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Performing under pressure:
Lessons for supporting multilateralism from Indonesia, Thailand, and Cambodia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Critics predicted the 2022 summits (G20, APEC, and ASEAN) wouldn't deliver results – the Russia-Ukraine war and tense geopolitical environment posed huge challenges to consensus decision making.
- Instead, the small and middle powers of Southeast Asia – Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia – demonstrated their ability to facilitate multilateral cooperation. Their neutral and non-aligned status helped them do this.
- Middle power diplomacy and sustained advocacy by hosts enabled the summits to be successful – with full participation of all member states, and joint statements issued.
- Australian foreign policy makers should continue to take small and middle power perspectives into account when planning their engagement in the 2023 summits.

1 INTRODUCTION

Huong Le Thu

Multilateral cooperation is under pressure, despite the mounting transnational challenges that call for it now more than ever. Tensions between some members, non-compliance of others, and great power competition is making it increasingly difficult for the international community to work together in multilateral institutions.

In 2022, three members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) had leadership roles in important regional and global institutions: Indonesia chairing the Group of 20 (G20), Thailand leading Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and Cambodia being the chair of ASEAN and related summits, including the East Asia Summit.

The 2022 summits in Southeast Asia performed above expectations – to secure joint statements that many observers hadn't thought possible. What lessons can the international community learn from these small and middle powers' multilateral leadership, and how can Australia apply them to multilateral engagement and summits in 2023?

In a region that is both complex and deeply interconnected, small and middle powers in Southeast Asia prefer inclusive multilateralism as a way of working.

Regional challenges since the onset of the pandemic have only grown; supply-chain choke points; the mounting effects of climate change; energy insecurity; rapid digitalisation, to mention a few. Most, if not all, of these issues require multilateral responses and cooperation.

But inclusive multilateralism is getting harder.

Within ASEAN, Myanmar's membership is increasingly problematic. Russia's G20 attendance in Bali in November 2022 risked alienating the US and Western members. Even economic cooperation has become politicised as the Sino-US decoupling affects the trade agenda within APEC.

2022's summits – the first in-person gatherings since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic – took place under the shadow of conflict.

With US and allied sanctions against Russia for its war in Ukraine, politics intruded into the summits more than ever before. Member states focused on who was attending, and who was not. The US and its allies reportedly put pressure on summit hosts (notably G20 host Indonesia, but also APEC host Thailand) to disinvite Putin.[1]

For the first time in history, there was a real possibility that none of the 2022 summits would produce a concluding joint declaration.

ASEAN admittedly had faced this situation once before in 2012 when the summit in Cambodia ended without a joint statement due to disagreement over the South China Sea (Scarborough Shoal standoff).[2] It was widely expected that both the APEC and G20 summits would fail to produce any consensus – Russia's membership of both organisations saw multiple disagreements in lead-up meetings, including on what seemed to be non-political issues.

Alongside the new challenge of Ukraine, there were other longstanding factors that threatened global cooperation and inclusion in 2022 which won't go away in 2023. US-China competition and decoupling is the obvious challenge.

1 https://fortune.com/2022/03/25/russia-g20-summit-putin-biden-indonesia-bali-china-ukraine/
2 https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/19/world/asia/beijing-and-manila-ease-tensions-in-south-china-sea.html

Inside ASEAN itself, the Myanmar situation continues to deteriorate – ASEAN Foreign Ministers acknowledged weeks ahead of the 2022 summits that its 5-point consensus on ending the violence in Myanmar was nowhere near being achieved.[3] Not to mention, there's been little progress in negotiations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

Yet, against all the odds, and despite the grim geopolitical atmosphere, all three countries hosted successful summits with some tangible outcomes. Participation was robust, as expected. **But the fact that all three summits occurred at all, and as smoothly as they did, was testimony that diplomacy can reduce tensions.**

Another key to the success of the 2022 summits was their practical (and largely economic) agenda, explicitly based on the region's needs. Indonesia's G20 agenda focused on global health, digitalisation, and sustainable energy transition. Thailand's motto for APEC was "open to all opportunities, connect in all dimensions, and balance in all aspects" to drive inclusive growth. Cambodia's theme for ASEAN explicitly called for the region to collaborate to become "stronger together - addressing challenges together."

