



# ASEAN'S OUTLOOK ON THE INDO-PACIFIC AND U.S.-CHINA RIVALRY



*EDITED BY*  
*POU SOTHIRAK,*  
*BRADLEY J. MURG*  
*AND CHARADINE PICH*

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**Cover Photo:** *ASEAN needs bigger voice in US-China rivalry*

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**Back Photo:** *Traditional Dance during the Gala Dinner hosted by Cambodia's Prime Minister during the ASEAN2022 Summit*

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**ASEAN'S OUTLOOK ON  
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## INTRODUCTION

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In recent years, it is undeniable that the US and China have and continue to compete for influence and power in the Indo-Pacific – with the concept “Indo-Pacific” itself even becoming a point of debate between the two sides. This competition is demonstrated by a preponderance of evidence ranging from US imposed sanctions on high-ranking, Chinese government officials to strong criticism of Beijing’s expansionistic behavior in the South China Sea. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy has specifically identified China as an expansionist power. Under this strategy, the US has also accused China of undermining human rights and international law, including freedom of navigation, with Washington also highlighting its willingness to work with allies and partners, including ASEAN, to block what many have considered to be China’s revisionist approach to the region.

Concomitantly, China stepped up and strengthened its engagement with Southeast Asia. In November 2021, China and ASEAN announced the establishment of the China-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. During the 2021 China-ASEAN Summit, China reassured ASEAN of the fact that China was and would always be a good friend, a good neighbor and a good partner. China’s foreign aid and concessionary lending through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) continues to flow into the region with Beijing-funded infrastructure projects an increasingly ubiquitous on both the physical and development policy landscape. From Beijing’s perspective, Washington’s continued, strong involvement with ASEAN is of increasing concern. Despite China’s recent reassurance of being benign in the context of ASEAN, this is by no way is indicative of the views of ASEAN states that have been on the receiving end of Chinese pressure tactics.

Against this backdrop, ASEAN issued a policy statement, the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” or “The Outlook” in short. With this document, ASEAN envisions itself to be the leading driver of the design of economic and security architecture in its region of the Indo-Pacific. The document has received both praise and criticism.

On the positive side of the ledger, many observers contend that the Outlook is a timely reflection of Southeast Asia’s position in an increasingly contested region. It clearly indicates the position of ASEAN while trying to balance the pressures imposed by the US and China. This should mean that ASEAN will seek to maintain good relations with China while also reassuring the US of the fact that ASEAN would not become part of a Chinese sphere of influence.

On the negative side, observers have perceived the Outlook to be merely an empty statement that does not contain any concrete actions or mechanisms. In this sense, the Outlook does not contain meaningful action plans or next steps that are likely to prevent the US, China, or other major powers from interfering in its regional affairs. Likewise,

the decades-old perception that ASEAN is a talking shop continues to bedevil the institution in light of a laundry list of challenges regularly discussed but still unresolved and continued questions as to whether ASEAN institutions and the “ASEAN Way” are fit for purpose in a rapidly evolving geopolitical context.

Recognizing these contrasting positions, an important next step is to understand how each ASEAN member state views the Outlook, its role, and its future development in the context of their respective bilateral relationships with China and the US. While the Outlook was agreed upon based on the principle of consensus among all ASEAN member states, each member state has a distinct relationship with the US and China, there is no “one size fits all model” of bilateral relations. Thus, the way in which each member views the Outlook in the context of the US-China competition will have impacts on the future trajectory of ASEAN and the Outlook itself as it evolves in the coming years. At the same time, there is the question as to whether the Outlook can be framed and developed not simply as a holding mechanism that seeks to tamp down or find an exit for Southeast Asia from the challenges of Sino-American competition (another “Principle of ASEAN Centrality”) – rather whether it can serve as a bridge that is able to begin a process of de-escalating Sino-American tensions and moving towards something resembling a framework for peaceful coexistence in the Indo-Pacific for the two great powers.

It is with this background and understanding that this book has been compiled and edited by the CICP editorial team in which scholars from various Southeast Asian states examine the AOIP at the regional and country levels, while incorporating policy recommendations as to potential next steps for ASEAN.

The first four chapters of the book discuss the overall sub-theme of the AOIP and ASEAN’s Future Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. CICP’s Pou Sothirak and Po Sovinda set out the case for the importance and value of the AOIP in the context of rising Sino-American competition. Deth Sok Udom examines the Outlook in comparative context, looking at it in relation to American and Japanese Indo-Pacific strategies and its place during Cambodia’s recently completed ASEAN chairmanship. Lawrence Anderson provides a deep dive into the contemporary challenges of Sino-American relations, the question of Taiwan, and the next steps for ASEAN as a whole. Simon Tay, Jessica Wau, and Janessa Kong consider the question of economic rulemaking in the region, Asian reactions to Washington’s Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and the strategies ASEAN might take as a group and as individual states in the future of rulemaking.

The subsequent three chapters of the book broadly focus on another sub-theme of the ASEAN as a Bridge between the US and China. Tho Nguyen and Bao Nguyen examine the concepts of mutual understanding and boundary crossing in order to propose concrete next steps for ASEAN’s role and engagement – highlighting the economic role of China and the security role of the United States. Kasira Cheeppensook looks at the

development and origins of the Outlook and its role and meaning in the context of Thai foreign policy. Finally, Geetha Govindasamy provides an in-depth case study of Malaysian policy towards China and the United States and sets out how Kuala Lumpur has sought to engage both great powers while avoiding confrontation.

The diverse perspectives of the authors set out in this text provide essential history, analysis, and a solid grounding for scholars, diplomats, journalists, and others interested in the myriad, competing factors that will shape the development of the Outlook in the coming years and a means to understand it in comparison and in dialogue with the Indo-Pacific policies of other leading actors in the region.

*Ambassador Pou Sothirak*

*Executive Director*

*Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP)*





## LIST OF BIOGRAPHIES

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### **Ambassador Pou Sothirak**

*Executive Director, CICP*

In addition to being the Executive Director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP) since 2013, Ambassador Pou Sothirak also serves as Advisor to the Royal Government of Cambodia as of February 2014.

He was appointed as Secretary of State of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia from September 2013 to January 2014. He was a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore from January 2009 to December 2012. He also served as Cambodian Ambassador to Japan from April 2005 to November 2008. He was elected Cambodian Member of Parliaments twice during the national general election in 1993 and 2003. He was appointed as Minister of Industry Mines and Energy of the Royal Government of Cambodia from 1993 to 1998.

He graduated from Oregon State University in the U.S. in March 1981 with a Bachelor Degree in Electrical and Computer Engineering and worked as an engineer at the Boeing Company in Seattle, Washington from 1981-1985. He has written extensively on various issues concerning the development of Cambodia and the region.



### **Dr. Bradley Jensen Murg**

*Distinguished Fellow & Senior Advisor, CICP*

Dr. Bradley J. Murg is Associate Professor of Political Science and Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences at Paragon International University. Additionally, Dr. Murg holds positions as Distinguished Fellow and Senior Advisor at CICP; Senior Research Advisor at Future Forum; and Distinguished Fellow at the Royal University of Law and Economics. His work, supported by grants from the Social Science Research Council and the International Research and Exchanges Board, focuses on contemporary international relations in Southeast Asia; the political economy of foreign aid; and the Greater Mekong Subregion as a whole. Dr. Murg graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Emory University with a B.A./M.A. in philosophy, received an MSc. in economic history from the London School of Economics, and his M.A. and Ph.D. in political science from the University of Washington.



***Ambassador Lawrence Anderson***

***Senior Fellow, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies***

In a 37-year career in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Lawrence Anderson served at the Singapore Permanent Mission to the United Nations in New York and Singapore Embassies in the US and Thailand. He was appointed Ambassador to Cambodia (2004-2007), as well as Ambassador to Saudi Arabia and concurrently Ambassador to Bahrain (2013-2019).

Back home in MFA, Mr. Anderson at various times held appointments covering Singapore's bilateral relations with its neighbors in Southeast Asia; Regional policy and strategic security issues involving ASEAN and its relations with the Dialogue Partners; overseeing Singapore's Technical Assistance Cooperation Programmes; as well as managed Singapore's relations with the European Union and other European countries; and Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific islands.

Mr. Anderson retired from the Foreign Service in late 2021 after a secondment to the Asia-Europe Foundation. He is currently Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. His areas of interest include regional security in the Asia-Pacific and beyond, ASEAN, and Sino-US strategic competition. He is a Senior Fellow at the MFA Diplomatic Academy. He is also Singapore's Representative to the Advisory Board of the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (ASEAN-IPR).



***Dr. Sok Udom Deth***

***Rector, Paragon International University***

***Senior Fellow, CICP***

Dr. Sok Udom DETH is an Associate Professor of International Relations and the Rector of Paragon International University (formerly Zaman University). Dr. Deth received his bachelor's degree with High honor's in Sociology from Boğaziçi University (Turkey), a master's degree in Southeast Asian Studies from Ohio University (USA), and a Ph.D. in Southeast Asian Studies from Humboldt University of Berlin (Germany). He is a member of the Board of Academic Advisors of Future Forum and a Senior Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP). Dr. Deth is credited with several academic publications and has been invited to give guest lectures at various institutions/universities. Occasionally, he shares his insights on local and regional media about Cambodian and regional affairs as well.



## **Ambassador Simon Tay**

*Chairman, Singapore Institute of International Studies (SIIA)*

Simon SC Tay is a public intellectual as well as an advisor to major corporations and policymakers. Based in Singapore, he is Chairman of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, the country's oldest think tank that has been ranked as the best independent think tank in Asia. He is concurrently a tenured Associate Professor, teaching international law at the National University of Singapore Faculty of Law and has also taught at Harvard Law School, the Fletcher School and Yale University. Prof Tay is also Senior Consultant at WongPartnership, a leading Asian law firm of some 300 lawyers and with offices in ASEAN, China and the Middle East. He served on boards for leading global companies including MUFG Bank of Japan, Toyota Japan, and Deutsche Boerse (Asia), and was previously Corporate Advisor to Temasek Holdings (2006-09). Prof Tay is appointed as an Ambassador for Singapore, currently accredited to Greece on a non-residential basis. From 1992 to 2019, he served in a number of public appointments for Singapore including as Chairman of the National Environment Agency (2002-08); an Expert and Eminent Person in the ASEAN Regional Forum (2002-2019); an independent Member of Parliament (1997-2001); and to coordinate the country's equivalent of the Peace Corps (1990-93).



## **Jessica Wau**

*Deputy Director of ASEAN Programme, SIIA*

Jessica leads the ASEAN programme at the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, the country's oldest think tank and founding member of the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) Network of think tanks. She is responsible for driving research, reports and conversations on ASEAN matters and its key economies of Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. Her work requires her to track policy trends and developments in Southeast Asia, which she analyses to provide advisory services to multinationals in the region. Jessica has worked on a series of dialogues on ASEAN Centrality and Collective Leadership on pertinent issues including, trade, infrastructure and the Indo-Pacific. Currently, her work focuses on building SIIA's ASEAN digitalisation programme, proposing a collaboration with digital economy stakeholders to offer research and analysis on 'Charting ASEAN's Digital Future'. She was previously an Associate Producer at CNBC covering Asia's major markets and economies. She specialized in 'Regional Studies: The Asia Pacific' as part of her master's programme on International Affairs at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.



**Janessa Kong**

*Policy Research Analyst of the ASEAN Programme, SIIA*

Janessa works on the ASEAN programme at the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, the country's oldest think tank and founding member of the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) Network of think tanks. She is responsible for conducting policy research, reports and engaging in conversations on ASEAN matters and its key economies of Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. Her work requires her to track political and economic developments in Southeast Asia, which she analyses to provide advisory services to multinationals in the region. Janessa is part of the core team planning the ASEAN-Asia Forum (AAF), the Institute's annual flagship forum which identifies pertinent issues in ASEAN. Currently, her work focuses helping to build SIIA's ASEAN digitalisation programme, proposing a collaboration with digital economy stakeholders to offer research and analysis on how to go about achieving an ASEAN Digital Community. She was previously a Research Analyst at Kantar focusing on delivering insights to brands and driving growth. She graduated from the Singapore Management University with a degree in Political Science and Corporate Communications with great distinction.



**Kasira Cheeppensook**

*Assistant Professor, Chulalongkorn University*

Kasira Cheeppensook, MPhil (Cantab), PhD is Assistant Professor at Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University (Department of International Relations), Thailand. Kasira is currently Director of Political Science Doctoral Programme, Deputy Dean for Academic Affairs and Deputy Director of the Centre for Social and Development Studies, Faculty of Political Science. Kasira serves as member committee in the Board of ASEAN Association of Thailand supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She was invited to teach at Institute of Advanced Naval Studies and Air Command and Staff College as well as Thammasat University.

Her research interests include ASEAN, normative transition and security in Asia-Pacific. She also provided expert consultations to the UN Office of Genocide Prevention and Responsibility to Protect in developing modules regarding atrocity prevention, as well as worked with the UNODC, UNDP, and National Security Council of Thailand in preventing violent extremism (PVE).



### **Geetha Govindasamy**

*Senior Lecturer, University of Malaya*

*Senior Visiting Fellow, CICP*

Dr Geetha Govindasamy obtained her PhD from Monash University, Australia, MA from the International University of Japan, M.Phil from Queens' College, Cambridge University, UK. She is an expert on East Asian international relations. She teaches courses related to East Asian regional affairs. Generally, she publishes more on inter-Korean issues and East Asian interactions. Her publications can be found in the local and international journals, UM Press and other reputable publishers. Thus far, she has been a recipient of various research grants from Korea Foundation, Sumitomo Foundation and local funding. Her networking experiences include academic exchanges at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Korea University, Institute of Far Eastern Studies (IFES), Kyungnam University and the Graduate Institute, Geneva (IHEID). Dr Govindasamy was also invited to attend the Study of the United States Institute (SUSI) Exchange programme for academics in 2013 and in 2019, she was invited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan to be part of an academic tour to Tokyo and Okinawa. Dr Govindasamy is a member of Malaysian Scholars on Korea (MASK) and the Malaysia-Japan Association (MAJAS) and simultaneously is the Managing Editor of *Wilayah: International Journal of East Asian Studies*. At present, she is a Senior Visiting Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Peace and Cooperation.



### **Nguyen Ngoc Tho**

*Associate Professor, Vietnam National University*

**Nguyen** Ngoc Tho is Associate Professor in Cultural Studies, majoring in East Asian and Vietnamese folklore and social ritual studies. He concentrates on rituals, customs, and daily life of the Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese peoples under the East Asian perspective. He obtained his PhD degree in Vietnam National University - Ho Chi Minh City, was a visiting scholar to Sun Yat-sen University in 2008, the Harvard Yenping Institute during the 2017-2018 academic year, Harvard University's Asia Centre in 2018-2019, Boston University in 2019-2020, and Brandeis University in 2020-2021. He is currently the Dean of Faculty of Cultural Studies, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University - Ho Chi Minh City. Nguyen Ngoc Tho is the author of six books and more than 40 journal articles published in Vietnam and overseas. He holds the co-authorship of a dozen other books, book chapters and journal articles. He is also a member of the Standing Committee of The National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED) of Vietnam (Council of Culture, Arts, and Mass Media).



**Huynh Hoang Ba**

*PhD Student, Vietnam National University*

Huynh Hoang Ba, MA., Ph.D. Student of University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University – Ho Chi Minh City. He majors in overseas Chinese cultural studies as well as socio-cultural exchanges between Southeast Asians and local Chinese communities. He is author and co-author of 8 articles and book chapters published in Vietnam, PRC, and Taiwan.



**Po Sovinda**

*Research Fellow, CICP*

*PhD Candidate, Griffith University*

Sovinda Po is a Senior Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace and a PhD Candidate in International Relations at Griffith University, Australia. His journal articles and commentaries have appeared in Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs, Explorations, Issues & Insights (Pacific Forum), East Asia Forum, New Mandala, The Diplomat, Australian Outlook, The Interpreter, Khmer Times, etc. His comments about the Indo-Pacific issues have been quoted in Voice of America (Khmer service), Radio Free Asia (Khmer service), the Wire Radio (Australia), Thmey Thmey International, and the Phnom Penh Post. His research interest includes small states' foreign policy, and great power's grand strategy in the Indo-Pacific region.

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# THE ASEAN OUTLOOK ON THE INDO-PACIFIC AND THE GREAT POWER RIVALRY

*Pou Sothirak and Po Sovinda*

## **Introduction**

The unanimous adoption of the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) at the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in June 2019 demonstrated a common ASEAN position beyond Southeast Asia and it explicitly included the wider Indo-Pacific region. The Outlook should be seen as an important codification, a vital next step in order to develop and to expand the application of "the ASEAN Way" outside of its traditional domain. With this Outlook, ASEAN wishes to "enhance ASEAN-led mechanisms to better face challenges and seize opportunities arising from the current and future regional and global environments" (ASEAN 2019).

We examine how ASEAN used the Outlook to manage its relationship with major powers and how the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific", hereinafter "the Outlook" contributed therein. In answering these questions, this chapter particularly discusses the ways in which ASEAN projects itself as a regional player that can play a significant role in shaping the security architecture not just in Southeast Asia, but in the broader Indo-Pacific region.

The first section describes the geopolitical reality of great power competition between the US and China and the implications for ASEAN. The second situates ASEAN's Outlook in the context of the Indo-Pacific concept, discussing some challenges that the ASEAN countries face while trying to implement their own policies.

## **Geopolitical Power Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific and Implications for ASEAN**

The regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific region has been undergoing a profound transformation. With China's re-emergence as a great regional power, it has initiated some ambitious, perhaps 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 US position and replace it in the region and beyond (Wang 2016; Yu 2017).

Since taking power in 2012, Chinese President Xi Jinping has been relentless in developing China's economic, diplomatic, and political influence on a global scale as well as building up its military strength and power projection capabilities. At the 2017 party congress, President Xi said China will become a global leader by the middle of the

century and amplified policies to accelerate the growth of China's comprehensive national power in support of the country's "great rejuvenation" by 2049 through the assertive use of all instruments of national power, including both economic and military. Beijing's strategic priorities will inevitably challenge US economic and military might as China aspires to become a global power, changing the unipolar world towards a multipolar or bipolar structure in which it will be the other super power through strengthening of its power projection capacity in the region and by expanding its economic and military power globally in order to achieve its strategic objectives and protect its core interests. However, Beijing has repeatedly denied this ambition.

Washington realizes that its position in the Indo-Pacific region faces mounting challenges, particularly from the People's Republic of China. The US believes that only the PRC with combining economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might can rival the American preeminent position in the long run as China continues to rise and seeks to become the world's most influential power.

With the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the U.S. seeks to defend both its interests and vision for the future and the strengthening of the liberal international system and to keep it grounded in shared values to overcome the 21st-century challenges. The objective - as noted by some American policymakers - is not to change the PRC but to shape the strategic environment in which it operates, building a balance of influence in the world that is maximally favorable to the United States as Washington seeks to manage competition with the PRC responsibly.

When dealing with the US and China, ASEAN faces multiple challenges. These involve the different ideological principles, choice of political system in their respective countries, normative perceptions as to how the international system should work in the global, regional, and individual country basis, and how they conduct their foreign policy with each other as well as in other bilateral relationships. The intensification of the US and China rivalry flared up acutely during the last round of the Shangri-La Dialogue when the American and Chinese defense leaders offered their respective visions for the future of the region. Broadly speaking, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin articulated America's positive vision for the region, while his Chinese counterpart, Defense Minister General Wei Fenghe, focused on how China will be important to the future of Asia and why it would be a mistake for any country to impede on Chinese core interest.

While emphasizing how the United States views the Indo-Pacific as the strategic center of gravity for American interests in the 21st century, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin focused on the revitalization of the alliance system to tighten their bonds to deal with Chinese assertiveness which the US and its allies perceive as detrimental to the liberal international system.

