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ASEAN and the United States in the Indo-Pacific: Convergence or Divergence?

ABSTRACT

The Indo-Pacific region is becoming more important to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United States as highlighted in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) adopted in 2019 and in the Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific strategy released in February 2022. As such, cooperation between ASEAN and the United States is increasingly framed in the context of the complementary objectives of the two guiding documents. This article examines the premises and objectives of ASEAN and U.S. approaches to the Indo-Pacific and seeks to understand the similarity and differences including the competition vis-à-vis China, and the U.S. preference to work with its allies and regional partners. While ASEAN is working towards mainstreaming the AOIP in further substantiating its outlook, there are a number of convergences in which ASEAN may align its interests with the United States, especially in the promotion of a rules-based order as well as tangible and cutting-edge cooperation such as technology, digital economy,



initiatives for sustainable development, and in the maritime domain. However, apart from positive-sum cooperation, ASEAN's preference for neutrality and the need for consensus-building will make it difficult for ASEAN to take sides in the U.S.-China rivalry or to take substantive positions on key security issues. As such, the establishment of U.S.-led minilateral groupings such as the QUAD and AUKUS may be detrimental to the interest of ASEAN and might further exacerbate divisions within ASEAN and challenge its unity.

Keywords: ASEAN, Indo-Pacific, United States, China, QUAD, AUKUS

The United States released a new version of its free and open Indo-Pacific strategy under the Biden Administration on February 11, 2022 and subsequently the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) on May 23, 2022.¹ Despite the change in administration, the importance of the Indo-Pacific to the United States remains paramount, reflecting the strong bipartisan support from the U.S. Congress—an affirmation that the administrations of both political parties share a common commitment to this region, and that the priority is unlikely to vacillate in the future. It has also been noted that the Biden Administration's approach to the Indo-Pacific is broadly consistent with the past two decades of policy directions by its predecessor administrations amidst the variations in the messaging.² In particular, the United States remains unswerving in its strategic posture in the region, in its approaches to its allies and partnerships, and its competition vis-à-vis China.

¹ "Fact Sheet: In Asia, President Biden and a Dozen Indo-Pacific Partners Launch the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity," White House, May 23, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/fact-sheet-in-asia-president-biden-and-a-dozen-indo-pacific-partners-launch-the-indo-pacific-economic-framework-for-prosperity/>.

² Ibid.

In fact, the importance of the Indo-Pacific overshadows the National Security Strategy by being the first strategy document by the Biden Administration to be released, which is premised on the view that the Indo-Pacific region is strategic and will grow even more so in the twenty-first century.³ Such views are not held solely by the United States but by an increasing number of regional powers with vested interests in the Indo-Pacific region such as Japan, India, Australia, the Republic of Korea (ROK), the United Kingdom (UK), as well as the European Union (EU).

Consisting of its ten member states, ASEAN lies at the heart and the intersection of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Given ASEAN's central location in the Indo-Pacific, its economic potential, and significant role in ensuring peace and security in the region over the past five decades, it is not surprising that ASEAN has become an important pillar of the Indo-Pacific strategies of major players in the region including the United States. It would reason that without the 'buy-in' and strong support of ASEAN and its member states, it would be difficult for the United States to achieve the objectives of its Indo-Pacific strategy.

Goals of this Study

Against this backdrop, the study aims to: (i) understand ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) adopted in 2019 and examine the role that ASEAN plays in this increasingly important region; (ii) analyze the Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific strategy announced in February 2022 including its economic dimension and the U.S. preoccupation with the threat of China, and (iii) identify the convergence of the two vital players in the Indo-Pacific by examining

³ Satu Limaye, "The Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Continuities, Adjustments and Domestic Dimensions," *East Asian Policy* 14, no. 1 (2022): 5-19.



the alignment of interest through tangible cooperation as well as aspects of divergence in the Indo-Pacific Pax Americana as ASEAN centrality may be threatened by U.S.-led minilateral groupings.

1. ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific

1.1 Why the AOIP Matters in the Region

With the rise of geopolitical and geostrategic interest in the Indo-Pacific, the narrative of the Indo-Pacific is increasingly being shaped by major powers in the region. This was recognized even in the founding days of ASEAN when former Indonesian Minister Adam Malik noted that “Southeast Asia is one region in which the presence of interests of most major powers converge, politically as well as physically (Malik, 1975)”⁴ ASEAN, which sits at the heart of the Indo-Pacific, noted the need to also come up with its own collective leadership in forging and shaping a vision for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and to maintain its central role in the evolving regional architecture.⁵ It was thus essential for ASEAN to come up with a guiding document to help steer the regional bloc in navigating the increasingly complex regional architecture amidst competing interests and territorial claims in the region. Furthermore, geographically, ASEAN is the only region apart from Australia that straddles both the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Despite the mixed views within ASEAN on the Indo-Pacific, Indonesia took the lead in 2018 and 2019 in elevating ASEAN’s geographical importance in the Indo-Pacific and strengthening ASEAN’s cooperation with the Indo-Pacific powers—noting that the

⁴ Adam Malik, “Regional Cooperation in International Politics,” in *Regionalism in Southeast Asia* (Jakarta: Centre for International and Strategic Studies, 1975).

⁵ ASEAN, “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific”, June 22, 2019, ASEAN Secretariat, https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf.

preferred option in Indonesia's foreign policy was to strengthen ASEAN's unity and expand ASEAN's presence in the Indo-Pacific.⁶ As such, under the leadership of Indonesia, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) was eventually adopted by ASEAN Leaders at the 34th ASEAN Summit in June 2019.

Notwithstanding the AOIP being a 'beginner' outlook document, rather than a strategy in the Indo-Pacific, several of ASEAN's dialogue partners including the United States, Japan, India, Australia, and the ROK welcomed its adoption and underscored the importance of the AOIP in the region. While the actual significance of the Outlook in the strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific has not been determined (in fact, some may even question ASEAN's leading role in the wider Indo-Pacific region), its value and merits stem from ASEAN's central and indispensable role in the regional architecture in two key aspects.

First, ASEAN's ability to set the rules, norms, and principles for cooperation in the region through key documents such as the "Declaration of the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality" in 1971, the "Declaration of the ASEAN Concord" in 1976, and more importantly, the "Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia" (TAC) in 1976 which has become a legally-binding code for inter-state relations in the region and beyond.⁷

⁶ Speech by Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno L.P. Marsudi, "Overcoming the World Challenge, the Foreign Minister Conveys the Focus of RI Diplomacy in 2018," <https://www.embassyofindonesia.org/overcoming-the-world-challenge-the-foreign-minister-conveys-the-focus-of-ri-diplomacy-in-2018/>.

⁷ ASEAN, Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), <https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/outward-looking-community/treaty-of-amity-and-cooperation-in-southeast-asia-tac/#:~:text=The%20Treaty%20of%20Amity%20and,in%20the%20region%20and%20beyond.>



Secondly, ASEAN as a group of relatively neutral countries is able to bring together major powers and regional players—regardless of ideologies or values—for inclusive political–security dialogue, economic, and other strategic cooperation through its multilateral mechanisms including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF, since 1994), the East Asia Summit (EAS, since 2005), the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus, since 2010), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership which entered into force for most of its members in January 2022.

As such, ASEAN has extended its diplomatic leadership beyond its own Southeast Asian region into the wider Asia–Pacific in establishing rules and shaping credible institutions and processes for the participation of its partners.⁸ The balancing role of ASEAN through its institutions, therefore, remains important to ensure that the region is not dominated, or driven, by any great power.

1.2 The Premise of the AOIP

The AOIP may be viewed as ASEAN’s first guiding document on the Indo–Pacific that would help to safeguard and preserve its centrality in a region envisioned to be closely integrated, prosperous, and one that promotes dialogue and cooperation. Furthermore, ASEAN aimed to promote and strengthen key principles and norms enshrined in key ASEAN documents including openness, transparency, inclusivity, good governance, respect for sovereignty, non-intervention, respect for international law such as the UN Charter and the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, among others.⁹

⁸ See Robert Yates, “Understanding ASEAN’s Role in Asia–Pacific Order,” in *Critical Studies of the Asia–Pacific*, ed. Mark Beeson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 191–286.

In materializing the objectives in the AOIP, ASEAN identified four priority areas of cooperation namely, maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development, and economic and other possible areas of cooperation (an indication that ASEAN is open to future proposals from its members or partners). Such cooperation may be pursued through Asean-led mechanisms such as EAS, the ARF, the ADMM-Plus, and other relevant ASEAN Plus One mechanisms.¹⁰



President Joseph Biden hosted the Quad prime ministers of Japan, India, and Australia for the first-ever in-person summit of Quad leaders at the White House in Washington, D.C. in September 2021. Left to right: Yoshihide Suga, Narendra Modi, Biden, and Scott Morrison. Photo by the courtesy of the White House.

⁹ ASEAN, “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, June 22, 2019, https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf.

¹⁰ Ibid.



