

# Navigating the Storm: How ASEAN Managed the Great Power Competition Through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific

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## ABSTRACT

*As it has globally, geopolitical competition has intensified in the Indo-Pacific. It is a competition between and among major powers; Japan competes with China, US-led allies challenge China's assertiveness, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a hinge in and a battleground. Situated at the heart of this region, ASEAN is under significant pressure. To set out their views and navigate through this turbulent time, ASEAN leaders released "the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" in June 2019. This paper seeks to answer how Outlook is used to help ASEAN maintain its central role in the Indo-Pacific region. The paper also discusses the internal and external challenges ASEAN faces in implementing its vision. Externally, rising power competition is a force pulling ASEAN apart. Internal to ASEAN, differences in the national interests of the member states remain roadblocks. The paper also tries to depict a future for ASEAN. Towards the end, it makes some recommendations for ASEAN to move forward. In the end, strong cohesion of the member states is probably the key to mutual prosperity and expanded influence, but can this be achieved when the forces of division have become so much greater?.*

**Keywords:** ASEAN Outlook; The Indo-Pacific; Institutional hedging; Great power competition

## INTRODUCTION

In June 2019, ASEAN leaders agreed to adopt the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, in short, the Outlook, amid rising strategic uncertainty. The Outlook envisages "ASEAN centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region." For clarity, it does not intend to create or replace existing mechanisms. However, with this Outlook, ASEAN wishes to "enhance ASEAN-led mechanisms to face challenges better and seize opportunities arising from the current and future regional and global environments" (ASEAN, 2019). For many scholars, Outlook directly responds to the US-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) (Ha, 2021; Lee, 2018). Accordingly, Outlook is a tool for ASEAN to navigate the power rivalry between the U.S. and China. However, rather than simply stating this argument, some questions remain to be answered.

One could ask: What is the significance of this Outlook while there are many existing ASEAN mechanisms, such as the Declaration on the Conducts of Parties in the South China Sea (DoC), Guideline for Air

and Maritime Encounters (GAME), and Code for Unplanned Encounters (CUE) engage the major powers to uphold ASEAN's relevance and centrality? For instance, the process of updating the DoC to the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (CoC) is one example to show that ASEAN has been working to enmesh more powerful regional players like China, and it is the institutional platform that recognizes ASEAN centrality (Bisley, 2017; Cook & Bisley, 2016). If this is the case, what is the role of the Outlook in a broader ASEAN's great power strategy?

This article explains how ASEAN used the Outlook to manage its relationship with major powers and how the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," from now on, "the Outlook" contributed to this cause. In answering these questions, this paper mainly discusses how ASEAN projects itself as a regional player that can play a significant role in shaping security architecture in Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific

Various studies show the role of ASEAN in managing the power competition in the Indo-Pacific. Koga (2018) argues that ASEAN countries have individually

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adopted the institutional strategy to manage the impacts of the great power politics in the South China Sea disputes. According to Koga (2022), the strategy also aims to limit the behaviors of great power, preventing small states from being drowned in the extraordinary power rivalry. He also contends that ASEAN creates new strategies adapting to the change in the geopolitical situation. He argues that if ASEAN cannot change its strategy, it will create new institutions to broaden its strategic options, creating a “strategic institutional web.” Yoshimatsu (2023) argues that ASEAN has mitigated the great power rivalry through its regional initiatives and sustaining organizational legitimacy. However, Yoshimatsu (2023) further argues that ASEAN has developed a system of socio-cultural norms to maintain its legitimacy. He (2009), in his research on the institutional balancing in the Asia Pacific, argues that the rise of China via economic interdependence and structural constraints vis-à-vis major multilateral institutions, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and East Asia Forum (EAF), could induce China to be a more benign great power, that is to in the author’s own words “soften the dragon’s teeth.”

However, the above studies have yet to examine the role of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific in managing the great power competition between the U.S. and China. Instead, since its release in 2019, many scholars have studied and investigated the middle powers’ roles, like Indonesia, in crafting it. Anwar (2020) looks at the role of Indonesia as a middle power and big brother in ASEAN in terms of drafting the Outlook. He argues that Indonesia places ASEAN at the center of its foreign policy, marking its “foreign policy activism as a middle power.” According to him, Indonesia’s strong support for the Outlook can be understood as its effort to make Indonesia a “Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF).”

Anwar (2020) further analyzes the role of Indonesia in which he believes that Indonesia, as a middle power, is utilizing its strategic location of being an archipelago state to enhance its maritime power to become GMF. Agastia (2020) looks at the term of the Indo-Pacific, indicating that Indonesia is manifesting the new Indo-Pacific concept fitting with Indonesia’s role as it is a middle power. This can be indicated by Indonesia using ASEAN to strengthen its Indo-Pacific outlooks. Agastia (2020) also argues that Indonesia is more inclusive as it tries to accommodate all specific actors in the region.

Other scholars argue that three main goals drive Indonesia’s new feature of the Indo-Pacific. Firstly, Indonesia aims to strengthen maritime cooperation in the region, part of Indonesia’s GMF (Febrica, 2021). Secondly, Indonesia wants to deal with illegal activities, such as illegal, unreported, unregulated (IUU) fishing occurring in its maritime waters (Febrica, 2021). Finally, Indonesia wants to create a conducive environment to solve disputes in the South China Sea (Febrica, 2021). This contradicts the view of other scholars, who argue that Indonesia’s widening term from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific is aligned with Joko Widodo’s attempt to archive Indonesia’s Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF). Indonesia lobbied ASEAN to adopt its concept of Indo-Pacific, which is to put ASEAN in the driving seat for ASEAN for norm-setting and cooperation between major power-led initiatives in the region. East Asia Summit has been introduced to push Indonesia’s concept of Indo-Pacific (Anwar, 2020). Indonesia has also demonstrated its desire to take the helm of this Indo-Pacific initiative due to its concern about its security vulnerability and to assert its strategic independence as a middle power.

