



ASEAN Summit in a post-Sept. 11 World

by John J. Brandon

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is meeting in Brunei for its annual summit. At the beginning of the 21st century, ASEAN finds itself at a crossroads in the wake of its inability to address a plethora of regional problems - the transnational haze caused by forest fires in Indonesia, human rights abuses in Myanmar, the proliferation of small arms and narcotics, the spread of HIV/AIDS, maritime piracy, and, most important, the Asian economic crisis. Now ASEAN faces the issue of how to deal with international terrorism in a post-Sept. 11 world and its ability to forge a coherent message on this issue is important not only for the sake of regional security, but also for the long-term viability of the organization itself.

The response of individual ASEAN states has varied. The strongest response has come from Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. She has backed fully the U.S. campaign against terrorism by offering use of Philippine air bases and troops, and has accepted two dozen American military advisors to assist the Philippine military in defeating the Abu Sayyaf group, which is believed to have connections with al-Qaida. The mostly Catholic Philippines has given President Arroyo wide-spread support as Abu Sayyaf has already inflicted massive damage on the Philippine economy by creating a climate of unacceptable political risk.

Conversely, and not surprisingly, Indonesia, home of the world's largest Muslim population, has addressed this issue in fits and starts. The government is struggling to control radical groups amid increasing anti-American sentiment. A week after Sept. 11, President Megawati Sukarnoputri condemned the attacks in a speech in New York as "the worst atrocity in the history of civilization." However, in a recent speech in Indonesia's largest mosque, President Megawati tempered her remarks by indirectly warning the U.S. that the war on terrorism did not give a country the right to attack another sovereign country. Indonesian pressure for President Megawati to condemn U.S. attacks on Afghanistan is based largely on the efforts of political opponents to undermine her political leadership. As such, it is unlikely these opponents will discontinue their efforts even if President Megawati continues to tone down her support and limits Indonesia's actions on the campaign against terrorism.

The first sign that little will come out of the summit in Brunei came when President Megawati and Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad nixed President Arroyo's suggestion that ASEAN leaders meet on the sidelines of the October APEC Leaders' Meeting in Shanghai to discuss terrorism. Moreover, the ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting has been cancelled because of the grouping's inability to issue a joint position paper on anti-terrorism at the summit. Had ASEAN developed a position on anti-terrorism, it might have rekindled some of the solidarity it has lost since the economic crisis. When

all 10 ASEAN members cannot come to a consensus, little, if anything, happens. This happens more frequently now that ASEAN has expanded its membership to include Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia.

ASEAN's culture of consensus has resulted in inertia - a problem highlighted once again by the cancellation of the foreign ministers' meeting. What is needed is tough-minded, constructive dialogue that is geared towards developing a regional approach to the challenges ASEAN faces in a post-Sept. 11 world. The failure of ASEAN to do so only serves to jeopardize its relevance to the international community and puts the region's security and economies at greater risk. Before the Asian economic crisis, ASEAN received more than twice as much of all new foreign direct investment than China. Today, China receives twice as much new foreign direct investment than ASEAN, an exact reversal from the ratio before the crisis began four years ago. Under current circumstances, this trend is likely to continue. That's something ASEAN can ill afford, given the pain and hardship the Asian economic crisis has already inflicted on the peoples of Southeast Asia.

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