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# ASEAN and Great Power Rivalry in Regionalism: From East Asia to the Indo-Pacific

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/saa](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/saa)**Hidetaka Yoshimatsu** 

## Abstract

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which serves as the linchpin of regionalism in East Asia, is facing a new challenge of great power politics. This article explores ASEAN's position in and strategy for taking cooperative regional initiatives by referring to the management of confrontational politics between rival states. It explains ASEAN's handling of great power politics theoretically by impartial enmeshment for managing great powers' material interests and moral legitimacy in developing specific ideational frameworks. This article argues that ASEAN managed great powers' rivalry by enmeshing them into its regional initiatives impartially and maintaining organisational legitimacy by developing systems of socio-cultural norms. It also contends that ASEAN needs, in envisioning the future of Indo-Pacific regionalism, to extend its strategic reach through alignments with other parties and enhance moral legitimacy by deepening and broadening normative frameworks for advancing collective interests for the Indo-Pacific region.

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## Keywords

Southeast Asia, China, the US, Japan, impartial enmeshment, moral legitimacy

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## Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a unique international organisation with a history of more than half a century. Despite sporadic disagreements and conflicts among the members, it has successfully enhanced internal integration to the extent to create the ASEAN Community. The association has also forged close political and economic connections with its dialogue partners including those with greater material capabilities and embedded them in its initiated multilateral institutions. ASEAN's presence as the linchpin of regionalism constitutes one of the key characteristics of international relations in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific.

In the 2010s, geostrategic competition between great powers escalated in multifaceted dimensions. Particularly after China enhanced its regional presence through the diplomatic vision of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the US and its allies sought to counter China's regional influence by developing a new geographical concept of the "Indo-Pacific." The new geostrategic landscape has influenced ASEAN, which has served as the key player in building multilateral architectures to discuss regional issues and challenges. The association needs to react prudently to the BRI and the Indo-Pacific initiative and exhibit its vision for the emerging Indo-Pacific construct.

This article explores ASEAN's position in and strategy for taking cooperative regional initiatives by referring to the management of confrontational politics between rival states. Quite a few studies have examined ASEAN's engagements in regional initiatives including institution-building (Ba, 2009; Ba et al., 2016; Emmers, 2012; Khong, 2004; Yeo, 2019). These studies have offered critical insights for analysing ASEAN's attempts to react to great power politics and develop regional institution-building such as the mixed strategies of institution-building and soft balancing, the mapping and re-configuring of regional cooperation, or complex forms of regional institutional architecture.

This article aims to advance the past research by showing ASEAN's stance on and policies for navigating confrontational politics between rival states and incorporating norms into their behaviour. It seeks to reveal the way ASEAN as a regional actor has attempted to manage rivalry politics in East Asian regionalism and the emergent Indo-Pacific regionalism and explore the theoretical implications of such management. Whereas the main empirical interest lies in ASEAN's commitments to Sino-US confrontation in the Indo-Pacific construct, the association's handling of China-Japan rivalry in East Asian regionalism is also a useful reference to ASEAN's position in and strategy for developing regionalism.

The article addresses three research questions. The first is how ASEAN has managed and mitigated rivalry politics between great powers in East Asia and the emerging Indo-Pacific. The second is how ASEAN's handling of rivalry politics is theoretically explained. And the third is what is required for ASEAN to remain an honest broker to promote the emerging Indo-Pacific regionalism in great power confrontation. The main arguments that this article makes are three-fold. First, ASEAN has managed rivalry politics between great powers by enmeshing them into its regional initiatives impartially and maintaining organisational legitimacy by developing socio-cultural normative frameworks. Second, ASEAN's handling of rivalry politics can be theoretically explained by

impartial enmeshment for managing greater powers' material interests and moral legitimacy in developing specific ideational frameworks. Third, ASEAN needs, in developing the emergent Indo-Pacific regionalism, to extend its strategic reach through alignments with other parties and enhance moral legitimacy by deepening and broadening normative frameworks for advancing collective interests for the Indo-Pacific region.

This article is organised as follows. The subsequent section presents theoretical conceptualisation for handling rivalry politics in terms of impartial enmeshment and moral legitimacy. The third section examines ASEAN's management of Sino-Japanese rivalry in East Asian regionalism. The fourth section investigates ASEAN's engagement in Indo-Pacific politics advanced by China and the US. The final section examines challenges in ASEAN's presence as the pivotal actor in Indo-Pacific regionalism.

## **Conceptualising ASEAN's Management of Rivalry Politics**

One of the key factors that have enabled ASEAN to maintain the central position in regionalism in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific is that it has navigated rivalry politics between major powers. Whereas states with greater material capabilities exist, ASEAN has maintained a grip to develop cooperative initiatives and embed them in its initiated regional architectures. This special position is formally enshrined as "the centrality of ASEAN" in the 2007 ASEAN Charter.

This research conceptualises the essence of ASEAN's handling of confrontational politics between rival states in terms of "impartial enmeshment." The "impartial" means that a regional entity gives "equal treatment to all actors, including the great powers, refraining from taking sides in the conflicts among them, and offering them a comforting atmosphere to sort out their differences" (Acharya, 2013: 21). The concept of "enmeshment" refers to "the process of engaging with a state so as to draw it into deep involvement into international or regional society, enveloping it in a web of sustained exchanges and relationships, with the long-term aim of integration" (Goh, 2008: 121). The impartial enmeshment characterises a regional entity's efforts to direct states concerned towards regional cooperation by mitigating severe power confrontation in the material domain.

