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Security Nexus Perspectives

COVID-19 AND THE ASEAN CHAIR AGENDA: VIETNAM'S LOST YEAR? AND BRUNEI'S, TOO?

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Abstract: *There is mounting concern the COVID-19 pandemic may negatively affect progress with several crucial issues confronting the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Precautionary measures such as restricted travel have virtually paralyzed progress while intensifying impacts have injected additional priorities on already crowded agendas, all to be addressed by Chairs facing increasing constraints. Efforts by the current and next incoming Chair – Vietnam and Brunei, respectively – will likely mitigate circumstances. ASEAN may also wish to consider bolder temporary measures to signal and reassure a sustained continuity and focus on these crucial priorities, despite the extraordinary challenges now faced.*

Keywords: COVID-19, ASEAN, ASEAN Chair, Vietnam, Brunei.

Given the centrality of ASEAN and its customary modality revolving around a dense calendar of face-to-face meetings, avoiding any impact from the COVID-19 pandemic was always going to be impossible. At the time of writing, the ASEAN Secretariat itself remains in limbo with precautionary measures such as travel restrictions severely curtailing operations. Progress with the massive regional agenda is almost at a standstill as officials at various levels are unable to move forward with planned routine meetings to advance ongoing work. As weeks and months drift by, to balance an expanding backlogged volume of work against a rapidly diminishing timeline, it is increasingly likely compromises will have to be made through a reordering of priorities to be addressed, and probably also, a more modest scoping of agendas and activities. These sorts of impacts will not be confined to ASEAN alone. Crucial derivative processes like the

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ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus mechanisms, will also suffer collateral impacts, as will likely other wider ASEAN-centric processes such as the East Asia Summit.

Compounding things, the current ASEAN Chair, Vietnam, is perhaps one of the most significantly affected by the pandemic. Upon assumption of the Chair role just a few months ago, a sense of optimism excited many about the potential of Vietnam's tenure (see e.g. Du 2020, Galimberti 2020). However, disruption and dislocation caused by the pandemic have significantly affected the normal functioning of government machinery and bureaucracy in Vietnam, which has unfortunately forced a reassessment. . Precautionary measures against contagion have upset established bureaucratic processes handling ASEAN-related matters, with a consequent loss in momentum. Worse, given Vietnam's deep integration into the world economy and supply chains, the economic repercussions of the pandemic have proved serious, with government attention rightly going towards urgent domestic priorities rather than external regional issues. Valiant efforts have been made to keep some ASEAN regional processes and dialogues going, particularly those related to initiatives mitigating current health-related concerns (Hoang 2020). And though some months remain in Vietnam's tenure as ASEAN Chair to expand on these positive efforts, doubts have legitimately been raised about the likelihood of Vietnam getting to some of its declared priorities, and perhaps more importantly, to look beyond pandemic-related issues and challenges that have crowded onto the agenda, to address long-standing and crucial challenges facing the bloc (Takahashi 2020).

Rightly, such concerns extend also to the next incoming ASEAN Chair, Brunei. Even under "ordinary" circumstances, the assumption of Chair responsibilities was always anticipated to be a significant undertaking, complicated by urgent big-ticket issues such as strategic competition and ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, the South China Sea Code of Conduct, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement, looming reviews of the ASEAN Community Blueprints and ASEAN Charter, and development of a post 2025 ASEAN Vision. Now, as it approaches its Chair role towards the end of 2020, Brunei is likely to inherit a suite of pandemic-related legacies and the unenviable dilemma of striking a balanced focus between these and onerous immediate and longer-term challenges facing ASEAN. Just recently, a budget was passed in Brunei with additional funding for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to prepare for the coming Chair year and associated summitry (Abu Bakar 2020). In connection with that, various priorities and ambitions were spoken of for Brunei's tenure. It is now likely that all this will have to be urgently revisited and recalibrated to juggle the realities of a post-COVID environment.

For those keenly interested in the fortunes of ASEAN, the likelihood of any dilution or delay in addressing some of the major issues described above is cause for considerable worry. Just how much of the pre-COVID agenda might be sacrificed? In addition to setbacks to Vietnam's aspirations, are we also looking at significant compromises for Brunei? Will these amount to the loss of not just one, but possibly *two* years for ASEAN? And what might we do now to minimize any deleterious impact on progress with these crucial agenda items that may pose grave consequences for international security, stability and prosperity?

To be fair, as Hoang (2020) points out, Vietnam and ASEAN have not sat idly by as the pandemic enveloped the region. Important accomplishments have come in regional cooperation responding to the extraordinary challenges shared by member states. Many have been enabled, moreover, by innovative

“virtual” mechanisms to overcome the restrictive pandemic conditions. In months to come, a redoubling of such efforts by Vietnam and very probably Brunei, will be likely. These will be crucial in assuaging concerns of any loss in momentum.

That said, it is important for the credibility and relevance of ASEAN for it to reassure wider stakeholders and supporters that despite the distraction of the pandemic, its members remain resolute on pursuing key priorities and maintaining its position as a contributor to the international rules-based order. At a time of considerable turbulence and uncertainty, a statement of such resolve is crucial.

This might be accomplished in different ways. Symbolically, for example, it might be conveyed by the temporary retention of the current Chair theme, a “Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN”, for at least the next (Brunei), and possibly the following (i.e. Cambodia), rotation in Chairs. Either in whole or with very minor modification, the current theme more than adequately reflects the pandemic challenge faced by ASEAN and the unity needed to navigate through it. Business as usual – represented by an incoming Chair with an entirely new thematic vision and work program superimposed on an already crowded agenda and overburdened Secretariat – may prove unhelpful at this time.

Underpinning this symbolism, important temporary process innovations could also be pioneered. For example, consensus among ASEAN members on what precisely are the top priorities that need to be highlighted and sustained from Chair to Chair for the next few post-pandemic years will need to be reached. Further, some kind of coordinating process between rotating Chairs for the tracking and monitoring of progress on priorities will be needed, including identification of key milestones aligned with the handover calendar.

All this, of course, can only come as a result of an unprecedented commitment, trust and unity among ASEAN members. We have already seen some evidence of that, as demonstrated by the successful regional pandemic responses to date, coordinated by Vietnam. The present pandemic may afford a unique opportunity to build on such sectoral accomplishments for a higher-order reaffirmation of ASEAN relevance and centrality. These extraordinary times call for bold, extraordinary responses. ASEAN has an important contribution to make.

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