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Can ASEAN and India Share a Common Outlook and Approach in the Indo-Pacific?

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India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar (L) speaking at the ASEAN-India Ministerial Meeting during the 55th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Phnom Penh on 4 August 2022. Picture: Tang Chhin Soth AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Over the past three years, ASEAN and India, as strategic partners, have been finding ways to align their outlook and strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific. As such, identifying common approaches and strategic alignment between the two can help elevate the relations to a higher level.
- ASEAN's approach to the Indo-Pacific through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) aims to defend its centrality through inclusive partnerships to promote greater strategic trust in the region. However, operationalising the AOIP will be challenging due to a lack of collective outlook.
- India aims to strengthen its influence in the Indo-Pacific through the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) by focusing on three key aspects, namely purposeful partnerships (with like-minded countries), power promotion, and broad pluralistic policy.
- ASEAN and India may find convergence in four aspects, namely, upholding common values; seeking balance in the Indo-Pacific and maintaining neutrality; broad and pluralistic approaches to engagement; and issues-based cooperation which may result in strategic alignment.
- However, India's interest to project its own leadership in the Indo-Pacific may pose a challenge to ASEAN centrality. ASEAN's inability to exert its leadership role in the Indo-Pacific due to the limitations in ASEAN-led mechanisms and a lack of collective outlook will result in India relying on other mechanisms such as the QUAD to project a greater influence in the Indo-Pacific.

INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region, signifying the confluence of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, is becoming increasingly important to ASEAN and India. Although there is no common definition of the strategic nature of the region, the construct was made with the strategic interests¹ of major powers in mind, including the US, Japan, Australia, and India—members of the Quadrilateral Dialogue (QUAD)—and others like the European Union, United Kingdom and the Republic of Korea.

In the case of ASEAN and India, the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region is underscored in their respective guiding documents, namely the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (ASEAN's collective outlook to guide ASEAN's engagement in Asia-Pacific and Indian Oceans region), adopted in June 2019 and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (India's non-treaty-based initiative for cooperation with partners in the Indian and Pacific Oceans region), launched in November 2019.

Over the past three years, ASEAN and India as strategic partners, have been finding ways to align their outlook and strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific; and this eventually culminated in the *Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region*² being adopted at the 18th ASEAN-India Summit in November 2021.

The joint statement which seeks to deepen ASEAN-India strategic partnership by exploring clear convergences and potential cooperation between the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), reaffirmed shared values and common fundamental principles. It also highlighted a long list of potential activities that are aligned to the four areas of cooperation outlined in the AOIP, namely maritime and economic cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development, and other areas of mutual interest. Apart from India, Japan has a similar joint statement with ASEAN³ on the AOIP adopted in 2020.

While most documents and literature on ASEAN-India relations seek to identify areas of cooperation for strengthening the strategic partnership, this paper explores ASEAN's and India's strategic alignment in the Indo-Pacific through their respective approaches, and examine if a common outlook can be established to take ASEAN and India relations to the next level.

ASEAN'S APPROACH TO THE INDO-PACIFIC

ASEAN's motivation in the Indo-Pacific has always been lacklustre and is driven primarily by its need to ensure that the region is not dominated or driven by any great power. The adoption of the AOIP in 2019 was in response to the growing narratives on the Indo-Pacific that are increasingly being shaped by major powers with vested interests in the region.⁴ ASEAN, under the leadership of Indonesia, decided to come up with its own collective outlook to carve out its

role in the Indo-Pacific in order to maintain its centrality in the evolving regional architecture.⁵ Apart from Indonesia and Vietnam⁶ which chose to embrace the Indo-Pacific, others in the bloc were less keen on a strong ASEAN approach towards the Indo-Pacific.

As such, the AOIP was deliberately kept broad, rudimentary and ambiguous to cater to the ambivalence or different levels of interest (or lack of interest) within the regional bloc on a construct that is, in fact, malleable.⁷ Several ASEAN member states were apprehensive about the new Indo-Pacific construct for fear of being seen to be embracing the free and open Indo-Pacific strategies of countries such as Japan and the US which were interpreted as countering the rise of China.

Apart from underlining key principles,⁸ forging inclusive partnerships is one of the main thrusts of ASEAN's approach to the Indo-Pacific. This approach enables ASEAN to defend its centrality in the regional architecture and, at the same time, ensure the sustainability of initiatives in the Indo-Pacific through the support of external partners. ASEAN, on its own, has limited resources to maintain multilateral processes and platforms or to fund sizable initiatives and activities.

Notwithstanding the lack of strategic and substantive elements within the AOIP, or any salient or concrete ASEAN-led Indo-Pacific initiatives, ASEAN has managed to gain considerable success in garnering support for its maiden document on the Indo-Pacific. Many of ASEAN's dialogue partners, including India, have seemingly welcomed its adoption and underscored ASEAN's central role in the Indo-Pacific in various statements with ASEAN. Attempts have also been made by partners to find areas of synergy between the various Indo-Pacific strategies and the AOIP.