Theoretically, impartial enmeshment is associated with the concept of "hedging" of which quite a few scholars have explored its implications in the Southeast Asian context. Kuik, a leading scholar of hedging in Southeast Asia, raises three attributes of hedging: an insistence on not siding with or against any one great power; an attempt to pursue opposing measures to offset different risks; and a diversification to cultivate a fall-back position (Kuik, 2008, 2016). The efforts to avoid taking sides to accompany an aspiration of impartiality or non-alignment. Jackson (2014) also argues that a small state, through the hedging strategy, pursues relative equidistance or "dual-track, proportionate engagement" with different great powers. The attribute of an insistence on not taking sides is similar to Goh's understanding of hedging to "cultivate a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side at the obvious expense of another" (Goh, 2005: 2).

The impartial enmeshment implies that a regional entity commits positively to other states going beyond passively not siding with either of the two great powers. The

enmeshment efforts are directed at binding other states into the regional institutions that it creates. The major powers in the institutions “would be able to ‘keep an eye on each other’ and to act as mutual deterrents against adventurism from one another” (Goh, 2008: 130). Moreover, planning and decision-making processes for institution-building create interlocking and mutual dependencies, which makes it difficult for the parties including great powers to contemplate and plan abrupt shifts in policy in isolation and reinforces the continuity of commitment (Ikenberry, 2001: 67). Importantly, the concept of enmeshment “goes further than engagement because it includes the long-term goal of identity alternation” (Goh, 2008: 121). This is because greater political interactions and interdependence as well as expectations and obligations for constructive engagements encourage all members to shift self-perception and self-role in the group. Through the combined functional and constitutive role of enmeshment, the fundamental form of the great power game is likely to shift from “competitive and zero-sum” to “competitive but positive-sum.”

The impartial enmeshment has to do with ASEAN’s long-term diplomatic strategies. Ralf Emmers (2018) argues that neutrality, which is incorporated into the 1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) Declaration, is defined by impartiality and autonomy. Emmers points out that a relative emphasis evolved from autonomy to impartiality since the early 2000s due to increasing multipolarity in the Asia-Pacific region. ASEAN has contributed to stability in the Asia-Pacific region by founding regional architectures such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting-Plus (ADMM+). Performance as a provider of regional public goods is supported by ASEAN’s identity as an honest broker that creates a neutral ground where all parties are given equal and fair opportunities to further their interests in the region (Tang, 2018: 50). The impartial enmeshment constitutes the foundation of ASEAN’s regional role as an honest broker.

ASEAN has accumulated expertise and knowledge for managing regional affairs with a long history as a region-based organisation since 1967, playing a key role in building inter-governmental institutions. The association has raised capabilities to define problems in interstate relationships, prepare for options to resolve them, and persuade other states to accept them. Such expertise provides ASEAN with the legitimacy to lead regional cooperation by drawing support from other states for its initiatives and engagements (Ba, 2013). ASEAN as a long-lasting regional organisation has developed a set of norms. The association has embedded other states in its initiated regional institutions that incorporated specific procedural and behavioural norms. By developing these ideational structures, ASEAN could gain the recognition of its legitimate status from other states in managing regional affairs.

Past research has already explored ASEAN’s legitimacy from various standpoints (Ba, 2013; Narine, 2004; Poole, 2015; Stubbs, 2019). Whereas Narine (2004) regards uncertainty about domestic political legitimacy as the key variable explaining the reluctance of Asia-Pacific states including ASEAN members to create strong regional institutions, Poole (2015) investigates ASEAN’s legitimacy from its commitments to human rights affairs. Alice Ba (2013) examines the internal and external dimensions of ASEAN’s organisational legitimacy with a focus on the external dimension as its responses to

international and regional challenges in the relatively long term since the mid-1990s. Stubbs (2019) employs legitimacy in parallel with effectiveness and efficacy for evaluating ASEAN's performance. He explores its legitimacy from the viewpoint of international agencies, but a major focus is an internal legitimacy in relation to member state governments. The analysis by Ba and Stubbs can be strengthened by locating ASEAN's external legitimacy in the broader conceptualisation of organisational legitimacy.

This study conceptualises ASEAN's ideational presence in regionalism in terms of "moral legitimacy". The concept of "legitimacy" is defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995: 574). Legitimacy has been used in various disciplines including management, political science, and sociology since Max Weber presented the ideal types of traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal legitimacy. In growing academic interests in organisational legitimacy in the 1990s, Suchman's seminal work that presents three types of legitimacy – pragmatic, moral, and cognitive – attracts scholars' concerns. Cognitive legitimacy is based on cognition rather than interest or evaluation in which audiences regard an organisation and its activities as inevitable and necessary, as its acceptance is explained by taken-for-granted assumptions (Suchman, 1995: 582). This legitimacy operates mainly at the subconscious level, making it difficult for an organisation to direct influence and change perceptions strategically (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006: 72). Pragmatic legitimacy is based on the self-interested calculation of an organisation's immediate audiences. The organisation can gain legitimacy when the audiences believe that it provides specific favourable exchanges such as tangible rewards and cost reduction and is responsive to their larger interests by adopting their standards and preferences into its own (Suchman, 1995: 578–79).

