



21st ASEAN Summit 2012: Key Outcomes

*Dr. Vibhanshu Shekhar**

As part of their annual cooperative deliberations, 10 ASEAN countries and its eight dialogue partners took part in a series of meetings over three days (18-20 November, 2012) at Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia and the chair of ASEAN for 2012. Their slogan of ‘one community one destiny’ displaying their continued commitment towards building an ASEAN community by 2015 appeared vulnerable to another growing opinion about ‘no ASEAN centrality or leadership without unity.’ The ASEAN deliberations have brought forth several trends with repercussions for the broader Indo-Pacific world.

First and foremost, the South China Sea dispute once again brought to the fore internal bickering among the ASEAN member countries. The Chairman’s statement of the 21st ASEAN Summit meeting, while underlining the importance of Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in South China Sea Dispute and (2002) and ASEAN’s Six-Point Principles on South China Sea dispute (2012), also called upon the member states for peaceful resolution of the dispute ‘through consultations and negotiations by sovereign states directly concerned.’ While Cambodia declared that ASEAN had agreed not to ‘internationalise the South China Sea issue,’ reflecting China’s position, the Philippino delegation expressed reservations over such an agreement among the ASEAN member states and asserted its sovereign right to defend its territorial interests in a manner as it saw fit. The Philippines called upon the U.S. to play a greater role in the resolution of the dispute. ASEAN’s response to its apparent disunity can be best understood in the form of

(a) acknowledging China's influence on Cambodia, (b) letting the Cambodian storm pass, and (c) pursuing what has been called 'quiet diplomacy.'

Second, the 21st ASEAN summit also provided greater regional and international legitimacy to both the ASEAN framework and its demand for a binding Code of Conduct over the South China Sea dispute. Even amidst his call for not internationalising the South China Sea dispute, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao agreed to the leadership role of ASEAN within the ASEAN-China framework for dialogue and the relevance of a Code of Conduct in the efforts towards peaceful conduct of parties in the dispute and ultimate resolution of the dispute. On the other hand, the freshly re-elected and beaming U.S. President Barack Obama called upon the claimant parties to follow a peaceful method of conflict resolution and supported the ASEAN framework as the main vehicle for the dialogue over South China Sea dispute.

Third, the 7th East Asia Summit saw an active participation from the U.S. and its desire to play an active role in the regional deliberations. Obama visited three mainland Southeast Asian countries – Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia and the visit was viewed largely a part of America's rebalancing strategy. Two important statements came from the U.S. – call for peaceful resolution of the South China Sea dispute within the ASEAN framework and active participation in the 7th East Asia Summit as evident from various U.S. proposals and initiatives. Some of these initiatives are implementation of the Rapid Disaster Response (RDR) agreement concept, the U.S.' intention to accede to the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), Brunei Darussalam-US English Language Enrichment Project for ASEAN, and Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia and the United States to establish a U.S.–Asia-Pacific Energy Partnership for a Sustainable Energy Future.

Fourth, ASEAN member states launched a fresh initiative for negotiation for a pan-East Asian Economic integration involving 16 founding members of the East Asia Summit (10 ASEAN states and six dialogue partners – Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand), known as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Moreover, the initiative has been kept open for any other FTA partner of ASEAN willing to join the initiative. The framework agreement of RCEP outlines its purpose as 'to achieve a comprehensive and mutually beneficial economic partnership agreement' that will 'involve broader and deeper

engagement with significant improvements over existing ASEAN FTAs/CEP with Dialogue Partners.’

The launch of RCEP has raised two unanswered questions – is it a compromise formula with ASEAN centrality between ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and EAS processes of integration; and is it an ASEAN counter-initiative to the American initiative of Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)? Augmenting the parallelism between the RCEP and TPP, Barack Obama had convened a meeting of the TPP members ahead of the RCEP meeting. The initiative offers India a much-needed and much-desired opportunity to get integrated with the larger East Asian economies. Some ASEAN countries including Singapore welcomed the Indian participation in the RCEP negotiation.

Fifth, though both India and ASEAN made commitments during the 10th India-ASEAN summit, they seemed to have kept the best of their announcements for their commemorative summit, scheduled to take place on December 20-21, 2012. India and ASEAN agreed to set the new bilateral trade target of US\$100 billion by 2015, develop a new India-Myanmar-Laos-Vietnam-Cambodia Highway, and extend the much-delayed India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway to Laos and Cambodia. The trilateral highway earlier received a shot in the arm with the U.S. declaration of support for the initiative.

Finally, in addition to some important functional decisions, the 21st ASEAN summit also took two important steps – adoption of the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, and the convening of ASEAN Global Dialogue. The Chairman’s Statement of 21st ASEAN Summit called AHRD as ‘a new milestone for ASEAN in the implementation of the ASEAN Charter.’ The summit elected Le Luong Minh, Vietnam’s Ambassador to the United Nations as ASEAN’s new Secretary-General of ASEAN for the period of 2013-2018 and handed over its Chairmanship to Brunei for the year of 2013.

The proceedings of these summit meetings amply demonstrate growing ASEAN vulnerability and continued undermining of the ASEAN Way. They also exhibited an increasing acknowledgement of ASEAN centrality in the regional strategic and economic deliberations. Active US presence also provided a sense of satisfaction and support for ASEAN’s efforts towards community building process.

** Dr. Vibhanshu Shekhar is Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*