

FROM INDO-PACIFIC CENTRALITY TO STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: ASEAN-US PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper employs qualitative analysis to answer the main contentions of: (1) how unilateralism affects Indo-Pacific, and what ASEAN-US role can be explored; and (2) does ASEAN-US matter and how it could actively find convergences in navigating forward in the rules-based region. Indo-Pacific is indeed a versatile region with vast geoeconomics and geopolitical advantages and potentials, with ASEAN at its centre. Strategic engagement of countries whether to bandwagon or balance major power's rivalries are pretty much a pertinent deliberation for the last and next decades to come as the global shifting is now moving towards the Indo-Pacific region. The author suggests that looking west and being concerned the east or the other way around can be a sufficient strategy in constructing ASEAN-US engagement amid the rising unilateral groupings and concerns against the "crippled" ASEAN centrality since AUKUS and the recent developments in the region.

Abstrak

Artikel ini menggunakan analisis kualitatif untuk membahas perdebatan mengenai: (1) bagaimana unilateralisme mempengaruhi Indo-Pasifik, dan peran ASEAN-AS apa saja yang dapat dieksplorasi; (2) bagaimana ASEAN-AS itu penting dan terus aktif mencari konvergensi dalam navigasi di kawasan yang rules-based. Indo-Pasifik adalah kawasan dengan potensi geoekonomi dan memiliki keuntungan geopolitik yang besar, dengan ASEAN berada sebagai aktor sentral. Partisipasi strategis negara-negara untuk bandwagon atau menyeimbangkan rivalitas para kekuatan besar menjadi deliberasi yang terus berkembang dalam dekade belakangan ketika dinamika global berpindah ke Indo-Pasifik. Penulis berpendapat bahwa "melihat ke barat" dan "memperhatikan ke timur" atau sebaliknya dapat menjadi strategi yang cukup untuk mengkonstruksi pendekatan ASEAN-AS ditengah meningkatnya unilateralisme dan keprihatinan terhadap sentralitas ASEAN yang rusak akibat AUKUS dan perkembangan regional lainnya.

INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region is the most contentious region ever since the United States-China rivalries started to grow, which made the global attention to whether

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as a key player, is able to maintain their centrality. This eventually determines whether ASEAN is able to gain larger autonomy especially how the future Indo-Pacific (IP) order will evolve: whether its going to be Washington-led or Beijing-led and event ASEAN-led (Nye, 2020). These geopolitical rivalries depends on three main elements: multilateral institutions, regimes that govern the order, and military alliances that derived from major powers' competition (Basu, 2020). The deliberation of power in IP is similar to what the Cold War has as a result of major powers pertinent actions in developing their own approach to find synergy in IP and pushing their own power-based state of play and how their alliance building implicates it further (Denisov et al., 2021).

IP regional complexity is also substantiated by ASEAN's interest in achieving regional integration, in which that made China also came with their own BRI that has always been classified as their own "carrot or stick" initiative. This made ASEAN needs to respond swiftly to preserving their own open regionalism against the outstanding Chinese influence within development projects (Jose, 2021). It then will conclude on three thesis: (1) whether that Beijing's regional infrastructure projects are a sustainable geopolitical tool; (2) the process tracing of Chinese redefinition of globalization and US-led order perception; and (3) how bilateral relation with US would made Beijing revisit their entry strategy in IP (Hartono, 2021). From there, the paper emphasizes around the quest of IP key regional players like ASEAN, US, Indonesia, and China when it comes to their interaction on minilateral platforms and engagement in the self-determination process.

There are many grey areas within the discourse, either for the intra-regional players to come into the play and make it up, or the external players

who are doing the work instead, which then means that key players like ASEAN (and Indonesia) loses their ambition to achieve strategic autonomy that they are wishing so long. In conjunction with this, previous studies argued several similar notions, where major powers' stance like the US is attempting to designate IP as their foreign policy cornerstone that was manifested in the "US Pivot to Asia" (Davidson, 2014). While other big players like China deliberate their own position with IP being in a more geoeconomic context, similar to their Russian allies (Denisov et al., 2021). Aside from the US and Chinese posture on IP, Indonesia put the issue as part of their "concentric circle" foreign policy, where it is harmonized with the geostrategic aspect of Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF). To conclude, all strategies formed centered around one epicentrum: the multiple territorial disputes in East Asia is indeed an attentive issue within the East Asian regional security architecture. It is also complemented by the issue of Beijing's counter-offensive against US allies like Japan and South Korea.