Chinese Defense Minister Gen. Wei Fenghe's presentation, on the other hand, was more acute, stressing that China's rise and its continued development cannot be stopped and China cannot be isolated or excluded from the region. Gen. Wei warned that American attempts to form exclusive blocs (e.g., through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or the AUKUS pact) would split the region and undermine the interests of all.

As the U.S. and China continue to compete in order to extend their spheres of hegemony, all countries are inescapably drawn into the complexities of this global competition. International stability now hinges on whether the world order will be reshaped toward a more China-centric order, downgrading U.S. influence. The distribution of the capabilities of both countries, both soft and hard, will be determined by their relentless rivalries, signaling the arrival of a new bipolar world. It is in this context that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) must remain vigilant, creative, and bold so as to ensure ASEAN's continued relevance, viability, and vitality. ASEAN needs to go beyond the consensual way and non-substantive reaction in dealing today's pressing challenges, ranging from traditional and non-traditional threats which are persistently testing ASEAN relevance.

During Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship this year, the renewed solidarity among ASEAN leaders amidst rapid geopolitical shifts have re-emerged around the Outlook and the debate is now about whether this is a meaningful initiative that could re-shape the Indo-Pacific's politico-security architecture to ensure continued relevance of the ASEAN Centrality among member states, boost up collective leadership, and instill a clearer and more strategic direction to help the regional bloc maintain its strategic autonomy by resisting pressure to choose side between the two biggest powers.

In light of these realities, ASEAN needs to prove that the Outlook can effectively assist the bloc in navigating safely into the uncharted domain of the wider Indo-Pacific.

### **ASEAN's Outlook in the context of the Indo-Pacific concept**

Since the very early on, ASEAN has always been willing to play a leading role and in a "driver's seat" in the regional security architecture. Since the release of the Outlook, there have been many short commentaries on it, but relatively little academic discourse.

The Outlook is the reflection of 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 to maintain its strategic autonomy. 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 a clear indication that the grouping neither wishes to align itself with one power nor welcome any pressure to do so. ASEAN has used institutional hedging to manage its relationships with the great powers. This approach was effective

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 benefit from the competing large 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). To be precise, the Outlook is not about Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy like those of Japan, the US 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. 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>1</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.

Essentially, Outlook offers five key points that could be viewed as positive and forward-looking as regards to the extra-regional application of ASEAN Centrality. These include: (i) emphasis on the connections between the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean; (ii) focus on cooperation and dialogue rather than rivalry; (iii) advancement of development and prosperity for all; (iv) recognition of the importance of the maritime domain in the regional architecture; and (v) aspiration to generate momentum for future initiatives based on appropriate ASEAN documents that could facilitate Indo-Pacific collaboration.

However, reviewing the Outlook more closely, there remain serious shortfalls which have to be addressed in concrete terms if ASEAN wants control of the "Geopolitical Genie" that is now out of the bottle. Addressing these issues is essential if ASEAN is to avoid falling down a slippery slope that could harm its goal of becoming an "honest broker in the Indo-Pacific."

For instance, and with regard to the interest of ASEAN to lead the shaping of the economic and security architecture beyond Southeast Asia, as stipulated in paragraph two of the Outlook -- this statement appears to be presumptuous and over optimistic given the structural constraints ASEAN already has to resolve in its own region. Most notably, the South China Sea crisis has to be dealt with resolutely. At present, ASEAN is acting in a bolder fashion to address wider and tougher economic and security issues in

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<sup>1</sup> See the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Available at [https://ASEAN.org/ASEAN2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific\\_FINAL\\_22062019.pdf](https://ASEAN.org/ASEAN2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf)

new territories that ASEAN may not be familiar with and certainly does not have control of, such as competition between the US and China. If ASEAN wishes to take the lead here, the paragraph should be revised to clearly state precisely how it intends to approach or to resolve the threats and challenges deriving from great power competition in the Indo-Pacific.

Paragraph six stated "the importance of the maritime domain and perspective in the evolving regional architecture". Here it appears that ASEAN is trying to get ahead of the rising Sino-American naval competition in the South China Sea. The big questions here are: What does this mean in actual practice? What about the shape and content of the South China Sea Code of Conduct? And the question concerning ASEAN as playing a central role -- is it as a facilitator of cooperation among the belligerent powers or a credible manager able to keep the maritime domain safe, sound, and free from escalating tensions and conflict?

Nonetheless, the Outlook is intended to indicate ASEAN's response to the evolving regional security architecture. It should be seen as an affirmation and reassurance of ASEAN's own 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). What the Outlook is seeking to achieve is space for its individual ASEAN states to continue to freely act in a regional strategic environment that is becoming polarized and in which the pressures on ASEAN states to choose sides are intense.

For the Outlook to promote cooperation using the ASEAN Centrality with all other regional and sub-regional mechanisms, as cited in paragraph five which is a good one, and given the growing pressure deriving from Sino-American rivalry, the ASEAN Centrality, in the context of the EAS, for instance, must work towards greater acceptance and command greater respect by all the major powers. Recognizing this reality, Marty Natalegawa, former Indonesian foreign minister, mentioned recently during the 33rd Asia Pacific Roundtable in Kuala Lumpur that ASEAN Centrality must be earned. 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 the Outlook has faced one big internal challenge. The challenge derives from the divergence of vision of the Indo-Pacific region and 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 appears to be the most ardent advocate of the concept. As Indonesian scholar Anwar Dewi 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” (Anwar 2020). Even though all members agreed on the release of the Outlook, it does not mean that all members share the Indonesian vision, which is of long-standing. Each Southeast Asian country has its own preference and interpretation of the FOIP. The extent to which each ASEAN member country embraces this concept depends largely on how it can help that state’s interests and strengthen its development and, more broadly, help maintain stability in the region.

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

Turning to Malaysia, former president Mohamad Mahathir, who resigned from office in 2019, sought to maintain the country’s traditional neutral foreign policy. He canceled the BRI-related projects worth USD 22 billion as overly expensive, but 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. His approach was known as “recalibrated equidistance” that will enhance its engagement with all bigger powers while strengthening the ASEAN centrality (Kuik & Liew 2018). Other countries such as Cambodia and the Philippines remained silent, citing the possibility that the discussion about the FOIP will jeopardize the centrality and neutrality of ASEAN.

As the US and China rivalry is intensifying, the ASEAN centrality and unity will be in jeopardy. The ability of ASEAN to implement the Outlook will not be strong. Those who do not support the FOIP led by the US and are pro-China will resist any collective policy that intends to sabotage China’s image or interest. Those who are less pro-China and tilt

towards the Western countries will support the FOIP more forcefully. If this divergent view is not addressed and reconciled internally within the bloc, ASEAN is likely not to put the Outlook into practice more successfully.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, the entire Outlook appears to be a smart way to project the ASEAN vision in the wider context of the Indo-Pacific, capitalizing on the ASEAN Way and allowing the regional grouping to withstand the pressures created by the geopolitical and geostrategic shift deriving from the relentless Sino-American competition. However, if ASEAN plans to gain "buy-in" from their major external partners at the next EAS Summit, fundamental readjustment of the existing Outlook text must take place to provide clearer, smarter, and deeper indications as to how ASEAN intends to reform and to strengthen its process of community building and to give new momentum to existing ASEAN-led mechanisms, be it the TAC, ASEAN Plus One, EAS or ADMM Plus One. Without such an approach, ASEAN Centrality could slide down that slippery slope into irrelevance.

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# THE ASEAN OUTLOOK ON THE INDO-PACIFIC (AOIP): CAMBODIA'S PERSPECTIVE

*Sok Udom DETH*

Fifteen years have passed since the concept of the “Indo-Pacific” was first conceptualized by the late former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. At that time, perhaps not too many people had predicted that what Abe referred to as the “confluence of the two seas” would become the increasingly ubiquitous geopolitical nomenclature as it is today. As Shihoko Goto postulated, few would have expected that Abe’s speech in 2007 “would become the foundation for multilateral cooperation in Asia” (Shihoko, 2022). With the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in 2017 (sometimes dubbed the “Quad 2.0”), various countries and regional blocs from Asia to Europe have repositioned themselves accordingly in response to this new concept and geopolitical reality in the making, especially amidst the surging tension between the United States and China.

As a contribution to this edited volume, this chapter provides a brief discussion on what the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) entails and how the AOIP differs from the Indo-Pacific strategies of Japan and the United States. More specifically, it proceeds to discuss the position of Cambodia as the chair of ASEAN in 2022 vis-a-vis the AOIP. To decipher the official stance of the Cambodian government and gauge the sentiments in Cambodia about the developments in the Indo-Pacific, the chapter reviews ministerial press releases, media articles, relevant survey results, as well as written views expressed by Cambodian academics from leading think tanks in the country.

## **FOIP and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)**

Following Japan’s announcement of the *Free and Open Indo Pacific* (FOIP), the United States, Australia, India and other European countries such as France and Germany also released their own versions of the Indo-Pacific Outlook.<sup>1</sup> While the (now declassified) U.S. *Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* under former U.S. President Trump committed to “maintain U.S. strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific region and promote a liberal economic order while preventing China from establishing new, illiberal spheres of influence,”<sup>2</sup> the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States released under President Biden in February 2022 mentioned the PRC’s “coercion and aggression” and stated that China undermined “human rights and international law, including freedom of navigation, as well as other principles that have brought stability and prosperity to the Indo-Pacific”

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<sup>1</sup> For recent discussions on various countries’ perspectives on the Indo-Pacific, see CSCAP, *Regional Security Outlook 2022*. Accessible at <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/14bSO8enlQmQ1tugVExu78nSZC1IBiUre>.

<sup>2</sup> Now accessible at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>.

(The White House, 2022, p. 5). Yet, it also added that the U.S. objective was “not to change the PRC but shape the strategic environment in which it operates, building a balance of influence in the world that is maximally favorable to the United States, our allies and partners, and the interests and values we share” (The White House, 2022, p.5). Accordingly, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy outlines five major objectives: (i) advance a free and open Indo-Pacific; (ii) build connections within and beyond the region; (iii) drive regional prosperity; (iv) bolster Indo-Pacific security; and (v) build regional resilience to transnational threats.

Similarly, but without specifically mentioning China, Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy highlights three major goals: (i) promoting and establishing rule of law, freedom of navigation, market economy; (ii) improving connectivity (through infrastructure development and and strengthening economic cooperation); and (iii) securing peace and stability (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, n. d.). But as Kei Koga observed, while the newly elected Japanese prime minister Fumio Kishida continued to emphasize Japan’s effort to promote the FOIP through its allies and partners (including ASEAN), “the difference between [former PM] Suga and Kishida in terms of pursuing the FOIP derive from Kishida’s emphasis on freedom, democratic values, and human rights . . . Japan’s value-oriented diplomacy has gradually taken a more significant role in its FOIP vision” (Kei, 2022).

It was not until June 2019 that ASEAN also adopted its own ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) at the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok. As Pich and Paciello argued, “ASEAN delayed in declaring its position on any of the early four Indo-Pacific concepts, to avoid risking the perception that it is taking sides” (Pich & Paciello, 2021, p. 7). The AOIP broadly outlines the region’s vision for improved connectivity, maritime cooperation, realizing the UN SDGs 2030, deepening economic cooperation, and the upholding of ASEAN’s principles contained in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), which, among others, “encompass peaceful settlement of disputes, renunciation of the threat or use of force and promotion of rule of law, with a view to further promoting amity and cooperation among countries in the IndoPacific region” (ASEAN, 2019, p. 3). Viewing the Indo-Pacific as a “region of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry” and “of development and prosperity for all,” the AOIP emphasized the centrality of ASEAN and existing mechanisms in tackling regional issues but also to “give new momentum for existing ASEAN-led mechanisms to better face challenges and seize opportunities arising from the current and future regional and global environments” and is meant to be “inclusive in terms of ideas and proposals” (ASEAN, 2019, p. 1).

Although Kei Koga (2022) considered the principles and functional cooperation stipulated in the AOIP and Japan’s FOIP to be highly compatible, the AOIP is thought of as focusing primarily on general goals and norms rather than on “concrete, practice-oriented proposals for resolving problems” (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020, p. 28). As such, it

has been deemed by some observers as “far from being a common strategy” and instead only “acts as a common reference point,” or worse, “irrelevant in many respects” (Castro, 2021, pp. 151-152). As Renato Cruz de Castro put it, “ASEAN’s acceptance of the AOIP as an outlook rather than a common strategy reflects its cautious – if not weak – approach to regional security trends and, more significantly, the divergent views of its members states about the concept” (Castro, 2021, p. 151). Beyond AOIP, even the very concept of “ASEAN Centrality” has been challenged. As Pou Sothirak, the Executive Director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP) argued, “this notion remains something of a myth and suffers from under-development both in conceptualization and in practice. The term, which is often used to enforce ASEAN’s position as ‘sitting in the driver seat’ of all established mechanisms, also needs to be re-clarified and explained from time to time” (Pou, 2021).

### **Cambodia’s Stance vis-a-vis FOIP and AOIP**

A few Cambodian academics (as well as Japan’s Ambassador to Cambodia)<sup>3</sup> have repeatedly pointed out that Cambodia was the first country to announce its support for Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Cheunboran Chanborey, Director-General of the Information, Research and Analysis Group at the Cambodian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, for instance, pointed out that “Prime Minister Hun Sen was the first ASEAN leader to express full support for Japan’s FOIP during his official visit to Tokyo in 2017” (Cheunboran, 2021, p. 22). Similarly, Cambodian think-tank Asian Vision Institute (AVI)’s Chairman Vannarith Chheang noted that Cambodia “is the first country from Southeast Asia that openly registered its support for the Japan-proposed Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) because it believes that the initiative complements ASEAN-led regional mechanisms” (Chheang, 2022, p. 2).

Cambodia’s expression of open support for Japan’s FOIP is particularly noteworthy considering the fact that “China has warned that the vision [i.e., FOIP] is a containment of Beijing” (Cheunboran & Bong, 2022, p. 21). At the same time, it is not entirely surprising given Cambodia’s past engagements with Japan – especially after the two countries upgraded their relationship to becoming “strategic partners” in 2013.<sup>4</sup> Cheunboran and Bong contended that the move “shed light on Cambodia’s diversification strategy to maintain a balance of influence over its foreign and security policy, and respond to the allegation of being China’s proxy during its 2012 ASEAN chairmanship” (Cheunboran & Bong, 2022, p. 20). The authors contended that

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<sup>3</sup> In the HIGHLIGHT section of CICP-KAS’s *Diplomatic Briefing* Issue 03 on “Japan, Cambodia, and a Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” Japanese Ambassador to Cambodia Mikami Masahiro remarked that “Cambodia expressed its support for FOIP ahead of many other countries when Prime Minister Abe proposed this initiative to Prime Minister Hun Sen in August 2017.”

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive discussion on Cambodia-Japan relations, see Leang, S. (2017). Cambodia-Japan relations: the bumpy and winding road to the strategic partnership and beyond. In S. U. Deth, S. Sun, & S. Bulut (Eds.), *Cambodia’s foreign relations in regional and global contexts*. KAS Cambodia.

Cambodia's hedging strategy with Japan is stemmed mainly from four factors: (i) Cambodia's concern that its growing reliance on China may erode its own strategic autonomy; (ii) relationship with Japan allows Cambodia to prove its "permanent neutrality" and "non-alignment" as enshrined in the Cambodian constitution; (iii) Cambodians' positive perception of Japan in general; and (iv) Japan's key role in contributing to Cambodia's economy (Cheunboran & Bong, 2022).

Against this backdrop of Cambodia's open support for FOIP, it is reasonable to assume that Cambodia also by and large embraces the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Japanese recent ambassador to Cambodia Mikami Masahiro alluded to this fact when he wrote: "AOIP and FOIP share relevant and fundamental principles in relation to the promotion of peace and cooperation" (Mikami, 2021, p. 18). It should be emphasized that Cambodia endorsed the AOIP especially – or perhaps only because of – its stated principles of ASEAN centrality, openness, inclusivity, and respect for sovereignty. On this strategic alignment, it is worth quoting AVI President's Vannarith Chheang at length:

"Concerning regional initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, Prime Minister Hun Sen supported those initiatives that promote peace and prosperity in the region, complement and support ASEAN Centrality, and do not create an alliance or coalition against a third country. The leader stressed that ASEAN Centrality was the cornerstone of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region and that the operationalisation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) with the support of all dialogue partners was crucial. Therefore, instead of asking ASEAN to support various Indo-Pacific initiatives, those who initiated the initiatives should support the AOIP" (Chheang, 2022, p. 1).

Under Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022, ASEAN is continuing discussions on the *Concept Paper: Mainstreaming Four Priority Areas of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific within ASEAN-led Mechanisms*, "including through a stock-taking exercise of programmes, projects and activities being undertaken within ASEAN and with external partners relative to the four priority areas of the AOIP" (ASEAN, 2022a, p. 26). The Chairman's Statement of the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) 10+1 Sessions with the Dialogue Partners and Trilateral Meetings also highlighted the expressed support from various Dialogue Partners for the AOIP (ASEAN, 2022b).

Beyond the usual buzzwords, however, it is possible to discern nuanced divergence between Japan's FOIP and Cambodia's embrace of AOIP from the different emphases by their respective proponents. In reiterating the essence of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, for instance, Japanese Ambassador to Cambodia Mikami Masahiro stressed the fact that "FOIP is an inclusive and transparent concept and not a containment directed at any particular country, including China" (Mikami, 2021, p. 17). However, he also cautioned

that while states may from time to time have disputes about international laws, they are not “free to interpret the rules as they like as they always have to explain their interpretations rationally and respect legal and diplomatic processes. Trying to change the status quo unilaterally by the use of force, disregarding others’ opinions, should be firmly rejected” (Mikami, 2021, p. 18). Cheunboran Chanborey, on the other hand, argued that “any regional initiative should not aim to fuel rivalry but instead complement the existing mechanisms to bring about stability, security, peace and prosperity. In contrast, any attempt to maintain a unilateral approach to regional security will be destabilizing; and so too will attempts to contain others in the region” (Cheunboran, 2021, p. 23). Speaking at the Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in Paris in February 2022, for instance, Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Prak Sokhonn also remarked that:

“As the rotating chair of ASEAN this year, Cambodia underlines the spirit of “Togetherness” in which we emphasize ASEAN centrality, unity, and solidarity in addressing regional challenges and enhancing ASEAN’s contribution to regional and global peace, security, and sustainable development. We stress unity for cooperation for our mutual interest and we focus on issues that bind us all together rather [*sic*] those that divide us” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2022, p. 2).

Furthermore, while the Cambodian government supports the Free Open and Indo-Pacific, it has not embraced the US-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD). A survey conducted by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute in 2018 found that while the majority of respondents in Southeast Asia considered the Quad to be complementing the existing (ASEAN) regional security frameworks, Indonesians and Cambodians were most concerned about the Quad challenging ASEAN centrality (Le Thu, 2018). The most recent *State of Southeast Asia 2022 Survey Report* by the Singapore-based ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute found that while 58.5% of Southeast Asians overall welcome the strengthening of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, only 28.4% of respondents from Cambodia agreed that the strengthening thereof and the prospects of tangible cooperation in areas like vaccine security and climate change is positive and reassuring for Southeast Asia. Similarly, 64.3% of respondents from Cambodia are worried about the United States’ growing regional political and strategic influence. Conversely, 54.1% of the respondents welcome China’s growing regional influence and a whopping 81.5% of Cambodian respondents in 2022 (compared to only 46.2% in 2021) would choose China when asked which side ASEAN should choose if it was forced to align itself with one of the two strategic rivals (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022). Unlike the majority of respondents from other ASEAN member states, Cambodian respondents (65.4%) have the strongest confidence in China to provide leadership to maintain the rules-based order and uphold international law and (71.6%) believe that China can provide leadership in

championing the global free trade agenda. From the survey results, it was very clear that the views in Cambodia have increased remarkably in favor of China in 2022, while the opposite can be observed for respondents in Myanmar (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022). Granted, the survey respondents were academics, researchers, representatives of business and finance sectors, civil society or media representatives, government officials, and regional or international organization personnel, and their views may not be necessarily reflective of the general populace. Still, such views are apparently prevailing among Cambodia's foreign policy movers and shakers nevertheless.

