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Singapore's ASEAN Chairmanship: Advancing Peace & Security

By Joel Ng

Synopsis

Peace in ASEAN has been good for Singapore. As ASEAN Chair for 2018, Singapore has worked hard to enhance these prospects during its tenure which just ended.

Commentary

SINGAPORE'S YEAR as chair has been marked by several milestones in deepening peace and security in the region. Singaporean Foreign Minister Dr Vivian Balakrishnan stated that ASEAN "actually achieved far more than I dared to anticipate". Peace in the region has been a central benefit ASEAN has given to Singapore. Singapore in turn has built on this foundation to strengthen ASEAN initiatives in a time of uncertainty about the global order.

It is often said that one can only play the cards you are dealt. Singapore, as a small nation, cannot impose its own ideas in regional or global settings. Instead, it has a much trickier challenge of convincing other players, each with their own contexts and agendas, that strengthening the multilateral framework is in their best interests. It also must be ready to push things forward when the momentum develops.

Progress on South China Sea

Tensions in the South China Sea, long range missile tests, and threats of trade wars clouded the end of 2017, and set out the challenge for the regional grouping to further cooperation. Despite a veneer of unity presented at summits, these contentious issues are not easy to deal with. Against this backdrop, ASEAN and Singapore have played an integral part in ameliorating tensions on all three fronts.

The just-concluded ASEAN Summit in Singapore has further eased the tensions as

China agreed to shift into talks on the Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea and even offered a timeframe of three years for negotiations among claimants to be completed. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, as ASEAN Chair, declared this as good progress which all parties should go by.

The COC is perhaps the least well-known to people in the region – yet most important – document on the South China Sea disputes. With competing states attempting to apply different rules to claim legitimate sovereignty over the waters, fears arose that conflict could break out over misunderstandings or maritime encounters going wrong. The COC has been in gestation since the 2002 Declaration on Conduct in the South China Sea, but barely made any progress in the intervening years.

A single draft text was agreed this year and while that may sound like piecemeal progress, it is important to remember the headwinds facing the discussion: Chiefly, there is little incentive for China, as a much larger power, to sign anything at all.

Keeping all parties on board while pushing consensus and norms forward – at a pace that divergent parties can accept – is something ASEAN does well. During the discussions on human rights, for example, Singapore found itself sitting between states that were opposed to greater human rights protection and those strongly in support.

It found a way to forge a middle ground that preserved the unity of the grouping. In similar vein, Singapore and ASEAN have helped to keep moving the COC forward without alienating any of the negotiating parties. The significant difference this year has been China's explicit commitment to a rules-based order, a position it believes contrasts itself with the United States. China's commitment to have the COC signed within three years is thus an important achievement of this year's summits.

Other Regional Peace Initiatives

Perhaps the most surprising event of 2018 was the US-Korea peace talks in Singapore. As recently as last year, both sides had issued threats, North Korea had conducted missile tests, and the murder of Kim Jong Nam had soured relations with a previously cordial Malaysia. Singapore was one of the only plausible choices as a venue because of its high security, positive relations with both sides, and an avowed impartiality. Despite the hectic schedule of events as ASEAN Chair, Singapore put everything else aside to ensure this could go ahead.

Moreover, talks were cancelled just weeks before they were to be held, and Singapore could barely conceal its disappointment as it stood down its security services. Yet it remained alert and ready for their resumption, and its experience in hosting summits put it in good stead for facilitating the dialogue, regardless of uncertainties on either side. The successful engagement demonstrated the importance of Singapore as an open, inclusive, and highly-efficient state ready to contribute to international security.

Supporting Future Diplomacy and Peace

ASEAN has been paddling against global currents this year to offer some big surprises that give hope for continued multilateral initiatives that bring states closer together on

common objectives. Trade tensions between ASEAN's two largest partners – the United States and China – will continue to concern the region. Progress on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) therefore remains a priority for ASEAN though negotiations will continue into 2019.

It must be remembered that the very impetus of uniting as a region was to buffer individual countries against the pull of larger powers, whose efforts to draw smaller states exclusively towards them are often driven by whimsical domestic agendas. Prime Minister Lee noted that by maintaining a collective voice on global issues, ASEAN had raised its standing in the world and made it greater than the sum of its parts.

Singapore's chairmanship has offered a strong restatement of ASEAN's aims and bolstered the frameworks that were devised to address the myriad concerns of its members. Maintaining unity in the face of these pressures is probably the best way ASEAN states will maintain a strong position and secure the best outcomes for their continued growth.

Joel Ng is a Research Fellow in the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg