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ASEAN Maritime Outlook: An Idea Whose Time Has Come?

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SYNOPSIS

*Indonesia recently tabled a concept paper on the ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO), an idea it had mooted last year. **GILANG KEMBARA** and **JANE CHAN** note that it may be too ambitious to expect the AMO to be finalised during Indonesia's chairmanship of ASEAN, but they believe there is much that Indonesia can do to lay the groundwork for the AMO to move forward.*

COMMENTARY

In November 2022, Indonesia's foreign minister, Retno Marsudi, raised the prospect of an [ASEAN Maritime Outlook](#) (AMO) in a speech at the 25th meeting of the ASEAN Political and Security Council (APSC) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Since then, few details of what the AMO would entail have been revealed. However, FM Marsudi did make clear that the AMO would not only focus on maritime security, which suggests that its scope would be significantly broad ranging. This bodes well for its feasibility, given the multifarious perspectives on maritime issues among ASEAN's members. The need to develop an AMO was raised again during the [ASEAN Foreign Ministers Retreat \(AMMR\) convened in Jakarta](#) in February 2023, when a concept paper that Indonesia tabled was adopted.

The [Concept Paper on the Development of AMO](#) outlines how the AMO could be formulated under the Indonesian chairmanship. It sets out the fundamental aspects of the AMO, including what can be expected of it. Referring to the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), the document also sets out to advance priorities already laid out in the AOIP.

What It May Entail

Commentators suggest that the AMO will most likely be a stocktake exercise to review ASEAN's existing maritime-related mechanisms. While it may not be the grand policy or strategy document that critics from within and outside ASEAN had called for, the AMO will still be an important and much-needed endeavour for ASEAN. The last time a review was done on the status of existing ASEAN and ASEAN-led maritime mechanisms and initiatives was in 2008.

The maritime priorities of individual ASEAN member states differ and have evolved over time. New priorities have emerged in the past two decades, especially as climate and environment matters were finally recognised as urgent and got some attention within the region. Marine plastic, ecotourism, blue economy, just to name a few issues, have led to some discussions about new regional initiatives. But it took a pandemic, and possibly a war, to force states to rethink their maritime policy at the national level, and now at the regional level too.

The AMO is likely to highlight the significance of each of the maritime issues that ASEAN observes under its various sectoral bodies. Currently, there is no sectoral ministerial body dedicated to maritime affairs. Thus, by underlining the work that ASEAN's sectoral bodies have done to alleviate various maritime issues, the AMO will help to gain further insight into whether there is a need to streamline several issues into a single overarching topic or add emerging issues into the fray.

On top of that, the AMO could accentuate maritime cooperation between ASEAN and other multilateral organisations owing to the fluidity of maritime issues that often transcend geopolitical boundaries. In some ways, the AOIP has already laid the path forward for ASEAN to link up with subregional organisations such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA). By clearly outlining ASEAN's maritime priorities, the common maritime agendas will become more apparent. Furthermore, the Indo-Pacific has seen the advent of minilateral groupings that seek to advocate maritime issues, the QUAD – involving the United States, Japan, India, and Australia – being one of them.



While the ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO) may not be the grand policy or strategy many have called for, it will still be an important endeavour for ASEAN in reviewing existing maritime-related mechanisms, highlighting the maritime issues it observes under its various sectoral bodies and emphasising maritime cooperation with other multilateral organisations. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

What It May Not Be

The AOIP has received strong criticism as to its practical value, with critics usually pointing to the lack of deliverables or tangible outcomes. Supporters counter that critics may have misinterpreted the intent and purpose of the AOIP: the AOIP was by no means intended as a strategy to guide ASEAN through the intricacy of great power rivalry, but rather to establish key areas of cooperation that could be integrated with the Indo-Pacific strategies of ASEAN's dialogue partners. In line with this view, the same should be expected of the AMO; the document will not provide a blueprint for ASEAN's maritime strategy.

ASEAN's broad maritime perspectives arise from the differing maritime priorities of its member states. The 10, and soon to become 11, ASEAN member states have specific maritime issues that need to be tackled. There are very few issues that can mobilise "whole-of-ASEAN" action. For example, the problem of illegal migration in the Andaman Sea is being managed mainly by its littorals.

It is also unlikely that the AMO will introduce new mechanisms or platforms to carry out its intended purposes since various maritime-related mechanisms are already in place, such as the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF), the ASEAN Regional Forum's Intersessional Meeting (ARF-ISM) on Maritime Security, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) Experts' Working Group on Maritime Security.

Starting on the Right Foot

It may be too ambitious to expect the AMO to be finalised during Indonesia's chairmanship. But much can be done by Indonesia to pave the way forward. Indonesia must utilise its chairmanship effectively to communicate to the other ASEAN members its rationale for mooted the AMO. The February 2023 AMMR was a good start to get the idea across the table, especially with the adoption of the [Concept Paper on the Development of AMO](#). As no specific deadline or timeline has been set for the delivery of the first draft, it may be useful to consider setting some tangible milestones even beyond Indonesia's chairmanship.

To that end, Indonesia must ensure that the initiative is carried out by the next ASEAN chair, possibly by utilising the Troika mechanism to maintain the momentum of the AMO in the overall ASEAN agenda. Moreover, the AMO would need an existing ASEAN mechanism to push its agenda. The most relevant ASEAN mechanism to host deliberations on the AMO would be the AMF and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (E-AMF) that follows. Discussion of the AMO could provide an impetus to reinvigorate both the AMF and E-AMF processes.

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