Neutral ground was also a factor in the biggest deliverables of the summits - the side meetings. The Xi-Biden bilateral meeting in Bali broke ice between the competing superpowers, as did the meeting between Xi and Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese (the first Australia-China leaders' meeting since 2016). Indonesia's neutral stance and ability to offer a middle ground for everyone to meet was pivotal to meetings happening at all.

ASEAN welcomed back for the first time since 2017 the US president's attendance, the first opportunity to welcome Biden in person to the region as the US president. All summits enjoyed eager participation from members, showing that multilateralism still matters in global politics.

As the Indo-Pacific navigates the most challenging geo-strategic environment since the Second World War, it's important that Australia and partners pay close attention to what factors keep channels of communication open, and what closes them down. The summits of 2022 offer some important lessons for the year ahead, with India to host G20, Indonesia chairing ASEAN, and the US hosting APEC in 2023.

This report offers perspectives from three authors from Indonesia, Thailand and Cambodia who explain how smaller and mid-sized Southeast Asian countries manage to outperform despite challenges and defend the importance of multilateralism.

U.S. President Joe Biden meets with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the G20 leaders' summit in Bali, Indonesia, November 14, 2022. Photograph by Kevin Lamarque via REUTERS.

3 Five-Point Consensus Archives - ASEAN Main Portal https://asean.org › tag › five-point-consensus

2 LESSONS FROM CAMBODIA'S 2022 ASEAN SUMMIT

Charadine Pich

The 2022 ASEAN Chair, Cambodia, had a tough task last year. It hosted the 8-13 November Summit alongside the 2nd ASEAN Global Dialogue, in the shadow of major conflicts: the Myanmar political crisis, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the ongoing South China Sea issue.

29 countries, international, and intergovernmental organizations attended – all with diverse points of view and objectives. But the main objective for Cambodia, as is the case for every ASEAN chair, was to strengthen "ASEAN centrality" – the organization's role in maintaining peace, security, and prosperity in the region. That's getting more and more difficult to do, in the context of intense strategic competition in the region.

So how did Cambodia, and ASEAN, navigate these challenges in 2022?

ASEAN WON'T PICK SIDES, BUT IT WANTS TO ADHERE TO PRINCIPLES

With rising global tensions, ASEAN wants to avoid taking sides at all costs. Most recently, this approach has been set out in the 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific – a strategic document that sets out ASEAN's focus on cooperation in the region, and desire to avoid confrontation.

But before ASEAN had the Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, it had the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), first established in 1976.

The TAC, a legally binding instrument, "is a prerequisite for any formal partnerships between extra-regional nation-states (dialogue partners, sectoral dialogue partners, or development partners) and ASEAN, embodies universal principles such as mutual respect for the independence of all states, the settlement of disputes by peaceful means, and the renunciation of the use of force."[4]

The way ASEAN used the TAC in 2022 demonstrates how the group wants to approach global tensions. In 2022, ASEAN acceded eight new members to the TAC: Denmark, Greece, the Netherlands, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Spain and on 10th November 2022 the 50th TAC signatory, Ukraine.[5]

ASEAN's approval of Ukraine as a High Contracting Party to the TAC was an indirect signal to Moscow that its invasion of Ukraine violated international law. And ASEAN was able to do this, despite member states not having a unified position on the Russia-Ukraine issue.

In its chairmanship year, Cambodia also hosted the 36th Meeting of the ASEAN-China Joint Working Group on the Implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in May – 20 years after the Declaration was first signed.[6] Some observers claim that Cambodia "defang[ed] any real public discussion of the topic against China's growing maritime assertiveness.[7] But that overlooks Cambodia's role in facilitating public dialogue.

