

ASEAN Centrality and the Indo-Pacific: Finding a Convergent Reality?

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Abstract

The Indo-Pacific is loosely articulated as a broad-based framing concept. It is a mega-region defined differently by each of its proponents based on national interest. As a geographic reality, the boundaries of the region have seen myriad interpretations, differing even among ‘like-minded’ Quad powers (India, Japan, Australia, US) and actors like the European Union (EU) and UK. China, meanwhile, has largely rejected the concept, even as democratic stakeholder states have promoted focused ventures, strategies, and visions for the region to deter Beijing’s revisionist rise. Nonetheless, an area of convergence among all actors in the region has emerged in the form of their commitment to upholding ‘ASEAN Centrality’. Ranging from the Quad powers to China, a bow to ASEAN Centrality — and the organisation’s own Indo-Pacific definition — shows a nuanced strategy to build autonomy in dealing with the region while attempting to ensure a balance of power in an increasingly multipolar Asia. This paper will seek to focus on the importance ASEAN holds in the Indo-Pacific by analysing why its centrality is espoused by all stakeholders involved. This paper will argue how ASEAN holds immense promise to both shape the future of the region’s convergent response to shared threats, and potentially provide the basis for a common conceptualization of its geography.

Key Words: ASEAN, Indo-Pacific, Quad, China

Introduction

The adoption of the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical concept has seen consistent growth over the past decade; the renaming by the United States of its strategically important Pacific Command (PACOM) as the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) marking a key milestone, showcasing changing realities and interests in the region by democratic stakeholder powers (George 2018). This re-christening showed the growing importance of India in the region while also highlighting the connect between the Indian and the Pacific oceans, wherein Delhi plays a critical role as a ‘fulcrum’. Importantly, it allowed for greater load-sharing and geographic security coverage especially vis-à-vis key maritime routes for economic and military chains. As the regions importance has grown, the geopolitical theatre of opportunity and conflict has moved Eastwards into Asia, wherein differences in perception of what constitutes the Indo-Pacific –geographically as well as ideologically – have further complicated cooperation and competition narratives.

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As an increasingly multipolar Asia attempted to manoeuvre the ‘Asian Century’ (Woetzel and Seong 2019), core debates over the conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific began to emerge in the past decade as some of the foremost lines of misalignment between nations, be it partner states or rival powers. For instance, we see divergences in the geographic ideation of the Indo-Pacific amongst the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) partner-states of India, US, Japan and Australia based on areas of strategic national interest for each of the actors. India’s Indo-Pacific stretches from the “shores of Africa to that of the Americas” (Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue 2018), thereby including the Gulf region and the Indian Ocean littorals. Delhi’s Indo-Pacific concept covers the broadest range of the region, more than that of the US, Japan and Australia.

For the US, the geographical scope of the Indo-Pacific was clearly defined in the 2017 *National Security Strategy* as extending from “the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States” (US State Department 2017). Meanwhile, for Australia, a focus on littoral states and the Pacific Ocean has largely overseen its engagement in the region even though more recently, a deeper focus on the Indian Ocean has seen emergence in Canberra’s regional outlook (Hijar-Chiapa 2020). Defined by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond” (Abe 2012) has served as the cornerstone of Tokyo’s Indo-Pacific outlook and laid the groundwork for a revitalized Quad. This vision drew a diamond connecting Japan, India, Australia and the US state of Hawaii. Evolving on the same, Japan’s “Free and Open Indo Pacific” (FOIP) vision has more broadly identified the region as stretching “from the Asia-Pacific across the Indian Ocean to the Middle East and Africa” (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015), thereby showing deeper synergy with India’s focus on Africa and West Asia.

Beyond the misalignment in defining the region by Quad states themselves, the notion of Indo-Pacific has seen challenges to its ideation. China —whose revolutionary revisionism in the region has greatly if not directly affected the emergent need for cooperation—has rejected the Indo-Pacific concept as an “attention-grabbing idea” that “will dissipate like ocean foam.” (Medcalf 2019 50 & Birtles 2018). Moreover, China sees the Indo-Pacific as a western concept, led by the US who is looking to impede Beijing’s own rise, especially by implementing an India-centric focus on the region. China’s rejection of the terminology has greatly impeded acceptance of the same by other Asian powers, with countries like South Korea – despite being a US ally and a vital partner to India – only recently beginning to warm up to the notion after years of appeasement vis-à-vis Beijing to protect their national and economic interests.

