



RIS
Research and Information System
for Developing Countries
विकाशशील देशों की अनुसंधान एवं सूचना प्रणाली



AIC
ASEAN-India Centre at RIS

AIC COMMENTARY

No. 41, July 2023

42nd ASEAN Summit: Outcomes and Future Outlook

Premesha Saha*

With raging debate on the failure of multilateralism, sluggish global economic growth, and a question mark on ASEAN unity along with crises in Myanmar and the South China Sea, ASEAN under the chairmanship of Indonesia has a lot to deal with. Against this backdrop, the 42nd ASEAN Summit took place at Labuan Bajo in Indonesia's East Nusa Tenggara from May 10-11, 2023. The summit witnessed significant progress on economic and institutional issues. However, progress on critical security issues like the South China Sea dispute and the Myanmar crisis remained elusive. This commentary argues that though efforts to strengthen the institutional capacity of the ASEAN are commendable, ASEAN will need to take a bolder approach to deal with the security issues like the South China Sea dispute and the Myanmar crisis in the upcoming summits.

Introduction

Indonesia assumed the chairmanship of ASEAN under very challenging circumstances. With raging debate on the failure of multilateralism, sluggish economic growth, and a question mark on ASEAN unity along with crises in Myanmar and the South China Sea, Indonesia has a lot on its plate to deal with. Hopes and expectations are high that Indonesia will steer the way for finding solutions to the crises inflicting the region. The successful completion of the G20 presidency has only added to these already high hopes. Against this backdrop, the 42nd ASEAN Summit was held at Labuan Bajo in Indonesia's East Nusa Tenggara from May 10-11, 2023. This commentary critically analyses the outcome of the summit.

Significant Outcomes: Statements and Deliverables

Several statements were adopted at the 42nd Summit. These statements/ declarations stressed on Indonesia's resolve to not only strengthen the institutional capacity of the ASEAN but also to ensure that the ASEAN is able to deal with many new challenges the Southeast Asian region is facing in the current times. A careful analysis of the statement adopted during the summit shows four significant outcomes. First and foremost is understanding of 'Advancing

* Premesha Saha is a Fellow with the Strategic Studies Programme at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi. Views expressed are of author's own.

Regional Payment Connectivity and Promoting Local Currency Transaction’. It aims to “foster bilateral and multilateral payment connectivity arrangements to strengthen economic integration by enabling fast, seamless, and more affordable cross-border payments across the region.”¹ The ultimate goal is to encourage the use of local currencies for economic and financial transactions among the ASEAN member states to promote the use of local currencies.

The second statement that stands out is ‘ASEAN Leaders’ Statement on Strengthening ASEAN’s Capacity and Institutional Effectiveness’. Its prime objective is to undertake efforts to uphold ASEAN centrality and unity while dealing with the challenges facing the Southeast Asian region and also the broader Indo-Pacific. The motivation to further strengthen the institutional capacity of the ASEAN is to ensure that the evolving regional architecture is ASEAN-centric and open, transparent, inclusive, and rules-based.² Given that the Indo-Pacific is witnessing a drastic rise in the number of minilateral and plurilateral platforms, there is the lingering possibility that the importance of the ASEAN might diminish, so efforts are being made to reduce such possibilities. Indonesia has always recognised itself as the ‘primus inter pares’ in the ASEAN and its foreign policy revolves around the ASEAN. Therefore, it seems only logical that during its chairmanship, Indonesia will try to revive the thinking that ASEAN has the potential to continue being a credible regional grouping, not only in Southeast Asia but also in the Indo-Pacific.

Indonesia providing a push to admit Timor-Leste as a full member of the ASEAN is the third significant outcome of the summit. Timor-Leste has been trying for nearly a decade to be a full member of the ASEAN. Dili formally applied for membership in the regional bloc in 2011, when Indonesia was the chair of the ASEAN.³ Though the decision to grant full membership to Timor-Leste was taken at the 41st ASEAN summit held at Phnom Penh in 2022, Indonesia is whole-heartedly trying to take the lead in this by drawing up the roadmap for Timor-Leste’s full membership in the grouping. The Prime Minister of Timor-Leste, Taur Matan Ruak, attended the 42nd ASEAN Summit in Labuan Bajo as an observer. Indonesian leaders have frequently referred to Timor-Leste as a “good neighbour,” with Jokowi even calling both countries “close brothers.”⁴ For Jakarta, good relations with Timor-Leste are important for ensuring stability in its shared borders, for Timor-Leste this would help in its economic development by getting greater access to the markets of the ASEAN countries. This would be a “good way to secure his legacy on the ASEAN stage”, similar to former Indonesian presidents who had left their footprints on ASEAN in most cases.⁵

