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ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook under Indonesia's Chairmanship: How Far Can It Go?

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SYNOPSIS

*The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific is Indonesia's brainchild. With Indonesia assuming the ASEAN chairmanship in 2023, **ARISTYO RIZKA DARMAWAN** argues that it is timely for the country to drive the regional process and operationalise the framework for the outlook.*

COMMENTARY

On 13 November, Indonesian President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) received a wooden gavel from Cambodia's prime minister, Hun Sen, in a symbolic gesture passing the ASEAN chairmanship to Indonesia. Concurrently, Indonesia announced that as chair it would adopt the theme of "ASEAN Matters: Epicentrum of Growth". The economic-centric theme highlights the Jokowi administration's consistent focus on economic development matters but also downplays the burgeoning regional and great power challenges faced by ASEAN in recent years.

This is unfortunate as the region continues to face outstanding regional security challenges, notably, a potential fallout from the Taiwan issue — an especially sore spot in US-China relations, as evident from then US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei in August 2022. Furthermore, the growth of non-ASEAN regional institutions such as the Quad and AUKUS highlight current deficits in the regional security architecture. ASEAN is in sore need of a strong response to reinvigorate its geopolitical relevance. Indonesia's chairmanship of ASEAN offers it an opportunity to revitalise the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), the signature initiative of Indonesia's foreign minister, Retno Marsudi.

Indonesia and the AOIP

Indonesia's foreign policy instincts have long been historically conditioned by a conscious desire not to take sides and participate in bloc politics. Thus, President Sukarno launched the Bandung Conference in 1955 and initiated the Non-Aligned Movement.

Within the boundaries of formal non-alignment, Indonesia's "[free and active foreign policy](#)" has nonetheless given each Indonesian president significant flexibility and agency in foreign policy matters. Under Sukarno, Indonesia was virulently anti-West, but under President Suharto Indonesia's foreign policy shifted dramatically towards the United States. President Jokowi, for his part, has spearheaded pragmatic and increasingly close economic cooperation with China while maintaining a formal position of geopolitical neutrality.

The AOIP originated out of this foreign policy tradition and represents a means to "regionalise" Indonesia's own foreign policy approach of augmenting agency through inclusiveness and neutrality. Considering the United States' "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" rhetoric, Indonesia felt compelled to launch the AOIP to ensure the region remains neutral amid geopolitical contestation and to rescue the "Indo-Pacific" concept from great power rivalry.

The AOIP also stemmed from Indonesia's belief that ASEAN could play the role of a "bridge builder" and foster dialogue that could accommodate all actors in the region, thereby ensuring ASEAN centrality amid the great power competition in the region. Indeed, Indonesia's past efforts to initiate [cocktail diplomacy](#) to mediate the Cambodia-Vietnam conflict and shuttle diplomacy to mediate the Thai-Cambodia conflict had been seen as examples of successful Indonesian diplomacy.

Since the AOIP was first adopted in 2019, it has received its fair share of criticism. One of the biggest criticisms is that even though the AOIP has been endorsed by the ASEAN Summit, not all ASEAN member states share the same sense of ownership over the concept and willingness to contribute resources for its implementation. For instance, in the latest [ASEAN Regional Security Forum Annual Security Report 2021](#), Indonesia did not use the term "Indo-Pacific" in referring to the region; instead, it used the more contrived "Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean Region". This represented a significant failure to "ASEAN-ise" the Indo-Pacific concept.

Many analysts suggest that to be more relevant, the AOIP should [go beyond a traditional norm setting role for ASEAN](#). If ASEAN is to retain centrality in the region, operationalising the AOIP should become a key item on the Indonesian chair's agenda. To pre-empt potential opposition from either the United States or China, Indonesia needs to stress and reassure that the AOIP is not targeted at any single country, but a regional initiative seeking to bolster peace and security in the region.

How Should the AOIP Be Operationalised?

While officials from Indonesia's Foreign Ministry agree that the AOIP needs to be put into practice, how that can happen remains an open question. In general, the AOIP

should emphasise ASEAN's institutional culture. It should avoid a rigid and legalistic approach. Instead, it should be flexible and inclusive by nature. This will create a framework allowing all ASEAN partners to engage and cooperate with ASEAN.

Moreover, observers have lamented that the initial AOIP was too heavy on the economic element and light on the defence and security perspective. Therefore, during the 2021 ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM), Indonesia proposed a discussion paper on the AOIP from a defence and security perspective. [The document](#) emphasised the centrality of ASEAN in regional defence and security cooperation. It outlined five objectives of security cooperation: (1) to complement the AOIP and serve as a guide on defence cooperation; (2) to enhance ASEAN's central and strategic role in maintaining and sustaining peace, security, stability and prosperity in the region; (3) to build upon progress made by the ASEAN countries' defence forces in forging practical, multilateral cooperation and exercises; (4) to enhance defence cooperation with the Plus partners within the framework of the ADMM-Plus; and (5) to enhance the ASEAN Community-building process by optimising the ADMM's defence cooperation with dialogue partners to seize opportunities arising from the current and future regional and global environments, while maintaining ASEAN unity and centrality.



Ships from Indonesia, Singapore and US navies in formation in the Natuna Sea during Super Garuda Shield 2022. *The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

The discussion paper on the AOIP's security and defence pillar was an important step forward but it has yet to be adopted by ASEAN. Therefore, advancing this discussion should become a priority during the Indonesia chairmanship to ensure that the AOIP puts forward a unified regional response to current and pertinent security challenges.

On the economic cooperation side, Indonesia plans to implement the economic and connectivity cooperation envisaged under the AOIP by hosting the [Indo-Pacific Infrastructure and Connectivity Forum](#) in 2023. This forum aims to be an inclusive forum to connect ASEAN member states with all their partners, such as the United States, China, Japan, the European Union and other countries with a stake in the Indo-Pacific. It also has the objective of bridging existing infrastructural initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative and the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework so that funding is channelled constructively, and the competitive dynamic can be reduced. With this inclusive ASEAN-led initiative, Jakarta hopes that it can emphasise ASEAN centrality and inclusivity in the Indo-Pacific.

Finally, ASEAN needs to enhance defence cooperation as well as exercises involving all member states. For instance, the expanded [Garuda Shield exercise](#), which Indonesia co-organised with the United States in 2022, mainly involved Australia, Japan and Singapore, in addition to several observer nations, and conspicuously excluded China. Therefore, Indonesia can consider formulating a more inclusive defence cooperation initiative or military training exercise that will include the militaries of all ASEAN member states, a feat that has yet to be achieved.

AOIP and Jokowi's Foreign Policy Legacy

Operationalising the AOIP during the Indonesian chairmanship could be a major foreign policy legacy for Jokowi. Beyond the infrastructure and connectivity forum, a comprehensive strategy on the implementation of the AOIP has yet to be formulated. The implementing strategy should involve a concrete multi-year workplan and solicit resources from ASEAN member states. As the largest member of ASEAN, Indonesia's efforts to drive a comprehensive implementation strategy for the AOIP will be key to overcoming the regional grouping's collective action problems.

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