The designation of these strategies does matter since it will be an important benchmark to measure rebalancing or band wagoning. Then we can measure ASEAN strategic autonomy in the IP to achieve centrality while leveraging from the existence of Asian Century concept. Although the Asian Century concept is pretty much defined in a more economic deliberation rather than a political one, it is important to seize the promising prospects of the Asian Century is indeed aligned with the shifting of global attention and how Asian countries are more plausible in catalyzing global prosperity which put them into the same level of European Union that is deemed the major regional economic powerhouse previously (Nag, 2015). The term Asian Century in this regard isn't necessarily narrowed to the ASEAN, East Asia, and Indian Ocean Region only, where it also extends to the Pacific region (South Pacific, in particular the PIF-MSG) (Rodd, 2020). This paper will be discussed on 4 sections which are: Minilateralism in Indo-Pacific and its relation to ASEAN-US relation; ASEAN-US prospects towards IP strategic

autonomy process; The trilateral engagement of US, China, and Indonesia in the IP regional geopolitics; and its way forward to construct a more fruitful and ASEAN-led strategic autonomy and how the US should play the role in a more explorative nature. The ASEAN-US engagement on IP was argued by a previous study to have one thing in common with ASEAN's vision, which is to sustain a constructive and not a destructive engagement that will exacerbate the regional conflicts and derail ASEAN-led mechanism into the darkness of regional rivalries (Muni, 2013). ASEAN-US relation will be constructed in a more ASEAN-centric context like this paper as to be coherent with the regional dynamics that emphasize ASEAN centrality and how Southeast Asian countries seize their momentum when the global community is paying attention to the power politics and major power interventions against their pragmatism (D. F. Anwar, 2020; Basu, 2020; Davidson, 2014).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Regional Security Complex

This theory employs that international security is indeed relevant to be framed and deliberated from regional perspectives. The theory is driven by three main explanatory variables such are: regional structure, power roles, and power orientation that defines the status quo, cooperation, and long-term design of the dimensional aspects of regional security (Frazier & Stewart-ingersoll, 2010). This theory is based on Buzan's conception that the enmity pattern is dependent on the involvement of external players that falls under the Buzan's power classification (Buzan & Waever, 2003). In which it was also discussed further on how the complex regional structure can be perceived from four main level of analysis: (1) geographical issues; (2) intra-regional state relations; (3) anarchic structure of international system; and (4) the polarity, enmity, and amity distributional patterns and how it is relevant as an indicator in understanding security complex (Buzan & Waever, 2003; Pratama, 2013).

Eventually the framework outlined that a regional security order will then be divided into hegemonic

security, power restraining power, concert system, security community, and unstructured order (Frazier & Stewart-ingersoll, 2010; Buzan & Waever, 2003). Starting from the power restraining power, it is largely discussed as the state's desire to pursue security establishment through balanced and stable distribution of power (Morgan, 1997). The next would be how a concert system will increase bandwagon among mutual countries and how they should cooperatively address the threats (Mearsheimer, 1990). While the last, the unstructured order means that the states within the region do not acquire such capacity for power projections, and it is geographically separated; it made the region to be lacking consistent means of managing security (Buzan & Waever, 2003).

RESEARCH METHOD

This paper uses qualitative research method using secondary source of information and data from literatures, past research, and other relevant credible source. The qualitative research method process is starting from the determination of research question coverage, data

collection, interpreting the data qualitatively, and concluding the research (Brymann, 2012). The research question for this paper covers on how ASEAN-US dynamics impact the ASEAN's quest to achieve their strategic autonomy in managing the IP geopolitics.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Introduction of the ASEAN-US Cooperation: The South China Sea as the Starter?

The ASEAN and US are both an important player with both parties converged on many security, economic, development, and people-to-people aspects. US-ASEAN relation started since it was established in 1977 as an official dialogue partner and it continues to grow until in 2008 the US acceded to the important Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). The signing of US to the TAC implied that Washington must respect the scope and provisions within the treaty. The US signed the accession instrument in 2009 by also reserving Article 10 of TAC that implies:

“... in any manner or form participate in any activity which shall constitute a threat to the political and economic stability, sovereignty, or territorial

integrity of another High Contracting Party” (Treaty of Amity and Cooperation)

At the same time, their accession insisted that the US is willing to respect and enforce Washington’s commitment to ASEAN (Crook, 2009). Although during the process the US reserved the Article 10 on the accession process, a legal study argued that it simply will not pose any legal constraint to US’ capacity in demonstrative use of force related. This is related to relevant security arrangements that may be conducted with one of the AMS or other parties within the TAC that includes Australia (a prime US ally in IP) (Seah, 2012). Washington pursue concrete cooperation projects with ASEAN through developmental platforms like US AID, bilateral trade pacts between each AMS and the US, Trade and Investment Framework; On thematic issues like economic integration, maritime security and cooperation, women and gender equality, and transnational issues while at the same time implementing projects under the 4 pillars of ASEAN-US Connect that was established in 2016: Business to Business (B2B),

Innovation, Energy, and Policy connect (US Mission to ASEAN, n.d.). Deeper on the geopolitical issues and inter-regional cooperation, the ASEAN and US tend to have sometimes a warm and a bit colder relation on some issues.