After reviewing these works, the question of how ASEAN has used the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific to manage the great power competition has yet to be answered. Thus, this study intends to fill in this gap. Therefore, the paper looks at the role of the Outlook and how it is used to navigate ASEAN through this turbulent time of great power competition.

### **Geopolitical Power Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific**

The regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific region has been undergoing a profound transformation. With China’s reemergence as a significant regional power, it has initiated some ambitious, maybe even grand strategies, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Some Chinese as well as foreign scholars contend that these initiatives are part of an effort to challenge the U.S. position and replace it in the region and beyond (Wang, 2016). The original motive of the BRI involves both internal and external considerations. Those factors include correcting the regional disparities within China, handling industrial overcapacity, expanding overseas markets for Chinese products, and deepening the relationship between Chinese borderland regions and other countries in Central and Southeast Asia. These have all been cited as the motives of the BRI. Nevertheless, as China grows more powerful compared to others, it faces counterbalancing strategies of major powers, especially the U.S. and Japan.

As the second-largest resident power in the region, Japan is deeply concerned with the rise of China. Japan's version of the Indo-Pacific strategy came before the U.S. one. As China has increasingly challenged Japan in a region it once saw as its "backyard," Japan has been gradually focused on preserving the order that has served it so well long before the launch of the FOIP. This initiative is a geopolitical gambit derived from the anxiety about the rise of China. Two crucial events gave rise to Japan's FOIP. The first was the growing support by small countries seeking less rigorous alternatives to the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and bilateral assistance in which Western and Japanese-promoted concepts are embedded, such as environmental protection and labor rights. The second one is the absence of a diplomatic coalition to hold China accountable to the Hague ruling on the South China Sea dispute in favor of the Philippines. This failure represents the fragility of the rules-based international order.<sup>2</sup> But Japan has been circumspect in desiring not to confront China outright; hence, Prime Minister Abe disingenuously argued that FOIP is complementary rather than competitive to the BRI and reassured BRI recipients that they do not need to choose between the two initiatives. The Japanese authorities knew that forcing such a choice would not be practical.

The United States, under Donald Trump, endorsed the Japanese FOIP and has expanded upon it, even taking over this concept. Launched at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meeting in Vietnam in December 2017, the U.S. version is similar to the Japanese one. However, it gives much more explicit attention to the security dimensions, especially in dealing with the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. In November 2018, the White House released a statement reaffirming the U.S. commitment to maintaining peace and stability in the East and South China Sea by upholding the principle of freedom of navigation (The White House, 2018). In 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense released another policy report titled "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report." This report was more forceful, accusing China of undermining the international system from within and eroding "the values and principles of rules-based order" (The Department of Defense, 2019). The report also highlighted the need to strengthen the alliance network with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and India and partner with other Indo-Pacific countries. Analysts see it as a U.S. strategy to construct a viable alternative to China's

BRI and check China's assertiveness (Scott, 2018).

Together with the U.S. and Japan, several other countries have picked up the term and crafted their Indo-Pacific strategies. With the same concern about the rise of China in its neighborhood, India and Australia were quick to endorse the Indo-Pacific concept even though they had their own visions. India's motivation to embrace the concept of the Indo-Pacific is to enhance its strategic autonomy by joining others to limit the Chinese behaviors in the Indian Ocean (Liu & Jamali, 2021). Australia's primary focus of the Indo-Pacific term is to safeguard its influence in the Pacific Islands region, an area where China has stepped up its engagement (Haruku, 2020).

The term has gained momentum and attraction in Europe as well. For France, the Indo-Pacific is "at heart" of its world vision, which is a "stable, multipolar order based on the rule of law and free movement, fair and efficient multilateralism" (Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2021). Germany has more comprehensive engagement elements with the Indo-Pacific region and ASEAN. In its "Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific," Germany will push forward several ideas, such as the expanding role of the E.U. with the region, the upholding of human rights, the protection of rules-based order, the strengthening of multilateralism, the promotion of inclusivity with ASEAN, among others. Germany also sees ASEAN as a region of potential market and its significance of upholding peace and security in the region (The Federal Government, 2020).

After all, the Indo-Pacific concept is not a coherent collective strategy among major powers that seek to keep China in check. The concept itself has remained contested. However, the Indo-Pacific strategy, by the U.S. or others, is seen as challenging for China. Even though these powers, to a certain extent, do not share the same vision of the Indo-Pacific region, for China, the term itself is an offensive attempt to contain China.

To break this containment circle, Beijing portrays BRI as an effort to build overland economic corridors and strategic ports to ensure China's access to Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and secure its energy supplies from the Middle East and Africa (Wang, 2016). In relation to the broader US-China strategic competition, Liu (2020) identifies three developments of deep concern to China: U.S. military deployment in Japan and the installation of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea, the strengthening of the U.S. security alliances, and the

U.S. positions towards Taiwan and the conflict areas, such as the East and South China Sea (Liu, 2020). The recent launch of the FOIP by the U.S. and Japan (discussed below) is a further indication to Chinese scholars that external powers intend to challenge China and, therefore, China needs to be ready to face formidable external challenges to its interests (Chen, 2018; Zhao, 2018).

