

ASEAN NEWSLETTER

*Prepared for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea by
the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia*

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ASEAN News Updates

The ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation

(December 10, 2013)

The ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR) held its first Governing Council (GC) meeting at the ASEAN Secretariat. The meeting discussed, among others, the Work Plan of the AIPR, the recruitment of Executive Director, funding, and reporting mechanism of the AIPR. The AIPR was established under Provision B.2.2.1 of the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint. Based on the ASEAN Leaders' Joint Statement on the Establishment of the AIPR, which was adopted on May 8, 2011, the institution is associated with ASEAN in accordance with Article 16 of the ASEAN Charter. (Source: Tempo.co)

ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children maps out plan of action

(December 2, 2013)

Subsequent to the adoption of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Elimination of Violence Against Children in ASEAN by the Leaders at the 23rd ASEAN Summit on 9 October 2013, the ACWC discussed strategies to implement the eight areas of commitments reflected in the Declaration. A framework of actions was discussed based on the corresponding projects under the ACWC Work Plan 2012-2016. An inter-sectoral consultation meeting with other relevant ASEAN bodies and dialogue session with civil society organisations were planned for February 2014 to socialize the Declaration and explore their potential contribution to its implementation. (Source: ASEAN Secretariat)

ASEAN Chief visits typhoon Haiyan ground zero; reiterates support to Philippines

(November 22, 2013)

ASEAN Secretary-General Le Luong Minh arrived in Tacloban City where he personally conveyed the Association's full solidarity with the Filipino people and to see how ASEAN can better support the Government and the people of the Philippines in its relief and long-term recovery efforts. "The devastation is massive but we know that the resilience of the people in this country is even greater. ASEAN will stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Philippines in restoring hope and progress in these communities," Minh said on his arrival in this typhoon-ravaged city.. (Source: Philippine Information Agency)

ASEAN Readies To Provide Relief To Philippines; Offers Assistance To Vietnam

(November 13, 2013)

The Asean Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) together with the Asean Secretariat, Asean Committee of Permanent Representatives, Asean Defence Attaches, and Asean Dialogue Partners yesterday convened at the AHA Centre to discuss collaborative efforts in response to Typhoon Haiyan emergencies in the Philippines and situation in Vietnam. "Within this week, Asean aims to distribute relief items including generators, mobile storage, and Asean Family Kits urgently needed to Tacloban. We are focusing on the most desperately needed food and clean water. The AHA Centre has stockpile ready to go. Local procurement is also underway. A key impediment is logistics, as the airport was destroyed," said Asean Secretary-General and Asean Humanitarian Assistance Coordinator Le Luong Minh. Earlier, Secretary-General Minh offered assistance to the Philippines in response to the devastation brought about by Haiyan. (Source: Brudirect.com)

11th Asia-Europe Foreign Ministers' Meeting (ASEM FMM11)

(November 13, 2013)

The 11th ASEM Foreign Ministers' Meeting (ASEM FMM11) was held in Delhi-NCR, India from November 11-12, 2013. It was attended by 34 Foreign Ministers from Asia and Europe. The theme of the meeting was: "ASEM: Bridge to Partnership for Growth and Development" provided opportunity for the Ministers to exchange views on a number of economic and financial issues and sustainable development as also non-traditional security challenges and regional and global issues. They also assessed the achievements of ASEM in the past 17 years and its future orientation. Ministers agreed to intensify efforts to bring about greater synergy between Asian and European partners of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) across the three pillars of political dialogue, economic cooperation and socio-cultural exchanges (Source: Ministry of External Affairs, India)

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ASEAN Focus*Bunn Nagara**Senior Fellow**Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia*

As ASEAN grows in stature, experience and functions, more is expected of it. Its performance also comes under greater scrutiny. Thus at certain defining moments, assessments are often made of ASEAN's performance whether or not such assessments are consistently well-founded.

In approaching its first half century (2017), ASEAN would also have notched up a telling record, accumulated valuable lessons and collected a significant number of objectives. ASEAN would also have developed a particular character and distinct traits.

One element in ASEAN's character is consensus as *modus operandi*. In a contentious region with contested territories, and despite vast disparities in strength and wealth among nations in South-East Asia, ASEAN has not only survived but prevailed and developed. Membership has grown from five to six, then seven, and then nine and finally the full 10.