For instance, on the South China Sea the ASEAN continuously urges all parties to refrain from the use of aggressive threats while promoting the importance of pacifist dispute settlement. However, it means the other way around for Washington, where standing back against Beijing is not an appropriate short-term action since Beijing has repeatedly disrespected the Declaration of Conduct on the South China Sea that has been spearheaded by ASEAN before back in Cambodia in 2002. The prolonged and complex dispute over the South China Sea region is the main driver of the US’ continuous presence, especially during 2020-2021 where the issue intensified while the ongoing but stuck negotiation of the ASEAN Code of Conduct on the South China Sea couldn’t deliver its expected result to draw every party under a unified South China Sea governance constructed by ASEAN. The author argues that the US-China

relation on the South China Sea is unique, where both parties demonstrated tangible use of military force, yet still maintains bilateral dialogue amid the numerous exchanges of heated arguments within many bilateral meetings. This sentiment is backed by the argument that both Beijing and Washington are still able to sustain their self-restraint from a large catastrophe that led to open conflict because both parties have a larger stake beyond IP context. Previous research argued that both countries aspire for a more strategic engagement on wider global governance issues although both have the same stance of using a “domestic politics-oriented approach” within the construct of their IP foreign policy activism (Regilme, 2018).

Furthermore on “self-restraint” narrative, it is understood that China has five stages of its foreign policy restructurization that the author considers as a pretext form them when engaging in IP. It begins with China seeking for convergence in developing their dispute settlement approach by nurturing warm relations, soft power, and low profile ambition on their foreign policy and IP geopolitics; Second, China redefined and revisited

their approach for a more effective engagement into a more assertive posture and started to consider territorial issues that implicate their sovereignty (Yang et al., 2018; Zhou, 2016). Third phase started when China began their transformative re-orientation on their front yard in the South China Sea that is supported by their capacities in scaling up military and geopolitical objectives in the region; For sure at this stage China is becoming more aggressive and begun to build man-made islands over the South China Sea sectors (Zhou, 2016). The Chinese desire on South China Sea is also complemented by their own need to explore the fisheries, gas and mining potentials to secure their own supply, in which this also what drives china to claim their territory using the 9-dash claim. They’ve discredited UNCLOS (UN Convention on the Law of the Sea); they also formulated their own analysis of Gas and Oil mining potentials in the South China Sea that they coined as a far richer source compared to the ones in the Middle East, although this has been numerously denied by US-led analysis and other international analyses (Buszynski & Sazlan, 2007). The

fourth and last stage suggested that the BRI and AIIB (Chinese-led investment bank competing to the World Bank, IMF, and ADB) started to become Beijing's primary weapon in opting allies and deepening strong precedence adjacent to their security interest in the quest to enhance physical presence over ASEAN countries and surrounding states within the Indo-Pacific landscape (Zhou, 2016).

The issue of South China Sea is a domino effect, where it also shaped the ASEAN-US engagement in a wider spectrum. This paper assumed that US-China rivalry on South China Sea is a benchmark which eventually followed by the US Free and Open Indo Pacific Strategy (FOIP). However, with the new 2022 US Indo-Pacific Strategy, where it emphasizes on AUKUS, trade connectivity, deeper APEC cooperation, the 5 treaty alliances (South Korea, Philippines, Thailand, Australia, and Japan) – we can see that this might be a new indication that US propose new norms in enforcing unilateral grip in IP as a new strategy to constrain China. This will put the currently impeded ASEAN Code of Conduct on South China Sea into an

uncertain state of play, and it might eventually be left behind. CoC will harm US in demonstrating military exercise with their allies in IP, while this is the only tangible balancing act against Beijing "salami-slicing" strategy (Kuo, 2018).

