

# United States and Southeast Asian Indo-Pacific Approaches Compared

By Susannah Patton

While the use of the term “Indo-Pacific” is relatively new, debates about its use echo longstanding arguments about how the region should be defined: who is in, who is out, and on what terms. Under two successive U.S. administrations, the term Indo-Pacific has become the accepted way that the United States refers to the broad geographic region stretching from the western Indian Ocean, through Southeast Asia and into Northeast Asia and the Pacific. However, adoption of the concept in Southeast Asia remains mixed. At Indonesia’s urging, ASEAN in 2019 adopted its “Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” (AOIP), and Indonesia itself readily uses the term. Most other Southeast Asian countries are cautious about the term, associating it with a confrontational approach to China that they cannot endorse. However, some, such as Singapore and the Philippines, now use it pragmatically in their engagements with regional partners, particularly the United States.

This article sets out the key elements of both the U.S. approach to the Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asian approaches to the Indo-Pacific, primarily focusing on Indonesia’s perspective, reflected in the AOIP. It identifies common concerns, especially an emphasis on maritime cooperation, as the driver of convergence, as well as several areas of divergence. Among these divergences are questions about the value of cooperation as a driver, rather than the product of strategic trust; and the relative importance of “inclusive” versus “exclusive” or “minilateral” cooperative mechanisms. In large part, these divergences reflect underlying disagreements between the United States and Southeast Asian countries about how to engage China.

## U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy

Current U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is rooted in a long history of U.S. engagement with Asia. Michael Green argues that two common strands can be found throughout this history: a desire to take advantage of economic opportunities in Asia, and the imperative of ensuring that a hostile power is never able to

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project power against the United States from Asia.<sup>1</sup> And although the Obama administration did not adopt the “Indo-Pacific” terminology, statements from this period, including an article in *Foreign Policy* by former U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, emphasize a key tenet of the current U.S. Indo-Pacific concept, which is to describe a region that is strategically interconnected across both the Pacific and Indian oceans.<sup>2</sup>

The United States first began officially using the term “Indo-Pacific” early in the Trump administration, a decade after others such as Abe Shinzo had started to popularize it. Trump’s first public articulation of a vision for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) came during his 2017 visit to Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> Among the Quad countries, the development of “Indo-Pacific” rather than “Asia” strategies aligned with a more confrontational period of relations with China, and a shared desire to collectively balance China’s regional influence. As Rory Medcalf has argued, the Indo-Pacific concept reflects countries’ desire for a more inclusive vision of a broad and interconnected region in which China does not dominate.<sup>4</sup>

A declassified version of the Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) gives insight into the end goals that the United States sought to achieve in the region between 2017 and 2021.<sup>5</sup> The strategy seeks to maintain U.S. primacy in the region while promoting a liberal economic order and preventing China from establishing its own spheres of influence. The strategy identifies several “lines of effort” to advance this goal: strengthening alliances and partnerships, working with India, countering China’s influence, addressing challenges on the Korean Peninsula, and partnering with Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

The Biden administration sustained the Trump administration’s use of the term Indo-Pacific, as well as an overall approach to China that prioritizes competition over engagement, albeit with a “more effective strategy in practice.”<sup>6</sup> Key to the difference in approach is a more concerted effort by the Biden administration to strengthen alliances and partnerships with regional countries, in contrast to the “America First” or zero-sum approach which characterised Trump’s foreign policy.

The Biden IPS highlights some of the differences between the two administrations’ regional approaches, although as a publicly released document intended to reassure regional partners, it is not directly comparable with the Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific guidelines.<sup>7</sup> Both strategies share an assumption that China’s behavior cannot be changed or directly influenced through diplomatic or strategic engagement; they differ on the question of goals. In contrast to the Trump administration’s goal of U.S. primacy, the Biden administration’s strategy seeks a “balance of power that is maximally favourable to the United States” and its allies and partners. In line with its status as a

document intended for regional countries, the Biden administration document seeks to articulate an “end state” or vision for the region that it hopes all countries would share. These goals include a region that is free, open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient.

