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Operationalizing the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP): Further Push Still Needed

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Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) commenced the regional bloc's 42nd Summit in Labuan Bajo, Indonesia on 10-11 May 2023 under the chairmanship of Indonesia. Among key agendas discussed and agreed, the discussion of the ASEAN Outlook for the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), inception in 2019, was one of them.

As usual, the ASEAN Chair, Indonesia, released a Chairman's Statement rightly after the Summit. The statement, while released by the ASEAN Chair, had undergone lengthy negotiations and consultations among the regional bloc's member states to reach a consensus.¹ The statement consists of 25 pages and 125 paragraphs.²

The four-year-old AOIP has a section of its own on Page 5 and 6 of the ASEAN Chairman's Statement.³ That section has 4 paragraphs updating on progress of ASEAN's implementation of AOIP. For ASEAN's observers, the repetitive mentions of a particular agenda in the ASEAN Chairman's Statement suggests the importance of such agenda.⁴ In this case, relevant matters related AOIP are among important priorities discussed and agreed by the ASEAN Leaders during the 42nd Summit in Indonesia. It is understandable that AOIP has grown in steam this year because the implementation of AOIP is one of the key 3 pillars of the Indonesia's ASEAN Chairmanship.⁵ The other two pillars are ASEAN Matters and Epicentrum of Growth.⁶

¹ Rodolfo C. Severino. 2006. "Southeast Asia in search of an ASEAN Community: Insights from the former ASEAN Secretary-General". Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

² ASEAN. May 2023. "Chairman's Statement of the 42nd ASEAN Summit Labuan Bajo, Indonesia, 10-11 May 2023". Available at <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-42nd-ASEAN-Summit-1.pdf>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Rodolfo C. Severino. 2006. "Southeast Asia in search of an ASEAN Community: Insights from the former ASEAN Secretary-General". Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia. 3 February 2023. "Press Briefing H.E. Retno L. P. Marsudi Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat". Available at https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/4397/siaran_pers/press-briefing-he-retno-l-p-marsudi-minister-for-foreign-affairs-of-the-republic-of-indonesia-asean-foreign-ministers-retreat

⁶ Ibid.

This analysis begins by providing some contexts of regional discourses related to AOIP. Relying on principally on relevant primary sources, particularly ASEAN's official documents, the paper will deliberate progress of the ASEAN's efforts in operationalizing AOIP since its adoption in 2019 until the recent 42nd ASEAN Summit in May 2023. Along with discussing these developments, it also attempts to examine key reasons why the extent of progress was made.

Background of AOIP

On 23 June 2019, ASEAN leaders unanimously adopted the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) during the 34th Summit on 23 June 2019 in Bangkok, Thailand. At that time, the ASEAN Chair's Statement has 14 pages and 57 paragraphs. AOIP appears on the last page and paragraph 56 which states:

*We adopted the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific which will help guide ASEAN's engagement and cooperation in the wider Indo-Pacific region. We reaffirmed ASEAN centrality, inclusiveness, complementarities, a rules-based order anchored upon international law, and commitment to advancing economic engagement in the region as the main principles of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. In this regard, ASEAN-led mechanisms can serve as platforms for dialogue and implementation of Indo-Pacific cooperation. We encouraged external partners to support and undertake cooperation with ASEAN on the key areas outlined in the Outlook as their contribution to maintaining peace, freedom and prosperity in the region.*⁷

AOIP was adopted in context of proliferations of Indo-Pacific strategies and power contestations by ASEAN's external partners of which some of them are deemed to be security-focused, and confrontational.⁸ As such, some ASEAN countries, particularly Indonesia, were concerned with the fast-evolving security landscapes in the "Asia Pacific and Indian Oceans regions".⁹ Therefore, ASEAN officially undertook rounds of discussions and negotiations among themselves for about one year and a half until a consensus on AOIP could be reached and adopted in 2019.¹⁰ Indonesia was credited by ASEAN members for "taking the lead...in finalising the Outlook which embodies ASEAN unity, centrality and leadership in the evolving regional architecture."¹¹

⁷ ASEAN. June 2019. "Chairman's Statement of the 34th ASEAN Summit Bangkok, 23 June 2019, Advancing Partnership for Sustainability". Available at <https://asean.org/speechandstatement/chairmans-statement-of-the-34th-aseansummit/#:~:text=ASEAN%20shall%20develop%20friendly%20relations,and%20international%20organisations%20and%20institutions>.

