

CHAPTER 3

ASEAN Regionalism in 2021: Chairmanship of a Small State

Asyura Salleh

Abstract

Introduction

Brunei Darussalam has often cited to be suffering from the small state syndrome. Yet, in 2021, Brunei was granted the heavy mantle of chairmanship while navigating an especially complex landscape in Southeast Asia. By reflecting on how Brunei managed the chairmanship in 2021 as a small state, we will be able to uncover indicators of evolution in ASEAN's capacity for regionalism and identify some strategies to aid other small states as they embrace the ASEAN chairmanship role.

This paper begins with reviewing the complex landscape in Southeast Asia in 2021 which includes the persistent restrictive conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, greater multipolarity and sharper rivalry between the United States and China. By adopting the perspective of a small state, this paper will attempt to identify the tools available to Brunei Darussalam as it navigated its chairmanship responsibilities. Brunei's performance as ASEAN Chair in 2021 also uncovered several themes pointing to an evolution in ASEAN regionalism, which will also be addressed in this paper. The paper concludes with revisiting the importance of ASEAN centrality while questioning its relative significance alongside other values such as ASEAN cohesion.

ASEAN in 2021

As Chair, Brunei has navigated a challenging environment in this year as most of the region's strategic challenges this year were completely unanticipated. New developments added to the complexity of the geostrategic landscape while the COVID-19 pandemic did not retreat despite many expectations.

The region spent most of 2020 in the shadow of COVID-19, which gave Brunei the opportunity to craft the chairmanship's new agenda for the following year under "We Care, We Prepare, We Prosper." A detailed analysis into these three themes would uncover that Brunei has carefully aligned its chairmanship priorities into these three complementary approaches by protecting human security, upholding emergency and disaster preparedness responses and supporting the region as it evolves into the anticipated post-pandemic environment.

Instead, Brunei began its chairmanship with the sudden onset of the Myanmar crisis added a mediating role to Brunei's already full chairmanship plate. The region also became increasingly defined by multipolarity with the announcement of the AUKUS partnership and the active commencement of the Quad meetings, which further ingrained middle powers into the bilateral major power competition between the United States and China. These arrangements have been viewed with careful skepticism from ASEAN member states, although there is also a healthy appreciation for the public goods that have emerge from them such as the provision of vaccines and support for ASEAN's Master Plan on Connectivity 2025. Meanwhile, tense maneuvers at sea continue such as mass encroachment of around 200 Chinese fishing vessels and the harassment of regional vessels operating in gas fields in Luconia Shoals and the Natuna Sea. This was shortly followed by unannounced surveys of the seabed.

With the looming COVID-19, escalating maneuvers at sea and new strategic arrangements, ASEAN member states are concerned they would find themselves in a predicament of feeling pressured to align with the competition. Many member states value their strategic autonomy by being able to determine their own balance with extra-regional powers through hedging strategies while reaping economic and security benefits. With such a complex environment presented to Brunei, how did Brunei perceive its role as Chair, and what resources did it have at its disposal?

From the Perspective of a Small State

With a population of around 430,000, Brunei just about surpasses the category of a microstate (150,000 to 300,000 people)¹ and falls comfortably within some definitions of a small state which sets the benchmark of a population of under 1 million according to Julie Bivin Raadschelders. The actual characteristics remain up for debate – whether the benchmark of the population should be under 2 million or less or of the geographical size of the country.

Either way, these parameters encompass Brunei's features – positing the country as a small state and so vulnerable to the discrimination often held against small states in international relations literature. This discrimination often stems from syndromes or characteristics that are associated with small states. Some of these include low institutional capacity which exposes the country to state failure, weak strategic autonomy under global pressures posed by systemic shifts such as major power competition and spillovers from domestic instability and unlikely economic success as they cannot facilitate their own consumption pattern by the production of its own industries that is compatible with larger states and so this leads to a high share of foreign trade in the country's GDP.

¹ Boyce, Blair, and Erdhardt

It is critical for the analysis to depart from this perspective to demonstrate how small state syndrome translates into regional responsibilities that a small state would be inclined to adopt in the international system, such as Chair of a regional organization. A review of these small state symptoms/characteristics is not necessarily justifiable in the case of Brunei. However, the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2021 did uncover some of Brunei's limited capacity as a regional leader. Interestingly, the chairmanship also highlighted the tools that Brunei chose to adopt to overcome these restraints as a small state.

The Small State Toolbox

As an institutionalized leader, Brunei understood that it possessed limited political capital as a small state. Popular for its neutral stance on a range of issues, such as the South China Sea dispute, Brunei was known to avoid firm stances and lobbying support it needed to forward a position.

However, as Chair, Brunei delved into its toolbox and worked on three key values: legitimacy, trust, and integrity. Recognizing its legitimacy was at stake, Brunei adopted drastically different foreign policy tools in an attempt to boost it. As a competent leader, Brunei needed to build legitimacy by mediating the competing interests of member states and find new and unanimously agreed solutions to crises such as the political strife in Myanmar. Under pressure from both international actors and other ASEAN member states, Brunei's small but competent foreign policy cohort skillfully exercised its procedural power to develop the Five-Point Consensus and release a Chairman Statement from the Emergency ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting where Myanmar was present, declaring that a non-political representative would be invited to the ASEAN Summit. Despite the norm of consensus decision-making, Brunei had just stopped short of violating this norm and managed to mediate the interests of member states while noting Myanmar's reservations through a participatory and consensual process. This Chairman Statement, I believe, should be seen as a case study setting precedence on how ASEAN navigated around norms that were previously seen as constricting to progress – while upholding core values amidst regional crises. Hun Sen has continued the narrative by insisting that Myanmar has not been expelled from ASEAN's framework.