An accompanying “action plan” identifies more practical priorities for the administration in implementing the IPS. Key measures include launching the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), reinforcing deterrence, working with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), supporting India’s regional leadership, delivering on the Quad, and building trilateral cooperation with the ROK and Japan. Good governance and accountability, and promoting open digital technologies, are also in the frame. Many of these priorities, especially the extensive emphasis on working with a core set of allies and partners, are consistent with the approach pursued by the Trump administration in the Indo-Pacific.

The Biden IPS explicitly makes linkages with other partners’ approach to the region, including Japan, Australia and the ROK. Among these linkages, it endorses the AOIP, noting that the United States shared the view with ASEAN that Southeast Asia is central to the regional architecture.

### *U.S. Indo-Pacific Economic Framework*

The approaches that the United States is pursuing through negotiations for an Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), elaborate on the economic objectives set out briefly in the IPS, and are an important component of U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. IPEF negotiators are working on four pillars: trade, including digital trade; supply chains; clean energy, decarbonization and the green economy; and tax and anti-corruption. Across all four pillars, the emphasis is on developing common standards on U.S. priorities such as labor and environmental regulation, to drive greater investment and business engagement across the region.

Importantly, the U.S. has signalled that negotiations will not include new market access commitments as was the case under previous U.S. economic negotiations with the region, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership. This choice is shaped by domestic political constraints which have made negotiating new free trade agreements unpalatable for the Biden administration. However, in recognition of the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific, and the region’s strong demand for greater U.S. economic engagement, the administration is seeking to negotiate IPEF as a compromise approach. It is complemented by other U.S. sectoral economic initiatives and broader global programs from which Indo-Pacific countries could benefit, such as the G7 Global Partnership for Infrastructure.

## Southeast Asian Indo-Pacific Strategies

### *The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*

For the past five years, the United States has enthusiastically embraced the Indo-Pacific as the framing for its approach to Asia policy. While many other countries, including Japan, India, Australia, South Korea, and Canada have also developed formal or informal Indo-Pacific strategies, the ten countries of Southeast Asia have mostly remained wary. With the exception of Indonesia and the Philippines, many Southeast Asian countries are suspicious that the Indo-Pacific strategies of the United States and its allies are policies to contain China. Despite this, ASEAN in June 2019 adopted the AOIP, which sets out ASEAN's perspective on this growing regional discourse.<sup>8</sup>

ASEAN leaders adopted the AOIP, after 18 months of wrangling, and at Indonesia's initiation. The AOIP has a curious status within ASEAN: it did not establish new mechanisms, or directly lead to new initiatives within the group. It references many principles that have been widely accepted by ASEAN for decades. A reader stumbling across the document without context might well wonder why the group adopted a document so bland and inoffensive as the AOIP at all. As Evan Laksmana has argued, a key push factor for Indonesia in 2018 and 2019 was the re-emergence of the Quad as a focal point for its members' Indo-Pacific strategies.<sup>9</sup> While many Southeast Asian countries worried that the Quad undermined ASEAN's role in the region, they equally recognized that they could not roll it back. The AOIP was ASEAN's way of articulating its own strategic vision and attempting to reclaim diplomatic space where it saw the Quad as potentially encroaching.

The document's adoption also reflects a parallel concern by ASEAN countries, which is that growing polarization between the U.S. and China could squeeze Southeast Asia. Over the past decades, Southeast Asia has grown wealthy thanks to an open and increasingly integrated regional economy in which the United States and China have both been key players. As China became a more assertive security actor, and the Trump administration's approach to Beijing hardened in turn, Southeast Asian countries became increasingly anxious that the "long peace" from which they had benefited was about to end. As many countries put it, they did not want to have to choose between the United States and China.<sup>10</sup> The AOIP reflects these concerns in its rejection of rivalry and zero-sum thinking.

The AOIP is a bureaucratic document, reflecting ASEAN's preoccupations and limitations. As such, its ambition is less sweeping than the goals set out in U.S. Indo-Pacific strategies. Even so, it provides some insight into ASEAN's vision

and priorities for the region. The document identifies the following overarching goals: a region in which ASEAN plays a central role; a region of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry; and a region of development and prosperity. Importantly, the AOIP is “defensive” in posture: it portrays the region in positive terms as dynamic and peaceful, with ASEAN’s focus being to defend against challenges to the current order.