If Southeast Asians overall may be receptive to the Quad, the same cannot be said about the trilateral security arrangement announced in September 2021 between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS). On average, 18% of ASEAN respondents think that AUKUS will weaken ASEAN centrality; 12.3% believe it will undermine the nuclear weapons non-proliferation regime; 22.5% are concerned that it will escalate the regional arms race, while 36.4% think that AUKUS will help balance China's growing military power and only 10.8% believe it will not affect the regional balance of power. As for Cambodian respondents, 30.2% of them think that it will escalate the regional arms race (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022).

Cambodia has repeatedly voiced its concern about AUKUS and the possible nuclear arms race. Cambodia's Deputy Prime Minister Prak Sokhonn raised this issue during his phone conversation with former Australia's Foreign Minister Marise Payne in October 2021, and speaking at the Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in Paris in February 2022, he once again noted: "We express our concern that the establishment of AUKUS could be the starting point that triggers a regional arms race, fuels confrontation and increases regional tensions" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2022b, pp. 1-2). For its part, Australia has consistently reiterated its intention to only acquire nuclear-powered submarines and upgrade its naval capacity and not acquire nuclear weapons or establish civil nuclear capability. Australia also reaffirmed its commitment to ASEAN centrality, regional peace and security, and firm adherence to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of nuclear weapons (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2021).

Amidst the latest cross-strait flashpoint following the early August visit to Taiwan by the U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, ASEAN Foreign Ministers issued a statement voicing concerns about "the international and regional volatility . . . which could destabilize the region and eventually could lead to miscalculation, serious confrontation, open conflicts and unpredictable consequences among major powers" and reiterated ASEAN Member States' support for their respective One-China Policy (ASEAN, 2022c). In a recent meeting with China's State Councilor Wang Yi, Deputy PM Prak Sokhonn expressed his concerns and underlined Cambodia's espoused adherence to the "One China Policy" and considered the issues related to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang "the internal

affairs and under the sovereign rights of the People's Republic of China" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2022c).

### **Strengthening Multilateralism and Respect for State Sovereignty**

Taking stock of the spiraling tensions and increasing geopolitical uncertainty, Cambodia continues to emphasize and uphold the principles of multilateralism in dealing with international issues. To that end, it has frequently and consistently engaged with the European Union because the latter also upholds multilateralism as an instrument for peace and development. In his Opening Address at the Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in Paris, Deputy Prime Minister Prak Sokhonn stated that:

"Our desire for peace and prosperity is shared within the framework of the French Strategy on the Indo-Pacific, the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and our own ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). In this framework, ASEAN and EU can find so much [*sic*] complementarities and synergies to tackle the commonality of issues ranging from maritime and cooperation, connectivity, trade, climate change, and sustainable development, among others" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2022a, p. 3).

He went on to emphasize his belief that greater economic interdependence will reduce the risks of conflicts, hence the need to further deepen intra- and inter-regional economic integration (including ASEAN-EU FTA, RCEP, as well as the linkage between the Master Plan of ASEAN Connectivity 2025 and the Global Gateway of the EU etc.). He concluded the address by suggesting that ASEAN and the EU are "natural partners to promote an open, inclusive, rules-based Indo-Pacific. Our partnership will shape the future of this region in which peace, prosperity and progress can be ensured" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2022a, p. 4).

In line with this official stance, Cambodian respondents to the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's 2022 survey, similar to the majority of respondents from the rest of the other ASEAN member states, consider the European Union to be the most preferred and trusted strategic partner or "third parties" to hedge against the uncertainties of the US-China strategic rivalry. Japan tends to be the 2nd most popular choice for many respondents (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022).

As the Ukraine-Russia conflict ensued, Cambodia joined other countries in co-sponsoring a resolution condemning and demanding that Russia withdraw its troops from Ukraine, thereby receiving praise from Western powers including France and the United States. This move may be somewhat surprising to some analysts (considering Cambodia's historical tie with the Soviet Union), but as Prime Minister Hun Sen

reasoned: “As the situation in Ukraine worsens . . . we need to take action within the framework of ASEAN and Cambodia itself,” adding that “our Russian friend is likely to be angry at us, but as a sovereign state we have the right to act in defense of the truth and we also have a responsibility as members of the UN” (Sam, 2022). Cambodia’s position on the Russia-Ukraine conflict reflects its firm position on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence of member states and denouement of aggression by another state. Yet, Cambodia was also among 58 countries (including 5 ASEAN member states) that abstained from calling for Russia to be suspended from the Human Rights Council (United Nations, 2022) with Vietnam being the only ASEAN country voting against the resolution.

## **Conclusion**

In the context of the revival of the Quad, and in spite of its close relationship with China, Cambodia was the first country in Southeast Asia to express its open support for Japan’s FOIP and has readily embraced the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Cambodia’s rationale for the support of Japan’s FOIP is its compatibility and complementarity with the existing regional and structures and mechanisms, i.e. ASEAN centrality. Yet, it can be argued that while Cambodia’s focus and preference are on the potential commonalities and inclusiveness that bind the region together (through such aspects as economic integration and connectivity development), it shies away from activities or initiatives that are perceived as confrontational, exclusionary, or potentially destabilizing to the region (e.g. AUKUS and QUAD military drills). As a small nation and a strong proponent of ASEAN, Cambodia wishes to uphold ASEAN centrality that allows for strategic maneuverability and is committed to strengthening multilateralism with like-minded partners such as the European Union.

Insofar as the whole of ASEAN is concerned, the ideal scenario for the Indo-Pacific is one where the member states are unified in their position and are not forced to choose sides, and one where the big powers can eventually find a great deal of convergence in their understanding of and commitment to the “Rules-Based Order” that complement – rather than compete with – each other in addressing traditional and non-traditional security threats in the region. The real situation, however, is increasingly more precarious and volatile. The truth is, as Seah, Li, and Martinus recently concluded in their article on *Fulcrum*, while ASEAN still retains its convening power to bring world powers to the table, “despite ASEAN’s best efforts (unity, centrality, etc), it remains hostage to great power politics” (Seah et al., 2022). After all, China will most likely continue to assert its influence as a rising power, while the United States and its allies will be determined to retain their dominance and the status quo in the region for the foreseeable future. Unless they can find ways to accommodate each other’s strategic interests, the region may not be able to escape from the so-called Thucydides Trap and avert the global crisis of the 21st century.



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# WHITHER US-CHINA COMPETITION AND STRENGTHENING ASEAN FOR REGIONAL PEACE, STABILITY, AND SECURITY

*Lawrence Anderson*

The regional security outlook in the Indo-Pacific is mixed and fraught with uncertainty. After three difficult years, COVID-19 appears to be under control prompting even China to ease up on its stringent zero-COVID policy. Even so, recovery in the regional countries' healthcare and economic sectors is fragile with a risk of further pandemics. Meanwhile, transboundary problems including the climate crisis, food security, spiralling fuel and other finance related costs will continue to afflict the Indo-Pacific and beyond for years to come. These non-traditional security challenges are best dealt with by countries big and small, working closely together, to mitigate their creeping effects. Above all, it requires the regional superpowers - China and the US - to iron out their differences peacefully, and work with ASEAN and other like-minded countries to address these challenges, instead of adding to the region's worries.

## **Whither US-China Competition?**

The heightened strategic competition between the two superpowers is the most pressing security concern facing the Indo-Pacific today. Hence, analysts have drawn some comfort from the first face-to-face meeting between Chinese paramount leader Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden on 14 November at the side-lines of the G-20 Summit in Bali. Both men approached their meeting with confidence after their respective elections - Xi in securing a third five-year term as Party general secretary and Biden, despite losing the House of Representatives, having halted a widely anticipated Republican landslide. While reaffirming their respective (and differing) positions on difficult issues such as Taiwan, North Korea (DPRK), Russia's war in Ukraine, human rights abuses in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong, and damaging trade and economic practices, both leaders also stressed the desire to manage tensions, avoid conflict and work together to deal with the global challenges. They agreed to allow their senior officials to renew communication on climate, debt relief, maintain open lines of communication and other sensitive issues. Following which, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken will visit China for further talks.

The realization by both leaders of the need to damp down tensions has already had a positive effect on the inflationary pressures in the west and the prospects for regional peace. If Washington's elites are serious in accommodating the 'red lines' reiterated by President Xi and likewise if China is prepared to make concessions on what the US considers priority issues mentioned in the preceding paragraph, then the current rally in

markets in the US, Europe and China will continue and economic pressures arising from big power confrontation should ease. But this is, frankly, a big if. While the positive atmospherics of the Biden-Xi talks and pledges of more frequent contacts have offered some encouragement, it will take more than just reassuring words to slow the slide towards heightened US-China tensions. Unless both sides make a serious and prolonged effort to reach an understanding on critical issues, tensions will remain high. The question is what compromises will either side make to reduce their widening differences?

### **Taiwan: The Most Prominent Flashpoint**

Both sides hold to a 'One China' policy, but with significant differences in what the term means. Beijing insists that the US recognize and accept that Taiwan is part of mainland China, that the US not support Taiwanese independence and not challenge China on what Xi said was the first 'red line that must not be crossed.' The US, however, insists that there is no change to its approach towards Taiwan, that it continues to reserve the right to make high profile visits like that of then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in August that prompted the latest downturn in bilateral relations and to supply arms to Taiwan to defend itself. Clearly, both sides are far apart in their views of 'One China' and need to reach a new and mutually acceptable Taiwan 2.0 policy on this most prickly of challenges.

This will be extremely difficult to achieve and is not likely to happen anytime soon. A positive development is Biden having told reporters after his meeting with Xi, "I do not think there's any imminent attempt on the part of China to invade Taiwan". This does not mean that accidents might not happen, but it appears that neither the US nor China want to go to war over Taiwan. At least, for now. Some analysts believe that the US has concluded that war with China is inevitable and if so, it would be better to have it sooner rather than later when China will be in a much stronger position to challenge the US militarily. This has worried Chinese analysts and policy makers, and contributed to the hardline uncompromising rhetoric from Beijing, which has made reconciliation on the issue most unlikely at present.

### **Decoupling, Signs of a New Cold War?**

Significant US legislation, the toughest to date, passed in late 2022 has led some to conclude that the US has moved from a policy of competition and containment of China to a concerted effort with its major allies to keep China down by degrading Beijing's capabilities to challenge America's global pre-eminence. The 12 October release of the Biden Administration's National Security Strategy, coupled with the earlier passage of the Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors and Science Act of 2022 (CHIPS Act), have imposed and moved towards restricting China's access to the most advanced semiconductors, namely, the critical components at the heart of technologies

from Artificial Intelligence to supercomputing to medical and biological innovations, as well as highly sophisticated weapons systems, all of which are priority areas in China's rise to world superpower status.

A major component of this policy approach is the 'decoupling' of their respective economies. For now, the focus is on national security export controls, to deprive China of the most advanced semiconductor component parts and the tools to manufacture those component parts. The most advanced chips and the tools to make them are produced mostly by companies from South Korea, Taiwan, the US and Europe (mainly the Netherlands). Coupled with the fact that the new legislation applies not only to American firms, but to companies worldwide that use US semiconductor technology, means that the world's leading chipmakers will be compelled to restrict China's access to the requisite technology.

If the US succeeds, it will deal a serious blow to Beijing's efforts towards building self-sufficiency in critical sectors of its domestic economy and its growing ability to project its influence and military forces overseas. But there are doubts whether the US will be able to persuade its allies or even its own companies to adhere strictly to the tough sanctions, since they will be hit very hard as well, with China their biggest purchaser of advanced semiconductors and tools. Already several governments friendly to the US have protested over what they perceive as unilateral US action to provoke China at their companies' expense. This has prompted the US to grant a one-year extension to companies with production facilities in China like Taiwan's TSMC and Korea's Samsung to continue to use US-made tools. Further extensions and concessions are likely forthcoming, if there is movement towards an upturn in US-China relations.

China, for its part, has contributed to global concerns over decoupling. At the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, President Xi reiterated the Communist Party's commitment to self-sufficiency in high-tech semiconductors and other industries, as well as its pursuit of advanced dual use technologies. Certainly, sectors dealing with and related to national security will be affected. However, how many more will be added if tensions between the US and China and their respective allies continue to worsen? In a speech just prior to the passage of the new legislation, US National Security advisor Jake Sullivan gave some indication when he said that other technologies, like biotechnologies and biomanufacturing and clean technologies would be considered for similar measures.

Decoupling of the two superpowers' economies is likely to widen, but it will not reach the levels of separation between rival capitalist and socialist economies in the Cold War era. Both the US and China are currently anchored to a single globalised economic system. Despite China's attempts at self-sufficiency and to diversify its trading partners, it remains highly dependent on markets in the EU, US, and East Asia for growth and access to advanced technologies. The same could be said of those Western and East Asian

countries' dependent on China's significant purchases and access to its huge domestic market.

### **Allies Have Added to the Tensions**

The increasing involvement of regional allies of the two superpowers have contributed to uncertainties in the Indo-Pacific. While the US and China cannot accept each other as number one in Asia, neither are major Asian countries like India or Japan prepared to recognise China as number one either. Most Indo-Pacific countries are wary of Beijing's increasing assertiveness, which has led several to participate in US-led alliances aimed at China like the Quad (Australia, India, Japan and the US) and AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom and the US). China, on the other hand, has joined Russia in a partnership that "has no limits" which is an alliance in all but name, notwithstanding China's wariness in supplying Russia with weapons and other assistance in its war in the Ukraine.

US power might have diminished in relative terms to China's, but Washington enjoys a marked advantage over Beijing in being able to call on allies who possess significant economic weight and materiel resources to supplement US force projection in this region and beyond. The US has over 60 security partnerships worldwide, while China has a scattering of security relationships with Djibouti, North Korea, and a few others. China counts Russia and North Korea as its key allies in Asia, though one must wonder whether both countries are more of a drag on Beijing's resources than major assets?

At the back of the minds of Beijing's strategic planners must be the disconcerting perception that in the event of any serious future conflict between China and the US, China will have to contend with an encirclement of US bases and allies. Indeed, China's predicament emboldened the DPRK to launch cruise and ballistic missiles in retaliation to the resumption of US-South Korea naval exercises. Moreover, President Xi's call at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress for faster military development and the defence of China's interests abroad has done little to allay regional concerns. Coupled with China's aggressive "wolf-warrior" diplomacy, actions such as Beijing's decision to respond to the Pelosi visit to Taiwan by launching missiles around the seas near Taiwan and Japan last August, has pushed Japan and South Korea towards better bilateral relations and for both to work closely with the US to counter China. These decisions taken by the governments of Japan and South Korea have won increasing support amongst their respective domestic populace, greatly alarmed at the missile launches and mounting tensions between China and the US.

It is true that President Xi's economic, military and foreign policy statements at the Party Congress did not raise anything startlingly new, but coming at the same time as his being voted a third five-year term, has lent added significance to what he has said. It confirmed that Xi aims to remain in power for life. Furthermore, the decision to pack an inner circle



of seven Standing Committee members with his close allies with the emphasis on loyalty rather than knowledge, experience and competency in their relevant areas of responsibility has raised doubts whether Xi will be receptive to views contradictory or even slightly nuanced from his own. Hence, questions arise whether Xi's unchallenged dominance as leader will lead to an even more assertive pursuit of China's foreign policy interests? Or will it provide Xi with the assurance and confidence to make the sort of compromises that signal China's determination to reach a *modus vivendi* with the US and win the support of the regional countries and external powers?

### **A Lack of Strategic Trust**

While most countries in the Indo-Pacific are wary of China and some have even joined in US-led alliances, none are looking to contain or decouple entirely from the Chinese economy. Even major US allies like Australia, South Korea and Japan are trying to find ways to work with Beijing on issues of mutual concern. The underlying impediment is the lack of strategic trust between China and the US. It could not have come at a worst time given the pressing need for both superpowers to show leadership, commitment and a serious desire to work together to manage the non-traditional security challenges that affect all of us, and are beyond the ability of any one country to counter them meaningfully.

These issues are familiar to everyone and there is no need to elaborate in detail. Suffice to note that the transboundary problems will persist for years, adding to the drain on each country's financial and other resources in trying to militate their effects. It will undermine the effort of governments to raise the living standards of their citizens through the provision of good education and skills training to secure better jobs, to access reliable supply chains, build stronger resilience in their healthcare services, develop eco-friendly green and smart cities, judicious use of new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, big data and the dangers posed by cyber-attacks. By extension, this will contribute to regional instability and affect the ability of countries to help each other and work together for the common good.

Consequently, there are tentative glimmers that neither the US nor China want to go to war, and that regional leaders should prudently build on this to lessen regional tensions. This will take time, persistent effort and a serious change in superpower mindsets. For now, however, given the current suspicions in their bilateral relationship and the difficulties faced by both to make meaningful concessions on their respective core differences, the countries of the Indo-Pacific and external powers are likely to see a worsening of regional tensions with a real possibility of accidents and conflict taking place over the next several years.

## ASEAN can play a Role

Both outcomes – either a further deterioration of Sino-US relations or a modest upturn – present ASEAN with opportunities, but also dilemmas. In short, how best to manage their relations with the two superpowers and to take the tough, but necessary, steps to regain the trust and confidence of the US and China that ASEAN can play a meaningful role like before?

In Asia, in the immediate decades following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, ASEAN played a significant part in establishing regional security institutions to uphold regional order. Forums like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus and the East Asia Summit (EAS) provided useful platforms for the major powers and regional states to meet at the Foreign Ministers, Defense Ministers and Leaders levels to exchange views on regional developments and explore areas of cooperation.

More importantly, they provided the cover for quarreling countries to meet in private and for the regional states to put forward alternative perspectives to what leaders of the two superpowers might be receiving from their advisers. With hindsight, President Putin might have benefitted had he chosen to talk privately to more leaders prior to the outbreak of the war in the Ukraine. Just as it would be beneficial now for President Xi to receive candid assessments from a range of Indo-Pacific leaders. To work effectively, leaders and senior officials must be committed to search for ways to avoid serious conflict and practice preventive diplomacy, as well as resist the urge to use such platforms to score public points through the staging of walkouts and disclosing details of sensitive discussions to the press and on social media.

The multilateral platforms are there. What needs to be thrashed out is the growing ideological debate over rules and norms. No one questions the need for rules. What China (and Russia) are demanding is an updated version of those rules to embrace current practices or norms. Frankly, many Indo-Pacific countries agree. They hold the view that there is a place for tried and trusted rules and a more flexible interpretation of norms.

Everyone recognizes and accepts the rules enshrined in the UN Charter, and they are also embedded in regional documents such as the ASEAN Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. They include respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and the rule of law, the non-use of force to settle conflicts, and respect for non-interference in the internal affairs of all nations.

But norms can be studied and discussed further. Not those that discredit or contradict the established rules used in international organizations and treaties. There is a need for flexibility to extract lessons learned and use the experiences in applicability across

diverse situations, especially for the benefit of the regional commons. To cite an example, some Asian countries are uncomfortable when the US and its western allies focus solely on liberal democracy and human rights in the conduct of foreign policy. These are important principles, but the perception in a number of countries is the overwhelming reliance of claims on universal application and imposition of values which are not even fully accepted in western societies and the developed economies of the world.

There is also a need for greater emphasis on economic growth. The US plan to engage the region through the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) is a start, but it is not a Free Trade Agreement akin to the broader Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) or the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). While IPEF is yet to be fleshed out, the initial indications are not promising. The regional countries recognize that the Biden Administration will not be able to persuade Congress to accept a region-wide rules-based FTA. But it will need more than just clauses that favor the US to persuade countries to sign on. Market access and access to reliable supply chains would go a long way to bring on board the regional states.