As a result of these threat perceptions, including some domestic reasons as mentioned earlier, China embarked on the BRI and undertaken assertive policies in neighboring regions, including SEA, South Asia, Africa, and the Indian Ocean, the latter traditionally seen as the defense perimeter of India. Thus, the BRI is about building infrastructure and entails robust security and geopolitical dimensions. It is also becoming more offensive (Wang, 2016). The Chinese military base in Djibouti, in support of the maritime road, is a prime example that China is beginning to undertake significant steps to defend its interests, if necessary, by using military forces (Li, 2020).<sup>1</sup> China claimed that this facility provides logistics support to Chinese peacekeeping and counter-piracy operations in Africa. However, there is speculation that China could transform this facility into “a full-fledged military base to conduct all sorts of traditional operations” (Jean-Pierre, 2019). At the least, however small, it is China’s first overseas military facility. It thus can be seen as dipping a toe into the water of overseas bases, something China once claimed it never intended to do.

What is fascinating about this power rivalry dynamics is the recognition by these three major powers of the significance of the ASEAN in realizing their objectives. For the BRI, the official document, titled “Visions and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road,” expresses Chinese commitment to enhance its cooperation with ASEAN within the framework of ASEAN Plus One (China) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015). For the Japanese FOIP,<sup>2</sup> ASEAN is seen as a hinge between the Pacific and Indian Oceans necessary to promote stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region (The Government of Japan). For the U.S., the extended FOIP report also recognizes ASEAN as a geographical center of the FOIP. It pledges to support “ASEAN’s efforts... to have an equal stake in determining the region’s future” (Department of State, 2019). In other words, all the more considerable powers seek ASEAN’s acceptance and support.

However, this support for ASEAN is more rhetorical. From the perspective of ASEAN, the FOIP strategy by these powers intends to consolidate their power to contain China. The reason is that these powers do not believe that ASEAN can handle the pressures posed by China. ASEAN has also faced the pull from China regarding economic considerations. This means that the more ASEAN engages China economically, the more they stand to gain from China. Nevertheless, this economic gain has to face the strategic sacrifice by not standing up against this giant neighbor. Thus, one tactic to secure its central position is reaffirming its position and vision of the Indo-Pacific region in ways that do not intend to sideline China. The following section illustrates this argument.

### **ASEAN’s Great Power Strategy**

Since very early on, ASEAN has always been willing to play a leading role and be in a “driver’s seat” in the regional security architecture. From the beginning of what was once called Asia-Pacific cooperation, ASEAN was the most reluctant partner, in part out of fear that ASEAN would be marginalized in the broader institutions. The price of ASEAN acceptance and participation in APEC thus became recognition of its “centrality.” Since its inception, ASEAN has consistently and pragmatically enmeshed major powers to support its regional initiatives. This strategy is what Goh (2007-2008) calls “omni-enmeshment,” whereas Koga (2018) calls it “institutional hedging.” The former concept refers to “the process of engaging with a state so as to draw it into deep involvement into international or regional society, enveloping it in a web of sustained exchanges and relationships, with the long-term aim of integration” (Goh, 2007-2008). The latter “is an action that incorporates a target state(s) into the institution as a member or a partner state, aiming to constrain the target state’s behavior by creating or consolidating institutional norms and rules” (Koga, 2018). Along with the institutional hedging,<sup>3</sup> Koga offers other concepts: institutional balancing, institutional bandwagoning, and institutional cooperation.

Koga (2018) defines institutional balancing as “collective actions by members of a security institution that aim to neutralize, or at least minimize the current and expected power differences of a hegemon or rising power that is situated outside the institution,” Institutional bandwagoning as “collective alignment with great powers, including the potential source of a threat, to gain benefits and ensure security at the expense of their institutional

authorities and opportunities to cooperate with others,” and institutional cooperation as “an institutional action that nurtures cooperative norms and rules by incorporating a target state(s) in the hopes of changing its preference” (Koga, 2018).

Omni-enmeshment helps make visible the engagement efforts by ASEAN. However, it is less insightful as an analytical concept because it needs to specify the objectives of such policies. Institutional hedging offers more insights into how ASEAN as a collective entity ensures that significant powers are ultimately constrained by norms and rules favored by the ASEAN nations. Any great power that violates these norms and rules will likely face tremendous resistance from the other community members. Institutional hedging intends to “maintain strategic ambiguity to reduce or avoid the risks and uncertainties of negative strategic consequences that would be produced by institutional balancing or bandwagoning alone” (Koga, 2018).

### **Situating the Outlook in ASEAN’s Great Power Strategy**

Since the release of Outlook, there have been many short commentaries, but more academic discourse is needed. One comprehensive study by Tan (2020) addresses Southeast Asian foreign policy behavior toward the fast-changing security landscape in the Indo-Pacific region. He tries to link the individual Southeast Asian state foreign policy behavior to the ASEAN behavior. However, there is a big difference between state and institutional behavior. States are sovereign and can determine their courses at the national level, but institutions like ASEAN are based on voluntary cooperation. Any agreement in ASEAN has to be reached by negotiation and consensus; thus, it is far less flexible. It is challenging for the ASEAN members to agree on specific objectives, functions, rules, and norms. These are usually stated in very general terms that often mask underlying differences among the member states. Once agreed, they will likely stay the same overnight or be applied to particular situations. The institution will change its actions only with radical transformation in the belief and commitment of the member states. However, an individual member state or regime can alter its foreign policy behavior more quickly if it threatens survival (Koga, 2018). Thus, this study adopts the institutional approach to studying the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

As briefly noted above, the Outlook is a policy document presenting ASEAN’s Indo-Pacific region vision. There are six key themes: Background and Rationale, ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, Objectives, Principles, Areas of Cooperation, and Mechanism. Among others, the objectives are stated clearly:

“(1) offering an outlook to guide cooperation in the region; (2) helping to promote an enabling environment for peace, stability and prosperity in the region in addressing common challenges, upholding the rules-based regional architecture, and promoting closer economic cooperation, and thus strengthen confidence and trust; (3) enhancing ASEAN’s Community building process and further strengthening the existing ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the EAS; and (4) implementing existing and exploring other ASEAN priority areas of cooperation, including maritime cooperation, connectivity, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and economic and other possible areas of cooperation.”

