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Indonesia's 2023 Chairmanship of ASEAN: What to Expect

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SYNOPSIS

*Indonesia's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2023 has raised hopes that, under Jakarta's leadership, ASEAN will find progress in its hitherto weak — and, in the case of the Myanmar crisis, failed — management of regional challenges. But, as **SEE SENG TAN** warns, obstacles exist.*

COMMENTARY

What can we expect from Indonesia's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2023? In terms of international diplomacy, Indonesia's phenomenal success as the host of last year's G20 summit has raised hopes that its turn as ASEAN chair could potentially reverse the regional bloc's ailing fortunes.

Indonesia Riding High

Indonesia is riding high after its successful leadership of the G20 summit in Bali in mid-November 2022 — a global forum that few had any high expectations of, given that it was held against the backdrop of the Ukraine conflict. Through intense shuttle diplomacy between Kyiv and Moscow from late June to early July last year, President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo secured the participation (via videoconference) of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky — who openly snubbed Russia by referring to the gathering as the "G19" — while resisting pressure from the United States and its allies to disinvite the Russians.



Indonesia's deft leadership of the G20 Summit in Bali has raised hopes that its Chairmanship of ASEAN in 2023 will result in concrete steps forward in resolving several challenges facing the organisation. *Image from Wikimedia.com*

In recent times, many pundits have decried the death of multilateralism. The failure of the 2022 East Asia Summit in Phnom Penh to produce a statement agreeable to all participating states led many observers to bemoan the unlikelihood that anything good would arise when the G20 met in Bali. However, the G20 summit surpassed expectations and issued an official consensus declaration whose language on the Ukraine conflict bore the signs of a viable compromise, containing both severe censure of Russia and practical acknowledgement of "other views and different assessments". The G20 leaders also placed their collective support behind the reform agenda endorsed at the World Trade Organisation Ministerial Conference in June 2022 on improving the functions of the world trade body, including reform of its dispute settlement mechanism.

That Indonesia deftly pulled off those achievements surprised many (including this observer). Indonesia's goal for G20 consensus on Ukraine was less about brokering peace than seeking to alleviate the disruptions to the global food supply chain and the energy market brought about by the war. Since minimising such disruptions is the sort of bread-and-butter issues that concern the ASEAN countries most, in hosting and chairing a successful G20, Jakarta arguably delivered a win not just for itself but for Southeast Asia as a whole.

All this seems to augur well for Indonesia as ASEAN chair in 2023, be it leading the search for a durable solution for the Myanmar debacle or taking forward the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) — the world's largest trade pact comprising 15 countries launched at the start of 2022.

Potential Obstacles

That said, there are significant obstacles in the way. Hitherto, ASEAN's peace effort on Myanmar, principally through a "five-point consensus" struck with junta leader Min Aung Hlaing in April 2021, has proved fruitless. At a special session of the ASEAN foreign ministers in October 2022, the ministers expressed their "determination" to resolve the crisis in Myanmar. However, with leaders of the ASEAN countries keeping faith with the five-point consensus during their summits in November — along with the vague promise to review Myanmar's representation at future ASEAN meetings "if the situation so requires" — it remains to be seen what such determination means precisely. For his part, President Jokowi has proposed banning the junta altogether from future ASEAN summits. Whatever Jokowi and his ASEAN counterparts end up choosing to do, it may involve having to forcibly nudge ASEAN away from its long-held brand of consensus-based, minimalist regionalism if the grouping were at all to succeed.

Moreover, there is a possibility that Jakarta's leadership of ASEAN's pushback against the junta could be compromised by what some see as Indonesia's own authoritarian reversal. In December 2022, the Indonesian parliament enacted a new criminal code, which included controversial articles that criminalise insulting the president, blasphemy, cohabitation and sex out of wedlock, as well as limit the right to protest. Indonesia could well find itself on the back foot if it tries to adopt the moral high ground against the junta's conduct.

Nor is it obvious whether Indonesia will champion the RCEP, and ASEAN economic integration more broadly. Protectionism in Indonesia has grown under Jokowi, whose administration issued a slew of "governmental" cum "presidential" regulations including establishing a legal framework to regulate industry access to imported inputs and requiring local governments to spend a minimum of 40% of their goods and services expenditures on local products from Indonesian micro-businesses and small enterprises and cooperatives.

A [World Bank report](#) released this past December estimated that Indonesia had enjoyed a respectable annual GDP growth of 5.2% in 2022, thanks to the post-COVID-19 reopening of its economy and the rise in commodity prices. It is entirely possible that Jakarta might attribute that positive development to, inter alia, its protectionist policies. And yet, with over 40% of Indonesia's intermediate inputs imported from places like Japan, China, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong, the likelihood is that Indonesia's high-tech electronics, electrical appliance and automotive industries have in fact benefited from their participation in regional production networks.

Finally, much as a successful chairmanship of ASEAN will undoubtedly burnish Jokowi's legacy, regional priorities may end up taking a backseat to the president's national political considerations. Jokowi has confirmed that Indonesia's general elections (presidential, parliamentary and gubernatorial) will take place in February 2024. Speculation continues to abound over whether Jokowi and his supporters will push for a constitutional amendment that will allow him legally to seek a third presidential term, lest his legacy — including the planned relocation of the Indonesian

capital from Jakarta to Nusantara in East Kalimantan — is left to flounder by whoever succeeds Jokowi as president.

Indonesia's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2023 promises much, but expectations may need to be adjusted in the light of a host of potential constraints.

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