### **ASEAN Needs to Get its House in Order**

To play a useful role over time towards achieving these outcomes require ASEAN leaders to take tough decisions. ASEAN's weakness is that it has forgotten how effective ASEAN, as a collection of ten member states with a population of 661 million, a combined GDP of US\$ three trillion and a young demographic in which 60% of its people are below the age of 35, ought to be able to continue exercising some influence over how external powers should behave in Southeast Asia and the surrounding neighborhood. Instead, ASEAN is no longer taken seriously as a strong, resilient and united organization today. Its friends abroad ask, what has ASEAN achieved recently to resolve its internal difficulties or dealt with regional problems? While the superpowers pay lip-service to ASEAN Centrality, both have taken the approach of trying to pull individual countries into their respective spheres, thereby dividing and weakening ASEAN further.

If ASEAN's leaders are serious about restoring traction to the centrality of ASEAN as a foundation for the ASEAN Community and its ability to strengthen peace and prosperity for the people of the region, there needs to be a mindset change and concerted effort to undertake meaningful reforms. Replicating a successful formula that it adopted in 2005, ASEAN has got together a group of experienced past and present persons to update the ASEAN Charter and look at reforms to strengthen ASEAN into a more resilient and untied organisation for the next decade and beyond. Meanwhile several commentators including the present contributor have written on the necessity to quickly move beyond the rhetoric of a strong, united, and successful ASEAN.

## What ASEAN Needs to Do

First, ASEAN countries need to decide what they are prepared to do together, as well as what they are not prepared to do with the big powers. Then, communicate this clearly to the 11 Dialogue Partners: **Australia, Canada, China, European Union, India, Japan, Republic of Korea, New Zealand, Russia, United Kingdom, and United States**. It need not entail forging an ASEAN consensus on all issues. But it does mean agreeing on areas where ASEAN member states must stand firmly together despite intense outside pressure to do things unilaterally.

In the past, ASEAN was able to achieve significant outcomes by taking positions based on the collective good of all its members and resisting the urge to resort always to positions based solely on their respective national interests. To be a credible and respected organisation, ASEAN must take a strong stand to uphold the principles enshrined in the UN Charter, ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, and work closely with its Dialogue Partners to affirm and abide by those principles.

Second, ASEAN must send the clear message to all big powers that ASEAN member states want them to stay engaged in the region, but in positive ways that benefit all. This means having the Dialogue Partners continue bilateral assistance to individual member states, but also contribute substantially to region-wide initiatives such as completing the proposed Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, enhanced cooperation to address problems afflicting the Mekong sub-region, combatting current and future pandemics, strengthening sustainable development and environmental protection, and increasing physical and digital connectivity among ASEAN member states and their respective neighbours.

Third, as stated earlier, ASEAN has the relevant regional security mechanisms and platforms to enable their leaders and senior officials to meet collectively with their counterparts from and beyond the region to engage in substantial and robust discussion rather than reading from scripted speeches per se. More importantly, if they so desire, leaders can meet bilaterally in private to share candid views on regional developments and critical challenges.

Finally, ASEAN must show it has the collective will to deal decisively with difficult, thorny intra-ASEAN issues, chief of which is Myanmar. There needs to be political reconciliation and negotiations between all parties in good faith. Sadly, that trust – like the absence of trust between the two superpowers – is lacking in Myanmar. As Singapore FM Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan has said, “...this is an internal Myanmar matter and ASEAN was never set out to interfere in internal matters...What we can do is to encourage, to cajole, to facilitate and our (ASEAN) Special Envoy will do his best to try to bring the parties to at least talk to each other across the table in good faith”.

ASEAN member states, as custodians of the regional processes and to lend substance to ASEAN Centrality, have the collective responsibility to persuade all parties to look seriously at what continues to be relevant and what needs to change, whether in terms of structures, practices, or mindsets. This will take time and considerable effort on the part of all parties concerned. Given the current regional tensions, neither the two superpowers nor their respective allies are in any mood to make substantive concessions or compromises. But this does not mean that ASEAN should give up all hope of persuading China, the US and other big powers to behave sensibly and settle their differences peacefully.

History has shown that when big powers reach the extent of deterioration shown at present between China and the US, it is likely to lead to conflict between the protagonists and/or their allies or proxies. The only question is how bad the clash(es) will be before both sides arrive at the same conclusion that with the high-tech weapons systems at their disposal and the way the global economy works, there will be no winners only pyrrhic victories with almost everyone a casualty in some form or another. When this stark realisation sets in eventually, both sides will recognise that it is better to reach a mutual understanding to manage their core differences rather than inflict crippling damage on each other. When that day arrives, will ASEAN be ready to step up and be in a good position to credibly offer its services and institutional platforms to rebuild trust between the superpowers to co-exist and work together to address the challenges and threats that affect us all?

Therefore, even though the time at present might not be ripe, ASEAN must make use of this interim period to strengthen its resilience, work out what it needs to do within the organisation and with like-minded countries and the big powers to embrace the ASEAN way of resolving differences through active support of the inclusive, rule-based multilateral system and proper use of ASEAN's institutional platforms. A strong, united and resilient ASEAN will be in the best position to minimise the fallout of superpower quarrels and, at the appropriate time, to play a substantive role in bringing peace and stability back to the region.

### **Relevant Practices, New Ideas**

For all the goodwill and effort on ASEAN's part, will it be sufficient to deter countries from forging alliances? Probably not, but ASEAN's regional security platforms could serve as part of an overlapping network of security mechanisms between diplomacy and war. The challenge is to make sure they are effective and not serve as mere talk-shops or unhelpful occasions for each side to hurl accusations and insults at one another. What is needed is a sort of 'bridge' over the region's troubled waters to span the widening chasm between the warring parties.

From the perspective of Cold War realists, Asia today is divided into two rival spheres of influence under two dominant hegemonies, namely China/Russia and the US, each with their friends and allies. Unlike the Cold War era, however, the countries in both camps strive to maintain a semblance of good relations with the hegemonies. As both sides jockey to win more friends and allies, it increases the risk of clashes taking place, whether by accident or design. What is sorely needed is recognition by both hegemonies that conflict between them is costly, self-defeating, and that it would be sensible to have some distance between their respective spheres. As we live in an inter-dependent, connected world, it is evident that peaceful relations and competition between them will be of paramount importance. This could be facilitated by ASEAN and its related fora in the form of a 'bridge.'

ASEAN leaders and senior officials have the challenging task to persuade the major powers to accept ASEAN's regional security platforms as a neutral, safe and relevant 'political and security' space to seriously engage one another. ASEAN also offers 'economic space' as a testbed for the major powers to build stronger economic linkages with individual ASEAN countries, short of being forced to choose between the two spheres.

ASEAN's value then is to be a neutral, reliable 'bridge' for the hegemonies to co-exist at the very least, and to build towards cooperation, instead of focusing on strategic competition. We want all major powers to work towards strengthening the bridge rather than competing to pull the bridge into their respective orbits, thereby threatening the collapse of the structure itself.

The ASEAN Chair will have a key role to play in not only marshalling member states to stay focused on the collective interests of ASEAN, and to present a strong, united and neutral grouping in persuading the major powers to abide by ASEAN's rules that will benefit all parties. This will take time, beyond the scope of a single Chairmanship. Cambodia can make a decisive start to lay the foundation for having the major powers recognise and accept ASEAN as a trusted neutral bridge to re-connect the two hegemonies, and to offer the relevant platforms for all parties to work together to address regional security and transboundary challenges. If first Cambodia, Indonesia as the next Chairman and subsequent ASEAN Chairs and member states succeed in doing this purposefully, it will reinvigorate the ARF, ADMM-Plus and EAS significantly, and thereby inject a meaningful relevance to the concept of ASEAN centrality.

## **Conclusion**

The countries of the Indo-Pacific stand at a crossroads. It will take a concerted and sustained effort by all parties if the region is to stay on a trajectory to peace, progress, and prosperity. ASEAN and its like-minded partners should work closely to persuade

all parties to focus on strengthening and using ASEAN for an enduring peace and security for all.

The US and China will not quickly or easily reach a new understanding to manage their core differences; neither are they likely to get everything they want by competing more aggressively against each other. The result is that ASEAN will have to steer through a prolonged period of more tensions and uncertainties. Still, the prospect of war between the US and China or between their respective allies and proxies is for the moment remote. China must fight only if the US supports Taiwan independence. This is unlikely. If an accident should occur in the South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula or elsewhere, both superpowers will probably try to contain it. Hence, short of a major US-China war, ASEAN ought to be able to cope with most situations. It will be in a stronger position to deal with such eventualities if member states use the time wisely to build resilience and unity, agree to work together for the greater good of ASEAN and not have each country push only for its national interests. ASEAN has dealt with more dangerous circumstances in the past. But managing current regional problems will require greater agility, unity and resolve than ASEAN has demonstrated in recent years.





# REGIONAL ECONOMIC RULEMAKING IN A DISORDERED WORLD

*Simon Tay, Jessica Wau, and Janessa Kong*

## **Navigating a Divided World**

Even as Sino-American competition and contention has grown, most Asians have hewn to a policy not to choose between one or the other major power, but to engage both. This policy, in place for more than a decade since the global financial crisis, is not merely pragmatic. It has reinforced the role of ASEAN as being “central” in providing an open and inclusive multilateral platform for dialogue and cooperation. It has also minimized the danger of cleavage within ASEAN given that member states have differing interests and relationships with the great powers. The two great powers in response have acknowledged ASEAN centrality (as have other partner countries). Each also says that it does not press ASEAN to make an “either/or” choice. Nevertheless, the present “no choice” stance faces increasing pressures.

The main pressure arises from the amplification of Sino-American differences across many areas of international policy such as trade, technology, and the digital economy, as well as infrastructure, security and questions of governance. Many of these differences play out not only bilaterally between the two great powers but also as they make initiatives geared toward ASEAN and other Asians. Secondary pressure arises from the ambition of ASEAN centrality – to be relevant and engaged on key questions. In comparison, a growing number of initiatives by the USA like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) excludes ASEAN and instead turns to other friends and allies. A third pressure stems from the need for an international rules-based order (IRBO). There is a crucial need for rules to shape international cooperation in new areas such as the digital economy and in response to the climate crisis. Yet, with the Sino-American contention, rulemaking is part of the contestation and is often stymied or at cross-purposes. Moreover, while both great powers say they uphold the IRBO, there are instances where they may bend and even break the rules in their favor and in relation to ASEAN. Against this background, this chapter will consider rulemaking in the region and more particularly, economic rule making by ASEAN. We begin with a consideration of China’s actions and policy preferences and suggest what other Asians would like to see China do differently. Next, we survey Asian reactions to the USA and the Biden administration’s initiative for the Indo Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). In the third part of this chapter, ASEAN itself is our focus as we consider the on-going and potential strategies by which ASEAN as a group and ASEAN member states independently might respond to the needs and opportunities in rule making.

## China's Growing Influence

China's increased and sustained commitment to the Asia Pacific has been growing over the years and is evident in its extensive involvement in the region. The Lowly Institute's Asia Power Index, which tracks economic data to assess regional power dynamics, has found that U.S. leverage has declined from 2018-2020, while China has propelled forward, particularly in economic influence (Lemahieu and Leng 2021). This is no surprise, given that in 2019 China overtook the EU to become ASEAN's largest trading partner, and the degree of trade linkage has only been growing since 2010 (Fung 2022). It has also surpassed the U.S. in what it once dominated in terms of investment flows to countries in the region (Patton 2022). Investments from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) alone have grown from US\$16.8 billion in 2014 to US\$29.3 billion in 2019, accounting for 27.6 per cent of all BRI investments worldwide (Yu 2021). Economic involvement is further complemented with persistent diplomacy efforts as well. Foreign Minister Wang Yi's trips across Southeast Asia (SEA) and the Pacific this year alone have outpaced the U.S. and these trips feature sustained engagement with countries on areas of mutual interest (Peng 2021).

While it seems that ties between China and ASEAN are solidified, ASEAN countries are by no means "China-naïve". There still remains challenges that need to be addressed, one of which pertains to China's "coercive and aggressive" behavior as U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin mentioned during the Shangri-La Dialogue (CAN 2022). China's strategy of resorting to economic coercion to penalize a country's foreign policy decisions is not unfamiliar to many ASEAN countries. Australia's ongoing trade war with China is evidence of this. After Prime Minister Scott Morrison publicly called for an investigation into the origins of COVID-19 in 2020, China responded by imposing trade restrictions across multiple industries like barley, beef, and ore (Hurst 2020). While Australia managed to mitigate most of the impact through diversification and finding new markets, the total cost of exports impacted is estimated to be approximately A\$20 billion, a bill which many ASEAN countries would not be able to foot (Wilson and King 2022). Moreover, given that trade and manufacturing lines run thick and deep in Asia, such wolfish behavior will disrupt trade in many ASEAN economies and is a source of concern.

Ongoing territorial disputes involving multiple ASEAN countries have also continued to be a barrier in trying to facilitate better relations, the most prevalent one being the South China Sea dispute. The most recent Hague Tribunal's ruling in favor of the Philippines in 2016 found that China's claims of historic rights within the nine-dash line were without legal foundation and that Beijing's activities infringed on Manila's sovereign rights (Hunt 2016). Since then, however, there has been little impact on China's behavior, as it has continued land reclamation and militarization of the surrounding islands, with its vessels regularly intruding into Filipino waters (CNBC 2021). With the newly elected Marcos government's declaration to be stricter in upholding this ruling

(Flores 2022), China's response will have implications as to how this relationship will proceed moving forward.

However, this also does not mean that ASEAN countries lack agency altogether. While member nations understand that they are economically reliant on China, they have also been successful in engaging strategically and exerting agency to set the terms of engagement. The BRI, for example, has long been accused of being a form of 'debt trap diplomacy' which takes advantage of less developed nations in need of infrastructure funding. However, there have been more than one instance of ASEAN countries negotiating with China to skew the contract in their favor. For example, Jokowi has successfully leveraged the BRI as a tool for productive investment and politically strategic projects. The Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Rail link was negotiated not to include government guarantees, and has been designed in a manner to make Indonesian and Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) work together through joint venture, enabling technology, skills, and know-how to be transferred (Tritto and Camba 2019). Other examples in the Philippines (Camba 2021), Malaysia (Lim and Ng 2022), and Myanmar (Gong 2022) have shown that local politics and community advocacy efforts are more influential factors in determining the terms of engagement with China along with the success of the project. However, that does not mean that the BRI does not need to be refreshed. A relook is timely, especially considering the failure of Rajapaksa government in Sri Lanka to repay its debts from the Hambantota port since it decided to lease out the port. Loans often come at a hefty price should governments be unable to fulfil the terms of the contract, and weak governance along with minimal consideration for the resultant environmental impact often disproportionately affects vulnerable communities in the country.

### **Cooperation with Limits**

Subsequent engagement with China then necessitates caution but it is not without hope. In spite President Xi reiterating that "time and momentum is on China's side" (Lo and Huang 2021), China still needs support. Domestic challenges exacerbated by the pandemic and climate change, its reliance on Western economies for essential goods and services, and its ongoing rivalry with the U.S. has undoubtedly derailed its growth trajectory. Beijing's Dual Circulation Strategy (DCS) for example, seeks to pivot the Chinese economy towards greater self-reliance through increasing domestic demand while engaging strategically with foreign partners (The Economist 2020). However, due to the pandemic and its zero-COVID policy, exports have continued to surge to other countries as economies are starting to recover, while domestic consumption has stagnated as households cut back on spending. In 2020, net exports accounted for 25.3 percent of the growth in Chinese GDP - the highest level since 1997. This trend continued into 2021, with net exports driving 20.9 percent of China's GDP growth that year -the second highest level since 1997. During the same period however, household consumption fell from 39.1 per cent of GDP in 2019, the highest level since 2005, to 37.7

per cent of GDP in 2020 (The Economist 2022). In the short-term, China still remains reliant on Western economics for high-tech goods, particularly for semiconductor manufacturing, as well as food security and foreign expertise.

Moreover, its intensifying rivalry with the U.S. will continue to impact trade and economic growth. The Trump administration's imposition of tariffs on US\$350 billion worth of Chinese goods remain in effect even today (Lobosco 2022), and current U.S.-led initiatives are exclusive and strategically founded to curb its growth. Consider the Quad with Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S., or AUKUS, the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the U.S. These groupings are not only exclusionary, but focused on containing China's increased maritime dominance in the Indo-Pacific (Merlow 2021). The Quad grouping has further reasserted its commitment to the region through pivoting to softer security issues as well, such as health security and climate change during the pandemic (Australia DFAT 2022). The financing of agreements to support the ramping up of COVID-19 vaccine production in India to be distributed to SEA countries was well-received and offered an alternative to China's vaccine diplomacy efforts (Ganapathy 2021). During the SLD, Prime Minister Kishida announced that the Quad will be more active in helping the region, and will extend more than US\$50 billion of further infrastructure assistance and investment in the Indo-Pacific over the next five years, with specific commitments to maritime security (Nikkei Asia 2022). The recent launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) by the U.S. is the latest in a slew of multilateral partnerships which serve to limit China's growing influence, now focused in the growing digital economy. U.S. Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo has explicitly stated that the IPEF seeks to restore U.S. economic leadership in the region and to "present Indo-Pacific countries an alternative to China's approach" (Tan 2022).

In light of these recent events, ASEAN emerges as prospective partner for China. It presents a viable alternative to the exclusionary practices of the U.S. and its like-minded partners as it continues to operate along the lines of a rational, rules-based sensibility when engaging with its partners. As both General Prabowo and Dato Tun Hussein summarized during the SLD, ASEAN respects the great powers, but upholding a rules-based order remains most important in order to maintain its centrality in the region. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) envisions APAC not as contiguous territorial spaces but rather as a closely integrated and inter-connected region with ASEAN centrality as the underlying principle. It has since served as a guide for subsequent regional economic rulemaking, and ASEAN's approach to other multilateral partnerships in the region. Consider initiatives that can influence China's engagement such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). China is the largest economy in RCEP and reaps the greatest benefits. Started as an agreement that sought to harmonize various ASEAN +1 agreements, the emphasis on inclusion entails that the depth and quality of the precepts will be modest. Realistic common targets have been set considering the diversity of economies present and similarly frames the largest and most dynamic market in the world. The risk of China's dominance in RCEP have also been

managed and balanced by two factors: the participation of India and ASEAN's chairmanship. This is in the hope that ASEAN centrality can continue to underpin these regional economic agreements, and that the AOIP can influence economic rulemaking in the region. Moving forward, member countries in RCEP should continue the ratification process, as Indonesia has most recently done in Q1 of 2022 (CNA 2021), especially for ASEAN countries which need sufficient influence to balance against China.

It is important to note that public perceptions will influence subsequent engagement with China. If history is any indication, deteriorating perceptions of China will impact trade decisions and close partnerships. China was once South Korea's top trade partner, but following economic restrictions, the elite and public opinion have become negative, and attempts are being made to shift South Korean manufacturing and supply chains towards the U.S., especially for high-tech chips (Chan and Choi 2021). China's behavior has led to deteriorating public perceptions in many ASEAN countries according to an annual survey conducted by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Seah 2021). According to the 2022 survey, while China is perceived as the most influential economic power in SEA at 76.7 per cent, it is also the least trusted – 58.1 per cent of respondents have either little or no confidence that China will 'do the right thing' to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, or governance. This figure contrasts with that of the other major powers – U.S., EU, and Japan, where 52.8 per cent, 48.5 per cent and 54.2 per cent of respondents respectively have confidence that these countries "would do the right thing".

### **U.S. Renewed Commitment to the Indo-Pacific**

The Biden administration is showing greater commitment the region and stepping up its engagement on multiple fronts. The resumption of the U.S.-ASEAN summit after a hiatus during the Trump presidency, Biden's visit to Asia and the launch of the IPEF holds promise that the U.S. is finally starting to reassert its commitment to the region. However, it remains to be seen just how reliable these new initiatives might prove. There are concerns surrounding the lack of details which need to be negotiated, and more fundamentally, how the U.S. views its partners, and domestic challenges. ASEAN countries will need to make their own calculations and consider how best to take their relationship moving forward.

