

The United States and ASEAN

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ASEAN held its summit meeting, the second in Phnom Penh, under Cambodia's chairmanship on 18 November.



According to the ASEAN Charter, which entered into force in December 2008, ASEAN holds at least two summits a year, each 'hosted by the Member State holding the ASEAN Chairmanship'. In practice, the first of the year's summits is devoted to ASEAN affairs, and the second to ASEAN's relations with its neighbours and with other countries important to it.

The November 2012 ASEAN summit saw all eyes on President Barack Obama, attending his first international gathering since his recent re-election. He attended both the ASEAN–US summit on 19 November, the fourth summit the United States has had with all 10 ASEAN members, and the East Asia Summit (EAS) on 20 November with ASEAN member states, Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and Russia. The United States and Russia took part in the EAS, which had its inaugural gathering in 2005, for the second time.

Given President Obama's visits to Myanmar, the first by a US president, and to Thailand in the lead-up to the Phnom Penh summits, the media and political commentators see renewed US attention to East Asia as an important manifestation of [Washington's 're-balancing' approach](#)^[1] to world affairs. This approach is also seen in the United States' response to reforms in Myanmar, its resolve to strengthen ties with old and new allies and supporters, the re-deployment of US forces in the area, and the president and secretary of state's participation in ASEAN-led multilateral fora.

Those who wish for a more robust US presence in, and attention to, East Asia, however, have evinced concern about its sustainability. The US economy is suffering. And compared to regions like the Middle East, where crises could easily attract US attention and action, East Asia is currently not beset by actual armed conflict. This concern can influence much of the analysis of US participation in ASEAN and East Asian summits.

Other potential foci of attention in relation to future ASEAN and related summits are the implications of the territorial and [maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas](#) ^[2] for ASEAN and its individual members' relations with China and for Sino–Japanese relations.

As many will recall, for the first time in its 45-year history, the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in July 2012 [failed to issue a joint communiqué](#) ^[3] because of the failure of the ministers to achieve consensus on a common ASEAN position on issues involved in the South China Sea. The failure took place despite the fact that such a consensus had been worked out in the past and was again expressed in an ASEAN ministerial statement on the South China Sea a few days later. Many pointed to Chinese pressure on Cambodia as the main reason for this undeniable debacle.

There was no reason to think that Cambodia or China had not learned its lesson from this turn of events. Nor was there reason to believe that Hun Sen, Cambodia's long-time prime minister, would allow his country to chair its last series of ASEAN and related summits without issuing an ASEAN, an ASEAN+3, an ASEAN–China or an EAS chairman's statement, with a consensus on the South China Sea in place, no matter how bland. ASEAN initially appeared to reach a consensus; Cambodia certainly announced that member states had agreed not to 'internationalise' the South China Sea dispute — thus maintaining China's desire to see the matter resolved bilaterally. Yet the façade lasted less than a day as Filipino president Benigno Aquino disputed that any such deal had been reached.

The start of FTA negotiations between China, Japan and South Korea on the sidelines of the ASEAN summit and EAS, which was announced early this year for this occasion, seemed unlikely to happen. The immediate reason for this doubt was the tension between China and Japan over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islets in the East China Sea. Japan and Korea, too, have a dispute over Dokdo/Takeshima. Nevertheless, the benefits of closer economic ties seem to have prevailed on this occasion, with officials agreeing to proceed with negotiations early next year.

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[1] Washington's 're-balancing' approach:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/11/11/what-obamas-second-term-means-for-asia/>

[2] maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/10/25/territorial-disputes-and-the-east-asian-regional-order/>

[3] failed to issue a joint communiqué:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/07/26/south-china-sea-disputes-why-asean-must-unite/>

[4] *ASEAN Studies Centre*: <http://www.aseanstudiescentre.org/>