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Amidst such varying visions and definitions of the ‘Indo-Pacific’, which is arguably one of the most used diplo-speak in the world of International Relations academia at present, there has been a plethora of activity that has created partnerships in the region; the Quad being a prime example. Despite differences in geographical outlook, what unites the ‘like-minded’ Quad states is their goal of building a free, open, inclusive and rules-based order across the region (The White House 2021). The term *Indo-Pacific* presents a bona fide territorial outlook that allows the Quad to engage each other on matters of security, strategy and economics. In addition, the diversity of proponents and their geographic constructs negates a claim that the Indo-Pacific is a Western-oriented concept. Rather, the Indo-Pacific is similar to a psychological guide or a “mental map” that suits the current period of maritime connectivity and international politics among various players (Medcalf 2020 34). Keeping such a notion in mind, it is all the more important to note what specific convergences emerge between all players of the region in their varied lenses vis-à-vis the Indo-Pacific. The adherence to upholding centrality of the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is one such guiding area of mutual convergence, with China, the Quad and even European players such as France committing to the same.

Decoding ASEAN Centrality

The release of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in June 2019 marked a key development in the regional power dynamics (ASEAN 2019). As the US-China rivalry grew, it became increasingly clear that it was vital for ASEAN to build on the ‘centrality’ assigned to it by players of the region. The need to re-focus on neutrality and leadership by ASEAN in the region marked a vital reminder of why the organisation’s ‘centrality’ was, and remains, critical to maintaining security balance in the Indo-Pacific. The AOIP allowed ASEAN to set an agenda for cooperation, especially as ASEAN members remain most vulnerable to great power politics of the region, even as China and India among others are dialogue partners of the body. Caught between US-China and India-China competition, ASEAN’s focus via the AOIP was on functional economic collaboration as well as maritime domain protection.

There are some generic ‘myths’ about the notion of ASEAN centrality which require clarification to truly understand what the concept is and is not, especially as it remains largely undefined (Acharya 2017 276). As opposed to what is the general belief, ASEAN centrality is certainly not a totally novel or new term. It is connected with a number of comparable

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ideas: ASEAN as the "pioneer", the "driver", the "planner", the "institutional center" of local processes in the Indo-Pacific (or, the Asia-Pacific) locale which must be connected to the notions behind the very establishment of the regional body in 1967.

A second well-known but misguided judgment about ASEAN centrality is that it is about ASEAN itself. ASEAN centrality must be viewed in line with the bigger elements of regionalism and territorial design in the region, now and in the past. The "centrality" of ASEAN in regional cooperation reflects the reality of regional development and is consistent with global development trends, especially as ASEAN remains the most cohesive representative group of countries in East Asia. Unity within ASEAN is critical to peace in the region, making the institution stand for values larger than its structural limits.

Thirdly, ASEAN centrality is believed to be the restrictive workmanship of ASEAN members themselves- this is incorrect (Connelly 2022). ASEAN centrality is as much a result of external players in Southeast Asia as ASEAN members themselves. For instance, the invocation of the term in itself is connected more with the elements of great power politics that emerges in the region than it is with the concept of promoting internal ASEAN unity (Ciorciari 2017 254).

Ultimately, in its most immediate and restricted sense, ASEAN centrality implies that ASEAN lies, and should stay, at the centre of the Asia (or Indo-Pacific) provincial foundations, particularly the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+), and the East Asian Summit (EAS) (Natalegawa 2019 128). ASEAN looks to provide the institutional stage on which the more extensive Indo-Pacific and Asian regional organizations are secured; hence, its centrality as a fulcrum. A connected importance of ASEAN centrality is that ASEAN is the first original gathering in Asia and looks to infer that Southeast Asia is at the centre point of Asian regionalist discussions and cooperations over changing dynamics and collaboration in Asia.

According to the ASEAN Charter, ASEAN seeks to establish cordial ties with other nations as well as sub-regional, regional, and international organisations and institutions. It also wants to engage in mutually beneficial dialogue with them. Through the grant of the formal status of dialogue, sectoral dialogue, and development partnerships, ASEAN has laid down the framework for broadening and strengthening its relationships with external parties. In order to promote regional cooperation and maintain its central position in regional cooperation

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mechanisms, ASEAN continues to maintain 'centrality'. Ten years after its formation in the late 1970s, ASEAN came to the realisation that relationships with international partners were essential for economic advancement, market access, technology transfer, and development aid. With the resolution of the Cambodian conflict and the unification of all Southeast Asian nations by the late 1990s, the region's overall potential was further enhanced by the presence of established peace and stability. It was then that ASEAN importance began to grow; almost a dozen nations wanted to collaborate with the organisation which posed a challenge for the group which was already struggling with handling domestic issues.

