



Discussion Report Talking ASEAN

on

Implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the
Indo-Pacific Amidst Changing
Geopolitical Landscape in the Region

Jakarta, December 8th 2023



Introduction

On Friday, 8 December 2023, The Habibie Center (THC) convened the Talking ASEAN seminar titled “**Implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific Amidst Changing Geopolitical Landscape in the Region.**” The seminar featured **Dr. Ian Montratama** (Lecturer at the International Relations Department, Pertamina University), **Prof. Aleksius Jemadu, Ph.D.** (Professor of International Politics, Pelita Harapan University), and **Joanne Lin Weiling** (Lead Researcher and Co-coordinator, ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute). The discussion was moderated by **Marina Ika Sari** (Researcher, The Habibie Center).

The objectives of this seminar were to: (a) analyze Indonesia’s role and the implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in maintaining ASEAN centrality in the region; (b) problematize AOIP’s inclusivity and situating AOIP amidst competing narratives; and (c) explore ASEAN’s future strategy for implementing AOIP in maintaining the region as a peace, freedom, and neutrality zone amidst geopolitical competition between the US and China.

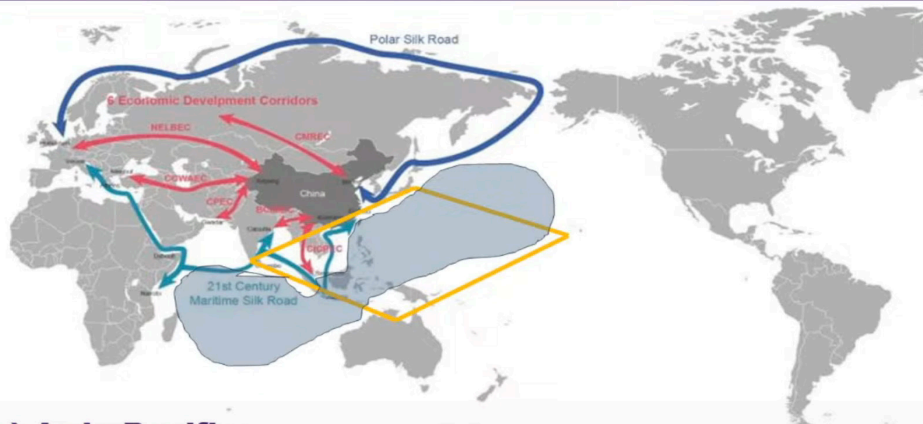
This discussion report summarized the key points of each speaker as well as the following questions and answers session.

PRESENTATION FROM THE PANELIST



Ian Montratama
(Board of Advisory Member of Defense
Diplomacy Strategic Forum/Lecturer at
International Relations Department,
Pertamina University)

China's Response: BRI as anti-thesis of the Quad



▪ The Quad → Indo-Pacific:

- Since 2007, the focus has been on maritime dimension defense cooperation aimed at containing China.
- In May 2022, initiate Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)

▪ Belt & Road Initiative:

- Since 2013, the focus of economic cooperation has been primarily infrastructure development with China as a creditor and project implementer.

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Dr. Monratama began by stating that the roots of initiatives within the AOIP, from the perspective of Indonesian scholars, can be traced to the establishment of ASEAN itself, in which ASEAN Member States (AMS) were faced with the challenge of achieving stability amidst regional conflicts. The term 'Indo-Pacific' itself, in its geopolitical parlance, emerged out of Japan's initiative to highlight the necessity for maritime cooperation among like-minded states—particularly the Quad—in the region. Subsequently, in 2008, the Quad inaugurated the Malabar Exercise in the South China Sea. China responded by submitting the nine-dash-line map to the United Nations in 2009. China has also built blue water navy capabilities and artificial islands in the South China Sea, following Xi Jinping's accession to power. Moreover, China also prohibited

Indonesia from drilling in the North Natuna Sea, escalating fear of inability to access the area from the standpoint of Southeast Asian states. These developments point to the fact that maritime issues feature prominently in the invocation of the 'Indo-Pacific' as a regional concept, which provokes a sense of insecurity among AMS towards their ability to maintain centrality, leading to the development of the AOIP.

The Quad's establishment was deemed as a containment policy to China. The development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), providing Foreign Direct Investment for infrastructure development, has pressured the Quad states to generate their counter initiative, as most aptly demonstrated by the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). While the AOIP is primarily driven by the desire to lead the regional

development in ASEAN's region, there are doubts that ASEAN can still play the leading role amidst the US-China rivalry. Given that ASEAN needs both parties, ASEAN should still be able to play the role of an honest broker.

Thus far, the AOIP has been implemented across all of its pillars. Most importantly, under Indonesia's chairmanship, ASEAN inaugurated the ASEAN Indo-Pacific Forum (AIPF), intended to build stronger connectivity between AMS and the Indo-Pacific. However, these projects sit at a major geopolitical crossroad, given the unavoidable power shift that comes from China's rising capability and the US' lingering importance for the region.

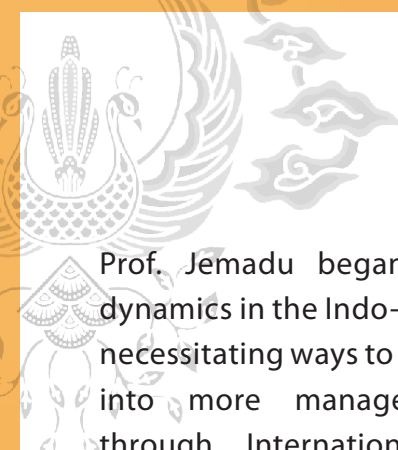
Therefore, Dr. Monratama suggested that ASEAN should take advantage of the competition, particularly by weighing the benefits and costs associated with cooperation with the US and China. For example, China can fulfill ASEAN's geoeconomic interests, while the US can provide a multilateral security structure. In other words, geoeconomic and defense cooperation should not be mutually exclusive.

It is also important to note that the types of cooperation and assistance provided by the US and China are different in nature. The US is less inclined to provide financial assistance, although it is more reliable in warding off threats from China. However, China is more generous with its financial assistance, notwithstanding its assertiveness. Dr. Monratama, quoting his book, asserted that Indonesia can be a lot more strategic and clearer about the specific benefits that can be reaped from each of its partners.

PRESENTATION FROM THE PANELIST



Prof. Aleksius Jemadu, Ph.D.
Professor of International Politics,
Pelita Harapan University




Prof. Jemadu began by arguing that the dynamics in the Indo-Pacific are very complex, necessitating ways to simplify such complexity into more manageable ways, including through International Relations theories. Different theories would warrant analysts to shift their focus on different factors of interest.

From a neoclassical realist perspective, the AOIP can be understood as a foreign policy output as a way to respond to external challenges in the region. From a neoliberal perspective, economic interdependence plays an important role, prompting actors to undergo mutual learning. Institutionalization of economic cooperation also leads to increasing national competitiveness among all stakeholders. Competition is not necessarily negative; rather, competitiveness can be a source of motivation to improve performance. From a constructivist approach, the focus would be placed upon understanding how the region itself is constituted, particularly in the minds of the leaders and policymakers who would build policies based on how they understand the region.

Prof. Jemadu noted that the AOIP puts emphasis on economic cooperation and avoids power politics. This is not only warranted by the lack of capacity to contend with the great powers but also the great benefits from the great powers' presence in the region. However, ASEAN remains firm in pushing for adherence to international law and norms, exhibiting ASEAN's characteristic as an organization constituted of middle

and small powers. Moreover, there is a strong intention or preference for economic interdependence which is open and inclusive. Taken together, the AOIP demonstrated the importance of Indonesia's regional leader and the importance of reaping from the economic benefits obtained through the great powers' presence in the region.