In early 2022, Indonesia took the lead once again to further substantiate its Outlook by proposing to mainstream the four priority areas in the AOIP within ASEAN-led mechanisms. By mainstreaming the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN is not only advancing the interest of the regional bloc in an important strategic sphere but also extending its partnership by effectively opening up platforms (i.e. ASEAN-led mechanisms) for concrete cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and to build upon existing initiatives.

Several dialogue partners including Japan and India have identified specific areas of cooperation through the adoption of Joint Statements during their respective Summits with ASEAN. The modalities of engagement are still being discussed within ASEAN with the aim of enhancing the practical implementation of activities to promote greater strategic trust in the Indo-Pacific region.

The exact role of ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific, other than being the region's facilitator, has not been clearly defined, or perhaps it was meant to be kept broad and ambiguous to satisfy the diverse interest (or lack of interest), within the regional bloc that continues to struggle in addressing a myriad of other regional challenges.

As such, the success of the AOIP will depend on whether ASEAN as a grouping is able to overcome some of its internal challenges. Apart from Indonesia, there are no other strong proponents of the Indo-Pacific within the grouping. ASEAN's impact in the region will be limited because of, first, its inability to undertake substantive positions on key issues; secondly, its need to preserve its neutrality and unity amidst major power rivalry; and thirdly, the lack of hard power in its security mechanisms. This, therefore, has prompted many scholars to examine if ASEAN can indeed play a leading role in the Indo-Pacific region—albeit with an “ASEAN characteristic” based entirely on consultation and consensus.

2. The US in the Indo-Pacific

In 2017, the United States started to use the term “Indo-Pacific” in the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS), replacing the term “Asia-Pacific” used during the Obama Administration.¹¹ According to the NSS, the Indo-Pacific region stretches from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States and represents the most populous and economically dynamic part of the world. As a relatively new construct, the premise of Trump’s Indo-Pacific is to provide an integrated sense of the region and its manifold interest. It corresponds largely to the military “area of responsibility” allocated to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.¹² It is, therefore, also about the geopolitical competition between “free and repressive visions of world order”—specifically, the threat of China (mentioned thirty-three times) and Russia (mentioned twenty-five times) to the security and prosperity of the United States. In comparison, ASEAN was only mentioned once in the document although its role was underlined as the center piece of the Indo-Pacific regional architecture.

In 2019, the U.S. Department of State published the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision” to formalize its concept of a free and open Indo-Pacific.¹³ It underscored the importance of principles and values such as freedom, democracy, the rule of law, as well as free, fair, and reciprocal trade. Similar to the earlier published NSS, the U.S. free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) highlighted that

¹¹ “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” White House, December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

¹² See Michael R. Auslin, *Asia’s New Geopolitics, Essays on Reshaping the Indo-Pacific* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2020), 149–183.

¹³ “A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision,” U.S. Department of State, November 4, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>.



“authoritarian revisionist powers seek to advance their parochial interests at others’ expense,” pointing mainly to China’s practices of repression both domestically and abroad. It was the first document that mentioned ASEAN more than thirty times, acknowledging that “ASEAN serves [as] the backbone of regional political and security discussion,” and is central to the United States’ vision. It was also the first time that the United States spoke of a “clear convergence between the principles enshrined in ASEAN’s Indo–Pacific Outlook and the vision of the United States for a free and open Indo–Pacific.”

2.1 The Premise of the Biden’s Administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy

The Biden Administration’s new Indo–Pacific strategy, issued in February 2022 premises on the view that the Indo–Pacific region is strategic and will grow even more so in the twenty–first century.¹⁴ As such, the administrations of both political parties have shared a common commitment to this region. It has also been noted that the Biden Administration’s approach to the Indo–Pacific is broadly consistent with the past two decades of policy directions by its predecessor administrations amidst the variations in the messaging.¹⁵ This includes competition vis–à–vis China; U.S. security posture in the region; the U.S. approach to commercial ties, alliances, and partnerships; the promotion of multilateral engagements (albeit with a slight break during Trump’s administration); and the promotion of human rights and democracy.

¹⁴ “Indo–Pacific Strategy of the United States,” White House, February 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

As such, Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy may be seen as a continuation of Trump's FOIP with a renewed focus on strengthening collaboration with allies, partners, and institutions, within the region and beyond. In addition, apart from the focus on security, Biden's strategy places significant emphasis on the newly released Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) which features new approaches to trade¹⁶ (See Section 2.3).

2.2 Responding to China's Ambitions

Sharing the same outlook as the Trump Administration, Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy continues to be preoccupied with the threat of China, noting that the "Indo-Pacific faces mounting challenges, particularly from the PRC (China)." The strategy further highlighted that "the PRC's coercion and aggression span the globe, but it is most acute in the Indo-Pacific." While the PRC (China) was mentioned thirteen times within the document (mostly in a competitive manner), the US also seeks to cooperate with China in areas like climate change, and non-proliferation.

Prior to the release of Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy, the U.S. Department of Defence introduced the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, 'prioritizing' China as the number one pacing challenge, demonstrating the United States' belief that it was necessary to bolster deterrence and maintain its competitive advantage.¹⁷ A stand-alone strategy for China¹⁸

¹⁶ "Fact Sheet: In Asia, President Biden and a Dozen Indo-Pacific Partners Launch the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity," White House, May 23, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/fact-sheet-in-asia-president-biden-and-a-dozen-indo-pacific-partners-launch-the-indo-pacific-economic-framework-for-prosperity/>.

¹⁷ "Pacific Deterrence Initiative," US Department of Defence, May 2021, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/fy2022_Pacific_Deterrence_Initiative.pdf.



had also been discussed by U.S. policymakers. The Biden Administration's approach to China was announced in May 2022 during a speech¹⁹ by Secretary Blinken.²⁰ While China has for years denied any hegemonic ambitions, its posture has shifted particularly in the past decade when former President Hu Jintao delivered a speech in 2009, calling for China to increase its power and influence in the international arena.²¹ China's foreign policy was further strengthened under President Xi Jinping when he sought to realize a 'Chinese dream' that is both prosperous and militarily powerful.

The change in Chinese posture is most apparent in the South China Sea where the region has witnessed China's increasing military build-ups in the disputed waters in the Spratly and Paracel Islands, and intrusions into Southeast Asian claimant states' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Despite the international arbitration tribunal ruling in 2016 that China had no historical rights to areas within Southeast Asia's EEZ, China continues to expand its maritime militia activities and claims about 90 percent of the South China Sea based on its "nine-dash

¹⁸ Patricia Zengerle and Michael Martina, "Blinken to detail US national strategy for China in coming weeks", Reuters, April 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/blinken-address-us-national-security-strategy-related-china-coming-weeks-2022-04-26/>.

¹⁹ Anthony Blinken, Speech by US Secretary of State, <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>, US Department of State, May 26, 2022.

²⁰ Wang Wenbin, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference, February 14, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202202/t20220214_10642170.html.

²¹ Masayuki Masuda, "Why has Chinese Foreign Policy Become More Assertive," *East Asia Forum*, February 20, 2016, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/02/20/why-has-chinese-foreign-policy-become-more-assertive/>.

line.”²² In addition, China announced its controversial Coast Guard law in January 2021 which allows Chinese coast guards to fire on foreign vessels in its claimed waters.²³

In response to China’s ambitions and violation of international law, the United States has taken on positions ranging from a legalistic stance based on acceptable international law to calls for limited military activities including freedom of navigation operations.²⁴ Furthermore, the United States has continued its underlying commitment to Taiwan in various forms such as arms sales, supporting Taiwan’s participation in international organizations, and visits by U.S. delegations to Taiwan, most recently the trip of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in August 2022.²⁵ The introduction of the Taiwan Relations Reinforcement Act in 2021, as well as other Reassurance Acts passed over the years, continue to substantiate relations between the United States and Taiwan while exacerbating relations with China.²⁶ During President Biden’s visit to Tokyo on May 23, 2022, he had expressed his

²² It has been noted by Michael R. Auslin that the Chinese strategy in the region has long been guided by the desire to control the maritime and air space within the so-called first and second-island chains. The first chain encompasses the East and South China Seas, linking up with China’s “nine-dash line” claim to the South China Sea. The second island chain is far broader in scope, encompassing Japanese territory and reaching far into the Western Pacific, to the U.S. territory of Guam in the Marianas.

²³ Joanne Lin, “China Should Build Trust Where it Matters,” *Fulcrum*, February 18, 2022, <https://fulcrum.sg/china-should-build-trust-where-it-matters/>.

²⁴ Edward Wong, “Chinese Military Seeks to Extend Its Naval Power,” *New York Times*, April 23, 2010.

²⁵ Auslin, *Asia’s New Geopolitics, Essays on Reshaping the Indo-Pacific*, xii.

²⁶ U.S. Congress, Taiwan Relations Reinforcement Act of 2021, (introduced on March 25, 2021), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/1054>.



willingness to use force to defend Taiwan against Chinese aggression, although analysts remain sceptical.²⁷

Apart from security concerns, the United States views China's global economic ambition and dominance in the region as a further threat. This includes China's aim to play a leading economic role through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as its interest to participate in all possible regional free trade agreements including the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

In preventing China's economic dominance in the Indo-Pacific, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the America COMPETES Act of 2022—a month before the release of its Indo-Pacific strategy—to boost U.S. economic competitiveness with China (which was mentioned thirty-six times in the document) in areas such as the production of critical semiconductor chips, strengthening supply chain for more manufacturing in the United States, and to turbo charge U.S. research capability, among others.²⁸

2.3 Economic Dimension: The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework

Another important component of U.S. strategy is the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) launched on May 23, 2022 on the sidelines of the Tokyo Summit of the QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, grouping Australia, India, Japan and the United States). According to

²⁷ “Biden says he would be willing to use force to defend Taiwan against China,” Channel News Asia, May 23, 2022, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/biden-says-he-would-be-willing-use-force-defend-taiwan-against-china-2700556>.

²⁸ “America COMPETES ACT of 2022,” U.S. Congress, January 25, 2022, <https://www.speaker.gov/sites/speaker.house.gov/files/America%20COMPETES%20Act%20of%202022%20HR%204521.pdf>.

the Joint Statement of the launch by thirteen initial partners—the United States, Australia, Brunei, India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam—the framework would cover four pillars namely trade (including digital economy), supply chains, clean energy, decarbonization, and infrastructure, as well as tax and anti-corruption.

Some experts in the region believe that the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework would, in fact, be the most important element of the U.S. policy for its own engagement in the region.²⁹ According to a study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), regional partners welcomed the announcement of the IPEF as a sign of renewed U.S. economic engagement in the Indo-Pacific region and that it complemented its security presence in the region.³⁰ Although most of the interviewed representatives expressed support for the overall content of the framework, members of the CPTPP characterized the IPEF as a second-best option to the United States joining the CPTPP or a similar comprehensive high-standard regional trade agreement. The high-standards imply the rising expectation of participating countries that the trade agreement includes a high degree of trade liberalization covering, for instance, 95 percent of tariffs, as well as high commitments to eliminate non-tariff barriers, to liberalize trade in services, facilitate cross-border investment, and reduce state subsidies in state-owned enterprises.

Furthermore, while the United States may prefer to keep its high standards exclusive to its preferred regional partners, several interviewees from Southeast Asia would prefer to see the framework being inclusive to all Indo-Pacific countries including the smaller

²⁹ Limaye, “The Biden Administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy: Continuities, Adjustments and Domestic Dimensions.”

³⁰ Ibid.



ASEAN economies such as Laos, and Cambodia, and Myanmar. Several countries in the region have also expressed discomfort should Taiwan (instead of China) join the framework, as such a move may be seen as further politicizing the framework and the U.S.–China divide in the region.

Fundamentally, ASEAN as a pragmatic organization would like to see greater value-added in the framework beyond the existing regional architecture and to commensurate with existing arrangements such as the RCEP, CPTPP, or the BRI.³¹ In addition, the United States should ensure that the high-quality clauses (such as labor or environmental standards) of the framework should not pose challenges to the existing policies of its members, otherwise, there would be no incentives for ASEAN members to join, and especially so when there is no market access involved.

While domestic constituents in the United States have realized that U.S. economic leadership and credibility are at stake in the Indo-Pacific owing to a lack of an affirmative economic strategy, there is little room to maneuver due to its political constraints.³² An initiative without strong bipartisan support is unlikely to gain congressional approval and will not stand the test of time. As such, the economic framework may only be an aspirational promise by the Biden Administration to distinguish itself from the more combative Indo-Pacific strategy of President Trump, and it remains to be seen if such a framework could indeed be a game-changer in the region.³³

³¹ Ibid.

³² Joshua Cartwright and Robert Delaney, “US plans trade meetings with Asean leaders as it retools Indo-Pacific strategy,” *South China Morning Post*, April 7, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/3173318/us-plans-trade-meetings-asean-leaders-it-retools-indo-pacific-strategy>.

3. ASEAN and the United States in the Indo-Pacific: Convergence or Divergence

3.1 Potential for Convergence: Aligning Interest between ASEAN and the United States in the Indo-Pacific

Ever since the release of the AOIP and the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific, cooperation between ASEAN and the United States is increasingly framed in the context of the complementary objectives of the two guiding documents. Where ASEAN and the United States may converge is the promotion of greater strategic trust in the Indo-Pacific region through the implementation of tangible activities of mutual interest. The United States has the upper hand in the Indo-Pacific due to its ability to garner trust in the ASEAN region and as a leader in championing a rules-based order and upholding international law.