Investigating further into the motivation of the Outlook, this vital policy document is more than a restatement of the existing doctrine. The paper analyzes numerous open-source academic and official documents and argues that it should be seen as a carefully crafted and negotiated declaration that facilitates ASEAN’s dual strategy to preserve its centrality in the Indo-Pacific region while bolstering its capacity to continue an institutional hedging strategy as defined below. As a regional organization of small and middle powers, ASEAN is often pressured by external forces in ways that threaten to marginalize it on regional issues. The Outlook affirms that the grouping neither wishes to align itself with one power nor welcomes any pressure to do so. ASEAN has used institutional hedging to manage its relationships with the great powers. This approach was influential during the Cold War when ASEAN strongly upheld neutrality and norms of non-violence. ASEAN’s effort to maintain positive relations with all major powers to sustain the balance of forces in the region provides space for its members and the institution to maneuver and maximize benefits from the competing considerable powers.

The fact that ASEAN uses the term “Indo-Pacific” does not mean that ASEAN pursues institutional bandwagoning with the Quad countries (Japan, U.S., Australia, and India). Specifically, the Outlook is not

about a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy like Japan, the U.S., or other European countries. The Outlook presents a unique vision of what the Indo-Pacific region should look like. The term only signifies the ASEAN awareness of the increasing concern about the rise of China in the U.S. and the other Quad countries.<sup>4</sup> It is evident through the first paragraph of the first page that states of the Outlook: "... the rise of material powers, i.e. economic and military, requires avoiding deepening of mistrust, miscalculation, and patterns of behavior based on a zero-sum game."<sup>5</sup> It also reflect ASEAN's awareness that "Indo-Pacific" places it more centrally in the picture as compared to "Asia-Pacific." Thus, ASEAN's use of "Indo-Pacific" is different from the U.S. and Japan's usage, and it also uses the word "outlook" to present itself as a shaper of the regional environment. The word should be read as an ASEAN vision of a desirable regional architecture in this intensifying power contestation.

The Outlook is thus a response to the evolving regional security architecture. It should be seen as an affirmation and reassurance of ASEAN's commitment to uphold its "centrality" in the Indo-Pacific security architecture. As Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong posits, "It reaffirms our commitment to ASEAN centrality and unity. It advances economic development and a rules-based order anchored on international law" (quoted in Yee, 2019). Moreover, for ASEAN's small states and middle powers, like Indonesia, maintaining their strategic flexibility and preserving or creating as much strategic space as possible to exercise their policy freedom is a constant objective and struggle. The Outlook seeks to achieve space for its individual ASEAN states to continue to act freely in a regional strategic environment that is becoming polarized and in which the pressures on ASEAN states to choose sides are intense.

Even though the U.S. and Japan clearly state that they prioritize ASEAN as a working partner, ASEAN may be rightly concerned that this is more rhetoric than reality. Since the rules and agendas are still contested, devised, and shaped by these two powers, they do not necessarily take ASEAN interests to heart. For example, one element of the US FOIP is emphasizing the rules of law and democracy. Since most ASEAN member states are not full democracies, the push to implement such ideas creates more tensions and distrust. At the same time, many ASEAN members distrust China's motives, particularly its wide-ranging claims in the South China Sea that conflict with those of half the ASEAN grouping.

While Japan maintains good bilateral relations with all ASEAN member states, the U.S. is at odds with a few small ASEAN countries, including Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and even Brunei. These countries' strategic and political mistrust towards the U.S. is still high. For instance, the Cambodian government maintains that the U.S. seeks to promote regime change in the country by supporting the main opposition party to organize a "color revolution" and plot against the government (Vicheika, 2019), while the Myanmar government under Ang San Suu Kyi does not like the way the U.S. deals with the Rohingya issue as a human rights question (Paddock, 2016). Taking these domestic concerns of some ASEAN member states into perspective, the Outlook ensures that, to a certain degree, ASEAN can uphold its "ASEAN Way" or "Consensus-based Approach" and not allow external encroachments in their internal affairs.

Furthermore, being in the driver's seat, Outlook seeks to enforce certain existing norms. The language used in the Outlook is mainly about "dialogue and cooperation" rather than "rivalry" with the elements, such as "peaceful settlement of disputes, renunciation of the threat or use of force and promotion of the rule of law," grounded in ASEAN's 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. To ensure that major powers conform to these norms and principles, ASEAN has created various regional dialogue platforms that engage all relevant Asian and external powers, like the U.S., to exchange views over specific issues, including non-traditional security, such as terrorism, climate change, and traditional challenges, such as the arms race and the management of the South China Sea dispute. The list of the ASEAN-led institutions includes the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Plus mechanisms, and others. During these socialization processes, these norms are diffused (Acharya, 2004).