Today, by virtue of having Dialogue Partnerships (“Overview”) with Australia, Canada, China, European Union, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, United Kingdom and the US beyond its eight ASEAN member states (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam), it is indeed the most expansive and successful regional bodies functioning in Asia. Importantly, ASEAN also has Sectoral Dialogue Partnerships (“Overview”) with Norway, Pakistan, Switzerland and Turkey as well as Development Partnerships (“Overview”) with Chile, France, Germany and Italy. Such a wide geographic base of cooperation makes it the ‘central’ vessel via which to align the future of the region, while also becoming a model to imbibe for other subregional groupings. ASEAN centrality is the most ambitious and elaborate projection of a subregional body to project itself on a more extensive local and global stage while maintaining its neutrality (Emmers 2001 352).

ASEAN’s members and partners – be it via Dialogue or Development partnerships –have historically shown support for ASEAN’s central role. Over five decades old, ASEAN remains a political miracle. Its members bring together nations that have wide-ranging contrasts; for instance, high GDP countries like Singapore and low GDP states like Myanmar. Numerous religious and ethnic groups are represented in the region's demographics, which vary widely. For instance, Indonesia and Singapore are among the most religiously varied nations in the world, whereas Cambodia, which has a majority of Buddhists, and Vietnam, which has a majority of Muslims, are relatively homogeneous (Cooperman et. al. 2014 15-16). Archipelagos and continental land masses with low plains and rugged hills make up the landscape of ASEAN (Council on Foreign Relations 2022).

ASEAN’s reach is intra and inter regional as well as cross-continental, further cementing its ‘centrality’. For instance, the European Union (EU) and ASEAN have been engaging with each

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other for more than 40 years ("The European Union and ASEAN."). In 1972, the European Economic Community (EEC) became the first organisation to forge informal connections with ASEAN. Relationships were formalised at the 10th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in 1977, and they became institutionalised with the March 1980 signing of the ASEAN-EEC Cooperation Agreement. Critically, the EU-ASEAN Dialogue Partnership was upgraded to a Strategic Partnership at the 23rd EU-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in 2020, showing continuous growth in relations which now have verticals ranging across politics, security, defense, economics, community building, and COVID-19 responses, as well. Momentum continued with the signing of the first bloc-to-bloc air transport deal in 2021, the EU-ASEAN Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement.

Convincing Southeast Asian nations that the EU can be a more comprehensive partner and not merely a lender of ASEAN projects will be one of the EU's tasks for 2022 (Hutt 2022). For instance, talks for a thorough digital accord may begin between the EU and ASEAN. The ambitious "Digital Masterplan 2025" from ASEAN was issued in January, and the EU has also identified connectivity, digital governance, and partnership as one of its top goals in its Indo-Pacific strategy. Such holistic growth in ties will also, importantly, allow deeper synergy between the AOIP and the EU's own Indo-Pacific Strategy released in 2021 especially in avenues of sustainability, supply chain resilience, and digital connectivity.

Finding Indo-Pacific Convergence

Such united emphasis on ASEAN centrality by various powers highlights the critical role ASEAN holds in promoting peace and collaboration in the region. Much like the Indo-Pacific construct itself, the notion of ASEAN centrality remains undefined. Yet, stakeholders who are unable to find convergence on their Indo-Pacific definitions have found a common cause to link their regional outlooks in the form of ASEAN's centrality. Hence, it is important to study the immense promise ASEAN holds in both shaping the future of the region's convergent response to shared threats and potentially providing the basis for a common conceptualisation of its geography.

The Quad, heralded as the premier Indo-Pacific grouping of present times, has been attempting to bring together like-minded democracies of the region while China has termed the grouping an 'exclusive clique' reminiscent of 'Cold War mentality and bloc politics' style politics (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022). Amidst such a push and

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pull, ASEAN centrality – which to China ensures a non-West led ideological or military vision in the region – provides much scope for binding the Indo-Pacific for constructive dialogue. The ‘Quad Plus’ mechanism which brought together South Korea, New Zealand, Vietnam, Israel and Brazil for a meeting with the Quad during the pandemic – despite not much development of the concept – has pushed debate that it is attempting to reform regional architectures. Quad’s focus instead should be to live up to its ASEAN centrality dedication, and serve as a “strategic filler for and a strategic amplifier to” ASEAN institutions, especially as ASEAN states will find appeal in the Quad boosting their institutions (Laksmana 2020 110).