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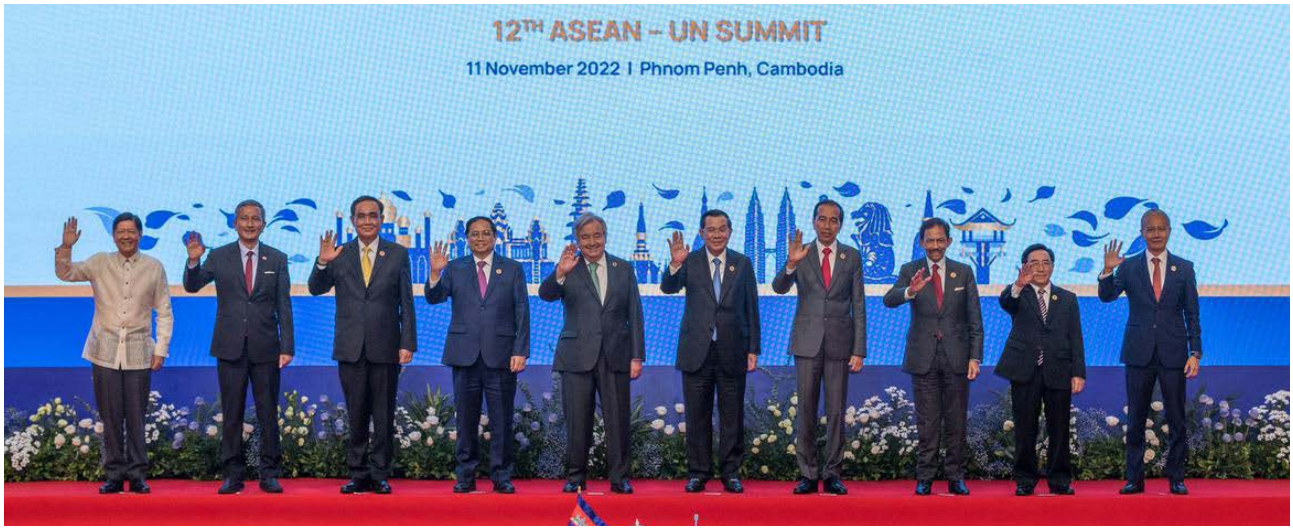
4 Lin, J. (August 3, 2022). Ukraine's Accession to TAC: A Critical Decision for ASEAN. Fulcrum: Analysis on Southeast Asia. Available at: https://fulcrum.sg/ukraines-accession-to-tac-a-critical-decision-for-asean/

5 Ben, S. (November 11, 2022). *New Partner: Ukraine signs TAC with ASEAN and is part of a bigger family*. Khmer Times. Available at: https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501182103/new-partner-ukraine-signs-tac-with-asean-and-is-part-of-a-bigger-family/

6 ASEAN Cambodia 2022 News. Available at: https://asean2022.mfaic.gov.kh/posts/2022-05-27-News-The-36th-Meeting-of-the-ASEAN-China-Joint-Working-Group-on-the-Implementation-of-the-Declaration-on--09-52-00

7 Kurlantzick, J. (November 15, 2022). *Reflections on the ASEAN Summit and the ASEAN-U.S. Summit in Cambodia*. Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: https://www.cfr.org/article/reflections-asean-summit-and-asean-us-summit-cambodia



PRACTICAL ACTION CAN HELP KEEP CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION OPEN

The other way the 2022 ASEAN summit attempted to navigate global tensions was by focusing on practical priorities – economic and regional integration and humanitarian assistance.

On regional and economic integration, leaders agreed in principle to admit Timor-Leste as the 11th member of the group after a decade of observer status. The free trade agreement between ASEAN, Australia, and New Zealand was upgraded, and the relationships between ASEAN and the US, and ASEAN-India elevated to "comprehensive strategic partnerships."[8] These were significant decisions that will support regional economic integration and engagement in other free trade agreements like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

On thorny issues like the Myanmar Political Crisis, Cambodia's chairmanship didn't seek a resolution of the political situation. Instead, Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn, as Special Envoy of the ASEAN Chair to Myanmar, prioritized humanitarian assistance, engaging with UN Specialized Agencies, AHA Center, ASEAN external partners and the Myanmar Task Force.[9] Regional observers have high expectations of the incoming ASEAN Chair – Indonesia – to set a tougher stance on Myanmar in 2023.[10] But it's important to note that Cambodia's year-long humanitarian focus has laid the groundwork for a tougher discussion.

SMALL POWERS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

There's no question there were still setbacks at the 2022 ASEAN summit – for example, leaders agreed that no progress had been made towards implementing the Five Point Consensus on Myanmar, a five-point plan aimed at immediately limiting and resolving the political crisis in Myanmar.

But Cambodia's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2022 also showed that small powers can address hard issues. The 2022 ASEAN Summit communique addressed tough questions: the Russia-Ukraine war, Myanmar, South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, Korean Peninsula, among others.

Major power rivalry and the US-China tussle won't go away in 2023. As the world heads into another challenging year in 2023, it will be important to recognize that for many small powers, like Cambodia, the principle of non-interference, international rules and norms and the UN Charter are the key mechanisms through which they will want to approach complex issues.