It is doubtful if ASEAN would still be around today had there not been consensus as a mainstay of decision-making. ASEAN's growth in membership in incorporating its newest members, which are mostly smaller and poorer than the more established ones, might never have happened without consensus as its work culture. Although consensus is often slow and sometimes frustrating, it works – and conceivably works better for ASEAN, in being more acceptable, than alternative modalities.

Another element in the ASEAN toolkit is the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of member states. This has also been subjected to criticism, usually by the impatient with little time to understand the region's evolution and sensitivities. However, absent this principle, what might the alternative be?

Part of appreciating the ASEAN context is understanding that ASEAN can and does intervene, but rarely and subtly, without acknowledging it as intervention. One example of this is the way it prevailed on Myanmar to skip its turn to chair ASEAN in 2006 on account of its poor record of human rights. However, misperceptions and misreporting sometimes give the credit of persuading Myanmar to forgo its turn to Western governments even when they have no authority to do so.

Despite the principle of non-intervention being neither exclusive nor unique to ASEAN, it has often been elevated in effect to such a status. It is a founding principle of ASEAN among other principles, as it had been with other transnational entities like the United Nations Organisation and the Non-Aligned Movement. ASEAN has no proprietary claim to the principle, nor does the principle have such a claim on ASEAN.

Nonetheless these and other elements of ASEAN, applied in practice and sustained by rhetoric, collectively make up the notional "ASEAN Way." Although procedurally there is room for improvement by fine-tuning ASEAN practice, occasional misunderstanding and under-appreciation of ASEAN processes all too easily throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. Interestingly, despite ASEAN's many critics, none has produced an alternative method or style or "way" that can conceivably work better for its members – not only on paper, but in practice as well.

Somewhere between values and principles on the one hand, and programmes and projects on the other, are objectives like ASEAN Centrality and a People-centred ASEAN. They are part of the means to ASEAN's ends, as well as part of the ends themselves.

Much of ASEAN Centrality used to be known as "ASEAN in the driving seat." It refers to ASEAN's decisive or defining role in matters that cover more than just the ASEAN countries' combined territories. The area that is so covered then has the ASEAN area central to it, or ASEAN as an organisation driving its outlook and activities.

One example of such an organisation is the 27-member ASEAN Regional Forum comprising countries in East Asia, South Asia, the Pacific plus the European Union. ASEAN Centrality is sometimes occasioned by ASEAN's compelling imperatives, supported by its energy, imagination and creditworthiness, and at other times by default through the lack of these qualities in ASEAN's partners. As an objective, ASEAN Centrality is supposed to imbue organisations and activities important to ASEAN with ASEAN values and principles.

For many, a People-centred ASEAN is a long overdue objective. Since its inception in 1967, ASEAN has almost exclusively consisted of a series of intergovernmental meetings. While these meetings have been valuable, even essential, in helping to develop regional relations, they have skirted people-to-people interaction that can do much to take those relations further. Today, what had until recently been a hypothetical "People-oriented ASEAN" has grown into a proposed "People-centred ASEAN."

As an Association of South-East Asian Nations, ASEAN is supposed to bring entire nations in the region together and not just their governments. Since the governments have set the scene in the public sector for decades, it is high time that ASEAN peoples in various capacities in the private sector do their part. Better people-to-people relations between countries would help their respective national leaders in improving relations between their governments as well.

Currently the prime project for ASEAN is the ASEAN Community, comprising the three pillars of the Political-security Community, the Economic Community and the Socio-cultural Community. The AEC (ASEAN Economic Community) is often said to be the most advanced pillar, but only by virtue of its more detailed schedule ("road map"). In practice, however, all three pillars still need considerable work.

An inadequate understanding of ASEAN realities has led some to suppose that the ASEAN Community, or at least the AEC, will be "created" by 2015 as a defining moment. All three community pillars cannot simply be created, but have to be nurtured, nourished and developed. Then they need to evolve.

This implies a phased, organic process instead of a snap action that is decreed. That is why the AEC, or any of the other ASEAN pillars, will not suddenly come into being on 1 January 2015 or even on 31 December that year. It is a progressive movement or journey through a continuum. That is also why the journey had begun some time ago, and why it will continue even after 2015.

