

POLICY BRIEF

Feb 11, 2020

Dr Thomas S. Wilkins is currently a Senior Fellow at the Japan Institute for International Affairs in Tokyo. He is normally based as a Senior Lecturer in International Security at the University of Sydney, Australia. He specializes in security issues in the Asia Pacific region and has published on this subject in journals such as *Review of International Studies*, *International Relations of the Asia Pacific* and the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, among others.

Searching for a middle path: ASEAN and the “Indo Pacific”¹

Dr Thomas S. Wilkins

ASEAN caught in the Indo Pacific crossfire

The notion of the “Indo Pacific” (IP) as a regional construct has gained significant traction in the last few years, at least in part due to its adoption in the centerpiece “Free and Open Indo Pacific” (FOIP) strategies of the United States and Japan. The continued application of the term by policymakers, analysts and scholars has served to further entrench its prominence within the regional security discourse. As a consequence, all states with major interests in this “new” region have felt compelled to engage with the concept and formulate appropriate policies to embrace or otherwise react to it. This task is made all the more difficult due to the fluidity of its definitions, interpretations, and the differing motivations of competing regional states that either adopt or reject it.²

In brief, the US, Japan, Australia, and India, alongside the UK and France, are champions of the term and it has now become integral to their regional strategies (e.g. FOIP). China and Russia firmly repudiate the label, seeing it, with some justification, as a strategic construct through which the democratic powers of the US, Japan, Australia and India, potentially in concert (through the “Quad-plus” process), will advance their national interests at Beijing and Moscow’s expense. As Graeme Dobell notes, the “Indo-Pacific’ has shifted from a geographic construct to an arena for mounting contest—and the label for a US strategy.’³ Meanwhile, China has its alternative in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which includes a “Maritime Silk Road”

Disclaimer :

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of The Japan Institute of International Affairs or any other organization with which the author is affiliated.

1 This Policy Brief is partially based upon information gathered at the ‘A Great Unwinding? Rules-Based Regional Security Order to 2020 and Beyond’, Institute of Strategic & International Studies (ISIS) Asia Pacific Roundtable, 24-26 June 2019, Kuala Lumpur.

2 See: Thomas Wilkins, ‘Australia and the “Indo Pacific” concept – disambiguating the “idea” and the “region” from quadrilateral “strategy”’, *JIIA Policy Brief*, 19 July 2018, <https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/policybrief/>

3 Graeme Dobell, ‘Indo-Pacific: from construct to contest’, *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 24 June 2019.

through the Indian and Pacific Oceans.⁴ The IP concept itself, despite the protestations of its inherently neutral and objective nature by some analysts, has therefore become emblematic of contesting visions of regional order.

This puts the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) – a grouping of ten small and medium sized countries describing themselves as a “Security Community” – in an awkward predicament, caught between the two competing American and Chinese led positions above. Finding itself sitting uneasily in the middle of these two loosely defined power blocs exerts pressure upon this organization, which has long prided itself on its “centrality” to the region’s security architecture, due to its impressive suite of multilateral institutions, (labeled “ASEAN-Plus”).

But this “centrality” is now potentially at risk of being undermined due to sharpening great power rivalry between the US and China, and the contested Indo Pacific concept is a prominent manifestation of this challenge. Confronted by the introduction of the “Indo Pacific” as a strategic concept by the US and others in rapid succession, ASEAN initially procrastinated, perhaps hoping the term would dissipate like so many other deceased buzzwords (e.g. “Asia Pacific community”). Yet, as the term become steadily entrenched in Japanese, then US policy documents and speeches, South East Asian (SEA) states recognized that they risked marginalization if they did not effectively engage and respond accordingly.

Two risks presented themselves on this front. First, without a united position on the concept, ASEAN centrality would be sidelined in the major strategic debates of the region.