Although the author is optimistic that ASEAN can be a central actor in restarting the paralyzed CoC, however US-led counteractions against China plays an important role to encourage Beijing to re-negotiate the CoC especially in sensitive provisions such as on naval incidents, threat management, confidence building, and further improvements on regimes concluded within the 2002 Declaration of Conduct (DoC). Both ideational and operational arrangements between ASEAN and US becoming more relevant considering that the Washington has the needed firepower to restrain Beijing, and the author wouldn't deny that as that is also what drives ASEAN-US bilateral forward (Mishra, 2017). US' engagement to ASEAN is also important because aside from Indonesia and the Philippines, Washington also need to engage with Vietnam as Hanoi wish to

engage in security-related activities with the US in responding towards the Chinese idea of “hiding capabilities and biding time” (Tuan, 2016).

Minilateralism: A Strategic Reflection on US-ASEAN Strategy on Indo-Pacific

The nature of this topic also allows a more extensive deliberation; however, the author would like to deepen on how minilateralism and ASEAN external cooperation engagement plays an important role in the IP quest to achieve strategic autonomy. Starting with minilateralism, previous studies have been discussing this as minilateralism will eventually trigger and prolong disharmonious stance among regional entities such as ASEAN pertained to their consensus-based and non-interference principles. First of all, there are several minilateral groupings within the IP regional architecture itself, namely: The Quadrilateral

Security Dialogue (Quad) consisting of Japan, India, US, and Australia – which is currently has the Quad plus proposal that might include Vietnam and other ASEAN states; AUKUS (Australia, UK, and US security pact); The Five Power Defense Arrangements (FPDA) consisting of the Commonwealth (UK, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore); and Mutual Defense Treaties like ANZUS, US-Japan, US-South Korea, and US-Philippines that should be considered when mapping out and deliberating the minilateral activism in the IP. Generally, minilateralism in IP is indeed a two-edged sword, where it can be leveraged by actors like ASEAN in rebalancing against the intervening geopolitical rivalries that are considered unsustainable for their centrality; or can be perceived as a threat that might kick ASEAN out of the IP drive’s seat (Ford, 2018).¹ The author would like to discuss the sub-issue on minilateralism

¹ The term “Driver’s Seat” was elaborated by the Former Foreign Minister of Indonesia, Dr. Marty Natalegawa as the main issue in ASEAN centrality. ASEAN should be sitting on the driver’s seat in order to substantiate the significant enabling environment for forums like the East Asia Summit (EAS) to accomodate a more ASEAN-centered dialogues and actions in preventing competing major powers to respect the rule-based order

of the region and to assert ASEAN leadership. This was elaborated by the institutional memory of the EAS itself where Indonesia as the leading voice does deliberate upon the decision to accept external dialogue partner like US, Russia, and others to the EAS under the high political stakes that can turn EAS into a flawed forum where major powers will win the driver’s seat and ruin the ASEAN strategic ambition by dominating the processes.

within this paper based on 3 main elements: the causes, the responses, and the prospects. Then it will be concluded on how ASEAN-US will reflect upon this matter within the Indo-Pacific geopolitical dynamic.

On the cause, minilateralism in IP is something extensive, and it requires ASEAN countries to revisit or bandwagon with it in order to achieve their goals amid their political and security limitations in projecting power against the major powers. Minilateralism will eventually become a threat if it disintegrates ASEAN consensus on any political contentions. China is indeed an important partner for ASEAN regional economic integration while the US has a more promising advantage in balancing China in East Asia securitization against Chinese intrusions; this process only prevails if ASEAN manages to contain both overlapping external interventions through politically-centered dialogues namely the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). (Deng, 1998).

The author further argues that in responding towards minilateralism, ASEAN needs to increase its attractiveness through intra-ASEAN

efforts and domestic policies, where the region should actively engage through trade and opening up through confidence-building measures (CBMs) (e.g. military exercises or Joint defense cooperation) that is toned down and not being aggressive to any major powers. To note, the minilateral activities of economic and political-security relation among AMS with any external parties should also be able in concerning the trends in global level, because ASEAN-US relation, in particular, can't prevail since potentials that can be exhausted for the sake of both parties will only grow in the adequate environment that is still promising and safe since ASEAN will need it the most (Simandjuntak, 1997).

