

Research Article

# Strengthening ASEAN's Stabilizing Role via ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific

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## Abstract

The Indo-Pacific has become at the forefront of geostrategic rivalry between the United States and China, which has implications for region's political, security and economic stability. As the only regional institution with multilateral capacity in the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN faces the challenge of maintaining its neutrality while strengthening its centrality. This context explains how, through the 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), ASEAN seeks to reinforce its stabilizing role by adopting preventive, mitigative, and adaptive strategies in response to regional power shifts. Using a descriptive qualitative method and the statement of strategy concept contextualized with neorealism, this study analyses the AOIP is an ASEAN's strategic response to regional power competition between the great powers. The finding shows that AOIP, as neutral framework, aims to foster cooperation in various sectors, including industry. ASEAN's neutrality is also tested in policymaking, particularly among Southeast Asia members, as it strives to manage tension between major powers while maintaining its coherence, relevance and influence in the evolving Indo Pacific order.

Keywords: AOIP, ASEAN, Indo-Pacific, Rivalry, Centrality

## INTRODUCTION

Since 2007, the Indo-Pacific has been proposed as a geographical construction by Gurpreet S. Khurana, an ocean strategist and executive director of the National Ocean Foundation in New Delhi. This concept encompasses the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions (Herindrasti, 2019). Indo-Pacific has been used to replace the earlier term Asia-Pacific, with a particular emphasis on water-connected regions. The term Indo-Pacific has become central in discussions of maritime geopolitics, security, trade, and environmental issues (Pangestu, Hikmawan, and Fathun, 2021). Geographically, the Indo-Pacific is in a very strategic position and has significant economic value because it links between major countries such as the United States, Japan, Russia, China, and ASEAN member countries. About 20% of the earth's total sea surface area, totaling 73.56 million square miles, falls within this region, which includes the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The geographical location of the Indo-Pacific makes it essential as a highly strategic international shipping lane (Sukmadewi, 2020). As a significant trade route, The Indo-Pacific transports about 32.2 million barrels of crude oil annually and accounts for about 40% of the mineral resources exported globally. Due to its

excellent economic value, the region is the focus of competition among several countries' interests, including the United States and China (Banyu, 2018).

The Indo-Pacific has attracted more attention, especially after Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept in 2016. Japan's 2016 FOIP is not a sudden change in policy, but a construction derived from gradual structural changes in Asia's strategic balance and Japan's response. The main objective of FOIP is to establish and consolidate a regional order in the Indo-Pacific based on the existing international order and rules (Koga, 2020). In the 2017, Donald Trump also adopted the Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept that had been announced earlier by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The US FOIP aims to maintain a rules-based regional order in the Indo-Pacific. However, will have the opposite effect, provoking China, alarming other smaller states, and pushing the region towards a taut zero-sum competition. This signals a significant geopolitical shift for the United States, which previously focused on Central Asia, towards a greater focus on the Indo-Pacific region (Nurmawati et al., 2022).

The articulation of FOIP by the United States can be considered a response to the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) that China has previously implemented in the Indo-Pacific. This created a rivalry dynamic between the region's two countries (Ramsi et al., 2023). The existence of FOIP can ultimately be considered as the first step for the United States to strengthen its barrier strategy against China's rise and to reconstruct the regional order in the Indo-Pacific (Pangestu, Hikmawan and Fathun, 2021). Countries in the Indo-Pacific, all of which border either the Indian Ocean or the Pacific Ocean, are seeking to strengthen their strategic entanglements by enhancing maritime connectivity through quality infrastructure development, promoting free and fair trade, safeguarding the sustainability of marine resources, confronting climate change, and facilitating digital connectivity, marine safety, and maritime security. However, despite having common goals in the Indo-Pacific context, there are differences in approaches between countries to the conception and development of the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, efforts are needed to maximize convergence in various areas of cooperation to achieve overall peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region (Pransiska, 2023).

ASEAN, as the only institution in the Indo-Pacific region, responded according to the national interests of each of its member states. This results in a fragmentation of alignments, forming three groups: countries that support US policies, countries that support China's policies, and countries that remain neutral (Ramsi et al., 2023). These perceptions led to the realization that a strengthened role for ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific was needed to overcome the impact of these rivalries. The aim is to enable ASEAN to maintain constructive cooperation without becoming beholden to any single party (Nurmawati et al., 2022). Originally proposed by Indonesia in 2013, aiming to make ASEAN a "host" in the Indo-Pacific region, the AOIP has been issued by ASEAN as a diplomatic strategy in response to the need to bridge the interests of countries in the Southeast Asian region. At the 34th Bangkok Summit on June 23, 2019, after 18 months of Jakarta's lobbying, ASEAN leaders formally adopted Indonesia's proposed ASEAN view on the Indo-Pacific (Anwar, 2020).