Adhering to these norms is particularly significant given the regional power competition between the U.S. and China. Both great powers have repeatedly expressed their problems with each other. As mentioned above, the U.S. under Trump has labeled China as a "strategic competitor," while China is increasingly challenging. Even though there are some criticisms regarding how much ASEAN can position itself as a regional order influencer, there is also some support for the remarkable achievements ASEAN has achieved (Stubbs, 2019). Critics point to the "ASEAN Way" as a weak way to manage the great power rivalry. The practices, such as consensus decision-

making, non-confrontational diplomacy, and non-interference in each other's domestic affairs, hinder ASEAN's ability to get all the members to act in unison. In the critics' view, ASEAN has never contributed to effective regional peace diplomacy and failed to address the most arduous challenges (Jones & Smith, 2006). It has created forums but has yet to achieve outcomes.

One prime instance most skeptic have repeatedly mentioned is Cambodia's blockage of a joint communique when it was chair of the ASEAN Summit in 2012. Citing this unique example, Australian scholars Beeson and Watson (2019) conclude that "China has skillfully employed a divide-and-rule strategy towards its weaker neighbors in the ASEAN grouping by effectively buying off Cambodia and making any collective agreement on the part of Southeast Asian all but impossible." Moreover, this "divide and rule" strategy also takes the forms of "coercion" with the claimant states of the South China Sea, such as Vietnam and the Philippines and "inducements" with the smaller ASEAN members, such as Cambodia and Laos with the ultimate goal of breaking ASEAN consensus (Thu, 2019). For Vietnam, which has repeatedly stood up against China, China usually sinks the Vietnamese vessel ships and fishing boats in the South China Sea.

However, one undeniable truth is that ASEAN can contribute to the prevention of major interstate conflicts. Kivimäki (2001) calls this "the long-peace." As Stubbs (2014) explains, "Its emphasis on the widely shared East Asian norms of informal and non-confrontational negotiations, and respect for sovereignty and non-interference, helps to account for ASEAN's successful leadership in terms of regional institution-building." Even though Stubbs's statement attributing "successful leadership" to ASEAN may be exaggerated, ASEAN has provided a mechanism for Southeast Asian member countries to dampen tensions within the region and help ensure that a physical confrontation among members did not occur.

Moreover, the norm adherence within the context of the Outlook reminds us of the significant powers of the notion of "regional solution to regional problems." As the Outlook (2019) states:

Southeast Asia lies in the center of these dynamic regions and is a vital conduit and portal. Therefore, it is in the interest of ASEAN to lead the shaping of their economic and

security architecture acritude and ensure that such dynamics will continue to bring about peace, security, stability, and prosperity for the peoples in Southeast Asia as well as in the wider Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions or the Indo-Pacific.

One could draw one interpretation from this statement: ASEAN is strategically clear in its message that external powers are not welcome to interfere in its regional affairs. They may contribute to solving regional problems, but the task rests primarily on ASEAN. Since ASEAN is not a problem-solving mechanism, it can create a more conducive political atmosphere in that all parties are comfortable discussing pertinent issues about other external powers. As Acharya (2005) argues, "The pursuit of regional solutions has to be seen more in the context of ASEAN's ability to induce outside powers to refrain from overt intervention... or to get them accept its own principles and 'model' of interactions." This concern is valid. Individual member states have undergone various historical experiences, such as colonization by bigger powers and interference in domestic political affairs, including supporting opposition to the government. The examples include the US-Thailand-Singapore lead support for the opposition party in Cambodia and Western support for the human rights activists in Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam. The governments of these Southeast Asian countries interpret such support as interference in their domestic affairs.

## CHALLENGES

### External Challenges

The future of ASEAN depends mainly on how the major powers view and engage with ASEAN. China may view the Outlook as a hedging policy (Tay & Wau, 2020). Although China has reiterated that it does not seek to pressure ASEAN to choose sides, Beijing insists that Southeast Asian countries respect China as a great power. In high-level Chinese government official speeches, language such as "big power" and "small country" further indicates that Beijing stands ready to demand respect. The term "respect" should be interpreted as "agreement" with Chinese positions. Any disagreement in the Chinese eyes means "disrespect," and small countries should suffer the consequences. It is worth remembering that during the meeting with the Southeast Asian foreign ministers in 2010, Yang Jiechi, then the Chinese foreign minister, said, "China is a big country and other

countries are small countries, and that's just a fact" (Pomfret, 2010). The Chinese perception of big-small country relationship was reinforced when Chen Hai, a senior official at the Department of Asian Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told the South Korean counterpart in 2017 regarding its decision to install the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) that "a small country was refusing to listen to a big country" (Ji-eun & Oi-hyun, 2017). In Southeast Asia, China threatened Singapore in 2017 before it took the 2018 chairmanship of ASEAN not to internalize the South China Sea and, as reported by Reuters, a Chinese diplomat told Singapore that "China thinks Singapore, as a Chinese-majority nation, should listen a bit more to Beijing" (Torode, 2017). The threatening rhetoric remains relevant in the current situation.

Since the end of the Cold War, China has adhered to a non-alliance policy—not forming alliances with any power. North Korea is an exception. This policy has been repeated and reaffirmed by various Chinese leaders and articulated in Chinese official documents. From Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping to the current Chinese President Xi Jinping, the rhetoric of non-alliance in Chinese foreign relations is still robust. During his remarks at the United Nations Office in Geneva in 2017, Xi Jinping called for all countries to adhere to "non-alliance" partnership and affirmed that this concept is a guiding principle for China to conduct its relations with the world (Jinping, 2017). However, under the leadership of President Xi, China is interested in playing a more significant role in global affairs. As China continues to expand its interests across the globe, Chinese scholars have debated whether China should abandon its non-alliance policy and begin to reach out to other like-minded states for the possibility of alliance formation (Ruonan & Feng, 2017). Practically, there are some warning signs that China may abandon some of its longstanding policies, such as not establishing any overseas bases. The Chinese military base in Djibouti suggests that.

