

# News from Southeast Asia *continued*

## The ASEAN chairmanship: duties, obligations and challenges

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THE ASEAN FOREIGN MINISTERS MEETING (AMM), the organisation's workhorse, met for the 48th time on 4 August 2015. The leaders discussed and reviewed ASEAN's many activities and initiatives, including updates on the three pillars of community-building and relations with external parties, but it was the South China Sea (SCS) disputes that hogged the limelight. Its lengthy 28-page joint communiqué bears testament to the AMM's comprehensive mandate and responsibilities.

Malaysia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs missed the deadline in releasing the communiqué, which led to much media frenzy and speculation about the reasons for the delay. In the end, however, the ignominy of the Phnom Penh debacle, where ASEAN failed to agree on a joint communiqué for the first time in its history, was averted. This episode was nevertheless instructive in two aspects. In the first instance, it reaffirms ASEAN's spirit of compromise, collegiality and consensus, which has been its hallmark since its formation in 1967. It is no secret that some member states would prefer to dilute or dispense altogether with any mention of the South China Sea, but acceded to the larger interest of the group and respected the positions of the ASEAN claimant states. Secondly, it underlines again the critical role played by the ASEAN Chair. Malaysia's statesmanship shone most brightly in building the consensus document under extraordinary circumstances.

Malaysia's objective dispensation of its chairing duties was all the more commendable considering that it faces certain Chinese displeasure and rebuke. This is no small feat as China is Malaysia's largest trade partner. According to Malaysia's Department of Statistics, in 2014 China accounted for 12% and 16.9% of Malaysia's exports and imports respectively. The two-way trade has exceeded the US\$100 billion mark. China may have understandably felt a tinge of disappointment with Malaysia, which it considers a close friend, for not having considered Beijing's interest when crafting the communiqué. Only last year, Prime Minister Najib Razak had retraced the footsteps of his father, who as prime minister in 1974 visited China and paved the way for the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Based on these solid economic and political foundations, China would have expected to find a sympathetic friend in Malaysia as the ASEAN Chair.

If the Chairman's Statement of the 26th ASEAN Summit and the Joint Communiqué of the 48th AMM are any indication, Malaysia successfully insulated its chairing responsibilities from its national positions and kept external influences at bay. Whenever an ASEAN state assumes the chairmanship, it has to balance its national interest with that of the regional association's. It wears both a national hat and regional hat. The chair has to be mindful that the bigger ASEAN hat

comes with the trust of member states and the obligation to put the common regional good at parity with that of its national interest.

Subduing one's national interest in favour of regional concerns flies in the face of conventional wisdom. Holding true to this unconventional precept, however, is key to ASEAN's centrality. ASEAN would risk irrelevance if the chairmanship is used by the holder to pursue its national interest or to allow itself to be influenced by outside parties.

The Chair performs three duties: (a) being spokesperson for the ten member regional organisation, (b) being 'chief executive' in chairing and facilitating official meetings and task forces, (c) tabling new initiatives and programmes to advance regional cooperation. However, it is the Chair's informal role as a consensus builder that is its most important (and often overlooked) tasking. ASEAN's high threshold of unanimity requires all round agreement and requires the Chair to exhibit leadership and diplomatic acumen to find common ground among diverging views.

Malaysia's dispensation of its duties as ASEAN Chair is a case study for future Chairs that share the strategic predicament of having a relatively high degree of economic dependency on external parties. Malaysia was able to perform the role of consensus builder by exercising the principles of neutrality and independence, which provide the Chair with the diplomatic cover to minimize blowback from external parties. It is vital for the Chair to recognize that its actions represent ASEAN's collective will and interest, and not its own.

It is also important for external parties to understand and respect the role of the Chair as a facilitator and consensus builder. ASEAN's credibility will be put into question if the Chair is seen to privilege one party over another or bows to external demands. An impartial Chair enhances ASEAN credibility by facilitating intra-ASEAN consensus building and serving as an effective interlocutor with external parties.

As ASEAN inches closer towards pronouncing a community, which will draw heightened interest from the major powers, it is in its best interest to reaffirm and strengthen the impartiality and independence of the Chair to avoid being pulled in different directions by external parties. ASEAN centrality is predicated on it being relevant to itself and to external stakeholders. Malaysia has led by example in taking a principled stand that may be painful in the near term, but it held its head high and refused to let ASEAN down. The bar has been set for Laos who will chair ASEAN in 2016.

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**ISEAS** YUSOF ISHAK  
INSTITUTE

## Call for applications for Visiting Fellowships in the ISEAS Malaysia Studies Programme

The ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute is a regional research centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment.

THE ISEAS-YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) invites applications for Visiting Fellowships in its Malaysia Studies Programme. Preference will be given to candidates who have done or can work on projects associated with one or more of the following themes:

- Ethnicity and Identity Politics in Malaysia. (This may include Islamization's impact on ethnic relations in East Malaysia.)
- Urbanization and socio-political change in Malaysia
- Migration, education and socio-economic mobility in Malaysia. (More specific topics can include the growth of the middle class or urban underclass, bumiputera minorities, and inter-generational mobility, among others.)
- State-Business Relations in Malaysia.
- Devolution and Federalism in Malaysia. (This may include state-federal relations in East Malaysia)

### Other requirements

- Applicants must have received their Ph.D. degree in any area of the humanities or social sciences (especially economics, political science, sociology, anthropology, geography and urban studies). Successful applicants are expected to start no later than 2 January 2017 and must have completed all requirements for the Ph.D. degree at the point of employment.
- Fluency in English and Bahasa Malaysia is preferred, along with good communication, networking and interpersonal skills.

### Responsibilities

Depending on the expertise of the candidate, he or she will be conducting one or two projects related to the themes listed above. Visiting Fellows are also expected to contribute to ISEAS in the following ways:

- Monitor economic, political and/or social cultural trends in Southeast Asia.
- Write for a range of ISEAS publishing outlets such as e-publications, Working Papers, academic journals and books.
- Contribute to ISEAS collective research efforts.

### Fellowship benefits

- An all-inclusive and fixed monthly stipend commensurate with qualifications and experience.
- A monthly housing subsidy (applicable to non-Singaporeans only).
- The fellowship term varies between 2 months and one year, with possible extension.

### Application

Please submit one original and one copy of a complete application consisting of the following:

- Cover letter (1 page)
- Research Statement (elaborating on what you think the key questions to be examined in your research topic are; 300-500 words)
- Research Plan (for one or two projects; each plan should address the research question, methodology and timeline; 3 pages each, double-spaced)
- Curriculum vitae
- Two letters of recommendation (sealed and signed; original copy only)

Please send application package by 30 April 2016 to:  
Mr Ang Swee Loh, Deputy Head of Administration  
ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
Singapore 119614

### Enquiries

Please contact Mr ANG Swee Loh (sweeloh@iseas.edu.sg).

