

ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and Korea's New Southern Policy



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As US-China rivalry intensifies, small and middle-sized states are under increasing pressure to maintain their strategic autonomy. This applies to the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as well. Since the end of the Cold War, ASEAN has succeeded in expanding its strategic space by positioning itself as an “honest broker” between major powers. The ASEAN-based dialogue platforms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) have provided venues for major powers to engage with each other, contributing to confidence-building and stability in the region. The ASEAN-led multilateral system has enabled smaller states to have a say in regional affairs, and so-called “ASEAN centrality” – placing ASEAN at the center of the Asia-Pacific architecture – has strengthened ASEAN’s leverage vis-à-vis great powers. The norm of ASEAN centrality presents a good example of how weaker states can exercise collective power against great-power politics. However, with tension escalating between the US and China, it is questioned whether ASEAN can continue to play a role in preserving the stability of the region.

ASEAN's basic policy towards US-China relations has been to avoid choosing sides, hoping for Washington and Beijing to settle differences based on their mutual strategic interests. This strategy seemed to work during the presidency of Obama, who chose not to pursue an all-out competition with China. While Obama's Asia rebalancing strategy aimed to constrain China's power, it also sought a constructive engagement with China.¹ This non-zero-sum approach to China left some room for ASEAN to maintain its strategic autonomy, and President Obama's great attention to ASEAN-led mechanisms was well-received by ASEAN member states.²

However, a more confrontational posture towards China under the Trump administration is narrowing strategic options that ASEAN countries have. Apart from waging a war on trade and technological hegemony, the US seeks to counter Beijing's regional influence, criticizing China's Belt and Road Initiatives as a debt diplomacy.³ Most notably, in its Indo-Pacific Strategic Report, the US bluntly labels China as a revisionist power seeking to "reorder the region to its advantage by leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce other nations."⁴ Although the US's Indo-Pacific strategy is in line with President Obama's re-balancing strategy, this zero-sum approach to China is shrinking ASEAN's strategic choices in managing regional affairs. In particular, anti-China rhetoric embedded in the Indo-Pacific discourse worries ASEAN nations in that they might be forced to choose between the two rival visions of regional cooperation.⁵ The revitalization of the Quad – a security dialogue formed by the US, Japan, Australia and India – and President Trump's relative lack of interest in the ASEAN-led multilateralism have also raised concerns that ASEAN may lose its centrality in the regional security architecture.

Against this backdrop, ASEAN leaders adopted the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) during the 34th ASEAN summit in Bangkok last year. Led by Indonesia, the AOIP was created out of the need to reaffirm ASEAN's centrality in addressing the evolving Indo-Pacific construct and mitigate great-power frictions in the region. Key takeaways from the AOIP are as follows. First, the AOIP ensures that ASEAN continues to remain at the center of Indo-Pacific cooperation. Acknowledging the growing interdependence between the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, the AOIP emphasizes that no new regional architecture is required to promote

¹ De Castro, Renato Cruz. 2018. "The Obama Administration's Strategic Rebalancing to Asia: Quo Vadis in 2017?" *Pacific Focus* 33(2): 179-208, pp. 185-186.

² ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. 2016. "Obama's legacy in South-east Asia" *The Straits Times*; 4 November 2016. <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/obamas-legacy-in-south-east-asia> (accessed on 13 March, 2020)

³ Remarks by Vice President Pence at the 2018 APEC CEO Summit (16 November, 2018) <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-2018-apec-ceo-summit-port-moresby-papua-new-guinea/> (accessed on 13 March, 2020)

⁴ US Department of Defense. 2019. 'Message from the Secretary of Defense', in "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region".

⁵ Stromseth, Jonathan. 2019. "Don't make us choose: Southeast Asia in the throes of US-China rivalry" *The New Geopolitics*, Brookings.

Indo-Pacific cooperation. The AOIP suggests that the existing ASEAN-centered mechanisms such as the EAS, ARF and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) are sufficient platforms to address newly emerging needs of Indo-Pacific cooperation.⁶ This sends a clear message to extra-regional powers that ASEAN-based multilateralism should be the fulcrum in forging an Indo-Pacific architecture.

Second, with a great focus on development and prosperity, the AOIP restates that the Indo-Pacific is a region for *dialogue and cooperation* instead of *rivalry*.⁷ While embracing key concepts of the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy – e.g. transparency, rules-based order, international law and freedom of navigation and overflight – the AOIP emphasizes inclusiveness and prosperity for all, implying that ASEAN does not exclude China in its Indo-Pacific vision. This is the continuation of ASEAN's traditional hedging strategy to avoid choosing any one party over the other. In an attempt to alleviate the strategic rivalry, the AOIP also proposes several priority areas in need of cooperation that leads to peace and prosperity of the region: maritime cooperation, enhancing connectivity, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other possible forms of economic cooperation.⁸ The emphasis on connectivity, sustainable development and intra/extra-economic cooperation continues ASEAN's previous efforts to lead ASEAN-based regional development. In addressing maritime cooperation, the AOIP highlights non-traditional security issues where mutual interests of regional states converge, creating room for strategic cooperation among major powers.

It is difficult to see whether the AOIP, as a non-binding document, will play a meaningful role in reconciling competing interests between the two great powers.⁹ Nevertheless, the AOIP provides reference for how smaller states can be resilient to challenges posed by great power politics. First, by adopting a unified perspective on how to deal with changing regional dynamics, ASEAN reasserts the unity of its member states. Proving to speak with one voice, despite different national interests, demonstrates ASEAN's will to maintain its collective power against the growing US-China rivalry. Second, ASEAN has taken a pre-emptive move to provide an alternative version of the Indo-Pacific discourse. ASEAN's vision of the Indo-Pacific, more development-oriented and less security-driven, attempts to offset strategic elements of the Indo-Pacific discourse forged by the quadrilateral group. The inclusive vision of the Indo-Pacific

⁶ The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), p. 2. https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf (accessed on 13 March 2020).