Moral legitimacy is based on the broader normative understanding of social appropriateness. This legitimacy is "sociotropic," reflecting a positive normative evaluation of an organisation and its activities, and a prosocial logic that differs fundamentally from narrow self-interest (Suchman, 1995: 579). The organisation can gain moral legitimacy by giving and considering reasons to justify certain actions, practices, or institutions, and by engaging in deliberative communication with opponents rather than manipulating and persuading them (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006: 73). The sociological and normative aspects of moral legitimacy are shown in its affiliation with "sociopolitical legitimacy" and "normative legitimacy" (Suddaby et al., 2017: 454). These approximate relations indicate the importance of norms, beliefs, values, and socio-cultural meaning systems, paying attention to collectively valued purposes, means, and goals (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008: 50).

ASEAN has developed, through diplomatic interactions and practices, the "ASEAN Way," which constitutes the base for diplomatic relations and procedural principles for decision-making (Acharya, 1997; Haacke, 2003). The association's relative inoffensiveness *vis-à-vis* different major powers bolstered arguments for its institutional centrality since no other regional actor (and certainly none of the major powers) would have

been able to draw all the relevant parties to the same table (Ba, 2012: 133). At the same time, ASEAN's regional presence has been sustained by the creation and diffusion of behavioural norms embodied in a code-of-conduct such as non-interference in internal affairs and peaceful settlement of the conflict, and a set of procedural norms for organisational management, which include consultation-based consensus and informality. The normative commitments have contributed to developing a specific social constitution for a group of states by employing "productive power," which implies "the socially diffuse production of subjectivity in systems of meaning and signification" (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 3).

In summary, this article hypothesises that the combination of impartial enmeshment in the material domain and moral legitimacy in the ideational domain enables ASEAN to manage complicated politics between rival states and encourage them to join and support cooperative regional architectures. In testing the hypothesis, this study adopts the two-case approach. The scope of ASEAN's regional engagement has extended from East Asia to the Asia-Pacific and then to the emergent Indo-Pacific. This study considers ASEAN's engagements in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific. A significant difference exists in the structural base of rivalry politics between East Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Whereas Sino-Japanese rivalry in East Asia relates to competition for influence in Southeast Asia and beyond, Sino-US rivalry in the Indo-Pacific has greater systemic influence and implications. However, exploring these two cases is useful for the study's main interest in investigating ASEAN's regional positions and strategies under conditions when two rival states compete for gaining an advantageous position in the region. The following section investigates how impartial enmeshment and moral legitimacy functioned in ASEAN's policy initiatives in navigating rivalry politics in East Asia.

## **ASEAN's Management of Sino-Japanese Rivalry in East Asian Regionalism**

In advancing East Asian regionalism, one of the uncertain factors was the Sino-Japanese rivalry on regional leadership. The two states competed over initiatives in regional cooperation by presenting different approaches to institution-building. Whereas China pushed forwards regional collaboration through the ASEAN + 3, East Asia Free Trade Area (EAFTA), and Network of East Asian Think-tanks (NEAT), Japan supported the EAS-based regionalism, Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement in East Asia (CEPEA), and Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA). ASEAN sought to manage these confrontational initiatives towards the smooth development of regionalism in various ways.

ASEAN declined Japan or China's proposals to set up bilateral institutions for a closer partnership and changed them into its own initiatives involving other countries. When the Japan-ASEAN Commemorative Summit took place in Tokyo in December 2003, Japan proposed concluding the Japan-ASEAN Charter that would indicate, based on the past

30-year bilateral relationship, the future direction of strengthening an integrative relationship. ASEAN members declined to accept the proposal because of reluctance to conclude a special agreement with Japan alone among various dialogue partners (Choi, 2019: 49–50). Instead, the two parties issued the Tokyo Declaration for the Dynamic and Enduring Japan-ASEAN Partnership in the New Millennium. ASEAN adopted a similar format to other dialogue partners, issuing, for instance, the ASEAN-Republic of Korea Joint Vision Statement for Peace, Prosperity, and Partnership at a commemorative summit to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of diplomatic ties held in Busan in November 2019. ASEAN also declined China's proposals to forge closer institutional connections. At the sixteenth ASEAN-China summit in October 2013, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang offered a proposal to conclude a treaty on good-neighbourliness and friendly cooperation, which aimed at strengthening strategic cooperation between China and ASEAN. ASEAN responded to this proposal, contending that “we noted with appreciation China's proposed treaty on good-neighbourliness and friendly cooperation. We acknowledged Indonesia's idea in having a treaty of friendship and cooperation that includes a wider Indo-Pacific region, *beyond ASEAN and China* (Italic added)” (ASEAN, 2013). ASEAN was apprehensive that China's proposal would duplicate and undermine the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and sought to maintain a basic preference for an open and inclusive regional order (Ha, 2019a).