8 Saha, P. (November 22, 2022). *Could the ASEAN Summit achieve anything substantial?* Observer Research Foundation (ORF). Available at: https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/could-the-asean-summit-achieve-anything-substantial/

9 *Press Release on the Outcomes of the Consultative Meeting on ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance to Myanmar.* (May 6, 2022). Available at: https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/ENG-Post-Event-PR-for-CM-Final.pdf

10 McCarthy, S. (November 11, 2022). *As major powers meet in Asia, the rest of the word is pressed to pick a side*. CNN. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/11/asia/asia-summits-asean-us-china-myanmar-intl-hnk-mic/index.html

(TOP Photo) The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-UN Summit in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Photograph by Nick Sells, Photo via United Nations News.

3 BALI'S G20 MAGIC SPELL: RE-ENERGISING MULTILATERALISM

Maria Monica Wihardja

The G20 Bali Summit in November 2022 was a success against all odds: the first summit of "a new cold war"[11] delivered a consensus in the form of a Leaders' Declaration.[12] The Summit proved that the G20 can deliver both global leadership and global governance, and that multilateralism still has an important role to play in managing global economic challenges.

Leading one of the most challenging G20 Summits ever, Indonesia's G20 presidency had to address not only the global economic fallout of the war in Ukraine, but also long-term structural issues like climate change and food insecurity, as well as new challenges like the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges all occur in the context of multilateral institutions and processes that are outdated.

In the face of such difficulties, how did Indonesia achieve such a successful outcome?

LEVERAGING NON-ALIGNMENT AND MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY

Key to success was Indonesia's shrewd diplomacy, along with its staunch adherence to non-alignment values and the G20's consensus-based principles. "Indonesia refused to be a pawn in the new cold war, said President Joko Widodo.[13] Instead, Indonesia invited all G20 members, as well as other non-member countries: Ukraine; small Pacific islands; and the African Union, all of whom have much at stake in G20 discussions on climate change, food insecurity, inflation, and debt.

The fact that the G20 is polylateral (i.e. bringing together state and non-state actors)[14] also helped achieve outcomes. The G20 has ten engagement groups, ranging from youth (Y20) to business (B20) to science and research (S20). Although not all of the G20 engagement groups achieved an agreed upon communique, those that were successful included Y20, B20, Think20 (T20), Urban20 (U20), and Women20 (W20). The ministerial meeting processes and the G20 working groups were unsuccessful.

From attendance to substance, 2022's G20 Summit also showed the critical role of middle-powers in brokering deals.[15] Use of the word "war" in the context of Ukraine wasn't considered in drafting the Leaders' communique, because several G20 member countries would refuse to accept it. Instead, Indonesia used food and energy security as an entry point, re-deployed UN resolution language, and phrased statements as being the position of "most members" (an implicit statement that leaders agree to disagree).

Where strong statements were reached, it was thanks to the middle-powers.[16] For example, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "today's era must not be of war" was ultimately included in the G20 Leaders' Declaration.[17] Besides Indonesia and India, Brazil also played an active role in the bridge building efforts to reach a consensus.

The international community would do well to pay attention to middle powers' perspectives in 2023. It's clear that countries like Indonesia, India, Brazil and South Africa (the next three G20 presidencies) are powers who are determined "to be at the table and not on the menu".[18]

11 Source: Rachman, Gideon. 2022. "The first global summit of the second cold war." Financial Times. The first global summit of the second cold war | Financial Times

12 Source: https://kemlu.go.id/download/L3NpdGVzL3B1c2F0L0RvY3VtZW50cy9TaWFyYW4lMjBQZXJzLzIwMjIvRzIwJTIwQmFsaSUyMExlYWRlcnMlMjclMjBEZWNsYXJhdGlvbiUyMEx0xNiUyME5vdmVtYmVyJTIwMjAyMiwlMjBpbmNsJTIwW5uZXgucGRm

13 ibid

14 See: Coulibaly, Brahima S., and Kemal Derviş (Editors). 2022. *Essays on a 21st Century Multilateralism that Works for All*. Global Economy and Development at Brookings. https://www.brookings.edu/research/essays-on-a-21st-century-multilateralism-that-works-for-all/