The launch of the IPEF by the Biden administration sets out to write "new rules for the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy" (White House 2022), particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. Indeed, at first glance, the framework holds a lot of promise: it is a sign that the administration understands that a long-term economic strategy is needed in the Indo-Pacific, and is simultaneously a timely response to signals from the region for greater U.S. economic engagement. Areas of mutual interest are right at the heart of the IPEF agenda as well – the four pillars of IPEF focus on a connected, resilient, clean, and fair economy (Tan 2021), and are in alignment with ASEAN's growth areas in the next

decade. The IPEF is also consistent in its approach of rulemaking and norm setting that considers the diverse economics in the region and models other forms of partnership that have been more successful. Like ASEAN itself, a broad group of stakeholders are engaged to discuss shared objectives, soft rulemaking in hopes of influencing common standards and norms in the long term. As compared to other larger security-centric initiatives in the region, like the QUAD and AUKUS, this will be a fresh and more inviting change for many ASEAN countries.

However, questions remain as to whether this initiative will be successful. For one, specific terms and details surrounding IPEF, along with its main offering are still unclear. The main gripe for many countries is that the IPEF is more symbolic than useful. Unlike Free Trade Agreements (FTA), the IPEF will not discuss tariff reductions or offer increased U.S. market access (Arasasingham and Benson 2022), concerns which are more relevant and tangible to ASEAN countries. The next question lies as to whether the U.S. can incentivize its partners to uphold its high standards on climate and labor, especially without conceding on market access. This may also prove to be a stumbling block for other countries interested in the proposition, but unable to commit substantively to the framework. These concerns are neither new nor revolutionary – they have previously been raised when China first announced the launch of its BRI, and more recently in its Global Development Initiative (GDI). China’s established presence in the region and its willingness to concede to local requirements is a big draw for many ASEAN countries.

The Chinese won the contract for the Kaliwa Dam project and the Chico River pump in the Philippines because they were willing to expedite the process despite the social cost incurred (Camba 2021). It was also distinctive from the Japanese offer because it upheld the principle of non-interference, which the Americans and Japanese were unlikely to abide by, and were more flexible in implementing the project quickly – which was important due to local politics between the Duterte government and key local players like the military and exporters at the time. China’s launch of its Global Development Initiative (GDI) late last year has also arguably made greater strides in progress in comparison to IPEF, both in terms of support as well as tangible commitments. Seen as a complement to the BRI’s focus on infrastructure development, the GDI hopes to help countries work towards inclusive growth aligned with the United Nation’s (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A group of “Friends of the GDI” was launched by the UN in January 2022, and more than fifty-five countries have joined it to date (Commissioner’s Office of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Hong Kong SAR 2022). China has since made further commitments to the initiative, first at the BRICS summit with the release of a Global Development Report that contributed a Chinese perspective on the SDGs and trends in global development, and more recently at the High-Level Dialogue amongst the “Friends of the GDI” initiated by the UN, where new financial commitments were made; President Xi pledged an additional \$42 billion to the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund, and increasing its contributions to the United National Peace and Development Trust Fund as part of the GDI (Akeredolu 2022). Thus,

in order for IPEF reach its full potential, the Biden administration will need to determine how to convince countries to harmonize standards and encourage interoperability while offering participating countries concrete benefits.

### **Is the U.S. Dependable?**

It is a given that ASEAN countries will show up when the U.S. calls and hear them out, but whether they decide to participate will ultimately depend on their individual interests. Given its dwindling presence after the Trump administration pulled out of the TPP, ASEAN countries need to ask the question of whether the U.S. is dependable and if its engagement in the IPAC will be sustained. On that note, the following section elaborates on three main challenges that ASEAN nations should bear in mind.

First, other U.S. development initiatives that previously held great promise have since stalled – consider the Build Back Better World (B3W) and Global Gateway, two G7 initiatives launched in 2020 and 2021. While large sums of money were promised, recipient countries are still waiting on these initiatives to mobilize financing and deliver on these commitments. Such concerns also surround the launch of the Partnership of Global Infrastructure and Investment during the 2022 G7 summit. Seen to largely a revival of the B3W launched last year, it promises a US\$600 billion financial package for less developed countries (White House 2022). Biden has set an ambitious target of US\$200 billion for U.S. investments, but it remains to be seen if this sum will pass Congress (Nyabiage 2022). Considering the massive economic impact of the pandemic and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, strong political resolve will be necessary in order to priorities and finance such initiatives amid domestic challenges.

Next, the U.S. is culpable of increasingly viewing events through a China prism – and a function of Sino-American competition for influence. Beijing has openly opposed Biden’s initiatives, suggesting that their intention is to create a NATO-type alliance to contain China’s growth in the region (Cheong 2022). This is not entirely without basis – while Russia’s invasion of Ukraine sparked international outrage due to a flagrant violation of the rules-based order, the U.S. interpretation of the conflict places overt emphasis on China’s response. Beijing’s statement of having a relationship categorized as “friends without limits” with Russia (Wei 2022) has been used to substantiate its point. Consider the intervention of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the U.S. (CFIUS) in Broadcom’s attempts to takeover Qualcomm. A presidential order was issued to block the transaction, even though Broadcom is not a Chinese entity, and its presumed ties to China are similar to that of Qualcomm and many other non-Chinese global technology companies (Vieira et al 2021). Thus, CFIUS actions highlight how concerns regarding China are expanding and how calculations are made based on the potential national security risks due to exposure to Chinese influence. In this case, national security concerns are increasingly linked to trade policy, emphasizing how economic security is

a key component of national security and the regulation of international trade and foreign investment is a means to secure U.S. interests.

Third, overlaying all of this is Biden's narrative framing the conflict as a war of values between democracy and autocracy. This is not surprising, given how strategic partnerships exclusively involve "like-minded" democracies like Japan, Australia, and India, as evidenced in the Quad and AUKUS, but this is fundamentally detrimental to its long-term strategy of engagement in the Indo-Pacific. This argument neither resonates with ASEAN governments nor is aligned with how ASEAN views economic rulemaking in the AOIP. This may in fact have a countereffect and deter further participation as ASEAN countries do not want to get caught in between. Prevailing public opinion reiterates this stance – when asked what the best strategy for ASEAN amidst U.S.-China tensions is, 46.1 per cent of respondents stated that ASEAN should enhance its resilience and unity to fend off pressure from the two major powers, while 40.2 per cent and 29.2 per cent of respondents said that ASEAN should broaden its strategic options to include the EU and Japan respectively (Seah et al 2022). Moreover, these democratic values are under stress within the U.S. itself. Mounting domestic political challenges may result in a lack of continuity of U.S.' reinvigorated approach to the region. Biden's approval ratings are appallingly low, the most recent poll by Gallup revealing that only 44% of Americans approve of Biden's presidency in August 2022 (Gallup 2022), a figure comparable to Trump's overall approval ratings (41%) during his term (Gallup 2022). Dissatisfaction with how Biden is managing the economy amid rising costs of living and spiking inflation, fractures within the Democratic Party, as well as cleavages within American society itself will determine if the Biden administration wins the upcoming mid-term elections and the presidential elections cum 2024. It is also important to note that Americans want Biden to be hard on China (Power 2021), and it is likely that future trade policy will reflect public sentiment as the administration struggles to shore up support from its citizenry. While the Quad and AUKUS are likely here to stay, more recent initiatives like IPEF and PGII may be tabled or overturned altogether.

Finally, recent actions might perhaps be more indicative of how the U.S. views its partners. The Indo-Pacific region is increasingly becoming a Cold War of sorts, with countries being pressured to pick a side or be left out of the global order altogether. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi's cautioning of smaller nations being mere pawns or "chess pieces" in a great-power game (CNA 2022) is not completely unfounded. Besides ASEAN, this competition has permeated the Pacific Islands as well. Both superpowers have been actively trying to engage the islands through offering incentives such as loans, security aid and developmental assistance. While the islands have traditionally maintained closer ties with U.S. allies Australia and New Zealand, the Solomon Islands signing of a security agreement with China in April 2022 signaled that China's engagement in the region was starting to pay off. In response, the U.S. warned the nation that it will take unspecified action against them should the accord with China pose a threat to U.S. or allied interests. The U.S. has also tried to increase diplomacy efforts in



the region to avoid more of such accords being struck, most recently committing an additional US\$60 million worth of funding every year at the annual Pacific Islands Forum in July 2022 (White House 2022). These actions undermine a country's sovereignty, and as the Solomon Island's Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavore expressed, is likened to being treated like "children with guns" (CNA 2022). Australia's repeated reference to the Pacific as its backyard also shows how smaller countries are increasingly being perceived as pawns amid Sino-American competition, and the recent contract securing a US\$66 million loan from China to fund the building of 161 telecommunications towers by Huawei in August 2022 (Kakea 2022) show how U.S. attempts to engage in this manner will ultimately backfire.

### **ASEAN Centrality**

The AOIP was adopted as ASEAN's central strategy in approaching the Indo-Pacific at the 2019 ASEAN Summit. Its principles include that of ASEAN centrality, openness, inclusivity, and abiding by the international rules-based order (Hussain 2019). Great powers have continued to offer polite recognition to the AOIP, as reaffirmed in the Joint Statements released during the ASEAN-China Special Summit 2021, the ASEAN-U.S. Special Summit 2022 and most recently in Prime Minister Kishida's keynote address during the SLD. However, there is no impetus to uphold it, and recent events suggest that great powers will ultimately make decisions in the interest of their national priorities. The reference to a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) used by the U.S. and its allies claims to share fundamental values with AOIP (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022). Yet, while inclusivity is claimed to be a hallmark of both visions, recent multilateral partnerships which seek to contain China beg to differ. The further emphasis on maritime security and increasing Japan's defense arrangements with like-minded countries during PM Kishida's speech during the SLD 2022 signals a shift in priorities in deciding on partners. Coupled with the increasingly turbulent environment where current affairs are viewed from a Sino-American lens and strategic forces threatening to pull member states in different directions, these principles are in reality difficult to uphold. The decision to stall China's application to the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) since 2021 elucidates some of the considerations involved. While the main concern surrounds China's ability to comply to the rules of the agreement (Shelton 2021), some continue to hold on to the hope that the U.S. might return following the Trump administration. The calculation for them then is that if China joins, there is zero prospect that the U.S. would return. This strategic reaction is understandable but undercuts the CPTPP's explicit undertaking that accession would be open to any economy able to meet the terms of engagement, subject to agreement by its current members. Taiwan's application to join has also thrown another spanner in the works, as rising cross-strait tensions and external backing from the U.S. and Japan may be misconstrued as an attack on Beijing.

## Reimagining/ Neo Non-Alignment

For some time, Asians have been counselled not to choose sides. In his book *Asia Alone*, Professor Simon Tay warned about a possible divide between the region and the USA after the global financial crisis. The advice was against the binary choice of either the U.S. or China but to embrace the idea of “and”. To be relevant to both major powers, and to other partners was recommended in order to forge a space in-between. However, factors have since shifted. The U.S. pivot under the Obama administration had elements of both cooperation and contention with China. But in the last decade, contention became the trope, whereas cooperative efforts now seem naïve. The China referred to then was still partly following to Deng’s dictum to “hide their strength and bide their time” (Heydarian 2014). Xi was only vice-president, whereas now he is on track to clinch an exceptional third term, with exceptional confidence in the economic system, governance model and foreign policy strategy that he has created (Haenle and Bresnick 2021). The question of choosing sides is raised again, and more strongly, and ASEAN’s existing strategy of “non-choice” may no longer suffice. Yet there are many countries which still wish to shift in the space in-between, rather than irrevocably joining one side or the other. While difficult, there are ways that can and should be tried to navigate a divided world, and examples to be considered.

## Tools for Navigation

The general rule of thumb is adhering to an order that is fundamentally rules-based. This can be done through economic rationality and by partnering either side when it suits the bloc’s economic interests. U.S. presence in the region is deemed necessary to curb Chinese dominance, especially its expansionist tendencies, while China’s investment through the BRI and other vehicles is integral for economic growth for many member states. Engaging both powers through mutually beneficial partnerships balances their involvement in the region and provides member states the space to maneuver along rational, economic rule making lines.

ASEAN also needs to make clear the basis and limits for agreement. For this, adopting a ‘friends with limits’ mentality is wise and can help clearly delineate the terms of agreement and streamline focus on strategic areas of engagement. Initial negotiations over the ASEAN-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) fell through over disagreements on human rights issues and while discussions have since resumed in 2017, full adoption of this agreement seems unlikely. However, both blocs recognize the strategic importance and opportunity in establishing a mutually beneficial partnership, and have since elevated relations to comprise a ‘Strategic Partnership’ in 2020 (EEAS 2020). The EU is already ASEAN’s third largest trading partner, contributing to 10.6 percent of its overall trade (European Commission 2022), and deteriorating relations with China over concerns on human rights, trade sanctions and mostly recently Beijing’s support of Russia (Wong and Wang 2022) shows the need for other strategic partners. This

commitment is thus a good first step, but can be extended even further. Alignment in areas of mutual interest like maritime security, digitalization and sustainability goals present a renewed opportunity for both blocs to advance broader interests in green growth. Individual EU member states are already making headway in these areas, like the Italy-ASEAN partnership for sustainable development (ASEAN 2021) and the ASEAN-German project *Reduce, Reuse, Recycle* to Protect the Marine Environment and Coral Reefs (ASEAN 2022).

Ultimately, ASEAN should cultivate a model of collective leadership where interdependence is prioritized and where no one country dominates the partnership. The checks and balances, as previously mentioned in RCEP, serve as a good framework which can be adopted in other agreements. This can be done by strengthening third-party multilateral ties with other powers it is already engaged with, like Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and India, or via bilateral and minilateral agreements in areas of emerging mutual interest like the digital economy or sustainable growth. The ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 has charted the roadmap for the digital economy and has set tangible goals for its members to cooperate on, and individual member countries are already embarking on Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) as well as forming Digital Economy Agreements (DEAs), a more comprehensive and enforceable set of rules governing digital trade. Singapore has established DEAs with Australia (DFAT Australia 2022) and separately with Chile and New Zealand in 2020 (Ministry of Trade and Industry Singapore 2022), and most recently with the United Kingdom in 2022 (UK Government 2022), with the intention of shaping rulemaking and norms in this area. On sustainability, the launch of the State of Climate Change Report in 2021 and the ASEAN Taxonomy for Sustainable Finance in 2022 represents the commitment of the bloc to work towards meeting climate ambitions and its focus on sustainable development moving forward. The 2021 Smart Green ASEAN Cities initiative is an example of initiatives that can be adopted among partners with shared interests. A collaboration between the EU, ASEAN and the UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), it aims to develop green and smart solutions to relieve the pressure from high urbanization rates in the near future.

### **Whose Vision will Prevail?**

There is a need for clear rules and standards to govern new aspects of the economy and serve as a guide to influence and guide global trade norms. The U.S. has traditionally played that role after World War II and the Cold War and these rules were generally accepted as it was beneficial to all. However, the anchor of American influence is shifting. Its commitment to the open and inclusive order it once advocated for seems to be faltering. Trump's 'America First' policy, its withdrawal from the CPTPP and making political and security exceptions in the name of national security all point towards a new form of economic rulemaking, one that prioritizes 'friend-shoring' instead of rational, economic-driven rationality. China admittedly is not the ideal hegemon either - accusations of rule-breaking abound, and its history of resorting to economic coercion

and threat of military force make it even more unsuitable to champion an economic order with Beijing at its center. With the threat of bifurcation and two starkly different visions of hegemonic control looming in the background, ASEAN is unwillingly caught between Scylla and Cysadis, a rock and a hard place. It must be prepared for rough seas ahead and hard knocks that will threaten its centrality and political resolve. While difficult, it is not impossible and will serve as preparation for what is likely to be an increasingly demanding and tumultuous decade.

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# BUILDING CROSSING BOUNDARIES AND PEACE IN ASEAN: A SOCIAL SCIENCE MECHANISM TO GENERATE SINCERITY AND SHARED EXPERIENCE

*Nguyen Ngoc Tho and Huynh Hoang Ba*

## **Introduction**

Regional cooperation and international relations are always complex and volatile and stakeholders are often most concerned with their own interests (the category of purpose). Meanwhile, the need to expand international contacts and exchanges is less variable (means). Can the diversity of international cooperation goals and the similarity of means and methods create and maintain a cultural dialogue mechanism, where all parties can gain mutual sincerity and move towards understanding and sharing? Handling culture and propriety in international relations, especially as ASEAN deals with two major powers, the United States and China, is critical to maintaining and strengthening ASEAN's position in the region. Confucius once said, "Do not do to the others what you don't like [己所不欲勿施於人]" (The Analects); China is the hometown of Confucius. Of course, Chinese people know better than anyone what they should not do toward ASEAN. The US claims to be a global power; this does not allow the US to transcend the boundaries of international relations. These are non-verbal compromises. The ethics of great powers and the will of small partners will be the decisive factors for the ritual/propriety model to maintain these compromises.

Research in this area is very active. In multiple books and articles, authors discuss the role of ASEAN, the rapid-growing presence of the U.S. and China in Southeast Asia - including many scholars from the institutes for international relations, peace, and development in the US, Singapore, China, India, etc. However, the vast majority of research is conducted from the perspectives of political diplomacy, economics, and military alliances; while cultural, especially moral, perspectives are invisible. Baviera (2007), Tran Xuan Hiep et al (2014), Chiang, Min-Hua (2019), etc. discussed the potential prospects of China-ASEAN economic and trade cooperation while Oliver Turner, Inderjeet Parmar, and et al (2020) analyze the role and influence of the US in the Southeast Asian region. David Shambaugh (2021) described how and why the US and China, two great powers, get involved in ASEAN's regional security and economic strategies in *Where Great Powers Meet: America & China in Southeast Asia* (2021). Various authors discussed the current situation and possible solutions for the South China Sea disputes in *The South China Sea: From a Regional Maritime Dispute to Geo-Strategic Competition* (Leszek Buszynski and Do Thanh Hai, 2020), etc. From the other perspective, Cooper (2020) studied the case of Singapore to show regional responses to U.S.-China competition in region (2020). The above studies either discuss the current state of ASEAN's political-diplomatic-economic cooperation and its opportunities and threats or

ASEAN's current state and future in response to the US and Chinese presence in the region. In this diverse landscape, it is necessary to examine the prospect of mutual understanding and the establishment of cooperation (rather than conflict) from the perspective of cultural and ritual studies.

This research, primarily using a method of synthesizing the written literature, draws on Seligman and Weller (2012) on the role of ritual (and more broadly, propriety) as a means of creating shared feelings, empathy, mutual understanding, and crossing boundaries between ASEAN, the US, and China. This study aims to answer whether, outside of political, diplomatic, economic, and military relations, culture and ritual can be viewed as channels for creating and maintaining dialogue, peace, and development under ASEAN's diplomatic relations with the two great powers. Preliminary research suggests that there is always an opportunity to create and maintain a ritual/propriety compromise in which people of different backgrounds, based on the sincerity of their hearts, are willing to empathize and share with each other through a shared experience of literary ethics and morality.

### **The Current Status of ASEAN, U.S. and China Relations: The Role of ASEAN**

With a total GDP of US\$3.2 trillion in 2019, ASEAN has achieved impressive economic success over the past five years. ASEAN replaces a war mindset with a development and economic growth mindset. ASEAN is now the fifth largest economy in the world and is expected to be the fourth largest by 2030. Over the past 50 years, ASEAN has made remarkable progress in terms of people and sustainable development, lifting millions out of poverty and increasing access to education and healthcare. Over the years, ASEAN has become a space for economic competition between China and the United States, and China has gradually emerged as the clear winner. So far, the United States has not come up with a coherent economic vision for the region. In 2020, the trade volume of goods and services between ASEAN and the United States is about \$362 billion \$329 billion US dollars, an increase of 3.2% over 2019. The scale of ASEAN-China trade has grown unprecedentedly, from \$9 billion in 1991 to \$685 billion in 2020. Also in 2020, ASEAN surpassed the EU to become China's largest trading partner. The United States is working to counter China's economic power in the region by strengthening defense and security ties with like-minded partners.