This is because partisan interests in US policies are still there and the conservative-moderate consensus is a key factor in legislating the needed policies for ASEAN approved by the US people's representatives (HORN, 1984). These kinds of joint activities and trade relationships can be done through minilateral groupings (for instance the RCEP that involves AMS, China, South Korea, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, which some of these

states have a not-so-warm relation with China like Australia and Japan). Or additionally, through trilateral like AUKUS, as long as the activities are not formalized as a direct counterbalancing against China or any other major powers. Because the room to accuse China or any other states in these minilateral activities will be much more filtered in real-life diplomatic activities rather than in the academic world, where scholars are much franker and more open to debates. Although this is might be a questionable argument at the first glance, it is still plausible. The author argues that China, for instance, will not complain if Indonesia is doing exercises with US Army in Manado, but instead China might be more sensitive when Indonesia collaborates with US Navy conducting exercises in the South China Sea (near Spratlys Islands for example). The author point is, any engagement is still fine and won't be regarded as a security threat by the other if the substance doesn't cross any parties' red lines, and this should be aimed to only build confidence, and not to balance certain powers because at least ASEAN countries can map out which one is far

strategic to themselves and can forge closer bilateral through each of the major powers' preferences (the US in the military; and China in trade & Investment affairs).

Deeper on the question of the cause, where minilateralism in IP is considered starting because of AMS interests' in searching their strategic partner in political and economic terms, the author suggests that the complex security architecture of the current IP is also driving the need for a sustainable minilateral engagement forward. What should be concerned is not merely how the minilateral should be conducted, but how it eventually produce its complicating effects that might limit ASEAN's effective space in maintaining ASEAN-centered multilateral strategies and engagements (Huang, 2018). Then this will bring us to the response towards the minilateralism in IP, which can be discussed under two main important elements: First, it's on how ASEAN member states respond to minilateral groupings like Quad, AUKUS, and FPDA; Second, how US-ASEAN should eventually move forward its minilateral relation in the post-pandemic IP era. On the first point,

starting from Quad, for sure there is no AMS involved, however, Quad's actions are posing threat to ASEAN-led pacifist efforts, plus the new Quad 2.0 plus proposal is possible enough in dragging both intra-ASEAN and external middle powers in IP like Vietnam, Thailand, or South Korea. With China still perceiving Quad as the main threat to their ambition, thus triggering Beijing to shorten the shelf-life of Quad owing to the reluctance of few Quad members like Australia and Japan in prolonging irritating moves against Beijing considering their position and calculations (Kliem, 2020). South Korea also, on the other hand, isn't interested to join Quad since their issues with China only last to the extent of Korean Peninsula security and not in a larger IP context since they are much more worried about Pyongyang's missiles that are 80-100 KMs away from Seoul that puts them into complex dilemmas (Mulyaman & Wibowo, 2021).

Secondly, ASEAN inability to explore non-traditional means of maritime cooperation is also something that is pretty much considered vital by the author, because if ASEAN acquires

enough cooperation networks with unexplored regions like IORA and the South Pacific, ASEAN would have a better "support system" from its surrounding countries; and could be able to have more options for ASEAN leading powers in choosing whether they bandwagon or balance against the unilateral groupings. Within IORA, for example, is China's next target because most of its hydrocarbon distribution lines from Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East are coming to Chinese ports via the Indian Ocean Region. Previous studies that the author echoes concluded several things, that China wishes to develop a larger Indian Ocean fleet that is capable to level the Indian Navy militarization in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR); or a more peaceful notion where China will have to do power-sharing with US and India to secure its economic and logistical interests (Li, 2017). This means that ASEAN has to prepare for both scenarios, because if China manages to concur with US and India within the IOR, then for sure the Western Front of the ASEAN Indo-Pacific region and Indonesia's important Global Maritime Fulcrum

(GMF) will have to be re-oriented and re-adjusted into a more pragmatic/pacifist stance that will weaken ASEAN's leadership. Therefore homework for all is how China and IORA as the largest multilateral body in IOR could diffuse their interests with Beijing's polygonal power (Panda, 2014). A previous study argued by Jose also explored that Indonesia's maritime diplomacy in IORA is pretty much significant in securing IORA against non-traditional threats that might concern China and leave them an option to deploy extensive naval force (Jose & Fathun, 2021). The author's main point is, IUU Fishing will give China an excuse to exercise power directly against Quad under the name of non-traditional maritime securitization. Furthermore, unilateralism in IOR could also sway away from the needed blue economy engagement and productivity as stipulated within the IORA Perth Consensus of 2014, The Mauritius Blue Economy Declaration of 2015, and UNCLOS – in which for Jakarta, ASEAN, and India this will trigger further unwanted intervention from Beijing that has been very evident and urged by its domestic views to exercise

emerging power play in IOR (Qodarsasi & Rachmawati, 2018).