Various strategies in the Indo-Pacific, published by various major powers in the region, display various focus and depart from different economic or geopolitical interests. First, the US foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific encapsulates two possible narratives: the liberal narrative of the US' traditional hegemony and the realist narrative of a struggle for power or military preponderance. Second, China prefers the narrative of complex interdependence to dull the edges of its assertiveness. The establishment of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) provided China with the momentum to lead the regional economy, leaving behind the US who chose to leave the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). This is strengthened by the networks built through projects under the BRI. The AOIP, despite the absence of China's endorsement, is also welcomed by China. The AOIP and China's global strategy are even increasingly converging, given China's awareness and will to use its economic prowess to meet ASEAN's needs. This is aided by the fact that the ASEAN way rarely demands legal commitment and adherence to the non-interference principle. Prof. Jemadu also emphasized the importance



of considering the different interpretations of the content of the draft of the Code of Conduct (CoC) in the South China Sea between ASEAN and China. These differences explain the long duration taken to finalize negotiations. Prof. Jemadu added that RCEP, which includes the US' allies, is an important factor in considering the US' return to Asia in the post-Trump era.

Japan will also face the reality of growing competition with China, while also seeking to benefit from China's economic growth. However, Japan continues its military reliance on the US and its close partnership with its traditional allies in the region, particularly the Quad states. Australia will also face immense challenges from China's increasing prominence. ASEAN's initiatives are perceived to be positive contributions to improve regional stability. Moreover, India's "Act East Policy" portrays its wish to strengthen economic cooperation with ASEAN. However, in comparison to China, India is still left behind in Southeast Asia, particularly given its absence from RCEP.

Indonesia has taken initiative to conduct the AIPF, which produced a commitment for cooperation which amounted to USD 38.2 billion. However, utilizing these commitments will still be contingent on various domestic and regional factors. It needs to be noted that these commitments will also entail political prices, particularly in the great powers' desire to leverage their prowess and presence to strengthen their political agenda. Meanwhile, the choice of ASEAN to


reach out to the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is part of the idea of widening the area of economic interdependence while reducing the conflictual nuance of entanglement with great powers. Maritime connectivity and the future prospect of blue economy demonstrate the wish of ASEAN to set the terms of reference of the cooperation before potential attempts to monopolize these opportunities by the great powers.

In conclusion, Prof. Jemadu noted that the AOIP and its implementation can be considered as ASEAN's collective strategy to assert its existence and centrality in a changing geopolitical and geoeconomic arena of the Indo-Pacific region, pointing to their preference for propelling economic interdependence amidst the inability to stop great power rivalry.

PRESENTATION FROM THE PANELIST



Joanne Lin Weiling
Lead Researcher and Co-coordinator,
ASEAN Studies Centre,
ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute



The fact that the implementation of AOIP was picked up during Indonesia's chairmanship was not surprising, given the fact that it led the process leading to the publication of AOIP. The implementation of AOIP has succeeded in garnering potential projects and explicit support from ASEAN's dialogue and external partners, which can potentially lead to a long-term commitment to further materializing the outlook. However, the question that should be addressed is whether or not the initiatives are strategic enough.

Invoking the concept of Indo-Pacific is not purely normative; in fact, invocations to the concept are largely driven by the underlying geopolitical rivalry. Noting its limited capacity, there will always be a limit to the strategic value that ASEAN's initiatives in the Indo-Pacific can offer. While what the AOIP offers are good, initiatives provided under other frameworks point to the fact that ASEAN will have to compete with the increasing attempt to touch upon non-security issues displayed by other unilateral and multilateral platforms in the region. ASEAN will have to share the strategic sphere with other major powers which ASEAN will need to live with.

The fact that it took four years for the implementation of the AOIP to pick up demonstrated that the AOIP has yet to receive strong support, including from the defense sector given the slow reception within the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM). If the goal is to have a process, the AOIP is sufficient, but it has yet to meet strategic

goals.

The implementation of the AOIP was very much aligned with Indonesia's interests. However, following Indonesia's chairmanship, doubts against its continuity are reasonable. Not all AMS share the same level of enthusiasm and sense of membership to the AOIP. Following the overwhelming support from ASEAN's dialogue partners—including China—AMS increasingly noticed the benefits of the AOIP, particularly given its omnidirectional and inclusive nature. The AOIP is increasingly being internalized as an instrument that brings benefits to the grouping. The Prime Minister of Laos, in a meeting with Weiling, noted the importance of AOIP, which was echoed by the Secretary General of ASEAN. Therefore, it will be important for the ASEAN Secretariat to keep track of projects intended to implement the AOIP.

