RSIS S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

RSIS COMMENTARY

www.rsis.edu.sg No. 155 – 6 August 2019

ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Dilemma: Where To From Here?

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SYNOPSIS

ASEAN has now added to the ongoing Indo-Pacific debate. The question is, where to go from here? Is ASEAN's Outlook an end in itself or a constructive roadmap for the future of regional cooperation?

COMMENTARY

AT THE just-concluded 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok, the regional bloc filled a void in the ongoing international Indo-Pacific debate. Various regional actors had previously released their own Indo-Pacific strategies and concepts, suggesting a redefinition of geo-strategic Asia.

Yet, ASEAN, the organisation that is supposedly the fulcrum of Asian regionalism, had remained silent. Eventually, ASEAN released its own document on the continuing "Indo-Pacific" debate: the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). What does this mean for the ongoing regional debate on the strategic future of the Indo-Pacific?

Southeast Asian Soul Searching

Notwithstanding continuous reassurances by ASEAN leaders regarding ASEAN's role in the region, ASEAN centrality has come under severe stress, internally and externally. In that light, it was sensible and timely for ASEAN to speak with one voice on geopolitical shifts in the wider region and, heeding Indonesia's initiative, produce the AOIP.

But what is AOIP supposed to be?

Is it ASEAN's own independent vision of a new regionalism, broadening the Asia-Pacific by strategically incorporating the Indian-Ocean and India specifically, following other actors' lead?

Or is the AOIP much rather an attempt to converge existing visions and reconcile those with ASEAN's own interests? The eventual content of the AOIP suggests it may be the latter.

The content also suggests that the deliberation process involved considerable soul-searching for ASEAN, reflective of ASEAN's Indo-Pacific ambivalence.

AOIP does not once directly address strategic competition among major powers in the region. And yet, the entire document seeks to distance ASEAN from precisely this strategic competition.

Divergences Within ASEAN

Intra-ASEAN differences are complicated by lingering uncertainty as to AOIP's conceptual priors, such as Washington's Free and Open Indo-Pacific: are they pragmatic updates on the geopolitical status quo including an acceptance of the increasing significance of India as well as China's deeper reach into the Indian Ocean; or are they barely concealed containment strategies by the Quad countries and others against China?

Many in ASEAN think it is predominantly the latter, and – prudently – believe that ASEAN should not play a role in any overt containment, complicating China's relations with ASEAN, and thus, remain neutral.

At the same time, if ASEAN leaders intend to retain ASEAN Centrality, they must stay on top of the discourse as well as actively shape the embryonic and evolving order.

This is ASEAN's Indo-Pacific dilemma.

ASEAN Striking a Balance

Considering this dilemma, AOIP is a remarkable document for ASEAN and reflective of a fine balance struck internally between the necessary and the possible.

With AOIP, ASEAN pursues three predominant objectives: to retain ASEAN's central role in regional multilateralism; to influence existing Indo-Pacific priors so as to maximise benefits for ASEAN and uphold its principles; and to maintain an entrance door for China by pacifying potential anti-China elements within those Indo-Pacific priors.

It does so by reinforcing ASEAN's core principles of sovereignty, inclusivity, and a regional order anchored in international law, multilateralism, and peaceful cooperation.

Primarily, AOIP reiterates ASEAN's position that ASEAN-led mechanisms must be preserved, and further, henceforth utilised as platforms for implementation of Indo-Pacific cooperation.

Accordingly, it distances ASEAN from strategic competition and seeks to create synergies among existing frameworks and mechanisms in order to maximise cooperation and advance strategic trust. In other words, AOIP insists on the perpetuation of the multilateral status quo.

Secondly, AOIP specifically invites functional cooperation on several key areas. It encourages ASEAN's partners to support and cooperate with ASEAN within e.g. the East Asia Summit (EAS), and issue specific inter-institutional cooperation, also anchored in ASEAN-led mechanisms. AOIP, therefore, prescribes inclusiveness through the backdoor, rather than signing up to binary US–China competition.

Navigating Small Power Dilemmas

AOIP is an overdue united ASEAN voice; it is ASEAN's attempt to recoup the discourse initiative amidst competing geopolitical narratives. In consequence, ASEAN has permanently redefined its geopolitical perspective, making its "Indo-Pacific-isation" path-dependent and, for the time being, irreversible.

Nonetheless, many questions remain. What is AOIP's endgame and whether ASEAN had promulgated its own perspective simply for the sake of it? What to do with this document henceforth?

AOIP has at least three immediate outcomes:

AOIP is a direct invitation to use ASEAN-based mechanisms as facilitators for Indo-Pacific cooperation, putting pressure on ASEAN's partners to respond.

Second, AOIP provides ASEAN members henceforth with a common compass regarding the Indo-Pacific debate and offers some breathing space. It was timely that ASEAN took a stance on a debate, which is essentially one about reconstructing a region, whose geographical centre is Southeast Asia, and whose institutional hinge is supposedly ASEAN.

Buying Breathing Space

Arguably, this follows a long-led ASEAN tradition: formulating positions and treaties, astutely formulated so as to buy breathing space from all external parties: reassure all, side with none.

Even if the immediate impact on major power rivalry may be marginal, it has shown that ASEAN can speak with one voice and seeks to define the region as an arena for positive-sum cooperation rather than security competition. It strengthens ASEAN unity and attempts to retain ASEAN at the heart of the regional multilateral architecture.

Thirdly, by inviting ASEAN partners to inclusive cooperation and peaceful and sustainable management of resources and the regional commons in multiple areas, including the maritime domain, AOIP pacifies the Indo-Pacific discourse, hitherto biased towards containment.

This is how ASEAN navigates its dilemmas.

ASEAN should repeat this invitation at coming opportunities, such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and EAS. Going further, ASEAN should capitalise on this momentum and propose concrete projects.

Some of these can be with existing regional and sub-regional mechanisms, such as in the Mekong subregion, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and BIMSTEC, and explore potential synergies.

ASEAN should also try to connect various initiatives for infrastructure development, connected to the various Indo-Pacific concepts.

ASEAN has skilfully navigated its dilemma once again. How it uses this momentum determines the future of ASEAN centrality.

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