

*The following is a regional perspective by Kavi Chongkittavorn, Editor of The Nation newspaper entitled "Jakarta's leadership hinges on Thai-Cam peace" as published in The Nation on 28 February 2011:*

By hosting the informal ASEAN foreign ministerial meeting on 22 February 2011, the ASEAN chair, Indonesia, made history that would gradually and tangibly transform the grouping into a true political and security community. It was a small step "with a giant leap of faith" as the credibility of ASEAN will now hinge on the outcome of bilateral talks between Thailand and Cambodia. The 90-minute meeting was brief -- a rubber stamp of prior discussions and agreements the chair mapped out with both sides. It was contrary to the high-power stakes games played out by the two protagonists in previous weeks.

One of the greatest weaknesses of ASEAN has been the inability to cope with intra-ASEAN conflict in a forthright manner, as in the other regional organisations such as the African Union or Mercosur. Obviously, this stems from the shame culture of Southeast Asian traditions and the ingrained fear of failure. Therefore, the ability to put up with inappropriate behaviours and non-compliance by members is pretty high. It is no surprise that ASEAN countries still prefer discreet and informal ways to deal with their internal squabbling minus the media fanfare. Looking back, almost all of the ASEAN disagreements in the past four decades -- though, not as serious as the Thai-Cambodian dispute -- were settled through casual and less structured meetings. In short, ASEAN does not want to "ASEANize" its disagreements.

This time around, the border clash has given a much-needed impetus for ASEAN to take up what was once a taboo issue -- an intra-ASEAN conflict -- in a more open way even though the role of the ASEAN chair is strictly confined to a facilitator. The ASEAN foreign ministers often used the 'retreat' to discuss overly sensitive issues, particularly when members could not reach a solid consensus. In that sense, the Burmese political crisis has occupied the retreat's agenda the longest -- for nearly two decades.

With the ASEAN Charter in place over the past two years, the member countries are becoming more responsive towards the Charter's mandates and objectives. By all means, nobody should get bogged down with the so called "informal" or "retreat" framework. Whenever the ASEAN leaders can draw up good results from these gatherings, it can be made official in no time.

Thailand and Cambodia know full well the onus is on them to honour and respect the ASEAN principles and norms enshrined in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and ASEAN Charter. They also know the ASEAN mantra that members -- in this case after a few days of armed skirmishes -- do not go to war or declare a state of war perpetually. Thanks to Indonesia's leadership, the two members agreed to station the Indonesian observers at their respective borders. The tripartite group is currently still working out a workable modality. Experience and good practice from various peacekeeping operations in East Timor (1999-2000) and the cessation of hostilities monitoring mission in Aceh (2003) are useful. A few ASEAN members including Thailand joined individually in both missions but financed their own participation in the latter of the two.

This is an important step as the ASEAN chair is performing this function, which is known as the "enhanced role of ASEAN chair" for the first time for an intra-ASEAN conflict. During the East Timor crisis, former Thai Foreign Minister Dr Surin Pitsuwan was acting as the chair of ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum, when he responded to Indonesia's appeal for peacekeeping assistance. Any misstep can send a wrong signal to hesitant ASEAN members and impact on the grouping's future political and security cooperation. Truth be told, Indonesia is extremely mindful of the presence of only two foreign ministers, Laos and Singapore, at last week's meeting apart from the countries concerned. If the chair's new venture achieves its intended purposes, their status within ASEAN, in Laos in particular, will be greatly augmented.

It remains to be seen how this dynamic will play out in the end. Initially, it is not difficult to predict that Indonesia will encounter a peaceful environment befitting the ASEAN spirit of cooperation as stated in the chairman's statement.

In a similar vein, Thailand and Cambodia have demonstrated their readiness and determination to defend their sovereignty and territorial integrity. At issue is whether the cessation of hostilities can be sustained as the two sides work out their common solutions. After all, Indonesia has only another 10 months to serve in this role. What would happen next? Cambodia will succeed Indonesia as the ASEAN chair next year -- it is also an electoral year there. Will Indonesia continue its current role beyond its chairmanship? If that is the case, will Jakarta take up a mediating role?

Indonesia's great leap of faith is also linked to its global agenda. Jakarta's desire and vision to prepare ASEAN as a single community with a common vision and identity after 2015 to engage with the larger world, notably old and new major powers, is extremely ambitious. As a tangible step towards this noble objective, ASEAN, under the Indonesian chair must demonstrate its ability to contain and manage efficiently any intra-ASEAN conflict without resorting to a bigger international arena. Otherwise, the overall ASEAN credibility would falter.

Over a decade ago, Indonesia showed the way. Jakarta had the courage to wash its dirty linen in East Timor for all to see and indeed set forth an unheralded political precedent in ASEAN -- balancing international manoeuvrability with regional solidarity, and limited leadership on individual ASEAN members. They left behind a good legacy in East Timor and Aceh. In the process, Indonesia's confidence and international profile was further promoted. Somehow, Jakarta was not able to jump-start such efforts to inculcate this noble approach. The expanded Bali Concord II was the compromise that the ASEAN members would concur on -- obviously commensurate to Indonesia's overall status at the time.

The next ten months will serve as a barometer on two pivotal regional developments. First and foremost, it has to do with the rise of Indonesia -- a far cry from 2003 -- as a regional power with global influence. Any resumption of Thai-Cambodian hostilities can immediately undermine Jakarta's unique position. Secondly, it will demonstrate if ASEAN really has the mettle to deal with internal conflicts.

One thing is certain, whatever the outcome, in the long-run, it will have a ripple effect on succeeding chairs. If there was a precedent set forth at the Jakarta meeting, it was essentially the ability of the members to settle their own conflicts themselves. If the UN Security Council has to take up the Thai-Cambodian border dispute again, it would mean a big slap in ASEAN's face and further hamper the realisation of an ASEAN political and security community.