

The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

No. 027/2021 dated 30 December 2021

Three Key Challenges for Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022

Shawn Ho and Sovinda Po



Phnom Penh. Down which roads will Cambodia take ASEAN in 2022?
Photo by Sanket Deorukhkar on Unsplash.

SYNOPSIS

Cambodia's upcoming chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2022 falls at a time when three major issues will dominate the ASEAN agenda: (i) the Myanmar crisis, (ii) the South China Sea disputes and Code of Conduct negotiations, and (iii) the Covid-19 pandemic. How will Cambodia steer ASEAN

through these challenges? This article aims to provide a general overview of the likely approaches that Cambodia, as ASEAN chair, will take towards these issues.

COMMENTARY

Cambodia faced a huge amount of criticism during its previous chairmanship of ASEAN in 2012 because the association failed, for the first time in its history, to issue a joint communiqué at its annual ministerial meeting in July that year. This was due to disagreements among member states over the South China Sea issue.

However, there was instead a subsequent [Statement of ASEAN Foreign Ministers on “ASEAN’S Six-Point Principles on the South China Sea”](#), issued about a week later, on 20 July 2012, that is less often mentioned. While this statement does not change the fact that ASEAN had failed to issue a joint communiqué, it does mean that [ASEAN member states did make a joint effort](#) at the time to resolve some of their differences in an attempt to salvage the situation.

During its chairmanship of ASEAN in 2022, Cambodia is certain to be more mindful of how it will be perceived by states around the region and beyond regarding its foreign policy stance. Other countries will be watching keenly to see whether Cambodia will take a neutral stance amid the ongoing intensification of the US-China rivalry or tilt towards China, which it is often accused of doing by the Western media.

Cambodia’s chairmanship of ASEAN comes at a critical juncture, with three issues — the Myanmar crisis, South China Sea disputes and Covid-19 pandemic — continuing to brew in the region. These issues will pose challenges to Phnom Penh’s ability to steer the association.

The Myanmar Issue

Major obstacles remain in the peace and reconciliation process in Myanmar despite the efforts made by ASEAN over the past few months since the military coup of February 2021. From a Cambodian perspective, the Myanmar issue is a family problem to be dealt with among ASEAN member states: regardless of how bad a member is, the other family members will feel obliged to assist it (instead of completely isolating it), especially in times of crisis. This reflects Prime Minister Hun Sen’s general approach of dealing with the military junta in Myanmar, and it will affect how Cambodia, as ASEAN chair, manages the issue as it seeks to accommodate the interests of all parties concerned.

In early December 2021, Hun Sen met with Wunna Maung Lwin, the military-appointed foreign minister of Myanmar. Hun Sen also announced that he would travel to Myanmar to meet the military junta in early 2022. These are early signals of the engagement policy towards Myanmar that Cambodia is likely to adopt. Cambodia is likely to resist any calls to isolate the junta in Myanmar.

South China Sea Disputes

Since Cambodia has no claims in the South China Sea, it is uncertain whether Phnom Penh will place the South China Sea disputes at the same level of priority on the

ASEAN agenda as the Myanmar issue. Nonetheless, Cambodia will still hope to make some progress on the negotiations for a South China Sea Code of Conduct (COC) in consultation with other ASEAN member states and China. However, this will not be an easy task by any means, as shown by the repeated delays in making progress on the negotiations over the past few years.

Any progress in the COC negotiations will only be possible when Cambodia is able to restore trust and confidence, first with Vietnam and then, to a lesser extent, with the Philippines. As the two major ASEAN member states with key interests in the South China Sea disputes, Vietnam and the Philippines will invariably take tough stances in the negotiations, as will China.

In recent years, Cambodia's relationship with Vietnam has worsened given the strong involvement of China in Cambodia's Ream Naval Base. Vietnam sees that involvement as an encirclement attempt by China. As for the Philippines, the presidential election in May 2022 will be a major factor in determining the next Filipino administration's policy towards China in general, and the South China Sea disputes in particular.

The Pandemic

Given the uncertainty of how the Covid-19 pandemic will pan out in 2022, the reopening of borders among ASEAN member states will be another key policy challenge that Cambodia has to face as ASEAN chair. While several Southeast Asian countries have reopened their borders to other Southeast Asians and travellers from beyond the region, this decision could be reversed overnight if governments assess the risks to outweigh the benefits.

It also remains uncertain what impact the likely spread of the Omicron variant of the virus will have on the region as Southeast Asian states seek to strike a balance between protecting the lives of their citizens and safeguarding their livelihoods by reopening their economies.

Cambodia will need to do more as ASEAN chair to ensure that more vaccines are made available and distributed equitably across the ASEAN region, especially in the smaller cities and rural areas. It will need to work closely with the private sector, NGOs, other ASEAN member states and ASEAN's dialogue partners to achieve these goals.

The Challenge of Maintaining ASEAN's Relevance and Centrality

Cambodia's chairmanship of ASEAN will be a challenging one as it seeks to steer ASEAN through the three key issues highlighted.

ASEAN's ability to make a difference on the regional and international stage has come under the spotlight, especially in recent years. ASEAN's centrality is also being questioned amid signs that some of the major powers are seeking to create alternative multilateral platforms instead of continuing to go with ASEAN-led multilateralism.

Prime Minister Hun Sen, as one of the longest serving leaders in Southeast Asia, will have to muster all his years of experience in order to steer ASEAN through 2022. The

aim of ASEAN and Cambodia for 2022 must surely be to answer their critics and to prove that ASEAN, despite its shortcomings, remains the most viable multilateral platform available to Southeast Asian states.

The future of ASEAN will rest on Cambodia's shoulders through 2022, and the world will be watching to see whether ASEAN can emerge stronger and more united from these challenges.

Shawn HO is an Associate Research Fellow at the Regional Security Architecture Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), RSIS. Sovinda PO is a PhD candidate at Griffith University and a Research Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg