

# The Role of ASEAN in the United States of America Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy

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## Abstract

Since 2017, the United States, Japan, India and Australia have also put forward their visions of Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy (FOIP) to achieve an international rules-based order and norms, transparency, governance, maritime security, and infrastructure. USA's FOIP places an emphasis on the maritime domain and Southeast Asia's importance is critical. Southeast Asia situated at the center of the Indian Ocean to the west and the Pacific Ocean to the east. ASEAN has established itself as the convener of the Indo-Pacific, a region that has grown more multilateral, with the increased presence of regional economic, security and dialogue institutions. ASEAN Leaders reinforced the ASEAN-centered regional architecture of ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). It intended to strengthen and 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. The research is conducted through a qualitative analysis by means of archival research relying on both primary and secondary sources. It will intend to give knowledge on the scope of FOIP, to reveal the significant role of ASEAN in FOIP and to examine how ASEAN is responding to US FOIP not to influence over ASEAN's fundamental principles and finally maintain its centrality. In conclusion, ASEAN member states want to ensure an ASEAN-centric and cooperation-based Indo-Pacific and to concrete deliverables for the benefit of the region's peoples.

Key words: free and open Indo-Pacific, multilateral, ASEAN-led mechanism, ASEAN centrality, ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific

## Introduction

The concept of the Indo-Pacific is not a new one, but it has certainly received much more attention since 2017. In a joint session of the Indian Parliament in 2007, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stated the Indo-Pacific concept. According to Abe, the Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity and he also emphasizes the confluence of the two seas. If Asia-Pacific is concerned with prosperity, the Indo-Pacific is pertained mostly to security. This paradigmatic shift from prosperity to security reflects the broader geopolitical contest and

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geo-economic tensions that are taking place within and beyond Southeast Asia. The Indo-Pacific is so much the geopolitical contest that ASEAN has been compelled to respond to it.

In December 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump first publicly revealed Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy in a speech at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Vietnam. He has recognized that Southeast Asia will be a central part of this emerging FOIP strategy and broadly conceived as an effort to defend freedom and openness in the rules-based order in concert with willing and able partners. Recognizing Southeast Asia's centrality to this evolving U.S. strategic conception in Asia is a good starting point. But this is only a first step. Successfully integrating Southeast Asia into such a strategy in the coming years will require U.S. policymakers to recognize both the opportunities and challenges that come with such a vision in the region, as well as being cognizant of how to navigate this mix of considerations that play into U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia as well as regional perceptions therein.<sup>1</sup>

### **Research Questions**

The research on "The Role of ASEAN in U S Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" tries to examine the significant role of ASEAN in this Strategy not to influence its fundamental principles and finally maintain its centrality in international arena. It is aimed at explaining:

- What is the scope of the FOIP strategy?
- In which role does ASEAN stand for in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy?
- How is ASEAN responding to the US FOIP while maintaining its emphasis on ASEAN centrality?

### **Arguments**

This research paper argues that ASEAN is crucial in the U S Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) that is so much the geopolitical contest that ASEAN has been compelled to respond to it. For ASEAN, Indo-Pacific is a contiguous and closely integrated and interconnected region, with ASEAN playing a central and strategic role. It also intended to examine how is ASEAN responding as a bloc to US FOIP. Maintaining centrality is crucial to ASEAN's success as a regional bloc and critical to its relevance in the international arena. Finally, it highlights the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) that is also testament to the challenges ASEAN continues to face in advancing its own conception of the Indo-Pacific.