As See Seng Tan warns – ‘The crystallizing of the overlapping Indo– Pacific concepts of the US, Japan, Australia and India may well mean that ASEAN has lost the ability to lead the development of this concept and use it—as they did with the idea of the Asia–Pacific—to tie major powers more closely to the ASEAN-led regional architecture.’⁵ Second, the SEA region might further succumb to serving as little more than an “arena” in which bipolar strategic competition between the US and PRC plays out, and in which its cherished neutrality would be jeopardized. Thus, in order to preserve its strategic relevance and autonomy, ASEAN member-states belatedly acknowledged they would need to formally address the concept and declare its position in relation to it. As Rizal Sukma notes ‘They agreed, in light of the ongoing strategic changes in the region, that ASEAN needs its own vision about the future of regional order, a vision that represents a distinct ASEAN view and voice.’⁶

This Policy Brief therefore looks how ASEAN state have viewed and interpreted the IP concept itself in Part I, before analyzing its major collective policy response in the form of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo Pacific (AOIP) in Part II. The course of the analysis below, careful attention is made to the various intersections and departures from US-led vision of the IP, and their Chinese alternatives.

South East Asian views of the “Indo Pacific”

In response to the headlining of the Indo Pacific concept in the regional strategies of several major powers, chiefly the US, Japan and India, ASEAN’s perspective took time to mature over the course of the last year (2019). At the

4 See: Baogang He, ‘Chinese Expanded Perceptions of the Region and Its Changing Attitudes Toward the Indo-Pacific: A Hybrid Vision of the Institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific’, *East Asia* 35, no. 2 (2018), pp. 117-132.

5 See Seng Tan, ‘Consigned to hedge: South-east Asia and America’s ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ strategy’, *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020), pp. 145.

6 Rizal Sukma, ‘Indonesia, ASEAN and Indo-Pacific (Part 1 of 2)’, *The Jakarta Post*, 29 August 2019.

beginning of that year the Institute for South East Asian Studies (ISEAS) conducted a poll of regional experts (*The State of Southeast Asia*)⁷ in which it posed the question: “How do you View the Indo Pacific concept”? At this time the majority of respondents (61.3%) felt the concept was “unclear and requires further elaboration”, thus indicating a wait-and-see attitude, perhaps reflecting the appreciation by 11.8% of respondents that it would simply fade away and did not require serious contemplation or policy action by ASEAN. These estimations have since been confounded as the concept has become progressively lodged in the official policy and associated strategic discourse of several of the region’s leading powers. Others elicited concern that the concept would undermine ASEAN centrality (17.3%), or that it was a US ploy “to contain China” (25.4%); fears that are amply reflected in the actual framing of the AOIP, as discussed below. Few (17.2%) saw it as a viable option for a new regional order, perhaps failing to foresee how solidly it has become embedded in US-led efforts to retain American regional primacy and counteract China’s assertive ambitions.

By the middle of 2019, though the equivocation continued, ASEAN had been compelled to think more seriously about the concept as it had not faded away (perhaps as hoped). For example, at the 33rd Asia Pacific Roundtable (APR) held by the Institute for Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) in Kuala Lumpur, the Chief Executive Tan Sri Rastam Mohd Isa, quipped that there was

“certainly no appetite on our part to rush into calling this conference the IPR (Indo-Pacific Roundtable).”⁸ Indeed, this set the proceedings for lively debates on the “Asia Pacific” versus “Indo Pacific” as competing regional descriptors. Interestingly, around the same time, at the ASEAN Summit meeting in Bangkok, 23 June 2019, an attempt was made to pronounce the collective position on the Indo Pacific – which resulted in the issuance of the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo Pacific” (AOIP) (discussed in Part II). Notably, in the run-up to this, Jakarta had been a strong proponent of embracing and operationalizing the concept, and Dewi Fortuna Anwar confirms that ‘Indonesia has taken a leading role in pushing ASEAN to take an active part in the discourse about this new ‘Indo-Pacific’ strategic concept.’⁹ Yet, only several months later in November, the term had been dropped from the Joint Statement of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM), which continued to refer throughout to the “Asia-Pacific”, thus confirming their preferred descriptor.¹⁰ Hence, equivocation and ambiguity persist to some degree.

