

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations – A Vector of Peace, Security and Stability in the South China Sea

As a regional organisation, the **Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN)** is playing a pivotal role in the **political, economic and socio-cultural development** of South-East Asia. Established in 1967, the ASEAN contribution to the quickly developing economies of its ten members (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) has been an undeniable fact. The ASEAN member countries are progressing with high speed towards their golden vision of ASEAN Community.

In the light of most recent developments in **South China Sea**, ASEAN is trying in a very intelligent diplomatic way to deal with the situation. The latest event in this regard was the **53rd ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting on September 9, 2020**.

By analyzing the **Joint Communiqué** issued at the end of the meeting, it is becoming vivid the way the ten ASEAN members states see the South China Sea and how it should be treated by those with an active interest in this part of the world.

From the very beginning, while tackling peace and security, they **“reaffirmed the importance of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) as the key code of conduct in governing inter-state relations in the region and as a foundation for maintaining regional peace and stability”**.

In parallel with the commitment of the ASEAN member states “to further promoting the principles embodied in the TAC”, they thought it necessary to “emphasise the importance of all High Contracting Parties in fulfilling their obligations under the Treaty”. It is worthy to underline that among the **“High Contracting Parties” are also China and the USA**, which are very much today in the news.

Just to complete the picture, the ASEAN member states underlined in the Joint Communiqué: **“We reiterated our commitment to preserve the Southeast Asian region as a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone and free of all other weapons of mass destruction as enshrined in the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ Treaty) and the ASEAN Charter”**; **“we reaffirmed our commitment to continuously engage the Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) and intensify the ongoing efforts of all parties to resolve all outstanding issues in accordance with the objectives and principles of the SEANWFZ Treaty”**.

Certainly, the Foreign Ministers came into an agreement to **collectively define the situation in the South China Sea** in the following, very important, paragraphs:

“We reaffirmed the importance of maintaining and promoting peace, security, stability, safety, and freedom of navigation in and over flight above the South China Sea and recognized the benefits of having the South China Sea as a sea of peace, stability, and prosperity.

...

We discussed the situation in the South China Sea, during which concerns were expressed by some Ministers on the land reclamations, activities, and serious incidents in the area, which have eroded trust and confidence, increased tensions, and may undermine peace, security, and stability in the region.

We reaffirmed the need to enhance mutual trust and confidence, exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability and avoid actions that may further complicate the situation.”

*The 10 ASEAN member states presented in the Communiqué the way they are ready to tackle all the matters: “We underscored the importance of **strengthening ASEAN Centrality** and unity in our engagement with ASEAN’s external partners through ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the ASEAN-Plus One, ASEAN Plus Three (APT), EAS, ARF, and ADMM-Plus, in order to build mutual trust and confidence, as well as reinforce an open, transparent, inclusive, and rules-based regional architecture **with ASEAN at the centre.**”*

*As it is the case in every democratic institution, one could understand that the debates among the ten member countries were quite effervescent, which led to interesting interpretations, reflected in the international and regional mass-media. Despite hints that ASEAN might take sides, there was **no implication so far in these commentaries that the Association has already made any steps in this regard.***

*Of course, the final document is crystal clear to sustain the reality that ASEAN is **the Vector of Peace, Security and Stability in the South China Sea and will continue to take the national interest and national sovereignty as the first priority defended by a collective and united position, as the only way the Southeast Asian Nations could act in consonance with the will of their peoples.***

*It is axiomatic that, as the driving force in the area, ASEAN has a superior negotiating power compared to each of its members individually. **Avoiding to lean towards one party in the South China Sea dispute will assure ASEAN remains a united block, continuing to benefit all the advantages of its Political-Security, Economic and Socio-Cultural pillars.** Peace, Security and Stability are universal values, boldly enshrined in the ASEAN Charter. The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation refers to the settlement of differences by peaceful manner and the renunciation of the threat or use of force as **Fundamental Principles**. **In a sea storm of contentious declarations, a return to Fundamental Values is the only way to assure tranquility.** As the Chinese saying goes, 覆水难收。 Water, just like harsh declarations, is easy to pour, but hard to recover.*

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* The opinions expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not reflect the official policy, position or view of the Romanian Institute for Europe-Asia Studies - IRSEA or any of its partners.