### **What is Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy (FOIP)?**

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<sup>1</sup> Thitinan Pongsudhirak: "Is the Indo-Pacific eclipsing Asia-Pacific?" <http://www.bangkokpost.com>, 2 August 2019, p- 1

The concept of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) policy was first raised in a speech Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made to the Indian Parliament in 2007. FOIP is seen by some Asian analysts as an extension of the Asia-Pacific security concept to the Indian Ocean region, including U.S. values and principles that it believes underpin the regional order. The core tenets of the concept include freedom of navigation, the rule of law, freedom from coercion, respect for sovereignty, private enterprise, and open markets, and the freedom and independence of all nations. Within this framework, the United States is proposing – and pushing for – a renewal of the so-called “Quad” – a potential security arrangement among the four large democracies of India, Australia, Japan, and the United States. It has initiated a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among these nations. It will have three main objectives – to reinforce the existing rule-based regional order; to promote a liberal trading regime and freedom of navigation; and to provide mutual security assurances. The Foreign Ministry of Japan states that the “key for stability and prosperity” is the “dynamism that is created by combining ‘Two Continents’: Asia and Africa, and ‘Two Oceans’: Free and open Pacific and Indian Oceans.”<sup>2</sup> The Trump administration’s FOIPS, which includes \$10 billion in energy infrastructure from the Japan-U.S. Strategic Energy Partnership (JUSEP), serves as an alternative to the Belt & Road Initiative.

Since 2017, FOIP has been attracting broad attention in Japan, India Australia and around the world. It aims for economic growth throughout the region connecting the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, identifying growing Asia and the latent potential of Africa as key regions. The strategy promotes free trade and infrastructure investment to expand trading zone and cooperation on security. It appeals to the freedom of the ocean based on the rule of law by constraining China's building of a military base in the South China Sea."

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<sup>2</sup> Giulio Pugliese:"The Free and Open Indo-Pacific" as a Strategic Narrative"-  
<https://www.chinausfocus.com//foreign-policy>, p-1

## ASEAN's Significance in the U S Indo- Pacific Strategy

ASEAN's centrality to U.S. Asia policy has often not been reached to the level of attention given to it, particularly during the first few decades. Nonetheless, under the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, U.S. policymakers displayed a growing recognition of importance of ASEAN on its own merits, its role in addressing challenges ranging from terrorism to climate change to China's rise. A major driver of the Trump administration's emphasis on Southeast Asia is the sub-region's importance within the broader Indo-Pacific. It is a region of great importance to U.S. interests, its allies and its partners. According to the following different lenses, Southeast Asia is a significant actor.

Materially, the Indo-Pacific region is significant economically and strategically for the United States to invest in. It represents more than half of the global population and more than half of the global economy in which Southeast Asia accounts for a major part of that importance. Globally, Southeast Asian countries represent the world's third largest population and the fifth largest economy. It is a testament to decades of prosperity in spite of the challenges that they faced. Within the Indo-Pacific, Southeast Asia is also home to two of the United States' five treaty allies—Thailand and the Philippines—as well as several other key strategic partners such as Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam. Geographically, it sits right at the center of the Indian Ocean to the west and the Pacific Ocean to the east. These two Oceans are the two ends of the Indo-Pacific vision which seeks to emphasize its significance as a single strategic environment. FOIP mainly emphasizes on the maritime domain and Southeast Asia is important because it is home to the vital sea lanes of communication (SLOC) which links both the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean. In SLOC, the South China Sea, the Malacca Straits and the Sulu Sea are strategic waterways that accounts for one third of global shipping passes.

Geopolitically, Southeast Asia is clearly a key battleground in the Indo-Pacific. The “freeness” and “openness” of the FOIP strategy will be tested in this region. It is a collection of diverse states, many of which are rather underdeveloped economically and politically and maintain diverse alignments. This accounts for the spectrum of views on issues critical to the advancement of a FOIP strategy.<sup>3</sup> Southeast Asia is also home to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a center of the Asia's multilateral architecture, with its stream of annual meetings representing a critical front in the battle for ideas.

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<sup>3</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran: “ASEAN's Role in a U S Indo- Pacific Strategy”, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org>, September 2018, p- 2

According to Thailand Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, Asia, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean must not be seen as a divided territory but as a contiguous and closely integrated and interconnected region in which ASEAN plays a central and strategic role.<sup>4</sup> ASEAN has grown as a multilateral region and has established itself as the convener of the Indo-Pacific with the increasing presence of regional economic, security and dialogue institutions. Washington needs to integrate ASEAN centrality into its strategy in order to successfully engage this vast, diverse, and dynamic region. At the same time, articulation of ASEAN's expectations toward the United States is necessary for the insurance of complementary in regional efforts, increasing of trust and confidence, and development of effective cooperative mechanisms.<sup>5</sup> In this context, the strategic partnership between the United States and ASEAN plays an essential role in the rapidly changing economic, political and security architecture of the Indo-Pacific Region.