15 Source: Foy, Henry, and Mercedes Ruehl. 2022. "`A remarkable job': how Russia and China buckled in the face of a united G20." Financial Times. 'A remarkable job': how Russia and China buckled in the face of a united G20 | Financial Times (ft.com)

16 Source: Foy and Ruehl, 2022.

17 Source: Times of India. 2022. "`Today's era not of war': How India united on PM Modi's idea of peace." https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/todays-era-not-of-war-how-india-united-g20-on-pm-modis-idea-of-peace/articleshow/95552042.cms

18 Source: Krastev, Ivan. 2022. "Middle Powers are reshaping geopolitics." Financial Times. Middle Powers are reshaping geopolitics | Financial Times (ft.com)

MULTILATERALISM IS NOT DEAD

The G20 Summit in 2022 was also proof of life for multilateralism. It still remains the only viable option for global cooperation on existential threats, from pandemics to climate change, to disrupted supply chains and technological bifurcation.

But for multilateralism to work, it needs outcomes. And Indonesia was clear from the outset that it did not want the G20 to be a talkfest. It wanted concrete results in the form of funds, initiatives, and projects.

There were many positive statements embedded in the G20 Leaders' Declaration that have practical implications for global cooperation between the world's twenty largest economies in 2023, as well as a few shortfalls that India should follow-up in 2023.

First, leaders agreed to "uphold international law and the multilateral system that safeguards peace and stability." That's a clear commitment by all members to the UN Charter and the UN system.

Second, leaders acknowledged that the "multilateral trading system is indispensable," and that World Trade Organization reform is essential to restoring trust in the system. In practice, that will mean that the US-China trade and technological war cannot be solved by the US and China alone. International rules and multilateral organizations must step in.[19]

The Declaration did not address the need to reform global economic governance and international financial institutions. But the "Think20" engagement group did,[20] and that's an action item that countries from the Global South, like Indonesia, would hope could be pursued during India's 2023 G20 Presidency.[21]

Third, leaders made serious commitments to tackle global threats – health, food security, and climate change. G20 Ministers of Health and Finance established a Pandemic Fund, which has already raised USD1.4 billion to better manage future pandemics. Leaders called for the renewal of the Black Sea Grain Initiative and committed to facilitate access to food in emergency situations and refrain from food export bans. On climate change, leaders committed to ensure at least 30 per cent of global land and oceans are conserved or protected by 2030. Indonesia also pocketed USD20 billion from the "Just Energy Transition Partnership" to help it get to net zero.[22] But climate financing remains a problem, with advanced countries in the G20 failing to provide the funds for the committed USD100 billion climate financing to poor countries before 2020 and per year through to 2025.[23]

Fourthly, and as expected, 2022's Summit did not reach any breakthrough agreements on global digital governance issues, like users' ownership of their data, or algorithmic bias against minority groups (raised in the Youth20 Communique).[24] India is well placed to address these issues in 2023, given its strong track record on digital transformation and digital public infrastructure (like the Unified Payments Interface), and its experience in passing its data protection bill.

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19 See: Part 1: Reckoning | 2022 Bloomberg New Economy Forum - YouTube

20 Source: E-BOOK-T20-Communique.pdf (t20indonesia.org)

21 India's G20 Sherpa, Amitabh Kant, said in a dialogue about the India G20 Presidency that "when you talk about multilateral institutions for the 21st century, all of them need to change." Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHYehzuJ3Ok

22 The Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) fund for Indonesia, which includes USD10 billion in public funding and USD10 billion from private sector investors, was unveiled during the G20 Bali Summit. JETP is an international cooperation of advanced economies led by the United States and Japan to finance energy transitions in emerging and low-income economies. Indonesia is the second country after South Africa to receive fund from this initiative. With the fund, Indonesia commits to bring forward its net zero emission target by a decade to 2050 and increase its target of renewable energy as a share of total power generation to over a third by 2030.

23 A report commissioned by the UN estimates that poor countries, excluding China, needs USD2.4 trillion annually by 2030 to cut greenhouse emissions and cope with the impacts of climate change. Source: The Economist. 2022. "There is a better way to help poor countries fight with climate crisis." https://www.economist.com/leaders/2022/11/17/there-is-a-better-way-to-help-poor-countries-fight-climate-change?gclid=CjwKCAiAyfybBhBKEiwAgtB7ftp5jxwkuq-tSQQmj8XR85ErkYapIB8kT9M1e4ytTP24M1Q-KYoUbRoCtHcQAvD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds

24 Source: Y20 Indonesia 2022 Communiqué.pdf - Google Drive

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM INDONESIA'S 2022 G20 PRESIDENCY?