Weiling suggested that having a multi-year work plan for implementation will be useful to avoid repetitions and ensure the ability to assess whether or not it meets the interests and needs of ASEAN. Second, ASEAN should take the lead in setting the priorities in the implementation of AOIP, instead of mapping the overlaps between the available offers from partners. Third, projects intended to implement the AOIP should be more meaningful, rather than just attaching the label of "AOIP" to future projects. Therefore, this will act as a measure to ensure the quality of projects affiliated with the AOIP. ASEAN needs to go beyond its obsessions

**SPEAKERS****Joanne Lin Weiling**

Lead Researcher and Co-coordinator, ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute



with statistics, given that outcomes are more important. Lastly, there is a need to set up a fund to implement projects from AOIP to reduce reliance on external partners and enhance ASEAN centrality. ASEAN's own fund will allow it to determine the activities it wishes to pursue and provide ASEAN ability with more room to speak for its own interests.

Therefore, institutionalization will ensure continuity, regardless of who is chairing ASEAN. Moreover, ASEAN will also need to consider how it can play the role of a bridge builder in the region, amidst the increasingly dense webs of initiatives in the Indo-Pacific.



QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION



Questions

Mabda Haerunnisa Fajrilla Sidiq (The Habibie Center):

Has Jokowi's domestic interests influenced his push on the foreign policy front for AOIP? Will the implementation of AOIP provide a channel for states engaged in rivalry in the region (such as China and the US) to improve their comfort level and ASEAN's standing as an honest broker against the backdrop of various flash points in the region, e.g., the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait?

Responses

Joanne Lin Weiling (Lead Researcher and Co-coordinator, ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute):

The AOIP implementation has been extremely successful given the fact that it was prioritized very highly by Indonesia. The amount of projects speaks for the fact that the domestic factor has helped in promoting the AOIP. However, the AOIP is not going to raise the comfort level in solving regional crises. But what AOIP provides is the opportunity for major powers to sit together at the same table, highlighting ASEAN's convening power.

Prof. Aleksius Jemadu, Ph.D. (Professor of International Politics, Pelita Harapan University):

Jokowi's emphasis on economic interests is exactly the reason why economic priorities are placed highly in Indonesia's ASEAN chairmanship. This emphasis is aligned with the need to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for Jokowi himself to demonstrate that he performed well on the foreign policy front. Southeast Asia is unique in comparison to other regions. In Europe, for instance, no actor plays the role of a bridge builder. ASEAN perceives itself as the actor who sits in the middle of the rivalry between great powers and is capable of providing an arena where all of the great powers can sit together. We should not expect too much from these arenas, but ASEAN-led platforms still provide an important alternative to bring the rivaling actors together. ASEAN must not be indifferent to this role; in fact, it should be seized to ensure its critical role in the region.

Dr. Ian Montratama (Lecturer at the International Relations Department, Pertamina University):

Logically, domestic factors play a huge role. However, it is not the president alone who plays an important role. Historically, during the Cold War, diplomats played an important role in pushing for more advances within the region. With regards to ASEAN's ability to become an honest broker, the US' role is important, particularly in their ability to provide economic opportunities and display involvement that are as significant as China's. The US needs to ramp up its economic involvement

in the region.

Questions

Syifa (Paramadina Graduate School of Diplomacy):

To Dr. Montratama, how does a quasi-alliance take form? Will it be more effective than a strategic partnership? To Prof. Jemadu, is it possible to establish cooperation in the transfer of technology and other sectors between middle and small powers to maximize their balancing strategies and mitigate the consequences of the US-China rivalry?

Responses

Dr. Ian Montratama (Lecturer at the International Relations Department, Pertamina University):

Following Stephen Walt's suggestion, there are two ways of addressing this issue: balancing (especially internal and external balancing) and band-wagoning. However, these prescriptions are not well suited for the Southeast Asian context. Moreover, he also noted Prof. Kuik Cheng-Chwee's suggestion on hedging. Dr. Montratama suggested the importance of bargaining, which prioritizes the importance of strategic clarity. Indonesia can try to build a quasi-alliance with the US, wherein their close and reliable partnership is not necessarily labeled as an alliance.

