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ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific: Seizing the Narrative?

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SYNOPSIS

The issuance of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) was one of the most important developments for ASEAN in 2019. However, it has been criticised for being yet another ineffectual ASEAN document. These criticisms, however, misunderstand the basis on which ASEAN operates.

COMMENTARY

ONE OF the most important developments for ASEAN in 2019 was the adoption of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). At the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok on 23 June 2019, the ten ASEAN members announced their vision of the Indo-Pacific in the form of a non-binding ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).

This document is a formal announcement of the incorporation of the “Indo-Pacific” into ASEAN’s security discourse to exist alongside other geographical notions, such as East Asia and the Asia-Pacific, and to treat the Indian and Pacific Oceans as one strategic space.

“Old Wine in a New Bottle”?

The AOIP has been criticised for just being ‘old wine in a new bottle’, reflecting ASEAN’s apparent inertia due to critical disagreements arising from intensifying great power rivalry. However, many such arguments tend to misunderstand how ASEAN, and by extension its documents, operate.

On the contrary, the AOIP can instead be seen as a sign of ASEAN's determination to address the challenge posed by the Indo-Pacific Concept as it demonstrates ASEAN centrality in the face of mounting great power rivalry.

As for most, if not all, ASEAN statements, the contents of the AOIP did not surprise anyone. It was cautious, muted and underwhelming, especially when juxtaposed with the worrying strategic uncertainty caused by the worsening US-China competition faced by ASEAN.

The document focused on economics and development issues, and had little innovative contribution in mitigating the rising uncertainty in the strategic environment. Additionally, as an ASEAN document, the AOIP is non-binding, and merely posits lowest common denominator principles and ways forward.

The Reality of ASEAN

Of course, critics focusing on only these weaknesses simply assume that ASEAN as an organisation ought to always achieve its goals through decisive collective action. The reality is that the only way for that to happen is when all member states have similar national interests, values, and economic, social and political internal circumstances.

ASEAN member states clearly do not have such similarities, and with ASEAN a consensus-based organisation, it is foolhardy to expect ASEAN member states to always be able to agree on the ways to move forward.

Moreover, criticism positing that ASEAN tends to ignore its own agreements overlooks the typical way ASEAN conducts its affairs. ASEAN tends to conduct negotiations behind the scenes, often with a view to prevent acrimonious disagreements from being exposed.

This is in line with previous ASEAN agreements, like the ASEAN Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, foundational pacts which set out ASEAN's cautious and neutral approach.

Observers of ASEAN were fully aware that the AOIP was never going to be a bold statement. They are used to the cautious tone in most, if not all, ASEAN's statements. Such an approach has served as a means for ASEAN to underscore its preferred features of regional order and its role as a convening power for all states to come together to build stability.

The AOIP was no exception. The document underscored these features, namely ASEAN centrality through ASEAN-led mechanisms, dialogue and cooperation to promote peaceful cooperation, a rule-based framework, and the pursuit of an open and inclusive regional order that does not close the door to any state.

This enables ASEAN's normative structure to continue to guide the regional order, be it Indo-Pacific or East Asia or Asia-Pacific. Moreover, the AOIP expressed ASEAN neutrality, especially in terms of distancing itself from the US-China strategic

competition and keeping out of any initiative that targets China, which other Indo-Pacific visions both either explicitly or implicitly do.

ASEAN's Role in Emerging Indo-Pacific Order

As such, the AOIP is arguably a relatively good beginning for ASEAN to define its role in the emerging Indo-Pacific order. Despite the expected disagreements between member states during the negotiation process, the final outcome displayed ASEAN's ability to come together to set the direction for a sub-regional institution in light of the rising uncertainty in the strategic environment.

The AOIP made sure that ASEAN was not left out or ignored in the larger debate on the Indo-Pacific that has been mainly led by the great/major powers. In contrast, an inability to even issue any document – similar to the non-issuance of joint statements in previous ASEAN meetings in 2012 and 2015 – would be a clear signal of ASEAN's failure to come to a consensus on the Indo-Pacific Concept.

The fact that the AOIP gained consensus from the ten ASEAN countries is an indication how important this development is for ASEAN. While the ensuing document may be a tame one positing lowest common denominator principles, it nonetheless demonstrates ASEAN's resolve to at least discuss and agree on baselines on how it should view the Indo-Pacific Concept. This is a positive, even if tentative, way forward.

Future of ASEAN's Centrality in Indo-Pacific

It is difficult to see whether the AOIP will translate into future success for ASEAN's relevance and centrality in the Indo-Pacific Concept. What is clear is that ASEAN does not intend to create new institutions defined by the Indo-Pacific geographical concept. It would prefer for the AOIP to co-exist within the current ASEAN-led normative and political order.

What observers should look for is the guidance from Indonesia – the leader that introduced and pushed for the document to be accepted by all the ASEAN member states - along with Vietnam, the current Chair of ASEAN. Moreover, a bellwether of the AOIP's progress would be how ASEAN frames any issue regarding the AOIP, as well as the level of consultation between ASEAN and external countries.

If ASEAN continues to guide the conversation on its role in the Indo-Pacific, ensuring that external countries do not overlook it, that will be a sign of things going well. Even so, closer study of such developments would be required, given ASEAN's tendency to engage and negotiate from behind the scenes.

It is important that ASEAN maintains the momentum in contributing to the strategic discussions surrounding the emerging Indo-Pacific order. The focus on neutrality, inclusiveness and pragmatic cooperation is exactly what the region requires amidst the rising uncertainty of the US-China competition. This rivalry threatens to unravel the existing regional order and lead ASEAN states to face the dreaded outcome of having to choose sides.

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