct (CoC) on the South China Sea. The discussion around the CoC was also reflected within the United Nations Convention on Law of the SEA (UNCLOS), aiming to ensure a South China Sea (SCS) is stable and prosperous to all nations. The Guidelines were adopted during the meeting between ASEAN Foreign Ministers and the Director of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, Wang Yi, in Jakarta.³ This achievement shows a positive momentum to strengthen a partnership that advances the paradigm of inclusivity and openness, respects international rule-based order, including UNCLOS 1982, and promotes habits of dialogue and collaboration.

Thailand's departing foreign minister made a secret trip to Myanmar, meeting with the leader of the widely condemned coup, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, and paying a visit to imprisoned elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Don Pramudwinai described it as "an approach of the friends of Myanmar, who would like to see a peaceful settlement," but did not go into detail. Don told the ministers in Jakarta that she was physically and mentally healthy. "She encouraged dialogue," Don said. Aaron Connelly, an expert on Southeast Asia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Singapore, said Don's trip undermined ASEAN's efforts to resolve the crisis. "A diplomatic process centered on Myanmar's neighbors, rather than ASEAN, will be more sympathetic to the junta," Connelly wrote on Twitter. "Its neighbors expect the junta to ultimately prevail and want to accelerate its pacification of the countryside and international legitimization".⁴

On 15 August, Thai PBS and Nikkei Asia claimed that the Philippines would hold the chair during that year, with Myanmar now slated to take over the position the following year. It was unclear whether Naypyitaw or ASEAN started the action because the regime has not spoken out on the matter thus far. The chair is currently held by Indonesia, which will be succeeded by Laos next year and Malaysia in 2025.⁵

On 5 September, the joint statement of the 43rd ASEAN Summit in Jakarta revealed that ASEAN leaders had mutually agreed to review the implementation of the Five-Point Consensus in resolving the Myanmar Crisis. While it is an open secret that all ASEAN member states want Myanmar to return to normalcy, if not democracy, the 19 Points as outlined in the so-called "ASEAN LEADERS' REVIEW AND DECISION ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FIVE-POINT CONSENSUS" is a timely and positive measure for the region.⁶

ASEAN Economic Community

Southeast Asian economies are among the fastest-growing economies in the world. ASEAN has seen positive performance over the past decade, being the fifth-largest economy and the fourth-largest exporter in the world, as well as the second-largest destination for foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2022.⁷ The economic priority has always been the main focus of ASEAN. ASEAN leaders have envi-

sioned economic integration as the end goal of the ASEAN Economic Community. On 13 July 2023, the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference with the UK occurred in Jakarta, Indonesia. Both parties agreed to enhance relations to effectively implement the ASEAN-UK Plan of Action (2022-2026).⁸ Trade, investment, supply chain resilience, digital trade, innovation, and cyber security were some of the priority cooperation areas covered during the discussion regarding the strengthening of ASEAN-UK economic cooperation. At the same time, several ASEAN members proposed the possible ASEAN-UK Free Trade Agreement. In addition, the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Retno Marsudi, emphasized the importance of collaboration in energy transformation.⁹

On 14 July, the ASEAN-US Post-Ministerial Conference with the US Secretary of State was held in Jakarta, Indonesia. As a result, many concrete issues were discussed, including an annex to the ASEAN-US (2021-2025) Plan of Action to enhance the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between both parties. Conversations focused on the importance of strengthening economic cooperation such as SMEs' capacity building, the development of connection infrastructure, and collaboration in technological advancements, while climate change and energy transition, including the development of the electric vehicle ecosystem, were also discussed.¹⁰

On 19 August, the 55th ASEAN Economic Ministers' Meeting was led by the Indonesian Minister of Trade in Semarang, Indonesia.¹¹ Among the attendees were ASEAN Secretary-General Kao Kim Hourn and the ASEAN member states' Economics Ministers. During their discussion, the implementation of Indonesia's priority economic cooperation initiatives during its ASEAN Chairmanship, essential tasks of the ASEAN Economic Community such as the Strategy for Economic Cooperation and Development, ASEAN strategy on carbon neutrality, preparation for the launch of negotiations on the ASEAN Framework Agreement on the Digital Economy, the implementation and upgrading of the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA), the negotiation of ASEAN-Canada FTA, ASEAN-China FTA 3.0, the performance of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), as well as the preparation for the consultation meetings between the Economic Ministers of ASEAN countries and partner countries, were reviewed by the Ministers.¹²

On 19 August, the ASEAN Economic Ministers officially endorsed the study on the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA).¹³ The DEFA negotiations will be guided by the Framework for Negotiating DEFA, which was also approved during the conference. It outlines the negotiation process and timetable and exercises the negotiation's goals and guiding principles. The DEFA aims to provide a comprehensive strategy for empowering businesses and stakeholders across ASEAN by boosting connectivity, accelerating trade growth, establishing an encrypted online environment, and expanding MSMEs' engagement. "With the Digital Economic Framework Agreement, it is expected that the number will double to US\$2 trillion in 2030," said Indonesia Coordinating Economic Minister

Airlangga. Before DEFA, he said, ASEAN's digital economy was predicted to grow to US\$ 330 billion in 2025, up to US\$1 trillion in 2030. ¹⁴

On 21 August, the second protocol to amend the establishment of the first FTA between region-to-region for ASEAN, Australia, and New Zealand was signed on the sideline of the 55th ASEAN Economic Ministers' meeting, while the first protocol was agreed upon in 2014. This multilateral agreement aims at enhancing the region's economies' sustainability through a more liberal and transparent market regime. The agreement also includes supplementary regulations on education services under the chapter on trade in services, and three new chapters have also been added: government procurement, micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), and business and sustainable development. A population of 711 million people makes up the AANZFTA market, which, as of April 2023, had a combined gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$5.9 trillion, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Economic Outlook.¹⁵

ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community

Southeast Asia is a diverse region, and ASEAN has maintained the emphasis on the area's diversity within the ASEAN Community's vision. Besides political and economic development, developing resilient and sustainable societies in ASEAN with an emphasis on the environmental protection and social development, is indeed essential in realizing a strong ASEAN community and identity.¹⁶

On 10 August 2023, the 6th Meeting of the ASEAN Working Group on Culture of Prevention was convened, discussing the issues, causes, and preventive practices for the six thrusts of the Declaration on Culture of Prevention (CoP) for a Peaceful, Inclusive, Resilient, Healthy and Harmonious Society. This declaration was adopted at the 31st ASEAN Summit on 13 November 2017¹⁷ that focuses on issues such as peace and intercultural understanding, inclusion, good governance, environment, health, and media and information, to address various forms of vulnerabilities including violence, drug use, youth and urban crime, and environmental degradation and quality of life. ¹⁸

The 19th coordinating conference on the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community was hosted on the same day under the theme "Post-2025 ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community". The conference examined conditions and identified challenges, trends, and options post-2025 to develop strategies to enhance partnerships, engagement, and resources for the post-2025 ASCC.¹⁹

From 21-22 August, the first meeting of the ASEAN Environmental Rights Working Group (AER WG) took place in Bangkok, Thailand. AER WG was established by the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) with cross-sectorial representatives as members with the goal of developing a Regional Framework on Environmental Rights in ASEAN to be reviewed by involved

ASEAN sectorial bodies and eventually adopted by ASEAN leaders. For its first meeting, it discussed and agreed on the timeline and goals to develop a comprehensive framework in line with the international norms and standards related to the right to a safe, clean, and sustainable environment.²⁰

On 24 August, the ASEAN Finance and Health Ministers Meeting (AFHMM) took place. The Joint Statement stated the recognition of collaboration between the finance and healthcare authorities in strengthening regional health capacity, the need for a strong and sustainable recovery, Prevention Preparedness and Response (PPR) capacity strengthening for future public health crises, as well as the commitment to for national investment in One Health initiative, and to the regional health architecture beyond Covid-19.²¹

On 29 August, the 30th ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Council Meeting was convened. The meeting discussed ASCC's strategic directions for a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable ASEAN and Post-2025 ASCC.²² Secretary-General of ASEAN Dr. Kao Kim Hourn urged the ASCC to “continuously work towards a stronger and more resilient region as we ensure the full and effective implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and journey towards 2045.” The council applauded the development of the ASEAN Declaration on Gender Equality and Family Development, proposed to include the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Early Childhood Care and Education in Southeast Asia for adoption by the ASEAN Leaders at the upcoming 43rd ASEAN Summit, acknowledged the development of the ASEAN Declaration on Disability-Inclusive Development and Partnership for a Resilient ASEAN Community, and encourage the adoption of the ASEAN Joint Statement on Climate Change to the 28th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC COP-28) as well as the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Sustainable Resilience.²³

On 31 August 2023, the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Sports (SOMS-14) took place. The Sports Ministers reiterated the commitment to establish the ASEAN Sports Fund, acknowledged the work of sports organizations in non-professional competitive sports as well as the outcome of the First Technical Working Group Meeting for the Preparation of ASEAN's Joint Bid for the FIFA World Cup 2034 (1st TWG-FWC). It also reaffirmed to the ASEAN Work Plan on Sports 2021-2025, and looked forward for the implementation of the programs under the Memorandum of Understanding between ASEAN and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (ASEAN-FIFA MoU) for gender equality and climate actions in sports.²⁴

Conclusion

For the last three months, there have been noticeable developments within the ASEAN Community related to its political security, economy, and socio-cultural activities. ASEAN, its institutions, and its member-states have displayed efforts to the development of the political, economic, and social

aspects of the region.

The notable development in the ASEAN Political-Security Community is the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation by Saudi Arabia, as well as the agreement between ASEAN and China on guidelines to accelerate the negotiation on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

For the ASEAN Economic Community, the efforts to enhance economic integration and cooperation are discussed via the ASEAN-UK Post-Ministerial Conference, focusing on strengthening relations and

and implementing the ASEAN-UK Plan of Action with the possibility of an ASEAN-UK Free Trade Agreement, and the ASEAN-US Post-Ministerial Conference emphasized the importance of economic cooperation between ASEAN and the United States.

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community has been on the right with various meetings that took place to address key issues and challenges, such as the first meeting of the ASEAN Environmental Rights Working Group, and especially, the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Sports focusing on the First Technical Working Group Meeting for the Preparation of ASEAN's Joint Bid for the FIFA World Cup 2034.

Overall, the collective efforts of ASEAN member-states to promote peace, stability, economic integration, and social development within the region can still be seen within these three months, highlighting the commitment of ASEAN member-states to promoting peace, stability, and cooperation within the region and beyond, shedding more light on the direction of ASEAN's community-building efforts.

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Chapter 2 | Cambodia

Khim Tensopheaktra, Ung Khemara Bormeychan, and Meung Chansomanita

Introduction

The paper provides the progress and performance of Cambodia's domestic politics, socioeconomic activities, and foreign affairs for the third quarter of 2023. In the domestic politics section, it provides insight into Cambodia's election activities including the amendment of election law, the performance during the election day and the result of the nation's voting, as well as the election of Cambodia's new prime minister. In socio-economic affairs, Cambodia is working on the digitalization, social protection programs, and the establishment of new policies toward sustainable socio-economic activities. Moreover, the Cambodian government is working on preserving financial and macroeconomic stability, and further enhancing bilateral trade with its main partner. Importantly, Cambodia continues to pursue a friendly foreign relation with other countries through many meetings and cooperations.