In practical terms, the AOIP seeks to bolster ASEAN’s role in three main areas: maritime cooperation, connectivity, and realizing the UN Sustainable Development Goals. It also contains a list of other “economic and other” possible cooperative activities, possibly reflecting the desire by a range of Southeast Asian countries to have their own specific national priorities reflected in the AOIP. Across all these areas, the focus is overwhelmingly on economic matters. The AOIP does not break new ground, leading analysts to critique it for bringing “old tools” to new challenges.<sup>11</sup> However, the AOIP has since given rise to diplomatic activity, led largely by Indonesia and the region’s external partners, including Japan, Australia, and the United States, to develop an “implementation agenda” (see below).

The AOIP is intrinsically linked with its sponsor, Indonesia’s, vision of the region. Indonesian scholar Dewi Fortuna Anwar traces Jakarta’s use of the term Indo-Pacific to a speech made by former foreign minister Marty Natalegawa in 2013.<sup>12</sup> Indonesia’s archipelagic geography, and strategic position between the Indian and Pacific oceans makes the Indo-Pacific concept a more “natural fit” for Jakarta than any other Southeast Asian country (see discussion of Singapore and Malaysia’s attitudes towards the concept, below). The region’s other principal archipelagic state, the Philippines, for example, lacks a sense of connection to the Indian Ocean.

Indonesia’s adoption of the term Indo-Pacific is linked with two strands of foreign policy thinking: a desire to be more a more activist and influential power, and a deeper focus on the maritime domain as a national priority. Former Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa drew on the Indo-Pacific concept in a major 2013 speech,<sup>13</sup> in which he set out Indonesia’s desire to be more influential on a wider regional stage. Natalegawa acknowledged that the region was in a period of rapid change, and set out an ambitious approach to tackling challenges, including the risk of conflict on the Korean Peninsula; unresolved territorial claims, especially in the South China Sea; and climate change. While neither Natalegawa’s level of ambition, nor his specific proposal (for an Indo-Pacific wide treaty of amity and cooperation) were taken forward by his successor as foreign minister, his early use of the term illustrates its influential position in Indonesia’s foreign policy discourse.

Establishing Indonesia as a “Global Maritime Fulcrum” (GMF) was a policy Indonesian President Joko Widodo adopted in his first term in office, beginning in 2014. The policy had both domestic and international elements and was focused on improving connectivity across the Indonesian archipelago, long a barrier to economic growth. Key elements of the GMF policy included rebuilding Indonesia’s maritime culture, managing maritime resources, developing maritime infrastructure, boosting regional maritime cooperation, and boosting maritime defence capabilities.<sup>14</sup> This approach culminated in an “Indonesian Ocean Policy” adopted in 2017.<sup>15</sup>

While many analysts welcomed Indonesia’s more outward-looking embrace of its maritime identity,<sup>16</sup> Widodo did not sustain the GMF policy during his second term in office.<sup>17</sup> He proved more interested in boosting inward investment and connectivity than in advancing an outward looking foreign policy of the type envisaged by the Global Maritime Fulcrum, and the policy is today considered a “dead letter.” However, vestiges of the policy remain in the bureaucracy, including in Indonesia’s maritime security agency (BAKAMLA) and a ministry tasked with coordinating maritime affairs. Indonesia has also pursued more modest maritime cooperative initiatives with its neighbors, such as a new meeting of ASEAN coastguards.

Though the term Indo-Pacific has become widely used in Indonesia, many are clear in distinguishing Indonesia’s use of the term from that of the United States. For example, Dino Patti Djalal has called for an “Indo-Pacific 2.0,”<sup>18</sup> expressing concerns that the Indo-Pacific policy pursued by the United States excludes China and could worsen zero-sum rivalry and the regional trust deficit. Even so, Djalal was supportive of Indonesia’s push to reclaim the Indo-Pacific terminology and pursue a more inclusive approach through ASEAN. By contrast, the head of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Indonesia’s leading think tank, Yose Rizal Damuri recently noted that the term “Asia-Pacific” represented a spirit of cooperation,<sup>19</sup> while the use of the term Indo-Pacific had at times been associated with a viewpoint of rivalry and competition.