As a rational actor, the surrounding countries of the IOR considers their naval power as one of the substantial significances of their maritime influence. This is relevant by the research of Mahan (2019) where he argued that the control of maritime commerce and naval power is one of the considerable elements in the power and prosperity of a particular nation-state (Mahan, 2019). Unlike the South China Sea, conflict in the Indian Ocean tends to be more non-traditional as contemporary threats from the growing involvement of non-state actors significantly contribute to the insecurity within the IOR architecture. In regard to the traditional context, the insecurity within the IOR is more attributed to the growth of the Chinese geopolitical presence that is being counterattacked by US hegemony. Chinese maritime dominance within the IOR region is more into emphasizing Sino presence whilst on the South China Sea, it is more confrontative. Therefore, IORA should navigate the regional cooperation and be more versatile in overarching the contentions that are vital to the region's

peace and security. Maritime conflict directly impacts territorial integrity, and it has always been the historical factor on why countries sustain their competition for a balance of power. US' role is only there in term of Quad, but not enough as the author doesn't consider RIMPAC as a solid geopolitical tool by the US seeing that currently the Asia-Pacific fleets are pretty much focused on East Asia and the South China Sea. The presence of US-led Asia-Pacific command, and its AUKUS engagement with Australia will surely act as a strategic spectator and strategic postman to Chinese ambition to violate the rule-based IOR that is governed by the IORA. However, this needs further studies, as there are no direct political or mechanical stipulations within the IORA that can revive the strategic narrative of the IOR to maintain deeper maritime security ever since Indonesia finishes the Chairmanship in 2017. Current IORA, as the author perceived, tend to be more peaceful and deepening more into technical matters and anti-piracies rather than geopolitical concerns.

Unlike the South China Sea, conflict in the Indian Ocean tends to be more non-traditional as contemporary threats from the growing involvement of non-state actors significantly contribute to the insecurity within the IOR architecture. Regarding the traditional context, the insecurity within the IOR is more attributed to the growth of the Chinese geopolitical presence that is being counterattacked by US hegemony. Chinese maritime dominance within the IOR region is more into emphasizing Sino presence whilst on the South China Sea, it is more confrontative. Therefore, IORA should navigate the regional cooperation and be more versatile in overarching the contentions that are vital to the region's peace and security. Maritime conflict means territorial integrity, and it has always been the historical factor on why countries kept competing towards one another and balancing their power. Although IORA may not be binding cooperation, the platform is still putting significant peer pressure on its contracting entities to comply and consider formulating a proportionate Indian Ocean's architecture. Although IORA may not

be binding cooperation, the platform is still putting significant peer pressure on its contracting entities to comply and consider formulating a proportionate Indian Ocean's architecture in conjunction to the need of a new ASEAN-US Maritime Security Dialogue that the author proposes to establish.

To understand the prospects, minilateralism according to previous studies were argued as something that involves the need to supplement existing institutions, functional coalitions, and to execute certain agendas with like-minded allies; with the intention to strengthen, confront, or do new block-building (Paik & Park, 2021). In implementing those 3 objectives with the 3 end goals mentioned previously, we can conclude that agenda-setting and blocking with states are the important determinants. First, we may argue that prospects will rely on how each minilateral participant is institutionalizing the pre-existing and newly established regimes on IP such as the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP), ASEAN Five Point Consensus on Myanmar, and another political-security regime. While second, minilateral prospects in

IP will have to depend on trilateral expansion and or role-assignment of middle powers in any minilateral groupings.

For instance, Indonesia, Australia, and the US trilateral relation is something evident in explaining the previous argument, although the trilateral is yet to be formalized, converging interests on key sub-strategic cooperation features allows the three countries to examine the possible way forward to achieve greater cooperation and synergizing common perceptions and networks that can eventually also work together with ASEAN or Indonesia bilaterally (Kelton & Willis, 2019). To conclude, why does minilateral matter in ASEAN-US cooperation in particular? As we discuss this, the US government previously was led by an isolationist leader namely Trump, hence with his withdrawal from IP, it gave China momentum to re-penetrate areas like development financing and technical cooperation – which then made US' engagement was undermined by the status quo. With the uncertainty of initial Biden's administration stance on IP during their first 100 days, minilateral engagement is important in

reconstructing the underdeveloped institutional memories and presence of the US government while immediately regaining allies, re-adhere to the norms, and supporting security cooperation because this might be taking a long time if it has to be decided through ASEAN-US formal dialogue first (Tow, 2019).