Domestic Politics

On June 23, 2023, the National Assembly of Cambodia unanimously passed an amendment to eight articles of the election law, requiring all future electoral candidates to have voted, among other legally binding requirements.¹ Following its approval by the Constitutional Council on July 3 and the National Assembly and Senate in June, King Norodom Sihamoni issued a Royal Decree on July 4 promulgating the revised election law. The new election law's article 142 introduced punishments ranging from five to twenty million riel for any means, including preventing eligible voters from registering to vote and encouraging them to spoil their ballots. Additionally, Article 143 provides the National Election Committee (NEC) the authority to ban any political party causing disruptions from running for office, or levied fines the party between 10 and 30 million riels, and imposed even severe criminal penalties.²

Moreover, in order to conduct the election of National Assembly members in 2023 in a free and fair election, the NEC organized the election in accordance with the law, regulations, and procedures of elections, including the relevant legislative instrument in force, and allowed the election stakeholders to actively participate in observing the election, with 89,562 national observers being present. Of these,

52,652 were women from 134 groups and NGOs, and 604 international observers from 61 institutions, according to NEC's press release.³ Likewise, the NEC disclosed in a press release on July 29 that they had assigned five teams, each of which was in charge of examining and confirming the election results from five constituencies. It certified that there were no errors or anomalies in the total number of votes cast for any political party on July 23.⁴

According to the NEC's official announcement of the results on August 5, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) won 120 of the 125 available seats in parliament and The Royalist Party FUNCINPEC won the remaining 5 seats. According to the NEC's election results spreadsheet, a total of 8, 214, 430 voting papers were placed in ballot boxes, 440, 154 of them spoiled.⁵ The CPP received 6, 398, 311 votes, while runners up FUNCINPEC received 716, 490 votes. Specifically, on August 22, 2023, the second day of the inaugural session of the NA's 7th legislative term, the National Assembly gave Hun Manet a vote of confidence where 123 of the 125 members of parliament voted in his favor. Hun Manet then officially assumed the position of Prime Minister of Cambodia.⁶

Many nations, including India, Bangladesh, Belarus, Brunei Darussalam, China, Cuba, Ghana, Hungary, Japan, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Republic of Korea, Maldives, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Tunisia, and Vietnam, have sent H.E. Hun Manet a heartfelt message of congratulations on his appointment as prime minister as Cambodia enters a new era under his leadership.⁷

Socioeconomic affairs

Concerning the progress of skills training for Cambodian students toward digitalization, the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications (MPTC) had its sights firmly set on three crucial actions. They might alter human resources in the digital industry during a basic technology information training session for students sponsored by the Foundation for Korea Software Global Aid (KSGA). A number of efforts at the elementary and secondary levels, including the future intellectual program and the technical innovation programs intend to improve students' comprehension of digital concepts and promote a competitive spirit. To give access to fiber optic cable internet in every commune by 2027, MPTC established community technology centers for each high school. These efforts aimed to meet the demand for technical specialists and to spark students' interest in digital skills as a necessary step for their future jobs.⁸

In regards to social support for vulnerable groups, expectant mothers, infants, retired public employees and veterans, National Social Assistance Fund (NSAF)'s Chairman Samheng Boros stated that the government has allocated roughly 10% of this year's budget to social support programs. In addition, the labor ministry will shortly launch a program that will give almost 1.5 million youths in need financial aid. Additionally, he also touched on the family package programs. The majority of this program's components are included in Hun Manet's strategic blueprint, in which he has outlined some of the

procedures he wants to implement. Consequently, the NSAF will play a key role in putting the government's new policy into action. ⁹

In order to create a strong Cambodia in the following 25 years, Prime Minister Hun Manet announced "Pentagonal Strategy-Phase 1" on August 24. The plan was created to accomplish the country's 2050 goal on the basis of the ruling party's "Political Platform for Nation Building and Defense 2023-2028." The first part of the pentagonal strategy is human capital development which focuses on education, technical skills, health, social protection, food system and equity based on the spirit of "leaving no Cambodian citizen behind". The second component is the improvement of competitiveness and economic diversification. The third is the expansion of the private sector and employment, with a focus on expanding the labor market and encouraging competition and new businesses. The fourth emphasizes resilient and sustainable development. Lastly, it concentrates on the growth of the digital economy and society.¹⁰

On August 30, the US embassy in Phnom Penh and the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts renewed their cultural cooperation agreement which took place at the National Museum, marking an extension of a commitment that has lasted two decades. The goal of the memorandum of agreement is to prevent the looting of priceless archaeological sites and to promote the exchange of archaeological and ethnographic materials for educational, cultural, and scientific purposes. During the ceremony, US Ambassador W Patrick Murphy made an additional donation which the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation had awarded \$450,000 to Cambodia to continue the repair work on the Phnom Bakheng temple.¹¹

Economic Affairs

Following the general election and the new prime minister, the Cambodian People's Party outlined five key economic strategies, the first of which is centered on preserving financial and macroeconomic stability.¹² This includes maintaining low inflation, maintaining foreign exchange rate stability, maintaining the national budget, and promoting the stability of both banks and non-bank financial institutions. Second, they prioritize the growth of small and medium-sized businesses, informal economy, digital technology, and green development. Third, it has established a budget that is both efficient and sustainable. Following that, they also intend to develop the banking industry by improving the efficiency with which national savings are transferred to investments in priority sectors. Finally, it is creating a favorable environment for investment and business, as well as incorporating regional and global economies and improving the provision of public services to the private sector.

Additionally, Cambodia-China bilateral trade will be projected to reach \$15 billion by 2025. The Cambodia-China free-trade agreement is anticipated to boost Cambodian exports to China, particularly

agricultural goods. China, which made investments of around \$20 billion in the Kingdom last year, is Cambodia's most significant market, which is followed by the United States, Vietnam, Thailand, and Japan from January to July 2023. This expectation extends to the outcomes of the Belt and Road Bilateral Cooperation Framework, a Diamond Cooperation Framework, and the Cambodia-China Free Trade Agreement. Therefore, these agreements and trade between Cambodia and China are expected to boost the economy of Cambodia with China. Cambodia's trade with China has surpassed \$7.09 billion in the last seven months. Cambodia's exports to China increased by 16.2 percent to more than \$814.73 million, while imports from China increased by 0.14 percent to more than \$6.27 billion.¹³

Lately, the EU market was not in a good condition at all as Cambodia's primary markets are the United States, which is followed by the European Union, Japan, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Cambodia's primary markets are the United States, followed by the European Union, Japan, Canada, and the United Kingdom. According to the General Department of Customs and Excise of Cambodia (GDCE), garments and clothing accessories valuable to \$4.5 billion were exported to global marketplaces in the first seven months of 2023, a 20.6 percent decrease from \$5.6 billion the previous year, accounting for 33 percent. Cambodian exports totaled at \$13.5 billion in the first seven months of 2023. Exports of goods fell 26.6 percent to \$814.6 million in July 2023, from \$1.1 billion in July 2022.¹⁴

Foreign Affairs

H.E. Sok Chenda Sophea, the new Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, has pledged to carry on implementing Cambodia's foreign policy with a five-point strategy after taking his position.¹⁵ First, as the global situation is complicated, Cambodia's foreign policy must reflect the principles and values enshrined in the constitution. Secondly, it is to continually implement the Royal Government's policy program for the 7th National Assembly legislature. Thirdly, its policy is to become more actively involved in regional and global initiatives to preserve and enhance peace, stability, and growth, as well as to combat the adverse impacts of global warming and all forms of illicit activity, terrorist activity, and transmissible illnesses. The fourth goal is to fortify economic relationships with both old and new partners, encourage investment, figure out markets for goods to support the trade sector and promote tourism and Khmer culture as a result of our strong economic potential and Angkor heritage. Additionally, it encourages the enactment of free trade agreements, as well as multilateral and bilateral strategies to support local manufacturing and economic expansion. Lastly, Cambodia continues to prioritize human resource training in the diplomatic field in order to keep drawing in talented individuals.

On August 12-13, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi visited Cambodia and Cambodia was one of the three Southeast Asian countries that China visited.¹⁶ He also met with the former Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Relations Prak Sokhonn and Sok Chenda Sophea, former Minister Delegate

attached to the Prime Minister and secretary-general of the Council for the Development of Cambodia. This visit demonstrates China's backing of the Cambodian government's seventh mandate, confirming that China continues to offer unwavering support to the Kingdom and its government, which has expanded ties and cooperation, despite the appointment of a new prime minister and Cabinet.

On the same day, former Cambodian Prime Minister Samdech Techo Hun Sen met in Phnom Penh with visiting members of the CPC Central Committee's Political Bureau and Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Wang Yi applauded the Cambodia People's Party on its election victory, and China expressed their deep appreciation for Prime Minister Hun Sen's significant involvement in building China-Cambodia community with a shared destiny. China appreciated the deep trust with Cambodia and significant friendship formed by the two leaders. China also affirms to stand with Cambodia and strongly endorse Cambodia in adhering to a strategy for growth suited to its national conditions. On the same day, King of Cambodia Norodom Sihamoni also met with Wang Yi.¹⁷

Additionally, H.E. Sok Chenda Sophea, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, and W Patrick Murphy, US Ambassador to Cambodia, met on August 31 to deliberate on points of cooperation that would enhance their ties.¹⁸ The US ambassador applauded HE Sok Chenda Sophea on his appointment as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation during the course of the conversation. In addition, while acknowledging the differences between the US and Cambodia, both sides emphasized the significance of ongoing discussions and coordinated attempts to determine prospective areas of collaboration and progress toward shared objectives that are beneficial to the two peoples.

Conclusion

This report provides information on various aspects of Cambodia's domestic politics, socioeconomic activities, and foreign affairs for the third quarter of 2023. It covers topics such as the election of Cambodia's new prime minister, the government's economic strategies, efforts towards digitalization and social protection programs, and foreign relations with other countries. This quarterly update serves as a useful resource for understanding the country's goals, strategies, and partnerships during the third quarter of 2023.

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Chapter 3 | Indonesia

Sum Pichkanika and Cheng Ousa

Introduction

Indonesia, a vibrant and diverse Southeast Asian nation, has undergone substantial transformations in recent months that have impacted various aspects of its societal fabric. On the political front, the country has taken a decisive stance by imposing a ban on the export of bauxite, a move that not only seeks to preserve its natural resources but also holds the potential to instigate protectionist sentiments among other nations in response. This policy shift underscores Indonesia's commitment to assert its sovereignty and safeguard its economic interests. In parallel, Indonesia's social landscape has been marked by noteworthy events, particularly the emergence of protests in response to the eviction of thousands of individuals to accommodate a Chinese-owned glass factory. These demonstrations reflect the concerns and grievances of the affected communities, who are voicing their discontent over the displacement caused by the development project. This highlights an ongoing socio-political discourse surrounding issues of land rights, foreign investment, and the balance between economic progress and social justice.

These developments unfold against the backdrop of Indonesia's economic dynamics, where the nation finds itself in the enviable position of experiencing a trade surplus at present. This favorable economic condition contributes to the strengthening of the local economy, fostering an environment conducive to growth, investment, and job creation. The trade surplus not only bolsters Indonesia's financial stability but also augurs well for its long-term economic prospects, potentially enabling the government to allocate resources towards key development initiatives and infrastructure projects aimed at enhancing overall national competitiveness. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze changes within Indonesia in the third quarter of 2023.

Domestic Affairs

Indonesia has recently implemented a ban on the export of bauxite, a decision that has raised concerns about potential protectionist responses from its primary trading partners. The prohibition on exporting

bauxite ore is seen as a strategic move aimed at stimulating domestic industrial growth and fostering the development of bauxite processing and purification within the country.¹ This forward-looking approach is expected to yield positive outcomes for industry participants in the long run.

The export restriction comes with a stipulation that raw metal and mineral products must be exported within three years from the effective date of the rule. This provision clearly demonstrates the Indonesian government's commitment to promoting domestic value addition and downstream processing of bauxite. However, caution is advised in implementing this downstream process, as each commodity possesses unique properties that must be taken into account. Without establishing a leading position in the downstream industry for the specific commodities involved, Indonesia might face challenges in competing with products from other nations.

