

ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and China: Grand Vision or Disillusion?

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Abstract

In light of the heightened attention on the Indo-Pacific in recent years, this article examines the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and geopolitical developments in the region, and considers the question of whether the Outlook is a forward-looking proposal or an overly idealistic proposal that has limited potential for success. The AOIP is unique in the sense that ASEAN did not have a statement that is concerned with developments in the Indo-Pacific before the Outlook came along. Noting the described context, this article looks into the AOIP in six parts. Part one observes the development of IPS and considers whether the AOIP is ASEAN's unique Indo-Pacific response. Part two highlights the main points of the AOIP. Part three turns to observe the AOIP's strategic vision and some challenges that the Outlook may confront. Part four considers the China factor and the opportunities and challenges that Beijing brings. Part five looks at the alignment between the AOIP and IPS and the security implications of such alignment. This article concludes with some thoughts on the prospects of the AOIP.

Keywords: *ASEAN Outlook, Indo-Pacific Strategy, Geopolitics, Alignment*

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1. Introduction

In the past three decades, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has played an important role in advancing regional integration in Asia while serving as a platform for multilateral dialogues. As the longest-running regional multilateral institution in Asia, like its European counterpart, ASEAN seeks to influence the region through the creation and diffusion of norms that shape state actions. Noting ASEAN's unique role, in a neighborhood of competing powers including China and the United States among others, Southeast Asia has come to be seen as a region that contributes to the maintenance of peace and stability by keeping the powers in check. Correspondingly, Southeast Asia's strategic location and booming economies have also encouraged strategic competition for influence among external powers. It is in such a complicated environment that the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) was proposed.

In the 34th ASEAN Summit held in Bangkok, Thailand in 2019, member states adopted the AOIP, which seeks to promote peace, stability, and prosperity by focusing on cooperation rather than rivalry. The AOIP came at a time when competition between China and the US intensified, and bilateral relations dwindled sharply. Washington challenged Beijing in the South China Sea based on the principle of freedom of navigation, and Beijing responded with land reclamation efforts in the region to advance its territorial interests. The AOIP echoed the US establishment of the so-called Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) under President Donald Trump and oriented Southeast Asia towards the Indo-Pacific region as well. In 2019, the AOIP stands among a series of similar policy proposals from external powers that centered on the Indo-Pacific.

In light of the heightened attention on the Indo-Pacific in recent years, this article examines the AOIP and geopolitical developments in the region, and considers the question of whether the Outlook is a forward-looking proposal or an overly idealistic proposal that has limited potential for success. The AOIP is unique in the sense that ASEAN did not have a statement that is concerned with developments in the Indo-Pacific before the Outlook came along. With the proposal of the AOIP, ASEAN joins the ranks of the US, Japan, South Korea, the European Union, France, Germany, and Canada, among other stakeholders that boast an IPS. The fact that Southeast Asia is emphasized in the respective strategies proposed by the various powers makes the investigation into the AOIP interesting – how

does ASEAN see and position itself within the Indo-Pacific, and how does the AOIP relate to other IPS?

Existing studies on the IPS generally adopt a statistical approach or explore the topic as part of a systemic competition between powers. For example, Manning (2018), Scott (2019a), Koga (2019), Rajagopalan (2020), Taylor (2020), Mohan (2020) and Holland (2021), among others have all examined the IPS in terms of national interests. From a wider perspective, Paskal (2021) assesses the IPS from a comparative viewpoint, looking into the respective strategies of the US, the United Kingdom, France, India, Tonga, Japan, and China. Similar to Paskal, Aryal and Nair (2025), who examine the strategies of respective powers, namely India, Japan, the US, and Australia, but argue from the standpoint of defensive realism that the differences among the players. Hu (2020), meanwhile, analyzes the IPS from a strategic competition approach between the US and China. Noting the established literature, this article seeks to contribute to the discussions by centering attention on ASEAN, which is often assumed to be a passive receiver of the IPS, and turning the tables to observe ASEAN's contribution to the discussions on issues other than geopolitics. This article argues that in contrast with other established strategies, the AOIP is not a geopolitical strategy aimed at containing China. The AOIP, rather, is a vision that seeks to highlight ASEAN's central role in advancing peace and cooperation in the region, which in turn projects the Outlook as a complementary rather than a contradictory blueprint to other parallel strategies and initiatives.