After it was officially adopted in 2019, there were significant challenges in its practical implementation. The increasingly intense competition between the United States and China complicates ASEAN's ability to strengthen its cohesion and consensus, which are the main principles of AOIP. Differences in priorities, interests, and challenges among ASEAN members create a rather complex situation in implementing AOIP in the region. The proximity of several ASEAN countries to China or the United States weakens internal unity, making it difficult for ASEAN to function as a cohesive bloc. This should decline ASEAN and AOIP's collective influence in the Indo-Pacific geopolitical dynamic (Teo et al., 2023). Gill (2023) states that AOIP is a positive step for ASEAN, but it lacks binding commitments for its members and a clear operational mechanism, making AOIP merely a diplomatic vision rather than clarifying ASEAN's firm stance in the Indo-Pacific. This implementation challenge raises questions about how effectively AOIP achieves its goal of strengthening ASEAN's centrality and role as a geopolitical regional stabilizer in the Indo-Pacific.

Basically, the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) is ASEAN's concept for building a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region, with ASEAN as the main actor (ASEAN, 2023). In addition, the important elements of the AOIP view of the Indo-Pacific are a perspective that views the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions not as contiguous territorial spaces, but rather as an integrated and closely interconnected region, with ASEAN playing a strategic role; an Indo-Pacific region that promotes dialogue and cooperation, not competition; an Indo-Pacific region that promotes development and prosperity for all; and the importance of maritime domains and perspectives in the evolving regional architecture (Yadav, 2022). In realizing the important elements of the AOIP, ASEAN agreed to cooperate in various fields, namely: (1) maritime cooperation is a challenge that countries in the ASEAN and Indo-Pacific region will face such as unresolved maritime disputes and sustainable exploitation of maritime resources; (2) linking connectivity to achieve seamless and comprehensive connections and integrity in the ASEAN and Indo-Pacific region that will foster competitiveness, inclusiveness, and a sense of community; (3) the UN Sustainable Development 2030 is in line with the common goal of realizing the SDGs under the AOIP which will be a great contribution in the region to the global community; (4) economy and other areas of cooperation (ASEAN, 2019). Through the AOIP, ASEAN not only aims to maintain balance but also to become a bridge between ASEAN's interests and the major powers in the Indo-Pacific, namely China and the United States (Ramsi et al., 2023).

The AOIP provides guidance for ASEAN's participation in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean region, which in cooperation activities can be pursued through ASEAN-led mechanisms, including ASEAN+1, ASEAN+3, East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) as platforms for dialogue and implementation of AOIP cooperation. This reflects the belief that existing mechanisms are sufficient to address challenges in the region (Anwar, 2020). The AOIP aims to strengthen ASEAN's centrality amid competing superpower debates over the emerging Indo-Pacific architecture. ASEAN

seeks to avoid superpower dominance from undermining its centrality and governance mechanisms to ensure a sustainable region that is conflict-free and driven by broad and stable economic growth (Ramsi et al., 2023). As a central organization, ASEAN has maintained stability in Southeast Asia aimed at geopolitical changes in the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean, driven by economic growth, bringing benefits and challenges (ASEAN, 2023).

Previous research has explained ASEAN's potential and limitations in the Indo-Pacific. Anwar (2020) highlights Indonesia's perspective on the Indo-Pacific through the AOIP, emphasizing ASEAN centrality, inclusivity, and cooperation amid growing geopolitical competition. Furthermore, Anwar also points out the challenges that ASEAN might face, including internal divisions, lack of enforcement mechanisms, and the influence of major powers like the United States and China. On the other hand, Mueller (2021) explained how ASEAN members used AOIP as a framework mechanism to balance their relationship with external powers. This explanation, supported by Ramsi (2023) evaluated the AOIP strategy's effectiveness, examining how it bridges diverse regional interests and impacts ASEAN members and major powers within the Indo-Pacific region. It suggests that the AOIP framework effectively bridges these interests and promotes regional stability. Furthermore, Yoshimatsu (2023) focuses on ASEAN's role in dealing with rivalries between major Asian and Indo-Pacific powers. It highlights ASEAN's commitment to preserving its centrality and upholding a rules-based order in the region despite challenges posed by major powers.

In the face of the Indo-Pacific geography, ASEAN, which is located at the center of the Indo-Pacific, should have a vital role in regional politics. In other words, ASEAN should be in the "driving seat" of Indo-Pacific regional politics. Which can then take the initiative in discussing and dealing with issues related to its members and shape the development of these issues so that they can be controlled. Amid the potential threat of fragmentation among the members, ASEAN, as the only regional organization in the region, is inevitably required to have a framework to ensure that it remains central in the face of a geopolitical uncertainty situation. Referring to the previous literature review, this research will examine how AOIP as a strategic statement can enhance the unity of its members and show to external parties that ASEAN remains central and inclusive.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative research method that focuses on information and description presented in words, supported by clear, analytical questions to draw conclusions. In addition, this research is descriptive in nature (Creswell, 2012) and uses a literature-based inquiry. Data interpretation is conducted through review techniques, which involves analyzing and synthesizing relevant literature to the research topic. Qualitative data analysis is used, as the data consists of textual rather than statistical information. The analysis follows the model by Miles and Huberman, consisting of three components, namely data reduction, data presentation, conclusion drawing, and verification. These components interact in a

continuous, cyclical process before, during, and after data collection (Sugiyono, 2015).

