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MIXED YEAR FOR ASEAN CHAIR

By

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Thailand achieved a great deal during its 2019 chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) under the theme of "Advancing Partnership for Sustainability", yet there is still much to be done as the kingdom officially passes the baton to Vietnam tomorrow.

Speaking at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Suriya Chindawongse, director-general of the Department of Asean Affairs, said Thailand's commitment to sustainable development had won support from member states and dialogue partners.

"For instance, Asean recently reached a consensus on climate change in Madrid and New York for the first time. We launched the Bangkok Declaration on Combating Marine Debris.

"Eighteen EAS leaders, including the US and China, also affirmed their commitment to partnerships on sustainability. All of these show that sustainability is a new strategy for Asean," he said.

Mr Suriya said the adoption of the Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) at the 34th Asean Summit in June has the strengthened regional architecture.

"The blueprint took about two years to develop in close partnership with Indonesia, Thailand and others. But in the end, it is the by-product of all 10 countries. We now have an outlook that seeks to build bridges among various strategies in the region. It is an inclusive, forward-looking, win-win cooperation.

"We are promoting its synergies with the East Asia Summit, the Asean Plus Three, the Asean Regional Forum, and the Asean Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus, to ensure sustainable security and economic growth," he said.

In addition, the bloc will synergise the Master Plan on Asean Connectivity 2025 with China's Belt and Road Initiative, Japan's infrastructure plan, and projects with the Republic of Korea, he said.

When asked about the greatest challenge Thailand faced during its Asean tenure, Mr Suriya said carrying policies forward is a major concern for all chairs.

"Accordingly, we launched seven Asean centres to ensure continuity. They are designed to carry forward all the projects when our chairmanship term ends. They are the legacy we have left to Asean," he said.

The seven centres include Asean Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue (ACSDD), Asean Centre for Active Ageing and Innovation and Asean Training Centre for Social Work and Social Welfare.

Auramon Supthaweethum, director-general of the Department of Trade Negotiations, said Thailand has cleared trade hurdles and cushioned the economic slowdown.

"Among our deliverables was the conclusion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). We managed to hammer out 13 chapters and, therefore, pass down the 20-chapter pact to Vietnam for signing," she said.

Achievements

Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit, deputy head and assistant professor at the Centre for Multilateralism Studies of the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, said the biggest achievements under Thai chairmanship were the conclusion of RCEP and the launch of the ACSDD.

"[The fact] that RCEP was concluded without India shouldn't be seen as a failure. It is because the door is left open for the country to join, and with or without it on board, the agreement will likely be signed next year which will create the world's biggest trading bloc," she said.

"RCEP conclusion happened against the backdrop of rising trade protectionism and US-China tensions. It was a signal to the markets that regional economies are still committed to an open system which can help restore market confidence in the region," added Asst Prof Kaewkamol.

Likewise, retired lawmaker and ambassador Kobsak Chutikul commended Thailand's push for sustainability but urged Asean to take the lead in tackling the climate crisis in the wake of new research showing that many countries in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand, will face annual flooding by 2050.

"After Trump announced his intention to pull out of the Paris Agreement, I think the bloc should have taken on a leading role. At the COP25 climate summit in Madrid, we didn't join the alliance of countries stepping up climate action plans though the region is at risk of inundation. Combating marine debris is a lower-hanging fruit," he said.

With the adoption of the AOIP, Mr Kobsak said the blueprint has yet to be tested as to whether the region can deal with the implications of the US-China geopolitical rivalry.

"Everybody pays lip service because the outlook is non-threatening. However, the absence of US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the summits forfeited the chance to test how the concept can practically work with America and China," he said.

Truncated tenure

Noting her disappointment, Asst Prof Kaewkamol said it was a shame that Asean was not able to convince the US to send a more senior official to the US-Asean Summit in November.

"It was partly a bit of a failure by the Thai chair as it could have lobbied harder," she said.

"[National Security Adviser Robert] O'Brien represented the US or Trump Administration. But the protocol is that the US should send the most senior person who was already there to the US-Asean Summit room," she said, referring to US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross who also travelled to Bangkok as part of a trade mission touring the region but did not attend the meeting with leaders.

Commenting further on whether the absence of the US president from the summit reflects America's waning influence in Southeast Asia, Mr Kobsak said the US will continue to maintain its presence in the region. "In my opinion, Trump skipped them because the bloc tends to gravitate towards China rather than jump on board with America. Moreover, he has already backed out of the China-backed RCEP, which was the centre of attention at the 35th Asean Summit. Nevertheless, I think the US will strengthen bilateral ties and its engagement in the region, especially the South China Sea, which I think is the most alarming flashpoint," he said.

Despite the early completion of the first reading of the Single Draft Negotiating Text of the Code of Conduct at the Asean Foreign Ministers' Meeting in July, Mr Kobsak warned the bloc to negotiate the legally-binding pact carefully.

Mr Kobsak also expressed his concern over the Rohingya issue, which put Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi on the defensive at the UN International Court of Justice, because it risks fracturing Asean.

"It is disappointing in that we failed to seize opportunities to solve the problem internally. For instance, in August, the political meeting in the Asean Inter-Parliamentary Assembly couldn't pass the resolution because Indonesia's proposal to include the Rohingya issue as the eighth item on the agenda was opposed by Myanmar. The principle of Asean consensus and non-interference can be problematic because we cannot hit the nail on the head. Don't forget that Southeast Asia is a Muslim-majority region," he said.

Way to go

When asked about what else Thailand should have done in its tenure, Mr Kobsak said Asean should step up efforts to engage with civil society groups because they can be "a source of strength" for the bloc.

"They should be included as part of the summits. Some members states dismiss them, but they can help Asean stand up to external pressure. If we can bring them to the mainstream, they will gain traction and become a key mechanism," he said.

Mr Kobsak said all eyes are on how the next chair will cope with maritime conflicts in the South China Sea and the US-China geopolitical rivalry.

"In the past, Vietnam fought China and the US in many wars. Accordingly, it has steel in its voice, meaning that it will not bend easily to anyone. In this context, I wish to see how the AOIP will develop. We should let Vietnam be itself because it might strengthen the bloc," he added.

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