Moreover, there is a potential downside to Indonesia's export embargo, as it could provoke protectionist measures from major trading partners. Mr. Jahen Fachrul Rezki, deputy main director of the Institute for Economic and Social Research, has emphasized the need for caution due to the possible negative reactions from other nations, particularly in terms of the impact on domestic consumers and manufacturers. The performance of the local sector could be adversely affected if Indonesia's trade partners respond with protectionist policies targeting some of the country's primary imported commodities. Therefore, Indonesia's decision to prohibit the export of bauxite reflects a proactive approach to boost domestic industrial development and promote downstream processing. While this strategy holds promise for industry participants in the future, careful consideration is necessary to ensure competitiveness in downstream activities. The potential repercussions, such as protectionist responses from trading partners and their impact on the local sector, need to be taken into account as Indonesia navigates the dynamic landscape of international trade.

In recent events, Indonesia has witnessed a significant protest involving thousands of people who are facing potential eviction for the construction of the "Eco-City" project.² The cause of this protest stems from the government's plan to establish a Chinese glass factory in order to meet the global demand for solar panels. The residents of Rembang island, where the project is set to take place, have been informed that they must leave their villages to make way for this expansive economic zone, which is being developed in collaboration with China's Xinyi glass company. With a remarkable commitment of 11.6 billion dollars from the Chinese firm, this project is anticipated to become the world's second-largest of its kind. The protest has emerged as a direct response to the government's proposal to evict thousands of people from the Rempang area to accommodate the multibillion-dollar Chinese-owned glass factory. Tensions surrounding this issue have been escalating over the course of several months, subsequent to the Indonesian government's announcement that 7,500 residents residing in Rempang would be required to relocate from the island.³ In the face of these governmental

actions, a dozen individuals have been arrested, while allegations of excessive force have been directed towards the police, who have reportedly deployed water cannons and tear gas during the protests.⁴ The situation highlights the complex dynamics at play, involving a collision of economic development initiatives, land rights, and the social impact on affected communities.

Economics

Indonesia's current economic landscape showcases a favorable trade surplus, which holds significant benefits for the country's overall economy. This trend of trade surpluses has been ongoing since 2020, owing to Indonesia's abundant natural resources and its strategic geographical location. In June 2023, Indonesia's trade balance boasted a surplus of USD 3.45 billion, continuing an uninterrupted streak that began in April 2020.⁵

According to Statistics Indonesia (BPS), the country's exports from January to June 2023 amounted to USD 128.66 billion, indicating a decrease of 8.86% compared to the same period in 2022.⁶ Non-oil and gas exports accounted for USD 120.82 billion, experiencing a decline of 9.32%. This reduction in export figures can be attributed to the diminished prices of several crucial Indonesian commodities in the international market. Notable decreases include a 6.78% decline in coal prices, a 3.90% decrease in crude palm oil costs, a 1.52% drop in rubber prices, a 1.58% dip in aluminum prices, and a 1.19% decline in nickel prices.⁷

In terms of exports, Indonesia is anticipated to remain robust, with certain non-oil products such as Mineral Fuels, animal or vegetable fats and oil, and Iron and Steel, experiencing significant increases.⁸ These sectors contribute to Indonesia's non-oil and gas shipments, with China, the United States, and Japan serving as key trade partners. China, in particular, stands out as a major recipient of Indonesian exports, with trade between the two nations reaching USD 133.6 billion in 2022. The Ministry of Trade reported that Indonesian exports to China alone were valued at USD 65.9 billion during the same year. This not only has positive implications for Indonesia's economy but also benefits the country's technological advancement, as technology-driven collaborations between Indonesia and China are poised to play a pivotal role in their bilateral relations. Therefore, Indonesia's trade surplus, supported by its diverse range of export products, contributes significantly to the country's economic well-being. While facing challenges such as declining commodity prices, Indonesia's exports remain resilient, with promising opportunities for growth in specific sectors. The country's trade relationships, particularly with China, hold the potential for further economic development and technological advancements, underlining the importance of ongoing collaboration and strategic partnerships in driving Indonesia's economic trajectory.

Foreign Affair

During the conclusion of the 43rd ASEAN Summit, President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo officially passed on the responsibility of the ASEAN chairmanship to Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. The ceremony took place at the Jakarta Convention Center in Jakarta. President Jokowi declared the summit closed and invited Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone to assume the ASEAN chairmanship for 2024. Throughout the three-day summit, which occurred from September 5 to 7, a total of 90 documents and several tangible agreements with partner nations were produced, as stated by the President.⁹

During a regional summit in Indonesia, President Joko Widodo urged global leaders on Thursday to move away from confrontation, highlighting the meeting’s backdrop of rivalries among major powers. The summit, hosted by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), was attended by U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, Chinese Premier Li Qiang, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, and leaders from other partner countries. Discussions during the summit have been marked by tensions surrounding various issues, including trade, technology, China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea, the Myanmar junta’s lack of cooperation with ASEAN, the conflict in Ukraine, and concerns about North Korea potentially supplying weapons to Russia. Indonesia and other Southeast Asian nations have expressed concerns this week about the “destructive” rivalries among major powers, specifically alluding to the tensions between the United States and China, which they believe pose a threat to regional stability.¹⁰

Moreover, Indonesia has recently achieved a significant milestone in its transportation sector with the launch of Southeast Asia’s fastest train. This ground-breaking development marks a major step forward in the country’s efforts to enhance its railway infrastructure and provide efficient and high-speed connectivity for its citizens.

The new high-speed train, known as “Whoosh”, has been designed to offer unprecedented speed and comfort, revolutionizing travel within Indonesia and throughout the Southeast Asian region. With cutting-edge technology and state-of-the-art engineering, the train is capable of reaching speeds of 350 kph (217 mph), this train cuts travel time from three hours to about 40 minutes, making it the fastest train in Southeast Asia.¹¹ Although Whoosh represents the most recent inclusion in the expansive and progressively global network, it also came with controversy. As Indonesia’s high-speed rail system is anticipated to bring economic benefits to the country, it also serves as a demonstration of China’s regional influence.¹² Although not all projects have achieved success, such as the delayed Tinaco-Anaco railway in Venezuela, China has continued to push forward with various other endeavors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Indonesia has experienced significant changes in various aspects of its society. On the domestic front, the country has implemented a ban on the export of bauxite to promote domestic industrial growth and downstream processing. While this move holds promise for the future, careful consideration is needed to navigate potential protectionist responses and their impact on the local sector. Indonesia has also witnessed protests in response to the eviction of residents to make way for a Chinese-owned glass factory. This highlights the complex dynamics surrounding economic development, land rights, and social impact, sparking a broader socio-political discourse on these issues.

Economically, Indonesia has maintained a favorable trade surplus, driven by its diverse range of export products. Despite challenges such as declining commodity prices, the country's exports remain resilient, with promising opportunities for growth in specific sectors. Trade relationships, particularly with China, play a significant role in Indonesia's economic well-being and technological advancement. On the foreign affairs front, Indonesia hosted the ASEAN summit, where President Joko Widodo urged global leaders to move away from confrontation and address rivalries among major powers. Concerns were expressed regarding tensions between the United States and China, highlighting the potential threat to regional stability. Additionally, Indonesia achieved a significant milestone in its transportation sector with the launch of Southeast Asia's fastest train, named "Whoosh." While the high-speed rail system is expected to bring economic benefits, it also symbolizes China's regional influence. Overall, these developments reflect Indonesia's ongoing efforts to assert its sovereignty, safeguard its economic interests, address social concerns, and navigate the complex dynamics of a globalized world.

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Chapter 4 | Laos

Lim Cheamara, Raksmei Lytangoun, and Meung Chansomanita

Introduction

This paper provides an update on Laos's domestic politics, socioeconomic affairs, and foreign affairs for the third quarter of 2023. Laos is occupied by numerous ASEAN-related meetings in the domestic political sector. In the socioeconomic sector, the economic crisis is still tormenting the livelihood of the people. Many Laotians are immigrating abroad in large numbers to seek higher paying jobs, resulting in the worker shortage. The Laotian government is enhancing the public health sector and healthcare quality through financial aid from the Asian Development Bank. Laos is also preparing for a nation-wide campaign "Visit Laos Year 2024" and deepening connectivity with its neighbors to boost tourism. Regarding the economic sector, Laos ministries are promoting domestic goods and establishing a high-level committee to address economic and financial issues such as the use of foreign currency and inflation. In terms of foreign relations, Laos has participated in regional meetings and signed a number of agreements with ASEAN member states. It also received financial support through the Mekong-Ganga scheme, and is preparing for the upcoming 2024 ASEAN chairmanship with Malaysia's support.

Domestic Politics

Lao Prime Minister, Sonexay Siphadone sent a congratulatory message to Cambodia's newly elected Prime Minister, Hun Manet after being officially appointed as the head of government of Cambodia on the 22nd of August. The message highlighted the commitment to strengthen bilateral ties between the two countries and aims to benefit the people of both countries, promote peace, stability, and both regional and global development.

The new Thai Prime Minister, Srettha Thavisin is also set to visit Laos to strengthen the Laos-Thai bilateral ties after a congratulatory phone call from the Laotian Prime Minister.¹ The Laos Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that the two prime ministers have committed to deepening economic coopera-

tion, focusing on trade, investment, and infrastructure development for regional integration, including expanding road networks, integrating power grids, and improving rail connectivity.

Additionally, Laos hosted the 17th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on the Environment and the 18th Conference of the Parties on ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution (COM-18) in Vientiane from 23-24 August. The meeting sought to reinforce cooperation on environmental issues including climate change, biodiversity conservation, and pollution control in the ASEAN region, and called for further cooperation to achieve the 2030 Agenda's goals for Sustainable Development.² On top of that, the conference focused on the key ASEAN agreements aimed at diluting transboundary haze pollution from 2022-2030, and the implementations of related agreements such as ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution (AATHP), the ASEAN Cooperation Program on the Control of Transboundary Haze Pollution, and the ASEAN Forest Management Strategy (APMS) for 2022-2030.³

Moreover, the 1st ASEAN-US Ministerial Dialogue on Environment and Climate Change also took place in Vientiane on August 24, which sought to enhance ASEAN-US cooperation in combating climate change and striving for net zero emissions. The meeting laid the groundwork for future cooperation and focused on innovation to support regional climate efforts, including enhancing climate ambition, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and implementing the Paris Agreement to achieve net-zero emissions and climate resilience by 2050.⁴

Lastly, the 27th ASEAN Tourism Ministers' Meeting and the 42nd ASEAN Tourism Forum (ATF) will be held in Vientiane in January 2024. A new committee was established for hosting responsibilities, including venue selection, preparing invitation cards, and reviewing the list of attendees, which includes tourism ministers from ASEAN plus three, ASEAN-India, ASEAN-Russia, and other international organizations. The Laos Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that Laos is in preparation for the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2024 with Malaysia's assistance following the official visit of Malaysian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Zambry Abdul Kadir to Laos in June.⁵

Socioeconomic affairs

In the socio-economic aspect, the Laotian government has implemented a new strategy to stimulate tourism and grow the country's foreign currency reserves by considering multiple-entry tourist visas for Laos. The policy may include the issuance of unilateral visas to nations interested in boosting tourism with Laos. This initiative is a part of the government's Visit Laos Year 2024 which plans to attract 4.6 million visitors and a target revenue of US\$712 million.⁶

Laos media reported that the Lao National Railway Enterprise (LNRE) have recently signed a memorandum of understanding on railway cooperation with Malaysia's Keretapi Tanah Melayu Bhd (KTMB). The terms of agreements permit trains from both nationals to operate on each other's rail net-

work while ensuring international technical standards of operations. Laos is now an important player in the Pan-Asian Railway network and becoming a vital logistics hub for Southeast Asia, particularly in trade with China.⁷

