

## AVI COMMENTARY

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### **The 55th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting and Related Meetings: Strengthening Multilateralism**

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The COVID-19 pandemic and increasing rivalries and tension among the superpowers have undermined international order and security and hindered the progress the United Nations (UN) aims to achieve as it approaches its 77<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

In Southeast Asia, ASEAN is facing similar challenges. The geopolitical rivalries have far-reaching strategic ramifications for conventional and unconventional security. The threats to regional security include the Myanmar political crisis, the South China Sea dispute, the tension on the Korean Peninsula, the strained China-Taiwan ties, the war in Ukraine, climate change, transnational crimes, and terrorism. Some of these issues are old and extremely complex, and we should not expect ASEAN to solve them overnight.

Cambodia, as ASEAN chair in 2022, has just hosted the 55<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM) and related meetings, which generated fruitful discussions on ASEAN's goals for 2022 and real and implementable methods to promote ASEAN Community Building, ASEAN centrality and unity, and ASEAN external partnerships. ASEAN should deserve justice and recognition for its effort to protect and promote multilateralism, an effective mechanism for enhancing international cooperation in addressing current regional and global issues.

#### **Multilateralism Matters for ASEAN**

In more than half a century, ASEAN has grown to encompass all the countries in the Southeast Asian region, except Timor-Leste. It has encouraged political, economic, and social integration among its members and with its partners and positioned itself as one of the world's most active and robust regional organisations. ASEAN is the third-largest economy in Asia and the sixth largest in the world. To deal with the global economic meltdown triggered by COVID-19, ASEAN is committed to increasing its economic unity by concluding and signing RCEP in 2020. This level of multilateralism has scarcely been attained in other regions during the same period. Regional solidarity has also been promoted under ASEAN-led initiatives and frameworks, such as the AOIP and the ASEAN Community Vision 2025.

ASEAN was founded to promote peace and the well-being of people in the region. The regional development process is guided by agreements and mutual respect for independence,

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sovereignty, territorial integrity, equality, and non-interference. The ASEAN Charter codifies these concepts.

Due to their adherence to these concepts and values, ASEAN nations cannot afford to give up multilateralism, regardless of the threats. Over the past 55 years, ASEAN has become a major regional forum for consultative dialogue, confidence building, and trust promotion. The ASEAN Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) are the principal code of conduct governing interstate relations in the region and the foundation for maintaining regional peace and stability. ASEAN values collaboration via unity, not confrontation, creating a conducive environment for lifelong cooperation.

ASEAN will withstand the pressure from great powers' geopolitical competition together. The 55<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting and related meetings underlined ASEAN's ethos as a linked family of ten countries working together to achieve common goals. ASEAN places great importance on unity and solidarity in addressing regional challenges and increasing its contribution to regional and global peace, stability, security, and inclusive growth.

ASEAN is also a platform for collaboration between the organisation and its partners. It prioritises a neutral, secure environment for dialogue and trust building, not confrontation. The organisation approaches international disputes with neutrality, nonalignment, and good offices. ASEAN is a reputable mediator and everyone's friend.

This year has been exceptional. Tensions between China and the US and between Russia and the US are at an all-time high due to the war in Ukraine, Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, and China's large-scale military exercises in response. Yet, despite the tensions, China, Russia, and the US were seated together during the 55<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting and related meetings to discuss global issues.

At the event, an atmosphere of dialogue also emerged when South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin urged an unconditional conversation with the North Korean ambassador to Indonesia during the ASEAN Regional Forum in Phnom Penh. Re-establishing communication between the two Koreas is crucial to building trust. On the South China Sea issue, textual discussions for the Code of Conduct (COC) have resumed. At the same time, ASEAN remains committed to mediating negotiations and humanitarian assistance for Myanmar. ASEAN has displayed optimism and multilateralism.

### **Cambodia's Pro-Multilateralism Foreign Policy**

Multilateralism provides a solid foundation for Cambodia's foreign policy. In his comment at a high-level meeting convened in September to celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations, under the title, "The Future We Want, the UN We Need: Reaffirming our Collective Commitment to Multilateralism", Samdech Techo Prime Minister Hun Sen stressed, "Cambodia recognizes the central role of multilateralism in addressing complex global challenges we face today. Our challenges are interconnected and can only be addressed through reinvigorated multilateralism."

Cambodia's commitment to promoting multilateralism can be seen in its active participation in the UN's multilateral peacekeeping structure. The country has sent more than 7,000 troops to join the UN peacekeeping missions in several war-torn countries since 2006.

Moreover, Cambodia has demonstrated its commitment to multilateralism as chair of ASEM13 in 2021. ASEM is the second-largest multilateral framework after the UN for addressing global, regional, and transnational issues. Under Cambodia's chairmanship, ASEM was committed to accelerating the post-COVID-19 socioeconomic recovery, fostering economic development and financial resilience, and building a more fair, sustainable, and inclusive future for everyone.

This year, Cambodia chairs ASEAN for the third time since joining it in 1999, and it chose "ASEAN A.C.T.: Addressing Challenges Together" as the theme for ASEAN in 2022. The theme is based on a proactive and cooperative attitude, openness, honesty, good faith, solidarity, and harmony among ASEAN members to address common issues and achieve peace, harmony, and prosperity for all members.

Cambodia's foreign policy has consistently emphasised ASEAN centrality. The country has been a constructive and helpful member of the regional organisation despite being the youngest member. Cambodia's courageous acceptance to take the ASEAN chairmanship role in 2002, only after three years of membership, showed its strong political commitment to regional integration and multilateralism. This commitment has sustained and grown stronger.

Although the 55<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting and related meetings in Phnom Penh faced several challenges, it managed to approve the Joint Communiqué, and the meeting sessions were engaging and productive. Therefore, Cambodia's dedication to promoting multilateralism and international cooperation manifested clearly through its efforts and coordination as ASEAN chair. The country has impressively demonstrated diplomacy, knowledge and capacity in hosting the meetings, coordinating the preparation of statements, and paying attention to various details such as seating arrangement. As a result, everyone at the meetings shook hands, talked, and contributed inputs to the Joint Communiqué. During times of global conflicts, it is extremely difficult to get everyone on the same page and issue a joint statement. Yet, Cambodia could make this happen by maintaining trust and communication.

In conclusion, with the support and strong solidarity of the ASEAN Member States and international partners, Cambodia strives to enhance peace and inclusive growth for the whole region, leaving no one behind. Multilateralism and ASEAN are the cornerstones of peace and security, and they are crucial for small states and middle powers to balance global and national goals. The consultative and win-win strategy spirit emphasising cooperation and unity, which has emerged from the 55<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting and related meetings, provides optimism for a peaceful and cooperative future.

*The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Asian Vision Institute.*