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ASEAN and the Contemporary Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific Region: Agenda for Future Research

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Abstract

In June 2019, ASEAN adopted a document known as the ‘ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.’ The document provided guidelines of how ASEAN will be relevant amid the great power politics in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and how ASEAN will continue its vision of ASEAN centrality in the conduct of international relations in Southeast Asia. This article provides the foundational basis of possible research agendas related to the Indo-Pacific Region and its correlation to the regional norms of ASEAN. It concludes that several questions that have arisen in relation to the Indo-Pacific region and ASEAN includes, but not limited to; (1) what contemporary dynamics have occurred in the Indo-Pacific region? and (2) how is ASEAN still relevant in the context of the Indo-Pacific region?

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, ASEAN, Southeast Asia, Norms, Great Power Politics

1. Introduction

On 23 June 2019, ASEAN implemented the ‘ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.’ The outlook is mostly defined as a guideline, on how ASEAN will conduct its international relations in the region of the Indo-Pacific region. Indo-Pacific consists of geopolitical dynamics in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, which includes the activeness of great powers including the US and China (Bagus, Agastia and Perwita, 2015). Besides that, there have been occurring dynamics in the region, related to emerging powers in South Asia (Pakistan, India), and East Asia (China, Japan, South Korea) (Chacko and Willis, 2018). The geopolitical dynamics have made several countries, including Indonesia, to formulate a foreign policy strategy that can effectively respond to the contemporary dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region. As seen in the context of Indonesian policymakers in Joko Widodo’s first term presidency, he made special reference to this region of Indo-Pacific. Indonesia is perceived located in a strategic location (between the Indian and Pacific Oceans), therefore leading Indonesia to aspire to become a ‘Global Maritime Fulcrum’ (Putra, 2017; Syailendra, 2017).

Besides state actors that continually implement the terminology of the Indo-Pacific region, it is worth noting the current dynamics that have occurred in the region. What makes the Indo-Pacific region strategic is the consideration of SLOC (Sea Lanes of Communication) (Tertia and Perwita, 2018). Indo-Pacific goes from the Middle East to Asian countries, which is in present times, defined as a major geopolitical advantage.

Transportation of oil and gas from the Middle East, for example, will need to go through this area to reach countries like China (known as the largest importer of oil and gas) (Wuthnow, 2019). The dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region has also led the state actors (specific to littoral states of the Indo-Pacific oceans) to focus on regional organizations such as IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association). (Putra, 2017) IORA has acted as a regional cooperation organization among the littoral states of the Indo-Pacific region, to implement cooperative norms in the conduct of international relations in the region. Putting aside its effectiveness, the presence of IORA's relevance indicates that global powers and regional state actors have translated the terminology of Indo-Pacific as a region of concern.

Southeast Asia has been since 1967, integrated through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. ASEAN has been relevant in the 21st dynamics, through the implementation of essential norms including the 'ASEAN Way' and 'ASEAN Centrality' (Putra, 2015; Putra, Darwis and Burhanuddin, 2019). Both these norms can be understood as international relations conduct in Southeast Asia. Each external state (as well as internally among ASEAN states) must cooperate with one another and must appreciate the established regional norms of peace and non-interference. As part of ASEAN's strategy in the region, ASEAN has included a number of global powers such as the US, China, India, Japan, Russia, EU, Canada, and Australia, to be included in the regionally established norms of ASEAN. For example, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation opened its ratification for external state powers, including the countries mentioned previously. Besides that, the establishment of other regional platforms such as ASEAN+3 (ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, China), ASEAN Regional Forum, and East Asian Summit, as tools of ASEAN Centrality.

But in the context of Indo-Pacific, ASEAN has long argued what the proper strategy should be in conducting its international relations in the emerging regional terminology. Indo-Pacific seems to be the center of highlight for many states in the region, considering the South China Sea conflict that resonates as a great power political issue for the claimant and non-claimant states to the South China Sea, power contestations between China and India in the Indian Ocean, and many more study cases. This article aims to evaluate the current position of ASEAN towards the Indo-Pacific Region, with reference to the recently concluded 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.'

2. Theoretical Framework

There is an emerging number of literature that focuses on the contemporary Indo-Pacific region. In general, Robert D. Kaplan's book *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (2011) provided the basis of discourse, related to the emerging geopolitical struggle of the US and China in the region of Indo-Pacific. Kaplan introduced the terminology of the Indo-Pacific region, and how this terminology defines a number of contradicting concerns among great powers, including China's String of Pearls (China's interest and intentions in the Indian Ocean region). The following parts will aim to evaluate the possible theoretical frameworks to understand the 21st-century international relations of the Indo-Pacific region.