⁸ Dewi Forutna Anwar. "Indonesia and the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific". In Kai He and Mingjiang Li (Eds), *International Affairs on Unpacking the strategic dynamics of the Indo-Pacific*, no. 96 (2020):111-129. Oxford University Press.

⁹ Ibid.

ASEAN. June 2019. "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific". Available at https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf

¹⁰ Evan Laksmana. 19 September 2019. "Flawed Assumptions: Why the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific is Defective". Asia Global. Available at <https://www.asiaglobalonline.hku.hk/flawed-assumptions-why-the-asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific-is-defective>

¹¹ ASEAN. June 2019. "Chairman's Statement of the 34th ASEAN Summit Bangkok, 23 June 2019, Advancing Partnership for Sustainability". Available at <https://asean.org/speechandstatement/chairmans-statement-of-the-34th-aseansummit/#:~:text=ASEAN%20shall%20develop%20friendly%20relations,and%20international%20organisations%20and%20institutions>.

In essence, AOIP is a short document. It has 5 pages and 23 paragraphs outlining visions, key objectives and areas of cooperation set out by ASEAN.¹²

ASEAN envisioned AOIP to have the following elements including (1) a perspective of viewing the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, not as contiguous territorial spaces but as a closely integrated and interconnected region, with ASEAN playing a central and strategic role; (2) An Indo-Pacific region of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry; (3) An Indo-Pacific region of development and prosperity for all; and 4/ The importance of the maritime domain and perspective in the evolving regional architecture.¹³

AOIP has the following key objectives: (1) offering an outlook to guide cooperation in the region; (2) helping to promote an enabling environment for peace, stability and prosperity in the region in addressing common challenges, upholding the rules-based regional architecture, and promoting closer economic cooperation, and thus strengthen confidence and trust; (3) enhancing ASEAN's Community building process and further strengthening the existing ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the EAS; and (4) implementing existing and exploring other ASEAN priority areas of cooperation.¹⁴

AOIP has 4 areas of cooperation. They are: (1) Maritime Cooperation, (2) Connectivity, (3) UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030, and (4) Economic and Other Possible Areas of Cooperation. Each area of cooperation comprises of items of activities that reflect pressing traditional and non-traditional security challenges that ASEAN has faced and hoped to shape regional discussions towards cooperation on finding ways to respond to those issues, rather than to confront with one another. The fact that in all of the 4 areas of cooperation of AOIP are huge in scope, and the fourth point even has a loose end suggests that ASEAN's intention to welcome all cooperation opportunities on almost all mutually concerned matters with all external partners.¹⁵

The content of AOIP on the state of regional affairs has met with mixed reactions. On the one hand, there are some scholars that view AOIP in a less positive light. They pointed out that AOIP is based on "flawed assumptions" that ASEAN's existing mechanisms are sufficient to manage effectively regional affairs, some of which are beyond ASEAN's control.¹⁶ Parts of AOIP are "grossly overoptimistic" that need rethinking given the regional bloc's limitation in having "a clear, strategic direction to help shape member states' respective economic and security beyond Southeast Asia".¹⁷ Some scholars suggest that "AOIP is in many ways aspects the same wine in a newly packaged bottle"¹⁸ and that it "will have little impact on the strategic outlooks of the major

¹² ASEAN. June 2019. "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific". Available at https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Evan Laksmana. 19 September 2019. "Flawed Assumptions: Why the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific is Defective". Asia Global. Available at <https://www.asiaglobalonline.hku.hk/flawed-assumptions-why-the-asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific-is-defective>

