



The 36th ASEAN Summit: Still Responsive and Cohesive?

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This Friday, June 26, 2020 Southeast Asian leaders will hold the 36th ASEAN Summit. However due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnam, as this year's current chair, has decided that the high-level meeting will take place virtually. Amidst ongoing tensions in the Indo-Pacific region over long-standing issues – such as the South China Sea, developments on the Korean Peninsula, and superpower rivalry between the United States and China – ASEAN Leaders will also have to contend with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic that has to date infected at least 128,890 people and claimed the lives of at least 3,793 in Southeast Asia.¹ What can be expected from the 36th ASEAN Summit? What will be the limitations of a virtual summit? Will ASEAN be responsive and cohesive?

Answering Doubters of Multilateralism and Globalization

The COVID-19 pandemic has arguably served as fuel to the simmering question marks about the relevancy of multilateralism and the benefits of globalization. The scale, scope and speed in which the coronavirus was able to spread to every corner of the world has been held up as an example of the dangers that an increasingly open and connected society poses. In such an unprecedented situation, governments have been accused of adopting an 'every man for himself' mentality with countries competing with one another in order to secure supplies of limited personal protective equipment (PPE), surgical face masks, and medicine.

Largely unprepared for the onslaught of COVID-19, Indonesia's dependence on foreign producers of medical equipment meant that medical workers in the archipelago initially struggled to treat patients with adequate protection. Indeed, Indonesia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Mahendra Siregar described that dependence as "an unacceptable risk".² Former Indonesian Foreign Minister, Hassan



Wirajuda went one step further, calling on Indonesia to ‘pivot away from multilateralism’ and focus more efforts on bilateral diplomacy due to the lack of an effective global response to the pandemic.³ Such sentiments appear in line with an increasingly populist and protectionist trend taking hold around the world.

In this sense, the upcoming 36th ASEAN Summit serves as an opportune moment to answer those doubts and to demonstrate the relevancy of multilateralism – of which ASEAN represents – and globalization – of which the ASEAN Economic Community aspires to. If anything, multilateralism and globalization will be even more important vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic. For one thing, progress towards developing and producing a vaccine will only be achieved as a result of cooperation amongst the world’s top scientists. Market stability and jobs will only return to stability following economic measures adopted by the world’s important economists. Uninterrupted and affordable food supplies will only be available if cross border trade is reopened and remains so. Indonesia has been keen to stress these points with Foreign Minister, Retno Marsudi using various multilateral platforms to underline the importance of international cooperation to achieve these ends.⁴ It is highly likely that the 36th ASEAN Summit will be similarly used by Indonesia to advance its concerns on such points and at a press briefing held on June 17, 2020, a senior Indonesian foreign ministry official confirmed that President Joko ‘Jokowi’ Widodo would discuss the issue of COVID-19 and the post-pandemic recovery.⁵

Issues on the Agenda

At the time of writing, it was not yet known what would be on the agenda for the 36th ASEAN Summit as it was still being finalized by Vietnam as this year’s chair. However, at the aforementioned press briefing, Jose Tavares, Director-General for ASEAN Cooperation at Indonesia’s Foreign Ministry explained that among the tentative broad issues that the Leaders would discuss are: (1) a mid-term review of ASEAN Community Vision 2025; (2) regional and global issues; (3) and external relations.⁶ The latter will be intriguing to follow given that earlier this month the United Kingdom applied to become a dialogue partner of ASEAN as it seeks to establish a post-Brexit presence in Southeast Asia.⁷ A moratorium on new dialogue partners has been in place since 1999 and whilst the United Kingdom presents an attractive option for ASEAN, it is not known how likely it is for the regional organization to reexamine its long-standing stance.

Aside from the three broad issues, Jose Tavares briefed to the media that the ASEAN Leaders would





be holding an “interface” with youth representatives, the ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ABAC), and the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA) as well as holding a Special Summit on Women Empowerment.⁸ Given the ‘elitist’ label often attributed to ASEAN, these events are encouraging and suggest the regional organization will continue in its efforts to be more people-centered, people-oriented.

Virtual Limitations

ASEAN’s quick adoption of technology in order to overcome restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic has also been encouraging. In April 2020, ASEAN Foreign Ministers held the 25th meeting of the ASEAN Coordinating Council whilst ASEAN Leaders held a Special Summit and ASEAN Plus Three Special Summit, all via video conference. However, there are limits to holding virtual meetings, especially when it comes to the intricacies of diplomacy and negotiations. Personal rapport, body language, and ‘gentleman’s agreements’ cannot be so easily replicated virtually. Neither are off-the-record, frank, and firm discussions given the fears that diplomats may not be afforded the privacy virtually that they usually enjoy in face-to-face encounters. Given such concerns, Indonesia has made it clear that negotiations on the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea (COC) ‘cannot be negotiated virtually.’⁹ It is therefore highly unlikely for there to be any progress made on the COC, despite initial plans to hold four meetings this year to complete a ‘second reading’ of a draft text of the COC before next year’s 2021 deadline.

Responsive and Cohesive?

In the middle of an unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, ASEAN’s responsiveness and cohesiveness has never mattered more than ever. The 36th ASEAN Summit will be a chance for the ten member-states to prove the relevancy of multilateralism and globalization in not only reacting to the multidimensional consequences of the pandemic but also in shaping a post-COVID-19 recovery. When Vietnam chose ‘A Responsive and Cohesive ASEAN’ as the theme of its chairmanship, one could not have imagined how 2020 would have unfolded. Arguably, it appeared somewhat simplistic and uninspiring. Six months into this tragic year, all hope hangs on just that: a responsive and cohesive region.





Endnotes

- 1 Our World in Data (2020, June 22a). 'Country-by-country data on confirmed COVID-19 cases). Retrieved from: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-cases?country=IDN~BRN~KHM~LAO~MYS~MMR~PHL~SGP~THA~VNM> and Our World in Data (2020, June 22b). 'Total confirmed deaths: how rapidly have they increased compared to other countries?' Retrieved from: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-deaths?country=BRN~KHM~IDN~LAO~MYS~MMR~SGP~THA~VNM~PHL>
- 2 Nina Loasana (2020, June 19). 'COVID-19 forces RI to be self-sufficient in medical supplies.' The Jakarta Post. Retrieved from: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/paper/2020/06/18/covid-19-forces-ri-to-be-self-sufficient-in-medical-supplies.html>
- 3 Dian Septiari (2020, June 19). 'Post-pandemic foreign policy must change, former minister says.' The Jakarta Post. Retrieved from: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/06/19/post-pandemic-foreign-policy-must-change-former-minister-says.html>
- 4 Antara (2020, April 29). 'Indonesia calls for equitable access to COVID-19 drugs, vaccines.' Retrieved from: <https://en.antaranews.com/news/147171/indonesia-calls-for-equitable-access-to-covid-19-drugs-vaccines>
- 5 MoFA Indonesia (2020, June 18). 'Press Briefing (17/06/20): ASEAN Bersiap Pertemuan Tingkat Kepala Negara.' [YouTube Video]. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRO77bxTWtQ>
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Reuters (2020, June 6). 'UK seeks to boost post-Brexit ties with ASEAN partnership.' Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-politics-asean/uk-seeks-to-boost-post-brexit-ties-with-asean-partnership-idUSKBN23C32D>
- 8 MoFA Indonesia (2020, June 18). *Op.cit.*
- 9 Dian Septiari (2020, June 18). 'South China Sea rules cannot be negotiated virtually: Indonesian official.' The Jakarta Post. Retrieved from: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/06/18/south-china-sea-rules-cannot-be-negotiated-virtually-ri-official.html>





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