ASEAN-US Prospects in Search of Indo-Pacific Strategic Autonomy

To understand the development of ASEAN-US cooperation in IP, we can start from the latest ASEAN-US Summit in October 2021 resulted in several important points: reiterating fundamental US-ASEAN commitment in reviving the norms and principles laid out in ZOPFAN, TAC, SEANWFZ, AOIP, UNCLOS, etc; financial assistance from US sources in addressing Covid-19 necessities; COVAX support in ASEAN; welcoming US engagement on ASEAN external cooperation platform like EAS, ARF, and SOMTC+1; rule-based multilateral trading system; regional security issues (North Korea, Myanmar, Climate); and other projects ranging from ASEAN-US Connect,

people-to-people projects, etc. From here we can conclude that: the US is committing itself to respect ASEAN-led dialogues and projects; China is yet to be mentioned and it shows reluctance that meant something significant for both parties not to provoke China; normative propositions from each party on important regional issues, whereas no solid actions should necessarily be explored – which means ASEAN-US will respect and not intervene aside from expressing concerns; and the awareness of each party in recognizing the pre-existing regime that came binding to promote ASEAN centrality and shared values. The author further views that to nurture proper autonomy with strong modalities for ASEAN by collaborating with the US in forging its ASEAN-led mechanism and autonomy in the rule-driven region – both countries have to slow down when needed and increase the pace when urged by the IP environment. Previous studies used the term “strategic autonomy” mostly on EU-NATO-related research because it was centered upon the discussion of the EU’s common security-defense

policies and how each EU member state could still have their own autonomy in formulating their own actions after the Brexit shook Europe and NATO (Howorth, 2018). With the nature of the IP region that is vital to global trade and major power needs, then connectivity and freedom of navigation shouldn't be impeded, which means also that a hybrid of traditional and non-traditional elements of security should be reintegrated and re-conceptualized in liaising the enormous interests within IP (Anwar, 2015). Furthermore, strategic autonomy prerequisites include an enormous amount of political and tangible resources, especially in conjunction to calculate the double hedging for ASEAN (Indonesia in particular as the lead voice) in doing balancing and bandwagoning while at the same time accommodating Jakarta's larger ambition as a Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF), which then will position the US as the important player in determining next path as their tension with China will draw the line of ideas for policymakers in AMS (Mubah, 2019).

ASEAN-US engagement in search of strategic autonomy should

also focus on how the region is drawing its primary weapons in preventing zero-sum game. Finding the strategic autonomy amidst the diverse political stance and the willingness of AMS to take sharper steps are uncertain, hence the ideational level of the ASEAN-US engagement must be synergized with the other ASEAN dialogue partners' forum. This is important for all ASEAN-US states that they both will not lose the momentum for something strategic and for the Southeast Asian countries to come together and convey to the external dialogue partner to support their vision in achieving ASEAN's autonomy in managing their actions and relations within the IP. To further increase attractiveness and platform for dia bandwagoning logues, the ASEAN came with a solution where they organize the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) 10+1 that is emphasizing frequent and consistent meetings to show that Southeast Asia is indeed a promising zone of peace and prosperity that has sufficient cooperation architecture, in which a past journal of US' State Dept highly praised about, in particular, the PMC existence to promote shared dialogue regarding regional

overarching views (Talbot, 1994). The PMC includes China, the US, Australia, Canada, Russia, South Korea, Japan, New Zealand, India, and the European Union where all parties contributed to the chairman statement in highlighting achievements and implementing multi-track diplomacy to handle principal and normative issues. However, just like the other cooperation, technical projects should also be proposed to increase the benefits of member states who are obliging themselves and to show that they bring something home to their capital. – and a technical platform to discuss projects and related regional business arrangements. This is pretty much backed by the importance of the US and another western partner also for the transfer of technology and financial assistance matters. One example was when the US donated 198 million USD of health supplies and humanitarian assistance back in August 2021 to assist AMS against Covid-19 and US AID cooperation to donate for the resiliency of ASEAN regional public health system (ASEAN Public Health Emergency Coordination System/ APHECS) simultaneously (US

Department of State, n.d.). That way, from this dialogue we can prevent any backlashes that are centered upon the issues of results, modalities, and why does it matter.