¹⁷ Pou Sothirak. 20 July 2019. "Re-thinking 'Asean Outlook on Indo-Pacific'". Bangkok Post. Available at <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1715795/re-thinking-asean-outlook-on-indo-pacific>

¹⁸ Hoang Thi Ha. 25 June 2019. "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific: Old Wine in New Bottle?". *Perspective*. ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute. Available at https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_51.pdf

powers and the intensifying US-China strategic competition”.¹⁹ Some views even go as far by suggesting that “AOIP was irrelevant in many respects...It failed to salvage ASEAN cohesiveness and centrality because it neither addressed nor managed the divergent national views and strategies of the ASEAN member states”.²⁰

On the other hand, there are also considerable opinions that see the adoption of AOIP in a more favourable lens. Some experts state that “AOIP seeks to re-assert ASEAN centrality amidst competing narratives of the major powers regarding the emerging Indo-Pacific architecture”²¹ and provides a common script for ASEAN member states in response to external pressures to take a stand on “Indo-Pacific”.²² Some call AOIP as “act of diplomatic and political assertion by ASEAN. ASEAN is telling the world that ASEAN has its own way of developing the Indo-Pacific idea”.²³ They also state that criticisms directed to AOIP fail to appreciate how ASEAN has been functioning since its inception, noting “ASEAN’s main roles in regional security have been in norm-setting and confidence-building, rather than in exercising hard power or conflict-resolution”.²⁴ The views also add that “ASEAN is bound to disappoint those who would like to see it act like a great power in a classical concert of powers. This is not what ASEAN is nor what it will ever be”.²⁵

Progress of AOIP

The road to mainstream and operationalize AOIP has been slow and at time not smooth. However, after four years since its adoption, AOIP has gradually moved forward to become a normative reference point for ASEAN. AOIP has also from time to time gained official support from all of regional bloc’s dialogue partners²⁶ although there have been differences in the extent of such support. Like any new initiatives, particularly those driven by ASEAN, the progress of AOIP has moved in a limited pace given continued discussions are required first within ASEAN members themselves and later ASEAN’s external partners to increase commonalities and reduce gaps of differences of understanding.

Granted, for the most parts of the past four years, Covid-19 has dominated most of the regional discussions that have hindered the extent of operationalizing AOIP. However, the global pandemic is not the only key reason.

Continued different views of ASEAN members remain on the emergent discourse of “Indo-Pacific”. Some scholars posit that “ASEAN member states have yet to reach a coherent view on

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Renato Cruz De Castro. “ASEAN in search of a common strategy in the Indo-Pacific. In Brendon J. Cannon and Kei Hakata (Eds), *Indo-Pacific Strategies: Navigating Geopolitics at the dawn of a New Age*, (2021): 139-156. Routledge.

²¹ Hoang Thi Ha. 25 June 2019. “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific: Old Wine in New Bottle?”. *Perspective*. ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute. Available at https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_51.pdf

²² Ibid.

²³ Amitav Acharya. 2019. “Why ASEAN’s Indo-Pacific outlook matters”. East Asia Forum. Available at <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/08/11/why-aseans-indo-pacific-outlook-matters/>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ ASEAN currently has 11 Dialogue Partners namely, Australia, Canada, China, European Union, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, United Kingdom and United States.

Indo-Pacific”²⁷ and they “remain ambivalent about the Indo-Pacific to different degrees due to the concept’s malleability and external pressures from China and Russia”.²⁸ Even within ASEAN, the approaches taken by ASEAN members toward discussions on Indo-Pacific. Some adopt “ASEAN-led approach” while some opt for “balance-of-power anchor”.²⁹ Meanwhile, despite adopting AOIP since 2019, some ASEAN members remain silent and prefer to use “Asia Pacific” or other nuanced terms in regional discussions.³⁰ To reflect these points, for example, in the ASEAN Regional Forum³¹ Annual Security Outlook 2022, only Myanmar, Philippines and Vietnam explicitly uses “Indo-Pacific”.³² Other ASEAN members including Brunei, Cambodia, Singapore and Thailand continue to mention “Asia-Pacific”.³³ Malaysia uses “Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean Regions”.³⁴ Indonesia does not mention any of the aforementioned terms.³⁵