In this context, building on the AOIP, ASEAN must come together to promote a holistic and collaborative Indo-Pacific that continues to strengthen its centrality. A focused strategic policy approach to implementing the AOIP — which has at last blueprinted the Association's notion of and strategy for the Indo-Pacific wherein the Pacific and the Indian Ocean districts have been viewed as the most critical geopolitical and geoeconomics areas — is needed. The centrality of ASEAN has been underlined in the midst of the internationally relevant challenges that this locale is experiencing; by ASEAN Centrality, the AOIP shows that it wants to retain its central role in the developing territorial design in Southeast Asia and encompassing areas. The point hence is not just making new components or supplanting existing ones; rather, it is expected that the AOIP will improve ASEAN's Community building process and reinforce, as well as give new energy to existing ASEAN-driven instruments like EAS and ADMM+ (Saha 2019).

China has continued to remain the top trade partner and one of the highest infrastructure aid providers to ASEAN; hence, the Association’s policy of engaging with China (and the US) has been largely normative. The same has now been redefined into a more strategic arc that provides ASEAN long-term autonomy from great-power politics (Acharya). For instance, ASEAN’s notion of Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) — first ideated and implemented during the Cold War — was reaffirmed in 2020 amidst intensifying US-China rivalry in the region (Southgate 2021 32). The ZOPFAN Declaration encapsulated ASEAN's desire to maintain Southeast Asia's independence and neutrality. ZOPFAN accommodated different strategic viewpoints within ASEAN while evading the legal ramifications of the neutrality principle. Neutrality is frequently cited as a crucial component in ASEAN's success, despite the fact that no agreement was ever achieved on ZOPFAN's exact use.

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Following a protracted period of external meddling in the form of Western and Japanese colonialism and US-Soviet Great Power security competition, ZOPFAN was originally founded as a result of a shared aspiration for regional autonomy among the states of Southeast Asia. The recent reaffirmation of ZOPFAN by ASEAN is a sign of the region's growing volatility as a result of US-China superpower rivalry and ASEAN's growing concerns about being involved in a potential "new Cold War" in Asia. ASEAN's declarations endorsing ZOPFAN must hence be seen as another kind of risk management that positions ASEAN equally (read, neutrally) between the Great Powers and serves as a protective measure. Hedging usage becomes more and more unsustainable as balanced behaviour takes its place, especially as the post-COVID 19 period brings in recognition of unsuccessful attempts at 'decoupling' from China.

As this notion regains footing, it is also important for ASEAN to concurrently build strong confidence-building measures as well as transparent rules of governance of military deployments. A revamped and stronger ZOPFAN should be well articulated and included in the AOIP to ensure robust implementation. It would also allow ASEAN the room to work on a more coherent 'responsibility to consult' practice that holds dialogue partners such as China more directly accountable for actions affecting the peace architecture of the region.

Continuing Challenges and Changing Narratives

Although it did so as a periphery power, ASEAN has faced major power competition in the past. Now, the primary arena of rising great power rivalry is Southeast Asia itself. In order to become a significant regional participant, the Southeast Asian region has come a long way. However, ASEAN's method of operation and its sporadic inability to get its act together have frequently prompted critiques and worries about its cohesion and position in the developing regional geopolitics. The Quad's long-term consequences for ASEAN have also not been ignored (Yhome 2020). ASEAN's "convening strength" in the developing regional architecture may eventually be undermined by the Quad's growing importance. Viewed as "parallel" mechanisms to ASEAN-led conferences, the idea of "Quad Plus" comprising the four Quad members and other partners from the Indo-Pacific region has also caused tensions in strategic communities. However, these should be looked at as avenues of cooperation rather than competition, drawn along the focus on democracy and ASEAN Centrality; the continued mentions of the latter by the Quad countries individually and as a group also highlights an attempt at presenting unity.