Moreover, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) will provide a US\$45 million financing package to strengthen health care services in 16 districts across 10 provinces in Laos. ADB reported that the Improving the Quality of Health Care Project is expected to annually benefit about 1.6 million people including the poor, women, elderly people and people with disabilities. ADB financing will support the Lao Ministry of Health in enhancing healthcare workforce capacity. This involves establishing a system for registering and improving the skills of health professionals, upgrading provincial health education institutions and an effective framework.⁸ Finally, Laos is facing a worker shortage as people are immigrating to seek employment abroad because the cost of living in the country is skyrocketing. Consequently, the operations and post-pandemic recovery efforts of local businesses in various sectors are being affected. In response, the Laotian government has approved the minimum monthly wage raise in the country from 1,300,000 Lao kip (67 USD) to 1,600,000 Lao kip (83 USD) starting from October.⁹

In addition, numerous events took place in Laos during the 5th Ordinary Session of the Ninth National Assembly. First, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce (MTC) outlined a variety of initiatives to increase domestic manufacturing and decrease imports. The MTC collaborates with the Ministry of Planning and Investment to encourage local companies to offer locally produced goods rather than import ones. They also reduce exports of raw materials and allocate supplies to domestic companies to boost the export of high-value items like corn, coffee and potatoes. The ministries and local communities also planned a strategy to promote agricultural products.¹⁰

Second, on July 06, the Ministry of Technology and Communication and the Ministry of Finance signed a contract to develop the use of electronic signatures in the state budget management system. The National One-Door Tax Notification System (ASYCUDA, NSWA+), the summary of financial statements, the accounts of privately and publicly held firms, and the Department of Taxation's Tax Notice System (TaxRIS) would all be included in the project. The government will also set up a payment center for taxes, fees, service charges, and payments made via the banking system as a part of its strategy to advance the digital economy. On the same day, Santiphap Phomvihane, Minister of Finance, put up a new draft law on land tax which is meant to replace the old land tax collection act. This new draft aims to define land tax collection in accordance with international standards based on the GDP of Laos, the rate of inflation, and the amount of previous land tax payments. This approach would ensure a clear, equitable, practical, and verifiable tax collecting procedure.¹¹

Third, it was recently discovered that a Bokeo company with a government-issued rubbish collection concession was taking payments in Thai Baht. Laos government has problems in regulating the usage of foreign currencies for many years. Therefore, the Bank of Laos revived the Foreign Currency Control Department earlier this year to oversee services, local currency, and limit the usage of foreign currencies. The Central Bank also changed the rules governing foreign currency exchange rates for commercial banks to close the gap between official and unofficial bank exchange rates. However, the foreign exchange rate is still increasing daily, leading to a continuous decline of Lao kip's popularity among the people.¹²

In addition, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) Central Committee established a high-level taskforce to address economic and financial problems in Laos. The taskforce aims to address inflation, higher living costs, currency exchange rates, and foreign debt. It also tasks with developing comprehensive plans and policies to address the issues and stabilize the economy. Thus, measures will be taken to control product and service prices and foreign currency circulation to improve the financial system and increase the value of the Lao kip.¹³

However, the inflation in Laos was 25.88% in August, somewhat less than the 27.80% of July. Prices for food and non-alcoholic drinks climbed by 31.85%, signaling a strengthening economy. While transportation costs increased by 17.68%, the cost of health and medical equipment increased by 21.11%. The hotel and restaurant sector showed a 32.79% gain, while home goods, post offices and communications, and education saw the lowest growth. The Lao kip's depreciation, the country's growing public debt, and a labor shortage all serve to intensify the country's prolonged economic problems.¹⁴

Foreign Affairs

In part of international cooperation, after becoming an active electricity investor and trading partner in Laos, China Southern electricity Grid (CSG) will continue to look for prospects there. According to Li Xinhao, General Manager of CSG's International Cooperation Department, the Chinese state-owned corporation and its regional partners have cooperated to balance electricity supplies according to the season. Thus, they will import during the rainy seasons when the neighboring countries' capacity for electricity production grows and export in dry season. In order to expand interconnection among the Lancang Mekong states in the future, CSG intends to develop a 500kV project connecting transmission lines in Laos and aiding it in extending transmission lines to adjacent nations.¹⁵

Moreover, Saleumxay Kommasith and Thongphane Savanphet attended the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Commission meeting in Jakarta, Indonesia, to discuss the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone Treaty (2023-2027) and its protocol on July 11. The pact was

signed by the ten ASEAN member states on December 15, 1995 and came into force on 27 March 1997.¹⁶ Saleumxay also attended the 56th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting, and ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights meetings. He provided updates on the ASEAN-Australia action plan and prepared for a special summit in 2024 to mark the 50th anniversary of bilateral relations.¹⁷

On August 10, the Lao Securities Commission Office (LSCO) and the Securities and Exchange Regulator of Cambodia (SERC) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to strengthen their collaboration in growing the capital markets, which indicates an important step in the development of the securities markets in Laos and Cambodia. The two parties reached agreement on a cooperation plan for 2023, which includes sharing experiences in regulating and resolving issues in security activities, supporting capital market investments, increasing cooperation and integration between the two countries.¹⁸

Furthermore, on August 18 in Vientiane, the 13th multilateral conference between the National Bank of Cambodia and the Bank of Laos was conducted to explore future cooperation initiatives and set up a cross-border QR Code payment system. The discussion primarily focused on digital connectivity of the payment systems between Laos and Cambodia which also includes macroeconomics, monetary policy implementation, economic development, foreign exchange management strategy, and personnel training. The conference unveiled the Lao-Cambodia cross-border payment system (KHQR scan LAOQR). It will allow users to make payments in local currencies, Lao kip and Khmer riel, for products and services in both Laos and Cambodia through QR codes. This system is expected to be accessible at eight commercial banks in Laos in the fourth quarter of 2023. Travelers from both nations will be able to make purchases by simply scanning the QR code.¹⁹

Conclusion

In conclusion, during the third quarter of 2023, the Laotian government has dedicated its commitment to regional cooperation and international partnerships, which is evident through the ASEAN-US Ministerial Dialogue and other ASEAN-related meetings, all of which aim to promote mutual advancement and address global challenges, including climate change. It continues to focus on infrastructure development, investment promotion, and sustainable resource management. Laos is harnessing its potential for growth, and prosperity, as well as promoting peace and cooperation in the region. Its ministries are working together to promote domestic goods and signed a contract to create electronic signatures in the state budget management system. They have also signed a memorandum of understanding, and the cross-border payment system (KHQR Scan LAOQR) agreement with Cambodia to promote digital economy in the region. In this third quarter Laos is improving in all sectors and actively preparing themselves for a promising future.

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Chapter 5 | Malaysia

Kea Chanvoleak, Ngoun Sovann Makara, and Chan Mary

Introduction

This report summarizes news in economic, political, and foreign affairs from June to September 2023. Domestically, Malaysia's economy grew by 5.6 per cent in the first quarter and four per cent in June but faced challenges of rising cost of living. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim advocated for reforms, especially in affirmative action policies, but faced the challenge of leading a multiracial party. Regionally, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim attended the ASEAN Summit and urged for economic integration and peaceful resolution of the South China Sea issue.

Domestic Politics

In June 2023, Malaysia's political climate was influenced by criticism of the government's online streaming of a movie and the increase of the overnight policy rate to support the economy. Anwar Ibrahim was elected as the new 'unity government', committed to reform in governance, corruption, and affirmative action laws. A self-governing media council was discussed, with taxes to fund it. TikTok became a politically significant medium, leading to the banning of over 1,000 controversial and extreme videos.¹

The state elections in Penang, Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan will take place on August 12, 2023, with 9.77 million eligible voters. The Pakatan Harapan (PH) chairman and Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim-led unity government, formed in November 2022, is holding its first round of elections. The election will include 245 seats, with 169 MPs out of 222 in the Dewan Rakyat. The main opposition coalition, Perikatan Nasional (PN), PH, PKR, DAP, and AMANAH parties will participate. The elections are expected to test Anwar's leadership and his alliance with BN, which has faced resistance from UMNO supporters.²

Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has faced a new threat following the state elections in August 2023. The Perikatan Nasional coalition, led by Muhyiddin Yassin, claimed the populace requested Anwar's resignation and rejected the unity government. The PN coalition gained 60% of the assembly seats in six states, including Selangor, Penang, and Negeri Sembilan. Anwar's Pakatan Harapan coalition gained control of three Malay heartland states. The state elections were seen as a referendum on Anwar's leadership and the opposition's viability. Anwar's government, which won the most seats, is viewed as unstable and requires more Malay majority support. Anwar has emphasized political stability and his progressive vision.³

Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has been facing increasing pressures from the opposition party and his allies as he navigates the economic and social challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and state elections. His government has been accused of being weak, indecisive, and ineffective, while the opposition leader Najib Razak has accused his government of corruption and mismanagement. Anwar's allies, including Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, are also causing issues for him.⁴

The Islamist-Malay nationalist opposition bloc gained significant support from Malay-Muslim voters, particularly in rural areas, while Anwar's coalition's multiracial and reformist parties suffered losses in urban areas. The result reflected the deepening of ethnic and religious divisions in the country, as well as the dissatisfaction with the government's performance. Anwar has been trying to balance the competing interests and demands of his coalition partners, while also reaching out to the opposition and civil society for dialogue and cooperation. He has vowed to implement reforms and initiatives to revive the economy, improve public health, strengthen democracy, and promote national unity. However, many analysts and observers doubt that Anwar can survive the political turbulence and deliver on his promises. They argue that Anwar lacks the charisma, authority, and support to lead a stable and effective government. They also warn that if Anwar fails to address the country's challenges and aspirations, he may face a vote of no confidence or a snap general election that could further destabilize Malaysia.⁵

Economic Affairs

Malaysia has risen to 27th position in the World Competitiveness Ranking 2023 report, driven by economic recovery, investment growth, and labor market stability. However, the report also high-

lighted challenges in corporate regulation, education, and sociocultural framework. Key challenges include developing an industry-ready workforce, encouraging digital thinking, reforming regulations, and pursuing sustainable development.⁶ Malaysia's Matrade Digital Trade Platform (MDTP), a public-private partnership between Matrade and Fusionex Group, aims to help local businesses become global champions by providing them with the necessary push and direction. The initiative, attended by Minister of Investment, Trade and Industry, Deputy Minister of Investment, Trade and Industry, and Fusionex Group CEO, aims to create a strong digital commerce environment for Malaysia. MDTP offers digital products and services to help Malaysian businesses navigate global trade challenges and boost their success.⁷

Malaysia's Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, has unveiled a new economic blueprint called "Ekonomi Madani" to strengthen the country's economy and improve quality of life. The framework focuses on a value-based, people-centric, and sustainable economy, aiming to create a more equitable distribution of wealth, enhance social justice, and ensure environmental protection. It has also introduced tax incentives for companies focusing on high-impact activities and fosters economic integration with neighboring countries through trade diplomacy and strategic arrangements.⁸ Malaysia's Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, aims to transform the country into a great economy within five to six years, citing Tesla's interest in Cyberjaya. His policies, including Madani Economy, aim to balance growth, equity, social justice, and environmental sustainability.⁹ However, Anwar has faced criticism from his coalition partners and opposition parties for being too pro-business and not inclusive enough for marginalized groups. Opposition parties are also trying to woo Parti Warisan Sabah to defect, but Anwar has dismissed these attempts as futile.