Five months after the adoption of AOIP, the 35th ASEAN Summit took place on 3 November 2019 in Bangkok/Nonthaburi. The post-summit ASEAN Chairman’s Statement is 17-page long and has 52 paragraphs. The mild and general mention of AOIP is on page 16 and paragraph 49 of which ASEAN called for “external partners to work with ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific”.³⁶ This trend seems to suggest at that time, more internal discussions were needed among ASEAN.

Efforts to mainstream AOIP gained some slow steam when Vietnam was the ASEAN Chair in 2020. In the Chairman’s Statements of the 36th ASEAN Summit on 20 June 2020 and the 37th ASEAN Summit on 12 November 2020, AOIP has a section of its own on page 12 and paragraph 36 in a 27-page and 66-paragraph statement of the former,³⁷ and on page 26 and paragraph 82 in a 28-page and 88-paragraph statement of the latter.³⁸ The statements both reaffirmed the importance

²⁷ Hoang Thi Ha. 20 April 2021. “ASEAN Navigates between Indo-Pacific Polemics and Potentials”. *Perspective*. ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute. Available at <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-49-asean-navigates-between-indo-pacific-polemics-and-potentials-by-hoang-thi-ha/>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Views expressed in this forum is significant because the ASEAN Regional Forum, despite its imperfectness, is the only ASEAN-led inclusive forum discussing security matters, with the current participants from 26 countries including all ASEAN members and the regional bloc’s external partners.

For more details, see ASEAN Regional Forum. 2023. “About ASEAN Regional Forum”. Available at <https://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/about-arf/>

³² ASEAN Regional Forum. 2022. “ASEAN Regional Forum Annual Security Outlook 2022”. Available at <https://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/librarycat/arf-annual-security-outlook-2022/>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ ASEAN. November 2019. “Chairman’s Statement of the 35th ASEAN Summit Bangkok/Nonthaburi, 3 November 2019”. Available at <https://asean.org/speechandstatement/chairmans-statement-of-the-35th-asean-summit/#:~:text=ASEAN%20shall%20develop%20friendly%20relations.and%20international%20organisations%20and%20institutions.>

³⁷ ASEAN. June 2020. “Chairman’s Statement of the 36th ASEAN Summit 26 June 2020”. Available at <https://asean.org/chairmans-statement-of-the-36th-asean-summit-26-june-2020-cohesive-and-responsive-asean/#:~:text=Under%20the%20theme%20of%20Cohesive,well%20as%20in%20addressing%20the>

³⁸ ASEAN. November 2020. “Chairman’s Statement of the 37th ASEAN Summit 12 November 2020”. Available at <https://asean.org/chairmans-statement-of-the-37th-asean-summit/#:~:text=We%20were%20gratified%20by%20the.better%20respond%20to%20changing%20circumstances.>

of AOIP “as a guide for ASEAN’s engagement in the wider Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Regions”.³⁹ These slight mentions with no new initiatives to substantiate the AOIP are understandable given ASEAN members, like the rest of the world, were overwhelmingly occupied with dealing with Covid-19 pandemic whose impacts were immense for many in Southeast Asia.⁴⁰ For example, to reflect how important ASEAN attached in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, in the ASEAN Chairman’s Statements of the 36th and 37th Summits, Covid-19 totally was mentioned in a considerable number of 97 times.⁴¹

During Brunei’s ASEAN Chairmanship in 2021, physical meetings were difficult because at that time, Covid-19 was still at its height, particularly in Southeast Asia.⁴² In this context, ASEAN held its 38th and 39th back-to-back on 26 October 2021 via videoconference.⁴³ With the regional bloc’s primary preoccupation with Covid-19, ASEAN at the top level once again continued the rather slow momentum of transforming AOIP in reality although there were more mentions of AOIP in the ASEAN Chairman’s Statement of the 38th and 39th Summits, 6 times, more than the mentions made by each previous Chairman’s Statement since AOIP was adopted.⁴⁴