Nevertheless, the upshot of the deliberations surrounding the AOIP and ancillary debates on the concept, especially in Indonesian circles, allows us to arrive at a clearer, but still slightly murky, picture of the ASEAN/SEA perspective. The best way to capture this perspective is to look at the concept as an ideational one (an “idea”) as well as a geographic construct (a “region”), as per Rory Medcalf’s formula.¹¹ Firstly, as with earlier adopters of the IP concept,

7 Tang Siew Mun et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2019 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), p. 25.

8 Tan Sri Rastam Mohd Isa, ‘A Great Unwinding? Rules-Based Regional Security Order to 2020 and Beyond’ (Welcoming Remarks at the 33rd Asia-Pacific Roundtable), 24 June 2019.

9 Dewi Fortuna Anwar, ‘Indonesia and the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific’, *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020), p. 114.

10 Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ‘Joint Statement by the ADMM-Plus Defence Ministers on Advancing Partnership for Sustainable Security’, 18 November 2019.

11 Rory Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won't Map the Future* (Carlton, VIC: Black Inc., Forthcoming).

the imagination of ASEAN states has been fired by the idea that ‘The Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean regions are amongst the most dynamic in the world as centers of economic growth,’ and that the ‘geopolitical and geopolitical shifts’ imply ‘opportunities and well as challenges.’¹² In general terms this accords well with the visions of the region’s major powers (barring China). It is also echoed individually by certain member-states such as Indonesia, but also the Philippines, whose Defence Minister Delfin Lorenzana, broke ranks by dropping the label ‘Asia Pacific’ in a 2019 policy speech, indicating a diversity of opinion among members states. He instead stated that the Indo Pacific

‘is the new pivot of global geopolitics. It is where the future of the international order will likely be decided. This mega-region, however, is also a cauldron of unimaginably complex challenges, which will transcend the capabilities—and strategic imagination—of any single power or any limited grouping of nations.’¹³

Thus, various efforts by individual SEA states to step up with their own ideational interpretation of the concept, demonstrate that ‘ASEAN is telling the world that it has its own way of developing the Indo-Pacific idea—previously pushed by outside powers such as Japan, Australia, India and the US—and that it won’t let outside powers dominate the “discourse” on the Indo-Pacific’, according to Amitav Acharya.¹⁴ Indeed, claiming a privileged role in this strategic discourse is crucial to any

pretense of shaping the regional order in ways beneficial to SEA and not solely dictated by either the US or China, or the clashing rivalry between them. But as well as pro-actively engaging with the concept, ASEAN has needed to stress actions that will contribute to its own distinctive vision for the IP aimed at contributing to ‘the maintenance of peace, freedom, and prosperity.’¹⁵

Secondly, looking at the Indo Pacific as a geographic “place” was initially tainted in SEA eyes by proponents playing up its “Oceanic” nature, and initially appearing to overlook or deemphasize the (continental) SEA sub-region altogether. As Baogang He notes ‘Since “Asia” disappears from the term of the Indo-Pacific region the concept of Indo-Pacific can be said to dilute the influence of ASEAN and marginalize its centrality.’¹⁶ Later having received ardent assurances from advocates of the concept that in fact SEA was quite “central” to it after all, the IP concept became more palatable. Notwithstanding, it has accepted the integral ‘importance of the maritime domain’ to the concept.¹⁷ ASEAN’s definition of the Indo Pacific appears to comport with the notion of the Indian and Western Pacific Oceans amount to a ‘single strategic system’ (in the words of Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi: a “Single Geo-Strategic theatre”). ASEAN’s later official proclamation characterized the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions ‘not as contiguous territorial spaces but as closely integrated and interconnected region.’¹⁸ Importantly, this interpretation allows ASEAN to delimit the IP

12 Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ‘ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific’, 2019, p. 1.

13 Cited in Graeme Dobell, ‘ASEAN peers, picks and pokes at the Indo-Pacific’, *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 17 June 2019.