In Southeast Asia, China tries to strengthen its relationships with Laos and Cambodia, two small states most dependent on China. Even though China does not form any formal treaty alliance with them, its bilateral relationship worries Vietnam, which has territorial conflicts with China and longstanding interests in the rest of what was once "Indo-China." One Vietnamese senior scholar warns that "while a lack of independent Cambodian foreign policy could affect relations, outright Cambodian acceptance of

China's plans for regional dominance would be viewed by Vietnam as a strategic threat" (Aun, 2019). The U.S. also raised concern about the potential Chinese military base in Cambodia, stating that such a base has the potential to destabilize regional security and stability. Such anxiety is reflected in U.S. Vice President Mike Pence's letter to Prime Minister Hun Sen, raising concerns about the possible Chinese military base in Cambodia that could destabilize regional security (RFA's Khmer Service, 2018). Afterward, U.S. officials such as John Sullivan, Deputy Secretary of State, and Joseph Felter, Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Southeast Asia, have continued to raise this issue with their Cambodian counterparts.

This gesture reflects that the U.S. will not tolerate such development, which will further increase the military tensions between China and the U.S., and the U.S. and Cambodia. ASEAN, which sits in the middle, will face the consequence of rivalry between China and the U.S. Having Cambodia as a member allows China to temper ASEAN's organizational mandate, eventually sabotaging its centrality and unity (Kausikan, 2017). This is reminiscent of the 2012 incident in Cambodia's opposition to release a joint communique because of disagreement over wording pertaining to the South China Sea dispute. Singaporean Ambassador-at-Large Bilahari Kausikan stated, "Cambodia is by no means the only ASEAN country that has been reluctant to incur China's wrath over the SCS. The unusual forthrightness of Cambodia's leaders in 2012 and after has been a convenient cover for the others inclined to duck" (Kausikan, 2016). In the future, Cambodia may also reject anything contrary to Beijing's preference. How this scenario unfolds remains to be seen.

It should be remembered that ASEAN, once a smaller organization of more like-minded states, deliberately increased its membership to Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar in the 1990s to encompass Southeast Asia. This was a classic trade-off between expansion and focus. The lack of like-mindedness and an increased ability of China to find an advocate within the institution is thus a product of ASEAN's decision-making. It increases the difficulty of finding sharply focused ASEAN policy statements beyond those of broad principles.

Even though the statement of the US FOIP report clearly states the central importance of ASEAN in realizing American goals in the Indo-Pacific, this is more rhetoric than reality. In comparison, regions such as Northeast Asia, the Middle East, and Europe

remain the top priority for the U.S. government (Acharya & Tan, 2006). For the U.S., Southeast Asia is comparatively less important than Northeast Asia regarding security and economic interests. For security considerations, both Japan and South Korea are likely to provide more counterbalancing weight to the U.S. against China than the whole of Southeast Asia combined. The U.S. has two treaty allies in Southeast Asia, Thailand and the Philippines. In contrast, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia have generally good military ties with the U.S. but are officially non-aligned. However, Thailand's recent shift in rhetoric and foreign security policy behavior under Pravit Chan-o-cha and the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte has eroded the U.S. traditional military ties in the region.

In terms of the economic dimensions, while the U.S. seeks to constrain China over the security issue, the economic decoupling between the U.S. and China is also underway—primarily driven by trade conflict. However, it does not reflect the complete scenario. Although President Trump initiated the trade war with China by increasing tariffs on Chinese goods, the bilateral trade between the two big countries remains very large compared to Southeast Asia. Thus, combining China, Japan, and South Korea adds more weight to the U.S. economy. In an overall economic indicator that includes the number of visitors, trade, and foreign direct investment, Northeast Asia remains a high priority for the U.S. For instance, in 2017, the U.S. trade with Southeast Asia was only 6.3 percent of its total trade, compared with its trade with Northeast Asian countries accounts for 25.3 percent (Singh, 2018). Annually, Southeast Asian visitors spend roughly USD 5 billion in the U.S., while Northeast Asia tourists spend around USD 58 billion (Singh, 2018).

However, the U.S. does pay close attention to the region's geography. Southeast Asia is located in the center of the Indo-Pacific region, astride essential sea lanes of communication (Singh, 2018). Many Southeast Asian scholars observe that "the U.S. strategic presence in Southeast Asia has been subject to major fluctuations and retrenchments" (Singh, 2018). This is evident through two things: the absence of President Donald Trump and other senior U.S. officials in the ASEAN-led forums and the limited budgetary allocation for its engagement with Southeast Asia, which contrasts sharply with former president Barack Obama's strong interest, in part reflecting several childhood years living in Indonesia.

Several issues may further contribute to the current neglect: illiberal political systems in Southeast Asia, the ASEAN's inability to manage the South China Sea dispute, the empty promises of regional integration, and others (Parameswaran, 2018). This is a tough test for ASEAN. Lee (2018) puts it well: "the current era will either enhance or lessen the relevance of ASEAN in the eyes of these three countries [the U.S., Japan, and Australia] in the years ahead depending on how the organization and its key member states respond." Increasingly, some members such as Cambodia, Laos, Brunei, and Myanmar are tilting with China while Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia continue to find a middle ground of accommodating China and tightening their engagement with the US.<sup>6</sup>

### **Intra-ASEAN Challenges**

The Outlook signifies the cohesive spirit that all the ASEAN members hold tight against all odds. This means that the members agree that the current fast-changing security environment in the region will likely pose risks to peace and development, and these risks need to be managed. This realization by its members indicates the persistence and desire of ASEAN to remain relevant and be central to the security challenges.