With the tension between China and the United States, the world situation has once again fallen into a state of power confrontation, and many countries have been involved in this process. How to avoid falling into the "dilemma" of having to choose sides is indeed a test of the rationality of political leaders of various countries, including ASEAN member states.

Southeast Asian countries are located in an important geo-strategic position connecting the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, and are obviously the object of competition and

manipulation by all parties. Through high-level visits to ASEAN in 2021, the United States and China have launched a number of important diplomatic initiatives, hoping to strengthen interaction and firmly grasp the advantages of manipulating or dividing international politics.

### **The US Influence in ASEAN**

Against the backdrop of China's significant expansion of influence in Southeast Asia, the United States sought to reaffirm its achievements in the region through the special ASEAN-US Summit in early May 2022.<sup>1</sup> On this occasion of the 45th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, US-ASEAN relation was re-energized. Under former President Donald Trump, the United States had neglected its ties with ASEAN. While U.S. President Joe Biden's administration remains preoccupied with Russia's military operations in Ukraine, it does not divert attention from China and the geopolitical importance of the Indo-Pacific region as the most important determinant of current global politics and economy.

On May 12-13, 2022, the United States convened the leaders of the ten ASEAN countries to hold a special US-ASEAN summit in Washington. Before the summit, White House spokesman Jen Psaki had called it an "historic summit". U.S. President Biden's presence showed that the U.S. government attached great importance to this summit. In addition to the president of the Philippines and the leader of Myanmar, eight other ASEAN leaders were present. At the end of the meeting, the two sides issued a "Common Vision Statement" for 2022, pledging to elevate the relationship between the two partners to a comprehensive strategic partnership by November 2022.

China has always had the greatest economic impact on ASEAN, and the United States has the greatest security impact on this alliance now and in the future. ASEAN's choice not to participate in the U.S.-China competition means the association is seeking a balance between economics and security. The Russian-Ukrainian war has made ASEAN pay more attention to security issues, and the United States is particularly important in maintaining the balance between economy and security. The negative impact of economic globalization has plunged many ASEAN countries into economic coercion and the only way out of the predicament is diversification. This was the backdrop for the May 12-13 U.S.-ASEAN Summit, which would result not in ASEAN choosing between the U.S. and China, but in allowing the U.S. to develop and play a role in balancing security.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/04/16/statement-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-on-u-s-asean-special-summit-2/>.

## **PRC Influence in ASEAN**

The world recognizes that China has the greatest economic impact on ASEAN. Murray Hieber, a scholar at the Center for Strategic Studies (CSIS), pointed out that Southeast Asian countries have two attitudes toward China. On the one hand, the economic growth of these countries is highly dependent on the rise of China; at the same time, they want to continue to trade with China. On the other hand, these countries are increasingly concerned about China's growing economic, diplomatic, and military power, and their foreign policies have become tougher and are ready to show off their power in the South China Sea.

In addition, China has built several hydropower dams in the upper reaches of the Mekong river, exposing important water resources in downstream countries to the risk of drought brought about by climate change. In addition, Chinese companies have also invested and built a number of large-scale hydropower projects downstream with Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and other companies, affecting the ecological environment and agricultural production. China's move has aroused dissatisfaction among the people of Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and other lower Mekong countries. These countries have different relations with China; therefore, it is impossible to form a common voice. In 2020, the United States announced the launch of the Mekong-U.S. Partnership, demonstrating that the United States is playing a balancing role and increasing its influence in the Mekong Subregion.

Another scholar specializing in Southeast Asia, Sebastian Strangio, believes that Southeast Asia has become an important economic partner of China, and China's political influence in Southeast Asia is very important. Because of its proximity, nowhere in the world has China's rise been seen more clearly than in Southeast Asia. Many ASEAN countries directly benefit from Chinese economic contracts and direct investment. However, the common message from China to the region is that countries within China's orbit will prosper and those outside China's orbit will weaken. In short, China appears in Southeast Asia as a great power with a carrot and stick.

## **The Response of ASEAN to the Great Powers**

There is a famous saying in Southeast Asia: "one must make friends and bind with neighbors even when they are not of your interest". China is always present in the region as both an economic and political power. A survey report released by the Singapore-based Southeast Asia Institute in January 2020 shows that many see China as the most influential economic and strategic political force, but most are concerned about China's growing influence in ASEAN (see Hiebert 2020). As such, ASEAN is looking for an acceptable model to balance foreign influence in the region.

Regarding the United States, the founding father of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, in his book *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World* (2013), stressed that the United States has excellent institutions and strong economic competitiveness. America always has the upper hand because its society is a whole society. The important reason why the United States has become the only superpower is because of the continuous advancement of science and technology in the United States, which has made great contributions to the enhancement of economic and military strength. He also asserted that among the great powers, the United States is arguably the friendliest.

Lee Kuan Yew warned that the United States could lose its global leadership if it does not continue to intervene in Asia to contain China's military and economic power. Of course, this does not please China, but it shows the common will of ASEAN countries. The current Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, has inherited Lee Kuan Yew's strategic consciousness. In 2020, Lee Hsien Loong stated in an article published in the July/August issue of *Foreign Affairs* that the US presence is very important to Southeast Asia and China cannot replace this position. In August 2021, at the Aspen Security Forum, Lee Hsien Loong also warned that the view of "East rises and West weakens" is wrong. Many other countries in the Asia-Pacific region and around the world are reassured that the United States has returned to its status as the "stabilizing anchor" of the international order in the regions.

The Russian-Ukrainian war not only proved the strategic judgment of the two prime ministers of Singapore concerning the international situation, but also once again warned small countries not to rely too much on big countries. In contrast, when great powers compete in Southeast Asia, small countries benefit the most. The Russian-Ukrainian war brings opportunities to the United States. President Putin's frequent use of nuclear weapons to threaten the United States and Europe will only lead to many small countries seeking American protection.

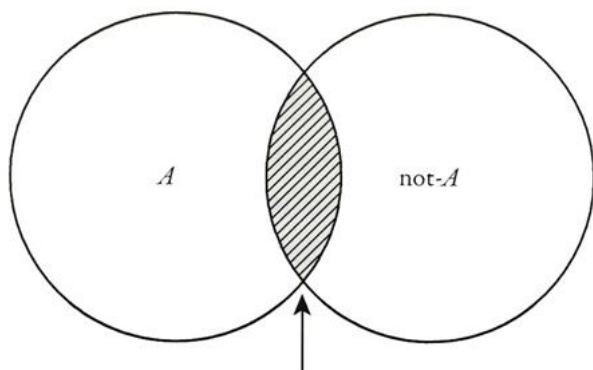
At a special summit with ASEAN leaders on May 12, U.S. President Joe Biden pledged \$150 million to support projects including ASEAN infrastructure. This is far behind the scale of Chinese investment in ASEAN through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, diversifying investment sources is the best option for ASEAN. The United States has included ASEAN in the framework of the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" and "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework", which is also another option for the alliance. For ASEAN, America's long-term security commitments are more important than economic issues, because a country's economic development requires a secure environment. On May 13, at the special US-ASEAN summit, Lee Hsien Loong said: "Ensuring that everyone enjoys absolute freedom of navigation in the South China Sea is the key to protecting global

international waters.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, China must make security commitments to ASEAN, otherwise it will only make ASEAN more and more dependent on the security of the United States.

Given that China has become an influential economic partner and the United States has become ASEAN's security partner, both sides must seek compromises with ASEAN and each other by finding and matching common interests and values. This is indeed a matter of articulation (interconnectivity, see Jennifer Daryl Slack) and all parties must be motivated to develop systematic and coherent mechanisms to facilitate all international and local communications and linkages of interests. What can social science contribute to this process?

### **Propriety, Mutual Understanding, and Boundary-Crossing**

Obviously, ASEAN's will and the interests of China and the United States in Southeast Asia are different, but together they constitute an overlap in the interests of the partners. Adam Seligman and Robert Weller (2012) called it *the ambiguous boundary zone*:



*Ambiguous boundary zone (Seligman & Weller 2012, p. 15)*

In international relations, when the interests of all parties are entangled, ambiguity is inevitable. Seligman and Weller concluded the same idea when analyzing various social expectations of various communities. They said: “denying it was impossible” (Seligman and Weller 2012, p. 19). Ambiguity disappears only if the interests of the relevant partners are not different.

When ambiguous boundary zone is too large, how can all parties compromise? According to Seligman and Weller (2012), all partners must join together to create regularity of communication which is built on “repetition”. They said, “regularity is

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-to-visit-the-United-States-of-America-for-the-ASEAN-US-Special-Summit-May-2022>.



central to our imposition of order and cohesion on world of human interaction that is, in principle, open to infinite permutations” (Seligman and Weller 2012, p. 25).

How is regularity created? We must create a common platform or "space" for all parties to share will and interests. Such a platform and "space" must be formed by indigenous communities, in this case, ASEAN, not China or the United States. Platforms/"spaces" cannot be built from scratch, but must be based on a combination of wills, interests, and international law. Emile Durkheim called this the space to “share the potential space of culture created through ritual” [propriety 禮] (Durkheim [1912] 1995). It can be dialogue forums (both official and non-official forums), academic seminar and conferences, cultural exchange forums, educational exchange camps, regional and cross-regional sports events, etc. Participants should fully express their willingness to get together, that is, to express their *sincerity* (誠心). Only sincerity can build lasting *trust* (信心). According to two American anthropologists, when all parties work together to create and worship the system of shared symbolic rituals/propriety and values (Seligman and Weller (2012) called this the “notation”), these activities hope to achieve regularity and effectiveness.

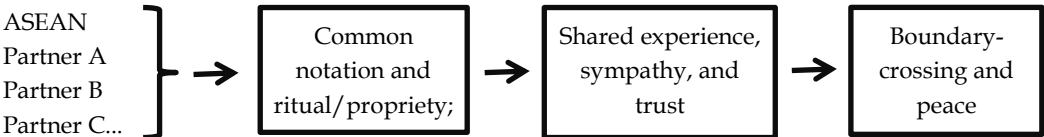
Confucius once stated that “he offered sacrifice to his ancestors he felt as if his ancestral spirits were actually present. When he offered sacrifice to other spiritual beings, he felt as if they were actually present” (Wing-Tsit Chan 1963, also cited in Seligman and Weller 2012). Once all partners share *sincerity*, multi-party and bilateral collaborative activities will achieve the goal of crucial boundary crossing. Shared sincerity brings shared *experience* (經歷) even experience still carries with its own ambiguities (Seligman and Weller 2012, p. 149). Sincerity, notation, and shared experience are key factors that help people deal with the ambiguities of the modern world. “Notation, in its most abstract form, attempts to impose a preconceived grid on experience – an interpretive template drawn from some ideal set of all previously similar experiences that will provide an ideal context and interpretive vision for it” (Seligman and Weller 2012, p. 150). Creating and maintaining sincerity, notation, and shared experiences through ritualized processes can provide tools for human dialogue and empathy, leading to peace and cooperation. Confucius once said “Human morals would not be well performed if there is no ritual/propriety (道德仁義, 非禮不成), and now another version can be developed: “international cooperation and development: no propriety no success”.

China is the birthplace of Confucius, and it is also a leading country for the dissemination of Confucian values such as propriety and sincerity (see Elman et al. 2002). Historically, pre-modern China also treated its neighbors with Confucian moral principles (see Baldanza 2016). China has been building/promoting Confucian studies so far, opening various dialogic forums based on Confucian values at the international levels, such as the International Confucian Association (ICA), the foreign-based Confucius Institutes, the Qufu-based World Conference on Confucianism, etc. This shows that the Chinese commit to apply Confucian ethics and values in dealing with the world. As a matter of

fact, China has long been seen by its Southeast Asian neighbors as the creator and protector of Confucianism. Therefore, in today's world, there is no reason for China to abandon the values that give it prestige and status. Based on the principle values of propriety, good symbols can help create shared sincerity and shared experience through active and positive communication.

The US, the global power, has been building an image of a global leader based on common principles acceptable to all nations (according to Lee Kuan Yew's statement quoted above). If the platform/"space" is built on the will of ASEAN countries and international law, then surely the US and emerging global powers (Japan, India, etc.) will also share and accept it. On the one hand, there is China and its long-standing propriety concepts, and on the other hand, there is the United States and international conventions; ASEAN's active design and operation of a complete system of notation and rituals/propriety in international exchanges can certainly achieve its common goals.

In summary, the boundary-crossing and peace can be created and/or promoted through the following mechanism:



**Conclusion**

The world is an ever-expanding society in which connections involving various interests and aspects of life have been identified and need to be controlled. The principle of articulation requires that all stakeholders must demonstrate enthusiasm and willingness to engage in compromise. While complying with international law, more organic mechanisms can be used to create shared experience, empathy, and trust, creating an important platform for dialogue based on ethics and law to ensure that all partners have matching commitments in various areas of international relations.

In Southeast Asia, China is emerging to be an influential economic partner, while the US is the security partner; ASEAN members states must build an agenda to create and nurture a healthy notation that brings all partners together in a shared "space" and use propriety and other forms of social rituals to create "communitas" (Victor Turner's concept) where participants naturally demonstrate their sincerity and share experiences. Sincerity and sharing of experiences are key factors in promoting empathy, compassion, and peace in the region.

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# AOIP AND ASEAN'S FUTURE OUTLOOK ON THE INDO-PACIFIC: THE THAI PERSPECTIVE

*Kasira Cheeppensook*

## **Introduction**

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific became a cornerstone of ASEAN external relations when it was adopted during the 34<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in 2019 after the SOM, when Thailand assumed the position of ASEAN chair. It reiterated ASEAN's position of promoting a balanced, inclusive, and open approach to partners beyond the region under 3Ms principle: Mutual respect, Mutual benefit, and Mutual trust (Department of ASEAN Affairs, MoFA of Thailand). Although it was achieved during the Thai ASEAN Chairmanship, the AOIP was in incubation for more than a year, not least due to growing uneasiness revolving around the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy by the Trump administration. With an ASEAN-centered vision, this regional institution could be seen as standing on its own feet without siding with the US FOIP or China's Grand Strategy in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Indonesia was also a main driver behind the concept that ASEAN needed its own version of Indo-Pacific vision. Thailand as ASEAN Chair worked closely with Indonesia "in putting up a first draft of ASEAN's position" and "exerted its bridge-building role" to build a consensus among ASEAN Member States (Phuangketkeow & Ganjanakhundee, 2020).

It seems that a number of corollaries from the ASEAN Way could be gleaned from the text. The AOIP was quick to remind partners that ASEAN did not intend to create any new formal mechanism. Rather, it tried to build upon pre-existing forums and tools, a reassurance to intra-regional relations among members who preferred the status-quo. At the beginning, it was viewed as a common stance that ASEAN members all agreed upon that could also serve as a basis for their common vision and strategy regarding international affairs. This could also contribute to 'ASEAN centrality' which ASEAN deemed at the heart of its external relations. In the light of regional and international crisis, it proved to be difficult for ASEAN member countries to come up with unified and united standpoint. This chapter aims to look at the AOIP in relations to the Thai foreign policy, and the challenges and opportunities in this context.

## **Various Versions and the Potential of Norm Sharing: The Cases of Japan and the EU**

As a matter of fact, countries like Germany, France, India and Japan had also come up with their own visions and strategies for the Indo-Pacific. It is also quite interesting to see the dynamic of various versions of Indo-Pacific strategies, how they complemented

and differed a little in focus from one another. A number of countries have made an effort to link their foreign policy to the AOIP, such as Japan.

Japan was the main driver of security norms circulating in ASEAN member countries, namely comprehensive security, (and to a much lesser extent, human security). It has long promoted adherence to principles of international law and rules-based governance, which ASEAN readily deemed significant. Moreover, the late Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo also emphasized a non-confrontational stance, connectivity, and a rules-based society. Free and Open Indo-Pacific is of common benefit, coupling with the fact that ASEAN is an effective nuclear weapon free zone due to the Treaty of Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ Treaty) as well as the long-standing Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). In this light, ASEAN vision worked well together with the Japanese, and in 2020 ASEAN and Japan issued the “Joint Statement of the 23rd ASEAN-Japan Summit on Cooperation on ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan). Both countries have planned, collaborative work on cooperation projects aiming to complement the AOIP.

One of the notable areas is maritime cooperation. In maritime safety, Japan highlighted technical cooperation on Countermeasures for IUU Fishing to help mitigate the impact of IUU fishing on the fish ecosystem and reinforce the sustainability of fishery (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan). This was in line with ASEAN’s Network for Combating IUU Fishing, the ASEAN Guidelines for Preventing the Entry of Fish and Fishery Products from IUU Fishing Activities into the Supply Chain which has been around since 2015, and the 2016 Joint ASEAN-Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDEC) Declaration on Regional Cooperation for Combating Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing and Enhancing the Competitiveness of ASEAN Fish and Fishery Products.

Thailand as a member state that was given a yellow warning by the EU was active in adjusting its domestic laws along with promoting IUU Guidelines at the ASEAN level. During 2019 Thai ASEAN Chairmanship, it worked for an ASEAN IUU taskforce to be set up as well as hosted The ASEAN Meeting on Combating IUU Fishing in Partnership with the EU (Royal Thai Embassy in Washington D.C., 2019). Based on the meeting, the ASEAN IUU Task Force will be “ASEAN’s core cooperative mechanism in combating IUU.” (Royal Thai Embassy in Washington D.C., 2019). At the same time that ASEAN adopted the AOIP, Thailand made combating IUU its priority as chair (Wiphatayotin, 2019).

Although ASEAN activities on combating the IUU began before the AOIP adoption, the AOIP certainly could provide opportunities and ground to build more cooperation in key areas laid out in the AOIP. Additional examples can be seen from the effort to respond to the key area of UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (SDGs), there was significant cooperation to mitigate Covid-19 such as “Support for the Establishment of

the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases” through the creation of “the Center to contribute to capacity building on response to public health emergencies as well as preventing future pandemic of emerging diseases in ASEAN.” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan)

This also applies when we look at the policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific issued by Germany, titled “Germany-EU-Asia: Shaping the 21st Century Together”, albeit it can argue that the German version was also directed towards domestic audience. As with the Trump initiation of FOIP, we cannot ignore a number of issues that have complicated China-EU relations at that time; for instance, the South China Sea (SCS) conflict.

In August 2019, Germany, France and the UK issued joint statement on the situation in the South China Sea: “As state parties of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), France, Germany, and the United Kingdom underline their interest in the universal application of the Convention which sets out the comprehensive legal framework within which all activities in the oceans and seas including in the South China Sea must be carried out and which provides the basis for national, regional and global co-operation in the maritime domain. They recall in this regard the Arbitration Award rendered under UNCLOS on 12 July 2016. Furthermore, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom welcome the on-going negotiations between the ASEAN member States and China in view of achieving a rules-based, co-operative and effective Code of Conduct consistent with UNCLOS in the South China Sea and encourage progress towards its early conclusion (UK Government).”

A month later, Germany together with France and the UK published the joint “Note Verbale” showing their concerns regarding China’s positions and referred to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 2020:

“France, Germany and the United Kingdom underline the importance of unhampered exercise of the freedom of the high seas, in particular the freedom of navigation and overflight, and of the right of innocent passage enshrined in UNCLOS, including in the South China Sea.

“France, Germany and the United Kingdom also highlight that claims with regard to the exercise of “historic rights” over the South China Sea waters do not comply with international law and UNCLOS provisions and recall that the arbitral award in the Philippines v. China case dating to 12 July 2016 clearly confirms this point.