14 Amitav Acharya, ‘Why ASEAN’s Indo-Pacific outlook matters’, *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 12 August 2019.

15 Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ‘ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific’, 2019, p. 2.

16 Baogang He, ‘Chinese Expanded Perceptions of the Region and Its Changing Attitudes Toward the Indo-Pacific: a Hybrid Vision of the Institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific’, *East Asia* 35, no. 2 (2018), p. 128.

17 Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ‘ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific’, 2019, p. 2.

18 Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ‘ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific’, 2019, p. 2.

concept to a mere extension of the accepted ‘Asia Pacific’ descriptor through the attachment of the Indian Ocean, as opposed to a complete rescaling of the “region” as has been implied in some conceptions. Thus, Huong Le Thu remarks that ‘The [AOIP] paper rejects the notion of the Indo-Pacific as one continuous territorial space. Instead, in ASEAN’s eyes, the Indo-Pacific is made up of two distinct regions: the Asia–Pacific and the Indian Ocean.’¹⁹ Likewise, ASEAN states have stressed the *inclusiveness* of their understanding of the IP region, designed to dispel fears that IP-related policies, such as FOIP, or even the concept itself, serve as a plot to exclude China. These perspectives, as well as those above are reflected in the resultant AOIP declaration to which we now turn.

An ASEAN “strategy” for the Indo Pacific?

Having made some attempt to engage with both the ideational and geographic parameters of the IP concept, just discussed, SEA states have tentatively sought to align their national policies behind it to differing degrees quite independently. But this section looks at what ASEAN as a collective actor in regional security politics has done to stake out its diplomatic position. The AOIP document itself, is rather vague and in parts repetitive, but it is useful to tease out its main content and implications, and comment on how it intersects to US-led (or Chinese-led) visions of the IP. After all, Dewi Fortuna Anwar proposes that the AOIP ‘will also be offered to other countries outside ASEAN as a possible common platform for promoting regional dialogue and cooperation, with the potential to transcend the various disparate visions of the Indo-Pacific already put forward by different countries.’²⁰

To the extent to which one may talk of a

putative “Indo Pacific strategy” for ASEAN, the AOIP outlines its ‘objectives’ as follows. Firstly, the outlook is designed to offer a ‘guide to cooperation in the region’. This initial objective lacks specificity in comparison to more well-developed strategy documents such as the US Indo Pacific Strategic Report (IPSR), and the American/Japanese FOIP policies. Secondly, the AOIP aims at ‘helping to promote an enabling environment for peace, stability and prosperity in the region in addressing common challenges, upholding the rules-based regional architecture, and promoting closer economic cooperation, and thus strengthen confidence and trust.’ The commitment to ‘rules-based architecture’ however is notable given the emphasis that this enjoys in the foreign policies of the US, Japan and Australia, through the FOIP strategy (and further substantiated as ‘principles’: see below).

Thirdly, comes ‘enhancing ASEAN’s Community building process and further strengthening the existing ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the EAS [East Asian Summit]’. There are two significant observations here: the highlighting of ASEAN’s distinctive “Security Community” (and “Comprehensive Security”) model as a distinct “third way” of regionalism apart from the US alliance system and the Chinese institutional network, and the apparent proffering of the EAS as the most appropriate pre-existing ASEAN-led mechanism to encompass the Indo Pacific regional construct. Indeed, at this point one of the most striking aspects of the objectives is that they are all apparently best served by optimizing and strengthening the existing suite of existing institutional mechanism of ASEAN, and that they all comport relatively seamlessly with the core “Community-building” aspects of the ASEAN model. As Dewi Fortuna Anwar admits ‘the ASEAN outlook is primarily driven by ASEAN-

19 Huong Le Thu, ‘The long and winding way to the Indo-Pacific’, *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 29 June 2019.