As ASEAN has been accorded a higher profile by major powers, the 10 member-states are also under constant pressure to respond to their clear calls and prove their strength. ASEAN has to be more proactive and adopt forward-looking positions on key transnational issues because of the rapid shifts of the regional and international environment. It is important that no one nation should be allowed to dominate the region. This appeal comes at the time when ASEAN is building up its regional security architecture, reliance on its existing security mechanism, and security partnerships. Among ASEAN countries, Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam have expressed their individual opinions about the perceived role of ASEAN in the overall Indo-Pacific scheme. It is clearly seen that Indonesia has been the leading voice on the Indo-Pacific concept as the group's biggest economy.

With continued strong bipartisan support, Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy will be value-added to further strengthening the US interoperability and networks of security partners in the region.<sup>6</sup> Overall, it is imperative on ASEAN to extend to the United States,

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<sup>4</sup> Kornchanok Raksaseri and Thana Boonlert: "Sights set on Indo-Pacific," <https://www.bangkokpost.com>, January 24, 2019, p-3

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Ordaniel and Carl Baker: "ASEAN Centrality and the Evolving US Indo-Pacific Strategy, Issues and Insights," Vol. 19, CR-4, March 2019 Conference Report Jakarta, Indonesia, <https://www.pacforum.org>, March 11, 2019, p- 1

<sup>6</sup> Kavi Chongkittavorn: "ASEAN's Role in the US Indo - Pacific Strategy", *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No. 425, Washington, DC: East-West Center, June 27, 2018, Pages: 2

Japan, India, and Australia to ascertain that all proposed elements are coordinated and most importantly, the emerging broader strategy would place ASEAN in the center.

#### **ASEAN's Response: ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP)**

The geopolitical shift from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific entails opportunities and challenges for ASEAN. Regarding the opportunities, the economic growth of the region opens up the possibilities of cooperation to alleviate poverty and elevate living standards of millions of people. On the other hand, the rise of economic and military powers needs to avoid the deepening of mistrust, miscalculation, and patterns of behavior based on a zero-sum game. Southeast Asia lies in the center of these dynamic regions and is a very important conduit. Therefore, ASEAN's interest is to lead the shaping of their economic and security architecture and ensure that such dynamics will continue to bring about peace, security, stability and prosperity for the peoples in the Southeast Asia as well as in the wider Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions or the Indo-Pacific.

By engaging in the development of an inclusive regional architecture for decades, ASEAN always tries to come up with its collective leadership in forging and shaping the vision for closer cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN also tries to maintain its central role in the evolving regional architecture in Southeast Asia and its surrounding regions. ASEAN Leaders have agreed to formulate an initiative that reinforces the ASEAN-centered regional architecture, namely, ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). This Outlook intended to enhance ASEAN's Community building process and to strengthen and 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.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the Outlook is intended to be inclusive in terms of ideas and proposals.

The ASEAN members have adopted the 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific' after more than a year of negotiations in the recently concluded (20th to 23rd June 2019) ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) held in Bangkok, Thailand. ASEAN acknowledged on the need to evolve a unified vision and strategy for the Indo-Pacific began after American President Trump proposed the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy during his Asia tour in 2017 and at the 2017 APEC Summit in Vietnam. Indonesia was the main initiative for drafting the ASEAN vision of the Indo-Pacific.<sup>8</sup> It did not want to bandwagon to either America's FOIP or China's BRI.