In the *State of Southeast Asia 2022 Survey Report* (conducted by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore), the United States remained the region's top choice for its leadership, both in maintaining a rules-based order and in championing the global free trade agenda with 36.6 percent and 30.1 percent of the votes, respectively.³⁴ While the United States has not been viewed as the region's most influential economic, political, and strategic power—falling behind China significantly—its growing influence has been welcomed by the region, a contrast to the high level of distrust towards China. In addition, when asked to choose between the United States and China, 57 percent of the region chose to

³³ John Bradford, Philip Shetler-Jones, "US-UK Consultations on the Indo-Pacific: An Unexpected Development for Southeast Asia," IP22026, IDSS Paper, Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip22026-us-uk-consultations-on-the-indo-pacific-an-unexpected-development-for-southeast-asia/#.YlBD_ShBxPY.

³⁴ S. Seah, et al, *The State of Southeast Asia 2022 Survey Report*, 2022 (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/The-State-of-SEA-2022_FA_Digital_FINAL.pdf.



align with the United States, indicating that the United States remained the preferred choice of Southeast Asians.

Given the region's trust towards the United States and the increasing uncertainties surrounding China's irredentism in the South China Sea, greater security assurances from the United States in the region will be welcome in the form of tangible activities (that do not intrude into the sovereignty and jurisdiction rights of ASEAN member states) such as information sharing, capacity building, and other fiscal/material assistance.³⁵

At the ASEAN-U.S. Special Summit in Washington, DC on May 12-13, 2022, President Biden announced over US\$150 million in initiatives³⁶ that were guided by the complementary objectives of the Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States and the AOIP to further deepen ASEAN-U.S. relations toward a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.³⁷ Some of the tangible areas of cooperation where ASEAN and U.S. interests could converge may include (i) maritime cooperation such as illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, increasing maritime domain awareness, maintaining a maritime rules-based order, and capability building for maritime law enforcement agencies; (ii) advancing partnership in economic development that would help the region to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic such as the

³⁵ Collin Koh, "Thinking Outside the Box on Southeast Asian Maritime Security," *theinterpreter*, Lowy Institute, April 11, 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/thinking-outside-box-southeast-asian-maritime-security>.

³⁶ "Fact Sheet: US-ASEAN Special Summit in Washington DC," White House, May 12, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/12/fact-sheet-u-s-asean-special-summit-in-washington-dc/>.

³⁷ "Joint Vision Statement of the ASEAN-US Special Summit, 2022," ASEAN Secretariat, May 14, 2022, <https://asean.org/joint-vision-statement-of-the-asean-u-s-special-summit-2022/>.

development of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), developing effective policy and regulatory practices for digital economies and cybersecurity; (iii) enhancing connectivity by strengthening people-to-people ties, promoting human capital development and increasing support for the ASEAN's Master Plan for Connectivity 2025; and (iv) promoting sustainable development through new initiatives to tackle climate change including technologies and climate financing, as well as investing in decarbonization and clean energy transition in the region.



President Joe Biden with ASEAN leaders during a special U.S.-ASEAN summit at the White House on May 12, 2022. Photo by the courtesy of the White House.

Apart from the above-identified areas of practical cooperation, the United States should also consider the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to walk the talk in its geopolitical rhetoric and lead by example.³⁸ The ratification of the treaty would strengthen the U.S. position in the Indo-Pacific which aspires to be rules-based, and would better justify the U.S. actions in the region including its freedom of navigation operations. Such an

³⁸ James Borton, "US-ASEAN Summit Opens up UNCLOS Ratification Issue, *Asia Times*, April 27, 2022, <https://asiatimes.com/2022/04/us-asean-summit-opens-up-unclos-ratification-issue/>.



effort would also result in greater convergence in interests between ASEAN and the United States in the conduct of maritime activities under an established international legal framework.

3.2 Prospect of Closer Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Pax Americana, and Possibility for Divergence

Apart from aligning interests between ASEAN and the United States, based on practical cooperation, the Biden Administration has plans to raise its stakes in the region by focusing on integrated deterrence—a framework for working across war fighting domains, in collaboration with all instruments of national power, as well as with U.S. allies and partners.³⁹ According to U.S. Secretary of Defence, Lloyd Austin, the idea of integrated deterrence means “using every military and non-military tool in our toolbox, in lockstep with our allies and partners.”⁴⁰

Such a posture would allow the United States to work closely with partners in the region to address more intense and complex global challenges including those stemming from the threat of China. However, the more strategic the cooperation is, the more polarized ASEAN would become due to the diverse security perspectives and priorities among its members.