20 Dewi Fortuna Anwar, ‘Indonesia and the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific’, *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020), p. 111.

led mechanisms, while recognizing the potential for cooperation with other regional mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions.²¹ This serves notice that ASEAN institutions are already deemed fit for all purpose and should thus be placed at the centre of any conception of the IP, and that no new or specific IP-focused instruments are necessary. Others might add more cynically, that it doesn't actually require ASEAN to do anything it is not already doing. Indeed, all the objectives can be matched back with those listed in the ASEAN Community 2015 and ASEAN Community Vision 2025 objectives.²²

The fourth and last objective of the AOIP is 'priority areas of cooperation, including maritime cooperation, connectivity, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and economic and other possible areas of cooperation.' Again, though quite amorphous, such 'areas of cooperation' allow for potential intersections with the FOIP-led objectives of the US and its allies. These 'areas of cooperation' as they are subsequently noted in the Statement are worthy of closer inspection in the section, after next.

Perhaps more notable are the 'principles' enunciated in the document. While they overlap with the 'objectives' above, they arguably contain a clearer statement of the ASEAN world view as it relates to the IP region. The first of three verbose paragraphs (No. 10) is a basic endorsement of the need for a "Rules Based Order" (RBO) – it mentions 'openness, transparency, inclusivity, rules-based-framework, good governance, respect for sovereignty, non-intervention, mutual respect/trust/benefit, respect for international law (including UNCLOS)'. This presents

an interesting amalgam of principles also advocated by the FOIP countries – such as 'openness, transparency, good governance, respect for sovereignty, and international law,' thus apparently aligning its with US-led IP strategy. As See Seng Tan reflects - 'many of the express principles of the FOIP—freedom of navigation, rule of law, respect for sovereignty, open markets and the like—are in fact attractive to many ASEAN member states.'²³ Yet, ASEAN has also long cherished 'harmony/consensus', 'non-intervention' and 'equality' (i.e. the "ASEAN Way"), which better chime with Chinese diplomatic positions. Thus, ASEAN seems to be carving out its own principles which (intentionally) straddle or 'bridge' those of the two major power centers in the region. The second and third paragraphs (No.s 11 & 12) in the 'principles' section belabor the role of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) as a preferred locus of confidence, trust-building, and peaceful resolution of disputes. It boldly, but slightly disingenuously, credits the TAC will having preserved peace in the region for the previous 40 years. Yet it stops short of adopting earlier Indonesian proposals to promulgate some form of "IP Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation", "Indo Pacific Partnership" or "IP Cooperation Concept", however. Interestingly, it adopts the preferred Chinese phrase of 'win-win cooperation', again ascribing the TAC as the putative mechanism through which this might be achieved.

Returning to the 'areas of cooperation' alluded to in the 'objectives' section, the first of these – 'maritime cooperation' – identifies the thorny question of territorial disputes in tandem with the environmental challenges in this sphere (e.g. pollution, resource scarcity). The

21 Dewi Fortuna Anwar, 'Indonesia and the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific', *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020), p. 128.

22 Association of Southeast Asian Nations, *Fact Sheet – ASEAN Community* (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2015); Association of Southeast Asian Nations, *ASEAN Community Vision 2025* (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2015).

23 See Seng Tan, 'Consigned to hedge: South-east Asia and America's 'free and open Indo-Pacific' strategy', *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020), pp. 141.

Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) is one of the applicable ASEAN organs here.²⁴ The AOIP itself makes pro forma declarations of the importance of the UNCLOS on the need for peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law, and asserts the rights of freedom of navigation and overflight (as per ‘principles’). All of this tallies with the more robust policies of the US in particular (including the conduct of Freedom of Navigation operations (FONOPS)). But the ASEAN document stops short of identifying the series of territorial disputes that its members states have with China in the South China Sea (SCS), or Beijing’s militarization of that maritime space. This ‘soft’ stance most likely reflects an unwillingness to provoke China, especially by those members with no stake in the actual disputes. Other than this implicit identification of serious geopolitical challenges in the SCS, mention of Non-Traditional Security (NTS) challenges, as per the ASEAN playbook, are relatively uncontroversial and delegated to a plethora of relevant organs.²⁵ However, the required responses of joining the US and its allies in improved capacity-building and increased Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), conveniently serve to concomitantly strengthen the hand of states affected by Chinese maritime encroachments as well. And, again this area of concern serves to bind the AOIP with the FOIP of the US-allies, who are directly assisting with such challenges. Once again Indonesia is at the forefront of building up the maritime security element of the AOIP, tied in with its own Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) strategy. Rizal Sukma attests ‘Seen in this light, Indonesia’s embrace of the Indo-Pacific idea is a foreign policy operationalization of a national maritime vision.’²⁶