This article looks into the AOIP in six parts. Part one observes the development of IPS and considers whether the AOIP is ASEAN's unique Indo-Pacific response. Part two highlights the main points of the AOIP. Part three turns to observe the AOIP's strategic vision and some challenges that the Outlook may confront. Part four considers the China factor and the opportunities and challenges that Beijing brings. Part five looks at the alignment between the AOIP and IPS and the security implications of such alignment. This article concludes with some thoughts on the prospects of the AOIP.

2. Indo-Pacific Strategy, ASEAN Version?

Not long after the election of US President Donald Trump in 2016, Washington expanded its strategy towards Asia to include the Indian Ocean, establishing the so-called "Indo-Pacific Strategy" (IPS). The IPS was built on

the previous Barack Obama administration's strategy of "rebalance to Asia," which centered on balancing China's increasing influence by reconsolidating regional partnerships and commencing new relations with states in the region (De Castro, 2018). The IPS carried over to the succeeding Joe Biden administration in 2020 and has since served as the guiding strategy for US policy towards China under the concept of "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP).

In light of Washington's strategic turn towards the Indo-Pacific region, in the past decade, a number of states, including Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Canada, France, and Germany, have followed in the shadow of the US and established their respective IPS. Regardless of the differences in content, a common theme among the various Indo-Pacific Strategies is the importance of the Indo-Pacific and China's central role in the region. Centered on the two oceans, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, the IPS highlights India and its potentially critical role of balancing China from South Asia (Choong, 2019).

It is against the described geopolitical backdrop that the AOIP came about. Proposed at the ASEAN Summit in June 2019, the AOIP notes that Southeast Asia lies in the center of the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, and therefore, "it is in the interest of ASEAN to lead the shaping of their economic and security architecture" (ASEAN, 2021). In a sense, the AOIP can be considered as a response to the series of IPS initiated by external powers, as a major part of the IPS concerns Southeast Asia, it is fitting that ASEAN should respond with an initiative that stems from the region. A brief survey of ASEAN member states suggested that the AOIP has overall support from all the states except Myanmar, which continues to engage in a domestic civil war.

Some observers have pondered over whether the AOIP should be considered as ASEAN's version of the IPS (Acharya, 2019; Lin, 2023). Several reasons suggest that while the Outlook is oriented towards the Indo-Pacific, it is not a complete strategy in any sense. For example, the fact that the AOIP does not lay out concrete details concerning the advancement of cooperation makes it a forward-looking vision rather than a strategy. Without descriptions of the actual steps leading to cooperation, the content of the AOIP becomes overly general and rhetorical at times (Chong, 2019). On the other hand, in contrast with the IPS, the AOIP does not have an anti-China component. As such, the AOIP does not consider China in a negative light

nor target other states with a hostile eye. Absence of an open enemy makes the AOIP stand out, as potential competition and conflict are largely ruled out. Without an established enemy or competitor, the AOIP may need to identify new challenges over time in order to sustain its relevance.

The fact that the AOIP stems from ASEAN and is established under the ASEAN framework suggests that the concept can be understood as an addition to the integration or regionalism that strongly characterizes Southeast Asia. ASEAN has played a major role in the advancement of regionalism in Asia in the post-Cold War period, a development that gained traction in the 1990s following the so-called “first wave regionalism” that developed in Europe during the Cold War. In contrast with first wave regionalism that emphasizes cooperation and spillover among countries within a region, second wave regionalism highlights cooperation with countries outside the region. ASEAN is an important contributor to second-wave regionalism; its role is exemplified by cooperation with neighboring countries to form institutions such as the ASEAN plus one and ASEAN plus three. Correspondingly, the AOIP can be considered in the same vein, as it offers a basis for existing partners to deepen cooperation with ASEAN and potential partners to create and expand relations with Southeast Asia.

3. Highlighting the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific

Upon closer examination of the AOIP, one may find the vision to be well-intentioned and cooperation-driven. Besides adding another perspective to developments in the Indo-Pacific, the AOIP suggests that ASEAN would like to play a central role in the region, “provid[ing] ballast for the current dynamism” and “provid[ing] added value to the existing regional arrangements” (ASEAN, 2021). As such, the adopted approach of the AOIP is different from the IPS in the sense that it openly seeks cooperation and does not establish specific partners for cooperation. In contrast with the AOIP, the US has explicitly stated that its approach towards the Indo-Pacific “draws from and aligns with those of our close friends..... like Japan, India, Australia, South Korea, ASEAN, New Zealand, United Kingdom, France, and the European Union” (White House, 2022). Based on the AOIP, ASEAN remains open to new partnerships and seeks to play a complementary role to other regional organizations and institutions.