However, operationalising the AOIP will be challenging due to the lack of a collective outlook. ASEAN's role in the region (let alone a leading one) will be limited due firstly to ASEAN's inability to undertake substantive positions on key issues owing to the diverse interest and alliances among its members; secondly, the need to preserve its neutrality and unity amidst major power rivalry will limit ASEAN's options; and thirdly, the absence of hard power in its security mechanisms cannot serve as a deterrence against potential aggressors.

INDIA'S APPROACH TO THE INDO-PACIFIC

In a similar vein, given the increasing salience of the Indo-Pacific discourse, Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined India's vision for the Indo-Pacific region⁹ in a speech delivered at the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018. In that speech, India envisioned the Indo-Pacific as a free, open and inclusive region based on international law.

Modi had specifically underlined that "India does not see the Indo-Pacific region as a strategy or as a club of limited members, nor as a grouping that seeks to dominate, and by no means do we (India) consider it as directed against any country".¹⁰ The importance of 'ASEAN centrality' and the need for greater cooperation in the region was highlighted.

Subsequently, Modi launched the IPOI at the East Asia Summit in November 2019, shortly after the AOIP was adopted. The IPOI draws on existing regional cooperation focusing on seven key pillars,¹¹ namely, maritime security; maritime ecology; maritime resources; capacity building and resource sharing; disaster risk reduction and management; science, technology and academic cooperation; trade connectivity and maritime transport.

A separate “Indo-Pacific” Division was set up within the Ministry of External Affairs to help consolidate India’s vision of the Indo-Pacific across the Government of India and to provide substantive policy elements and programmes to its vision. ASEAN-India relations have since been subsumed under the new division.¹²

While the IPOI appears to be an announcement and framework rather than an actual policy document, it aims to provide a specific institutionalised structure¹³ and strategic direction to the Indo-Pacific architecture. It is to establish India as a ‘rule-maker’ rather than a ‘rule-taker’,¹⁴ and to bolster New Delhi’s strategic posturing.¹⁵ This is in line with India’s ambition to be a stronger regional security power as evidenced in its Act East Policy. Scholars have also noted the important role that the Indian Ocean plays in supporting India in its economic rise, and as a maritime power in the region.¹⁶

The need for India to extend its influence in the Indo-Pacific also stems from India’s sensitivity to China’s expanding influence through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and China’s growing partnership with Pakistan.¹⁷ Safeguarding maritime security and strengthening relations with countries in the Indo-Pacific region, especially with ASEAN, has become an important priority for Modi.

However, India has not taken a defined position on the contested power politics in the Indo-Pacific¹⁸ and has maintained cordial relations with most countries in the region. It has also kept its objectives and definition of the Indo-Pacific very broad to suit its interest to maintain a degree of “fuzziness”.¹⁹

It is observed that India’s approach to the Indo-Pacific focuses on three key aspects, namely, purposeful partnerships (with like-minded countries), power promotion, and broad pluralistic policy.²⁰ In addition, strategic autonomy, non-alignment (or multi-alignment), and inclusiveness are core to India’s foreign policy and have been translated into its Indo-Pacific approaches.

India’s aim, therefore, is to foster a culture of institutional participation²¹ in the Indo-Pacific region, especially the Indian Ocean region, that will strengthen India’s power and influence. Cooperation with international organisations and regional groupings (such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association, and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium), minilateral partnerships (i.e. QUAD), trilateral (i.e. India-Australia-Japan Supply Chain Resilience Initiative), bilateral engagements (including with ASEAN countries), as well as issue-based partnerships²² (i.e. the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, BIMSTEC), form the cornerstone of India’s approach to the Indo-Pacific.

A COMMON OUTLOOK AND APPROACH

While ASEAN and India have attempted to explore synergies and identify areas of cooperation that are complementary to the AOIP and IPOI, what is equally important to understand is the extent to which ASEAN and India may align their approaches in the Indo-Pacific.

There are converging approaches including upholding fundamental principles and values, as well as the pursuit of multilateralism and neutrality that will allow ASEAN and India to further advance their strategic partnerships. At the same time, certain divergences between ASEAN and India may also pose challenges to their relations in the long run.

Seeking Balance in the Indo-Pacific and the Need for Neutrality

India is keen to balance—although not specifically contain—China’s influence²³ in the Indo-Pacific.²⁴ Thus, India’s membership in the QUAD will help to satisfy India’s security needs. However, India is also viewed as the weakest link in the QUAD due to its need to maintain strategic autonomy and therefore may not align with Australia, Japan, and the US to the same extent in their outlooks toward China or even Russia. India’s history and policy of non-alignment (and being a founder of the Non-Aligned Movement, NAM) reflects its desire to “be friendly to all countries...and not being entangled in any alliance”, in the words of Jawaharlal Nehru.²⁵

This aspect bodes well with ASEAN’s aim to preserve neutrality. The importance of neutrality in ASEAN has been reflected in the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration (ZOPFAN) signed in 1971²⁶ in which the five ASEAN foreign ministers (then) agreed to work towards the neutralisation of Southeast Asia, free from outside interference in its internal affairs. The need for neutrality was also considered in ASEAN’s AOIP which did not mention any specific countries or align itself to the Indo-Pacific strategies of major powers.

