

**Cambodia's EAS Carrot: Incentives for a Successful Summit** by Gregory Poling and Alexandra Sander

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Cambodia will fulfill its last major obligation as this year's ASEAN chair November 18–20 when it hosts the annual ASEAN Summit and seventh East Asia Summit (EAS). The EAS in particular will provide Cambodia with the opportunity to restore some of its credibility after the public embarrassment of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in July. On that occasion, Cambodia used its prerogative as ASEAN chair to block the inclusion of any mention of the South China Sea maritime disputes in the joint communiqué at the end of the meeting, resulting in the organization's first-ever failure to release such a document.

That failure cast significant doubt on ASEAN's ability to evolve and tackle tough issues. It also caused troubling allegations, especially from Vietnam and the Philippines, that Cambodia had placed its close relationship with China above the interests of its fellow ASEAN members. All the damage wrought in July will not be fixed in three days in November. But if the EAS goes demonstrably better than the AMM did, Cambodia's image will have a chance to recover and some of the ASEAN skeptics will be quieted. A successful EAS, and by extension a stronger regional framework in the Asia Pacific, is in the interests of all EAS members, including the United States. The key will be supporting Cambodia as an effective chair.

The EAS was only established in 2005, but its membership and mission are already of great significance for regional architecture. Encompassing all 10 ASEAN members plus Australia, New Zealand, India, China, South Korea, Japan, Russia, and the United States, the EAS boasts the most effective membership of any Asia-Pacific organization. It does not split ASEAN as APEC does, or exclude major powers as ASEAN+3 does, or contain too many disparate members to be effective, like the ASEAN Regional Forum.

Leaders at this year's EAS will likely find common ground on green growth, the adoption of a Declaration on Resistance to Antimalarial Medicines, and various means of boosting ASEAN connectivity. Cambodia is eager to see its chairmanship accomplish these and other relatively easily achievable goals. However, its tenure as chair will be judged not on laudable but non-contentious deliverables. Instead, it will be judged on how willing and able it is to oversee an

honest, balanced, and productive discussion on the tough issues that divide members.

The 2012 EAS agenda will include a number of such topics. Foremost among these will be maritime security and the ongoing disputes in the South and East China Seas. Some members would rather avoid these topics, which have turned contentious at nearly every major ASEAN-led meeting in the last three years. But Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan are almost certain to raise them, and others, the United States included, will not keep quiet once the issues are tabled.

The summit will also include side meetings on two different visions for economic integration—the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership favored by China and the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership. Even if demonstrable progress on these key issues proves elusive, fostering an honest and substantive dialogue will show Cambodia to be the responsible chair it claimed to be early in the year.

Strong Cambodian leadership and a flexible, effective response to any lack of consensus on key issues will alleviate doubts about ASEAN unity and efficacy. That will allow the organization to cement its place at the center of regional political, security, and economic structures. Cambodia occupies the chairmanship during an important juncture in ASEAN's evolution and is therefore saddled with the difficult task, but also the opportunity, of steering it through these thorny issues.

Cambodia should seek to leverage the expected accomplishments of the EAS in order to mitigate the damage from any points of contention. The most important role of the chair is the prerogative to set the agenda at the summit. Cambodia cannot prevent the Philippines or Vietnam from raising the South China Sea issue, for instance, but it can take the initiative and place that discussion where it will be most effective. Where that is, whether at the end of discussions, after the low-hanging fruit have created an environment of mutual trust and understanding, or sandwiched between expected accomplishments to soften the blow, will be up to Cambodia. But what it cannot attempt is a repeat of its behavior at the AMM, where it refused to include any of the tough issues on the agenda and became upset when its counterparts refused to play along. The role of the chair must be to guide discussions, not to block or react to them.

Cambodia follows the groundbreaking chairmanships of Vietnam in 2010 and Indonesia in 2011. Those two countries made a successful ASEAN year a hallmark of their foreign policy and a coming-out party for their role on the regional and global stage. The unfortunate side-effect of such successes, which pushed the bounds of ASEAN norms and sought to bring the organization closer to its potential place as regional fulcrum, is that the bar seems a bit too high for those

that follow. Brunei is set to take over the chairmanship in 2013, followed by Myanmar in 2014 and Laos in 2015.

Cambodia's performance at the AMM cemented the perceptions of those who said fecklessness and division were the inevitable outcomes of ASEAN's smaller and less developed members occupying the chair. This is certainly not inevitable—as Cambodia can prove with a successful chairmanship of the ASEAN Summit and EAS. It is crucial that Cambodia set a precedent for how the upcoming chairs can engage contentious issues and manage tensions between the region's larger players.

This is especially true of Cambodia's handling of China. Cambodia, like Myanmar and Laos, is heavily dependent on Chinese aid and investment. And, like them, it lacks a deep strategic relationship with the United States to help balance its dependence on Beijing. The result is that Cambodia is more prone to Chinese pressure than are most ASEAN members. One possible result was on display at the AMM, when China leveraged its relationship with Cambodia to crack ASEAN unity and protect its interests. A repeat at the upcoming summits could be devastating, supporting those in Beijing who argue that China's interests are better served by a divided ASEAN and sending a message to the organization's other susceptible members that sacrificing ASEAN unity to please China is acceptable.

Instead, Cambodia must communicate to China, by words and actions, that it cannot manipulate the ASEAN chair into overrepresenting Chinese interests. This will be a tall order, particularly as the EAS will take place amid a highly sensitive leadership transition in Beijing. Cambodia will have to allow its neighbors to discuss the contentious issues important to them, regardless of Chinese objections, in an honest and transparent manner. But it will also have to guide the discussion to avoid provoking China unnecessarily. Placing difficult issues like the South China Sea squarely on the agenda ahead of time will be critical; these issues will be raised regardless, and leaving China feeling ambushed serves no one's purposes.

Ensuring that all parties have a say in crafting the joint communiqué following the meetings—and there must be one—will also be important. Equally important will be clear messaging, in advance, that any attempts to unilaterally filibuster the statement or discussions are unacceptable. If successful, a strong Cambodian chairmanship will be a vital first step toward convincing China to work within existing regional structures like the EAS, and to do so transparently, rather than trying to exploit its bilateral relationships to undermine ASEAN unity.

The United States and its partners can play a supportive role in this effort. They must state their positions on issues of contention, especially the importance of international law and peaceful resolution to maritime disputes, but must at the same time not be seen as attempting to ostracize China at the summits. For instance, the United States must reiterate its neutrality on all territorial disputes, in both the South and East China Seas.

It is also important that the United States continue to argue for the value of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, but not in

opposition to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Such an effort would be futile and would only promote an unhelpful zero-sum mentality. The overall goals of the United States and all EAS members must be to voice their positions openly and honestly, support Cambodia as the chair, and not force it into a position of choosing between China and the rest.

A successful Cambodian leadership in November could have a significant impact on the effectiveness of ASEAN for years to come. If the summits were to face difficult issues honestly and yield measurable progress toward regional goals, the debacle at the AMM would become a footnote. Cambodia would help restore confidence in ASEAN's effectiveness and centrality to regional architecture.

Just as important, it would set the stage for Brunei, Myanmar, and Laos to oversee their own successful years as chair. The next few years could prove a watershed for ASEAN in its quest for centrality in regional architecture. It is the best chance for a multilateral vehicle to promote peace, stability, and continued economic development in the region. All members of the EAS, China and the United States most of all, should welcome this goal and support Cambodia in its efforts to bring it a step closer to reality.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*