When Cambodia was the ASEAN Chair in 2022, there was an increasing momentum in mainstreaming AOIP. Covid-19 began to subside with growing rate of vaccination in Southeast Asia.⁴⁵ Such an atmosphere paved the way for growing returns of physical meetings in ASEAN. However, for health precaution purposes given continued Covid-19 situations,⁴⁶ Cambodia hosted in-person the 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits back-to-back on 11 November 2022 in Phnom Penh,

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ United Nations. July 2020. “Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on South-East Asia”. Available at <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/2020-07/SG-Policy-brief-COVID-19-and-South-East-Asia-30-July-2020.pdf>

Peter J. Morgan & Long Q. Trinh. March 2021. “Impacts of COVID-19 on Households in ASEAN Countries and Their Implications for Human Capital Development”. *Asian Development Bank Institute Working Paper*. Available at <https://www.adb.org/publications/impacts-covid-19-households-asean-countries>

⁴¹ The ASEAN Chairman’s Statement of the 36th ASEAN Summit mentions Covid-19 35 times, while the Statement of the 37th ASEAN Summit mentions Covid-19 62 times.

ASEAN. June 2020. “Chairman’s Statement of the 36th ASEAN Summit 26 June 2020”. Available at <https://asean.org/chairmans-statement-of-the-36th-asean-summit-26-june-2020-cohesive-and-responsive-asean/#:~:text=Under%20the%20theme%20of%20Cohesive,well%20as%20in%20addressing%20the>

ASEAN. November 2020. “Chairman’s Statement of the 37th ASEAN Summit 12 November 2020”. Available at <https://asean.org/chairmans-statement-of-the-37th-asean-summit/#:~:text=We%20were%20gratified%20by%20the,better%20respond%20to%20changing%20circumstances>

⁴² ASEAN Biodiasopra Virtual Center. 11 October 2021. “COVID-19 Situational Report in the ASEAN Region”. Available at https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/COVID-19_Situational-Report_ASEAN-BioDiaspora-Regional-Virtual-Center_11Oct2021.pdf

⁴³ ASEAN. October 2021. “Chairman’s Statement of the 38th and 39th ASEAN Summits 26 October 2021”. Available at <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-38th-and-39th-ASEAN-Summits-26-Oct....pdf>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ ASEAN Biodiasopra Virtual Center. 8 April 2022. “COVID-19 Situational Report in the ASEAN Region”. Available at https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/COVID-19_Situational-Report_ASEAN-BioDiaspora-Regional-Virtual-Center_08Apr2022.pdf

⁴⁶ Ibid.

instead of two separated summits. Released shortly post-summit, the Chairman’s Statement has 33 pages and 105 paragraphs.⁴⁷

AOIP continues to have its own section on page 30-31 and paragraph 99. AOIP is mentioned 7 times.⁴⁸ Besides stating the usual of affirming the importance of AOIP, the ASEAN Chairman’s Statement makes known of new progress to implement AOIP. It states that “we adopted the *ASEAN Leaders’ Declaration on Mainstreaming Four Priority Areas of the AOIP within ASEAN-led Mechanisms*, and we noted the Concept Note on ASEAN Roadmap for Promoting ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific”.⁴⁹ The ASEAN Leaders’ Declaration on Mainstreaming Four Priority Areas of the AOIP is available in the public domain while the Concept Note on ASEAN Roadmap for AOIP is not. This suggests the latter is still in negotiating stage with more consultations are needed among ASEAN and its external partners.

In the ASEAN Leaders’ Declaration on AOIP adopted on 11 November 2022, in addition to affirming and expanding key ASEAN principles as noted in AOIP, the document also makes two important points that provide essential basis for ASEAN to start implementing AOIP.

