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18th ASEAN Summit

A Critique

Report of the IPCS Discussion held on 13 May 2011

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18th ASEAN Summit

A Critique

Report based on an IPCS discussion (led by Amb Navrekha Sharma and Prof Baladas Ghoshal) held at the IPCS Conference Room, on 13 May 2011, on the recently concluded ASEAN summit (06-07 May 2011) in Jakarta.

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The Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), established in August 1996, is an independent think tank devoted to research on peace and security from a South Asian perspective.

Its aim is to develop a comprehensive and alternative framework for peace and security in the region catering to the changing demands of national, regional and global security.

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Summary

- Unlike the 17th ASEAN summit, which was held against the backdrop of Chinese claims over the South China Sea, there were no major international issues, that brought the ASEAN countries together during the 18th summit.
- Myanmar assuming the next ASEAN chair was a major issue of focus during the 18th summit. ASEAN is likely to pressurize Myanmar to make measures (even cosmetic) before agreeing over this issue.
- Connectivity outside and within Southeast Asia, Food and Energy Security, Disaster Management and Sub-regional cooperation were the other main focus areas during the 18th ASEAN summit.
- The 18th ASEAN summit was seriously imperiled by the ongoing border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia.
- Failure of the ASEAN to convince Thailand and Cambodia to cease hostilities was a major failure of the 18th summit, highlighting ASEAN's inability to deal with internal differences among member countries.

Amb Navrekha Sharma

ASEAN's growing social integration and assertion of regional identity serve its relative strength as a regional organization. ASEAN, formed in 1976, originally included Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, and had a limited but an important role to play. The legacy of 'Swarnabhoomi', a group of 30,000 islands that constitute ASEAN, represents the harmonious social interaction of the association, along with a common sense of community. Today, with the membership extending to include Brunei, Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, the regional forum aspires to create an ASEAN community by 2015, modelled on the European Union (EU).

Initially, the common factor linking these countries was an anti-communist sentiment which later led to cultural linkages popularly know as the 'ASEAN Way'. The display of harmony with a combination of cultures provided a base for strengthening the regional structure. Although the member countries have different political systems, they have been able to successfully manage their relationships. The economy of the region started to boom in the 1990s, but the 1997-98 financial crisis created differences among the members with unexpected political repercussions. The political and social effect of the economic recession was a huge setback for the regional institution. Under the leadership of Indonesia, ASEAN succeeded in overcoming this catastrophe. ASEAN successes and failures have always been dependent on Indonesia's role. ASEAN, under Jakarta's leadership, produced the Bali Concord-I, initiating the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and Bali Concord-II, which initiated the ASEAN Economic Community. Indonesia has led from behind the scenes, and has handled sensitive political issues such as the Thai-Cambodian border dispute commendably. ASEAN's efforts to call for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi represent the credibility of the organization.

Prof. Baladas Ghoshal

The 18th ASEAN summit organized under Indonesia's chairmanship represented the dilemma between ideals that are cherished by the members of the community and the implementation of these ideas. The civil society in Jakarta claimed that the summit was disorganized, unprofessional and chaotic. It was in sharp contrast to the last summit that was held in Hanoi, Vietnam. The 17th ASEAN summit received wide media coverage whereas this year it was conspicuous by the absence of reporting. The 18th summit was clouded by division on the question of the Thai-Cambodian border dispute, which could not reach any significant agreement. Also the question of Myanmar assuming ASEAN chair in 2014 received a cold reception. Initially a communiqué was released announcing Myanmar's Chairmanship, which was later brought under consideration again.

A review of history shows that ASEAN has struggled to manage its internal disputes. Although measures for constructive engagement have been proposed, they could not make any tangible progress, first, due to the ASEAN non-intervention policy and second, due to the hidden skeletons of its own members. For instance, the Preah Vihar temple dispute between Thailand and Cambodia is yet to be resolved. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) declared Cambodia the rightful owner but the changing contours of borders also meant that Thailand had, at one point, made inroads into Khmer territory. Indonesia's effort to mediate between the two countries and send observer teams along the border was refused by both Cambodia and Thailand.

Indonesia's theme - 'ASEAN community in a global community of nations' is too ambitious: ASEAN should first concentrate on resolving its internal conundrum. ASEAN always needed the assistance of the international community in resolving its internal disputes. For instance, the Pedra Branca dispute between Malaysia and Singapore in 1979 was largely resolved by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2008. The international

community's support and assistance during the East Timor economic crisis and the 1997-98 environmental crises in Southeast Asia are also notable.

The 18th ASEAN summit was also important in terms of the consideration of Myanmar's chairmanship in 2014, but the leaders preferred to shift the focus from Myanmar to other issues such as food security and energy security. ASEAN receives huge support from the EU and due to Myanmarese human rights issues especially as perceived in the West; they wished not to further provoke the international community. Moreover Human Rights Watch had launched a schathing rebuke of ASEAN's proposal to appoint Myanmar as Chair of the organization. In 2006, therefore, the offer to Myanmar was withdrawn.

Finally, the issue of connectivity has been dominant in most of ASEAN discussions, including the recent one. By improving its connectivity and linkages, ASEAN has created economic value for itself on a regional basis instead of only on a country-wide basis. It has been relatively successful in its economic integration, which is a result of neither government policy nor a conscious effort, but a function of global capital, multinational companies and investors.

Discussion

Indonesia as the ASEAN chair might succeed in its own economic growth, but leading ASEAN towards economic integration in a short period will be tough to achieve. The economic integration of ASEAN is unrealistic because of economic disparities, lack of political will and differences amongst its members. However, in terms of greater integration, ASEAN has improved its economy post the 1997 financial crisis. ASEAN trade, which was less then 10%, has now increased to 30%.

It is not feasible to compare ASEAN to the European Union. EU intra-association was created by capitalizing on the need for the evolution of a United European nation state, which took three to four hundred years to evolve. Due to Asia's colonial past, ASEAN countries have different issues to contend with before its anticipated integration by 2020.

It is important for India to use its soft power in Southeast Asia. Although India cannot export democracy, it can help in capacity building and the development of democratic institutions in Southeast Asian countries. It can provide technical assistance and indirectly use its soft power by providing human resource development, education and training in Myanmar. .

The East Asia Summit (EAS) in October 2011 will bring international focus with the new membership of the US and Russia. Interactions between ASEAN countries have been either bilateral or trilateral. They have not seen the institution as a trusted source of interaction. Engagements with outside power like the US, China, India and Russia will help in extending ASEAN's global influence. For the resolution of both internal and international disputes, ASEAN architecture will not suffice. However, it is also important to retain ASEAN credibility as on one the hand, although there are countries like Indonesia and Singapore that have the capacity to look beyond ASEAN, on the other, d there are smaller countries that need ASEAN's support.

There is a huge division among the Southeast Asian countries in terms of support for the US and China. How is ASEAN going to manage the friction that is emerging between China and the US in the region with these diverse opinions among its members?

Despite all these issues , ASEAN's importance as a regional structure cannot be denied. The creation of goodwill among its members, frequent interaction level-meetings which is lacking in other organizations such as SAARC and especially prevalent in South Asia, and ASEAN's increased role in the global arena cannot be disregarded. ASEAN has been relatively successful, if not in resolving conflicts, then at least in managing them in limited proportions. However, by extending its global influence and with the inclusion of the US and Russia in the EAS, it will be important to retain the centrality of ASEAN.