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The Idea of Indo-Pacific: ASEAN Steps In

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SYNOPSIS

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) is an initial step towards formally incorporating ASEAN Centrality in the evolving Indo-Pacific concept. The AOIP has been much anticipated as different powers assert their conceptions of the Indo-Pacific region in which ASEAN claims a key role. What does this mean for sub-regional cooperation?

COMMENTARY

AFTER MONTHS of deliberations and hesitation, ASEAN has contributed to the conversation on the evolving Indo-Pacific concept. The *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (AOIP) was officially released at the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok last month.

This much-anticipated document provides an ASEAN narrative of the various versions of the Indo-Pacific concept articulated by the United States, India, Japan and others, thereby setting the stage for further dialogue on the specifics of Indo-Pacific cooperation in accordance with an ASEAN-centered regional architecture. The AOIP steers clear from adopting the *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* (FOIP) formulated by the US or those conceived by other powers.

The Indo-Pacific: ASEAN's Perspective

The AOIP envisages ASEAN Centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, with ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) providing platforms for dialogue and implementation of Indo-Pacific cooperation.

The [document](#) also clarifies ASEAN's perception of the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean not as contiguous territorial spaces but rather a closely integrated and inter-connected region. As such, connecting the various connectivity initiatives already out there for the regional states with the existing Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 will be one of the top priorities for ASEAN.

While officials have said that the document ought to be viewed as a work in progress, the release of the AOIP goes to show that ASEAN is willing to acknowledge the inevitable changes in the regional security architecture and is determined to continue to shape the geopolitical narrative amid intensifying big-power rivalry in the region.

The AOIP represents the first formal and publicly disclosed document detailing ASEAN's views on the Indo-Pacific concept. The absence of an ASEAN vision was rather conspicuous given that ASEAN lies in the centre of the Indo-Pacific and other major powers had already released their visions of the Indo-Pacific concept.

France unveiled its Indo-Pacific policy in May followed by the US with its updated "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report" coinciding with US Acting Defence Secretary Patrick Shanahan's speech at the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue in June.

ASEAN's Cautious Approach

ASEAN's cautious approach towards the Indo-Pacific concept was largely due to the nebulous nature of the idea which lacks clarity in its scope and process of implementation. While ASEAN still needs to thrash out details of how exactly it plans to utilise its forums in their existing formats towards Indo-Pacific cooperation, a critical point in the AOIP is the nod to furthering sub-regional cooperation.

This is important because the AOIP does not otherwise intend to create new mechanisms or replace existing ones.

The geographic vastness of the Indo-Pacific region brings into light the crucial role that sub-regional groupings can play in realising the AOIP's stated areas of collaboration in the Indo-Pacific: maritime cooperation; connectivity; sustainable development; and the economy.

The AOIP considers exploring potential synergies with sub-regional frameworks such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Mekong subregional cooperation. ASEAN must consider dwelling on the specifics of collaborating with sub-regional groupings as it updates the AOIP going forward.

Changing Geopolitics

Changing geopolitical realities have brought about a renewed interest in the Bay of Bengal and BIMSTEC. With access to the Indian Ocean and the Himalayas, BIMSTEC is becoming the theatre of convergence and competition for China's Belt and Road Initiative, India's Act East policy, and the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor.

Since BIMSTEC includes two ASEAN member states (Myanmar and Thailand) in its ranks, engaging the sub-regional grouping will better facilitate existing infrastructure projects. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway has lagged behind deadlines for years; BIMSTEC can make way for closer cooperation in a region where the China-led Belt and Road Initiative is rapidly changing the geo-strategic landscape.

The United States is also looking to engage in the Bay of Bengal through its new [security cooperation programme](#), the Bay of Bengal Initiative, for which the Trump administration has sought US\$30 million from US Congress to finance maritime and border security capacity for Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives.

ASEAN would also do well to make use of existing mechanisms within the Mekong subregional cooperation frameworks at a time when China and Japan are locked in a race to pave their influence in the Mekong.

The China-led Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) platform pushes infrastructure projects in the Mekong while Japan unveiled its recent Tokyo Strategy 2018 for [Mekong-Japan Cooperation](#). This runs from 2019 to 2021 and assists Mekong countries with at least 150 projects. ASEAN might want to explore synergies with the infrastructure and connectivity initiatives already under way in the Mekong.

AOIP and ASEAN Centrality

In terms of maritime cooperation in the wider Indian Ocean region, IORA is the only region-wide body designed to facilitate regional dialogue at the government-to-government level. ASEAN and IORA could work together in exchanging best practices and experience in regional cooperation. The ASEAN Maritime Forum, with a focus on maritime safety and connectivity, complements IORA's agenda on improving maritime safety and security.

The AOIP is an initial step towards formally incorporating ASEAN Centrality in the evolving Indo-Pacific concept. The AOIP needs to provide concrete plans regarding implementation of its vision, and expanding on cooperation with existing sub-regional mechanisms.

It will give ASEAN a good start to managing strategic competition in the region and driving ASEAN to carry out its many plans of action in the respective pillars of ASEAN community building. There will be inclusivity and mutual accommodation towards regional peace and stability.

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