

ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat: Driving ASEAN to Sustainability

Department of Information
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Thailand hosted the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat on 17-18 January 2019 in Chiang Mai. Among the news reports covered by Thai and foreign media, one of the stories catching the attention of many observers was that of Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai presenting podiums and chairs to Ban Fang School. These items were produced from recycled paper by Siam Cement Group (SCG) and were used during the Retreat, literally translating Thailand's intentions to go for 'green meetings' during its Chairmanship, into reality.

The theme of Thailand's ASEAN Chairmanship is "Advancing Partnership for Sustainability." Using equipment made from recycled paper is only one among several initiatives for sustainability under the Thai Chairmanship. This also reflects ASEAN's determination to synchronize its implementation with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by linking the 2025 ASEAN vision with the 2030 SDGs to create a sustainable ASEAN community. In this regard, Thailand will host a high-level brainstorming meeting on this issue in March, followed by the launching of the ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue later this year.

Furthermore, Thailand will host other meetings relevant to sustainable development in other aspects as well, such as the ministerial meeting on marine debris; the high-level meeting on human capital development and the inception workshop on combating IUU fishing. The outcomes of these meetings will enable ASEAN to bequeath a sustainable community to the next generation by having in place an effective management scheme of natural resources and human resources that corresponds to the rapid economic and social changes in this era.

As 'partnership' is another keyword in the Chairmanship theme, ASEAN will strengthen cooperation with dialogue partners to render more tangible results for sustainable development. We also aim at expanding relations beyond the region. Presently, ASEAN has nine dialogue partner countries plus the European Union. ASEAN is aware that in the current world where interdependency across regions is the norm, it is imperative to enhance closer cooperation more than ever, particularly in international trade, as the proportion of ASEAN trade value with countries outside the region is as high as 70 percent. In this regard, ASEAN plans to elevate its relations with the European Union to a 'strategic partnership' and will work more closely with Russia, its most recent strategic partner.

The practice for countries to establish cooperation as a new partner with ASEAN is that the interested country must first accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC). The Treaty was signed in 1976 to make Southeast Asia a region of lasting peace and cooperation. Since 2003, non-ASEAN countries were allowed to

become parties of TAC, and China and India were the first two to take part. Afterwards, several more countries acceded, for instance, Turkey, Chile, Egypt and Iran. Most recently, Peru has expressed its interest to become a party. TAC is an important foundation of ASEAN's political and security pillar. The fact that many countries are interested to join confirms the growing relevance of ASEAN in international politics and reinforces the vision of TAC to sustain peace in the region.

Regional matters that were of special interest during the ASEAN Ministerial Retreat were the Rohingyas in Myanmar and the situation in the South China Sea. The Retreat agreed that ASEAN should continue providing humanitarian support to the Rohingyas in Myanmar and acknowledged the result of the ASEAN Secretary-General's visit to Myanmar in December 2018 to assess local needs. The meeting supported the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Myanmar government and related United Nations organizations (UNHCR and UNDP), to help displaced Rohingyas resettle in their former localities voluntarily and safely.

On the situation in the South China Sea, ASEAN wishes to see the South China Sea remain a sea of peace and stability with freedom of navigation. All parties should comply with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). ASEAN expects the negotiations for the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) to make substantial progress this year since it is an important guideline for navigation in the South China Sea that would help avoid unnecessary tensions, conflicts or misunderstandings.

On economic matters, ASEAN is hopeful that the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Free Trade Agreement will be finalized this year. The RCEP comprises all ten ASEAN member states and six other countries with whom ASEAN has concluded a free trade agreement, namely China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and India. Once effective, RCEP will become the largest free trade area in the world, accounting for 40 percent of the world's GDP.

The Retreat also expedited the implementation of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 to build intra-regional and inter-regional networks or, "connecting the connectivities" by expanding cooperation with dialogue partners to provide funding for certain infrastructure projects.

On social and cultural aspects, the meeting exchanged views on how to create a sense of belonging for the population of ASEAN or an "ASEAN identity" to strengthen the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. For instance, 2019 has been designated as the ASEAN Cultural Year to promote ASEAN culture on the world stage and strengthen ASEAN identity. Thailand will also arrange an award presentation ceremony for the recipient of the ASEAN Prize during the 34th ASEAN Summit in Thailand. The ASEAN Prize was inaugurated in 2018 during Singapore's Chairmanship of ASEAN, to give recognition to individuals or organizations who have dedicated themselves to promoting ASEAN identity. The first recipient was Miss Erlinda Uy Koe from the Philippines, whose work involved raising awareness about people with autism disorder.

The Foreign Ministers' Retreat lasted less than two days but managed to cover an array of issues which will set the tone for ASEAN collaboration under the Thai Chairmanship throughout the year. The advantage of a retreat is its casual atmosphere that allows free flow of discussions and constructive openness which would not usually be present at a formal setting.

In Chiang Mai, deliberations could have taken place at the dinner table or while delegates were strolling around 'kad mua' or a traditional Lanna market before dinner on 17 January 2019. It does not happen often that ASEAN delegates could exchange views while tasting the local food of Northern Thailand, such as grilled omelette in banana leaves, spicy sausage and fried banana blossoms. The photo of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers taking selfies at Ratchapruek Park posted by Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan on his Facebook site clearly reflects the intimacy and close friendship among the ASEAN colleagues. There is no doubt that the Foreign Ministers attended a Retreat where the overall atmosphere of discussions was positive and cordial.

In the modern world, it is important that diplomacy is relevant in the eyes of the public. "Leaving no one behind" is not just a sweet rhetoric, but attests to the principle of a result-oriented and people-centred development. The UN and ASEAN are working and heading in the same direction and Thailand, as the Chairman of ASEAN this year, will continue to pursue the decisions of the Retreat in Chiang Mai. This is, by all means, a good start for the Thai Chairmanship of ASEAN which has now fully commenced.

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