

Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific Concepts: From Resistance to Reticence to Reaction

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The Indo-Pacific concepts have been front and centre for a number of the most important actors in the region — the United States, Japan, India and Australia. While their respective understandings of the Indo-Pacific are yet to be developed, one thing is clear — the “Indo-Pacific” needs to be taken note of. Southeast Asia has been an important venue for the promotion of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy — or at least the US version of it. It was in Da Nang, Vietnam, at the APEC Summit in November 2017 that US President Donald Trump first used the terminology. In the following months, a number of important speeches and discussion on the concept further elaborated the American, Australian, Indian and Japanese views on the Indo-Pacific. In June 2018 at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, speeches delivered by the US Defence Secretary, then General Mattis, India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and the Japanese and Australian Defence Ministers, Itsunori Onodera and Marise Payne, all laid out the importance of the concept and emphasised ASEAN centrality. Later that year at the November East Asia Summit (EAS), US Vice-President Mike Pence gave his articulation of the United States’ preferred vision of the regional order. In 2019, similar efforts to promote the FOIP were made by US Admiral Philip Davidson, the Indo-Pacific Commander, who toured Southeast Asia, including Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines.

From an Australian perspective, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Defence Minister Christopher Pyne both made public speeches in Singapore, in March 2017 and January 2019, which further promoted the Indo-Pacific principles. The Indo-Pacific has been referred to as a region, rather than espousing what a strategy or a plan behind it would be. As Bishop said: “The Indo-Pacific region has a long way to go. We have no option but to preserve and strengthen the liberal rules-based order if peace, stability and prosperity is to continue”.¹ The rules-based order figured in Christopher Pyne’s speech at the IISS Fullerton Forum in January 2019:

The Indo-Pacific we aspire to is one underpinned by the rules based order, which is open, inclusive, robust and free of coercion.(...) We value its importance and presence in establishing and promoting the norms and principles that have underpinned the region’s security and prosperity.²

1 Julie Bishop, ‘Change and Uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific: Strategic Challenges and Opportunities’, speech, 28th IISS Fullerton Lecture, March 2017, <www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/julie-bishop/speech/change-and-uncertainty-indo-pacific-strategic-challenges-and-opportunities> [Accessed 14 January 2020]

2 Christopher Pyne, Keynote address at 2019 IISS Fullerton Forum, Singapore, 27-29 January 2019, <www.iiss.org/events/fullerton-forum/fullerton-forum-2019> [14 January 2020].

In other words, since first enunciated in 2017, much of the articulation of the Indo-Pacific has occurred in Southeast Asia.

Yet, despite those efforts, the region remains largely confused and reluctant to address the Indo-Pacific concept. According to a recent survey of around 1,000 Southeast Asian elites (see Figure 1), more than 61 per cent of respondents thought that the Indo-Pacific concept “is unclear and needs further elaboration”. As many support as are suspicious of the concept; a quarter thought that the Indo-Pacific agenda was to contain China.³

Southeast Asian leaders have been reluctant to embrace the term ‘Indo-Pacific’.⁴ Partly this was because of sensitivities towards the relationship with Beijing, but also partly because it remains unclear to them what support for the Indo-Pacific would entail or commit to.

In Australian strategic circles, there seems to be a growing tendency to look at Southeast Asia with frustration. There is frustration towards ASEAN because of its inconclusive ‘ASEAN Way’, emphasising process over progress. There is also frustration towards individual Southeast Asian states for ‘not standing up enough’ against China in the South China Sea, ‘not pushing back enough’ against the Belt and Road Initiative or even not supporting the Indo-Pacific concept enough. But the level of understanding of motivations and decisions of the Southeast Asian states remains incomplete and uneven.

In 2020 the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute regional survey showed that 54% of all respondents in ten ASEAN states still consider that the Indo-Pacific concept is unclear and requires further elaboration.⁵

This sense of frustration partially comes from an assumption that after all, Australia and Southeast Asia, like the rest of the world, are facing similar challenges coming from the ongoing global changes and are affected by the same geopolitical turbulence. But recent developments suggest that Southeast Asian strategies to deal with the pressure are increasingly different from those that Australia pursue.