One of the biggest concerns for ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific is having to choose a side between the United States and China, especially

³⁹ C. Todd Lopez, “Integrated Deterrence at Center of Upcoming National Defence Strategy,” U.S. Department of Defence, March 4, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2954945/integrated-deterrence-at-center-of-upcoming-national-defense-strategy/#:~:text=At%20the%20core%20of%20the,U.S.%20allies%20and%20our%20partners.>

⁴⁰ EAF Editorial Board, Australian National University, “Trying to Unscramble Asia’s Economic Interdependence with China,” *East Asia Forum*, April 11, 2022, [https://www.easiaforum.org/2022/04/11/trying-to-unscramble-asias-economic-interdependence-with-china/.](https://www.easiaforum.org/2022/04/11/trying-to-unscramble-asias-economic-interdependence-with-china/)

in the event of a crisis or military conflict in key flashpoints.⁴¹ The *State of Southeast Asia 2022 Survey Report* showed that in the midst of major power rivalry particularly between China and the United States, ASEAN member states continued to favor the option of enhancing ASEAN's resilience and unity to fend off pressure from the two major powers (46.1 percent of votes) as well as the option of continuing its position of not siding with China or the United States (26.6 percent of votes).⁴²

This demonstrates that any strategy that requires taking sides, i.e., containing the rise of China would not be in line with ASEAN's mission of promoting peace and neutrality, and might also weaken ASEAN's central position in the region that is necessary to "balance" major powers. ASEAN's preference for inclusive cooperation also runs counter to the U.S. preference for exclusive alliances which has been observed by Amitav Acharya in which ASEAN's preferred approach to regionalism is based on cooperative behavior rather than 'constraining' uncooperative behaviour.⁴³

Furthermore, ASEAN member states in recent years have become more economically dependent on China's trade, investment, financing, and infrastructure and would like to seek stronger positive engagement with China.⁴⁴ Thus, while some ASEAN members might desire to bolster defences against China's coercion and aggression, it is

⁴¹ Robert A. Manning, "US Indo-Pacific Strategy: Myths and Reality," Valdai Paper #89, July 2018, https://government.report/Resources/Whitepapers/59ee4130-e335-4a9d-814c-15b91b19a17f_US-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf.

⁴² S. Seah, et al, *The State of Southeast Asia 2022 Survey Report*.

⁴³ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (London/New York: Routledge, 2014), 7.

⁴⁴ Robert Sutter, "US Challenges in Southeast Asia Under Biden," *Fulcrum*, August 10, 2021, <https://fulcrum.sg/us-challenges-in-southeast-asia-under-biden/>.



doubtful that they would share the U.S. view that China should be excluded from regional economic arrangements and decision-making forums.⁴⁵ In fact, ASEAN member states chose to engage with China individually and collectively with the hope of ‘socializing’ China into considering itself a ‘responsible regional power’ rather than a revisionist power or regional hegemon.⁴⁶

It is therefore clear to ASEAN that the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy to establish a U.S.-led regional order may be detrimental to the interests of ASEAN, and might further exacerbate divisions within ASEAN, presenting a challenge to its unity. This point was also highlighted during Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s official visit to the United States in March 2022, when he urged the United States that the “everyone but China” approach to the region was unrealistic.⁴⁷

US-Plus Approach

Another concern that ASEAN has in the Indo-Pacific Pax Americana is the U.S.-led minilateralism or the “U.S.-Plus” approach which may be viewed as the United States ‘bypassing’ ASEAN regionalism in building its own coalitions of the like-minded such as the QUAD, and the trilateral security arrangement AUKUS (with Australia and the UK) to counter China in the Indo-Pacific. Such an approach considers the limitation of ASEAN-led mechanisms which are unable to achieve security objectives.

⁴⁵ EAF Editorial Board, “Trying to unscramble Asia’s economic interdependence with China.”

⁴⁶ Yates, “Understanding ASEAN’s Role in Asia-Pacific Order.”

⁴⁷ Maria Siow, “Singapore’s Lee Cautions US against ‘Everyone but China’ Approach in Asia Engagement,” *South China Morning Post*, April 11, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3173870/singapores-lee-cautions-us-against-everything-china-approach>.

These minilateral groupings are also gaining prominence and importance under the Biden Administration with the elevation of the QUAD into a Summit-level dialogue at the leaders' level since March 2021, with four Summits (including two physical ones) held to date.⁴⁸ The QUAD has also been featured prominently in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, having been mentioned thirteen times in the document.