ASEAN made efforts to incorporate China and Japan into its regional institutions impartially. In the political domain, ASEAN members sought to embody China, Japan, and other dialogue partners in the TAC. The TAC was originally an internal treaty that spelled out founding ideas for ASEAN, but the association sought to use it for making its external partners endorse its codified norms including respect for independence and sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, and peaceful settlement of disputes. After concluding the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in November 2002, China engaged in ASEAN positively, which led to the signature of the TAC in October 2003. Japan was cautious about signing the treaty because of a likely negative impact on the Japan-US security treaty. ASEAN leaders strongly encouraged Japan to change this stance by raising China's swift reaction as a testimony to establishing political trust and higher cooperative relations with ASEAN (Choi, 2019: 50–52). Japan signed the TAC in July 2004.

In the economic domain, the formation of ASEAN + 1 FTA networks led to an FTA covering the entire of East Asia. ASEAN and China kindled the first move in the ASEAN + 1 FTA networks, signing the Framework Agreement on China-ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Cooperation in 2002, which became a legal foundation to establish the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area. Japan reacted to this move quickly, and the leaders of Japan and ASEAN issued the Joint Declaration on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership on 5 November 2002, one day after the signing of the Framework Agreement. Afterwards, ASEAN formed similar ASEAN + 1 FTAs with South Korea, Australia/New Zealand, and India. ASEAN maintained its grip to embed China and Japan in the subsequent process towards creating a region-wide FTA. The rivalry between China and Japan led to the co-existence of the former-proposed



EAFTA and the latter-initiated CEPEA. In August 2011, China and Japan jointly proposed forming a regional FTA in East Asia at the ASEAN + 3 and EAS economic ministers' meetings. ASEAN considered this proposal seriously and sought to advance a new FTA under its leadership based on the principle of ASEAN centrality (Pambagyo, 2021). Under such consideration, the association proposed the ASEAN Framework on Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which was agreed upon at the nineteenth summit in November 2011.

ASEAN promoted regionalism in East Asia by inducing China and Japan to accept its procedural and behavioural norms for managing regional affairs. This was the case for a procedural norm of the chairmanship system in regional institutions. The chairmanship system has contributed to reconciling diverse positions among members through consensus-based decision-making (Suzuki, 2021). ASEAN made the chairmanship system a standard for managing regional institutions involving China and Japan. The ASEAN + 3 adopts a format that ASEAN invites + 3 members, and China, Japan, and South Korea admitted that the ASEAN + 3 chairmanship was institutionally sustained by the ASEAN chairmanship (Suzuki, 2004). The discussion on the EAS began for establishing a more equal partnership between ASEAN and other partners. However, ASEAN successfully added three conditions to become an EAS member: to be a TAC member; to be a complete dialogue partner; and to have substantive relations with ASEAN. Moreover, ASEAN made other EAS members accept its chairmanship system, and Malaysia became the chair for the first EAS meeting, which was also the ASEAN chair for the year from summer of 2005.

Significantly, China and Japan willingly suggested ASEAN's chairmanship in their initiative. In a joint proposal on a regional FTA in August 2011, the two states expected that ASEAN assumes the chair in negotiations on the FTA. This proposal was realised in the negotiation process of the RCEP. The RCEP Trade Negotiation Committee, seven working groups, and four sub-working groups were all chaired by ASEAN members (Fukunaga, 2015: 105). Pak Iman Pambagyo, Director General for International Trade Negotiations at the Indonesian Ministry of Trade, assumed the chair of the Trade Negotiation Committee from the first round of negotiations in May 2013 until the last conclusion in November 2020. This persistence illustrates that the RCEP was a special trade architecture that represented the ASEAN initiative (Tanaka, 2021).

In promoting regional economic cooperation, ASEAN sought to diffuse a particular behavioural norm. Whereas trade liberalisation is pursued to promote efficiency in the market, the association paid attention to maintaining the principle of equitable development, giving due consideration to different development levels among members. Such attention was reflected in the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Importantly, equitable development was comprehensively incorporated into the RCEP. Its guiding principles and objectives mentioned that negotiations recognise interests in supporting equitable economic development among members and referred to "taking into consideration the different levels of development of the participating countries." Due consideration to equitable development was also

incorporated into the scope of negotiations: economic and technical cooperation that “will aim at narrowing development gaps among the parties”; and competition with recognising “the significant differences in the capacity and national regimes of RCEP participating countries.” The RCEP principles contained the wording that “the RCEP will include appropriate forms of flexibility including provision for special and differential treatment, plus additional flexibility to the least-developed ASEAN Member States, consistent with the existing ASEAN + 1 FTAs, as applicable.” This wording indicated the recognition that whereas improving the level of liberalisation from the existing ASEAN + 1 FTAs was necessary, it still needed special and differentiated treatments for the less-developed ASEAN members, and flexibility was a key to meeting such a need.

Given China and Japan’s greater material power, ASEAN could be manipulated by the two powers that attempted to “use the rhetoric of regionalist solidarity to pursue their self-interested competition for regional hegemony” (Jones and Smith, 2007: 181). The above cases indicate a more complicated story. Certainly, rivalry sentiment urged China and Japan to launch initiatives and projects to attract ASEAN and expand their influence in East Asia. In the medium term, such competitive commitments often contributed to institutional depth for regional cooperation in East Asia. The initiatives and projects in which China or Japan took the lead produced mutually reinforcing effects, contributing to consolidating ASEAN-centred constitutive relations and promoting deeper regional cooperation.