Malaysia's budget deficit is expected to decrease to 4.5% of GDP in 2023, from 5.5% in 2022, as the government continues fiscal consolidation and prudence. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the Finance Minister, aims to reduce the deficit gradually and sustainably while ensuring adequate spending for economic recovery and social well-being. The Budget 2023 will be guided by the Madani Economic Framework, focusing on economic growth, investment, and industry strengthening. The budget will align with the 12th Malaysia Plan, which outlines strategic development priorities for 2021-2025.¹⁰

Foreign Relations

In July, Malaysia and the Philippines plan to expand their halal industry partnership to international markets, particularly in the Middle East, as they celebrate 60 years of diplomatic relations. They aim to increase trade and investment volume, uphold ASEAN centrality, and build capacity in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region.¹¹

Along with good relations with the Philippines, Malaysia and China have agreed to uphold mutual respect, trust, and cooperation in their bilateral relations, supporting each other's interests and concerns. They will strengthen coordination on regional and international issues like the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, counter-terrorism, and multilateralism. They expressed satisfaction with Malaysia's progress on the Belt and Road Initiative projects and agreed to expedite their implementation. They also signed memorandums of understanding on cooperation in traditional Chinese medicine and education. They also discussed the South China Sea issue, which has caused tension between China and ASEAN countries.¹²

Malaysia rejected the latest China map, stating it does not recognize China's claims in the South China Sea. The issue of South China Sea sovereignty is complex and sensitive, and Malaysia calls for dialogue and international law to resolve it.¹³ Malaysia appreciates China's support for ASEAN's Myanmar crisis resolution and South China Sea code of conduct negotiations. Malaysia looks forward to hosting the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in November 2023, attended by Chinese President Xi Jinping.¹⁴

Conclusion

In conclusion, the state elections in Malaysia in Q3 2023 revealed a polarized political landscape, with different parties and coalitions gaining or losing ground. Key issues influencing voters' choices included COVID-19 response, economic recovery, ethnic and religious tensions, and government corruption. The elections has underscored the need for national reconciliation and political reform, addressing issues affecting people's livelihoods, economic diversification, social inclusion, and good governance. Malaysia's economic affairs in Q3 2023 were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with lockdowns, restrictions, and vaccination programs impacting various sectors. Despite improvement, challenges arose, and the government's budget for 2023 aimed to balance health and economic priorities for sustainable recovery and positive contribution to regional and global affairs. Malaysia's

foreign affairs in Q3 2023 were influenced by its active participation in regional and international platforms like ASEAN, UN, and APEC. It demonstrated leadership, pursued national interests, and maintained neutrality, aligning with its vision of becoming a respected nation.

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Chapter 6 | Myanmar

Hai Sohem, Navy Roya, and Him Rotha

Introduction

Myanmar, in the third quarter of 2023, is no different from the previous quarter, which is still in a fragile state. There will be no election as the military authority extended their rules by another 6 months. ASEAN made a new decision to strip the bloc Chairmanship in 2026 from Myanmar to the Philippines. This quarterly update will briefly summarize what happened in Myanmar from June to September 2023.

Domestic Politics

There have been many interesting political events in Myanmar. Some of the most trending events are related to the extension of the State of Emergency and the indefinite postponing of the military-orchestrated election that was supposed to be held in August 2023. Concurrently, the military court made a sudden partial pardon towards Aung San Suu Kyi.

State of emergency Extended and No Election in 2023

On July 31, 2023, as expected, the Military Authority in Myanmar extended the state of emergency for additional 6 months in order to bring back control over the country. Therefore, there is a possibility that the election will be delayed until 2025.¹ Min Aung Hlaing stated that the 6 months extension will help Myanmar speed up in restoring peace and stability. Furthermore, he also addressed the resistance movements as terrorist threats and acts. A few days later, following the extension of the state emergency, on August 4th, the Junta reshuffled the cabinet which changed the position and key post of many officials within the ministries.²

Aung San Suu Kyi Reappeared in the Equation: Sentence Reduction and Meeting with the out-going Thai Foreign Minister

The Myanmar military has reduced 6 years off of Aung San Suu Kyi's 33 years sentences. The Military

Authority has pardoned five of Aung San Suu Kyi criminal cases among the 19 cases due to general amnesty. Alongside Aung San Suu Kyi, U Win Myint was also pardoned for 2 cases, which left him with only 6 cases remaining.³

On July 28, 2023, Aung San Suu Kyi had been moved from prison to a much higher-level venue compound of government building, according to NLD's official.⁴ According to the same source, she was expected to meet the country's lower house speaker and Chinese special envoy for Asian Affairs afterward as well.

Despite many requests from other countries, the military authority never granted their wishes of visiting Aung San Suu Kyi. However, surprisingly, on July 9th, the junta granted Thailand's outgoing Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai a meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi. This unexpected visit is recorded as the first ever time that the junta allowed any diplomat to meet her. On that note, the Junta stated that Aung San Suu Kyi is in good health as well. In addition, they also clarify that they do not have access to the meeting and its contents.⁵

Foreign Relations

Myanmar lost its ASEAN Chairmanship rights in 2026

ASEAN decided to pass the 2026 chairmanship to the Philippines in the ASEAN leaders' review and decision.⁶ In addition, ASEAN still condemned the act of violence in Myanmar, while seeking to assist Myanmar to find a peaceful and durable solution and ensuring the implementation of the five-point consensus. Predictably, the National Unity Government (NUG) – a shadow government led by exiled civilian lawmakers – welcomed this decision, while the military authority rejected ASEAN's latest resolution.

NUG Foreign Minister met Timor-Leste Foreign Minister and President of the National Parliament

On the side of NUG, it has continued putting efforts in connecting with the other state's government and strengthening the cooperation. On 5th of July, the NUG Foreign Minister, Zin Mar Aung has engaged in a meeting with the Foreign Minister and President of the National Parliament of Timor-Leste where they discussed about the promotion of cooperation that will help in regard to the Spring Revolution, as well as to hold and tighten Myanmar and Timor-Leste bilateral relation.⁷

The Military Regime expels East Timor's top diplomat

In response to the NUG holding bilateral discussions with East Timor's Prime Minister and Foreign Minister in July, the Military Authority decided to expel East Timor's diplomat.⁸ In addition, the

action further added as the military authority condemned East Timor on the irresponsible actions of encouraging the terrorist (the NUG group) to further commit violence in Myanmar.⁹

Myanmar Military Authority Has Actively Engaged with China, India, and Russia

On July 2nd, the chairman of the Anti-corruption commission of Myanmar signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Russian Prosecutor General on the anti-corruption cooperation.¹⁰ This MoU included the international discussion such as conference and workshop for the sake of information exchange and better practice in anti-corruption actions and research.

India on the other side has been a great trader to the regime when it comes to arms and explosive weapons. So far, the government has been purchasing the arms that have been supplied by Indian companies, such as Bharat Electronics Limited.¹¹ Additionally, the enhancement of the human resource between the two countries is also in the working process as well.¹²

Besides, the Union Minister of the regime joined the forum held with the Chinese Minister of Industry and many other ministers of ASEAN countries on various agendas such as electric vehicle production, the solar panels, the transfer of technology and medical production for the sake of MSME development.¹³

Myanmar Military Authority's Diplomacy Expanding to the Middle East?

In July 2023, Min Aung Hlaing had a phone call with the Prime Minister of Kuwait, while his Foreign Minister talked with Saudi Ambassador and Qatari Representative in Myanmar.¹⁴ Other than that, the military regime also engaged with Egypt as well.¹⁵ All the discussions were mainly directed on the economic purpose by which Myanmar demanded the economic ties on trading, investing and exporting from the counterparts.

Socioeconomic Affairs

Although the armed attack and violence all across Myanmar have been drastic, these have become the daily basis – the deaths, the wounded, and destruction happens daily. However, the new social incidents also emerged, too, such as the arrest and oppression on LGBTQ activists and the users on social media respectively.¹⁶ Economically, the dollar's and foreign exchange's issue has caused great impacts on the Military Authority as well, as it recently became the new trend of challenges on Myanmar.

Military authority uses Telegram as Military Intelligence to Arrest Online Critics

Recently, the Junta has started to use the famous social platform, Telegram, as a weapon to monitor and arrest any users who criticize the military. The Junta has considered Telegram as a Military Intelligence that allows them to identify, arrest, and kill the cyber critics and will prosecute under the counter-ter-

rorism act of the Myanmar law. The move of the military authority threatens the rights of expression of the people, and their security.¹⁷

Singapore Bank imposed restriction on Myanmar

After suffering a bad sanction on two of the most influential state-owned banks from last June, the military regime is partially affected by their foreign currency exchange. In fact, on July 10, the United Overseas Bank (UOB) of Singapore declared to close Myanmar Airways International's bank account by August 15th.¹⁸ Moreover, the UN declared a proposal urging the suspension of currency supply to the regime from the international community.¹⁹ By doing so, the UN chief suggested shutting down the accessibility of the international currency to the country.

Dollar Crisis and Dollar's suppression

The regime has caused serious damage to the national economy. As expected, Myanmar has experienced a severe dollar crisis as its currency continued to collapse. The official rate of Myanmar's Kyat currency is MKY 2,100 equal to USD 1; however, in the market rate, USD 1 equals to MKY 2,800 for several months. The rate dropped to MKY 3,000/USD just recently.²⁰ The situation was affected by the restrictions and oppressive intervention due to the political crisis. Besides the dollar crisis, the military authority has been targeting people who use dollars in their bank accounts as 51 people were arrested for speculating US Dollars after the regime's State-owned banks and Defense Ministry were sanctioned by the United States.²¹

Conclusion

To sum up, in the third quarter, the situation in Myanmar is still worse with no sight of resolution. In essence, the election that would be holding in August has been delayed by the extension of the state emergency, the international community such as the UN, the US and private financial institution have been forcefully restricted and sanctioned the flow of international currency to this country, which would inevitably result in dollar shortage and high inflation. Recently, the exchange rate from US Dollar to Myanmar Kyat dropped from 2,800 Kyat/USD to 3,000 Kyat/USD. ASEAN, on the other hand, expressed frustration over the implementation of the Five-Point Consensus, while under the Indonesian Chair, ASEAN decided to hand the 2026 ASEAN Chairmanship to the Philippines.

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Chapter 7 | The Philippines

Sovann Tepy and Cheng Ousa

Introduction

With a population of over 100 million, the Philippines is a lively archipelago in Southeast Asia with a rich history, diversified culture, and a dynamic political environment. Like any other country, the Philippines's present and future are significantly shaped by its economy, foreign policy, and domestic politics. The political system, which runs under a democratic framework, is at the center of Philippine domestic affairs. Regarding its economy, the Philippines is one of the fastest-growing economies because of its consistent growth. The GDP of the nation is mostly driven by important industries including services, manufacturing, agriculture, and tourism, but issues like income inequality and infrastructure development continue to be top priorities for the government as it works to promote inclusive and sustained economic growth. Through its foreign relations, the Philippines also maintains a strong bilateral relationship with both its Asian neighbors and its international partners while actively participating in the world community.

This paper intends to provide an update on the nation in terms of domestic affairs, economics, and foreign relations in the third quarterly of 2023.

Domestic Affairs

During the election period in the Philippines, which is lasting from August 28 to November 29, there will be heightened security measures and certain activities will be prohibited. The entire country is officially under the election period leading up to the barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan polls on October 30. To ensure public safety, the Commission on Elections (Comelec) has set up checkpoints across the country, which will be manned by the police or military starting from midnight on August 28. The election period will continue until November 29, which is the deadline for barangay and Sangguniang

Kabataan election aspirants to submit their statements of contributions and expenditures (SOCE). Despite a Supreme Court ruling in June declaring the law rescheduling the December 2022 polls to October 2023 as unconstitutional, the elections have still proceeded this year due to legal practicality and necessity. Approximately 67.8 million people are eligible to vote in the barangay elections, while 23.2 million people are registered to participate in the Sangguniang Kabataan polls.¹

Meanwhile, President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. has pledged to promote the interests of the Philippines at the 43rd Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit and Related Summits in Indonesia. He highlighted the need to promote a rules-based international order, further address issues in the South China Sea, ensure food security, advocate for climate justice, harness the potential of digital and creative economies, protect migrant workers in crises, and combat human trafficking. Marcos also intends to participate in the ASEAN Plus Three and East Asia Summits to discuss developments in the South China Sea, the situation in Myanmar, the conflict in Ukraine, and major power rivalries. He plans to engage with bilateral partners to advance cooperation aligned with Philippine foreign policy. Marcos is expected to attend 13 leader-level engagements, including summit sessions with other leaders.²

Following this, President Marcos has authorized the release of P12.7 billion for the Rice Farmers Financial Assistance (RFFA) program, potentially benefiting 2.3 million small rice farmers. Each registered beneficiary in the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture (RSBSA) will receive P5,000 in financial aid, sourced from excess tariff collections on rice imports in 2022. Various farm groups, including cooperatives and associations, will also benefit from the RFFA.³ This assistance is provided under the Cash Assistance to Filipino Farmers Act of 2021 and is unconditional for farmers with less than two hectares of land.