The second area is that of ‘connectivity’, and once again a suitable pre-existing institutional arm is at hand in the form of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 (MPAC). This strongly emulates both the BRI and FOIP by aiming at ‘increasing integration and interconnection among Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean countries’ in order to ‘promote competitiveness, inclusiveness, and a greater sense of community.’ Rather than stake out major infrastructure or investment ambitions, as per the BRI and FOIP, however, ASEAN contents itself with less grandiose and costly physical schemes that are more confined to public-private partnerships, people-to-people linkages, institutional connections, with the Indian-Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), for example. Such aspirations are quite modest when measured against the aims of the BRI and even FOIP countries across the region. They do echo with the core ASEAN commitment to extend ‘community-building’ into the economic and societal/cultural spheres, however.

The third area relates to the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (SDGs). Again, this area is made to align with extant ASEAN policies, specifically the ASEAN Community Vision 2025.²⁷ Existing plans are simply rolled out and rebranded as constituents of the AOIP. Vague potentialities for tapping into the digital economy and regional development agenda are floated, but not firm commitments outlined. The fourth area for cooperation ‘economic and other’ is simply presented as a bullet point list and gives the impression that this final section is simply a repository of afterthoughts. In addition

24 Department of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Philippines, ‘PH Hosts 8th ASEAN Maritime Forum, 6th Expanded Maritime Forum’, 18 December 2018.

25 ADMM-Plus Experts Working Groups (EWGs), including: Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief, Maritime Security, Military Medicine, Counterterrorism, Peacekeeping Operations, Humanitarian Mine Action and Cyber Security.

26 Rizal Sukma, ‘Indonesia, ASEAN and Indo-Pacific (Part 2 of 2)’, *The Jakarta Post*, 30 August 2019.

27 Association of Southeast Asian Nations, *ASEAN Community Vision 2025* (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2015)

to some minor activities (e.g. SciTech and smart infrastructure, trade facilitation), it again takes the opportunity to place these under another pillar of the ASC, the Economic Community Blueprint 2025,²⁸ as well as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Conclusion: Can the AOIP serve as an IP strategy?

The AOIP is deliberately labeled an “outlook”, as opposed to a “strategy” or even “policy”, though it arguably contains hints at the first and elements of the second. Indeed, the document is relatively brief, innocuous and full of “ASEAN speak” in marked contrast to say the IPSR of the US, this presents no grand strategic blueprint. The “outlook” label sets the leitmotiv for fulfilling two functions. One, it a general statement of the unified ASEAN position in response to the IP strategies of the US and others in context with the BRI. Two: it recapitulates how pre-existing ASEAN mechanisms can be made relevant to the IP concept. In essence, Rizal Sukma argues ‘They hope that the vision will reconcile the competing visions of regional order advocated by major powers. By adopting the Outlook, ASEAN evidently wants to remind itself, and send a simple message to extra-regional powers, that ASEAN centrality should never be forgotten.’²⁹ This will potentially allow ASEAN to chart a ‘middle’ path between the two rivalrous great powers in the region.