## **ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

This research uses the conceptual framework of statement of strategy. Historically, the development strategic statement reflects how states and other international actors articulate their plans, policies, and goals at the global level. According to Lawrence Freedman, a statement of strategy is a document or statement that provides a structured framework for understanding and organizing the relationship between ends, ways, and means in an effort to achieve national or organizational goals (Freedman, 2013).

First, “ends” are the end goals that the strategy aims to achieve. These are long-term desired goals and specific outcomes. Relating to ASEAN creating an initiative called AOIP. ASEAN does not want the dominant influence of superpower interests to dictate ASEAN as a centralized entity. Second, “ways” are the approaches and methods that will be used to achieve the goals that have been set. The method ASEAN uses in implementing AOIP in the Indo-Pacific is to enhance ASEAN's role in regional multilateral cooperation meetings and coordination through ASEAN-led institutions, namely high-level meetings and multilateral negotiations to discuss strategic issues, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS). Third, “means” refer to the resources that will be used to support the means in achieving the goals. Means refer to the various resources and tools used by ASEAN to achieve its strategic goals. These include key elements such as human resources, financial resources, institutions, and diplomatic power needed to support strategy implementation and achieve ASEAN's objectives in the Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific region. Linking Lawrence Freedman's "statement of strategy" with the AOIP illustrates how ASEAN formulates and implements strategies to strengthen its role in the Indo-Pacific region.

This research also contextualizes the neorealist approach to explaining the complexity and dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region, characterized by the anarchic nature of the international system, where no overarching authority governs interstate behavior. The strategic rivalry between the United States and China generates structural pressures for regional actors, including ASEAN. This aligns with the neorealism approach, which argues that power distribution in an anarchic system shapes state behavior and influences international interactions (Williams, 2018). The formulation of AOIP by ASEAN can be understood as a form of hedging strategy against the structural pressures resulting from major regional power rivalries (Anwar, 2023). ASEAN strives to maintain regional stability and autonomy through multilateral cooperation, emphasizing the principle of neutrality (Amin, 2024).

While the international system is inherently anarchic, lacking central authority to comprehensively enforce rules, neorealists argue that international cooperation is still achievable. Axelrod and Keohane (1985) explain that such cooperation in international politics hinges on the ability of states to leverage

international institutions and frameworks to stabilize state behavior and mitigate uncertainty. AOIP represents a strategic initiative by ASEAN to address the challenges posed by the anarchic international landscape in the Indo-Pacific region. By establishing principles and institutional frameworks, AOIP aims to enhance regional cooperation despite the ongoing rivalry among great powers (Anwar, 2020). Through AOIP, ASEAN creates a space for cooperation amidst conflicting interests and serves as a collective platform for managing interstate relations peacefully. These conditions show that even in anarchy, institutionalization through regional regimes like AOIP can be an important mechanism in creating and maintaining long-term cooperation. Through a neorealist approach, ASEAN's behavior reflects a rational effort to achieve security and stability and its influence in a competitive and uncertain international environment due to great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific.

## **RESULT AND ANALYSIS**

### **ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific Era**

In 1967, ASEAN was established with the aim of bringing together Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand to address potential conflicts, enhance the development process, and promote political, economic, and social stability in Southeast Asia. Its membership expanded rapidly in the late 1990s following the resolution of the conflict in Cambodia and the normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam. After the formation of ASEAN, many other countries joined ASEAN, namely Brunei (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos, Myanmar (1997), Cambodia (1999), and Timor Leste (2022) which expanded ASEAN's scope in the region (Maizland & Albert, 2021).

The impetus for the formation of ASEAN arose from the desire to create a stable and prosperous region in Southeast Asia, address potential conflict, and enhance the development process. The creation of the Bangkok Declaration, signed by the five founding foreign ministers of ASEAN, set out the main goals of the organization. These objectives include accelerating economic growth, maintaining peace and stability, enhancing cooperation in various fields, and maintaining links with international organizations that share similar goals (Anwar, 2020). ASEAN's leadership system is highly inclusive and provides opportunities for every member state to take part in the organization's decision-making. ASEAN's organizational structure includes the ASEAN Summit: A high-level meeting of heads of state or government of member states, ASEAN Coordinating Council: A meeting of foreign ministers of ASEAN members who act as coordinators of the ASEAN Community Council and ASEAN Community Council: Meeting of ministers in charge.

In its function, ASEAN plays an important role in several other ways, namely, (1) maintaining regional peace and stability, which acts as a forum for dialogue and diplomacy to resolve disputes and conflicts between member countries peacefully, promoting mutual understanding and cooperation in the political, economic, social, and security fields; and (2) increasing regional economic integration, as ASEAN facilitates free trade through the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) which aims to create a single market in the region. Promote the flow of investment, goods,

services, and skilled labor among member states; (3) develop cooperation in various fields. ASEAN facilitates cooperation in the fields of socio-culture, education, environment, and tourism. Promote regional identity and awareness among ASEAN citizens; (4) strengthens regional and global bargaining power, ASEAN serves as a platform to unify member states' voices on regional and global issues. Serve as a dialogue partner with other major countries and international organizations; and (5) disaster management and emergency response: ASEAN facilitates coordination and cooperation in natural disaster management, food security, and public health.