The emphasis on ASEAN Centrality can be observed as another objective of the AOIP. Instead of seeking to replace, the AOIP will further

strengthen and optimize ASEAN-led mechanisms, including the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defense Minister Meeting Plus, Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum, and ASEAN Plus One (ASEAN, 2021). In a sense, much like the IPS, the AOIP serves as guidelines and complements existing institutions. The fact that Outlook has a reduced focus on security suggests that it is less comprehensive than the IPS, which covers security and other cooperations. By establishing Indo-Pacific as the scope, however, it is clear that ASEAN seeks to establish its Outlook as a potential vision for all neighboring countries and extend its institutional and normative influence beyond Southeast Asia.

In terms of specific areas of cooperation, the AOIP sets maritime affairs, connectivity, sustainability, and economic and other potential areas as the prioritized fields. With the exception of maritime affairs, the described fields do not have strong regional security implications. Rather, connectivity, sustainability, and economics correspond with key developments in recent years that are led by China's initiation of the Belt and Road Initiative, and promotion of the related Digital Silk Road and Green Silk Road initiatives, which in turn generated other corresponding responses from the international community. For example, in contrast with the past, the establishment of infrastructure is a mainstay of the BRI. Noting the development of digital technologies and worsening of climate change in the past decade, through the digital and green silk roads, not only is infrastructure emphasized, but the demand that new infrastructure should be smart and environmentally friendly is also promoted. In the AOIP, in addition to the emphasis on infrastructure, the Outlook notes that "environmental and ecological impacts and considerations must be taken into account to ascertain sustainability in the long term" (ASEAN, 2021). The AOIP also notes the challenges of rapid urbanization and the utilization of the digital economy as a way to achieve sustainability.

4. Grand Vision or Disillusion?

Despite the vision that the AOIP boasts, noting other institutional and geopolitical developments in Southeast Asia, one should keep in mind some factors and be cautious when assessing the potential of the Outlook. First, the AOIP offers a visionary concept for cooperation, which cannot be in any way as rigid as the IPS. Hence, the AOIP should not be assessed in terms of the achievement of concrete goals over a short period of time (2-3 years), but should be assessed in terms of the advancement of cooperation

in the region and whether overall peace and stability are maintained over time. In this regard, the number of established agreements and treaties is only one indicator to consider; the lower incidence of conflict may be a more important indicator to account for. Second, unlike the IPS, the AOIP is not centered on security. Therefore, security should not be a criterion used for assessing the Outlook. Instead, one should look towards exchanges in trade and investment and connectivity initiatives in and beyond Southeast Asia.

While the AOIP makes Southeast Asia an active participant in the successive establishment of IPS by several states joining the race, it is worthwhile to note that ASEAN is chronically hindered by disagreements among its members. Territorial disputes in the South China Sea continue to bear on the relations of ASEAN members, particularly those who may still have outstanding sovereign claims in the waters. In addition, the AOIP dawns on three challenges.

First, in light of Europe's development of Indo-Pacific strategies in recent years – with France, Germany, and the European Union having respective IPS – whether Southeast Asia would adopt a similar path is unclear. Yet a clear implication of the development of multiple Indo-Pacific strategies is the challenge of increased strategic competition that may paradoxically undermine the goals set by the multilateral body. In the case of Southeast Asia, currently, only Indonesia boasts an independent IPS, specifically titled as the “Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept.” The IPCC promotes “cooperation, inclusiveness, transparency, and openness,” or principles that largely align with the goals laid out in the AOIP (Scott, 2019b). Of the states that have an established IPS, France and Japan have demonstrated great interest in strengthening relations with Indonesia, with both states boosting their defense cooperation with Indonesia (Laroche, 2025). Other states have not shown particular interest in Indonesia, and in the case of the US, under the second Donald Trump administration, US-Indonesia relations became destabilized as Washington and Jakarta renegotiated issues of tariffs and market access (Ghifari, 2025). As the example suggests, IPS remains a part of state foreign policy that is subject to the development of bilateral relations. While the AOIP and Indonesia's IPS largely align in interests, ASEAN's interests do not necessarily align with the US.