In understanding the international relations of the Indo-Pacific region, we can implement to different approaches; (1) offensive realism and (2) geopolitical analysis. In the point of offensive realism, this approach perceives the Indo-Pacific region as a center of great power politics among regional hegemons (Mearsheimer, 2001). This particular approach argues that there is currently a showing of offensive military posturing and foreign policies that are conducted by India and China, with the involvement of the US in several instances. Regional hegemons as stated previously show that the current contestations of powers relate to emerging powers and economies that aim to dominate the region to solidify SLOC. Other littoral states in the Indo-Pacific region are thus forced to follow the flow of power contestations in the Indo-Pacific region.

Furthermore, the second perspective that can be implemented is in the geopolitical level of analysis. With reference to Ratzel in 1940, he pointed out how Germany during the Second World War sought an expansionist agenda in both land and the sea (Guzzini, 2012). The central argument in the perspective of geopolitics is that state actors will tend to implement expansionist agendas for sea and land areas that have the potential to provide economic opportunities for state actors. In the case of the Indo-Pacific region, the expansionist agenda is not apparent and visible. This expansionist agenda can only be visible in the context of the South China Sea, in which China has

sought the expansion of its EEZ based on their defined Nine-Dash Line. Despite facing confrontations with claimants states (Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, and to a small extent, Indonesia), China views the Pacific oceans as a pivotal national interest considering the importance to their grand strategy of 'Belt and Road Initiative' and the securing of the SLOC for the Pacific Oceans region. For the other areas of the Indo-Pacific region, the expansionist agenda is not clearly visible as it is in the form of joint navy exercises, and mass sea-based investments (port facilities) by foreign state actors. Nevertheless, the dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region can be analysed through both lenses as it complements one another.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Great Power Politics in the Indo-Pacific Region?

In understanding the presence of great power politics in the Indo-Pacific region, it is pivotal to perceive the Indo-Pacific region as a major strategic area for major great powers. The region consists of an abundance of resources and has been for centuries connected to different oceans. For some scholars, the Indo-Pacific region has been defined as a volatile security environment (Putra, 2017), due to the existing power political dynamics among major powers of the region. The strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region can be highlighted by the fact that it connects a number of continents including Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, and also consists of strategic chokepoints (Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandab Strait, and Strait of Malacca). Millions of barrels of crude oil and petroleum goes through the Indo-Pacific oceans on a daily basis, with the addition of tons of volumes of commodities that connects between the continents mentioned previously. This fact is critical considering China for example, is a major importer of oil and gas from the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. If such a fact is not sufficient to portray the complexity of the region, considering that the Indian Ocean alone consists of 32 littoral states, with a diversity of economic powers and interests between one country and the other.

Specifically, in the Pacific oceans, the contestation of the South China Sea has made regional hegemonies such as the US and China to engage in unfriendly confrontations in the high seas. The US has long implemented a stance of 'Freedom of Navigation,' in which the claimed Nine-Dash Line is interpreted as the high seas / international waters with no state having sovereignty claims in those seas. Since then, a number of confrontations, both in rhetoric and in practical reality have occurred in the seas. Many scholars have interpreted this phenomenon as the center point of great power contestations between China and the US. The US stance is near permanent in the issue, especially since Hillary Clinton's announcement of the 'US Pivot to Asia' in the ASEAN Regional Forum.

But the geopolitical rivalries have also occurred in the Indian Oceans, especially between China and India. India is arguably one of the emerging powers in global politics. Besides China, India is also a member of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), which is a group of emerging powers that have united to contest the liberal world order. India contains an abundance of natural and human resources, and has the potential to grow becoming a major global hegemon in the region. The contestation between China and India can be defined based on China's grand strategy programs of the 'Belt Road Initiative' and China's 'String of Pearls' (Putra, 2017). The concept of 'String of Pearls' is a geopolitical analysis showing the location of China's heavily influenced and invested countries in the Indo-Pacific region. As it collides with the region of interest of India, India has responded with coerciveness in recent years. The major policy is through an exhibition of military capacity and to show the global military alliances that India has maintained throughout the years.

India's response to the concept of 'String of Pearls' is through the projection of military postures. Since 2002 for example, India has undergone a trilateral naval exercise between Indian, the US, and Japan, to show the links of alliances of India in East Asia. Furthermore, India has also engaged with the UK, and France since 2002, to conduct similar joint military exercises. The reason for this dynamic is the need to secure the Bay of Bengal, as a potential area of contestation between China and India, due to its large coverage in the Indian Ocean.