In recent years, ASEAN has become an instrument for cooperation enhancement with outside countries and regional organizations, namely the United States, Australia, India, Japan, Canada, South Korea, Russia, New Zealand, China, the European Union, and the United Kingdom. ASEAN has also increased its active role in the international community, especially in various international forums, to enhance ASEAN's interests in the Indo-Pacific region. ASEAN has an important role in regulating security and stability in the region as well as increasing cooperation between countries, increasing trade, and improving security in the Indo-Pacific region (Bomassi, 2023).

ASEAN's view of the Indo-Pacific is based on the principles of strengthening ASEAN centrality, openness, transparency, inclusiveness, rules-based frameworks, good governance, respect for sovereignty, non-interference, complementarity with existing cooperation, prosperity, mutual respect, such as the UN charter, the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, other relevant UN treaties and conventions, the ASEAN charter, and various ASEAN treaties and agreements, as well as the EAS (East ASEAN Summit) principles for mutual benefit (ASEAN, 2019). ASEAN has shaped its collective activities based on specific norms adopted from its Indigenous cultural and political heritage, with a focus on a culture of diplomacy and great power management. However, ASEAN also faces various current and future challenges. These include the need to remain independent and effective as a regional stabilizer in maintaining peace and stability in Southeast Asia, including the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN must uphold its role and centrality in shaping the evolving regional architecture. Additionally, member states must address the social, political, and economic impacts of regional crises, which can heighten nationalism within individual countries. The global economic slowdown also presents a significant challenge, highlighting the need to strengthen institutional dialogue and cooperation among member states (Nuradhwati, 2020).

To support these activities, ASEAN presents an initiative called AOIP that can help run the norms that are formed. The establishment of AOIP, can create momentum to build strategic trust and mutually beneficial cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region and ASEAN (ASEAN, 2019). Of course, carrying out this initiative requires an arena to implement the objectives of creating the AOIP so there are several practical cooperation activities through ASEAN-led mechanisms, including the EAS (East Asia Summit), AIPF (ASEAN-Indo Pacific Forum), ASEAN Plus One, ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum), and ADMM-Plus (ASEAN Defense Ministers'

Meeting) as platforms for dialogue and implementation of AOIP cooperation (ASEAN, 2019).

Overall, ASEAN plays a vital role in maintaining stability, enhancing economic integration, promoting cooperation in various fields, and strengthening regional bargaining power in the Indo-Pacific region. However, in the process, there are challenges that exist in ASEAN, one of which is the competition between China and the United States which creates an imbalance and fragmentation of countries in ASEAN. In the past 10 years, China-United States rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region has intensified, especially with the emergence of China as a significant economic and military power. The United States, as a superpower, has increased its military presence in the region in anticipation of threats from Beijing. China, in turn, has increased military and economic presence in the region to enhance its geopolitical and geostrategic influence (Sutrisno, 2020).

### **China-United States Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific**

In order to maintain a consistent momentum of economic development, President Xi Jinping introduced the Silk Road Initiative and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in October 2013, later called the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) Initiative, to achieve the goal of expanding markets and obtaining energy sources and industrial raw materials. By December 2023, OBOR will have 146-151 countries, with members from Asia, Europe, the Middle East and beyond. (Nedopil, 2023). With the enactment of the OBOR (One Belt One Road) policy, China's economic changes have changed. Since 2013 to 2022, BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) involvement has cumulatively amounted to US\$962 billion, construction contracts of around US\$573 billion, and non-financial investment of US\$389 billion. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) financing and investment stabilized in 2022 at US\$67.8 billion in 147 countries, compared to US\$68.7 billion in 2021 and according to China's customs, China's trade with BRI participants grew 76% from 2013 to 2022, surpassing China's overall trade increase of 51% (Setiawati, 2023). This shows the success of China's foreign economic policy, which is quite successful in improving the country's economy.

In response to Beijing's rapid growth and economic strength, the US made a policy of raising import duties on thousands of Chinese products in March 2018 to 30 percent and 20 percent, respectively, and the steel industry was raised to 25% (CNN, 2020). The US action was then responded to by the Chinese government by retaliating. China eventually planned to increase import tariffs on hundreds of products from the US. It was in this phase that the trade war between the two countries began, although in practice the implementation of the increase in import tariffs began in July 2018. At least three rounds of the US-China trade war timeline were recorded from July 2018 to September 2019, with the percentage of import tariff increases ranging from 10%-25% and with the value of import tariff increases from US\$34 billion to US\$300 billion (Bown, 2021). The impact of this trade war causes considerable losses between the United States and China. Based on simulation

results, US imports from China and Chinese imports from the US will decrease by \$91.46 billion and \$36.71 billion, respectively (Bown, 2021).

The military tension between Beijing and the United States in the Indo-Pacific region has also escalated due to China's claim to almost all of China's southern sea areas. The Nine-Strip Line, also known as the Nine-Strip Line (SGT), appears on maps released by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to show maritime territorial boundaries in the Spratly Islands. The line was first shown in 1947 and is used by the PRC to support its claims to the Paracel Island, Spratly Island and coral islands. China has also stationed military forces on several artificial islands in the South China Sea (SCS), causing tensions with Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, as well as several other countries that believe in their rights. In addition, the United States feels it has an interest in the SCS. The US Navy regularly conducts shipping operations in the region, which are meant to "challenge" China's claims. The US has also warned China that it will not be able to gain control of the region (Johannes, 2023).