Noting preferences among most ASEAN member states for bilateral security arrangements, there are diverse views among ASEAN member states on the implication of these U.S.-led minilateralisms. The concerns include the weakening of ASEAN centrality, the sharpening of the U.S.-China rivalry, and the escalation of a regional arms race.

China has also further criticized these minilateral groupings as an "Asian NATO" or a new Cold War strategy to contain the rise of China,⁴⁹ and had recently proposed a counter Global Security Initiative.⁵⁰ Similar sentiments were also previously raised by ASEAN leaders. Former Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had argued that an external-led regional security framework would compromise

⁴⁸ See, Hoang Thi Ha, "Understanding the Institutional Challenge of Indo-Pacific Minilaterals to ASEAN," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 44, no. 1 (2022): 1-30.

⁴⁹ China has been extremely cautious of the assertiveness of the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific. According to China's Vice-Foreign Minister Le Yucheng, "The Indo-Pacific strategy is as dangerous as the NATO strategy of eastward expansion in Europe. . . . if allowed to go unchecked, it would bring unimaginable consequences and ultimately push the Asia-Pacific [region] over the edge of an abyss."

⁵⁰ Xi Jinping, keynote speech at the opening ceremony of BFA annual conference 2022, April 21, 2022, Boao Forum for Asia, <https://english.boaoforum.org/newsDetail.html?navId=3&itemId=0&permissionId=114&detailId=16834>.



ASEAN's norm of "regional solutions to regional problems" and that could lead ASEAN to "lose its identity."⁵¹

Despite these concerns which are not in line with ASEAN's objectives, the regional bloc has not issued any statements or expressed any views in its documents. In fact, in the *State of Southeast Asia 2022 Survey Report*, 58.5 percent of the respondents welcomed the strengthening of the QUAD and the prospect of tangible cooperation in areas such as vaccine security and climate change.⁵² Such a finding seems to signal the possibility of cooperation between ASEAN and the QUAD which has been proposed by the members of the latter.

In fact, scholars have argued that the QUAD should not reinvent the wheel in building a regional architecture, and seek instead to become a "strategic filler" or "strategic amplifier" to existing ASEAN-led mechanisms and institutions.⁵³ It may seem that the idea of the QUAD complementing ASEAN's institutions is more appealing than expanding the QUAD into a QUAD-plus by inviting countries such as South Korea, New Zealand, or even ASEAN member states such as Vietnam. Evan Laksmana had argued that the key to a future QUAD-ASEAN relationship, therefore, lies in finding a calibrated partnership based on shared principles and interests, as well as practical cooperative engagements.⁵⁴ As such, it cannot be ruled out that the convergence of strategic interests between a multilateral organization

⁵¹ Lee Kuan Yew interview, *The Straits Times*, September 16, 1988.

⁵² S. Seah, et al, *The State of Southeast Asia 2022 Survey Report*.

⁵³ Evan A. Laksmana, "Whose Centrality? ASEAN and the QUAD in the Indo-Pacific," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* (Special Issue 2020): 106-117, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Mar/12/2002599864/-1/-1/0/6-LAKSMANA.PDF/TOC.pdf>.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

and a minilateral group is impossible if the QUAD, and the AOIP, could find common ground in shared normative and practical engagements.⁵⁵

4. Conclusion

The paper has shown the strategic and economic importance of the Indo-Pacific to both ASEAN and the United States. Given ASEAN's central location in the Indo-Pacific and its success as a regional organization, ASEAN has become an important pillar in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and a vital partner for the United States to achieve its objectives in the region. Similarly, in order for ASEAN to strengthen its presence and central role in the Indo-Pacific, its partnerships and engagements with major powers in the region, including the United States, will be imperative.

Noting similarities and differences in the premises and objectives of ASEAN's Outlook and the U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific, this article has identified areas of convergence in which both sides may better align their interests, such as in the promotion of a rules-based order and strengthening cooperation in the areas of the economy, connectivity, maritime domain, and promoting sustainable development.

Apart from positive-sum cooperation, however, ASEAN's preference for neutrality and the need for consensus-building will make it difficult for ASEAN to take sides in regards to the U.S.-China rivalry, or to take substantive positions on key security issues. As such, the establishment of U.S.-led minilateral groupings such as the QUAD and AUKUS may be detrimental to the interests of ASEAN and might further exacerbate divisions within ASEAN, challenging its unity.

⁵⁵ Ibid.



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