Second, noting the principle of “ASEAN Centrality,” the status of AOIP can only be a vision or strategy that positions ASEAN at the center. In terms

of economic cooperation in the Asia Pacific region, ASEAN Centrality is critical in the sense that ASEAN has played the important functional role of providing institutional platforms for the likes of China, Japan, and South Korea to discuss potential cooperation and mitigate disputes. However, regarding security topics, it is less clear what role ASEAN or the AOIP can play. In the AOIP, security is only mentioned three times - twice in relation to ASEAN and once in the context of maritime security (ASEAN, 2021). While the reserved mentioning of security differentiates the AOIP from the IPS, it also suggests that ASEAN's voice in the realm of security may be limited. Compared to the IPS, the AOIP risks being marginalized in the sense that it has little to say on security, while initiatives such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and ASEAN plus already hold important economic status, and the AOIP adds little to the progress of economic development in the region.

Third, in contrast with states that have an established IPS, the eleven member states of ASEAN support the AOIP. Despite the open support, besides Indonesia, it remains unclear whether the other ASEAN states have their respective conceptions of the Indo-Pacific, whether their ambition stretches as far as the Indo-Pacific, and whether support for the AOIP is simply support for a visionary statement rather than a concrete foreign strategy. While one can point to the EU as having an IPS as well, the fact that Europe is challenged by an ongoing war in Ukraine and its security is supported by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) suggests that its situation is markedly different from that of Southeast Asia (Camroux, 2008). For the EU, the Russo-Ukrainian War brought a common security challenge to the fore and provides reason for establishing a strategy that strengthens the EU's relationship with Asia, noting the interconnectivity of the world today. In the case of ASEAN, it is less clear whether member states share a common security threat or not. The usefulness of a common challenge is to unite states over a consensus and create a rally around the flag effect. Without an established challenge, in reality, the AOIP risks becoming a statement or declaration of well-intentioned principles that may become detached over time due to the lack of a clearly defined concern shared by all member states. The following Table 1 summarizes the content of the respective Indo-Pacific strategies and initiatives adopted by the main stakeholders in the region.

Table 1: Indo-Pacific Strategies and Initiatives (2016 - Present)

State / Regional Body	Year	Chief Focus	Key Areas for Cooperation
Association of Southeast Asian Nations	2019	Reinforce ASEAN centrality and promote a peaceful, open, and inclusive region.	maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development, and economic cooperation.
Japan	2016	Establish a rules-based order, economic prosperity through connectivity, and maritime security.	supply chains for critical minerals, digital governance, maritime law enforcement, disaster management, and infrastructure development.
United States	2017	Strengthen regional alliances and economic ties to maintain a free and open order.	resilient supply chains, clean energy transitions, cyber and technology partnerships, and maritime security.
Indonesia	2018	Maintain a free and active foreign policy, prioritize ASEAN centrality, economic development, and diplomatic dialogue to avoid choosing sides between major powers.	maritime security, connectivity, infrastructure development, economic resilience, and sustainable development.
France	2019	Maintain regional stability and a rules-based order.	defense/security, economy/connectivity, multilateralism, and environmental protection.
Germany	2020	Diversify partnerships away from over-dependence on China, strengthen economic ties, uphold a rules-based international order, and enhance security cooperation with democratic partners in the region.	maritime security, economic resilience, climate action, digital transformation, and sustainable development.
European Union	2021	Strengthen economic, environmental and security ties to promote a rules-based order.	sustainable prosperity, green transition, ocean governance, digital partnerships, connectivity, security/defense, and human security.
Canada	2022	Strengthen regional ties; prioritize economic growth, security, and sustainable development.	peace and security, trade and supply chain resilience, people-to-people ties, and green growth.

Source: Self-Compiled by author

5. Dealing with China and the Belt and Road Initiative

Since Xi Jinping succeeded as Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party in 2013, China's ambition towards Southeast Asia has grown steadily. In the South China Sea where China and a number of Southeast Asian countries share territorial disputes, Beijing's belligerence increased. In addition to faceoffs in regional waters, China carried out land reclamation projects while adopting gray zone strategies to harass and intimidate states in the region (Chen et al., 2024). Most recently, in August 2025, two Chinese military vessels attempted to intercept a Philippine patrol boat operating near the Scarborough Shoal, which added to tensions between Beijing and Manila (Barona, 2025). In the following month (September), near the disputed Scarborough Shoal, Chinese Coast Guard vessels fired water cannon at Philippine vessels (News Agencies, 2025). The incident happened within days after the Philippines, Japan, and the US carried out joint military exercises in the South China Sea.