It is clear that several, if not most, of the ASEAN states have been extremely lukewarm toward the concept. This highly cautious stance is explained by the desire to avoid

choosing sides between the US, with whom the IP concept is strongly affiliated, and China, which rejects and opposes the concept, and the American strategies it represents. ASEAN concomitantly seeks to preserve its role as a form of regional security arbiter – its “centrality” – by emphasizing how its preexisting institutions and plans could be accommodated into and made relevant to the IP concept. There are indeed, intersections between the ASEAN view of the IP and the US-led policies, such as FOIP, whilst ASEAN still maintains aspects of common ground, such as non-interference principles and the prospect of win-win relations with the PRC. As Ryosuke Hanada argues ‘ASEAN welcomes the FOIP as a counterbalance to China’s overwhelming power in the region while remaining somewhat reserved, due to concern over possible entrapment into a binary choice between Washington and Beijing.’³⁰ The AOIP is an attempt to overcome the dilemma of ASEAN marginalization or loss of neutrality by walking a fine middle ground on the divisive IP issue.

It would of course, be simplistic to view the AOIP and the mechanisms and plans attached to it from among the ASEAN stable to represent a perfect unison of interests among its diverse membership. It is no more than a common “guide” based as usual on basic consensus among member-states. As has been alluded to earlier, Jakarta is both considerably more interested in the IP concept and thus a strong driving force behind the AOIP. This appears to have been strongly predicated upon Jakarta’s earlier unsuccessful efforts to embrace and the concept, with Amitav Acharya remarking that it ‘resembles an Indonesian-conceived plan.’³¹

28 Association of Southeast Asian Nations, *ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025* (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2015).

29 Rizal Sukma, ‘Indonesia, ASEAN and Indo-Pacific (Part 1 of 2)’, *The Jakarta Post*, 29 August 2019.

30 Ryosuke Hanada, ‘ASEAN’s Role in the Indo-Pacific: Rules-based Order and Regional Integrity’, in Sharon Stirling (eds), *Mind the Gap: National Views of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific* (Washington, DC: German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2019), p. 12.

31 Amitav Acharya, ‘Why ASEAN’s Indo-Pacific outlook matters’, *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 12 August 2019.

Thus, Rizal Sukma posits that ‘it is logical to expect that Indonesia would continue to take the lead in ensuring that the AOIP does what it is meant to do.’³² As the only genuinely Indian and Pacific Ocean state in SEA, Jakarta has made repeated efforts to motivate its ASEAN partners with only minimal success to date.

Meanwhile, the various American-led policies that attach to the IP concept continue to attract adherents according to their selective national interests, for example Singapore’s interest in the Quad (“SQUAD”), whilst none of them fully endorse all aspects of US policy, particularly its more confrontational elements toward the PRC. As Rory Medcalf reminds us ‘Just because Asian governments are not all, or not yet, comfortable with the Indo-Pacific label, does not mean that their interests and actual policy choices are not in accord with it.’³³ It is therefore likely when hard-headed Realist aspects of national security come to the fore, there will be closer individual SEA state alignment with American strategic policy whilst they continue to maintain a collective front under the combined ASEAN position, which in the form of the AIOP offers little new of any substance likely to concretely augment its role through the IP concept.

The ASEAN approach to the IP can be summed up as follows:

- Lack of enthusiasm for “rescaling” of region, and continued attachment to the “Asia Pacific” as preferred descriptor (possible exceptions: Indonesia, Philippines).
- Some proactive efforts by Jakarta to engage with and profit from new concept both nationally, and (less successfully) through ASEAN.
- Concerns that the IP construct undermines ASEAN “centrality” claimed under the extant descriptor of “Asia Pacific”.
- Roll-out of existing ASEAN mechanisms

and policies simply rebranded under “Indo Pacific” banner – no real new commitment or strong definitive position.

- Fears of being drawn into US-led strategy against China – being forced to “pick sides” – wariness of “security” or “geopolitical” overtones of the IP concept.

32 Rizal Sukma, ‘Indonesia, ASEAN and Indo-Pacific (Part 2 of 2)’, *The Jakarta Post*, 30 August 2019.

33 Rory Medcalf, *Pivoting the map: Australia’s Indo-Pacific System* (Canberra: Strategic & Defence Studies Centre, 2012), p. 2.