

ASEAN chair Cambodia faces challenges ahead of E. Asia summit

By Puy Kea

PHNOM PENH, Oct. 5 Kyodo - With its troubled, one-year chairmanship of ASEAN drawing to a close, Cambodia faces more challenges ahead as it prepares to host ASEAN and East Asia summits in mid-November, amid simmering maritime disputes involving increasingly assertive China and apprehensive Asian countries whose leaders will participate.

The 21st ASEAN Summit, the 7th East Asia Summit and related meetings in Phnom Penh are being seen as further tests of Cambodia's diplomatic skills and of ASEAN's ability to remain unified and credible amid China's growing political and economic leverage over some of the grouping's 10 members.

The meetings will follow the unprecedented failure of ASEAN foreign ministers to issue a joint communique at the end of their annual meeting in Cambodia in July, for the first time in the group's 45-year history, owing to inability to forge a consensus on how or even whether to refer in the document to maritime disputes involving China and several ASEAN member states in the South China Sea.

International media and academic experts commented after the meeting that ASEAN suffered a major loss of face.

Some even went so far as to suggest Cambodia, by refusing to issue a communique that would mention the disputes in the South China Sea, had "kowtowed" to China, its close friend and key benefactor, putting its national interest ahead of the grouping's solidarity.

Cambodia, however, insists the failure to issue the communique was caused not by intransigence on its part or any lack of effort to find common ground among all parties concerned.

Instead, it blames the Philippines' insistence that the communique mention the recent standoff between Manila and Beijing at Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea, and Vietnam's call for the document to stress the importance of respect for littoral countries' rights and jurisdiction over their exclusive economic zone and continental shelf in the South China Sea.

“I am of the view that we do not put the joint communique a hostage of a bilateral dispute of some ASEAN members and another country in the region,” Foreign Minister Hor Namhong said at the time in explaining the move.

From Cambodia’s perspective, yielding to the demands of its fellow ASEAN members would mean taking sides in their bilateral confrontations with its staunch ally China, which does not want its territorial disputes discussed multilaterally.

“As the chair of ASEAN, Cambodia had attempted to build consensus on a non-consensual issue, and when there is no consensus, Cambodia wanted ASEAN to focus on the points it can agree on, rather than on divergent views,” Cambodia’s Ambassador to Thailand wrote in a recent opinion piece in The Nation newspaper.

Arguing that Cambodia had actively sought a compromise at the meeting, she said, “What should Cambodia have done when two members of ASEAN decided at the time to stick to their inflexible, ‘non-negotiable’ positions?”

On allegations that pressure from Beijing was behind Phnom Penh’s unwillingness to issue the communique, the ambassador said, “Cambodia is a sovereign nation. It does not kowtow to any country.

To say that China was behind ‘Phnom Penh’s intransigence’ is an insult.”

The unresolved issue is expected to overshadow the upcoming summit meetings as the involved parties have not backed down from their positions since July.

Indeed, the situation has become more complicated now that Japan’s territorial disputes with China over a cluster of islands in the East China Sea and with South Korea over a pair of islets in the Sea of Japan have taken center stage.

The three nations are Cambodia’s major donors and development partners.

In addition to demands from the Philippines and Vietnam for a united ASEAN stance vis-a-vis China, Cambodia may also face demands from

other countries for stronger wording on territorial disputes in concluding documents to be issued at the summits.

Japan, for instance, has conveyed to Cambodia its dissatisfaction with the content of a chairman's statement issued following an East Asia Summit ministerial meeting in July, saying it did not properly reflect territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

Chheang Vannarith, director of Cambodian Institute for Peace and Cooperation, said the recent flare-up of tension between Cambodia's two key benefactors -- Japan and China -- poses a huge challenge for Cambodia as ASEAN chair.

He said the ASEAN chair needs to exercise quiet diplomacy and consultation in order to find common ground for regional cooperation among countries in the region amid thorny issues like the South China Sea.

Observers of ASEAN affairs say that if the grouping's division is not healed in the coming few weeks, its credibility will be dented further, making it even harder to repair.

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in a speech last month in China, said that while ASEAN should not take sides on the various competing claims in the South China Sea, it must at least address the issue as not to do so "would severely damage its credibility."

"It has to take and state a position which is neutral, forward-looking, and encourages the peaceful resolution of issues," he said.

Lee said that amid the territorial disputes between some ASEAN members and China, many countries are watching ASEAN "to see if it can deal with difficult issues effectively."

"A divided or discredited ASEAN will lead to a scenario where the member states are forced to choose between major powers, and Southeast Asia becomes a new arena for rivalries and contention. No one wins," he said.

Pou Sothirak, a visiting senior research fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, said recent tension in the South China Sea has created a confrontational mood not only between China and

the two ASEAN members, Vietnam and the Philippines, but also between China and the United States.

He said China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea has pushed the two Southeast Asian countries closer to Washington, "favoring the U.S. leadership in Asia by way of constraining China through regional states, which is key part of Washington hedging strategy."

Under such circumstances, the former ambassador to Japan said, it is important that ASEAN maintain its unity and its neutrality, and "posture itself as an appeasing force to manage this power competition (between China and the United States) so as to keep this region at peace, free from military conflict, and with prosperity."

He stressed the need to expedite a legally binding regional code of conduct aimed at preventing misunderstanding and miscalculation that could lead to armed conflict, as was agreed at a China-ASEAN summit in 2002.

In 2002, ASEAN and China signed the "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea." But in the decade since then, the proposed code of conduct has yet to be formulated, though work has begun.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, speaking early last month in Jakarta amid her 11-day Asia-Pacific tour, said advancing those talks should be the goal of next month's East Asia Summit.

"It's important that there be...a mechanism for resolving the potential for the outbreak of conflict or miscalculation by any party," she said.

In the meantime, she added, "No party should take any steps that would increase tensions or do anything that could be viewed as coercive or intimidating to advance their territorial claims."

China, which has been flexing its muscles not only in the South China Sea but also in the East Sea, is not expected ahead of the summit to soften its position on defending its maritime rights and interests. Nor are the Philippines and Vietnam, or Japan for that matter.

Amid the confrontational rhetoric and escalating tensions in the region, Cambodia contends that as ASEAN chair, it can at least play a conciliatory

role by not taking any actions that would add fuel to the fire, thus leaving the door open for negotiations between the parties concerned.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations comprises of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The East Asia Summit includes them plus Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia and the United States.

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