“France, Germany and the United Kingdom hold that all maritime claims in the South China Sea should be made and peacefully resolved in accordance with the principles and rules of UNCLOS and the means and

procedures for the settlement of disputes provided for in the Convention” (The United Nations).

The South China Sea continues to be a challenging issue in ASEAN under the framework of the AOIP; this will be explored in the following section with Thailand’ role. Suffice it to say that although adhering to the rule of law has been what ASEAN emphasized, the result was different and far from a united and strong response. The EU in this regard strived to work with China in environment including maritime conservation based on their ocean partnership in 2018 (European Commission). This was the strategy also favored by ASEAN.

To be precise, the German-EU-Asia policy guidelines already identified ASEAN as key partner. The policy guideline shares common viewpoint with the AOIP in three notable areas:

First, the emphasis on rules-based order also enshrined in the ASEAN Charter as well as international cooperation. Both the EU and ASEAN shared common interest in promoting multilateralism over unilateralism, the rule of the negotiated rather the law of the strong. The strategy of diversifying partnerships in an open and free environment is the way to go. The shared vision in Indo-Pacific had potential to tap into the existing regional architecture and strengthen regional cooperation, complementing the global regime on specific issues especially on connectivity, sustainability, and environment.

In effect, it could strengthen ASEAN in some of its main multilateral venues such as:

1. ASEAN-centric security architecture, i.e. the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The EU already maintained a presence herein since it is ASEAN dialogue partner, and the Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-EU Strategic Partnership (2023-2027) pledged to “Explore potential collaboration in the four priority areas of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)” (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations).
2. Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS): The EU as member of Friends of Mekong (FOM) could also build even closer partnership regarding better donor coordination.
3. A number of EU member countries including Germany signaled more engagement through observer status seeking at the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+).

The interest and intensified engagement by the EU, particularly the emphasis on the rules-based order, could have significant implications on peaceful conflict transformation such as their stance on the SCS conflict. Similar to Japan, Germany and the EU have stakes in open and free routes. It intended to support a substantive and



legally binding Code of Conduct (COC) between China and the ASEAN Member States for the SCS through tangible projects on international maritime law as well as greater resources for stabilization and mediation in the Indo-Pacific region.

As mentioned above, both the joint statement and the Note Verbale cited the arbitration award. The Note Verbale was submitted around three weeks after the policy guidelines were issued. The EU stance echoed these major member countries when its spokesperson stated that:

“The EU is committed to secure, free and open maritime supply routes in the Indo-Pacific, in full compliance with international law, in particular the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), in the interest of all. The EU reiterates its strong opposition to any unilateral actions that could undermine regional stability and the international rules-based order. We urge all parties to resolve disputes through peaceful means in accordance with international law, in particular UNCLOS, including its dispute settlement mechanisms. The EU recalls in this regard the Arbitration Award rendered under UNCLOS on 12 July 2016. The EU supports the ASEAN-led process towards an effective, substantive and legally binding Code of Conduct, which should not prejudice the interests of third parties. The EU urges all parties to pursue sincere efforts towards its finalization” (European Union External Action Service).

In expressing these concerns, norm-conforming behavior has been consistent and it might be expected from ASEAN counterparts that the shared vision on the Indo-Pacific called for reinforced efforts to stabilize the region and maintain regional peace and security whereby the policy guidelines as well as the AOIP could serve as normative resource for further peaceful resolution.

Second, there exist common concerns on environmental issues. ASEAN has intensified its environmental cooperation in recent years as well as embraced green growth, promoting Climate-Resilient Economies. Renewable technology and the concept of a circular economy was embraced. The EU was also in the process of transitioning towards a low carbon economy, and through the shared vision on sustainable prosperity, ASEAN could benefit from knowledge transfer and people-to-people exchange.

Despite tensions regarding the SCS previously, China was a willing partner in this area of cooperation, and the EU responded positively. President Xi Jinping pledged that China would become carbon neutral by 2060 (The New York Times, 2020). Despite skeptics around the rhetoric, it was undeniable that China seeks to be seen as cooperative after the backlash stemming from its actions in the SCS. Needless to say, the AOIP was perceived as better accommodating to China’s plan when compared to the FOIP.

The European Green Deal in which the EU has strived “to be the first climate-neutral continent” (European Union, A European Green Deal) has been a central focus of the EU Commission Mandate, in which the region aimed for climate neutrality in 2050. It intended to respond to climate change in a multilateral framework, and China stepped up when the US distanced itself from its prior global commitments in this area.

Third, there is the question of connectivity in general and digital connectivity in particular. Both regions agreed to accelerate the implementation of the EU-Asia connectivity strategy presented by the European External Action Service and the European Commission in 2018 (Federal Ministry for Digital and Transport). The aims of “is to enhance connectivity in a rules-based and sustainable manner (smart, green and sustainable)” (Federal Ministry for Digital and Transport). were echoed in the AOIP. The EU-ASEAN comprehensive air transport agreement (CATA) was the first bloc-to-bloc air transport agreement, which aimed to boost more connectivity, and complemented well with the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 (MPAC-2025).

Apart from the green transformation, digital transformation was also on the agenda. This requires an appropriate infrastructure in the areas of transport, energy and digital technology. Certainly, digital sovereignty remained a challenging issue together with cybersecurity, control over personal data, and effectiveness in law enforcement.

### **Thai Foreign Policy in the Context of the AOIP**

A number of ASEAN member countries were accused of conducting “value-free” foreign policy, meaning that the policy was not normatively based. Rather, the source of foreign policy was derived from material, expedient design such as narrowly defined tangible national interest. For Thailand, it struggled to maintain a “balanced” and inclusive approach, and tried to avoid being coerced into siding with any of the major powers overtly. This could be seen as an attempt to prevent selective multilateralism by the great powers and promote generalized reciprocity.

Since the AOIP was adopted during Thailand’s ASEAN Chairmanship, Thailand has often referred to the document in the conduct of its foreign affairs, especially within the context of ASEAN. A notable example being the Thai Prime Minister and Defense Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha encouraged ASEAN-Russia cooperation based on the four areas identified in the AOIP (Royal Thai Government). This happened shortly before Russia’s military operation in Ukraine in early 2022. Thailand “welcomes Russia’s proposal to designate the year 2022 as the ASEAN-Russia Year of Science and Technology Cooperation to build upon cooperation in the field of science, technology and innovation, in which Russia has expertise...” (Royal Thai Government). Connectivity was another potential area for ASEAN-Russia cooperation.

Another area often emphasized in Thai foreign policy is sustainability. Thailand highlighted Sustainable Economy Philosophy (SEP) for SDGs as an important element in its foreign policy. In September 2022, Don Pramudwinai, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand hosted “Regional Pathways to the Global Goals: ASEAN’s Approach towards SDGs Implementation and Sustainable Post-COVID-19 Recovery” event in the margins of the 77th Session of the UNGA High-level Week (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand). Thailand as ASEAN Coordinator on Sustainable Development Cooperation, and the ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue (one of the deliverables of the Thai 2019 ASEAN Chair) co-hosted the event.

Don referred to the AOIP among other frameworks and initiatives as vehicles to promote “peace and partnerships for sustainable development” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand). According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Don “suggested two key elements that are preconditions for taking forward SDGs implementation: (i) ensuring a peaceful environment conducive to sustainable development and reinforcing constructive cooperation to build strategic trust and create mutual benefits; and (ii) enhancing partnerships through synergies, the whole of society approach, and multi-stakeholder engagement for the UN 2030 Agenda” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand).

From the cases illustrated above, the AOIP complemented Thai foreign policy well in the “lower level politics” aspect. The AOIP also complemented the global regime along the same lines. The area that proved to be difficult was complementarity in the peaceful settlement of disputes and the maintenance of peace and security. The AOIP for all its reiterated principles of “renunciation of the threat or use of force and promotion of rule of law” also enshrined in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) played very little role in impacting the stance of ASEAN on armed conflict, as in the case of Russia-Ukraine. ASEAN issued weaker statements comparing to the UNGA’s and in the end, Thailand along with two other ASEAN member countries abstained from condemning Russia’s “referendum” and the demands from the UNGA that Russia cancel the annexation.

According to a statement from Suriya Chindawongse, Thailand’s permanent representative affirmed that Thailand respected the UN Charter and was against forced territorial acquisition; nonetheless, it worried that “the emotionally charged atmosphere” by which the voting took place might minimize the chance for peaceful conflict resolution (Thai PBS World, 2022).

Formally, the AOIP was still employed as a point of reference also by external powers. Thailand and the US issued the Communiqué on Strategic Alliance and Partnership in 2022, where both sides reaffirmed commitments towards the main areas of the AOIP, and event went beyond that with added element of democratic emphasis:

“Promoting democratic development in an open and transparent way is essential to implementing our shared vision of an Indo-Pacific that is free, open, inclusive and sustainable. Strong democratic institutions, independent civil society, and free and fair elections are central to this vision, allowing our respective societies to reach their full potential. We intend to strengthen our shared values and ideals, including the rule of law; protecting human rights and human security; adhering to humanitarian principles, including non-refoulement; promoting sustainable development; and upholding resilient democracies (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, Thailand-United States” Communiqué on Strategic Alliance and Partnership).

The Communiqué further stated that:

“We reaffirm our support for Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) centrality and the vital role that ASEAN plays in addressing traditional and non-traditional security challenges through ASEAN-led mechanisms, including the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), guided by the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, Thailand-United States Communiqué on Strategic Alliance and Partnership).”

It is quite interesting to note that human-centric norms including challenging issues for Thailand such as non-refoulement is integrated into the shared vision of free and open Indo-Pacific. The AOIP originally was not as specific in this regard. Since the AOIP was adopted formally during Thailand’s ASEAN Chairmanship, we can see strong correlations among the main priority deliverables Thailand highlighted. Thailand has also integrated its national interests into the deliverables, enhanced in the ASEAN context. These include the area of marine cooperation resulting in the Summit’s adoption of the Bangkok Declaration on Combating Marine Debris in the ASEAN region, the ASEAN Maritime Forum with a focus on maritime safety and connectivity, ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue, ASEAN Digital Integration Framework Action plan, and the ASEAN Innovation Roadmap.

As mentioned above, core ideas laid out in the AOIP correlated well with Thailand’s priorities such as avoidance of behavior based on a zero-sum game, *inter alia*. In one of the rationales at the beginning of the document, the AOIP states that:

“ASEAN, which for decades has been engaging in the development of an inclusive regional architecture, needs to consistently come up with its collective leadership in forging and shaping the vision for closer

cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and to continue to maintain its central role in the evolving regional architecture in Southeast Asia and its surrounding regions. ASEAN also needs to continue being an *honest broker*<sup>1</sup> within the strategic environment of competing interests” (ASEAN, ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific).

It is the role of an honest broker to which this chapter now turns, especially Thailand’s past roles as ASEAN country coordinator for ASEAN-China relations during the South China Sea conflict in 2012-2015. Building on this past success, it is interesting to consider how Thailand could utilize the basis of the AOIP and how ASEAN positioned itself as honest broker. Thailand remains the driver of the development of the Code of Conduct (COC), which stalled due to Covid-19.

Pitakdumrongkit saw that Thailand’s role as the country coordinator for ASEAN-China relations were necessary towards the first official consultation on a Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea in 2013 (Kaekamol, 2015 & Kaewkamol, 2016). This was no small feat given that there have been some tensions in the area in the year before Thailand assumed the task. Thailand was careful to adhere to what China already agreed upon in principle such as the DOC, and worked upon that basis. It was successful in keeping the channel of communication open through the three Cs strategy: Community-building, Connectivity, and Code of Conduct (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand, 2015).

In effect, Thailand reinforced the core norms recognized by ASEAN and later the AOIP, i.e., sovereign equality and rules-based governance via lower-level political engagement such as marine environmental protection and research. This was also to stabilize the atmosphere since there was a rift at the 45<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Ministerial Meeting. When China was against the Philippines’ Triple Action Plan (TAP), Thailand as country coordinator had to reassure China when it hosted the 8th ASEAN-China Senior Officials’ Meeting on the Implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (SOM on DOC) and the 12th ASEAN-China Joint Working Group on the Implementation of the DOC (JWG on DOC) in October 2014 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand, 2022).

Also, Prime Minister Prayuth reaffirmed Thailand’s commitment as country coordinator for ASEAN-China relations and listed three proposals:

1. Promoting sustainable economic development through trade liberalization, with emphasis on agricultural sector and products.
2. Enhancing regional connectivity in all dimensions by developing connectivity network and increase economic capabilities.

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1 Italics by author

3. Strengthening ASEAN - China relations and resolving pending issues in order to realise the strength of the strategic partnership. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand, The 17<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-China Summit).

It can be seen that Thai approach towards conflict transformation was similar to the principles in the AOIP. One of the reasons that Thailand had space to act stemmed from the fact that it was a non-claimant, meaning that it had no claims on the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. China also sent positive signals regarding Thailand as driver for the actual COC in the context of the AOIP, especially when the US Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report 2019 could be read as targeting China: "... geopolitical rivalry between free and repressive world order visions... China seeks to reorder the region to its advantage by leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce other nations" (US Department of Defense, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

Looking toward the future, the AOIP might work best as incremental, preventive diplomatic tool. There are three factors that Thailand might wish to consider if it would like to utilize AOIP to support and enrich its foreign policy:

1. Within the regional dynamics that new strategic groupings such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and AUKUS have facilitated, how can Thai foreign policy remain relevant in changing strategic environment? It is in the interest of Thailand that the regional security agenda not be dominated by external powers. The AOIP reflected Thailand's wish to remain balanced, where the lessons when it acted as country coordinator for ASEAN-China relations were valuable.
2. How could Thailand exercise value commitments that it has proclaimed to subscribed to? These values such as "openness, transparency, inclusivity, a rules-based framework, good governance, respect for sovereignty, non-intervention, complementarity with existing cooperation frameworks, equality, mutual respect, mutual trust, mutual benefit and respect for international law, such as the UN Charter, the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea..." (ASEAN) are already recognized by the international community. It is crucial that the values are also reflected in Thai foreign policy in a consistent manner.
3. How can Thailand encourage partners in the region to step up in areas that Thailand has already highlighted as crucial in its foreign policy such as a bio-circular-green economy, sustainability, and food security? It is interesting to note that in stepping up its strategic engagement with the Indo-Pacific region, the EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific integrated human security as a

priority area (European Union External Action, 2022)<sup>2</sup> along with other areas that would not be misplaced in the AOIP such as digital connectivity and sustainable and inclusive prosperity. As one among the very few countries in the region that adopted the term officially - and even reformed a Ministry to deal precisely with the issue - Thailand is in a good position to drive the agenda further, bearing in mind that its international agenda should correspond with its domestic record.

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# ASEAN, MALAYSIA, AND THE US-CHINA RIVALRY: AVOIDING CONFRONTATION AND UPHOLDING ENGAGEMENT

*Geetha Govindasamy*

## **Introduction**

The Indo-Pacific strategy is in vogue now. Though there are multiple versions of the Indo-Pacific construct, Malaysia has yet to internalize a coherent view of the strategy. Instead, Malaysia has acquiesced to the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) which promotes a more non-aligned stance. The phenomenon of neutrality stands at the core of ASEAN as well as Malaysian foreign policy discourses when dealing with external powers. Therefore, the chapter begins with ASEAN's basic norms and principles as the foundation for Malaysia's own response to the Indo-Pacific strategy that is a result of United States-China confrontation. This is followed by Malaysia's own foreign policy considerations in terms of its relations with China and the US.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is no stranger to major power rivalries. ASEAN was established during the Cold War era when there was great power competition between the United States, Soviet Union and China. With the exception of Thailand, all other member states have experienced foreign domination. Therefore, in the early years, navigating major power competition became a norm for the Association. In addition, the five founding members of ASEAN (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) fought to contain the spread of communism in their respective states. To cope with the changing geopolitical landscape after the withdrawal of the US from the region in the 1970s and later a rising China, strengthening internal cohesion through a collective voice became the main goal of the Association. In particular, the Association followed a two-pronged strategy which was to strengthen national and regional building while managing the influence of external powers by welcoming them into ASEAN led mechanisms.

From the outset, ASEAN embarked on promoting a neutral Southeast Asia in the face of continued great power politics. The creation of the 1971 declaration of a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), a Malaysian initiative, signaled the neutralization of Southeast Asia. Among others, ASEAN sought recognition for ZOPFAN's principles of free from outside interferences in domestic affairs, respect for the territorial integrity of all states, and abstention from threat or use of force and peaceful settlement of international disputes (ZOPFAN 1971). These principles were later incorporated into the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. When the communist threat abated in 1989, it can

be reasonably argued that ASEAN and its member states became free from external political interference and began concentrating on cooperation with multiple actors.

Malaysia and the rest of the ASEAN member states endorsed the concept of ASEAN centrality that refers to the Association as the main driver of regional cooperation with external partners. External powers understood that they had to accept ASEAN centrality if they desired to participate in ASEAN led mechanisms such as: the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). Unfortunately, ASEAN centrality is under threat as the Southeast Asian region has once again become a theater for the competing agendas of the US and China. With the passage of time, most ASEAN states, like Malaysia, have come to accept the presence of the US and China - especially in terms of economic and security influences in varying degrees. Moreover, ASEAN member states are aware that external involvement is crucial in promoting regional peace and development. However, US-China rivalry is a cause of concern for ASEAN and its member states like Malaysia.

In 2017, the Trump administration came up with the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), supported by regional allies to promote economic and communal principles in governing the Pacific as well as the Indian oceans. Following in Trump's footsteps, the Biden administration unveiled its own version of the Indo-Pacific strategy in February 2022. Basically, the US seeks to promote rule of law, freedom of trade and navigation as well as develop mutual economic prosperity. The US clearly opposes the rising influence of China as well as certain aggressive Chinese activities in the South China Sea. The articulation of this strategy is designed to limit Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific region where Southeast Asian is a key constituent.

The Indo-Pacific strategy espoused by the US threatens to derail ASEAN unity and centrality. The promotion of ASEAN centrality meant that external powers had to acknowledge that the Association was the voice of Southeast Asia. However, ASEAN's traditional agenda setting authority is being diluted with the emergence of the Indo-Pacific strategy and its related alliances like that of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS). Even though the US claims that ASEAN is the main drive of the Indo-Pacific strategy, the Quad and AUKUS are not anchored by ASEAN centrality. In other words, the non-participation of ASEAN in these alliances reflects ASEAN centrality is fast becoming mere rhetoric. The Association and its members are cautious in managing these new forms of mini/multilateralism. So as not to be trapped in US-China rivalry, all member states have signed on to the principles of the AOIP. Basically, the AOIP reaffirmed long-standing norms of inclusivity which includes ASEAN centrality and a rejection of great power competition that is viewed as detrimental to regional developmental goals and security.

Then there is also the issue of ASEAN and its members being pushed subtly to choose a side between Beijing and Washington.

In reality, ASEAN members realize that both Washington and Beijing are needed to navigate present regional challenges. While Beijing is a much-needed economic partner, the US plays the role of a security patron in Southeast Asia. In understanding how the ASEAN member states have reacted to the Indo-Pacific strategy, Malaysia is a great exemplar of how smaller states behave in the midst of major power competition. At the regional level, as one of the founding members of ASEAN, Malaysia's responses to great power competition are dictated by the norms and practices set by ASEAN, including supporting the AOIP as well as upholding ASEAN centrality. Concurrently, Kuala Lumpur is managing the US-China rivalry by engaging both Washington and Beijing.

### **Malaysia-China Relations**

It must be noted that both the US and China's importance in the region fluctuates according to the national interests of each ASEAN member state. For example, Malaysia is friendly to all countries. In particular, it emphasizes an equidistant, flexible, and pragmatic foreign policy towards China and the US. Among the ASEAN countries, Malaysia was the first to establish relations with Communist led-China in 1974. From the beginning, Malaysia has sought to engage China positively in all sectors. Like most relations, Kuala Lumpur-Beijing relations have seen some fluctuations but overall ties are deepening, especially where trade and investment are concerned.