First, ASEAN agrees that “projects and activities initiated by ASEAN or jointly initiated by ASEAN and an external partner(s), including those with open and inclusive participation of interested parties in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, and approved by ASEAN, could be considered as AOIP-implementing projects”.⁵⁰ Second, ASEAN leaders task the ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) – the ASEAN Foreign Ministers “to oversee the overall implementation of this Declaration... and to explore developing an ASEAN roadmap for promoting AOIP, which will provide a framework for external parties to collaborate on concrete projects/activities under the AOIP”.⁵¹

Interestingly, there was no mention of AOIP in the Joint Statements by the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM)-Plus in November 2019 and December 2020.⁵² ADMM-Plus is an important regional platform to discuss regional security matters joined by the Defence Ministers of ASEAN and important partners such as Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Russia, the US.⁵³ It was not coincidental that AOIP was not mentioned in the ADMM-Plus Joint Statements at the early years of its adoption. It is a deliberate attempt to signal that ASEAN’s external partners, or at least some of them, might need more discussions with ASEAN

⁴⁷ ASEAN. November 2022. “Chairman’s Statement of the 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits 11 November 2022”. Available at <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/01-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-40th-and-41st-ASEAN-Summits-rev.pdf>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ ASEAN. 11 November 2022. “ASEAN Leaders’ Declaration on Mainstreaming Four Priority Areas of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific within ASEAN-led Mechanisms”. Available at <https://asean.org/asean-leaders-declaration-on-mainstreaming-four-priority-areas-of-the-asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific-within-asean-led-mechanisms/>

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² ASEAN. 18 November 2019. “Joint Statement by the ADMM-Plus Defence Ministers on Advancing Partnership for Sustainable Security”. Available at https://admm.asean.org/dmdocuments/2019_Nov_6th%20ADMM-Plus_Bangkok,%2018%20November%202019_1.%20JS%20of%20the%206th%20ADMM-Plus.pdf

⁵³ ADMM. 10 January 2023. “About the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus”. Available at <https://admm.asean.org/index.php/about-admm/about-admm-plus.html>

to get clearer picture of what AOIP is and what it is not. ADMM-Plus only mentioned AOIP in its joint statements on 16 June 2021 and 23 November 2022 respectively.⁵⁴ This shift suggests ASEAN is able to convince external partners to at least diplomatically accept the existence of AOIP as an important guiding document in working with the regional bloc.

Many ASEAN's dialogue partners has registered official support for AOIP during the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference on 3-4 August 2022 in Phnom Penh.⁵⁵ They are Australia, India, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea.⁵⁶ Other dialogue partners such as the US, China, the UK, Canada, the EU and Russia have one way or another also welcomed AOIP.⁵⁷ Among all the ASEAN dialogue partners, Japan has stood in the forefront to explicitly support ASEAN in implementing AOIP. As of November 2022, Japan partially or fully funded 22 projects ranging from cooperation on personnel training, public health, disaster management, to enhancing logistic network and cyber security capacity building which are in line of the four key priority areas of AOIP.⁵⁸

Followed the progress made last year, ASEAN under Indonesia's Chairmanship this year has put more emphasis on operationalizing AOIP. According the Chairman's Statement of the 42nd ASEAN Summit in May 2023, AOIP was mentioned 8 times. There are also three important elements made in the Chairman's Statement regarding AOIP. First, ASEAN will convene "the ASEAN-Indo-Pacific Forum: Implementation of AOIP this year that will focus on creative

⁵⁴ ASEAN. 16 June 2021. "Bandar Seri Begawan Declaration by the ADMM-Plus in Commemoration of the 15th Anniversary of the ADMM on Promoting a Future-Ready, Peaceful and Prosperous ASEAN". Available at https://admm.asean.org/dmdocuments/2021_Jun_8th%20ADMM-Plus_16%20June%202021.%20VC_1.%20Special%20Declaration.pdf

ASEAN. 23 November 2022. "Joint Declaration by the ADMM-Plus Defence Ministers on Defence Cooperation to Strengthen Solidarity for a Harmonized Security". Available at https://admm.asean.org/dmdocuments/2022_Jun_16th%20ADMM_Phnom%20Penh_22%20June%202022_1.%20Joint%20Declaration.pdf

