

ASEAN joins the Indo-Pacific conversation

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After months of deliberation and hesitation, ASEAN finally contributed to the discussion on the evolving Indo-Pacific concept. The *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (AOIP) was officially released at the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok at the end of June 2019.



The much-anticipated document provides an ASEAN narrative of the various versions of the Indo-Pacific concept articulated by the United States, India, Japan and others. This sets the stage for further dialogue on the specifics of Indo-Pacific cooperation in accordance with an ASEAN-centred regional architecture. The AOIP steers clear from [adopting](#) ^[1] the US-driven Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) or approaches conceived by other big powers.

The AOIP envisages ASEAN centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, with ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) providing platforms for dialogue and implementation of this cooperation.

The [document](#) ^[2] also clarifies ASEAN's perception of the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean not as contiguous territorial spaces, but rather as a closely integrated and inter-connected region. Connecting the connectivity initiatives already out there for the regional states with the existing Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 (MPAC) will be one of the top priorities for ASEAN.

While officials emphasise that the document should be viewed as a work in progress, the release of the AOIP shows that ASEAN is willing to acknowledge inevitable changes in the regional security architecture and is determined to continue to shape the geopolitical narrative amid intensifying big-power rivalry in the region.

The AOIP represents the first formal and publicly disclosed document detailing ASEAN's views on the Indo-Pacific concept. The absence of an ASEAN vision was conspicuous given that ASEAN lies in the centre of the Indo-Pacific and other major powers already released their visions for the region.

France unveiled its Indo-Pacific policy in May 2019, followed by the United States with its updated 'Indo-Pacific Strategy Report' coinciding with US Acting Defence Secretary Patrick Shanahan's speech at the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue in June.

ASEAN's cautious approach towards the Indo-Pacific concept was largely due to the ill-defined nature of the idea, which lacks clarity in its scope and process of implementation. While ASEAN still needs to formulate a detailed plan for using its forums in their existing formats to promote Indo-Pacific cooperation, a critical point in the AOIP is the nod to furthering sub-regional cooperation. This is important because the AOIP does not otherwise intend to create new mechanisms or replace existing ones.

The geographic vastness of the Indo-Pacific region brings to light the crucial role that sub-regional groupings can play in realising the AOIP's stated areas of collaboration in the Indo-Pacific (maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development and the economy).

The AOIP considers exploring potential synergies with sub-regional frameworks such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Mekong subregional cooperation. ASEAN must consider the specifics of collaborating with sub-regional groupings as it updates the AOIP going forward.

Changing geopolitical realities are [resulting](#) ^[3] in renewed interest in the Bay of Bengal and BIMSTEC. With access to the Indian Ocean and the Himalayas, BIMSTEC is becoming the theatre of convergence and competition for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India's Act East policy and the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor.

Since BIMSTEC includes two ASEAN member states (Myanmar and Thailand) in its ranks, engaging the sub-regional grouping will better facilitate existing infrastructure projects. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is still lagging behind deadlines — BIMSTEC can make way for closer cooperation in a region where the China-led BRI is rapidly changing the geostrategic landscape.

The United States is also looking to engage in the Bay of Bengal through its new [security cooperation program](#) ^[4], the Bay of Bengal Initiative. The Trump administration sought US\$30 million from the US Congress to finance maritime and border security capacity for Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Maldives.

ASEAN would also do well to make use of existing mechanisms within the Mekong subregional cooperation frameworks at a time when China and Japan are locked in a race to pave their influence in the Mekong.

The China-led Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) platform pushes infrastructure projects in the Mekong while Japan unveiled its recent Tokyo Strategy 2018 for [Mekong–Japan cooperation](#) ^[5]. This runs from 2019–2021 and assists Mekong countries with at least 150 projects. ASEAN should explore synergies with these infrastructure and connectivity initiatives already under way in the Mekong.

In terms of maritime cooperation in the wider Indian Ocean region, IORA is the only region-wide body designed to facilitate regional dialogue at the government-to-government level. ASEAN and IORA could work together in exchanging best practices and experience in regional cooperation. The ASEAN Maritime Forum, with a focus on maritime safety and connectivity, complements IORA's agenda on improving maritime safety and security.

The AOIP is an [initial step](#) ^[6] towards formally incorporating ASEAN centrality in the evolving Indo-Pacific concept. It will give ASEAN a good start in managing strategic competition and driving peace and stability in the region. But ASEAN needs to provide concrete plans regarding the implementation of its vision and expanding on cooperation with existing sub-regional mechanisms.

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An earlier version of this article appeared [here](#) ^[7] on RSIS.

Article from the East Asia Forum: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org>

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[1] adopting:

<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/02/09/regional-consensus-needed-for-a-free-and-open-indo-pacific/>

[2] document: <https://www.asean2019.go.th/en/news/asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific/>

[3] resulting:

<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/11/23/is-bimstec-re-modelling-for-a-bigger-role/>

[4] security cooperation program:

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/world/north-america/2019/06/14/trump-admin-seeks-30m-for-its-bay-of-bengal-security-initiative>

[5] Mekong–Japan cooperation:

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-and-Mekong-nations-to-push-150-Southeast-Asia-projects>

[6] initial step:

<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/02/24/time-for-bolder-steps-from-asean/>

[7] *here:*

<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/the-idea-of-indo-pacific-asean-steps-in/#.XUuhhkb7SUm>