Commitment towards the implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) through concrete initiatives and projects like the convening of the ASEAN-Indo-Pacific Forum is another significant outcome. The declaration emphasises the need to engage more with countries of the Indo-Pacific region. The proposal for establishing Secretariat-to-Secretariat cooperation between ASEAN- the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) and the ASEAN- the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), as well as the participation of the Chairs of PIF and IORA as the Guests of the Chair at the 18th East Asia Summit (EAS), has been floated.⁶ The AOIP thus far mainly focused on issues like maritime cooperation, SDGs, and connectivity, but the ADMM is currently developing the Concept Paper on the Implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific from a defence perspective. Indonesia is also pushing for the development of the ASEAN Maritime Outlook, the idea it proposed at the 25th meeting of the ASEAN Political and Security Council at Phnom Penh in

November 2022⁷. So, there is a possibility that an updated version of the AOIP with an ASEAN Maritime Outlook and the defence perspective can be released in the course of Indonesia's chairmanship. If this happens, it will enhance the role of the ASEAN to address shared security challenges in the region and strengthen its relations with external players and like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific region.⁸

Need for a Push

Despite notable progress on economic and institutional issues, summit witnessed little headway on issues that have been plaguing the security of the region.

South China Sea Code of Conduct Deliberations

With regard to the South China Sea Code of Conduct (SCS COC) deliberations, little to no significant progress was seen in the chairman's statement released after the meeting. The ASEAN-China Joint Working Group on the Implementation of the DOC (JWG-DOC) convened its 38th meeting on March 8-10, 2023, in Jakarta; however, the latest ASEAN Summit had little to do except recognising the meeting. Though the statement does mention that there is a need for an "early conclusion of an effective and substantive COC that is in accordance with international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS"⁹, no plan of action for this has not been drawn out.

Myanmar Crisis

There has been little progress on Myanmar and 'The Five Point Consensus' continues to be the preferred mechanism for dealing with the crisis in Myanmar. The progress made on the humanitarian front with the completion of the Joint Need Assessment (JNA), the partial delivery of humanitarian aid to the people of Myanmar on May 7, 2023, and continued efforts towards providing humanitarian aid would continue. ASEAN strongly condemned the recent attack on the convoy of the AHA Centre and the ASEAN Monitoring Team in Shan State.¹⁰ Though there is concern and condemnation of the escalation of armed conflicts and violence, ASEAN leaders have once again avoided taking any strong measures to ensure fair elections in Myanmar.

Conclusion

It is still imperative for the ASEAN to boldly deal with issues that are troubling the peace and stability of Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. There are a lot of expectations from Indonesia's chairmanship as Indonesia has always been seen as the "first among equals" in the ASEAN. Even in 2012 when the ASEAN failed to come up with a joint communique after a meeting, it was Indonesia's efforts which led to the release of this statement later. Recently, despite a tough geopolitical scenario due to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War, Indonesia managed to successfully host the G20 Summit in November 2022 and come up with a joint statement. Indonesia is known for its role as a successful mediator. ASEAN has formed the nucleus of Indonesia's foreign policy, therefore efforts to strengthen the institutional capacity of the ASEAN are well taken. But Indonesia will need to take a bolder approach to deal with the more serious issues like the South China Sea dispute and the Myanmar crisis in the upcoming summits.

¹ “Chairman’s Statement Of The 42nd ASEAN Summit Labuan Bajo, Indonesia, 10-11 May 2023”, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-42nd-ASEAN-Summit-1.pdf>

² “ASEAN Leaders' Statement On Strengthening ASEAN’s Capacity And Institutional Effectiveness”, <https://asean.org/asean-leaders-statement-on-strengthening-aseans-capacity-and-institutional-effectiveness/>

³ Patrick Dupont, “Why Indonesia is Backing Timor-Leste’s ASEAN Bid”, *The Diplomat*, March 6 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/why-indonesia-is-backing-timor-lestes-asean-bid/>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Chairman’s Statement Of The 42nd ASEAN Summit Labuan Bajo, Indonesia, 10-11 May 2023”, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-42nd-ASEAN-Summit-1.pdf>

⁷ “Indonesia pushes ASEAN Maritime Outlook at APSC meeting”, *Antara News*, November 10 2022, <https://en.antaraneews.com/news/259545/indonesia-pushes-asean-maritime-outlook-at-apsc-meeting>

⁸ “Chairman’s Statement Of The 42nd ASEAN Summit Labuan Bajo, Indonesia, 10-11 May 2023”, n.10.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

About AIC



RIS

Research and Information System
for Developing Countries

विकासशील देशों की अनुसंधान एवं सूचना प्रणाली

Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC works with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India and undertakes evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.

AIC Commentary Series Editor: Dr Pankaj Vashisht, AIC at RIS, New Delhi

Contact us at:

ASEAN-India Centre (AIC)
Research and Information System of Developing Countries (RIS)
Zone-IV-B, Fourth Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road
New Delhi – 110003, India
Tel. +91-11-24682177-80
Fax: +91-11-24682173-74
E-mail: aic@ris.org.in
Visit our website at: <http://aic.ris.org.in>

@AIC_aseanindia

