

## DISTRACTED ASEAN? WHERE TO FOR ASEAN CENTRALITY?

by Joyce A. Teodoro

The ASEAN Charter and key documents, such as the ASEAN Community Vision 2025: Forging Ahead Together, explicitly state that ASEAN maintains its centrality in the regional processes and in the conduct of its external affairs. Maintaining centrality is crucial to ASEAN's success as a regional bloc and critical to its relevance in the international arena. Moreover, through ASEAN centrality, a rules-based regional order is promoted and developed, consequently diffusing potential tension and conflict between and among states, whether big or small. ASEAN centrality rests on the idea that ASEAN has the capacity to play a leading and driver role vis-à-vis regional agenda setting.<sup>1</sup> It also puts premium on ASEAN's ability to act as leader, driver, and fulcrum of regional initiatives in relating with its external partners, while promoting, first and foremost, ASEAN's own interests.

ASEAN centrality is defined as ASEAN's role in the regional security architecture, regional order, and the power dynamics between and among external powers that have interests in the region. However, the assertion of this centrality draws strength from a politically cohesive, strategically coherent and economically prosperous ASEAN. These will serve as strong foundations for ASEAN in playing and asserting with credibility this centrality role.

However, ASEAN's cohesion, coherence and relations within ASEAN are showing cracks. The setbacks in recent years, most especially in the political-security issues, have only highlighted the internal friction between and among the AMS, due in part to the differences in threat perception on strategic issues they face in common. Moreover, the AMS are facing domestic issues that may divide their attention—whether attending first to the needs of the country and their constituents or attending to their regional commitments. It is against this backdrop that ASEAN is having a hard time in asserting with confidence its centrality.

### *Distracted ASEAN?*

The imperative on the AMS to deliver on the regional commitments as outlined by past and newly adopted blueprints cannot be overemphasized. More so, the expectation on ASEAN to make a unified stand on key strategic issues becomes more pressing not only because ASEAN is now formally a Community, but because the dynamic geostrategic environment demands it to be one.

But looking closely as to how ASEAN has responded as a bloc to strategic issues, one may be led to think that ASEAN may be falling short of expectations; the implications of which falls heavily on its credibility to assert a central role. In recent months, ASEAN was faced with situations wherein its unity and resolve as a bloc was put under stress. The setbacks in Kunming during the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting and the non-issuance of an ASEAN statement with regard to the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling on the Philippines' case are some examples that show ASEAN is falling behind expectations. Rather than being able to come up with a common voice, these situations only highlight that with respect to pressing developments, the AMS are not all on the same side of the fence. These also point to the bigger picture that the appreciation of issues, or threat perception among the countries, remains different among the AMS.

With respect to domestic issues, the individual AMS are also faced with concerns that need immediate attention. The possible implication of such a situation is that these may more likely to take precedence over the regional concerns. Domestic politics, no doubt, will have a ripple effect on ASEAN. For instance, several AMS are facing political and economic uncertainties. In Cambodia, there is a growing concern on the escalation of political tensions between the government and the opposition as the general election in 2018 draws near. Malaysia has been grappling with questions on the political legitimacy of its leadership due to governance issues. Myanmar, while undergoing numerous changes since a new leadership was installed, is facing some setbacks, in particular on the peace process with the indigenous groups (e.g., Rohingya). Under a new leader-

ship, the Philippines is recalibrating its policy directions, with a strong focus on internal peace and order situation, in particular fighting drugs and criminality. Also, the country's foreign policy is undergoing some calibrations under the new administration. In Thailand, there is a cloud of uncertainty on the country's political future as it transitions to a new era without the guidance of its revered leader King Bhumibol Addulyadej, the anchor of the Thai society. Indonesia, meanwhile, is relatively less engaged regionally as it was before and the effect of which is palpable because Indonesia is regarded as the natural leader of ASEAN. As a result, [ASEAN](#) has been devoid of Indonesia's leadership and guidance.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, this may also provide an opportunity for other AMS to take on the responsibility of leading ASEAN in sectors where they are believed to be at the forefront.

Without question, all of these developments affect the regional bloc. Their domestic politics/concerns may distract the respective governments to deal with regional issues. Also, due to different appreciation of issues such as geostrategic ones, the AMS may be susceptible into making compromises that may only be beneficial to a few but not to the entire ASEAN region. It may be timely to remember what S. Rajaratnam, one of the Founding Fathers of ASEAN said during the signing of the Bangkok Declaration – that there is a need to have a two-level mindset wherein the AMS do not only think about their national interests “but posit them against regional interests”. He furthered that while these two may conflict, ASEAN needs to face these painful adjustments if the bloc intends to succeed.

#### *Drawing ASEAN centrality from internal progress*

ASEAN's next steps on the deepening and broadening of regional community building efforts have been laid down by the ASEAN Community Vision 2025. In addition, the recently adopted Initiative for ASEAN Integration Work Plan III and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 will complement the Community Pillars' blueprints to ensure that community building remains on track. More importantly, the Leaders, through the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on ASEAN 2025, resolved that the AMS together with the ASEAN Organs and Bodies shall implement the action lines identified in these documents. These documents are aimed at delivering tangible benefits to the region, to the individual AMS, and more importantly, to the peoples of ASEAN. The vision of achieving an integrated ASEAN will bear into fruition if these regional commitments are translated down to the domestic level.

The work is cut out for the AMS. Institutionally, the AMS are expected to take heed of regional developments so that the implementation of commitments is not constrained by the respective bureaucratic set-ups. The alignment of the regional instruments to the national policies is crucial if ASEAN intends to fast track the implementation of regional commitments down to the respective AMS. The successful realization of the vision and action lines, therefore, will result in a more progressive and stable ASEAN. These positive developments will undoubtedly help ASEAN in solidifying its stronghold on centrality.

The pressing issues faced by ASEAN, as a whole, and Member States, individually, should serve as a constant reminder to behave and act coherently. ASEAN centrality will not hold true even if the concept is established in the ASEAN Charter. Efforts and commitment are needed to ensure that centrality is not only on paper but practiced by ASEAN. 🌸

#### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>SIIA. "ASEAN Centrality in the Regional Architecture." Singapore Institute of International Affairs Policy Brief, 2015.

<sup>2</sup>Surin Pitsuwan. "ASEAN Beyond 2015: What to Expect?" Lecture, Mangrove Forum on International Relations, Foreign Service Institute, Pasay City, August 24, 2015, <http://www.fsi.gov.ph/former-secretary-general-shares-views-on-aseans-future/>

Joycee A. Teodoro is a Foreign Affairs Research Specialist with the Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies of the Foreign Service Institute.

Ms. Teodoro can be reached at [jateodoro@fsi.gov.ph](mailto:jateodoro@fsi.gov.ph)

*CIRSS Commentaries* is a regular short publication of the Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies (CIRSS) of the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) focusing on the latest regional and global developments and issues.

*The views expressed in this publication are of the authors alone and do not reflect the official position of the Foreign Service Institute, the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Government of the Philippines.*

The Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies (CIRSS) of the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) undertakes studies in support of the formulation, review, and dissemination of Philippine foreign policy. It also organizes conferences, roundtable discussions (RTD), lectures, and forums as channels for interaction, cooperation, and integration of the efforts of local and foreign experts from government, private and academic sectors on foreign policy issues and their domestic implications.