⁵⁵ ASEAN. 11 August 2022. "Chairman's Statement on the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) 10+1 Sessions with the Dialogue Partners and Trilateral Meeting 3-4 August 2022". Available at <https://asean.org/chairmans-statement-the-asean-post-ministerial-conference-pmc-101-sessions-with-the-dialogue-partners-and-trilateral-meetings/>

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ US Department of State. 4 August 2021. "U.S. Support for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific". Available at <https://www.state.gov/u-s-support-for-the-asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific/#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20is%20committed,security%20in%20the%20Indo%2DPacific.&text=More%20than%20%243.5%20trillion%20in,livelihoods%20for%20millions%20of%20people.>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 4 August 2022. "Position Paper of the People's Republic of China on Supporting ASEAN Centrality in the Evolving Regional Architecture". Available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202208/t20220804_10734029.html

ASEAN. August 2022. "Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-United Kingdom Dialogue Partnership (2022-2026)". Available at <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/FINAL-ASEAN-UK-POA-2022-2026.pdf>

Shofi Ayudiana. 18 February 2023. "Will align efforts with ASEAN outlook in Indo-Pacific: Canada". *Antara*. Available at <https://en.antaranews.com/news/273123/will-align-efforts-with-asean-outlook-in-indo-pacific-canada>

Delegation of the European Union to Malaysia. 24 February 2023. "ASEAN: 30th Joint Cooperation Committee Meeting with the European Union convenes in Jakarta". Available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/asean-30th-joint-cooperation-committee-meeting-european-union-convenes-jakarta_en?s=170

ASEAN. 28 October 2021. "Joint Statement of the 4th ASEAN-Russia Summit". Available at <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/82.-Joint-Statement-of-the-4th-ASEAN-Russia-Summit-Final.pdf>

⁵⁸ Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund. 1 November 2022. "Progress Report on Japan's Cooperation for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)". Available at <https://jaif.asean.org/whats-new/progress-report-on-japans-cooperation-for-the-asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific-aoip/>

economy, infrastructure, business and investment and the role of youth on digital development for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)".⁵⁹ Second, ASEAN will "establish a Secretariat-to-Secretariat cooperation between ASEAN- the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) and the ASEAN-the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)"⁶⁰ and welcome the Chairs of PIF and IORA as the Guests of the ASEAN Chair to the upcoming 18th East Asia Summit on 7 September 2023.⁶¹ Third, ADMM is developing the "Concept Note on the Implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific from a Defence Perspective".⁶² While details remain to be seen to implement these important points, it is undeniable with these developments, there is a growing momentum to operationalize AOIP.

Conclusion

Since its adoption in 2019, the journey to operationalize AOIP has been slow and tumultuous, but it has progressed forward for the past two years. The road ahead will face many stumbling blocks, particularly how ASEAN can turn aspirations stipulated in the AOIP into concrete actions, how ASEAN internally and externally can minimize different and often contradictory interpretations of AOIP by the regional bloc's own members and external partners, and how ASEAN can consistently maintain current momentums to operationalize AOIP as time goes by in years to come. These questions represent litmus tests for ASEAN and its continued relevance in the fast-changing security landscapes in Southeast Asia and beyond. It is important that ASEAN members possess a far-sighted strategic vision in contemplating all scenarios that are happening and will imminently happen regarding the ongoing regional and global security megatrends. In this context, ASEAN would enhance its standing and relevance if the regional bloc manages to minimize internal differences, address major institutional constraints, and realistically exercise its agency in practical, consistent as well as clear operationalizations of ASEAN's *agreed* mechanisms such as AOIP. These will be daunting but essential tasks for ASEAN.

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⁵⁹ ASEAN. May 2023. "Chairman's Statement of the 42nd ASEAN Summit Labuan Bajo, Indonesia, 10-11 May 2023". Available at <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-42nd-ASEAN-Summit-1.pdf>

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

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