

On a Bali high

Reasons to cheer, even if ASEAN is selling the same horses again



THE ten-member Association of South-East Asian Nations, ASEAN, does not do breakthroughs. The “ASEAN way” involves consensus, bonhomie and progress that is at best incremental and often imperceptible. Yet as this year’s meeting of the club’s foreign ministers and “dialogue partners” in Bali wound up on July 23rd with the ASEAN Regional Forum, a security talking-shop, ASEAN could at least point to noticeable movement on two of East Asia’s perennial sources of tension.

At its meeting with China, ASEAN agreed on “guidelines” for implementing a 2002 declaration on a “code of conduct” to minimise the risk of conflict in the contested waters of the South China Sea. And in the margins of the ASEAN meetings North and South Korea held their first public talks for two-and-a-half years. Prospects of a resumption of talks on getting rid of North Korea’s nuclear arsenal rose further when Hillary Clinton, America’s secretary of state, used her time in Bali to invite a North Korean negotiator for talks in New York this week.

Meanwhile, Thailand and Cambodia, two ASEAN neighbours whose soldiers this year have been shooting at each other around the disputed border temple of Preah Vihear, kept their differences from souring the mood. All in all the organisation and the host, Indonesia, which holds the rotating chairmanship, could congratulate themselves on a useful set of meetings. After fraught months even modest progress comes as a relief. In the South China Sea, China, whose maps include dotted lines showing virtually all the sea as Chinese, has been alarming other claimants by throwing its weight around. Vietnam, which claims both the Chinese-controlled Paracel islands in the north and the Spratly chain in the south, has been especially incensed. But just ahead of the ASEAN meeting it moved to end anti-Chinese street protests in Hanoi. In the Philippines activists are less malleable. On July 20th, as the foreign ministers met in Bali, five congressmen landed on a Philippine-occupied island in the Spratlys, Pagasa, to plant the national flag.

China argued, plausibly enough, that this broke the 2002 declaration, which enjoins signatories to avoid provocations. Even so it did sign up to short – and vague – guidelines on turning the declaration into the formal code of conduct promised for nearly a decade now. Even Mrs Clinton, who at last year’s ASEAN meetings in Hanoi angered China by declaring

an American “national interest” in the sea and offering to act as a mediator, commended China and ASEAN for the agreement, as a “first step”.

She also welcomed the breaking of the ice between the Koreas, as Wi Sung-lac, South Korea’s delegate to nuclear talks, met his new North Korean counterpart, Ri Yung Ho. The South’s demand that the North formally apologise for last year’s sinking of a South Korean naval vessel and shelling of civilians was quietly shelved, presumably at least partly at America’s urging.

Mrs Clinton’s invitation to another North Korean official, Kim Kye Gwan, to come to New York for talks was freighted with the usual stern riders about not rewarding North Korea simply for returning to the table. In fact, for North Korea, which values bilateral contacts with the United States above all other diplomatic prizes, the invitation itself is the reward. America, keen to avoid another Korean crisis, needs to find some way of engaging the North. When the North is being ignored, it tends to resort to crude attention-seeking behaviour – military provocations, missile and nuclear-bomb tests, and the like.

It is not certain that the smiles in Bali will lead to the resumption of six-party talks involving the two Koreas, America, China, Japan and Russia on denuclearisation. Since North Korea does not look like giving up its bombs anyway, not everyone agrees they should resume. In a warning against undue optimism, some observers recalled the equivalent ASEAN meeting in 2002, in Brunei, which North Korea also used to break out of isolation, establishing its first contacts with the administration of George Bush. Nine years, two nuclear tests and countless acts of bellicose aggression later, it is clear that was not a turning-point for the better. Similarly, the guidelines on implementing the 2002 declaration on the South China Sea are hardly evidence of rapid progress. The promised code of conduct itself has still not materialised – let alone agreement even on a mechanism for tackling the complex mesh of overlapping territorial claims. China still insists it wants to negotiate bilaterally with the ASEAN countries with partial claims, which also include Brunei and Malaysia. ASEAN, China points out, has no role in disputes over sovereignty. But its members fear being bullied if picked off one by one.

That ASEAN enables them to try to negotiate from a less weak position is an achievement for the organisation. So is its provision of a forum where regional-security concerns can at least be raised, and where, in the margins, useful bilateral talks can be held. This year has been a relative success, with Indonesia, its biggest and most influential member, in the chair. But there is always the danger in ASEAN that the process of consensus is confused with the substance of actually resolving conflicts.

Concerns about the future, moreover, only grow. The next chairman is Cambodia. Since it seems unlikely that the Preah Vihear dispute will be settled by the end of the year, this could prove debilitating. Potentially even more damaging is Myanmar’s demand to take the chair in 2014. To grant its wish would be to suggest that last year’s rigged elections under an army-drafted constitution merited international acceptance. It might provoke Western boycotts of some ASEAN meetings, undermining ASEAN’s central role in regional security. But to refuse would antagonise the mufti junta in Myanmar and other ASEAN members, such as Laos and Cambodia, and suggest a willingness to follow Western norms. And that would not be the ASEAN way.