

**ASEAN's misperception on its roles**

ASEAN foreign ministers pose for a group photo during the ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting (AMM Retreat) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Feb. 17, 2022. Xinhua

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**A**SEAN is a group of 10 countries with very different political leadership and political systems. The economic and living standards of the ten ASEAN members differ significantly as well. Apart from differences in economic and military power among its members, there is another important distinction that distinguishes ASEAN from the EU or other organizations.

What is it about ASEAN that distinguishes it from other organizations? ASEAN is an organization that prefers to focus on the future while ignoring the present. Some ASEAN members would like to talk about the perfect outcomes of its future implementation, despite the fact that they could never achieve perfection.

There are two examples that show how ASEAN prefers to focus on the future while ignoring the present: the South China Sea issue and the Myanmar crisis.

The South China Sea issue was the hottest issue in the world in 2012, when Cambodia was chairing ASEAN for the second time, and some ASEAN members thought Cambodia was unqualified to resolve the issue because it was treated as a Chinese client state. 2012 was a difficult year for Cambodia as ASEAN chair, and it was the first time that ASEAN was unable to issue a statement following its summit meeting. Because Cambodia had received so much criticism at the time, some ASEAN members and western countries

believed that other ASEAN chairs would be able to resolve the issues that Cambodia had not been able to resolve under its leadership.

The likelihood of other ASEAN chairs resolving the ongoing crisis is nil, as no other ASEAN countries have been able to resolve the South China Sea issue, which remains a hot and sensitive issue to this day. Why did those claimant states put pressure on Cambodia to resolve a problem that they couldn't resolve? It has to do with diplomatic and economic power.

Cambodia's foreign policy is currently on the right track, as the country enjoys good relations with many countries around the world. Cambodia maintains excellent relations with the United States, trusting relations with China, warm relations with Japan, and friendly relations with all ASEAN countries and the rest of the world. Cambodia, on the other hand, still needs to improve its diplomatic capabilities, and it should use real qualified diplomats to represent Cambodia abroad. Following the first general election in 1993, Cambodia faced a difficult task in recruiting the best diplomats to represent the country, as many Cambodian students sent abroad to study had decided not to return home after graduation, and the two political parties in power at the time wanted to nominate their trustee members as their representatives abroad. It was a sad chapter in Cambodian history that the country had two prime ministers, but it was the only way to break the political impasse at the time. Cambodia's experience following the first general election demonstrates that

every problem requires time and steps to be fully resolved.

ASEAN is still operating under the same mindset. Before Cambodia became the chair of ASEAN a third time, a few ASEAN members judged Cambodia to be an unqualified chair to resolve the Myanmar crisis, which occurred in February 2021, when Brunei was the chair. There is a lot of criticism of Cambodia as the ASEAN chair and its strategies to lead ASEAN. For example, when Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen travelled to Myanmar to meet with the junta leader on January 7, 2022, just one week after Cambodia was officially appointed to lead ASEAN for the third time, there was a lot of criticism. Some ASEAN members believed Hun Sen's visit to Myanmar would be used to legitimize the junta regime that had staged the coup to depose the elected president. Hun Sen believes that talking to those in power and those who wield the guns is the only way to change things. There are disagreements among ASEAN members about how to resolve the crisis, which includes both the South China Sea and Myanmar.

There have been numerous discussions and meetings about how to resolve the Myanmar crisis, with some scholars and ASEAN members placing strong hopes in Indonesia to resolve the crisis while Cambodia continues to lead ASEAN. Some academics believe Cambodia used soft power to resolve the Myanmar crisis for no reason, and that Indonesia will use hard power to resolve the Myanmar crisis. Instead of placing high hopes in this country and low hopes in that country, ASEAN should work together and

place all of their hopes in each chair of the year, so that ASEAN can live up to its slogan.

The two examples given above are sufficient to demonstrate that ASEAN prefers to concentrate on the future before bargaining with one another in the present. Each ASEAN member is assessed based on the size of its land, economy, military power, and diplomatic power. In ASEAN, there is no true solidarity, only economic and individual benefits for each member state.

ASEAN members should learn how to work together to solve regional challenges, and each member of ASEAN should learn how to speak on behalf of the group, not just each member, but the entire association since a failure of a chair is a failure of the whole of ASEAN not just one country. However, speaking on behalf of the group is a pipe dream that will never come true because ASEAN lacks even one organization to work with. For example, Prime Minister Hun Sen proposed a rice association to supply the world, but it was ignored by its neighbors.

ASEAN is a nice place to meet and chat with one another over coffee before returning home to work on your own. If you have a strong desire to work to improve your country, you will feel very proud of it when you meet and chat next time. There appear to be many good books that provide many good recommendations for improving your life, but you must put those theories into practice on your own. ■

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