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The ASEAN Charter and key reports, for example, the ‘ASEAN Community Vision 2025: Forging Ahead Together’, express that ASEAN remains central in the provincial cycles and in the leadership of the region’s external undertakings. Keeping up with centrality is pivotal to ASEAN’s prosperity as a local coalition and basic to its pertinence in the global field. Besides, through ASEAN centrality, a rules-based order in the region is advanced and grown, thus diffusing likely pressure and struggle between big and small states (Emmers 2018 279). For instance, disagreements over China, in particular Beijing’s assertive behaviour in the South China Sea, where several ASEAN member nations have been embroiled in maritime territorial disputes with China, have challenged ASEAN unity and called into doubt the regional bloc’s centrality.

ASEAN centrality builds on the possibility that ASEAN has the ability to play a main role in regional plan setting. It likewise puts a premium on ASEAN’s capacity to be a pioneer, driver, and centre of territorial drives in relating with its external partners while advancing, most importantly, ASEAN’s own advantages. Similarly, the need for ASEAN to conduct more multi-track diplomacy avenues focused on the Indo-Pacific is critical; this will work towards an academic and institutional reclaiming of the Indo-Pacific idea, allowing the terminology to become more ingrained with the analytic assessments pertaining to the region.

Hence, simply put, ASEAN centrality is characterised as ASEAN’s role in the territorial security design and regional order to mitigate power dynamics between, and among, outer powers that have interests in the locale. In any case, the declaration of this centrality draws strength from a politically firm, decisively sound, and monetarily prosperous, ASEAN. These will act as areas of strength for ASEAN in implementing its centrality job. However, there are impediments to such success. ASEAN’s cohesion, rationality and ties within ASEAN are showing breaks (Teodoro 2016). The present challenges are essentially not quite the same as what the organisation confronted when the ASEAN was established in 1967, accentuated after, but present since before the COVID-19 pandemic. The rise of middle powers like Australia, Japan, India and South Korea must now be considered more greatly in the region. Even as these middle powers seek to institutionalise great powers via ASEAN-led mechanisms (Emmers 2018 42), owing to their continued allegiance to ASEAN centrality, there emerges a power imbalance within the region which is already struggling to accommodate the demands of powers.

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Furthermore, the Sino-US contention is only deepening separation points inside ASEAN as countries are compelled to pick sides. The more modest ASEAN member states, due to their reliance on China, represent a difficult arc in balancing ASEAN centrality. This has been a long-present problem, witnessed more clearly when in 2012 at the Phnom Penh ASEAN meeting, ASEAN failed to give a joint statement as a result of Cambodia's emphasis on not permitting any mention of the South China Sea (SCS) debate in it ("ASEAN talks fail over South China Sea dispute"). Then in 2016, ASEAN foreign ministers issued and retracted a communique on the SCS (Panda). Nonetheless, we have now seen a clearer position by ASEAN against China, especially vis-à-vis the SCS, which highlights the changing bilateral balances between ASEAN states and China. Yet, individual ASEAN States (and even ASEAN) continue to seek China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), causing rifts especially as BRI holds great appeal for countries like Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar (Ujvari 2019). Importantly, the rise of minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific and Asia such as Quad, AUKUS, Australia-Japan-India (AJI) and Japan-US-India (JAI) has compromised existing ASEAN security systems like EAS, ADMM+ and ARF (Ha 2022 11). Concurrently, two significant ASEAN Dialogue Partners, the US and India, have exited the ambit of recently new financial gatherings—the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Importantly, even as ASEAN attempts to build economic and trade independence via such large-scale FTAs, China has remained ASEAN's largest trading partner since 2009 (Xinhuanet 2021) while ASEAN has become China's largest trading partner for the second time in a row in 2022 (Embassy of the People's Republic of China to Brunei 2022).

The ASEAN must build a convergent response to shared threats with its Dialogue partners, therein providing the basis for a common conceptualisation of its geography. Despite challenges, there remains immense scope for ASEAN to build itself as a regionally owned and regionally driven grouping for the Indo-Pacific, moving beyond the Quad. ASEAN enjoys deeper trust, stronger cultural ties, and grander partnerships as compared to the minilaterals of the region nonetheless arguably upstaging the decades old body. As ASEAN's own China and US bilaterals begin to imbibe a more rationale outlook which keep economic security and militarist security independent, the room for ASEAN to grow in the Indo-Pacific only expands. As US and China focus attention onto Taiwan, ASEAN must build itself as a balancer of peace in Southeast Asia and beyond; especially one that smaller and developing countries can rely on. India, Japan and China remain integral partners to the ASEAN framework but keeping in

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mind the three countries own multifaceted ties in mind, the Association should be allowed to build itself as a body for open dialogue aimed for a shared vision of a prosperous, rules-based Asian Century.

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