Seeing these conditions, US President Joe Biden progressively emphasized the need to revive the original idea of QUAD (The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) by forming QUAD 2.0. QUAD was first established in 2007, consisting of the United States, Australia, Japan, and India, with the aim of promoting freedom and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and countering China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific Region. However, QUAD experienced a lull in 2008 when Australia withdrew from the dialogue to pursue better diplomatic relations with China under the tenure of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. The strategic dialogue between QUAD member countries was reactivated in November 2017 under another name, QUAD 2.0. Since then, senior officials from Quad member countries have held eleven meetings to discuss common interests, have conducted two additional military exercises in Malabar, and completed a table-top counterterrorism exercise, which is an exercise conducted by elite forces to practice strategies for countering terrorist acts in the air, sea, and land (Valioulis, 2021).

The existence of QUAD 2.0 has caused criticism and concerns from various countries, including China. Where China considers that QUAD 2.0 is a regional threat, even the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs directly accuses the QUAD 2.0 group of being dedicated to damaging China's interests in the Indo-Pacific (Sorongan, 2022). Although China's foreign policy does not appear to challenge US power directly, China is trying to shift US dominance. China's main concern is the stationing of foreign militaries around its territory. The SCS disputes are one of the main reasons for China to build a navy that can rival the power of the US and its allies (Bendini, 2016).

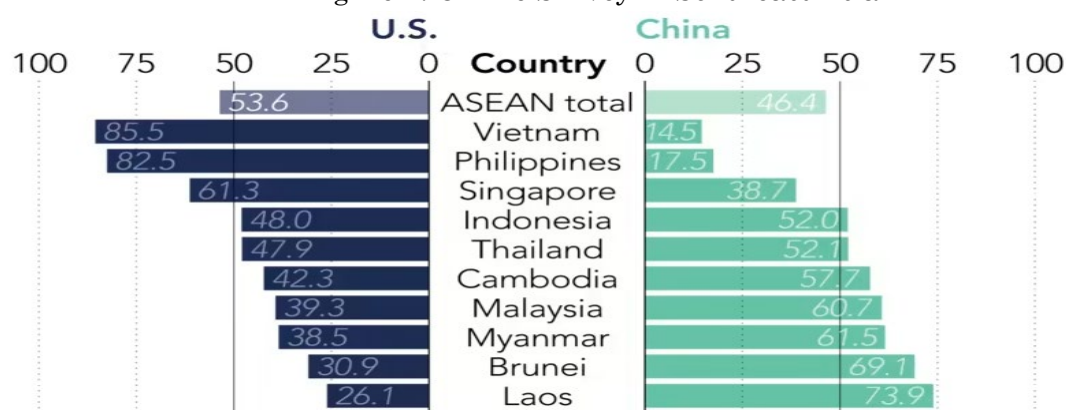
According to the US Department of Defense, China is trying to secure its status as a great power by gaining regional supremacy. Although China is not yet a global military power, at least in its efforts to approach the position of the United States, it has become a global military power. Even as China significantly increases its military spending, America's technological and military prowess can still be achieved. However, the US responded to China's military strengthening in the Indo-

Pacific by strengthening cooperation in the military field, for example, with joint exercises with allied countries, namely the Philippines, Japan, Australia, South Korea, Thailand, and New Zealand, on several occasions (VOA Indonesia, 2023) and the establishment of a trilateral security partnership in September 2021, referred to as "AUKUS," comprising the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Reuters, 2024). The American stance is based on the consideration that in this region there are a number of countries that have been America's strategic partners for a long time; another consideration is the concern over China's role in dominating the conflict and taking provocative actions (Trilke, 2018). On the other hand, China does not want the US to interfere in the issue, as US involvement is considered to lead to efforts to internationalize disputes that can make things worse. This condition then continues to develop to affect the political and economic conditions of regional countries.

Currently, China still seems to be focused on the active defense doctrine. This doctrine emphasizes territorial defense against military attacks and invasions. In simpler terms, active defense is a mobile warfare strategy in which ground troops conduct strategic defense before turning to counterattack. To defeat an enemy with numerically superior strength. Therefore, China is emphasizing the modernization of its near-land forces to fully focus its military capabilities on territorial security. Although currently outmatched by US military power, China has become a regional power to be reckoned with in the Asia-Pacific region. In addition, superpowers still find understanding each other's intentions challenging. For example, no one can predict the ultimate goals of China's security policy.

Moreover, the country's ability to think strategically as a "great power" does not seem to have diminished with the end of the Cold War (Tosi, 2023). However, from the economic and military competition between China and the US, Southeast Asian countries have their own interests in both China and the US. The statement is based on a survey conducted by various respondents, including the public sector, academia, think tanks, research institutions, the business sector, non-governmental organizations, and the media. The results show that 7 out of 10 ASEAN member states prefer China over the United States as a cooperation partner (figure 1).