Some observers argue that China sees Southeast Asia as its backyard and attempts to establish its own Monroe Doctrine in the region, echoing the historical experience of the US in Latin America. While China has repeatedly dismissed such claims and stressed its stance of "not seek[ing] alignment, confrontation, hegemony and expansion, and not to use force" (PRC State Council Information Office, 2019), its adopted actions in the South China Sea suggest otherwise. However, regardless of the doubts, China continues to maintain good economic and cultural relations with Southeast Asia – a development that goes well with the BRI, China's proposed project to integrate with the world. Southeast Asia is a critical segment of the BRI, which extends from China to Europe and connects states in Eurasia and the Indian Ocean through infrastructural developments (Bharti & Kumari, 2024).

In light of China's belligerence and expansion, the AOIP, if taken as a response to changing geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific, harbors multiple meanings that are worth noting. As mentioned previously, the AOIP is not anti-China, nor does it make China its focus. As such, the Outlook is not aimed at pushing China away or excluding China from potential cooperation. Rather, the AOIP suggests that Southeast Asia is open to cooperation with partners in the Asia-Pacific and beyond, including China. From an alternative perspective, the AOIP does not contradict the BRI in the sense that connectivity is highlighted as a key area for cooperation. Based on the

ASEAN vision on Connectivity, Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025, and the Declaration of the Sixth East Asia Summit on ASEAN Connectivity, AOIP emphasizes the importance of realizing connectivity through the establishment of infrastructures and people-to-people linkages (ASEAN, 2021). The AOIP and BRI clearly overlap in the aim of connectivity, which generates potential for cooperation and exchanges.

Another highlight in the AOIP is the emphasis on the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030 and other areas of cooperation that include South-South cooperation, digital economy, climate change, and disaster risk reduction and management (ASEAN, 2021). The Outlook's emphasis largely aligns with China's four "global initiatives" (4GIs) that are proposed by Xi Jinping in recent years, namely the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) and Global Governance Initiative (GGI). Specifically, in the GDI, which was launched in September 2021, China commits itself to the UN SDGs 2030. In the GSI, which was launched in April 2022, China identifies food security, energy security, and climate change as prioritized areas for cooperation (Xi, 2022). The highlighted categories for cooperation echo Southeast Asia's position. Meanwhile, China also makes a particular statement on ASEAN that aims to "support and improve the ASEAN-centered regional security cooperation mechanism and architecture" (Xi, 2022). In terms of sustainability and non-traditional security, China and ASEAN seem to share many similar goals.

Nonetheless, despite overlapping aims, a major obstacle that may stand in the way of cooperation between ASEAN and China is maritime affairs, which is another prioritized area for cooperation in the AOIP. The Outlook notes "unresolved maritime disputes that have the potential for open conflict," and "the need to prevent, manage and eventually resolve these issues in a more focused, peaceful and comprehensive way" (ASEAN, 2021). While China is not explicitly mentioned in the AOIP, existing tensions in the South China Sea hint at a difference between the Outlook and the BRI. Even though both initiatives may stress the importance of maritime cooperation, spanning areas such as the peaceful settlement of disputes, sustainable management of marine resources, marine pollution, sea level rise, and marine science collaboration, outstanding sovereign issues remain in the South China Sea between China and other claimants in the region. Whether the AOIP would continue to have relevance as China expands into

the Indian Ocean through the Maritime Silk Road remains an open-ended question worthy of continued observation.

6. Securitization of the AOIP and Geopolitical Challenges

Since ASEAN's adoption of the AOIP, its primary focus has been the promotion of cooperation while security affairs are de-emphasized. As previously noted, compared to the IPS, security is not the main priority of the AOIP. However, following the establishment of IPS by a number of states, the fact that many of the states seek to cooperate with ASEAN pulls Southeast Asia away from neutrality and in the direction of confrontation with China. As security is the focus of the IPS, by not turning away cooperation with states that boast an established IPS, ASEAN inadvertently agrees to the security agenda of the IPS. In turn, Southeast Asian states may find themselves in the somewhat contradictory position of promoting ASEAN centrality and peace while also condoning the possibility of tensions and conflicts that may be generated by states outside the region.

The described scenario may possibly arise in the near future following the 2025 ASEAN Summit meeting in Malaysia that witnessed the attendance of Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi. By traveling to Malaysia in her first official trip abroad, Takaichi clearly established Southeast Asia as a priority in Japan's foreign policy (Tan, 2025). Such an emphasis is not a unique switch, as since former PM Shinzo Abe's second term, which commenced in 2012, Japan has prioritized engagement and cooperation with Southeast Asia. Just like Takaichi, Abe commenced his term by visiting the Southeast Asian state of Indonesia in his first trip abroad in January 2013 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2013). The highlight of the trip was the announcement of the Five Principles of Japan's ASEAN Diplomacy, which continues to serve as a cornerstone of Japan's policy towards Southeast Asia. Observers note that, as a close former aide of PM Abe, PM Takaichi may likely adopt similar policies to her predecessor (Suzuki, 2025).