Additionally, President Marcos has approved the use of P700 million in excess tariff collections for the “Palayamanan Plus” conditional cash transfer program, benefiting RSBSA-registered farmers who are part of the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). Around 78,000 beneficiaries are expected to receive P10,000 each through this program. President Marcos is committed to finding sustainable solutions for agricultural challenges and encourages collaboration to improve the sector. Prior to this, he also provided financial assistance of P15,000 to small rice retailers and sari-sari store owners affected by the price cap on rice.⁴

Economics

The Philippines's economy experienced a decrease in the third quarter, with a year-on-year growth rate of 4.3%. This marked the third consecutive quarter of slowing growth, primarily due to slow government spending. The growth rate was lower than both the 7.5% recorded in the same quarter last year and the 6.4% in the first quarter of this year. On a quarterly basis, GDP contracted by 0.9% after growing by 1.1% from January to March, with all supply-side sectors experiencing negative growth.⁵ Government expenditures and private investment also declined compared to the same period last year. The government expenditures contracted by 7.1% and private investment by 0.04%, compared to growth rates of 10.9% and 17.2% respectively in the second quarter of 2022.

The absence of election-related spending in the first half of the year, which refers to increased economic activity during national elections in May last year, contributed to the slowdown in the economy. Economists expressed disappointment with the report, attributing the slowdown to all major sectors of the economy, fading “revenge spending,” and lower government expenditure. To boost the economy, the government is implementing remedial measures, including accelerating the execution of government programs and projects. The administration of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is relying on the Build Better More infrastructure plan to fuel growth, with a medium-term objective of sustaining infrastructure spending at 5% to 6% of GDP annually through 2028. While the country is still on track to meet its 2023 growth target of 6% to 7%, risks such as El Niño and volatile external trade conditions remain.

To achieve this year's growth target, the Philippine economy will need to grow by an average of at least 6.6% in the second half which according to the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) Secretary Arsenio Balisacan can be achieved if the government spending ramps up in the third and fourth quarters.⁶ On the other hand, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), the headline inflation in August rose to 5.3%, surpassing the 4.7% recorded in July which marks the end of six consecutive months of deceleration in inflation. The increase was primarily driven by higher prices of rice and fuel during the period.⁷ The surge in rice prices can be attributed to reduced rice production caused by El Niño and the export ban imposed by major rice exporters like India and Myanmar. Vegetable prices also increased due to production losses caused by enhanced monsoon rains and Super Typhoon Egay. Fuel prices also contributed to the rise in inflation, with oil companies raising diesel and gasoline prices. In response to the rising inflation, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. ordered a price

cap on rice. Economists have expressed concerns about supply constraints and the negative impact on consumers and farmers. Finance Secretary Benjamin Diokno emphasized the importance of ensuring sufficient rice supply at reduced prices while avoiding non-competitive behavior in the rice industry.

Foreign Affairs

President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. announced that the Philippines and Malaysia have agreed to hold the next Philippines-Malaysia Joint Commission Meeting. The meeting will focus on discussing priority areas of cooperation in various fields of mutual interest. President Marcos made this announcement following his bilateral meeting with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. President Marcos highlighted the commitment of both nations to collaborate closely in building capacity in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in the southern Philippines, particularly in sectors such as the Halal industry, Islamic banking, and food security. Malaysia has offered its expertise to train Philippine personnel and officials to strengthen their capabilities in these important sectors. Both President Marcos and Prime Minister Ibrahim reaffirmed their commitment to support activities within the framework of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), recognizing the importance of ASEAN Centrality. Prime Minister Ibrahim echoed President Marcos' sentiments and highlighted their agreement to accelerate the process of resolving outstanding MOUs and signing them prior to or during the joint commission meeting.⁸

Additionally, to commemorate their 49th year of diplomatic relations, the Philippines and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are gearing up to strengthen their technology partnerships in the coming year. Leveraging the Philippines' pool of skilled IT professionals and the UAE's status as a prominent technology and innovation hub, the two nations are set to embark on a collaborative journey. Already having signed multiple agreements centered around technology, the Philippines is committed to further amplifying these joint efforts to foster a fruitful exchange of knowledge and expertise. In a recent interview, H.E. Mohammed Noordin Macatoman, the Philippine ambassador to the UAE, expressed the Philippines' enthusiasm for engaging in various technology initiatives alongside the UAE. These aspirations include Smart City Development, Data Center Establishment, AI and Robotics Research, and IT Workforce Training. By amplifying their technological collaboration, the Philippines and the UAE are not only strengthening their bilateral relations but also positioning themselves as formidable players in the global technology landscape. This synergy will undoubtedly yield innovations that ex-

tend far beyond their borders, impacting various sectors and industries.⁹

Lastly, the leaders of the Philippines and Indonesia announced their intention to strengthen their defense and security cooperation in response to the highly unstable geo-political situation in the region. During his two-day visit to Indonesia, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. emphasized the importance of inclusive and concrete collaboration between the two nations. During their talks on Monday, the two leaders witnessed the signing of several significant agreements. These included the renewal of the 1997 Agreement on Cooperative Activities in the Field of Defense and Security, as well as the Philippines-Indonesia Plan of Action, which aims to strengthen economic ties in areas such as agriculture and energy over the next five years. Both sides also discussed the role that they believe the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) should play during these challenging times in geopolitics, not just within the region but globally. They agreed that ASEAN should take the lead in bringing peace to their respective countries and promoting positive changes in the world.¹⁰ In regard to the South China Sea, the tension between China and the Philippines is still high. China constructed a 300-meter floating barrier, which the Philippines coastguard claimed was preventing fishing vessels from accessing Scarborough Shoal and they promised to remove any more floating barriers installed by China at a disputed reef in the South China Sea. Following the removal of the barrier at the mouth of Scarborough Shoal by the Philippines coastguard, the Philippines' fishing boats entered the shallow lagoon and captured approximately 164 tonnes of fish in one day.¹¹ The shoal, which is 594 nautical miles (1,100 kilometers) from China's southern island of Hainan and 120 nautical miles (222 kilometers) from the Philippines' Island of Luzon, is claimed by both nations since China has maintained a coast guard force there from 2012 onwards.¹²

Conclusion

In conclusion, the third quarterly update of the Philippines highlights significant developments in domestic affairs, economics, and foreign relations. In terms of domestic affairs, the country entered the election period, which brought heightened security measures and restrictions on certain activities. President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. pledged to promote the interests of the Philippines at the ASEAN Summit and Related Summits, emphasizing advocacies such as a rules-based international order, addressing issues in the South China Sea, and combating human trafficking. Furthermore, President Marcos authorized financial assistance programs for rice farmers and small retailers affected by price caps. In the economic sphere, the Philippines experienced a deceleration in growth during the third quarter,

primarily due to the slow government spending. The government expenditures and private investment declined compared to the same period last year. To stimulate the economy, the government is implementing measures to accelerate the execution of programs and projects, particularly through the Build Better More infrastructure plan. While the country is still on track to meet its growth target, risks such as El Niño and volatile external trade conditions remain.

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Chapter 8 | Singapore

Him Rotha, Sok Molyneang, and Vorn Manatra

Introduction

Singapore in the third quarter of 2023 was dominated by the discussion of the Presidential Election. Prior to the election in September, domestic politics in Singapore was rocked with political scandals from the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and the opposition, the Workers' Party (WP). Economically speaking, the country has a positive projection with steady growth. Nevertheless, the house rental price in Singapore has kept increasing to the point of concern.

Domestic Politics

Singapore has elected a new president for the first time since 2011

On September 1, Singapore held the Presidential Election for the first time since 2011. Four individuals submitted the letters of intent officially to the Elections Department. Those are former Senior Minister, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, former CEO of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), Tan Kin Lian, former Head of the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC), Ng Kok Song, and a businessman, George Goh. Three eligible candidates for the presidential election are Ng Kok Song, Tan Kin Lian, and Tharman.

The election ended with Tharman's victory. He got 70% of the votes, while the other two got a little over 10% respectively.¹ With a history in politics and governance, Tharman will carry out presidential duties, including protecting reserves, while focusing on integrity and independence. He is committed to resolving these challenges and ensuring Singapore's future success.²

The Corruption in Singapore

Singapore's Former Transport Minister S. Iswaran and multibillionaire businessman Ong Beng Seng were detained and released on bail on July 11 on the corruption charge. Iswaran was given a leave of absence until the investigation is complete, and his passports were seized as a condition of their

release.³ The Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) questioned Iswaran for ten hours on Tuesday.⁴ As the investigation is still on-going, this corruption case has not yet been revealed any further. Iswaran is still the Minister and an MP, while there are some demands to suspend his posts during this investigation.⁵

Investigation into the two Ministers' Renting Houses Concluded

The investigation into Singapore's Minister for Home Affairs, K. Shanmugam and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Vivian Balakrishnan over the alleged corruption on renting home was concluded with the two Ministers being found not guilty.⁶ Rumors circulating around May questioned the two Ministers' financial capability in renting the state bungalows at Rideout Road. Some accusations appeared online around May, claiming that those houses could be priced up to almost SGD 1 million a year, while their ministerial annual salaries are around SGD 1 million.⁷ Nevertheless, according to the investigation led by Senior Minister, Teo Chee Hean, the Home Minister, Mr. Shanmugam has paid SGD 26,500 per month, while the Foreign Minister has paid SGD 19,000 and later SGD 20,000 a month, of which less than 70% of the price circulating in the May rumors.

However, there are still critics to that report, and among them was Lee Hsien Yang, the Prime Minister's brother. He questioned the credibility of the report in his social media posts.⁸ Ministers for Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam and Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan have addressed Lee Hsien Yang's legal letters regarding slanderous claims about their renting of two black-and-white houses. Opposition lawmaker Kenneth Jeyaretnam expressed concerns about ministers purchasing public properties for less than fair market value. Investigations have not found any illegal activity or unfair treatment. Yang defended his tweet, claiming it was written in the UK. Shanmugam and Balakrishnan should file a lawsuit against Yang in the UK if they have a strong case.⁹

Singaporean MPs resigned over extra-marriage affairs

Four Singaporean Members of Parliament resigned from the posts over extra-marriage affairs. Speaker Tan Chuan-Jin and MP Cheng Li Hui resigned from their parliament and the People's Action Party (PAP) after an affair, citing improper language and seeking healing. Seah Kian Peng, who was the Deputy Speaker from 2011 to 2016 was elected to replace Tan Chuan-Jin.¹⁰ Leon Perera and Nicole Seah left the opposition party, the Workers' Party due to their extramarital affairs. Both the PAP and WP regretted their party cadres' acts and called for the nation to move on.

Socioeconomic Affairs

This quarter, Singapore has seen the falling price of private homes for the first time in three years. Other than that, the island country had agreement with Malaysia to operate a special economic zone (SEZ). Besides these positive events, money laundering was discovered and cracked down in Singapore.

Money Laundering Scandal in Singapore

Singapore cracked down money laundering crimes in September, arresting at least 10 people, three of whom are Cambodian citizens.¹¹ The three Cambodian passport-holders are Chinese-nationals as they were just naturalized into Cambodian citizenship from 2018 to 2021. Those detainees are alleged to be related with an organized crime group, called the Fujian Gang. Singaporean authorities raided their homes and seized luxury goods and money in cash around SGD 1 billion.