The ASEAN-centred regional constitution has been referred to in formal documents issued by Northeast Asian states. Both China and Japan kept making the point that ASEAN was “in the driver’s seat” in showing the direction and conditions of regionalism in East Asia. This point was also confirmed through trilateral settings involving South Korea. The Joint Declaration on the Enhancement of Trilateral Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership issued at the fifth trilateral summit in May 2012 contained the wording that “regarding ASEAN as an important partner in regional cooperation, we reaffirmed our support for ASEAN’s leading role in East Asia cooperation” (MOFAJ, 2012). This kind of statement could be regarded as rhetoric, but China and Japan paid attention to sensitivity to ASEAN centrality. For instance, the three Northeast Asian states considered ASEAN’s concern that the trilateral FTA would become a regional agreement to which ASEAN made no commitments and announced the launch of the FTA at an ASEAN-initiated meeting by sharing information about its content with ASEAN (JETRO, 2012: 14).

In brief, ASEAN managed rivalry politics between China and Japan relatively successfully in developing regionalism in East Asia. The association paid due attention not to making special political or economic arrangements with either of them. ASEAN also changed their proposals and commitments to its own initiatives applied for East Asia or the Asia-Pacific as a whole and created new institutions based on the initiatives. China and Japan positively engaged in new institutions including the ASEAN + 3 framework, ASEAN + 1 FTA networks, and the RCEP among sixteen EAS members. The following section explores ASEAN’s engagement in rivalry politics between China and the US in the Indo-Pacific construct.

## **ASEAN's Reactions to Sino-US Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific Construct**

The sprout of Sino-US geopolitical rivalry in the Indo-Pacific was China's launch of the BRI in 2013. Beijing increased its geopolitical and geo-economic presence from Asia to Europe by developing the BRI which is comprised of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road (MSR). Whereas China has secured natural resources in Central Asia and extended its land routes to Eastern Europe through the SREB, it has enhanced the political and economic presence in the Indian Ocean and South Pacific regions through the MSR. In 2013–2018, Chinese enterprises directly invested more than US\$90 billion in countries along the BRI route, an average annual growth rate of 5.2 per cent, and the value of newly signed foreign contracted projects exceeded US\$600 billion, an average annual growth rate of 11.9 per cent (Belt and Road News, 2019).

ASEAN members have been deeply involved in the BRI. When the Chinese government organised the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017, eight out of the ten members sent the heads of government or state to the forum. The ASEAN members sought to secure economic benefits from BRI projects, particularly through support for infrastructure development. The China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, one of the six economic corridors under the SREB, incorporates the China-Laos Economic Corridor and China-Laos-Thailand high-speed railway. China began the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway construction in January 2016 and has been involved in several BRI-related projects in Malaysia such as the Kuala Linggi Port expansion. Thus, the BRI has brought about substantial economic benefits in Southeast Asia including stronger regional connectivity, a reduction in the persistent development gap between developed and developing countries, increased technology investment from China, and help to address the challenges of sustainable urbanisation through smart city projects (Rana and Ji, 2020).

Although its members have made substantial commitments to the BRI, ASEAN has maintained a restrained posture towards the BRI in its official documents. ASEAN committed to the BRI by issuing the Joint Statement on Further Deepening the Cooperation on Infrastructure Connectivity in November 2017. Yet, it has not treated the BRI with special attention in joint communiqués of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM). For instance, the joint communiqué of the forty-eighth AMM in August 2015 referred to the BRI in ASEAN-China relations, but a similar reference was given to other projects such as the ASEAN-US Partnership for Good Governance, Equitable and Sustainable Development and Security (ASEAN-US PROGRESS). Despite its members' extensive involvement in BRI projects, ASEAN maintained a neutral position on China's grand strategy.

In response to China's growing regional presence, Japan and the US began to take new initiatives under the Indo-Pacific concept. In August 2016, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe presented the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, which assumed that the peace and prosperity of the international society depended on the free and

open maritime order, and such a maritime order should be fostered from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean (Yoshimatsu, 2019). US President Donald Trump referred to “sharing our vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific” at the twenty-fifth Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in November 2017. Afterwards, James Mattis, US Secretary of Defence, presented four themes of the Indo-Pacific strategy: maritime space; interoperability; strength in the rule of law, civil society, and transparent governance; and the private sector-led economic development at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018 (US Department of Defense, 2018). The FOIP then became a key diplomatic vision for guiding the development of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or the Quad among the US, Japan, Australia, and India whose consultation meeting took place in November 2017 as a revived dialogue after its first formation in 2007.

ASEAN members were generally passive about the FOIP as political leaders openly questioned its exclusive nature. In March 2018, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated that “We hope that the eventual outcome [of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the FOIP] will be an inclusive and open regional architecture, where all countries engage one another peacefully and constructively. We do not want to end up with rival blocs forming or countries having to take one side or the other” (Cheng, 2018). Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi also cautioned, at the twenty-fifth Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC) General Meeting in May 2018, that “the concept [the Indo-Pacific] should not be used as a containment strategy” (Scott, 2019a: 22). The political leaders were worried about the FOIP’s orientation to maintain a free and open maritime order on the premise of China’s aggressive diplomacy and offensive actions. Singapore encouraged Japan to revise the FOIP’s exclusive nature, and Tokyo changed its formal title from the FOIP “strategy” to the FOIP “vision” (Nippon.Com, 2018). In the meeting with the Malaysian Prime Minister in November 2018, Abe formally used the term, vision, instead of strategy.