It is noteworthy that in a statement after the 2025 ASEAN Summit meeting, PM Takaichi stated that "Japan advocates for a free and open Indo-Pacific and consistently supports the AOIP... which confirms [the] will to promote further cooperation between Japan and ASEAN" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2025). While advocating closer cooperation between Japan and ASEAN, by speaking of the IPS and AOIP together, Japan seems to have taken the initiative to suggest the advancement of

security cooperation as well. Such a proposal is supported by Japan's long-term efforts to improve Southeast Asia's capacity building cooperation in human resource development and technical assistance in defense-related fields. Towards the Philippines, for example, Japan has conducted training programmes on ship maintenance, while towards Vietnam, Japan has conducted several maritime security-related programmes, including disposing of underwater unexploded ordnance and underwater medicine (Shoji, 2024: 26-27). With both the Philippines and Vietnam, Japan has also extended capacity-building cooperation in coast guard training and exchange (Japan Coast Guard, 2024).

Without rejecting Japan's proposal to support both the IPS and AOIP, the latter becomes securitized in the sense that its goals align with the former, which includes an intention to balance China's rise and its expansion into the Indo-Pacific. Regardless of whether Southeast Asian states have the intention to balance against China or not, the alignment of interests between the IPS and AOIP inevitably signals that China is targeted. An alternative way of reading the alignment is to consider the IPS as providing concrete strategic content for the AOIP, despite the fact that the additions may not be fully agreed upon by all Southeast Asian states. The implication of alignment is to assume that Japan and ASEAN share similar thoughts towards China and seek to jointly balance against China. By strengthening the security aspects of the IPS and AOIP, China falls into the dark light of a potential aggressor that may threaten regional order. It remains to be observed how ASEAN states would respond when conflict concerning China and Japan breaks out in the near future, for example, in the South or East China Sea.

7. Conclusion

This article briefly surveys the AOIP and the potential opportunities and challenges that it brings for Southeast Asia. The Outlook is distinctly different from the established IPS outside the region in the sense that security is not its main focus, which creates space for cooperation with China among other countries, while also casting doubts as to the meaning and direction of the statement. By not openly making China the target, the AOIP provides space for expanding cooperation with China, noting that the Outlook also places emphasis on connectivity, sustainability, and economics. Such a position goes well with China's established position of ASEAN Centrality. However, the AOIP is challenged when states with established IPS outside

the region seek cooperation with Southeast Asia. As the IPS targets China, cooperation with other states becomes paradoxical. While ASEAN can choose to remain silent on issues that involve Chinese interests, such a strategy may generate misunderstandings when other interested parties decide to take the lead and assume ASEAN support. In other words, ASEAN states may be forced to choose a side even if they do not want to.

Noting the position of ASEAN, concerning the future of the AOIP, several developments warrant continued observation. First, geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific will continue to implicate the AOIP, particularly in terms of issues related to China. Should the frequency and intensity of tensions or conflicts that involve China increase, the minimal security focus in the Outlook may be enlarged, which may in turn balance out or even overshadow the general emphasis on cooperation. In this sense, the AOIP may become increasingly similar to other established IPS and lose its uniqueness. Second, in light of the fact that Indonesia has the IPCC, as the Indo-Pacific continues to be prone to rising tensions, more states in Southeast Asia may introduce or consider developing independent Indo-Pacific strategies. The Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam are potential candidates in this regard. Without a doubt, the Indo-Pacific will become excessively complex following the increased number of IPS.

Finally, as described earlier, the AOIP's emphasis on cooperation echoes well with the BRI. However, as the growth of the Chinese economy begins to slow, a corresponding question that emerges is whether ASEAN can begin to take the lead in identified areas for cooperation, such as connectivity, sustainability, and economics. As a relatively new outlook, the AOIP can gain influence only through ASEAN, making efforts to take the lead in promoting the Outlook and pushing for cooperation. If the AOIP is to have continued relevance in the near future, ASEAN members will need to consider taking up a stronger leadership role in the region. Without a determination to promote the AOIP and step into some of the vacuum for cooperation that are opened up due to China's slowing economy, the AOIP may remain visionary and risk losing significance over time.

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