Southeast Asia, although often described as one region, is in fact a collection of actors with very diverse interests and strategies for responding to pressure. The region’s importance has been self-evident, and its centrality has been recognised time and again in presentation of the Indo-Pacific strategies across Japan, Australia, the United States and India. In the current context of the Sino-US great power competition the region’s alignment politics is of additional importance. Understanding the nuanced, and often diverging, factors determining those alignment politics is essential for a successful strategy. The aforementioned frustration about ASEAN’s resistance to act more decisively (and more importantly, more supportively of the Australian and American policies) is not accompanied by solid cognition of Southeast Asians’ motivations.

ASEAN’s apparent coolness toward the Indo-Pacific strategy can be explained in terms of some long-term trends, which a successful Indo-Pacific strategy should have been able to address.⁶

3 ASEAN Studies Centre, *The State of the Southeast Asia: 2019 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak Institute, 2019).

4 John Lee, ‘The Free and Open Indo-Pacific and implications for ASEAN’, *Trends in Southeast Asia*, vol. 13 (2018).

5 “The State of Southeast Asian: 2020 Survey Report”, ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak Institute, Singapore 2020. P. 32

6 Huong Le Thu, ‘Three Traps in Building the Indo-Pacific Narrative thus far’, *The Pacific Forum PacNet* No. 43, 22 June 2018, <www.pacforum.org/analysis/pacnet-43-three-traps-building-indo-pacific-narrative-thus-far> [14 January 2020].

Just as the American version of Free and Open Indo-Pacific cannot be separated from its new China policy, views from Southeast Asia on the FOIP are not divorced from perceptions of the United States under the Trump administration. And in Southeast Asian perceptions, the US commitment to Southeast Asia is sharply declining. Just like Australia, Southeast Asians are concerned about China's creeping aggressiveness and its revisionist ambitions. But unlike Australia, Southeast Asians have lived with this perception of threat for a while longer. What is seen as changing fast is in fact not China, but the United States. Judging from the perceptions, the confidence in the United States has declined considerably. In sum, some 68 per cent of the surveyed believe that the Trump's administration decreased (or substantially decreased) engagement with Southeast Asia in 2019.⁷ That view only worsened in the following year with 77 per cent of the respondents believing that the US engagement in the region has decreased.⁸

In fact, similar views were voiced during the Obama administration's Pivot to Asia. Obama was popular but the value of his administration's Rebalance to Asia was doubted. The reluctance to address China's assertiveness is now one of the most frequent criticisms of Obama's legacy. The Philippines in particular have been burnt over Obama's declaration that "the US will not go to war over some rocks".⁹ This cast doubt over Washington's reliability and resulted in tempering Southeast Asia's appetite to stand up to Beijing's coercion. The US insistence in not taking sides and in avoiding supporting any party's claims, and instead supporting rhetorically international law — namely the UNCLOS which the United States has not ratified — was interpreted as unreliability. In the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump's 'America First' caused anxiety among Asian partners and allies.

What makes the Southeast Asians uneasy about the Indo-Pacific concept, or more precisely the FOIP, is that its articulation is increasingly in conflict with Washington's language about competing with China. Both recent National Security and National Defence Strategies have identified Beijing as a long-term strategic competitor of the United States and a challenger to the rules-based international system. The campaign promoting the FOIP is increasingly seen in the region as pressure to 'take sides'. Hosting the ASEAN Summit in November 2018, Singapore's PM Lee Hsien Loong said:

We can all see the growing geopolitical uncertainties. At the same time, each ASEAN Member State is subject to different pulls and pressures from different powers. In these circumstances, all the more we must stay united and strive to maintain our cohesion and effectiveness. That is the only way for ASEAN to remain relevant and to be of value to our members as well as to our external partners.¹⁰

7 *The State of the Southeast Asia: 2019 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak Institute, 2019), p. 16 Question 15.

8 "The State of Southeast Asian: 2020 Survey Report", ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak Institute, Singapore 2020. P. 39

9 'Remarks by President Obama and Benigno Aquino III of the Philippines in Joint Press Conference', Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, 18 April 2014 <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/28/remarks-president-obama-and-president-benigno-aquino-iii-philippines-joi>> [Accessed 14 January 2020]

10 Huong Le Thu, 'Southeast Asians Hope for Neutrality, Prepare for a Choice', Pacific Forum PacNet No. 75, 20 November 2018, <www.pacforum.org/analysis/pacnet-75-southeast-asians-hope-neutrality-prepare-choice> [14 January 2020].