Figure 1. Online Survey in Southeast Asia



Source: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute-Year 2020.

The survey comes amidst prolonged trade tensions between the US and China. According to the survey, 64% said the trade war will have a negative impact on Southeast Asian economies. In fact, export-dependent countries like Singapore and Thailand are already facing sluggish economies. While economic powers such as the US, EU, and Japan have a strong influence in the region, the survey highlighted China's growth, with 79% saying that Beijing is the most influential economic power in the region, up from last year's 73%. However, 72% of those who cited Beijing's influence expressed concern that China's economic influence is being felt but not well received in the region. The survey revealed that most Southeast Asians are not confident in the Belt and Road Initiative, with 64% of respondents saying they have little or no confidence in China's approach to project lending (Iwamoto, 2020).

These findings illustrate the uncertainty associated with the increasing competition between the US and China. This polarization encourages ASEAN countries to be cautious in navigating the competition. In response, ASEAN has introduced the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) as a strategic framework designed to maintain ASEAN's centrality and neutrality. The framework also promotes inclusive cooperation, openness, and respect for international law. The framework is important because it positions ASEAN not as a passive actor but as an initiative-taking regional institution that shapes the Indo-Pacific dynamics according to its interests. Data from the ISEAS survey reinforces the rationale behind AOIP, a framework that balances external pressures and reaffirms ASEAN's central role in managing regional peace, security, and development.

### **Strengthening Asean in the Region Through Asean Outlook on Indo-Pacific**

When there are rapid changes in the natural environment, it causes significant uncertainty in the strategic landscape. The complexity of relationships between elements in the strategic environment exerts a considerable influence. The strategic environment, poses challenges for planning and decision-making due to the inherent ambiguity associated with habitual patterns (Putra & Hakim, 2016). Similarly, ASEAN must be able to play a vital role in regional politics. In this regard, the issuance of the AOIP can be seen as an effort to affirm ASEAN's position and centrality in the increasingly heated politics of major powers. However, before the AOIP, ASEAN already had contributions in the Indo-Pacific region concerning the development of cooperation in the fields of infrastructure, security, defense, and economy. The existence of the AOIP is a response to the presence of the US and China's economic rise in the Indo-Pacific, which has made the dynamics of the region more complex. Therefore, cooperation with the US and China is important for ASEAN countries (Nurmawati et al., 2022).

The presence of the US and the rise of China's economy create instability in ASEAN. This instability does not occur without reason, as each ASEAN member tends to sympathize with one of the two powers – either the US or China. Which results in the formation of a new political map framework that has the potential to cause instability in ASEAN's sustainability. ASEAN realizes the urgency due to the uncertainty of the transitional regional order generated by the rivalry of US and Chinese power hegemony (Nurmawati et al., 2022). The alignments have shown that

a new political framework will emerge that has the potential to disrupt the continuity of ASEAN. Due to the uncertainty of the transitional regional order brought about by the power hegemony rivalry between the United States and China, Indonesia realized the importance of this issue (Mun et al. 2019). To respond to the dispute, Indonesia initiated the idea of Indonesia's Perspective for an ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific: Towards a Peaceful, Prosperous, and Inclusive Region that had to be approved by all ASEAN member state leaders (Anwar, 2020).

Indonesia tried to achieve ASEAN consensus through diplomacy in various formal and non-formal meetings. Among them: 32nd ASEAN Summit on April 27-28, 2018, ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting on July 30-August 4, 2018 in Singapore, 33rd ASEAN Summit on November 11-15, 2018 in Singapore, 13th East Asian Summit, ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat on January 17-18, 2019, Senior Officials' Meeting on March 7, 2019, in Chiang Rai, Thailand, High-Level Dialogue on Indo-Pacific Cooperation on March 20, 2019, in Jakarta. Finally, at the 34th ASEAN Summit held in Bangkok, Thailand on June 20-23, 2019, the leaders of ASEAN member states approved the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which will be ASEAN's first official view of the Indo-Pacific concept (ASEAN, 2019). Although ASEAN's journey has taken a long time, the decisions made by the 10 ASEAN leaders have not only affected ASEAN itself but also the surrounding countries. One of the outcomes that caught the world's attention was the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific agreement (Anwar, 2020). Therefore, to ensure that the principle of ASEAN centrality in the AOIP is recognized by all powers, the ASEAN bloc must ensure that it successfully leads the process of resolving disputes and other issues in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific, as illustrated in the following table:

Table 1. Benefits of "ASEAN Centrality" for Various Countries and Global Power

Parties	Benefits
ASEAN countries	Increased trade and investment, access to new markets, prevention of regional fragmentation, maritime security, unity, stability, diversity, opportunities to balance China's growing influence.
India	Increased investment trade, access to new markets, opportunity to balance the influence of China and the United States, prevention of regional fragmentation, maritime security, opportunity to expand the country's influence by connecting Southeast Asia with East Africa and the Middle East, opportunity to increase cultural influence in Southeast Asia, and opportunity to normalize China relations.
Quad Group	Increased trade and investment, access to new markets, prevention of regional fragmentation, maritime security, unity, stability, diversity, and opportunities to balance China's growing influence.
China	Increased trade and investment, access to new markets, opportunity to balance the influence of the United States, opportunity to improve relations with other countries in the Indo-Pacific region, opportunity to normalize relations with India, influence in the region with the help of existing institutions and frameworks.