Singapore private home prices fell for the first time in three years

Singapore's private home prices fell for the first time in three years by 0.4% in the second quarter of 2023 as estimated by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). This marks the first quarterly decrease since 2020, as price momentum eased across all market segments. The price fall comes after property cooling measures were set by the Singaporean government, including an increase in additional buyer's stamp duty. The government has increased housing supply to meet demand, with a Confirmed List supply of 9,250 units for 2023. Non-landed property prices fell by 0.5% in the second quarter, driven by properties in the rest of the Central Region, the Core Central Region, and the Outside Central Region.¹²

Singapore and Malaysia are discussing setting up the Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone

Singapore and Malaysia are discussing to establish a special economic zone in Johor and the Republic to boost growth and connectivity. A task force, led by Singapore's Ministry of Trade and Industry and Malaysia's Ministry of Economy, will study the zone's terms of reference and collaboration areas. The zone will focus on transport connectivity, innovation, the business ecosystem, the environment, tourism, and technical and skills training. Malaysian Minister Rafizi Ramli has urged investors and businesses to understand the zone's value proposition and harmonize immigration and customs processes.¹³

Foreign Relations

As usual, Singapore is busy with diplomacy. In this quarter, the Prime Minister Lee Hsein Loong was on diplomatic trips to Jakarta and New Delhi for big-ticket multilateral engagements, such as ASEAN Summit and G-20 Meeting.

PM Lee went to Jakarta and New Delhi for ASEAN and G-20 Meetings

Singapore's Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong led delegates to Jakarta and New Delhi for ASEAN and G-20 Meetings. In the ASEAN Summit, PM Lee pushed for the implementation of Myanmar Five-Point Consensus and called for ASEAN to deepen the integration amidst the complexity of geopolitical landscape.¹⁴ In Delhi, PM Lee said multilateralism is "still alive, but needed to be refreshed".¹⁵

PM Lee Hsien Loong met with Cambodia's New PM

PM Lee Hsien Loong wrote a congratulations letter to PM Hun Manet, the new PM of Cambodia, saying that he was looking forward to meeting him. Along with the good relations between Cambodia and Singapore, PM Lee Shien Long also mentioned that there will be commerce, investment, aid, and a joint military drill between the Cambodian and Singaporean armies. Moreover, he also mentioned cooperation on the export of renewable energy to Singapore and the carbon credit sector, including cooperation on climate change and digitalization.¹⁶

PM Lee met with PM Hun Manet during the sideline meeting of ASEAN Summits in Jakarta this September. The two Premiers reaffirmed the commitment to strengthen the two countries' relations. Interestingly, PM Manet expressed his willingness to learn from Singapore's Defense Strategy and National Services.¹⁷

The Singapore-based businesses are accused of providing support to the military junta

Singapore-based organizations are involved in the supply chain for Myanmar's military, with no blanket trade boycott. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs aims to stop the gun flow and forbid dual-use military products. MPs demand information on Singaporean banks' financing cases and investigations against military-related companies.¹⁸

Singaporean Chinese-Language Newspaper was Alleged to be Pro-China

According to Mahtani and Chandradas' article in the Washington Post, the Chinese-language newspaper Lianhe Zaobao, published in Singapore, repeats Beijing's propaganda.¹⁹ Lianhe Zaobao rejected the allegation in the report and took a clear editorial position. Further than that, Mr. Lui Tak Yew, the Ambassador of Singapore to the United States, has written a letter to the editor rejecting the accusation, citing that Singapore has a strong public backing for its foreign policy, which is focused on national interests.²⁰

Conclusion

To sum up, in the third quarter of 2023, Singapore encountered many events. The city-state found its new elected President for the first time in more than 10 years. Nevertheless, Singapore was surrounded by scandals of corruption of top government officials and political dramas of extra-marriage affairs. Besides political affairs, Singapore cracked down and seized around SGD 1 billion in money laundering. Yet, these events seem not to cause any harm to its business-as-usual domestic stability and its overseas diplomacy.

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Chapter 9 | Thailand

Hol theaneth and Long Sovitou

Introduction

This report provides an update on Thailand's domestic politics, economic affairs, and foreign affairs from June to September 2023. Thailand experienced a major political shift when Srettha Thavisin of the Pheu Thai party was elected prime minister over Pita Limjaroenrat of the Move Forward party. In tandem with the stabilizing political situation, Thailand's economy shows signs of improvement while its foreign relations continue to thrive.

Domestic Politics

The Election Commission (EC) has already disproved four allegations that may have led to the dissolution of the Move Forward Party. In his capacity as the EC's Political Parties Registrar, EC Secretary-general Sawaeng Boonmee dismissed Move Forward's rivals' four charges that the party had violated the Political Parties Act due to a lack of evidence.¹ However, the following day, political activist Ruangkrai told the EC that the minutes of the most recent shareholder meeting of Intouch Holdings Plc appear to conflict with an audio recording of the meeting. As a result, the business has instructed its subsidiary iTV Plc to investigate.² Afterward, Pita Limjaroenrat, the leader of the Move Party, rebutted claims that he is exploiting the election support his party received on May 14 as a justification for charges of breaking the law by saying he is committed to addressing the problems that the people face.³

As the first meeting to choose the speaker of the new House of Representatives approaches, the conflict between Move Forward and Pheu Thai, the coalition's two biggest allies, is getting worse since the eight political parties involved in forming the next government have not yet reached an agreement on which party will control the position of House Speaker, delaying the final decision.⁴

It was announced that Wan Muhamad Noor Matha, an experienced Muslim politician from the extreme south of Thailand, was chosen by lawmakers to fill in the role of Speaker of the House of Representatives. He committed to carrying out his responsibilities with transparency, integrity, and respect for the

Constitution, laws, and parliamentary procedures after being chosen for the office of House Speaker.⁵

In other news, Prayut Chan-o-cha reportedly said he will quit the United Thai Nation Party (UTNP) as well as all Thai politics. In a Facebook post, Prayut stated, “I would want to express my gratitude to the people who supported the United Thai Nation Party and me in the previous election.” He urged all other UTNP members to respect the party’s core principles of preserving the state, the monarch, and religion as well as to strive for the interests of the people notwithstanding his absence from the party.⁶

Meanwhile, Pita failed in his attempt to be elected prime minister by the Parliament as he only received 324 votes, the majority of which came from his coalition of eight parties, while 182 others voted against him and 199 others were undecided. He required 375 votes to win.⁷ The eight-party coalition later chose to put Pita Limjaroenrat forward as its candidate for prime minister in the subsequent round of voting.⁸ In a further development, Srettha Thavisin, one of Pheu Thai’s three candidates for prime minister, claimed that quitting the eight-party coalition may be inevitable and declared himself ready to govern Thailand moving forward. The eight coalition partners’ representatives would soon discuss their further coordinated action, according to Srettha. If the executive board of the party agreed to let Pheu Thai propose its candidate, Pheu Thai would select one of its three candidates for prime minister. The eight-party alliance, it was underscored, would “remain united until any change.”⁹

In August, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra reportedly returned to Thailand on the 22nd.¹⁰ Prior to being brought before the Criminal Division for Persons Holding Political Position of the Supreme Court in the Phra Nakhon district to hear the charges against him, his family members and the media were given up to 10 minutes to speak with Thaksin.

On a separate note, Srettha Thavisin, a Pheu Thai contender, was declared to have been elected as Thailand’s 30th prime minister, effectively breaking the nearly 100-day parliamentary gridlock. After hours of debate, the former real estate billionaire received 482 votes in the joint parliamentary session, far more than the required 374 votes. 19 parliamentarians were not present, 81 members abstained, and 165 votes were against. Srettha also succeeded in winning the backing of 152 senators, with Move Forward MPs constituting the bulk of his opponents. Srettha was afterwards proposed as the only candidate for prime minister by the coalition by Cholnan Srikaew, the leader of Pheu Thai. The coalition holds a majority in the Lower House with 314 total MPs.¹¹ Related to this, as he led his new Cabinet to take the oath of office, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin declared that his administration would respect democratic ideals while the King served as the head of state. He reaffirmed his administration’s commitment to acting as the people’s government and its unwavering commitment to serving the needs of the populace. He is also committed to advancing equality for all Thais in order to boost the country’s economy.¹² In connection with this, a statement of policy that Srettha would present to the Parliament

is reportedly nearing completion. The newly approved administration led by Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin has a policy that can be summed up in seven parts, including “1 stimulation, 3 speeding up, and 3 creation,”¹³

Economic affairs

According to the Board of Investment (BOI), Thailand’s ambition to become a regional hub for three industries—manufacturing of electric vehicles (EVs), upstream electronic manufacturing, and digital and creative—has been significantly boosted by soaring investments. The BOI has also put six measures into place to support the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the supply chain for these three industries. Through its “Thai Overseas Investment Support Centre” training program, the BOI additionally aids SMEs looking to expand internationally.¹⁴

As long as there are more foreign visitors to Thailand, according to the director of the Bank of Thailand’s monetary policy department, the tourism sector will continue to be the country’s main engine of economic growth. The Bank of Thailand director claims that, while the headline inflation has been sharply down despite a slight increase in food prices and the core inflation has remained steady, the government spending has increased in both operational and capital expenditures. The improvement in the labor market will also result in increased consumption.¹⁵

As the political atmosphere in the country seems to have stabilized and is improving, overseas investors have expressed interest in investing in Thai equities. Sectors like tourism, transportation, and commerce are reporting increased profitability and expansion, particularly in soft-power industries.¹⁶

The Commerce Ministry reported that domestic inflation rose by 0.88% in August despite constant costs for fresh food due to an increase in oil prices. Cost increases has led to an increase in the price of public transportation. In addition, prices for personal care items, cooking gas, and electricity remained higher than in the previous year.¹⁷

Foreign Relations

Trade ties between Thailand and Saudi Arabia have grown following a visit by the Thai Chamber of Commerce Chairman to Riyadh. According to Sanan Angubolkul, the Chairman of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, disclosed that PTT Oil and Retail Businesses has received an invitation from a Saudi business group to establish filling stations in Saudi Arabia that include retail spaces, restrooms, and other amenities similar to those in Thailand. He also disclosed that PTT is currently in discussions about joint investment in significant projects, such as making Thailand a supply chain for green hydrogen.¹⁸

Thailand also participated in the 2023 OSCE Asian Conference in Vienna, using the platform to pro-

mote Asia-Europe cooperation on issues like climate change and cybersecurity. During the Conference's discussion sessions, the Thai delegate made comments that elevated a number of issues of common concern. On non-traditional security issues like cyber security and climate change, these included developing good engagement and collaboration between Asia and Europe, particularly between ASEAN and the OSCE.¹⁹

Within ASEAN, the Thai parliamentary delegation visited Jakarta for the annual ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly meeting. The Wan Muhamad Noor Matha-led delegation was greeted by Supadma Rudana, an Indonesian lawmaker and vice president of the AIPA.²⁰

Lastly, Thailand and UAE are progressing well in negotiations for a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, aiming to finalize it by end-2023. Meetings of the Trade Negotiating Committee, chaired by the Thai side and represented by the director-general of the Department of Trade Negotiation, were held during the negotiations.²¹

Conclusion

The election of Srettha Thavisin as Prime Minister marks a significant political shift in Thailand. As his new government establishes itself, the stabilization of the political situation has fostered economic optimism. However, it remains to be seen how the change in leadership will impact Thailand domestically and globally. Domestically, Srettha will need to deliver on his populist agenda to boost the economy and living standards of ordinary Thais. His policy priorities include increasing minimum wage, expanding healthcare coverage, and investing in infrastructure and tourism. However, he faces challenges from a fragmented parliament and coalition. Srettha will have to compromise with other parties to ensure stability of his government. His policies also carry economic risks if deficit spending increases substantially. The long-term impacts on growth, public debt levels and inflation will need to be managed prudently. Too aggressive spending plans may undermine investor confidence.