Even with that said, the implementation of Outlook has faced one big internal challenge. The challenge derives from the divergence of vision of the Indo-Pacific region and the understanding of the FOIP concept by the member states. There are various signs that some ASEAN members strive to reconceptualize ASEAN centrality that is conducive to the current developments in the region and their own country (Tan, 2020). Indonesia stands out in this case. Perceiving itself to be a middle power, Indonesia is the most ardent advocate of the concept. As Indonesian scholar Anwar (2020) contends, "Jakarta's interest in the Indo-Pacific concept is ... related to the policy of President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) of establishing Indonesia, an archipelagic state, as a global maritime fulcrum (GMF), leveraging its location at the intersection between the Indian and Pacific oceans into something greater than a mere physical presence." Even though all members agreed on the release of Outlook, it does not mean that all members share the Indonesian vision, which is long-standing. Each Southeast Asian country has its preferences and interpretation of the FOIP. The extent to which each ASEAN member country embraces this concept depends mainly on how it can help that state's interests, strengthen its development, and,

more broadly, help maintain stability in the region.

Even though Vietnam fears that the U.S. promotion of human rights and democracy in Vietnam may undermine its regime, it is less of a problem with the current U.S. Administration. It shares common strategic interests and will continue to deepen its relationship with the U.S. within the framework of the FOIP. The Vietnamese commitment to engage the U.S. is evident through various instances, such as hosting the recent Trump-Kim Summit, the Vietnamese Prime Minister's visit to the White House in 2017, and the many U.S. naval ship visits at the Vietnamese ports. The U.S. also extended defense assistance to Vietnam. In 2017, the U.S. provided Vietnam with six Metal Shark patrol boats and a High Endurance Hamilton-class Cutter (Nguyen, 2017). Vietnam will leverage its relationship with the U.S. to balance China (Tran, 2019).

Turning to Malaysia, former president Mahathir resigned in 2019 and sought to maintain the country's traditional neutral foreign policy. He canceled the BRI-related projects worth USD 22 billion as overly expensive. However, he continued to speak highly of the BRI concept while being critical of Trump's approach towards China, saying that "he does not know much about Asia and therefore [the statements] he makes that are not based on the realities or the facts on the ground" (Shikun, 2018). At the same time, he sought to continue the improved relationship with the U.S. forged by his predecessor without embracing the American version of FOIP. Kuik and Liew (2018) call his approach "recalibrated equidistance" to enhance its engagement with all bigger powers while strengthening ASEAN centrality. Other countries, such as Cambodia and the Philippines, remained silent, citing the possibility that the discussion about the FOIP would jeopardize the centrality and neutrality of ASEAN.

This variation can result from domestic political dynamics and economic dependence on China. First, as briefly noted above, countries that face unstable domestic political conditions, such as Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, are also worried about the US FOIP. One of the core values of this strategy is to promote human rights and democracy, which are a source of political threats to some regimes in those countries. The fear of regime collapse will determine how those leaders approach the major powers. Even the traditional U.S. ally - the Philippines under Duterte, is increasingly dissatisfied with the U.S. promoting human rights and democracy. Duterte's anti-drug

campaign and related extrajudicial killings came under fire by the Obama administration. However, human rights were not pursued as consistently by the Trump administration but remained an underlying feature of U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. Senate, in January 2020, sought to impose economic sanctions under the Magnitsky Act on Philippine political figures tied to those killings, which led to Duterte's decision to unilaterally terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA)—something he had threatened to do in the past and finally did.

If the FOIP does not push hard on these critical yet politically sensitive issues, more countries may endorse or broadly engage in the initiative. Second, the economic dependence on and the prospect of financial assistance from China has shaped the behavior of most Southeast Asian countries. China is the biggest trading partner with all Southeast Asian countries while, at the same time, the economic lifeline for Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. Undoubtedly, these three countries have tilted more towards China in economic and security fashions. At the same time, the rest are committed to hedging, trying to keep the major powers in check. Chinese economic prowess is more influential in influencing Southeast Asian countries' foreign policy behavior.

When these two factors collide, the ASEAN centrality and unity will be in jeopardy. The ability of ASEAN to implement Outlook will be weak. Those who do not support the FOIP, either led by the U.S. or Japan, and are pro-China will resist any collective policy that intends to sabotage China's image or interest. Those less pro-China and tilt toward the Western countries will forcefully support the FOIP. If this divergent view is not addressed, ASEAN will likely not implement Outlook more successfully.

### **An Optimistic Future for ASEAN**

In the end, there is some room for optimism. For a rising power, being fearful of a containment coalition encompassing the U.S., Japan, and possibly India and Australia, China is trying to make sure that it pushes ASEAN enough so that countries line up to anti-China coalition. China depends mainly on a reassurance strategy and approach with its soft power to restrain countries from joining such a coalition. The fact that China sits down with ASEAN to negotiate the Code of Conduct (CoC) on the South China Sea is one indication of China's willingness to discuss issues with the claimant states regarding the SCS as a group, even if it has no intention of abandoning its claims (Kipgen, 2018). By contrasting typical narratives,

China has stressed that it does not intend to seek regional dominance. While there is some truth in such a narrative, one may also interpret this as a Chinese effort to gain acceptance from Southeast Asian states at no serious cost to its interests.