### *The Indo-Pacific: other Southeast Asian perspectives*

That Indonesia needed to extensively lobby ASEAN to adopt the AOIP suggests that other Southeast Asian countries either did not immediately see the need to adopt a common position on the Indo-Pacific, or had reservations about the concept itself. Among these countries, Malaysia’s stance is especially relevant, as Malaysia like Indonesia geographically bridges the Indian and Pacific Ocean. Yet Malaysia was silent in the discourse ahead of ASEAN’s adoption of the AOIP. Malaysian observers attribute Malaysia’s silence to a deliberate choice to distance itself from an “externally constructed term” that could see it drawn into U.S.-China competition.<sup>20</sup>

Even so, Indo-Pacific concepts, especially the AOIP, were a clear influence on Malaysia's 2020 Defence White Paper, an important and unusual public articulation of Malaysian strategic policy,<sup>21</sup> which Malaysia's new government has committed to implementing.<sup>22</sup> The White Paper does not describe Malaysia's own region as the Indo-Pacific, but this idea is implicit in the document's description of Malaysia as a "maritime nation with continental roots" that is connected to both the Pacific and Indian oceans, a point reinforced prominently by maps. The document also embraces Malaysia's "bridging" geographical role especially as a hub for maritime security and endorses the AOIP's as a statement of ASEAN's regional importance.<sup>23</sup>

Singapore likewise remained aloof from Indonesia's push to adopt the AOIP,<sup>24</sup> perhaps reflecting a view that there was little to be gained but potential costs to be paid for endorsing an unclear concept. Singapore still does not tend to use the Indo-Pacific terminology in its own foreign policy documents, but it is pragmatic in using the preferred language of its external partners such as Japan and the United States.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, Philippines President Bongbong Marcos refers to "Asia-Pacific" rather than Indo-Pacific; however successive Philippine defense secretaries have all used Indo-Pacific. Notably, current DND Secretary Galvez has openly endorsed U.S. objectives of sustaining a free and open Indo-Pacific.<sup>26</sup> In this case, his adoption of U.S. terminology is likely intended to signal the Philippines' support for its alliance with the United States.

No Southeast Asian country has adopted an Indo-Pacific strategy like that which U.S. allies South Korea and Canada each released in 2022. However, since 2019, the use of the term Indo-Pacific has become more common, especially in the Philippines, which since 2021 has drawn closer to the United States. Most other ASEAN countries, including Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam predominantly use the term Asia or Asia-Pacific in their own statements, but appear to be flexible in using the term Indo-Pacific in joint statements or meetings with the United States. Smaller continental ASEAN countries such as Cambodia and Laos remain wary of the term.

### **"Implementing the AOIP": the role of external partners**

Because the AOIP was a vague document that did not commit ASEAN to concrete action, Indonesia, supported by extra-regional partners, has sought to develop an agenda to "implement" the AOIP. For example, Indonesia will host an infrastructure and connectivity forum as part of its ASEAN chairmanship in 2023, intended to bring together ASEAN and external partners, bridging disparate regional initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the U.S.

IPEF. Indonesia also presented a discussion paper on the AOIP at the 2021 ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting, perhaps to compensate for the AOIP's limited focus on security issues.<sup>27</sup>

The United States and its allies Japan and Australia clearly see the AOIP as worth supporting. While they likely recognize that the AOIP does not directly equate to support for U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, they welcome its principles of inclusivity and openness. With the aim of buttressing these values within ASEAN, the United States now frames its assistance to ASEAN as falling within the four pillars of the AOIP (maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development and economic partnership). This is more rhetorical than a substantive shift, as programs listed under support for the AOIP include many long-standing initiatives such as the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, Japan claims to sponsor 73 cooperative projects supporting the AOIP,<sup>29</sup> and Australia's prime minister issued a "Joint Statement on Cooperation under the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific."