Prof. Aleksius Jemadu, Ph.D. (Professor of International Politics, Pelita Harapan University):

Prof. Jemadu believes that transfer technology is a lie, given the reluctance to share technology that can be regarded as sensitive information. This is especially true for technologies that require huge amounts of investment. Indonesia should have more will to cultivate its own technologies, given that relying on cooperation has been proven to be less effective. If China's global power is not legitimated in Southeast Asia, it will not be accepted elsewhere. Therefore, ASEAN is important only if they are united and can deal with the great powers.

Questions

Seonyoung Yang (ROK Mission to ASEAN):

Convening power is ASEAN's strength in engaging external partners, which is also notable in the implementation of the AOIP. How can ASEAN lead the AOIP without being dominated by external powers? Moreover, specifically addressed to Ms. Lin, in the political-security field, can

ASEAN encourage the involvement of every dialogue partner, including China and Russia, in the implementation of AOIP? Which areas of cooperation can be led by middle-power dialogue partners?

Responses

Joanne Lin Weiling (Lead Researcher and Co-coordinator, ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute):

ASEAN's convening power is indeed a part of ASEAN's success. ASEAN does not have adequate hard power and does not have any common security or defense policy. Dialogue partners are the lifeline of ASEAN, given ASEAN's inadequacy to fund ambitious projects. The ASEAN Secretariat is inadequately funded, leading to its need to rely on external partners and pointing to their role in determining the priorities. However, ASEAN's job is not only as a bridge builder but also to develop itself as a community. The latter should be emphasized to ensure ASEAN unity and be emphasized in enhancing ASEAN's ability to take ownership of its own initiatives. It should be noted that the AOIP is not about containing anyone and welcomes the participation of all partners.

Dr. Ian Montratama (Lecturer at the International Relations Department, Pertamina University):

What AOIP can do is toning down the security tensions caused by the invocation of the Indo-Pacific concept by the Quad. Noting the primarily non-security nuance that ASEAN pursues with the implementation of the AOIP, it allows the Quad to not only pursue its security interests but also to address economic matters.

Prof. Aleksius Jemadu, Ph.D. (Professor of International Politics, Pelita Harapan University):

Great powers are aware of their instruments and if the situation allows, great powers will not be hesitant to use them. What ASEAN can do is act as a norm entrepreneur by playing the role of a normative power by pushing for alternatives to power politics. ASEAN can promote multilateralism as a real alternative to power politics. Despite AOIP's weaknesses, the member states have created their own definitions and they set the terms themselves on how the interactions in the region should be. This acknowledges that, despite the presence of external powers, ASEAN can define how the external powers should present themselves in the region. However, we cannot ignore the reality that AMS have different perspectives among themselves. Other AMS are seemingly aware and acknowledge Indonesia's leadership in pushing for ASEAN to take the driver's seat.



ABOUT ASEAN STUDIES PROGRAM

The ASEAN Studies Program was established on February 24, 2010, to become a center of excellence on ASEAN related issues, which can assist in the development of the ASEAN Community by 2015. The Habibie Center through its ASEAN Studies Program, alongside other institutions working towards the same goal, hopes to contribute to the realization of a more people-oriented ASEAN that puts a high value on democracy and human rights.

The objective of the ASEAN Studies Program is not merely only to conduct research and discussion within academic and government circles, but also to strengthen public awareness by forming a strong network of civil society in the region that will be able to help spread the ASEAN message. With the establishment of ASEAN Studies Program, The Habibie Center aims to play its part within our capabilities to the ASEAN regional development.

ABOUT TALKING ASEAN

Talking ASEAN is a monthly public dialogue held at The Habibie Center in Jakarta. Covering a wide array of issues related to ASEAN, Talking ASEAN addresses topics of: Economic Integration, Socio-cultural, & Democracy, human rights and regional peace, among others. Featuring local and visiting experts, Talking ASEAN is one of a series of twelve dialogues regularly held each month and open to a target audience consisting of ASEAN officials, foreign ambassadors & diplomats, academics, university students, businesses, and the media.

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