

ASEAN SUMMIT

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On July 13 and 14, the 42nd ASEAN Summit took place in Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, on the island of Labuan Bajo. The central theme was "ASEAN Matters: Epicentrum of Growth." At the opening, Indonesian President Joko Widodo stated that his country -which is the fourth largest population in the world and represents more than 40% of the total ASEAN countries- wants to unite in terms of production power so that the region becomes become the center of global growth. With a combined population of approximately 650 million (about half that of India or China), Southeast Asia has been growing steadily above the world average. Widodo argued that many products consumed in the world originate in countries in this region, which may also be the epicenter of the production of more competitive items, such as TV sets, batteries, and electric vehicles. The ASEAN was initiated by the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, with the declaration of Bangkok in 1967. Brunei joined in 1984 and once the consequences of the Vietnam War had been overcome, this country followed suit in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999. In the last two Summits, the 40th and the 41st, progress was made in the incorporation of Timor-Leste as the tenth member. It is a group of countries that are clearly part of the emerging world and are trying to strike a balance between China and the United States, although each of them has specific strategic interests.

But the economic matters ended up being more formal than real, because the geopolitical matters were dominant, given the current international situation. It was the Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Retno Marsudi, who stressed the importance of ASEAN's unity and centrality in maintaining regional peace and stability. She also said that "for more than five decades, Southeast Asia has enjoyed peace, stability and prosperity. We cannot take it for granted. Peace does not fall from the sky". She added that regional peace and stability "must be maintained, especially in the midst of an increasingly complex global situation. ASEAN must be able to navigate regional and global dynamics and continue to instill the paradigm of collaboration." He also said that "stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific (the region most in contention between Washington and Beijing in Asia)" should be its aim and that "ASEAN should also expand its

relationship with the Pacific region." It should be noted that several ASEAN countries have territorial sovereignty conflicts in the maritime field with Beijing in the so-called South China Sea, and also in its eastern part.

China's position at the Summit as an observer was expressed by Chinese Communist Party Foreign Policy Chief Wang Yi on July 13. At the foreign minister level, an agreement was reached to complete a so-called Non-Aggression Pact in three years to prevent the constant territorial disputes from deriving into an armed conflict. The foreign ministers of the ten ASEAN countries and the Chinese representative agreed on a roadmap to complete a "code of conduct before autumn 2026." China and four ASEAN member states (Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam, as well as Taiwan), have been involved in a territorial dispute for decades in a maritime region that is very important for the transit of global trade, and which is estimated to house large underground oil and gas reserves. There are fears that this region could trigger military clashes in Asia and is clearly an area of rivalry between China and the United States. On the same day, the British Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee released a report warning that China "poses the biggest risk to the UK", outlining its methods and strategies to become a superpower. He maintains that the Xi Jinping regime has an "aggressive" approach and tries to "influence the elites and policy makers." The report came a day after Microsoft claimed China-based hackers sought intelligence and breached the email accounts of several US government agencies.

At the Summit, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who was also attending as an observer, called for "upholding freedom of navigation" in the East and South China Sea. In the South China Sea, it claims almost all of this strategic maritime trade passage, overlapping with that of other countries, such as Indonesia and Vietnam, which are key in ASEAN. For their part, they demanded freedom of navigation in this area, after a series of incidents with Chinese patrols. They also demanded that China address their territorial claims. Blinken added the need to maintain the "status quo" in the Taiwan Strait, around which more important military exercises are being carried out than in the past, which have generated tensions. Washington and Beijing have escalated their tensions over this conflict in recent years. China considers the island as part of its territory and claims sovereignty over it. The Asian power has reacted energetically to the transit of foreign military ships and planes through the

narrow maritime corridor that separates mainland China from the island. Blinken also said on July 13 that he had had "frank and constructive" talks with the Chinese diplomatic representative, Wang Yi. But the Secretary of State mentioned the alleged Chinese involvement in the hacking, denounced at the same time by the British Intelligence Service in the English Parliament. For the State Department, the dialogue with China is yet another gesture of *détente*, like the visits by the Secretary of State, the Secretary of the Treasury and the US President's envoy for the environment, which have taken place in recent weeks in the Chinese capital. In addition to the United States and China, Russia, Australia, Japan and India had diplomatic representatives as observers at the Summit.

In conclusion: the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting was convened with the economy as its central theme, but global geopolitical tension dominated the meeting. The conflicts around China in its southern and eastern seas, those involving the United States and its allies in the region, were the most far-reaching political issue. China, through its representative, ratified its claim to sovereignty over a large part of its South Sea, key to global trade, which would also have oil and gas reserves in its bedrock. Finally, through the Secretary of State, the United States expressed its position in favor of free navigation in this maritime region, reiterating its position on the independence of Taiwan.