

## **Regional Leadership in Southeast Asia: Can ASEAN Still Occupy the Driver's Seat?**

**Panel:** Session 4 (Orchid)

**Date/Time:** April 26, 2012 (14:30-15:45)

**Organizing Institution:** Pacific Forum CSIS

**Speakers:** Ralph Cossa (Moderator) [Pacific Forum CSIS]  
Ian Storey [Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, ISEAS]  
Kavi Chongkittavorn [The Nation, Bangkok]  
Le Cong Phung [Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam]  
Jonathan Chow [The Asan Institute for Policy Studies]

### *Panel Short Summary*

Shwe Mar Than, GSIS in Ewha Womans University  
Robert Warshaw, The Heritage Foundation

Ralph Cossa framed discussion by asking whether Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will remain in the driver's seat, and, if so, will it even drive. Stressing the importance of good U.S.-ASEAN relations, he notes that ASEAN needs unity, as it is fracturing on several issues, most notably the South China Sea.

Ian Storey believes that ASEAN will continue to remain in the driver's seat in terms of instrumental centrality, leading regional security architecture for lack of alternatives. However, he warns that as outside competition increases, ASEAN will continue to fracture internally over disputed issues, namely the South China Sea, leading to a weaker collective unit. Moreover, ASEAN's record on handling hot disputes is patchy, proving largely ineffective in addressing North Korea, Kashmir, Taiwan, and the South China Sea. Attributing Southeast Asia's rising strategic profile to growing Sino-U.S. competition, Storey notes that the South China Sea dispute has splintered ASEAN into claimant and non-claimant states. Even if ASEAN and China agree on a binding South China Sea Code of Conduct, it will hardly mitigate the cyclical maritime tensions.

Kavi Chongkittavorn further explores the increased fracturing within ASEAN. Espousing a very critical view of ASEAN's track record, Chongkittavorn argues that as individual ASEAN members increasingly assume their own positions on global issues, ASEAN's voice in the global community diminishes, examples including on environmental

issues, Palestine, and the South China Sea, weakening ASEAN. As outside powers expand engagement with ASEAN, the institution cannot maintain old, untenable mindsets, and today, ASEAN's voice simply cannot represent the region as a whole. In essence, ASEAN's centrality in the future will be severely tested. Finally, Myanmar may become a coordinator between the U.S. and ASEAN in the next three years.

Le Cong Phung is more optimistic of ASEAN's role, noting that due to regional sovereignty, ASEAN has to take the driver's seat. While this centrality is more difficult now, ASEAN's establishment of new mechanisms demonstrates its flexibility. Also, no nation wants to take away the driver's seat from ASEAN—no nation has sought that role. Instead, China, the U.S., and India all need ASEAN. As a collective organization, ASEAN can wield major power in the region, and it must unify vis-à-vis increased Sino-U.S. competition. While ASEAN changes at a slow pace, it continues to move forward, not backward.

Jonathan Chow focused primarily on ASEAN's role as a regional economic driver. The 2015 ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) will mark the beginning, not the end, of increased regional integration. However, persistent non-tariff barriers remain, and the ASEAN Single Window is fraught with difficulty. Furthermore, Chow highlights a contradiction between two of ASEAN's three pillars—economic and socio-cultural. While the economic pillar stresses trade liberalization, the socio-cultural pillar aims to promote human, environmental, and labor rights, creating an intrinsic contradiction. This de-linkage is not sustainable for ASEAN.

Finally, when asked to predict whether ASEAN in five years will be more fractured or more unified than today, every panelist, except Phung, predicted that ASEAN will be more fractured.

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