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<sup>7</sup> ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (Final),” <https://asean.org>, June 22, 2019, p-5

<sup>8</sup> Premesha Saha : “ASEAN's Indo-Pacific outlook : An analysis”, <https://www.orfonline.org>, 28 June 2019, p- 2

Indonesia proposed an ASEAN Indo-Pacific approach based on key principles such as ASEAN centrality, openness, transparency, inclusivity, and a rules-based regional order. This suggests that Jakarta, and others in Southeast Asia want to ensure an ASEAN-centric and cooperation-based Indo-Pacific. Indeed, the ASEAN Indo-Pacific “Outlook” concept paper is emphasizing ASEAN centrality by encouraging major powers to make use of existing ASEAN-led mechanisms, not create new ones. For ASEAN, the United States should not pressure any member-states to take sides, and instead make ASEAN a platform for substantive cooperation. The United States’ long-held preference for bilateralism is no longer as effective in dealing with Southeast Asia. This does not mean that Washington should downgrade bilateral engagements. But, it is critical to develop a more appropriate multilateral approach, one that recognizes ASEAN’s important roles, and strengthens ASEAN institutions. As Washington pursues a “whole-of-nation” approach to ASEAN, it is important to reevaluate the unsustainable model where the United States is expected to be the exclusive provider of regional security while China (and Japan) the main driver of regional economic growth and development.<sup>9</sup> New thinking on how to accommodate the United States in the economic sphere and China in the security sphere is needed while maintaining ASEAN centrality and still ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific.

ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific envisages ASEAN Centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>10</sup> It describes the use of ASEAN-led architecture consisting of systems such as East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN + 3, and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM), which includes major Indo-Pacific countries, including China. The fact that ASEAN countries express Indo-Pacific cooperation using this architecture underscores ASEAN’s aim to present the Indo-Pacific in a form that also includes China, rejecting the notion of exclusiveness.

ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific envisioned by ASEAN consists of the following key elements:

1. The integration of the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions;
2. An Indo-Pacific region of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry;
3. An Indo-Pacific region of development and prosperity for all;

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<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Ordaniel and Carl Baker: ASEAN Centrality and the Evolving US Indo-Pacific Strategy, Issues and Insights, VOL. 19, CR-4, March 2019 Conference Report, Jakarta, Indonesia, March 2019

<sup>10</sup> Premesha Saha : “ASEAN’s Indo-Pacific outlook : An analysis”, <https://www.orfonline.org>, 28 June 2019, p3

4. The importance of the maritime domain and perspective in the evolving regional architecture.<sup>11</sup> And it enumerates the four functional areas through which ASEAN believes collaboration can be tangibly advanced: maritime cooperation; connectivity; sustainable development; and the economy

ASEAN is working to come up with a common position on a geopolitical framework for the Indo-Pacific to ensure that the 10-member grouping is not marginalized. In the past 50 years, ASEAN's existence has never threatened others because the group always prioritized "inclusiveness, cooperation and habit of dialogue."<sup>12</sup> The FOIP Strategy will have an impact on ASEAN's political and economic development, so ASEAN must seek to be consulted and involved.

### **ASEAN Centrality**

ASEAN centrality is not a new and distinctive term. But it is related to the "leader", the "driver", the "architect", the "institutional hub", the "vanguard", the "nucleus", and the "center" of regional processes and institutional designs in the Asia-Pacific region. It is accurately about the larger dynamics of regionalism and regional architecture in the Asia Pacific and beyond. According to Herman Kraft, a Filipino scholar, it has been a "significant shift in the evolution" of ASEAN. It shifted from an association dedicated to keeping the Southeast Asian region free from great power rivalries to one which accepted its 'centrality' in a wider East Asian and Asia-Pacific regionalism.<sup>13</sup> It is a process that would entail accepting involvement of and engaging the major powers in the context of the region.

The ASEAN Charter explicitly stated that ASEAN maintains its centrality in the regional processes. In the conduct of its external affairs, ASEAN firstly promotes its own interests. Maintaining centrality is crucial to ASEAN's success as a regional bloc and critical to its relevance in the international arena. Moreover, a rules-based regional order is promoted and developed through ASEAN centrality that consequently diffusing potential tension and conflict between and among states, whether big or small.