⁷ AOIP, p. 2.

⁸ AOIP, pp. 3-5.

⁹ Laksmana, Evan. 2019. "Flawed assumptions: Why the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific is defective" Asia Global Online (19 September) <https://www.asiaglobalonline.hku.hk/flawed-assumptions-why-the-asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific-is-defective> (accessed on 14 March, 2020)

opens the door for China to participate in ASEAN-led Indo-Pacific cooperation, allowing regional countries to have room for maneuver. Third, the AOIP reinstates the importance of multilateralism when unilateralism and minilateral alignments are gaining ground in the region. With the AOIP, ASEAN endeavors to restore the primacy of the ASEAN-centered multilateral system which has been a cornerstone in facilitating peace and prosperity throughout the Asia Pacific region.

ASEAN's efforts to overcome great power rivalry offer many implications for South Korea, which faces a similar dilemma. Like Southeast Asian nations, Korea is striving to secure its autonomy in the face of growing major power competition. Korea's New Southern Policy (NSP), aimed at reorienting its foreign policy towards ASEAN and India, is also derived from the need to diversify its diplomatic options against the changing geopolitical dynamics. Building upon the already well-developed relations with ASEAN, the NSP seeks to elevate the status of ASEAN on a par with Korea's four traditional major diplomatic partners: the US, China, Japan and Russia. The three pillars of the NSP – People, Peace and Prosperity (3Ps) – manifest a departure from Korea's previous economic-oriented policy in its engagement with ASEAN. President Moon's visit to all ASEAN countries in the first half of his term also signifies Korea's commitment to enhance its strategic ties with ASEAN.¹⁰ The NSP has been received well by ASEAN countries, leading to Korea's hosting of the third ASEAN-ROK special summit and an inaugural summit between the five Mekong countries and Korea last November. The special summit reaffirmed that both sides would advance their strategic partnership towards a future-oriented community that shares peace and co-prosperity.

The NSP indeed opened a new chapter in ASEAN-Korea relations, but there is still room for Korea to upgrade its strategic partnership with ASEAN. Under the Peace pillar of the NSP, Korea has garnered ASEAN's support for establishing peace on the Korean Peninsula. However, it has not articulated a vision of how to jointly address uncertainty in the strategic environment of the region. The heavy focus on the Korean Peninsula issue is also likely to narrow the scope of strategic cooperation between the two sides in managing US-China competition. A recent survey of Southeast Asian elites released by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, a Singaporean think tank, suggests that few ASEAN elites see Korea as a "preferred and trusted strategic partner" in hedging against the uncertainties of the great power rivalry.¹¹ While these results represent the views of a minority of opinion leaders and would need further substanti-

¹⁰ President Moon Jae-in is the first Korean president to pay a visit to all ASEAN member states during their term in office.

¹¹ ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. 2020. "The State of Southeast Asia: 2020 Survey Report", p. 30.

ation to be generalized, the clear indication is that Korea needs to make further efforts to address ASEAN's strategic needs. One possible way is to enhance cooperation where mutual strategic interests converge, and in this sense the AOIP can be a good reference for forging future partnership between the two.

In fact, the aim of the NSP, "creating a co-prospering, people-centered peace community," goes hand-in-hand with the regional vision proposed by the AOIP. Since the AOIP invites like-minded countries to "promote an enabling environment for peace, stability and prosperity in the region,"¹² there are several areas where Korea can work with ASEAN to lead a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific partnership. First, as an active participant of the EAS, ARF and ADMM-Plus, Korea can contribute to enhancing the role and functions of ASEAN-based mechanisms. Given that maintaining multilateralism is the most viable option for smaller states to counterbalance great power politics, both ASEAN and Korea have mutual interests to strengthen the multilateral architecture in the region. Second, Korea can invest more efforts to shore up ASEAN-led development and connectivity projects. For instance, Korea can drive its renewed emphasis on Korea-Mekong partnerships to support cooperation projects under the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) launched by ASEAN member states. Supporting the development of ASEAN-led regional initiatives not only serves to buttress ASEAN centrality – the cornerstone of regional multilateralism – but also diversifies the scope of regional cooperation beyond the competing visions proposed by the two major powers. Lastly, given that the AOIP highlights the importance of maritime cooperation, Korea can expand its partnership with ASEAN in the following areas: promoting maritime safety and sustainable management of marine resources; addressing transnational crimes at sea; and addressing maritime pollution, sea-level rise and marine debris. Ensuring a stable maritime environment is one of the vital interests of the region, and it is also a key area where multilateral cooperation is mostly needed.

Gaining fresh momentum from the ASEAN-ROK special summit last year, the Korean government announced its plans to push forward with the NSP 2.0, an updated version of the NSP.¹³ There is a wealth of potential opportunities and overlapping areas between the NSP and AOIP, and these are the areas that the Korean government could consider more closely when formulating its NSP 2.0. **KIEP**

¹² AOIP, p. 2.

¹³ Lee, Chi-dong. 2019. "S. Korea announces New Southern Policy 2.0 plan after Busan summit with ASEAN" Yonhap News Agency (27 November) <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20191127004500315> (accessed on 17 March, 2020).