ASEAN itself will continue to grow and evolve. The European Union also undergoes continual development and refinement, constantly adjusting to its members' needs and external demands. This responsiveness is an indication of a living, sentient and intelligent being.

ASEAN continues to be assessed on its key founding principles. Judgment is usually based on how faithfully ASEAN in practice abides by these principles – and the values and ideals on which they are based.

All of these are vantage points from which to evaluate ASEAN further. There are more than a few moments in ASEAN's history when it seems perfectly natural to pass such judgment on it. If only to help ensure that ASEAN delivers, it is apt to evaluate ASEAN from time to time.

However, a frequent problem lies in flawed evaluations. These often result from mistaking ASEAN's purpose, misjudging its capacity or misunderstanding its character.

From Outcast to ASEAN Chair

Natalie Shobana Ambrose

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Since the admission of Myanmar as a member of ASEAN in 1997 the regional body spent over a decade defending its controversial decision up until reforms began after the elections at the end of 2010. In 2011, ASEAN was 'positively considering' Myanmar's bid for chairmanship of the grouping even though Europe and many countries like the US maintained tight political and economic sanctions on the country. Myanmar had previously given up its rotational turn in 2006 because of international pressure due to a weak human rights record and the years of house arrest of pro-democracy leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. Of course by 2011, this was old news and Myanmar's ASEAN chair bid was a litmus test of its full acceptance into the grouping and international community.

Since then, Myanmar the country with two capitals Rangoon and Naypyidaw, has showed up many of its ASEAN brothers through vigorous reforms by welcoming opposition parties into parliament, freeing political prisoners, relaxing press and censorship laws and even passing an International Labour Organization approved law which allows for labour unions to be formed and allows for strikes with prior notice given – something a few ASEAN founding member countries are yet to allow.

These reforms have caused an ease of sanctions enabling Myanmar to become a fast growing economy and more importantly become the poster child of democratic transformation which is seen as a sign of acceptance and re-entry into the global community.

After waiting 17 years, Myanmar is finally ASEAN chairman for 2014 taking over from the very capable and excellent 2013 chair Brunei Darussalam. Many may say Myanmar has big shoes to fill as Myanmar's organising skills were tested and found weak earlier in the year when it hosted the World Economic Forum in June 2013 but with its limited resources, the country has since improved as witnessed when it hosted the 27th Southeast Asian Games in December 2013. Problems such as a shortage of hotels rooms have been pacified. Brunei managed well with 2000 rooms and Naypyidaw now boasts 4,286 hotel rooms, but with weak infrastructure it might still prove a challenge and strain resources.

In a recent address at the Yangon Institute of Economics titled 'Building the Future of Myanmar', Christine Lagarde, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) stated that "*As Myanmar opens up and expands, it needs the structural foundations of a modern economy. This is an urgent priority. Three-quarters of the population have no access to electricity. Road density is only a fifth of the ASEAN average and almost half of existing roads are not passable during monsoon season. Telephone density is less than 10 percent, and only 1 percent of the population uses the internet.*"

Needless to say as a newly opened country, Myanmar is nowhere near expected standards of a country that will be hosting over 1000 meetings, its delegates, support staff and the influx of journalist. But the country's will is strong and the want to succeed not just as a facilitator of regional discussions is fuelled by the need to distance itself from its past and shine on the world stage leaving a different legacy to be remembered by – and the ASEAN chairmanship is the platform to do so.

Each chair maintains a set of identical broad goals as the previous Chairs of moving forward with regards to ASEAN economic integration, to find a resolve, reduce tensions, manage and defuse the multiple South China Sea disputes and prepare the agenda for the grouping's future. While ASEAN's 2015 regional integration deadline nears, it needs to prepare now for the 'what next' questions that will arise and Myanmar has an opportunity to drive the agenda forward as preparation needs to be done immediately if not years before.

Each Chairmanship has its strengths. For Myanmar one of its many assets is that fact that it is regarded as a 'bridge between the two great civilizations of India and China'. As chair, the ASEAN centrality agenda of finding a balance and managing extra-regional influence and presence within the region can be integrated into Myanmar's chairmanship.

