



# Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 111 | May 19, 2011

## Indonesia Expands ASEAN's Role

BY KAVI CHONGKITTAVORN

Despite the Thai-Cambodia border dispute, which overshadowed the 18th ASEAN Summit held on May 7-8 in Jakarta, Indonesia has effectively expanded the role of the ASEAN Chair, which it holds for 2011. Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa discharged their duties as hosts with clarity and boldness. They confined the Thai-Cambodia dispute to a bilateral meeting between the two antagonists, thus allowing the summit to focus upon other issues. Support was garnered from other members to work out a common vision beyond the 2015 benchmark—when ASEAN will transform itself into a single community with at least 700 million citizens spanning eleven (including Timor-Leste) countries throughout Southeast Asia. Indonesia clearly aspires to create new opportunities for ASEAN by contributing to problem solving within a globalized world. However, to achieve this goal, ASEAN needs to develop into a more rules-based institution. This will include strengthening existing conflict resolution mechanisms pertaining to regional peace and stability, and creating new ones that consolidate overall ASEAN solidarity.

Kavi Chongkittavorn, Senior Fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University, reports from the 18th ASEAN Summit that the Chair Indonesia “[a]s the only ASEAN member of the G-20, prefers that ASEAN moves beyond its passive and narrow geographical narratives to incorporate a broader global perspective.”

With the overarching theme of an active ASEAN Community participating within a Global Community of Nations, Indonesia concentrated on two objectives—maintaining the centrality and creditability of ASEAN. To achieve these goals, Indonesia asserts that ASEAN needs to speak with one unified voice and world view, based upon the simple premise that there is space for ASEAN input on global issues. Foreign Minister Natalegawa reiterated that ASEAN's leading role within the global community begins with members' shared objectives and unity. Indonesia's continued impressive economic growth and democratic consolidation since 1998, coupled with its high political and religious tolerance, further augments Indonesia's regional and international prestige. More importantly, it also further strengthens Indonesia's leadership role in ASEAN. In the past few years, the world's third largest democracy has promoted shared values and norms for open society that strengthen democracy in ASEAN through its own Bali Democracy Forum. As such, working towards bridging the economic and social gap among ASEAN members remains a top priority for Indonesia.

The adoption of a joint statement highlighting ASEAN as a member of the Global Community of Nations is very significant. This move has the potential for ASEAN to be an active participant concerning matters of global concern, although it is premature to predict the exact nature of issues that ASEAN will address collectively. In the past, individual ASEAN members have actively discussed both traditional and non-traditional security issues including human trafficking, peacekeeping operations, climate change, energy and food security, healthcare, terrorism, and disaster management, but without adopting a common unified position on these matters. For example, all ASEAN members have, in some manner, contributed to United Nations Peacekeeping Operations, but not under the unity of the ASEAN flag. A new culture needs to be cultivated that collective positions do not undermine the sovereignty or territorial integrity of individual members.



**“The success and legacy of Indonesia as 2011 ASEAN Chair could very well rest on how efficiently Jakarta translates the whole gamut of its vision for ASEAN within a globalized world into tangible results.”**

Indonesia succeeded in getting a commitment from ASEAN leaders that this joint statement will be transformed into a declaration at the 19th Summit in Bali in November. A declaration allows the ASEAN Chair to further formulate ASEAN input on global issues of concern, without which individual ASEAN countries cannot hope to weigh in alongside the world’s heavy weights.

Indonesia, as the only ASEAN member of the G-20, prefers that ASEAN moves beyond its passive and narrow geographical narratives to incorporate a broader global perspective. ASEAN has already demonstrated that it can be vocal in matters of an economic and financial concern. Since 2009, the leader that holds the ASEAN Chair has been invited to attend G-20 Summits, thus raising ASEAN’s profile, especially within the financial realm. ASEAN has taken advantage of this invitation to highlight its financial surveillance system, known as Chiang Mai Initiative, which could also be applied to other regions to help cope with financial downturns. Yet ASEAN is rather timid when confronting non-economic issues which include social, political, and security concerns. At the 16th ASEAN Summit at Hanoi in 2010, leaders agreed that ASEAN needs to prepare a matrix of common positions on international issues. Unfortunately, this objective has yet to materialize.

In more ways than one, the agreement to establish an ASEAN Institute of Peace and Reconciliation, as outlined in the summit Political-Security Community blueprint, represents a milestone for ASEAN. Unlike other regional organizations such as the European Union, the African Union or the Organization of American States, ASEAN does not have an effective mechanism to resolve intra-member conflicts. The 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) provides a code of conduct and framework for the peaceful settlement of conflicts between members. However, disputing members have never utilized this mechanism to settle their differences. Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore relied on the international court of justice to end their border problems. With seventeen additional non-ASEAN signatories to the TAC, consensus will be even harder to forge. The envisaged Institute of Peace and Reconciliation will help provide structures to the ASEAN Secretariat, as well as to ASEAN leaders, to manage and resolve conflicts that may arise.

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the East-West Center.

[EastWestCenter.org](http://EastWestCenter.org)

[EastWestCenter.org/Washington](http://EastWestCenter.org/Washington)

Although ASEAN, throughout its 44-year history, has avoided wars among members, the on-off border dispute flare-ups between Thailand and Cambodia are cause for concern. Current ASEAN leaders, just like their predecessors, want to ensure that problems arising within the region be resolved through regional dispute resolution mechanisms. This is easier said than done, granted members’ preponderance to rely on outside institutions rather than bodies within ASEAN. It is pivotal for ASEAN to support the Institute of Peace and Reconciliation which can subsequently increase confidence and trust among members, thereby promoting regional stability.

As a young democracy, Indonesia’s engagements with civil society organizations have been quite exceptional. ASEAN-based groups have endorsed Indonesia for enabling them to present views and concerns directly to leaders. However, since its inauguration in 2005, the interface between ASEAN leaders and civil groups have been marred by controversies and boycotts. At last year’s summit, the ASEAN Chair Vietnam did not even hold the event. The resumption of these dialogues at this summit reflects Indonesia’s leadership and openness.

At the November Bali Summit, Indonesia’s prestige will increase further when it hosts the East Asia Summit with leaders from the United States, Russia, China and India. Indonesia will seek to engage all these major powers in creating a broad consensus related to the ongoing regional architecture. The success and legacy of Indonesia as 2011 ASEAN Chair could very well rest on how efficiently Jakarta translates the whole gamut of its vision for ASEAN within a globalized world into tangible results.