Whereas major states in the Asia-Pacific began to exhibit stronger interests in the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN maintained a cautious stance on the concept. ASEAN did not give an endorsement to the FOIP by just mentioning, in the joint communiqué of the fifty-first AMM in August 2018, “we agreed to explore mutually beneficial cooperation and create synergies” with “the Indo-Pacific, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure.” This wording, which refers to the US/Japan-led Indo-Pacific, China’s diplomatic vision of the BRI, and Japan’s quality infrastructure programme, indicates ASEAN’s impartiality to avoid taking sides between great powers, displaying unbiased engagement in concepts and programmes advanced by its dialogue partners.

Amid intensive moves towards the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN adopted its vision for the Indo-Pacific – the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) – at the thirty-fourth ASEAN Summit held in Thailand in June 2019. The AOIP is comprised of six pillars: background and rationale, outlook on the Indo-Pacific, objectives, principles, areas of cooperation, and mechanism. The five-page report spells out key principles for closer cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: ASEAN centrality, openness, transparency, inclusivity, a rules-based framework, good governance, respect for sovereignty, non-intervention,

and so on. It then raises specific areas for cooperation: maritime cooperation, connectivity, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and economic and technical cooperation.

The AOIP represents ASEAN's careful handling of great power confrontation, which is illustrated by the equitable treatment of norms and principles. On the one hand, the AOIP indicates ASEAN's engagement "in the development of an inclusive regional architecture" and refers to "openness, transparency, inclusivity" as its principles. An emphasis on "open" and "inclusive" in contrast with the US and Japan's "free" and "open" represents an engagement posture towards China (Acharya, 2019). The AOIP also includes "building strategic trust and win-win cooperation." The terms, strategic trust and win-win cooperation have been advocated by Chinese political leaders as ideal means to develop a regional partnership. On the other hand, the AOIP aims at "upholding the rules-based regional architecture" as a way of "the maintenance of peace, freedom, and prosperity," underscoring respect for international law and freedom of navigation and overflight. These norms and principles have been underlined by the US and Japan for managing maritime affairs, and a reference to them could be interpreted as a thinly veiled caution to China. The document also includes the short sentence, "the Outlook is intended to be inclusive in terms of ideas and proposals," which illustrates ASEAN's willingness to incorporate suggestions from dialogue partners into its own. The AOIP represents ASEAN's orientation to enmesh the preferences of its external partners including great powers into its institutional frameworks impartially.

The AOIP reflects the socio-cultural norms that are based on ASEAN's long-term experiences of regional cooperation and institution-building. First, the Outlook presupposes ASEAN's distinctive approach towards regionalism. The AOIP uses the phrases "ASEAN's Community building processes" and "a greater sense of community." The community approach, which cherishes consensus-based consultation, peer pressure, and consideration for equitable development, is a key feature of ASEAN diplomacy. The chairman's statement at the thirty-second ASEAN Summit in April 2018 noted that ASEAN leaders "reaffirmed the importance of ASEAN centrality and unity in our Community-building efforts and engagement with external partners." The statement focused on community-building as a key component of ASEAN's regional enmeshment in looking forward to furthering discussions on the Indo-Pacific concept. The community model can be regarded as a distinct "third way" of regionalism apart from the US alliance system and the Chinese institutional network (Wilkins, 2020: 5). Chinese political leaders became eager to use the discourses of the community of common destiny for all mankind and a China-ASEAN community of common destiny. But, a regional actor that is more qualified to take the lead in building a regional community is ASEAN, which has engaged in the persistent community-building process by promoting the ASEAN Community and launching the ASEAN Community Vision 2025. The AOIP reaffirms ASEAN centrality, the organisation's legitimate qualification to lead regionalism, based on the community approach.

Second, the AOIP reflects ASEAN's non-confrontational approach. It underscores the area of cooperation rather than the area of conflict, which is demonstrated in the maritime domain where various sorts of practical cooperation are indicated: sustainable

management of marine resources; maritime connectivity; the protection of the livelihood of coastal and fishing communities; the promotion of the blue economy and maritime commerce. The listing of functional cooperation in the disputed policy field derives from prudent considerations to accumulate practical cooperative outcomes, foster mutual trust based on positive-sum thinking, and resolve geopolitical conflicts peacefully and comprehensively.

The US's FOIP aims to defend a rules-based regional order in the Indo-Pacific. However, it is likely to have the opposite effect, provoking China, alarming other smaller states, and driving the region towards a highly tense, zero-sum competition (Swaine, 2018). China has underlined the win-win approach in its external engagement including the BRI, but its approach towards Southeast Asia has become too demanding and even dictatorial (Shambaugh, 2018: 98–99). Both Washington and Beijing seek to retain influence through a bilateral, not multilateral approach. ASEAN seeks to maintain a regional order by using its multilateral experiences in creating open platforms where all parties concerned can join as community members and foster mutual interests and confidence through the step-by-step process.