With the theme 'Moving Forward in Unity in a Peaceful and Prosperous Community', Myanmar does have a one glaring challenge that will be under the international microscope more so during its time as ASEAN Chair

which is its human rights record – in particular with regards to the religious violence that is displacing the Rohingya.

While Myanmar has made inroads on other human rights concerns such as the release of many prisoners of conscience and President Thein Sein's clear remarks signalling support for amendments to be made to the Constitution saying that he "would not want restrictions being imposed on the right of any citizen to become the leader of the country".

This indicates a possibility that the 2008 constitution which reserves 25 per cent of parliamentary seats for the military and which specifically does not allow candidates such as Aung San Suu Kyi from running for president and vice president as her close family members 'owe allegiance to a foreign power' (she has two sons born in Britain with her British husband), reconciliation with the various ethnic groups needs to also be incorporated into new constitutional amendments.

The Rohingya are not officially recognised as nationals of Myanmar and are seen as interlopers from Bangladesh especially after 1982 when the ruling military junta stripped them of their citizenship, excluding them from Burmese society. While this is a significant and sensitive issue, Myanmar will need to address it well as ASEAN chair, even if it is considered an internal issue as many Rohingya have fled by boat to Thailand and Malaysia adding strain to relations with these ASEAN countries.

While it is a known fact that Chairmanship is not necessarily leadership, many have hopes that Myanmar will strive to improve its reputation strengthening its democratic transition efforts which is critical for the country in the long run and at the same time, leave a positive mark as ASEAN Chair.

Comment: ASEAN & the G20 in 2014*Steven C.M. Wong**Deputy Chief Executive**Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia*

The G20 Heads of Government Meeting will be held in Brisbane, Australia from 15-16 November 2014. It will be the ninth time that leaders will have met to discuss, among other things, global macroeconomic growth and stability. Whether G20 has lived up to all the hype about it being the world's most influential political economic body is seriously to be doubted. Quite apart from ill-advised and distracting interjection of political issues on to the agenda, the absence of coordination, or even common worldviews and approaches, on the part of members has made this talk fest open to criticism.

In one respect, however, the Brisbane Summit will be different from previous ones: It occurs at a time when the world economy is expected to pick up. Global economic growth in 2014 is forecast by the IMF and OECD to reach 3.6 per cent, up from 2.9 and 2.7 per cent respectively. The US economy, which has seen declining unemployment and improvements in non-farm payrolls, should grow around 2.6-2.9 per cent while is seen to emerge from negative 0.4 per cent to around 1.0 per cent. If these figures are anywhere close to reality, there will no doubt be a great deal of self-congratulations even though the G20 Summit agenda will have had little to do with contributing to these outcomes.

ASEAN is not a participant in the G20 but a regularly invited guest. It therefore does not have the weight or the responsibility of full members like Indonesia or Singapore who are. Having said this, its voice may in reality be no less than of a number of G20 members whose economies may be large are hardly influential. The fact that the Chair of the G20 is Australia – a country that knows ASEAN well and values its relations with it – also presents unique opportunities. As the ASEAN Chair, Myanmar is as yet untested quantity but there is likely to be a great deal of sympathy and goodwill for it as it struggles to reform. Both these factors speak well for ASEAN's attendance at this year's G20.

At the G20, Myanmar will no doubt want to highlight the development concerns, especially of the less advanced members of ASEAN like itself, and call for greater cooperation and assistance. This is to be expected and should be encouraged in order to instil a sense of realism amidst the celebrations. The global macroeconomic uptick is certainly something that is highly desirable but will not do much to trickle-down to poorer countries if it occurs in fits and starts. For less advanced countries in general to achieve development progress, the macroeconomic environment will need to be much more sustained and resilient.

More than this, the specific conditions in Asia, especially China, Japan and India will have a more important role to play in spurring the economic growth of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. With the Chinese economy in the midst of consolidation, the global economic upturn may lose some of its lustre. The economic reforms, on their own, are unlikely to lead to win-win outcomes and the ASEAN Chair is in the position to point this out. ASEAN's participation in the G20 is little more than making a statement. By being interested, interesting and fully engaging through its networking, however, the ASEAN Chair has the opportunity to temper any exuberance and confidence that the G20 might have.