This principle has therefore allowed ASEAN to bring together major powers and regional players—regardless of ideologies or values—for inclusive dialogues and strategic cooperation through its multilateral mechanisms including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) which India is a member of. Similarly, this principle has allowed India to extend its diplomatic influence into the wider Indo-Pacific and engage freely with multiple partners through established rules, processes and institutions.

Broad Pluralistic and Multi-Pronged Engagement

Another similarity between ASEAN and India as observed in the AOIP and IPOI is the vagueness and broad nature of both approaches. This is perhaps designed to allow both parties to have a stake in the Indo-Pacific without the need to parse the nature of the Indo-Pacific.²⁷ The avoidance of having a definitive position on the contested power politics in the Indo-Pacific has allowed ASEAN and India to maintain cordial relations with most countries and stakeholders in the region.²⁸

India's plurilateral approach in the Indo-Pacific as reflected in the IPOI not only focuses on its engagement with ASEAN and its multilateral mechanisms but also through various forms of cooperation (minilateral, trilateral and bilateral, as illustrated in the earlier section).

Apart from cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, India is also part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)—a growing China-led organisation—and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). This reflects the reality of India's "need for a strong multi-polar world order for dealing with the challenges of our times", according to Modi.²⁹ India's preference for multi-pronged engagement has therefore prompted observations that India's non-alignment policy is increasingly shifting to multi-alignment.³⁰ Some scholars have also referred India's enlargement of partnerships and strategic space to "conjectural alliances"³¹—alignments without political or military alliance structure—which can result in little commitment.

This in a way is similar to ASEAN's outward-looking approach to external relations in which multiple partnerships are formed bilaterally (with over 95 Non-ASEAN Ambassadors accredited) and through sub-regional, regional and international organisations. The number of formal partnerships including dialogue partners, sectoral dialogue partners, and development partners as well as with various organisations have grown over the years, although commitment remains low. In fact, scholars have observed that ASEAN's strategy for external relations is to embrace as many outsiders as possible to balance any threat arising from one single power.³²

Projection of Leadership in the Indo-Pacific (Power Promotion vs ASEAN Centrality)

As much as India has always placed emphasis on the importance of ASEAN centrality and leadership in the regional architecture (as underscored in most documents), India has also been active in projecting its own power across the military and commercial domains in the Indo-Pacific. Some scholars have argued that the Indo-Pacific as envisioned by the IPOI, "celebrates the rise of India, re-emergence of Japan and the return of the US to the region".³³

Furthermore, India's partnerships through regional sub-groupings or minilaterals like the QUAD help to promote greater (and largely unexplored) roles of middle powers such as India, Australia, Japan, France, and the UK, and hold the potential to bridge between the smaller littoral states of the region with the bigger powers like the US.³⁴

By embracing the QUAD, India is able to rise above its middle-power status³⁵ and project a greater influence in the Indo-Pacific, particularly post-pandemic through various vaccines and economic initiatives. Scholars have noted that New Delhi visualises a regional and global order which facilitates a greater role for India in its diffusion and distribution of power.³⁶ As such, its promotion of a "Quad Plus"³⁷ will enable India to build a more concentrated power structure in the Indo-Pacific that could help it gradually break away from its dependency on the Chinese economy.³⁸

It seems then that the value of the QUAD to India far surpasses that of ASEAN. India's aspiration to project its leadership through the QUAD or QUAD-Plus will run contrary to its support for ASEAN as the driving force in the regional architecture.

Although ASEAN has not issued any official statements on the QUAD, the bloc is cautious about QUAD replacing ASEAN centrality in the regional architecture. In addition, ASEAN does not wish to be entangled in a possible power transition taking place³⁹ in the Indo-Pacific region and does not wish for the Southeast Asia region to be securitised. In this aspect, ASEAN and India do not have the same level of ambition when it comes to the securitisation or building of a power structure in the Indo-Pacific region, especially if such a move is to counter the rise of China in the region.

However, the convergence of strategic interests between a multilateral organisation and a minilateral group cannot be ruled out if the QUAD and ASEAN find common ground in shared normative and practical engagements.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

The examination of ASEAN's and India's approaches to the Indo-Pacific shows many similarities which could lead to significant strategic alignment. India's pragmatism, neutrality and open approaches to engagement in the region will allow both sides to advance their strategic partnership, especially in areas of common interests or issues to forge a win-win partnership.

However, there remain differences when it comes to leadership in the Indo-Pacific. The limitations in ASEAN-led mechanisms coupled with the declining unity of ASEAN have resulted in ASEAN centrality appearing obsolete in the face of emerging challenges. Fundamentally, ASEAN will not be able to exert its leadership role in the Indo-Pacific due to the lack of a collective outlook among ASEAN countries toward this construct. As such, it will be tough for India to rely on ASEAN alone to satisfy its ambitions in the Indo-Pacific.

As ASEAN and India work towards a comprehensive strategic partnership after 30 years of relations, ASEAN and India may need to find new options to sustain its strategic alignment, including closer cooperation between ASEAN and the QUAD.

ENDNOTES

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