

ASEAN Matters

for all of us

The ASEAN Foreign Ministers and the ASEAN Secretary-General at the AMM Retreat.



ASEAN Retreat: Origins and Functions

Moe Thuzar and Hoang Thi Ha

The ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM) is ASEAN's first and longest standing institution. Over the past five decades, ASEAN has developed a full-fledged institutional structure with the ASEAN Summit at the apex and various sectoral ministerial bodies, but the AMM continues to be a focal institution in the ASEAN process.

The images of ASEAN at work often convey a notion of formality, with dignitaries and officials in dark suits, seated around a conference table, or making interventions that rarely veer off-script. In fact, a lot of ASEAN's work gets done in more informal settings that are conducive to frank and substantive exchanges. These meetings, known as "retreats", have become a preferred venue for ASEAN member countries to thrash out difficult and important issues that affect the grouping and the region.

The retreat has its origins in the 32nd AMM held on 23-24 July 1999 in Sentosa, Singapore. At that time, ASEAN's dented credibility had not fully recovered from the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis. The admission of Cambodia in April 1999 as its tenth member added further diversity and complexity to ASEAN which risked becoming a two-tier grouping. The political situation in Myanmar, then under military rule, was a source of intense pressure by Dialogue Partners on ASEAN. Against this backdrop, Singapore initiated the retreat format to facilitate

brainstorming on the future directions of ASEAN and its external engagement mechanisms.

That first retreat was a success. It allowed the Ministers to address extensively and candidly the above strategic and institutional challenges. As narrated by then Singapore Foreign Minister S. Jayakumar – who initiated the retreat format – “during the session, the Foreign Ministers undertook a hard-nosed self-evaluation and introspective critique of ASEAN.” Professor Jayakumar summed it up best as a “heart-to-heart brainstorming.” The retreat session then became a fixture, in conjunction with a plenary session, at the regular AMM.

On 30 April 2001, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers convened their first retreat separate from the regular AMM. From then on, ASEAN has maintained the practice of convening the annual AMM Retreat, normally in the beginning of the year. Apart from the regular Retreats, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers also convene *ad hoc* special meetings in the event of crisis or emergency situations affecting ASEAN. For example, Indonesia called for a special AMM in February 2011 to discuss Cambodia-Thailand border skirmishes. More

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recently, the Foreign Ministers met in December 2016 in Yangon to discuss the situation in Rakhine State. The Foreign Ministers also meet informally in New York on the sidelines of the annual United Nations General Assembly in September to coordinate ASEAN positions on the UN-related issues.

The AMM Retreat has set a trend for other ASEAN bodies, including the ASEAN Summit, ASEAN Economic Ministers Meeting (AEM), and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM), which all convene their respective retreats. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) also include the retreat format for their closed-door discussions.

Since the purpose of the retreat is to allow for free-flowing exchanges of views, it is important to ensure its informal and frills-free nature, as characterised by the following:

- (a) The absence of a formal agenda. Instead, the Chair would circulate an indicative list of topics as a starting point for discussions.
- (b) Participation is exclusive to the Ministers or the Ministers plus one (a senior official or interpreter), and the ASEAN Secretary-General. The expectation is

that away from the scrutiny of big official delegations, the Ministers would feel more comfortable and candid in expressing their views.

- (c) There is no formal report, again to ensure a level of comfort for the Ministers to brainstorm, deliberate and even debate. The Chair, with the support of the ASEAN Secretariat, would prepare a summary of points for follow-up where necessary.

AMM Retreats are often held in a relaxing and reclusive environment (e.g. a resort town) without pomp and ceremony, and little media attention. The dress code is usually smart casual or batik. Even the meeting layout does not have to follow the traditional boardroom style. It can just be a circle of comfortable sofas, with no meeting backdrop or banner. In contrast to the retreat style, a formal meeting has an official agenda, and adheres to strict meeting etiquette with limited intervention slots for each delegation.

The retreat style harks back to ASEAN’s earliest beginnings. The first meeting of the five Founding Fathers in August 1967 was at the beach resort of Bangsaen in Thailand. In the resort’s relaxing atmosphere, they “played golf in the morning, had meetings in the afternoon, and gathered for informal dinners in the evening,” as recalled by then Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman. This is indeed the ASEAN Way that places importance on forging collegiality and a comfort level among the Ministers so that they can discuss difficult and controversial issues constructively and cordially.

The AMM Retreat has become an important platform for ASEAN members to critically examine and evaluate the regional landscape, discuss strategic issues and challenges facing ASEAN with a long-term perspective, and chart the way forward. The AMM Retreat is also a preferred venue for some Foreign Ministers to brief ASEAN on the domestic situations in their countries while keeping intact the non-interference principle.

Last but not least, as the first high-level meeting of the year, the AMM Retreat provides a preview of ASEAN agenda for the rest of the year, and kicks off the ASEAN process to prepare for the first meeting of the ASEAN Summit usually held in April. At the Retreat, the ASEAN Chair’s Foreign Minister would share the list of its priorities and deliverables, canvass the views of his/her ASEAN counterparts, and mobilise their support for the year’s agenda. The 2018 AMM Retreat was recently convened on 5-6 February in Singapore to kickstart an eventful year of its Chairmanship. The Retreat’s cosy atmosphere among fellow members of the ASEAN family helps the ASEAN Chair smooth differences and promote regional harmony, in keeping with the ASEAN culture of consultation and consensus. ■

Ms. Moe Thuzar and Ms. Hoang Thi Ha are Lead Researchers at the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.