

# Philippine chair: Challenges and celebrations

Kavi Chongkittavorn

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**T**ump could be a blessing or a curse. For the time being, he has not made any comment or tweet that could disrupt the ongoing four-decade old United States-ASEAN relations — further strengthened in the past eight years by his predecessor, outgoing President Barack Obama.

The ASEAN chair, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, was the first ASEAN leader to speak with Trump over the phone. They connected with each other and wrapped up their long-distance call with mutual invitations to visit their respective capitals.

The ASEAN chair now hopes that this initial good rapport will be sufficient to persuade Trump to take part in the ASEAN-led summits later in the year. Indeed, other ASEAN members, especially Singapore and Thailand, the 2018 and 2019 chairs, have similar dilemmas concerning American presidential aspirations.

Since 2009, Obama has presented his visits to all ASEAN countries and meetings with their leaders at their summits as US milestones. He firmed his commitment to engage with the strategically and economically dynamic region, which is also the backbone of a US rebalancing policy. As if that was not enough, in February last year, he hosted a special summit for ASEAN leaders for the first time at Sunnylands in California to enhance ties further.

Truth be told, Trump, who is determined to repeal some of the good work Obama accomplished, can easily destroy the Obama legacy in ASEAN by skipping the scheduled year-end summits with ASEAN in November — the fifth US-ASEAN Summit and the 12<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit. In contrast with China, its leaders have never missed any summit meetings — 19 in all — with ASEAN.

Although ASEAN has extensive relations with all major powers in the world, its overall ties with the US and China generally shape the emerging security and strategic environment in the region. At this juncture, ASEAN decision-makers are still struggling to figure out Trump's foreign policy toward ASEAN.

The often-asked question is whether the US intends to remain active or become a benign power in the region while intensifying its diplomacy and resources in the Middle East and Russia.

New and recurring issues related to trade and investment, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, negotiations on the treaty to ban nuclear weapons, climate change, the South China Sea and sustainable development goals could impact on ASEAN-US relations this year.

For instance, all ASEAN members support a two-state solution to the Palestinian problem and relevant UN resolutions including the latest one, which was denounced by Israel and by the US Congress last week. For decades, ASEAN members have

had a common position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as manifested in their annual joint communiques. In addition, in October 2016 ASEAN members voted unanimously to support a UN resolution to begin negotiations for a new treaty to ban all nuclear weapons. While these common positions have strengthened the ASEAN centrality further than before, they also have the potential to bring future ASEAN-US relations into a collision course.

Given his own controversial policies and maverick behavior at home, it remains to be seen how Duterte can play out domestic and regional challenges coming his way. Throughout this year, the Philippines will host at least 14 ministerial meetings, 29 with senior officials and 60 working group sessions involving the whole gamut of ASEAN affairs.

There could be special meetings, like the "retreat" in Yangon last month, to address if need be any emergency issues or those requested by a member country.

Duterte has made few comments on ASEAN and its direction. Earlier he pledged to "highlight ASEAN as a model of regionalism and a global player with the interest of the people at its core". The ASEAN chair's theme this year is "Partnership for change, engaging the world" — with six broad objectives: a "people-oriented and people-centered" ASEAN; peace and stability in the region; maritime security and cooperation; inclusive, innovation-led growth; a resilient ASEAN;

and ASEAN as a model of regional and global involvement.

Beyond these official meetings, the chair also plans varieties of programs to celebrate ASEAN at 50, which would be divided into four pillars: culture and media, education and youth, the environment and other sectors.

As a multicultural country, the Philippines will use its cultural backdrop and high level of freedom of expression to share the region's cultural diversity via performing arts and forums such as the Best of ASEAN Performing Arts — and a forum on Maximizing ASEAN Nation TV Networks.

Second, blessed with a growing young Filipino population, the chair would like to build capacities and engage ASEAN's younger generation. Over half of ASEAN's 630 million people are young. They are considered the future leaders who can carry on the ASEAN vision and nurture future ties with dialogue partners.

Third, in the environment sector, the ASEAN Biodiversity Art and Film Festival is planned for wider publicity. This is something new as far as ASEAN is concerned.

Finally, ASEAN will focus on social security and health-related issues through conferences such as the Cross-regional Roundtable on Elimination of Violence against Children.

All these efforts, especially, will forge ASEAN as a community on the occasion of its golden jubilee.

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