It's no surprise that Indonesia used the G20 presidency to attract foreign investment into the country. President Jokowi is after all famous for his "mercantilist diplomacy," leveraging foreign policy to maximize trade surplus and investment flows into the country.[25] But at G20, the president managed to kill two birds with one stone, casting himself as both an inward-looking nationalist and a global statesman.[26]

Indonesia should take pride in its role re-energising fraying multilateralism at the G20 in 2022. As it passes the baton to India, which looks set to also focus on multilateralism - 'one earth, one family, one future' or in Sanskrit translation, 'the world is one family'[27] – Indonesia *as a nation* must maintain that energy. It must also resist receding into a more passive global presence or unilateralism by banning exports of major food commodities or minerals that could elevate global prices.

Ultimately, Indonesia's G20 presidency showed that the country has a significant role to play in the international community, helping the world navigate global challenges. And the world needs that now more than ever.

G20 Summit | Bali, 15 November 2022
Photograph by President Paul Kagame's Flickr account, via Flickr.

25 In his words, "friends with benefits – making friends with countries that can provide us with benefits" (Bland, 2021). This encapsulates his colloquial interpretation of Indonesia's long-standing principle of "free and active" foreign policy – meaning no formal military and security alliances with any country. Source: Bland, Ben. 2021. Man with Contradictions. Penguin publisher.

26 See: Wee, Sui Lee. 2022. "Once Inward-Looking, Jokowi Casts Himself as a Global Statesman." New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/13/world/asia/indonesia-joko-widodo-g20.html

27 See: Decoding G20 Indonesia Summit - YouTube

4 APEC SUMMIT: THAILAND'S MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY

Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit

2022 was a difficult year for international relations. The Sino-American rivalry intensified, with the Biden Administration retaining most Trump-era tariffs on Chinese goods, restricting Chinese acquisition of American businesses, and attempting to counter China's dominance of the semi-conductor (microchip) industry through the CHIPS and Science Act of August 2022. Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine has seen some APEC participants join Western sanctions against Russia, and others continue to purchase Russia's fossil fuels. The war's impact on food prices has led other countries to restrict or ban exports.

It was in this challenging environment that Thailand hosted the 29th APEC Economic Leaders Meeting in Bangkok, 17-19 November 2022.

Critics had doubted whether a Leaders' Declaration would be possible. No joint statements had been issued at the precursor meetings: the Ministers Responsible for Trade Meeting (MRT) in May 2022 (some APEC members walked out of the meeting in protest against the Kremlin's aggression against Kyiv); or the Finance Ministers' Meeting in October 2022.

FOCUS ON ECONOMIC COOPERATION

The theme of the summit – "Open. Connect. Balance." helped facilitate dialogue. Members had to work together to deepen trade and investment ties by reducing protectionist barriers ("open"), restore the connectivity interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic ("connect"), and cooperate to achieve sustainable and inclusive growth ("balance").

Ultimately, it was Thailand's clear focus on the economic objectives of the gathering that enabled a Leaders Declaration to be issued. Committing to "promote strong, balanced, secure, sustainable and inclusive growth," leaders also agreed to accelerate the realisation of the Putrajaya Vision 2040 (a 2020 APEC agreement to make the region "an open, dynamic, resilient and peaceful Asia-Pacific community by 2040").

The outcomes were very practical. Leaders agreed to push forward collaboration on sustainable finance and digital economy (including the APEC Internet Digital Economy Roadmap), enhance women's economic participation by boosting the capacities of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, and promote the safe and seamless cross-border movements of people via the interoperability of vaccine certificates and expanded eligibility of the APEC Business Travel Card.

Thailand also brought two significant regional proposals to the Summit, that were approved by Leaders: the roadmap for the Free Trade Agreement of Asia-Pacific, and the Bangkok Goals on Bio-Circular-Green Economy. The Bangkok Goals provide a comprehensive framework for accomplishing APEC's sustainability objectives and, if fully implemented, will enable the region to achieve the Putrajaya Vision 2040.

MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY ON UKRAINE

Thailand didn't only bring leadership on regional economic integration to the APEC Summit. It displayed careful, middle-power diplomacy in its handling of the Ukraine war issue.