The above dynamics that has portrayed the contemporary geopolitical dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region opens room for several critical research in the future. Among them; (1) the critical interests of littoral states in the region,

(2) emergence of great power politics in the Indo-Pacific region, (3) portrayal of military capacity to secure SLOC, and (4) how states perceive the terminology of the Indo-Pacific region.

3.2. Relevance of ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific Region?

It is inevitable to conclude that the Indo-Pacific region is currently one of the flashpoints of global power contestations in the 21st century. In the Pacific Oceans, we have witnessed the South China Sea conflict between claimant states in Southeast Asia, and China. Their claims are different, with China's Nine-Dash Line, and Southeast Asian reference over the UNCLOS Exclusive Economic Zone. In the case of the South China Sea dispute, ASEAN has maintained an active conflict management effort in managing the disputes.

Considering the number of ASEAN member states involved in the territorial dispute, ASEAN has for years aimed to conclude a legal instrument known as the 'Code of Conduct.' In comparison to the past agreement, 'Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea,' the conclusion of a 'Code of Conduct' will result in a legally binding agreement between China and the claimant states of Southeast Asia in regards to the actions that are legal and illegal to be conducted in the South China Sea area. ASEAN has thus introduced norms of cooperation and consultation in order to respond to the crisis that has occurred in the Pacific Oceans. ASEAN does not have a choice, considering a number of past ASEAN Summits have been affected due to some states favoring China, and some ASEAN members against. But in the wider area of the Indo-Pacific region, ASEAN has for several past years been passive in responding to the ongoing dynamics. One of the major reasons is due to geographical concerns, in which the dynamics in the Indian Ocean can no longer be included as a priority area for ASEAN. However, in the 21st century, the dynamics that occur in the Indian Ocean must be connected to that in the Indo-Pacific region in general. Considering that intertwinement of the dynamics, it is thus critical for ASEAN to respond to the Indo-Pacific dynamics by introducing new norms that include the terminology of the Indo-Pacific.

The norm of ASEAN centrality relates to how ASEAN will be the center of negotiation and regional frameworks agreed upon to in the conduct of international relations of Southeast Asia and regions near that. In 2019, ASEAN concluded the 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,' which acts a guideline for ASEAN on how to respond to the Indo-Pacific region and all of its contemporary dynamics that have emerged as of late. In face of the regional concept of the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN continues to recall the ASEAN way and the need to establish a system of comprehensive security without establishing a new organization such as those which have been established for other regions in Asia. Instead, ASEAN focuses on placing the ASEAN centrality concept in facing the Indo-Pacific region, by prioritizing several points of cooperation between ASEAN and Indo-Pacific. The cooperation areas include in the field of maritime, SDGs, and economic cooperation.

What is pivotal to understand about ASEAN's Indo-Pacific outlook is that ASEAN now announces that it is concerned with all of the dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region. This is not new, considering that for example, the dynamics in East Asia relating to North Korea, has resulted in the issue to be included in forums of ASEAN, leading to the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asia Summit, which in both regional organizations, engage towards the issue of North Korea. In regards to the outlook, as stated previously, it focuses on norm-setting to apply not only in the context of the Pacific Oceans but also to the Indo-Pacific region in general. This is an opportunity for ASEAN to be involved in the Indo-Pacific dynamics, considering its activeness in half of the Indo-Pacific region, the Pacific Oceans.

ASEAN's involvement in the Indo-Pacific region raises a number of research agendas for the future; (1) how important is the Indo-Pacific region for ASEAN? (2) Is ASEAN a relevant regional organization in responding to the power politics in the Indo-Pacific? And (3) Will the norm-setting agenda that is heavy to the 'ASEAN Way' be relevant to be implemented in the Indo-Pacific region?

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 'ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook' has now acted as a guide for Southeast Asian states to engage in the emerging volatile political environment of the Indo-Pacific. Bodies of literature have majorly focused on

the significance of the Indo-Pacific region and how it contains strategic chokepoints that are in need to be secured by emerging powers. This article thus has outlined a number of research agendas in the near and distant future, in relation to ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific region, which includes the relevance of ASEAN's norm-setting, specific to ASEAN Way to be implemented in the Indo-Pacific, and the issue of emerging geopolitical rivalries among littoral states of the Indo-Pacific region.

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