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# How about a Singapore-Jakarta consensus?

Rather than focusing on differences between the two, their collaboration could pave way to ASEAN solidarity



MAHDEV MOHAN AND LAN SHIOH TSAI

Expectations ran high as leaders met last weekend in Jakarta for the 18th Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit. However, the 10-member regional organisation has left two key issues unresolved – including the ongoing conflict surrounding the 900-year-old Preah Vihear temple at the Thai-Cambodian border that has claimed 18 lives and Timor-Leste's formal request for admission into its fold this year.

All eyes were on ASEAN's current chair, Indonesia, to capitalise on its political clout and push for a breakthrough on key decisions that member states have stonewalled on in previous meetings.

And indeed, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa demonstrated unprecedented leadership in his efforts to mediate the Preah Vihear temple dispute between Cambodia and Thailand, managing to elicit a joint agreement from these countries which envisions a 30-member Indonesian Observers Team being stationed at both sides of the border upon the "attainment of an environment conducive to their assignment".

Nevertheless, the high-level meeting has shown that despite its best intentions and leadership efforts, a single country alone cannot steer a regional bloc to safe harbour.

As the largest economy in the region and a newly transformed democracy, Indonesia's political sway over ASEAN is undeniable. Only Singapore has comparable influence in the region, having played an integral role in the drafting of the ASEAN Charter and in laying the legal and economic groundwork as the regional body moves towards becoming a single community by 2015.

Commentators have often contrasted Indonesia, which champions democracy, with Singapore, which places a high premium on technocratic competence and the rule of law as a precursor to ASEAN integration.



Senior Minister S Jayakumar (left) with Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono at the 18th ASEAN Summit in Jakarta. AP

Much has been made, for instance, about Singapore's opposition to Timor-Leste's bid to join ASEAN as its 11th member and Indonesia's unequivocal support for the country it once brutally occupied.

Writing for *The Straits Times*, one commentator has even suggested that Singapore's rigid stance has caused an "undercurrent of speculation and dissension within ASEAN ranks".

But pitting these two countries – and the values and norms they are seen to represent – against one another is parochial. It ignores the importance of fostering a new Singapore-Jakarta Consensus. After all, keeping pace among countries as diverse as the 10 which make up ASEAN will require both Jakarta's vision and Singapore's eye for detail; not to mention a good dose of collective verve.

## BECOMING A RULES-BASED COMMUNITY

Drawing from economic development theory, such a Consensus would mean that both countries collaboratively propose systemic reform and address key problems in the region with the guidance of core ASEAN principles, including democracy, good governance and the rule of law, which are

mutually reinforcing and interlinked. This would pave the way for ASEAN solidarity.

That is not to say that Singapore or Indonesia should have primacy over their ASEAN neighbours or that consensus in its vernacular sense – that is, the meeting of minds – should no longer matter.

Rather, a Singapore-Jakarta Consensus could power the regional bloc towards its goal of becoming a rules-based community of shared values and norms. The Consensus would serve as a starting point from which consensus-based decision making in the South-east Asian region can begin and take root – not unlike other similar theories such as the 2010 Seoul Development Consensus.

A Singapore-Jakarta Consensus would entail the consistent use of common mechanisms provided by the ASEAN Charter and the creation of benchmarks to measure and assess progress toward ASEAN integration.

Specifically, rather than seek international adjudication at the Hague – which may do little to resolve historical animosity and domestic politicking that stoke border conflicts in Preah Vihear – Cambodia and Thailand should place their faith in

ASEAN-based peaceful dispute settlement mechanisms. Eschewing dilatory tactics and adhering to their joint agreement to deploy the Indonesian Observers Team in the affected areas, both countries should constructively engage with Indonesia in its role as mediator.

In mediating the dispute, Indonesia would do well to reverse the burden it currently faces to help create a "conducive environment" for conflict resolution, and instead pay tribute to Cambodian and Thai cultural memory which both revere the ancient and sacred Hindu temple at the centre of the conflict.

Commemorating the temple as a site of memory and rebuilding the great libraries it once housed would be powerful steps toward achieving lasting peace in Preah Vihear. Such memorialisation is well-established in other parts of the world, such as the temple precinct at Babylon, which is being restored as a symbol for peace after having been scarred by violence.

Failing this, Cambodia and Thailand should consider having their dispute referred to the ASEAN High Council, a dispute settlement body provided for by the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation which is yet to be tested. Recourse to regional processes will strengthen ASEAN's credibility in the eyes of its international counterparts, including the European Union with which it is negotiating trade agreements, and enhance its capacity to deal with future problems that emerge as integration nears.

## THE TIMOR-LESTE QUESTION

Singapore's former Foreign Minister S Jayakumar noted, almost a decade ago, that "the future of East Timor is also inextricably linked to the future of the region". His pronouncement rings true today.

ASEAN leaders have not closed the door on the region's newest state. They have tasked their foreign ministers to provide recommendations for their consideration, and have deferred their decision till later this year.

After identifying and assessing Timor-Leste's needs, ASEAN's

foreign ministers should facilitate Timor-Leste's admission by calling for sectoral technical assistance consistent with the benchmarks in ASEAN's "Roadmap for the ASEAN Community", such as compliance with regional and international economic instruments.

Given its experience in conducting technical assistance for lesser developed neighbours such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam, Singapore should take the lead in helping to support and build human resource capacity in Timor-Leste.

Enhancing Timorese officials' appreciation of ASEAN's legal obligations will help expedite Timor-Leste's integration into a rules-based community.

In keeping with ASEAN's professed respect for shared values and norms, such capacity building should be conducted in a manner which is sensitive to Timor-Leste's context and in cooperation with local stakeholders, not on the basis of top-down techniques – parachute in, provide training and get out – which are notoriously problematic and have not yielded lasting results in the country since independence.

Engagement with Timor-Leste should also recognise its comparative economic strengths, such as its well-managed sovereign wealth fund and burgeoning natural resource and extractive industries.

The next three years will see countries with relatively lower institutional capacity assume the chairmanship of ASEAN, including Myanmar which will chair the regional bloc a year ahead of ASEAN's vision for 2015.

Singapore and Jakarta should help set the tone for a strong, cohesive and, importantly, effective ASEAN for and beyond that year, as it endeavours to serve as a common platform for member states on global issues and shake-off the image that it is just a talk-shop. ■

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