Globally, Srettha is expected to pursue a balanced foreign policy. Relations with China and the US will be crucial for trade and investment. Srettha may be less hawkish on China compared to the previous military-aligned government. But maintaining strong ties with the US and other western nations will remain a priority. Within ASEAN, Srettha is likely to leverage Thailand's economic strength to exert greater diplomatic influence. His government may play a key role in facilitating greater economic integration through existing and new trade deals. Overall, Srettha faces high public expectations domestically for economic reforms amidst a complex parliamentary landscape. Globally, he has an opportunity to make Thailand an anchor for regional growth and stability. The success of his government over its four-year term will determine the long-term social, economic and diplomatic standing of Thailand.

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Chapter 10 | Vietnam

Nou Seihak, Khan Menghok, Loeng Chetha, Moeung Cheery, Han Phakdeypanhaboth, and Him Raksmeay

Introduction

Between July and September 2023, Vietnam has experienced a number of challenges, including shifts in the global economy and politics, global inflation, food and power security, and natural disasters. Therefore, in this third quarterly report, there will be updated briefings covering three key essential developments in the domestic politics, the economy, and the foreign relations in Vietnam. On the balance, Vietnam remains in a good position in all aspects. While the domestic politics remains strong and stable, Vietnam's economy has continued to prosper. Additionally, Vietnam has shown efforts and commitment to strengthen its diversified diplomatic and economic cooperations, bilateral agreements, and upgrading relations with various countries around the world.

Domestic Politics

There were various events in Vietnam's domestic affairs. This part covers the current status of the East Sea conflicts, ethnic terrorist attacks, as well as the proposal and adaptation of various domestic laws.

On July 4, Vietnam and China held the 16th round of negotiations regarding the demarcation of the sea area beyond the mouth of the Gulf of Tonkin and the 13th round of consultation on cooperation for mutual development to discuss marine issues.¹ Both parties reaffirmed each nation's stance on the delimitation of the sea area beyond the mouth of the Gulf of Tonkin. They exchanged opinions to promote cooperation at sea, including the early negotiation and signing of a new agreement on fisheries cooperation in the East Sea.

On July 6, the Spokesperson of Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pham Thu Hang, held a press conference in response to the public concern on the issues of the terrorist incident in Dak Lak and the news that Japan would soon release treated radioactive water into the ocean.² In response to Dak Lak's case, the government rejected that the terrorist group was caused by "ethnic discrimination"

but instead due to violating the law and national security. Meanwhile, in response to Japan's treated radioactive water, Vietnam held that each country must be responsible for ensuring nuclear safety and security while cooperating closely with the international community for information transparency.

Meanwhile, on July 16, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs made the official statement regarding Vietnam's standpoint on the East Sea that the dispute needs to be resolved through peaceful means in accordance to international law while also reaffirming its legitimate sovereignty over Hoàng Sa (Paracel) and Trường Sa (Spratly).³

On July 17, the President's Office announced the adoption of the eight new laws to be put in order by President Vo Van Thuong.⁴ The new eight laws are the Law on Civil Defence, Law on Cooperatives, Law on Bidding, Consumer Rights Protection Law, Law on Electronic Transactions, Law amending and supplementing several articles of the Law on People's Public Security, Law amending and supplementing several articles of the Law on exit and entry of Vietnamese citizens and the Law on entry, exit, transit, and residence of foreigners in Vietnam, and Price Law.⁵

On August 3, another press conference by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson resolutely opposed China's drill in the East Sea and asked China to respect Vietnam's sovereignty over the Paracel Islands and avoid repeating similar violations. It also stated, "China's inclusion of part of the Paracel Islands in a military drill area in the East Sea from July 29 to August 2 seriously infringed on Vietnam's sovereignty over the archipelago".⁶

On August 25, the National Assembly's Chairman evaluated the draft amended land laws and telecommunication laws.⁷ The new amendment land laws focus on adding necessary detailed criteria and guiding principles for empowering localities to oversee the bidding and auction of land use rights. At the same time, the telecommunication laws will also adjust regulations for three new services, including over-the-top (OTT) telecommunications, data center, and cloud computing services.⁸

On August 28, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Pham Thu Hang, Vietnam demanded Taiwan to permanently cancel its illegal military drills in Vietnam's Truong Sa (Spratly archipelago) as it is a severe violation of Vietnam's territorial sovereignty threatening peace, stability, maritime safety and security.⁹

Economy

In the economic aspects, Vietnam continues to be hit by global inflation, which has been slowing down its economy. Therefore, these parts will update on Vietnam's economic forecast, tourist attraction updates, foreign direct investment updates, and bilateral and multilateral trade with various partners.

According to the General Statistics Office, Vietnam's economy grew only 3.72%¹⁰ in the first six months of 2023, much lower than the official target of 6.5% and the lowest half-year growth in 13 years except 2020. As a result, the Global Market and Economic Research has revised its GDP growth forecast for Vietnam by the end of this year to 5.2%, from the previous forecast of 6% and forecast that interest rates will continue to be cut off in this third quarter to curb economic growth.¹¹ However, according to the Vietnam National Authority of Tourism, Vietnam welcomed approximately 7.8 million international visitors in the first eight months of this year, already hitting 97.5% of the whole year target¹² due to the new visa policy, and more are expected to come in the second half of 2023.

On July 10, according to the statistics of the Cambodia Ministry of Commerce, Vietnam became the largest trading partner of Cambodia in Southeast Asia. Cambodia exported about US\$1.3 billion worth of goods and imported back totaling over US\$1.5 billion from Vietnam.¹³ On 25 July, Israel joined 16 partners to have a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Vietnam.¹⁴ This is the first-ever FTA between Israel and ASEAN countries, which ultimately removes duties on at least 86% of Vietnamese products and 93% of Israeli products, while both countries expected to boost bilateral trade from US\$2.2 billion to US\$3 billion after signing this FTA.¹⁵

As of August 15, according to the General Department of Customs, Vietnam enjoyed a trade surplus of over US\$16 billion as the country's total exports hit US\$209.43 billion while total imports were only US\$192.5 billion.¹⁶ This value of product imports declined 10.1%, or US\$23.5 billion, compared to the same period last year.¹⁷ According to Vietnam Customs, for these first eight months, vegetable and fruit exports increased by nearly 56%, equivalent to US\$3.5 billion.²⁰ This resulted from the expanding demand of Vietnam's agricultural market in China, the EU, and the US, while droughts and floods hit several countries. According to the General Statistics Office, in the first eight months of this year, exports to major markets such as the US, EU, ASEAN, and South Korea have dropped 19.1%, 8.3%, 8%, and 7.3%, respectively; while the significant drops were smartphones fell 15.4% and electronics fell 17.6%.²¹ Despite the positive progression, Vietnam has been facing a sixth-month consecutive drop in exports since March due to declining orders.²²

Moreover, as of August 20, according to the Ministry of Planning and Investment, Vietnam's total foreign investment, including newly-registered, additional capital and capital contributions, reached US\$18.1 billion, which increased 8.2% for the first eight months of this year.¹⁸ Singapore ranks first with more than US\$3.8 billion, accounting for 21.2%, followed by China, Japan, and Korea.¹⁹

Foreign Relations

Vietnam experienced paramount changes and developments in its foreign affairs as it has actively committed to practicing its diversified diplomatic skills. This part covers Vietnam's roles in regional

and global communities while also highlighting Vietnam's bilateral relations with major partners such as ASEAN, the U.S., China, Australia, and Brazil.

On July 10, a Vietnamese Communist Party delegation led by Politburo member Nguyen Xuan Thang visited China at the invitation of the Communist Party of China Central Committee.²³ During meetings, both sides highlighted the positive growth between the two Parties and countries' relations over the past years and hoped to deepen the comprehensive strategic cooperative relationship of the two countries.

On July 11-12, the Vietnamese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bui Thanh Son, attended the 56th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM) in Jakarta, Indonesia. On the sideline of the meeting, the foreign minister met with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi. Despite the tensions in the South China Sea, Wang said that China was willing to import more goods from Vietnam and would continue to enhance its communication with Vietnam to "consolidate strategic mutual trust and expand cooperation of mutual benefit."²⁴ Furthermore, on 16 August, Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Tran Luu Quang met Wang Yi in China, where Wang stressed that Vietnam and China shared the same communist-led socialist ideas, so "the two sides should prepare for the next stage of high-level exchanges" and urged Vietnam to prevent external interference.²⁵

On July 20, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim started the two-day official visit to Vietnam, where he met with the four most influential leaders of Vietnam: Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, President Vo Van Thuong, PM Chinh, and National Assembly Chairman Vuong Dinh Hue. Both countries also signed cooperation agreements in many fields, such as science, trade, and technology. Malaysia is now Vietnam's second-biggest trade partner within ASEAN.²⁶ Before the visit, PM Anwar said Malaysia could learn from Vietnam's redeveloping experience after French colonialism and the Second Indochina War.²⁷

On August 22, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong met with the Vietnamese Minister of Foreign Affairs Bui Thanh Son in Hanoi. Both sides agreed to upgrade both countries' relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership and acknowledged that cooperation in security and national defense has been improving. They also exchanged views on the South China Sea, emphasizing the role of international law, namely the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).²⁸

On August 28, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh met with his Singaporean counterpart, Lee Hsien Loong, in Hanoi, following the Vietnamese Foreign Minister's visit to Singapore in July.²⁹ During the meeting, Lee considered upgrading the relationship between both countries to a comprehensive strategic partnership. Chinh recommended Singapore import Vietnamese goods into its market and called

for more Singapore's investment in the country, especially in the technology field.³⁰

On September 5–9, Vietnamese PM Pham Minh Chinh led a delegation to the 43rd ASEAN summit and related summit at the invitation of the President of Indonesia, Joko Widodo. As one of the active members of ASEAN, Vietnam continues to discuss essential issues with regional and dialogue partners. Moreover, the PM urges all members to maintain the importance of ASEAN's central role, as it is the only way to uphold the spirit of independence, self-reliance, self-resilience, and respect for the rule of law and stay steadfast to their fundamental principles and norms of conduct. On the summit's sidelines, the PM also joined a bilateral discussion with all ASEAN leaders, dialogue partners, and investors.

On September 9, the US President Joe Biden arrived in Vietnam. President Biden met and held talks with General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, PM Pham Minh Chinh, and other Vietnamese leaders to discuss Vietnam-US relations further. Both nations have also agreed to upgrade their bilateral relations to the highest level, which is “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Peace, Cooperation, and Sustainable Development”.³²

On September 16, PM Pham Minh Chinh led a Vietnamese delegation to attend the 20th China-ASEAN Expo and the 20th China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit in China.³³ On the summit's sidelines, PM Chinh talked with Chinese Premier Li Qiang to discuss essential issues such as border issues, bilateral trade, the framework for opportunities, and collaboration.³⁴

On September 17, PM Pham Minh Chinh and a high-ranking Vietnamese delegation attended the high-level week of the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and official bilateral visits to the United States and Brazil.³⁵ This official visit to the U.S. followed the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership last week. During the trip to the US, the PM made official statements at the UNGA summit on economic recovery and post-pandemic response. Moreover, he also held nearly 20 bilateral meetings with the leaders of countries as well as private and international organizations.³⁶

Following that, the PM paid his official visit to Brazil at the invitation of the Brazilian President, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. The two countries discussed essential opportunities for collaboration across related sectors to promote bilateral trade to 10 billion dollars by 2025 and diplomatic relations as the most significant trading partners in Southeast Asia and South America.³⁷

Conclusion

For the past three months, Vietnam has experienced many domestic, economic, and foreign relations trends. Despite some slow progress in economic sectors due to the global inflation, Vietnam's domestic affairs and international relations are still set on stable ground. More developments are likely to happen, particularly on critical issues such as the situation in the South China Sea, Vietnam's comprehensive strategic partnerships, and economic recovery.

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