The importance of the AOIP as a normative framework has been referred to in formal statements by the US and China. The US Department of State (2019) contends that:

We see strong convergence between the principles enshrined in ASEAN's Indo-Pacific outlook – inclusivity, openness, a region based on rule of law, good governance, and respect for international law – and the vision of the United States for a free and open Indo-Pacific, ... The United States continues to place ASEAN centrality at the heart of our Indo-Pacific strategy. ASEAN is central to the region and is an indispensable and irreplaceable strategic partner with the United States.

The reference to ASEAN's centrality and an irreplaceable strategic partner could be understood as being linked to pragmatic legitimacy as it reflects the US expectation on ASEAN to pursue policy directions in its favour. China's stance on the AOIP, which includes the term Indo-Pacific, was more nuanced. The Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi considered that the AOIP's principles and ideas are consistent with those of the Chinese, such as insisting on openness, inclusiveness, and transparency, upholding dialogue rather than confrontation, underscoring economic cooperation, and achieving common prosperity (MFAPRC, 2019). Whereas China endorsed the principles included in the AOIP, it was reluctant to use the concept of Indo-Pacific favouring the old term of Asia-Pacific. However, Chinese President Xi Jinping, in his speech at the Special Summit to Commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of China-ASEAN Dialogue Relations in November 2021, mentioned that "we seek high-quality Belt and Road cooperation with ASEAN and cooperation between the Belt and Road Initiative and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (Xinhua, 2021). This phrase was crucial because "this was the first time Xi and China mentioned the term which is seen as an apparent official recognition to the Indo-Pacific concept" (Business Standard, 2021). Thus, ASEAN could gain an endorsement of its Indo-Pacific strategy from the US and China. The inclusion of

righteous norms and principles impartially contributed to raising ASEAN's legitimacy as an honest broker to develop cooperation in the region covering the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

## **Challenges for ASEAN's Engagement in Indo-Pacific Regionalism**

The AOIP demonstrates ASEAN's willingness to coordinate great powers' preferences and interests impartially by mentioning that ASEAN "needs to continue being an honest broker within the strategic environment of competing interests." The Outlook also incorporates ASEAN's specific normative approaches that are based on past experiences in regional cooperation and institution-building.

As Sukma (2019) points out, "responding to external change at critical times is something ASEAN has always been good at," and such a responsive capacity was demonstrated in the announcement of the ZOFPAN during the Cold War period and the proliferation of ASEAN-centred multilateral processes just after the end of the Cold War. The current regional environment is challenging equal to these past conditions. China's willingness to change a strategic and territorial order, which threatens the core interests and/or territorial integrity of other states, has intensified strategic confrontation with the US and its allies (Lee, 2018). Under such climates, ASEAN needs to consider threats and opportunities created by evolving geostrategic politics, deepen prudent considerations from the long-term perspective, and enhance the institutional capacity in the process of fleshing out an action plan under the AOIP.

For sure, ASEAN has limitations and weaknesses, which constitute at least three requirements to meet challenges that influence its continuous Indo-Pacific engagement. First, the association needs to maintain a unified position among its members. Although ASEAN's impartial engagement is based on the maintenance of internal cohesion, it has sometimes exhibited weak internal cohesion in developing its external postures. This was typical of a failure to issue a joint statement of the forty-fifth AMM in July 2012 due to conflicting views on the South China Sea issues between Cambodia and the Philippines/Vietnam. Maintaining internal cohesion is a crucial challenge for ASEAN's Indo-Pacific strategy. In the process of formulating the AOIP, member states exhibited divergent views on Indonesia's original proposal. Singapore urged other members to refrain from announcing the AOIP to continue discussions on the choices of wordings and specific areas of cooperation. Moreover, there was an exchange that Cambodia, which received the intention of China, demanded that the wording of freedom of navigation and overflight be deleted, and Singapore persuaded it to leave the wording (Chongkittavorn, 2019). The divergence continued even after the adoption of the AOIP in 2019. Indonesia and Vietnam are two of the most forward-leaning in embracing the Indo-Pacific construct, but even the two states have different perceptions of the AOIP. Indonesia aimed at promoting a non-aligned Indo-Pacific that is led neither by the US nor China and locating ASEAN as an anchor to advance normative frames and

cooperative initiatives. In contrast, Vietnam had an interest in promoting the Indo-Pacific with a realist balance-of-power orientation, which was more receptive to minilateral engagements outside the ASEAN framework (Ha, 2021).

ASEAN is in dilemma on the maintenance of internal cohesion. Consensus is required to maintain cohesion among the members and this consensus-based cohesion is the critical source of external bargaining. At the same time, this consensus method tends to hinder ASEAN from developing common positions swiftly. The growing complexity of geostrategic confrontation makes this dilemma more costly and ASEAN needs to pursue new mechanisms in policymaking going beyond consensus-based conference diplomacy.