If embracing the FOIP means adopting the American vision — the confrontational approach the Trump administration is taking towards China — then ASEAN nations are not likely to support it. On the perceptions level, the damage has been done: the majority of Southeast Asians believe that the United States and China are on a collision course. Interestingly, there is little blame given to Beijing for getting onto that collision course, but rather it is associated with Trump's unconventional approach to foreign policy.

In other words, the main difference between how Southeast Asia and Australia view the current great power competition is that, unlike Canberra, the majority of ASEAN member-states see neither China nor the United States as benign. Hence, if the FOIP continues to be 'all about China', Canberra may find that the level of alarm raised by Beijing's behaviour is dissimilar in neighbouring Southeast Asia.

Seeing the FOIP only through Washington's diplomatic language would be incomplete, if not misleading. The good news is that Southeast Asians' confidence and trust towards Japan is consistently steadfast and it is not surprising that they are most comfortable with Tokyo's version of the FOIP. In fact, the Japanese version is the oldest and most developed vision, with a strong focus on development and connectivity. Among the main areas for developing the strategy are:

- 1) Developing an environment for international peace, stability and prosperity, and sharing universal values;
- 2) Addressing global issues toward achieving Sustainable Development Goals and promoting human security;
- 3) Economic diplomacy that aims at "quality growth" together with developing countries and contribute to regional revitalization.¹¹

Most recently, ASEAN leaders have embarked on the process of developing their own version of the 'Indo-Pacific', which is said to converge with the Japanese FOIP strategy. At the 34th ASEAN Summit in June 2019, ASEAN leaders formally adopted 'The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific' (AOIP).¹² The Outlook reaffirmed long-standing norms present in the diplomatic life of this regional institution, such as ASEAN centrality, the value of dialogue and cooperation for the sake of development and prosperity, and so on. It specifically rejects and opposes zero-sum great power competition as detrimental to both the prosperity and the multilateralism of the region. Interestingly, the AOIP rejects the Indo-Pacific as a continuous territorial space, instead it is made up of two distinct regions: the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, the AOIP gives priority focus to maritime cooperation, connectivity and infrastructure — issues that have been an ASEAN focus for a long time. The AOIP is neither innovative nor even substantive. But it represents an effort to showcase ASEAN's diplomatic leadership and an attempt to reiterate what Southeast Asians consider as important — growth and the rejection of great powers' zero-sum competition.¹³

11 'Priority Policy for Development Cooperation FY2017: Key Areas', International Cooperation Bureau, MOFA Japan, April 2017, <www.mofa.go.jp/files/000259285.pdf> [Accessed xx Month 20xx].

12 ASEAN OUTLOOK ON THE INDO-PACIFIC, 22 June 2019, <asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf> [14 January 2020].

13 Huong Le Thu, 'ASEAN's Long and Winding Way to the Indo-Pacific', *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 29 June 2019, <www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-long-and-winding-way-to-the-indo-pacific/> [14 January 2020]

To be sure, ASEAN's attitudes towards FOIP — even after adopting AOIP — have been more reactive than proactive, and perhaps a level of frustration towards it is well founded. But to gain stronger support for the evolving many versions of the FOIP, Tokyo, Washington, Canberra and New Delhi should work towards stronger coordination of their strategies to reduce the level of confusion as well as individual governments' efforts. In shaping the strategies, it is important for those who build the strategies to understand the complexities of that vast region and its multifaceted needs.

Arriving at the AOIP — the blueprint for the region's approach to the Indo-Pacific — might seem to be a diplomatic accomplishment. But the critical question — and deciding factor for the AOIP impact, as well as ASEAN's centrality — is where to from here? Does ASEAN have an intention to continue with another document on the Indo-Pacific, develop a strategy or move on to implementing it? All of that remains unclear, if not unlikely, but it is also contingent on how the United States, Japan and other actors develop their Indo-Pacific concepts. In any case, ASEAN remains reactive, rather than leading, in the Indo-Pacific discourse.

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