Preceding gatherings showed that the war was a no-go issue – the APEC economies do not agree with one another.

Despite those differences, the Leaders' Declaration dedicated a whole paragraph outlining the grouping's responses to the Ukraine war. Members noted APEC was not a security forum, but the war had had a significant impact on the global economy. They reaffirmed their previous positions made at the United Nations Security Council and United Nations General Assembly in March 2022 condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine and demanding Russia's withdrawal. Importantly, the Declaration also left room for differences of opinion – Leaders acknowledged "other views and different assessments of the situation and sanctions."

This nuanced declaration showcased Bangkok's ability to navigate a diverse and complex membership group in order to reach a consensus.

LESSONS FOR 2023

The outcomes of APEC 2022 were better than expected.

Of course, APEC alone cannot solve every international problem and 2023 is set to be another challenging year. The war in Ukraine will likely drag on. The US-China rivalry is here to stay if not intensify.

The international community tends to focus on clashes involving major powers. But it's important to remember that no single player can influence the region by itself. Small and middle powers do have roles to play, and very important ones at that. As this year's APEC outcomes demonstrate, middle powers like Thailand can advance regional collaboration even under the tensest of conditions.

APEC 2022 Thailand.
Photograph by ISOM - SOM Family Photo via Flickr.

5 CONCLUSION

Huong Le Thu

The smaller and middle powers of Southeast Asia performed above expectations during the 2022 summits. Their success contains some lessons for the year ahead.

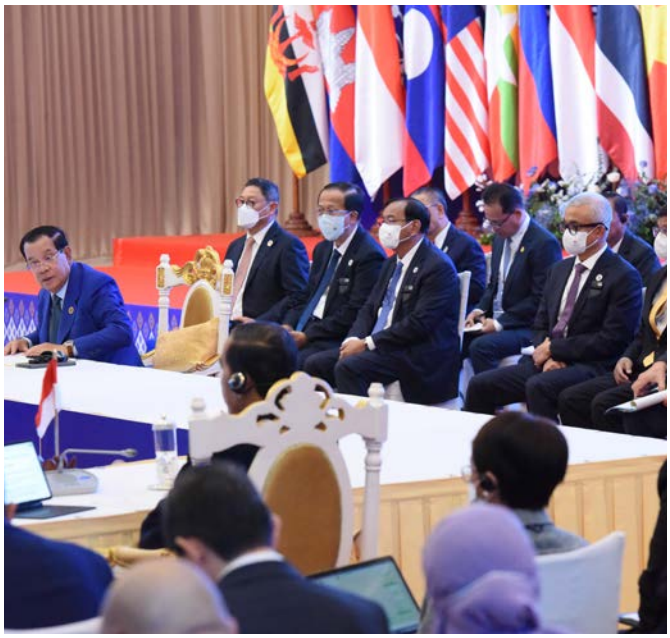
Firstly, they showed that multilateralism still matters, and can achieve outcomes. Multilateral fora are a valuable platform for communication and a conducive environment for cooperation.

Secondly, smaller actors are in a better position to demonstrate the value of multilateral cooperation than major powers, because they depend on a greater deal of cooperation.

And thirdly, smaller and middle powers can sometimes play an even more effective role in brokering deals on sensitive issues, because of their non-aligned or relatively neutral status.

2023's summits fall to the big guys: Indonesia - which by relativity within the group is seen as the region's giant - takes over the ASEAN Chairmanship; India takes over the G20 presidency, while the US takes over the APEC host role.

The global tensions that characterised 2022 aren't going anywhere. Multilateral gatherings offer essential platform for communication that can help ease tension, support dialogue and facilitate cooperation in areas of global concern.



ASEAN, G20 and APEC 2022
Photograph by various. Photos via Flickr.

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ABOUT PERTH USASIA CENTRE

The Perth USAsia Centre located at The University of Western Australia is a non-partisan, not-for-profit institution strengthening relationships and strategic thinking between Australia, the Indo-Pacific and the USA. The Centre is a leading think tank focusing on geopolitical issues, policy development and building a strategic affairs community across government, business and academia. Since the Centre's inception in 2013, we have collaborated with over forty partners to convene more than four hundred programs across sixteen cities in eight countries, engaging a world-class community of over 10,000 strategic thinkers and policy leaders.

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