Such a policy preference is crucial for Beijing, and China has much to lose should ASEAN tilt more toward Washington. Promoting the ‘peaceful rise’ notion may further constrain China’s assertive posture in the region. As Lai (2019) explains, “China’s ‘peaceful rise’ discourse creates a self-binding effect that significantly increases the cost of any revisionist behavior.” Boon (2017) also argues that China has its sense (and internal debate) about itself as a great power and its international obligations. It also seems obvious that China—its “peaceful rise” and perceived international obligations aside—treats the South China Sea as non-negotiable. Thus far, Beijing has shown it will not budge on the SCS. As Xi has repeated, China would not lose an inch of its sovereign territory in the South China Sea, and recently, China’s “wolf warriors” in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have pushed a more sharp-edged line. With this perspective in mind, ASEAN, when negotiating the CoC, is under the close watch of the other more significant powers.

The extra-regional powers with security and strategic interests in this region will continue to closely observe the evolution of the relationship between China and ASEAN. ASEAN can operate somewhat smoothly because the great power rivalry has been primarily verbal. However, as this competition intensifies, external powers such as the U.S. and Japan will begin to question how ASEAN conducts its relationship with China. One possible conclusion may be that the U.S. and Japan have come to believe that because of neutrality and consensus-based principles, ASEAN allows China to dominate the region and exploit the South China Sea to its advantage.

Such a conclusion is valid from these powers’ perspectives because half of the ASEAN members are non-claimants (Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and Singapore). Because the non-claimant states receive vast economic benefits, such as trade, investment, and aid from China, these states may not push the CoC hard to get it more legally binding at the expense of their economic benefit from China. With the CoC not built on legality, China will continue to undercut opposition to its expansionist actions in the South China Sea. China may use this platform to counter the U.S. assertion of China’s illegal maritime

operation in the South China Sea and gradually try to push the U.S. out of the region. Thus, China is not guaranteed to reverse its course even after the CoC is concluded. This worries bigger powers and ASEAN that the practice of freedom of navigation will come under tremendous pressure.

## CONCLUSION: THE WAY FORWARD

The above discussion reveals that the Outlook declares the ASEAN commitment to uphold its relevance and centrality in the Indo-Pacific region, further strengthening its institutional hedging strategy. However, realizing this objective is a challenging task. There are many challenges ASEAN is facing at the moment. Nonetheless, there are a few ways in which ASEAN can keep these challenges at bay.

First, the ASEAN should work to strengthen its internal and institutional cohesion. The need for more trust in institutional authority is weakening ASEAN to stand firm against any external threats. For instance, the border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand in 2008 indicated the limit of ASEAN’s ability to resolve the security challenge even among its members. This inability generated a lot of distrust and suspicions among Cambodian elites about whether ASEAN effectively resolved disputes and promoted harmony among its members (Chong, 2017). Therefore, there is a need for ASEAN to revisit its internal loopholes that have caused some discontent among its member states. As mentioned earlier, ASEAN’s failure to mediate the conflict contributed to Cambodia’s tilts toward China (Po & Primiano, 2020). Cambodia’s distrust towards its ASEAN neighbors (Thailand and Vietnam) remains. Thus, the Cambodian example indicates that the solid internal cohesion among member states will empower ASEAN to possess more “institutional power” necessary to deal with the external constraints. ASEAN has well-defined guidelines for conflict management mechanisms in place. As alluded to briefly in the above sections, there are several such as ADMM, ADMM Plus, ARF, ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC), and others. However, the point is its inability to implement these guidelines more effectively, and it is the fact that ASEAN needs to consider them seriously. Leaving it unsolved will reduce its credibility (Dosch, 2017).

Second, ASEAN should constantly reach out to QUAD members to persuade them to put ASEAN at the center of the FOIP strategy (Chongkittavorn, 2018).

The fact that all QUAD members have recognized the significance of ASEAN in their version of strategy should be considered and valued. The future is still being determined as the power competition keeps intensifying regularly. Those bigger powers may shift their focus overnight, jeopardize ASEAN centrality, or risk the existence of ASEAN itself in a worst-case scenario. The constant interaction with the QUAD members could help instill the idea of ASEAN centrality in their mentality. This is significant because, on the one hand, ASEAN has the chance to dispel the doubt that it does not allow China to dominate the region at the expense of the QUAD countries, and, on the other hand, it is the opportunity for ASEAN to reassure these bigger powers that their interests are secure. Overall, whether this strategy becomes a reality and is successful depends mostly on how competent ASEAN can unite and craft a viable policy that serves its members' interests. Internal unity is vital to ensuring how much ASEAN can handle this worrisome power contest in the Indo-Pacific region. The United States is critical since, unlike the others, it is less of a "resident" power in the region and more diverted by its other priorities. However, a change in U.S. leadership may provide ASEAN with an opportunity to affirm a stronger relationship with the U.S. based on an American accommodation of ASEAN's centrality and rhetoric.

Third, ASEAN should consider providing at least an informal guarantee of the security needs of each country so that ASEAN countries have less need to get involved with outside powers. For those ASEAN countries with less defense capability to protect themselves, ASEAN needs to ensure that they do not feel insecure if there is coercive rhetoric from bigger powers. Security assistance is critically important for small ASEAN states because they need more workforce, weaponry, and finance capability to be worry-free. A constant fear of disruption at the border by bigger powers or invasion of their sovereign territory remains a high priority of their security policy.

Fourth, ASEAN also needs to address the economic needs of less wealthy members so that they are more confident, more resilient, and less susceptible to outside manipulation. Rich member countries, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, need to share more of their technology, fiscal policy design, and governance experience by providing scholarships and training to government officials and students of less wealthy members. Bilateral trade and foreign

direct investments should also be increased because wealthy members invest more in less wealthy partners while reducing tariffs for products from them. If fully realized, there is hope that if the U.S. or China is too aggressive with ASEAN, the countries will pull back because they do not want to take sides.

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