Second, ASEAN needs to promote practical cooperation to materialise the AOIP's principles. Several scholars underscore the Outlook's shortcomings of generalities, vagueness, cooperation assumptions, and wishful thinking, as "the same old wine in a newly packaged bottle" (Anwar, 2020: 128; Ha, 2019b: 2; Scott, 2019b: 210). The norms and principles enshrined in the AOIP are broad and encompassing, which served to gain a kind of positive evaluation from both the US and China. ASEAN did not necessarily include a broad range of norms and principles to acquire pragmatic legitimacy from Washington and Beijing. They are the norms and principles that have sustained the development of ASEAN itself and its successful engagement in regionalism in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific. Given that China has become willing to use discourses or narratives to legitimate its position on developing global governance and regional order, ASEAN's sticking to its long-honoured norms and principles is all the more valuable.

The objectives spelled out in the AOIP are allowed to be abstract and idealistic, but an action plan to achieve the objectives needs to be concrete and realistic. The Outlook indicates specific areas for cooperation, and concrete programmes to flesh out cooperation need to be contemplated. This is particularly the case in regional connectivity. ASEAN is required to offer a broad vision for integrating connectivity development for the Indo-Pacific region, and the "Indo-Pacific Infrastructure and Connectivity Forum" functions as a springboard for such a direction. In the medium term, it is necessary to expand the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity to the Master Plan on Indo-Pacific Connectivity and integrate the existing regional projects into this new framework (Thepchatree, 2019). In so doing, expanding the base of norm-sharing from its own to other institutions is useful. For instance, the Group of Twenty (G20) Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investment was adopted in June 2019, and ASEAN can consider the principles in leading the formation of connectivity guidelines in the Indo-Pacific.

Third, ASEAN needs to extend its strategic reach based on the Indo-Pacific. The AOIP underlines socio-economic cooperation rather than strategic and security affairs, and "a single geostrategic theatre," a term used in Indonesia's original vision for the Indo-Pacific, was omitted in the deliberation process due to its likely association with military alignment/alliance (Ha, 2019b: 5). Given the sensitivity of security issues and a close connection to great power politics, it is understandable that ASEAN avoided dealing with maritime security directly in the AOIP, a guiding vision for Indo-Pacific



cooperation. However, ASEAN has exhibited its institutional capacity to handle strategic and security affairs by founding and developing the ARF, EAS, and ADMM+, all of which have functioned as regional security platforms where all great powers in the Asia-Pacific are involved. Indeed, the four areas of cooperation spelled out in the AOIP do not explicitly mention security cooperation. Yet, they illustrate ASEAN's strategy in the security field that underscored comprehensive rather than collective security with an emphasis on joint maritime activities, connectivity projects, and sustainable development programmes (Acharya, 2019). A critical challenge is how ASEAN can find effective ways to substantiate the process of comprehensive security.

ASEAN can use principles incorporated into the AOIP to maintain its engagement in strategic and security affairs. The two sets of principles matter. The first is the rule-based principle. The AOIP includes, as one of its principles, a rule-based framework, which is attuned to other phrases such as rules-based regional architecture and the promotion of the rule of law. China's assertive policies and behaviour in the South China Sea threaten the maritime rights of Southeast Asian claimants, run counter to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and thereby contradict a rule-based framework envisioned in the AOIP. ASEAN needs to substantiate the application of the rule-based principle. The second is the principle of inclusivity. ASEAN has used socialisation and persuasion to engage not only other East Asian countries but all the great powers of the current international order, and the principle of inclusivity propped up such engagement (Acharya, 2017: 207). After 2020, European nations have shown a growing interest in the Indo-Pacific. In April 2021, the European Union adopted the Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, which referred to rule-based regional security architecture and its involvement in the ASEAN security architecture. ASEAN can employ the growing interests in the Indo-Pacific under the principle of inclusivity and envision a sound future for the region based on the participation of enlarged stakeholders.

## Conclusions

This article examined ASEAN's management of rivalry politics between great powers in the process of creating and developing multilateral institutions for regional cooperation. It explored essential characteristics and implications of the management in terms of impartial enmeshment and moral legitimacy.

In the process of regionalism in East Asia, ASEAN directed China and Japan's preferences and strategies towards contributing to broadening and deepening regional cooperation. ASEAN paid due attention to avoiding special political and economic arrangements with either of the two states. The association also transformed China and Japan's proposals and commitments into its own initiatives applied for East Asia or the Asia-Pacific as a whole and created new institutions based on the initiatives. China and Japan positively engaged in the new institutions.

After the late-2010s, the scope of regionalism in which ASEAN had to engage gradually extended from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific politics was complicated as China and the US competed for greater influence through new regional

initiatives of the BRI and FOIP, respectively. ASEAN launched the AOIP as its Indo-Pacific vision that functioned to coordinate the two great powers' preferences and interests impartially. Whereas the AOIP gained endorsements from regional states including the US and China, its development accompanied various challenges including the maintenance of internal cohesion, a transition to practical cooperation, and a need to incorporate strategic and security affairs.

In the 2020s, ASEAN is facing various challenges including intensive US-China geo-strategic rivalry, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the prolonged political crisis in Myanmar. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 also implied a significant challenge to the rules-based order that the AOIP underscores. In the face of such multiple challenges, the association needs to scrutinise the fundamental properties required for remaining an indispensable organisation to manage regional affairs and promote regional cooperation and deliberate on ways to enhance the institutional capacity further, even transforming its conventional diplomatic approaches.

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