However there has been a concern in ASEAN Centrality that ASEAN countries could slide into irrelevance among the great power confrontation. Based on this concern, the Outlook emphasizes the use of ASEAN-led regional architecture that has been developed by

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<sup>11</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran : "Assessing ASEAN's New Indo-Pacific Outlook", <https://thediplomat.com>, June 24, 2019, p-4

<sup>12</sup> "The Biggest Threat to US Indo-Pacific Strategy", <http://thediplomat.com>, August, 2019, p-1

<sup>13</sup> Amitav Acharya: "The Myth of ASEAN Centrality?", *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Volume 39, Number 2, August 2017 pp. 273-279



attempting to institutionalize “ASEAN centrality.” Through this architecture, small and middle powers are cooperated into ASEAN that has played a certain role in regional politics. Moreover, some of the “Principles” of Indo-Pacific cooperation described in the Outlook are the standards and rules that constitute the “ASEAN way.” ASEAN countries respects and follows “ASEAN Way” of respect for sovereignty, non-intervention, equality, mutual respect, mutual trust, mutual benefit and respect for international law, such as the UN Charter and the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The document also suggests that Indo-Pacific cooperation be conducted based on the “ASEAN way.” In other words, in the context of a growing confrontation between the U S and China, the ASEAN-style Indo-Pacific concept maintains a relationship with these two nations without joining either one’s camp. At the same time, to maintain order in the broader region of the Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific, the Concept must retain a certain degree of ASEAN influence and avoid the worst-case scenario of ASEAN being torn apart by an intensification of the U.S.-China confrontation. It also envisages maintaining a stable ASEAN-led regional system architecture which would be harnessed to stabilize the relationship between the major powers in the broader Indo-Pacific. And it encourages socioeconomic development and cooperation that can bring stability and prosperity to the region. Only a politically cohesive, strategically coherent and economically prosperous ASEAN can establish and maintain this centrality.<sup>14</sup> These will serve as strong foundations for ASEAN in playing and asserting with credibility this centrality role.

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<sup>14</sup> Joyce A. Teodoro : “Distracted ASEAN? Where To For ASEAN Centrality?”, *Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies (CIRSS)*, VOL. III, NO. 15, December, 2016.

## Finding and Conclusion

Since its founding, ASEAN is at an important crossroads. Major pressure on ASEAN centrality is increasing geopolitical competition. Neighboring countries, such as China, are finding new methods for exerting influence through soft power and official development assistance (ODA). So, ASEAN regional architecture will allow the smaller states of this region to exert greater collective pressure and maintain an effective balancing strategy because of Chinese expansion of influence. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the new type of competition that poses major opportunities and risks for ASEAN countries.

Reality, the U S FOIP strategy aimed to counter China expansionism and U S and Japan officials have acknowledged ASEAN a core part of the strategy. ASEAN leaders believe in multilateralism, the rule of law, and peaceful dispute resolution. However, US President Donald Trump has repeatedly expressed a preference for bilateral trade instead of multilateral ones. South-east Asia has long been a vital channel for goods that has always been exposed to the increasing economic and strategic competition among the major powers. Regarding how ASEAN will fit into the free and open Indo-Pacific concept, it is recognized that the concept and others like China's BRI, if properly envisioned and carried out, can coexist and benefit all in South-east Asia. South-east Asian countries do not want to be forced into making false choices or forced choices. ASEAN believes in an open and inclusive position that leads to the road to prosperity.

ASEAN also believes that cooperation under the Indo-Pacific concept should also complement existing frameworks of cooperation at the regional and sub-regional levels and generate tangible and concrete deliverables for the benefit of the region's peoples. The AOIP will provide ASEAN member states 'cover' in responding to pressures to support or move away from existing Indo-Pacific proposals. ASEAN now has its own narrative and injects its perspective to the ongoing discourse. But ASEAN also needs to go beyond the statement and take concrete action to protect its interests. But, while ASEAN and major member states are focused primarily on the risks of action, there are considerable risks of inaction and hesitation. Indeed, if ASEAN remains passive, it is more likely to be left behind by strategic events and developments.

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