Source: Albert, in A.Yadav's, 2022

Table 1 shows that ASEAN's centrality strategically benefits its member countries and global powers. This centrality can enhance trade, investment, maritime security, and regional cohesion for ASEAN, particularly in Southeast Asia and more broadly in the Indo-Pacific. On the other hand, India can utilize this mechanism to expand its influence and maintain a strategic balance with China and the United States in the region. Similarly, QUAD countries can benefit from the AOIP mechanism, which is considered neutral and prioritizes multilateral cooperation to advance regional stability without increasing geopolitical tensions. Meanwhile, China is using ASEAN's central position to expand its economic engagement and normalize relations with regional actors in the Indo-Pacific. These benefits further affirm that the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) is a credible strategic instrument to strengthen ASEAN's relevance and role as a regional stabilizer amid intensifying great power rivalry.

The AOIP emphasizes the importance of ASEAN as the main principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. ASEAN's instability is not without reason, as each ASEAN member state tends to sympathize with either the US or China. Which results in a tendency to form a new political map framework that has the potential to cause instability in ASEAN's sustainability. ASEAN realizes the urgency due to the uncertainty of the transitional regional order generated by the rivalry of US and Chinese power hegemony (Nurmawati et al., 2022). The China-United States rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region has become a global concern because of the potential conflicts that could arise from military and economic power competition between the two superpowers. This rivalry can affect security stability in the region and potentially disrupt global trade (Sutrisno, 2020).

For ASEAN member countries, the Indo-Pacific concept is not a new concept because ASEAN has previously encouraged the concept of cooperation with a more comprehensive scope by cooperating with countries that have great power and have an interest in security stability conditions in the Pacific and Indian regions, for example, through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) framework. One of the things that makes the Indo-Pacific Concept important for ASEAN is that right at the transition point between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the countries that carry the Indo-Pacific concept are countries with great power, both in the economic and military fields (Syahroni et al., 2021). The ratification of the AOIP is a joint concept for ASEAN member countries to further enhance ongoing cooperation as well as develop cooperation in the maritime, connectivity, sustainable development, and economic fields (Medina, 2020). In its implementation, the cooperation is based on ASEAN-led mechanisms. Indonesia's initiation of the AOIP is a goal of the Joint Project and is reactively undertaken by ASEAN. This achievement can be said to be a strategy in a forum that has the potential to enhance Indonesia's foreign policy role and interests in the Southeast Asian region as well as the Indo-Pacific region.

Meanwhile, the concrete implementation of the AOIP is through the organization of the AIPF (ASEAN Indo-Pacific Forum), which is expected to bring great benefits to various industry sectors, including maritime, connectivity, UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030, and the economy (Sekretariat Kabinet

RI, 2023). AIPF highlights three main agendas, namely Green Infrastructure and Resilient Supply Chain, Sustainable and Innovative Financing, and Inclusive Digital Transformation and Creative Economy. More than 2,500 people from 51 countries attended the forum, including heads of state and government, CEOs and business leaders, and leading experts from various fields. The outcome of the AIPF was cooperation on 93 projects worth \$38.2 billion and additional opportunities for 73 projects worth \$17.8 billion. With these achievements, the AIPF is expected to maximize promising investment opportunities in the ASEAN market of 680 million people and tap into the Indo-Pacific market, which accounts for 58% of the world's population, 45% of world trade, and 61% of world GDP. The result is collaboration on 93 projects with a total value of \$38.2 billion and added opportunities for 73 projects with a value of \$17.8 billion (Mulyana, 2023).

In addition, flexible and adaptive policy formulation to meet the needs of uncertain times must be faced. To ensure the implementation of AIPF commitments by conducting regular monitoring and reporting mechanisms, the active role of the ASEAN Secretariat is crucial. To ensure that problems that arise can be addressed at once through solutions, this mechanism can be implemented through ASEAN organs. ASEAN should optimize all agreements that have been reached in various documents and cooperation agreements related to the implementation of the AIPF. For example, the goal of the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025 is to develop a more integrated and cohesive, sectoral connected, resilient, inclusive, and globalized ASEAN economy. In addition, ASEAN should immediately capitalize on the momentum of the adoption of the Jakarta Statement on ASEAN Matters: Epicenter of Growth (ASEAN Concord IV) to encourage overall AOIP cooperation (Mulyana, 2023).

The implementation of the AIPF demonstrates ASEAN's shared commitment to building a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region, as Indonesian President Joko Widodo said, "walk the walk," which means walking the talk is a form of integrity. Further commitment is needed to ensure that the AIPF can be organized regularly with more participants from various sustainable industry sectors. Thus, the hope to maintain ASEAN's economic growth despite the slowdown in world economic growth will be more easily realized. The success of the AIPF is believed to encourage similar concrete actions in other areas of AOIP cooperation and strengthen the legitimacy of regional cooperation with several Indo-Pacific countries, including ASEAN, on important non-economic issues such as cross-border crime, maritime security, sustainability, and climate change (Mulyana, 2023).