The next tool that Brunei used was to exercise its agenda-setting power to preserve legitimacy. Here, Brunei was faced with difficulties posed by social distancing measures at the peak of the pandemic. While discussing deliverables in the previous year, the Foreign Ministry had considered placing the South China Sea dispute on the agenda, hoping to follow Viet Nam's lead and conclude the South China Sea Code of Conduct (CoC) on the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-China relations. However, the risk in undermining trust in Brunei's leadership capabilities ran too high – member states declared that such a sensitive issue could not be discussed over virtual meetings that prevented genuine confidence building. Brunei then exercised its agenda-setting

power to revisit the issue later in the year under the pretext of the pandemic and to follow the lead of the Philippines – who was the Country Coordinator for ASEAN-China relations. The ASEAN-China meeting in August 2021 eventually saw progress – albeit limited – in discussing the language in the preamble and implementation modalities. However, it is worth noting that Myanmar has since been appointed as Country Coordinator of ASEAN-China relations, which may further stall progress.

Another area where Brunei exercised agenda-setting was in welcoming the United Kingdom as a Dialogue Partner in the aftermath of Brexit. In recognizing growing multipolarity in the region, ASEAN welcomed more middle powers into the fold to balance against the growing U.S.-China rivalry – a calculated move as the UK is eagerly developing a new post-Brexit identity while enhancing its presence in the region.

Meanwhile, ASEAN continued to maintain relations with the United States and China through bilateral summits. In the U.S.-ASEAN summit, ASEAN priorities were aligned with the United States' agenda which included extending support to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing climate change, and even gender equality. ASEAN recognizes the long-term immense security, economy, and strategic benefits served in maintaining a relationship with the United States – which is reflected in the ISEAS Southeast Asia Survey. Although the survey also logged lower levels of trust in China as a major power, the recent China-ASEAN summit also witnessed declarations by ASEAN member states to support further strategic trust in a wider China presence. This alludes to widening fissures in foreign policy stances amongst member states.

The last tool that Brunei used from its toolbox was a reevaluation of priorities to preserve integrity. To exhibit integrity would be to facilitate the will of the ASEAN member states over Brunei's own preferences as Chair. Integrity can build trust, which ultimately would strengthen the legitimacy that Brunei needed to expand its political capital and lobbying space to maneuver as a regional leader. The Foreign Ministry in Brunei had spent a large portion of its year in 2020 to detail a comprehensive three-pronged deliverable plan under “We Care, We Prepare, We Prosper” as ASEAN Chair. In inheriting the agenda from Viet Nam, Brunei saw its role as supporting regional recovery from COVID-19. However, the unanticipated Myanmar crisis and U.S.-China competition demanded a review of Brunei's priorities as Chair. As a small state, Brunei came under pressure to realign its focus towards these crises – having recognized that its integrity as ASEAN Chair would be at stake if it failed to do so. Although less publicized, Brunei continued to achieve all the deliverables it had set out under its COVID-19-oriented agenda, in addition to navigating the Myanmar crisis and pressures from external powers.

Evolving Regionalism

Brunei's ability to utilize these tools, albeit at varying success levels, shed light on the evolving flexibility surrounding the development of regionalism within ASEAN. This stands out in three distinct ways.

Firstly, ASEAN member states have demonstrated the preference for informal interactions within a formal organizational structure. These informal interactions often take place in the form of bilateral discussions, on the sidelines of proceedings in ASEAN. The importance of these interactions lay in their ability to build confidence between member states. In the absence of physical interactions, informal diplomacy relied heavily on personal camaraderie and were maintained through technology such as the instant messaging application, WhatsApp. These informal interactions, such as that between Brunei and Myanmar, were critical in developing confidence needed to assure Myanmar that it was not exiled from the ASEAN family. Similarly, the decision to postpone consultations on the Code of Conduct also evolved on the understanding that the absence of these interactions could risk jeopardizing negotiations.

Secondly, the foundational norms of non-interference in domestic issues and decision-making by consensus was proven to be able to stand the test of time (and domestic and regional crises). Brunei was able to push the limits of non-interference while respecting consensus in navigating the Myanmar issue. While this may be viewed as a testament to Brunei's strategic leadership, it also shed light on the space available to navigate around these norms. These norms may be set in the foundational stone of ASEAN, but they may not necessarily impede progress.

Thirdly, varying foreign policy stances and internal discord do not necessarily indicate the impending dissolution of ASEAN. As the region enters an intensely multipolar region, strategic autonomy is increasingly valued. ASEAN member states, Brunei included, will begin witnessing shifts in their foreign policy due to some impact from regional issues, some member states more than others, creating divergence in national priorities. Yet, as we witnessed, ASEAN held firm to the position that all member states should remain united. The Myanmar crisis has demonstrated that perhaps, in the coming years, centrality may matter less than cohesion.

Whither Centrality?

In 2021, ASEAN was dealt a difficult hand by managing crisis upon crisis, within a regional environment that was attracting more external power. Brunei's chairmanship has demonstrated that international pressures have impacted the policy direction taken by ASEAN. Brunei's decision to expand its agenda towards addressing Myanmar and to perhaps shelve the South China Sea crisis can be linked to pressures from international actors.

As a spillover effect from the Myanmar crisis, external relations with ASEAN member states were reevaluated. Despite the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Agreement coming into effect earlier this year, Myanmar's ratification is still waiting on acceptance by other members. Meanwhile, ASEAN's ability to develop new relations with external partners were also hampered. While Qatar's accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation was welcomed, the Treaty had not been signed despite being one of the chairmanship deliverables. This was in part due to the requirement of signatories from all ASEAN member states, which would risk legitimizing the military government in Myanmar.