Understandably, containing and competing with China does not sit well with Malaysian policymakers. Not surprisingly, the country has responded reactively rather than bandwagoning with the Indo-Pacific strategy. In line with ASEAN's inclusivity precedent, Kuala Lumpur prefers managing China and the US not only by engaging them bilaterally but also often within ASEAN-led mechanisms. This explains why Malaysia does not have its own version of Indo-Pacific strategy or why internal discourses on the Indo-Pacific strategy are so rare. In fact, in two key policy documents, neither the 2019 Malaysia's Foreign Policy Framework nor the 2020 Defense White Paper mentions the Indo-Pacific strategy even once. Given this, it can be deduced that Malaysia refuses to center its foreign policy interests within the broader Indo-Pacific region. Instead, these documents stress that the Malaysian foreign policy has long been premised on pursuing an independent outlook on security as well as economic policies. Economic development and security sustainability are two factors that mainly drive Malaysia's policy considerations. In particular, the Foreign Policy Framework is instructive on this:

“...the New Malaysia will continue to pursue a foreign policy that will aim to protect the security of the country and its people...Malaysia will continue to seek economic prosperity for

the country and its people” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia, 2019, p.15).

Further, foreign policy emphasis has always been on shared interests and mutual cooperation with external partners. Veritably, it does not want to be caught in a geopolitical clash between China and the US. In line with this, Malaysia is cautious not to exclusively align itself with one particular country. Malaysian Ambassador to China Raja Nushirwan Zainal Abidin (Xie & Bai, 2020) explains the reason for this stand: “We will not take sides... for countries like Malaysia, it's commonly said that to choose is to lose.” Malaysia’s relationships with both China and the US are distinctive, and they’re both booming. Like his predecessors, the newly minted Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has indicated that while China is a pivotal foreign policy partner, strengthening relations with the US, Europe, India and ASEAN is equally important (Shahabudin, 2022). Even so, past actions imply that at times, the country bends to whichever direction that benefits its national interests most.

In terms of China’s economic influence in the country, Malaysia is China's second-largest trading partner in ASEAN while China has been Malaysia’s largest trading partner for 13 consecutive years (China International Import Export, 2022). Given this, it is not surprising that bilateral trade volume from January to August 2022 reached US\$131.2billion and it is expected that trade could surpass US\$190 billion by December 2022 (Kaos Jr, 2022; The Star, 2022). Though China and the US are key trading partners for Malaysia, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has provided an impetus for more advanced relations with Beijing. Not surprisingly, Malaysia was one of the earliest countries to support the BRI since its conception. Launched by the Chinese government in 2013, the BRI was designed to accelerate trade and economic growth by improving global infrastructure development and connectivity. Malaysia’s leadership has shown that it is willing to collaborate with any country that can create a favorable trade and investment environment for mutual benefits. In the last few years, political elites have increasingly cooperated with China. BRI projects, mostly related to construction, transport and digital infrastructure development, has enabled the Malay-led government-linked companies (GLCs) to collaborate with Chinese entities. This in turn not only solidified the status of Malay elites, they also became the key beneficiaries of BRI projects (Shamsunahar, 2022). Moreover, the legitimacy of these political elites was further enhanced with ‘the ability to provide jobs and economic opportunities to their constituents’ (Bush, 2022).

Where BRI-related infrastructure and connectivity projects are concerned, China and Malaysia have been involved in major projects like that of the development of the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP), China Railway Rolling Stock Corp’s Rolling Stock Center (CRRC), Gemas-Johor Bahru Electrified Double-Tracking Project (G-JB), East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) and Kuantan Port Expansion Project. For Malaysia, economic connectivity is key to improving internal and external trade and commercial

activities. As economic growth is mostly focused on major cities, Malaysia needs to expand economic activities inland to provide greater employment and equity ownership opportunities to its rural population. Hence, when completed, the ECRL is expected not only to fulfil infrastructure needs but also to assist in accelerating domestic development as well as regional integration that will facilitate trade and people-to-people exchange between Malaysia and its neighbors. In the long run, the development along the larger Kunming-Singapore railway, also known as the Pan-Asian Railway Network is going to increase China's economic ties with Malaysia as the ECRL will be linked to the China-Laos Railway and the China-Thailand Railway.

As China is one of the frontrunners of the digital economy, the idea of a more competitive Malaysian foreign policy is also a response to the changing needs to accelerate the adoption of Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) technologies and foster the development of a digital economy. In line with the goals outlined in Malaysia's Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 blueprint of 2019 which partly focuses on innovation in digital economy, the BRI is expected to further contribute in areas like financial technology, e-commerce, and advancement of big data, cloud computing, smart cities and mobile payment (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Republic of China, 2022). Given the supremacy of BRI projects in Malaysia's domestic political landscape, China has indeed become a vital economic partner for Malaysian opening.

In connection with regional economic integration, Kuala Lumpur and Beijing's participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is expected to further strengthen economic and trade cooperation in a period of economic downturn and supply chain disruptions. While the RCEP came into force on January 1, 2022, Malaysia's participation come into force a few months later on March 18, 2022. The RCEP - the world's largest free trade deal is expected to employ unified trade and customs procedures - creates an intra-Asia logistics and shipping network more efficient and boosts digital trade which will cut costs of handling supply chain. Malaysia is expected to take advantage of China's huge market access with lower costs as well as benefit from a stable industrial and supply chain as a result of preferential policies of RCEP and the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (China International Import Export, 2022). If China ever succeeds in becoming a member of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) trade agreement, Kuala Lumpur and Beijing will have another opening to appear more centrally integrated into the regional economy. Given the intertwined economic relations, it is expected that Malaysia will continue to accept China's involvement while downplaying contentious issues in bilateral relations.

In recent years, Malaysia's main flashpoint with China is in the South China Sea (SCS). Beijing claims the "nine-dash line" in the SCS which overlaps with six parties of which Malaysia is one. Despite multiple changes in government since February 2020, Malaysia has opted to engage rather than confront a rising China in order to achieve a peaceful resolution. Basically, the Malaysian government sees the South China Sea as a very small

part of a much multi-faceted relationship (Xie & Bai, 2020). Kuala Lumpur has used a two-step approach, both bilateral and multilateral diplomatic channels to deal with China's SCS claims. However, this does not mean that Malaysia may not find itself drawn in a direct conflict with China. Increasingly Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) vessels have been assertive in the SCS where Malaysia continues to explore for oil. For example, the CCG spent 258 days patrolling around Luconia Shoals claimed by Malaysia in 2019 (Jennings, 2019). Further, China has been constantly harassing work done at the Kasawari gas field by Malaysia's state-owned Petronas oil. The gas field is projected to hold 3 trillion cubic feet of gas resources. Though China has demanded that Malaysia stop its oil exploration on contested continental shelves, Zachary Abuza, Professor of Southeast Asia Studies at the Washington-based National War College observed that while Malaysia does not confront China directly, it uses UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) filings to deal with Chinese intimidation (Chiew, 2021). Interestingly, rather than confronting, it has been reported that the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) responds to Chinese incursions by 'shadowing' CCG vessels. This particular action is a form of 'assertion of presence and a safety measure' when and if the CCG disrupts operations (Syailendra, 2021).

Interestingly, it seems that Malaysia is also not in favor of involving US naval ships in the SCS dispute. Undoubtedly, Malaysia does not want to appear to be aligned to the US in the conflict for fear of antagonizing China. The US dispatched navy ships when the Chinese Coast Guard was present in the West Capella standoff involving Malaysian and Vietnamese vessels. The response was telling when the then Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein remarked,

“We must avoid unintended, accidental incidents in these waters. While international law guarantees the freedom of navigation, the presence of warships and vessels in the South China Sea has the potential to increase tensions that in turn may result in miscalculations which may affect peace, security and stability in the region” (Wisma Putra, 2020).

Ultimately, since Malaysia values its economic cooperation with China and with limited deterrence capability, the SCS issue is being dealt with rather quietly by Malaysia.

Multilaterally, Malaysia uses ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN-China Dialogue to address common security concerns with China. In addition, Kuala Lumpur supports maritime cooperation in the South China Sea through the full implementation of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DoC), the conclusion of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (CoC) and the Declaration for a Decade of Coastal and Marine Environmental Protection in the South China Sea (2017–2027) in dealing with the dispute. As seen above, the manner in which Malaysia deals with China are multifaceted.



## Malaysia - United States Relations

There is an assumption that the US' presence is declining in Southeast Asia. Obama's pivot to Asia, Trump's own version of Indo-Pacific, and Biden's Asia policies have not convinced ASEAN member states that the US sees Southeast Asia as a pivotal region of importance when compared to East Asia (Huong, 2020). In contrast to the public acceptance of China, Kuala Lumpur-Washington relations have been kept low key. Intermittently, anti-American sentiments do flare up among Malaysians, especially whenever US actions in the Palestine-Israel conflict contradicts with the idea of defending and supporting the freedom and struggles of Palestinians. Moreover, Malaysia is conscious not to be seen as siding with the US in the context of the US-China rivalry. For these reasons, Kuala Lumpur has been reluctant to be profiled as too close to the US. Nonetheless, Malaysian policymakers have always taken great pride in maintaining strong continuity in maintaining positive Malaysia-US relations.

The year 2022 marks 65 years of Malaysia-US diplomatic relations. In April 2014, bilateral relations were elevated to a Comprehensive Partnership. Similar to other past visits by prominent American personalities such as Mike Pompeo, Rex Tillerson, Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Condoleezza, US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken's visit to Malaysia in December 2021 was seen as advancing US engagement with Malaysia in particular and Southeast Asia in general. Conversely, Blinken's visit was also designed to promote the efficacy of the FOIP. Though not as influential as China, the US is also Malaysia's important trading and investment partner. Malaysia-US cooperation indicates a diverse range of cooperation from trade and investment, digital and green economy, cyber-security, defense, health, tourism, education, and people-to-people ties (Wisma Putra, 2021). While Malaysia-US trade volume amounted to RM178.18 billion, the manufacturing sector saw US investment of RM3.7 billion in 2020 (Wisma Putra, 2021).

The Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), involving 13 countries provides new opportunities for Malaysia's further integration into the global economy. On top of that, it is expected that the IPEF would also allow for Malaysians to collaborate with the US in newer sectors like digital economy, technology, sustainable supply chains, decarbonization as well as clean energy and corruption. Having said that, the IPEF's main weaknesses include not allowing access to the American market, nor is there room for tariff reductions between member countries. Given this, most Southeast Asian economies like Malaysia are more likely to end up focusing on the RCEP as well as the BRI. For its part, China may embark on making RCEP a successful trade agreement in order to counter the IPEF. In essence, Malaysia may be more receptive if and when the IPEF actually provides tangible benefits, such as: increasing US investment or replicating Japan's Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, Australia's Partnership for Infrastructure (P4I) or the US-led Blue Dot Network to spur Malaysia's economic recovery and growth. Such a situation might even make the IPEF an attractive alternative to the BRI. For the time being, the Malaysian government seems to have adopted a hedging strategy in

agreeing to join the IPEF so as not to look isolated from the rest of the Indo-Pacific countries.

From the US perspective, Malaysia is an important partner in the US led Indo-Pacific strategy, especially in ensuring a free and open maritime domain. Though not highly publicized in the Malaysian media, bilateral security cooperation seems to be the cornerstone in enhancing maritime security, at least in the SCS. To this end, security cooperation in counterterrorism, combatting trafficking in persons, human rights, non-proliferation, and maritime security that involves bilateral and multilateral exercises and visits remains a staple in bilateral relations. As a littoral state that lacks adequate maritime assets and having to constantly put up with Chinese incursions in the SCS, Malaysia has openly welcomed defense assistance and training given by the US armed forces. In supporting Malaysia to improve its maritime enforcement, since 2017 the US has contributed US\$200 million (RM853 million) in grant assistance to the Malaysian Armed Forces which included ScanEagle unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), maritime surveillance upgrades, and long-range air defense radar since 2017 (Malay Mail, 2020).

Moreover, security engagements incorporate multiple, yearly joint military training and exercises like Cope Taufan, Keris Strike, Tiger Strike, and Air Warrior (Malay Mail, 2020). Recently, bilateral maritime ties were further strengthened between US Naval Forces and Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) through the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) Malaysia between November 21-29, 2000 in Kuantan, Pahang. The training, designed to demonstrate interoperability, featured anti-submarine, air and surface warfare training coupled with medical, dental and antiterrorism defensive. The US views such training as a security sharing commitment with key Southeast Asian partners as well as a preferred mode of maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific (Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, 2022). In addition, to manage non-traditional security such as environmental disasters, the US pledged to contribute a mobile intensive care unit worth USD 1.5 million to the Malaysian Armed Forces for emergency purposes (US Embassy Kuala Lumpur, 2021).

On one hand, robust security cooperation with the US has certainly strengthened bilateral relations. On the other, this does not indicate that Malaysia supports the US led Indo-Pacific strategy. Malaysia's pragmatic foreign policy approach and dependence on Chinese investments and trade certainly forces Kuala Lumpur to be cautious in its approach towards the US. In order to balance its bilateral relations with the US and China, Malaysia has chosen to engage both countries in differing degrees in distinct domains. Malaysia's preferred mode of management in overcoming the US-China rivalry is through peaceful diplomatic undertakings while maintaining strong bilateral ties and this stance will persist in the coming decade.

The Indo-Pacific strategy and its related minilateral alliances are definitely a cause of concern for Malaysian policymakers. For Malaysia, peace and stability of the Asia Pacific

is essential for its commercial activities. When Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States unveiled their Enhanced Trilateral Security Partnership (AUKUS) in late 2021, Malaysia openly showed its discontent. AUKUS, which includes nuclear powered submarines, directly played into Malaysia's security vulnerabilities of nuclear proliferation and the sustainability of peace in the SCS. For Kuala Lumpur, the potential emergence of an arms race in Southeast and East Asia is concerning. Malaysia which recognizes the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, ASEAN's Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty, and ZOPFAN fears AUKUS has the potential to heighten tensions in the SCS (Wisma Putra, 2021). With reference to the Quad, featuring Japan, Australia, India, and the US, former prime minister of Malaysia Dr. Mahathir Mohamad noted that the encirclement of China, provoking Beijing, may produce an economic backlash. Instead of attempting to limit Chinese influence, he suggested a direct dialogue with China may bring about peace and stability to the region (China Daily, 2021). The complete exclusion of China from Quad which denotes containment is a disconcerting attribute for a Malaysia that practices neutrality. Hence, the Malaysian government's response towards the Quad has been muted in order to avoid upsetting China.

### **Malaysia and the Navigation of the Indo-Pacific Strategy**

The repercussions of the rise of China and the US attempt to limit Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific region has culminated into a protracted US-China rivalry. Smaller states like Malaysia may look like they are trapped but the reality is that Kuala Lumpur has forged its own path in dealing with both China and the US. Using quiet diplomacy and engagement at the bilateral and multilateral levels, relations with both Beijing and Washington are as robust as ever. By bandwagoning in the AOIP, Malaysia has successfully remained neutral and at the same time fully engaged. While the FOIP is increasingly pressuring Southeast Asian states to choose sides, Malaysia is well placed to take advantage of the multiple overlapping initiatives like the BRI and the IPEF. However, in the fullness of time, the efficacy of these two initiatives depends on how attractive they are to Malaysian interests. Due to long historical ties, advantageous economic bonds, and the existence of elite support, Kuala Lumpur-Beijing relations will continue to be positive in the years ahead. Meanwhile, against the backdrop of American commitment towards the goal of a free Indo-Pacific, expansion of Kuala Lumpur-Washington relations beyond economic and security engagements remains possible under the Biden administration.

While Malaysia practices neutrality where major power rivalry is concerned, the country's economy depends on global markets which makes it vulnerable to any external disruptions or shocks as that will affect the demands for Malaysian exports. Both China and the US are leading trading and security partners respectively for Malaysia. Therefore, it is not surprising that Malaysia tends to take a hedging posture towards China and the US in order to reduce any exposure to external risks.

It can be assumed that the US-China confrontation is here to stay for the foreseeable future, making it crucial for Malaysia to find alternate ways to position itself advantageously in an unstable global environment. To safeguard peace and stability, Malaysia has been working in tandem with other like-minded neighbors to collectively overcome vulnerabilities due to trade tensions. Building partnerships through RCEP, IPEF, BRI and the CPTPP where either Washington or Beijing are part of the equation, is expected to somewhat decrease Malaysia's vulnerabilities to major power competition.

Malaysia has also had the advantage of strengthening relations with its East Asian partners like Japan and South Korea through the country's Look East Policy (LEP) which was established in 1982. Though attention towards the LEP has been intermittent, the government of Anwar Ibrahim has pledged to forge stronger ties with neighboring countries. Against this backdrop, the LEP that mainly concentrates on attracting Japanese and Korean trade and investment needs to be expanded to include a security dimension as well. Recently, the discourse on LEP has also transcended to include the FOIP making it easier for Malaysia to be included in the general debates on the manner in which middle powers like Japan and Korea can contribute to a stronger region that promotes shared interests and prosperity.

In view of the fact that both Japan and South Korea have their own versions of the Indo-Pacific strategy, Malaysia is well positioned to collaborate with Tokyo and Seoul to seek a policy to balance relations with both the US and China without taking sides. In fact, South Korea has just created the Korea ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KAI), which is designed to discuss security aspects with ASEAN member states in addition to political and economic cooperation. Since South Korea adheres to the concept of ASEAN Centrality and AOIP, it has become rather straightforward for Malaysia and others to collaborate with Seoul on issues of common interest. In terms of the SCS dispute, as mentioned before, Malaysia relies on quiet diplomacy and ASEAN-led mechanisms to communicate with China. Despite not being claimant countries, Japan and Korea view the SCS as a vital area for their economic wellbeing and supply chain. As such, it is expected that together with ASEAN, Seoul and Tokyo would be more emboldened to speak out on Chinese harassment and incursions within the SCS. To this end, Japan has been assisting ASEAN states in terms of beefing up security of the SCS through equipment and capacity building efforts. For example, the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) was provided with two patrol vessels by Japan in 2016. In addition, Japan has been involved in capacity building programs with Malaysian coast guard officers for over 17 years (Salleh, 2022). In comparison, South Korea just began an institutionalized defense arrangement in April 2022 encompassing future collaborations in joint activities between the Malaysian Armed Forces and the Korean Armed Forces.

In conclusion, Malaysia needs to work towards a unified regional response to reduce US-China strategic competition. With neutrality and engagement as the core policies in dealing with Beijing and Washington, Malaysia has been able to maintain cordial

relations with both countries. While Malaysia's relations with China remains friendly, it is concerned with Beijing's aggressive behavior in the SCS. Comparatively, though Malaysia welcomes US assistance in strengthening its security and defense capabilities, Kuala Lumpur is not in favor of US naval presence in the SCS for fear of escalating tensions. Against this backdrop, Malaysia has shown resilience in being able to get away with not choosing sides in the US-China rivalry ecosystem. The country has managed to achieve an equilibrium between economic needs and security considerations through mutually beneficial collaboration.

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### ***THE ASIA FOUNDATION OFFICE IN CAMBODIA***

House No. 59, Oknha Peich (St. 242)

Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Tel: +855 (23) 210-431

Email: [cambodia.general@asiafoundation.org](mailto:cambodia.general@asiafoundation.org)

<http://asiafoundation.org/where-we-work/cambodia/>

### ***CAMBODIAN INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION AND PEACE***

No. 204, Street 1966, Phum Paung Peay, Sangkat Phnom Penh Thmey

Khan Sen Sok, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Email: [cicp01@online.com.kh](mailto:cicp01@online.com.kh)

Webpage: [www.cicp.org.kh](http://www.cicp.org.kh)