Although finding synergy, involving the US at a greater forum, and ASEAN-led mechanism is being emphasized and deepened, the author finds another thing that might either impede or accelerate the process of establishing strategic autonomy for ASEAN in IP architecture. Although the US did engage in bilateral political tools with ASEAN, security alliances will always be the center of the US' intention to rebalance China and continue programs like Cobra Gold Exercises in Thailand and capacity building to all AMS but Myanmar (Pennisi di Floristella, 2019). ASEAN is always concerned with the growing military power projection in IP because it reminds an institutional memory of ASEAN where it was established during the Cold War, however, the US is always a promising security guarantee with their Asia Pacific command and fleets. This is also mainly because AMS couldn't handle issues like Taiwan or Korean Peninsula

tension. After all, there is no AMS that is willing to outreach militarily to those seeing limited armaments capabilities and always encouraging dialogues rather than confrontation, so the US is there for the “dirty works”; because those external tensions are greater on its impact rather than intra-ASEAN security concerns (Koh, 2011). However, AMS is still collective on strengthening the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint by adopting new dialogues like ASEAN+8 DMM on non-traditional security (NTS) issues because of its ramifications and rising concerns regarding human security as a regional securitization referent object (Wibisono, 2017).

Lastly, strategic autonomy could only be achieved if the issues are pretty much specific because ambiguous agenda setting within ASEAN-US discussions is pretty much counterproductive for ASEAN communities. Strategic autonomy is something that should be achieved if every party is specific on their demands and proposals, so there will be no loose ends. As we know, the US government needs to also know what values can be retrieved and how ASEAN could

ensure that their demand for strategic autonomy in IP can be resilient even to the intrusions made by China. Because when ASEAN demands their autonomy, they need sufficient capacities and how it can still reciprocate the interests of US allies, while China might also resound this narrative, to let ASEAN acquire its strategic autonomy. Because learning from the EU, strategic autonomy requires far stronger actions that will not undermine the transformative and normative power of the EU while at the same time not leaving the institutional memories behind (Tallis, 2021).

Developing ASEAN-led management in IP will be impeded by unilateral acts of ASEAN external partners, which means that ASEAN should enforce and guarantee all major powers first that they are ready to synergize with the different AOIP concepts upheld by each external country. Top-down approaches are important because higher authorities' recommendations and stipulations (larger Indo Pacific forum) will make it easier for national line ministerial agencies to synergize and formulate a better position, especially when preparing for the ASEAN-US meetings

from SOM to leaders' level. What matters also is that the AOIP can stand as a guide for the ASEAN member states' foreign policy restructurization, because it will stand as the only perimeter before breaking ASEAN further. The author argues that minilateralism is no joke for both Jakarta and the ASEAN. With the world is moving to its multipolar structure, ASEAN must be awake because eventually the world would be comfortable, and the fate of ASEAN needs to be drawn imperatively. This is important for ASEAN-US bilateral relation seeing that sudden changes on individual AMS would affect how consensus could be achieved especially within sensitive issues like bilateral ASEAN-US security arrangements, how they will perceive different Indo Pacific concepts from external dialogue partners, the question of what will China respond, and how Indonesia held its central leadership in responding Chinese willingness to became the new non-traditional partner for ASEAN with its promising and attractive investments.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the author would like to be optimistic for the ASEAN strategic autonomy from ASEAN-US bilateral arrangements, however, it will require extensive “look east” (towards China) policies and “Concern the west” policies (towards EU, US, Canada, and other western counterparts). Concerning the west is important because, for instance, the recent EU approach on Indo Pacific might convey a different meaning with France and UK is standing on different perspectives on AUKUS (where Australia betrayed the French submarine deal). Looking to China is important to also measure the gap and close the grey areas that can be counterproductive to the ASEAN agenda in achieving strategic autonomy. All in all, both China and the US are competed until now on both the eastern front (the South China Sea and the Pacific) and the western front (Indian Ocean Region) and it will not stop there. There is a significant signal that China will take their counterbalancing efforts against Washington to the African region in navigating their China dream amid the Asian Century. Strategic autonomy

should be achieved through strong efforts with solid modalities and solidarities with external supports for it to be resilient, overarching, and able to prevail in 10-20 years ahead in the new post-pandemic IP regional order driven by ASEAN and supported by a strong sense of ownership from the surrounding ASEAN dialogue partners that are engaging constructively.

It is recommended for key regional players like Indonesia and the US to do the following steps in navigating the rules-based region. First, engaging other middle powers to co-pilot in finding the synergy between the economic and political-security community in ASEAN to embracing the IP outlook deeper, as previous AEC mechanisms don't put AOIP as a reference. Second, the US should reassure the middle powers and Indonesia especially regarding their long-term vision in a more robust and non-pragmatic narrative. This is important to prevent misunderstanding of political propositions. Third, ASEAN must move forward from being a spectator and play their own game with their own rule and deepening deeper reference on US IP

outlook concept to be harmonized with AOIP on its convergence.

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