ASEAN member states recognize their position amidst competition between major powers in the Indo-Pacific. Its increasing internal cohesion has strengthened ASEAN's strategic role. Through neutrality and inclusive regional cooperation, ASEAN promotes stability, economic growth, and infrastructure development through foreign capital inflows (Amin, 2024b). Looking at the mechanisms offered by the AOIP, some skeptics are quick to undermine the four primary areas of the AOIP and consider it does not close to a strategy. In addition, AOIP is considered still unable to prevent the potential polarization of ASEAN member states. Hence,

in this case, AOIP is limited to ASEAN's strategy statement to demonstrate its centrality in the Indo-Pacific region. Despite the support of ASEAN partners, AOIP's lack of strategic thrust hinders its ability to effectively manage external threats, particularly those posed by Beijing.

The inclusive nature of AOIP makes it difficult for ASEAN to be seen as a "like-minded" partner by countries with vested interests in the Indo-Pacific, such as the US, Japan, Australia, and India (QUAD members), as well as countries like the ROK, UK, Canada, France, and Germany. This is especially the case when ASEAN refuses to oppose China for its aggression in regional conflict spots such as the SCS and Taiwan Strait (Lin, 2024). ASEAN urgently needs four key areas of cooperation: maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development, and economic cooperation. Pragmatists are not happy with the progress of AOIP; they even demonize it as ASEAN's long-term problem. More moderate people argue that ASEAN is using AOIP as a tool to pool ideas and strengthen their ties. They believe that ASEAN is a force that convenes to study, define, and develop the idea of the Indo-Pacific (Yang, 2022)

Amidst the pressure to implement AOIP in ASEAN, several approaches can be used to accelerate its implementation. The first is a multi-year work plan that includes a list of activities that are critical to maintain a consistent trajectory of progress and ensuring more effective implementation (Lin, 2024). Second, to strengthen ASEAN centrality, ASEAN should also ensure that activities are synergized across ASEAN-led mechanisms. Third, a quantity-focused approach may lead to competition among dialogue partners and undermine the strategic value of AOIP. Activities or workshops proposed by external partners will not overlap with this approach. ASEAN should shift from focusing on statistics and numbers to activities that produce outputs and significant outcomes that can enhance members' capabilities in strategic competition. Fourth, although ASEAN has identified many concrete plans, mainly bilateral, as demonstrated at the first ASEAN-Indo-Pacific Forum, it is imperative to transform separate initiatives into cohesive ASEAN strategic goals. This can be achieved through a process "linking up", which means member states can work together and share information to develop innovative initiatives. To strengthen the status of AOIP as a true "ASEAN" initiative, concerted efforts should be made going forward to ensure that the AOIP project will benefit as many ASEAN member states as possible. In addition, this will ease the burden on current and future chairs in organizing large-scale events such as the ASEAN-Indo-Pacific Forum and provide more incentives for them to manage more such events (Lin, 2024).

ASEAN's existence is particularly important as a norm-setter, consensus-builder, and peacekeeper. This is done through four cooperation frameworks that prioritize the interests of ASEAN countries in the Indo-Pacific region, namely maritime cooperation, connectivity between these countries, achieving sustainable development goals, and economic cooperation and cooperation in other fields. Which is where the four frameworks of cooperation are included in the AAOIP (Ramsi et al., 2023).

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the analysis above, strengthening ASEAN's role through AOIP is implied by the creation of the AIPF forum that demonstrates ASEAN's shared commitment to building a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region through cooperation. The organizing outcome of the AIPF was cooperation on 93 projects worth \$38.2 billion and added opportunities for 73 projects worth \$17.8 billion. The success of the AIPF can encourage similar concrete actions in other areas of AOIP cooperation and strengthen the legitimacy of regional cooperation with several Indo-Pacific countries, including ASEAN, on important non-economic issues such as transboundary crime, maritime security, sustainability, and climate change. Looking at the tendency of establishing AOIP as a Strategy Of statement to neutralize the US-China conflict in the Indo-Pacific and strengthen ASEAN's position in the Indo-Pacific, there are internal ASEAN challenges to the fragmentation of ASEAN member states creating serious problems for ASEAN unity and the commitment of member states to form a strong position in responding to regional security issues. In addition, the presence of QUAD 2.0 and the formation of a de facto alliance system formed by the US to contain China from escalating security in the Indo-Pacific region aggravate the situation in the Indo-Pacific region.

ASEAN member states will face the challenge of maintaining and sustaining ASEAN centrality, and unity in the future. Without unity and centrality, ASEAN's role in the region and the world may become less relevant. To this end, communication among ASEAN foreign ministers has been enhanced, both through formal and informal channels. We must continue to maintain and strengthen ASEAN unity and centrality and not let the ASEAN region become a 'proxy' for major powers. By looking at the complex strategic environment, the AOIP can be declared as a statement strategy because it does not have major implications in the Indo-Pacific and does not overemphasize ASEAN's centrality in the Indo-Pacific without any new institutional plans pursued by ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific.

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