Even China, which has long decried U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy as "going against the trend of the times," and reflecting a "cold war mentality" belatedly acknowledged the AOIP. In a 2022 position paper China's foreign ministry stops short of welcoming the AOIP but acknowledges it as ASEAN's "independent initiative."<sup>30</sup> The paper notes that China is ready to work with ASEAN to advance practical cooperation in the four areas of the AOIP. However, perhaps unsurprisingly, China is yet to announce any such cooperative projects.

### *Are they strategies?*

This article's brief survey of Southeast Asian approaches to the Indo-Pacific raises the question of whether any qualify as "strategy" at all. If strategy is an attempt to align ways and means with desired goals or end states, arguably Southeast Asian Indo-Pacific strategies do not exist. Indonesia's disparate efforts since 2017 to harness the Indo-Pacific concept for its own purposes perhaps come closest to answering as strategy. The AOIP might qualify as a strategy for boosting ASEAN centrality, but it does not present a plan to shape the Indo-Pacific. In part this may reflect that aside from Indonesia, Southeast Asian countries are small states with limited strategic ambition, more focused on responding to the actions of external powers than shaping the region around them.

## Southeast Asian and U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategies Compared

	<b>ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific</b>	<b>U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy</b>
<b>Level of ambition</b>	Responsive, seeking to bolster ASEAN's own role  Seeking to maintain the status quo against possible challenges	Ambitious, seeking to shape the Indo-Pacific region  Seeking to reverse the trend of China's growing regional influence
<b>Regional scope</b>	Seeing ASEAN at the center of the Indian and Pacific Oceans	Defining the Indo-Pacific as one inclusive region, albeit with distinct sub-regions
<b>Maritime focus</b>	Prioritizing the maritime domain, primarily economic cooperation	Prioritizing the maritime domain, primarily security cooperation
<b>Purpose of cooperation</b>	Seeing cooperation as a building block to establish trust	Often seeing cooperation as the outcome of strategic trust and alignment
<b>Institutional arrangements</b>	Bolstering ASEAN's own role vis-à-vis other newer institutions	Pursuing cooperation both with ASEAN and newer minilateral groupings
<b>Economic focus</b>	Primarily focused on economic cooperation	Secondarily focused on economic cooperation

Even so, it is possible to discern where U.S. and Southeast Asian worldviews align and diverge from comparing the content of their Indo-Pacific approaches. The following observations are largely drawn from a comparison of the U.S. IPS and the AOIP.

### *Regional scope*

The IPS defines the Indo-Pacific as stretching from the United States' own Pacific coastline to the Indian Ocean. While the IPS does not specify, speeches and policies from the Biden administration appear to primarily focus on the region as far west as Pakistan, rather than a more expansive view that would also encompass Africa's Indian Ocean coast. The IPS refers to the Indo-Pacific as one region, but also acknowledges the existence of sub-regions, including

Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific Island countries. By contrast, the AOIP identifies the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean as two regions, rather than as “contiguous territorial spaces,” with Southeast Asia at the center.

While this difference may appear semantic, it may reflect ASEAN’s anxiety that Southeast Asia’s weight is diluted within an expansively defined Indo-Pacific. Within Southeast Asia, ASEAN is clearly the preeminent regional organization, and one in which Southeast Asian perspectives are elevated above those of other external partners. Whereas within the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN is just one of several groups and could be seen as facing competition from other forums such as the Quad, comprising regional heavyweight powers.

### *Importance of the maritime domain*

Both the United States IPS and the AOIP share a focus on the maritime domain. In the U.S. case, this is driven by concern about regional security flashpoints that are maritime in nature, especially in the South China Sea and East China Sea. In practical terms, the U.S. is pursuing a Quad initiative to promote regional maritime domain awareness with the aim of harnessing commercially available technologies to develop a common operating picture with countries in Southeast Asia and beyond. A Maritime Security Initiative, involving capacity building especially for the Philippines, was a hallmark of the Obama administration’s Asia policy, and Washington has continued to focus on this with Manila, its key regional security partner.

While the AOIP, driven by Indonesia’s interests as an archipelagic state, shares the IPS focus on the maritime domain, its prioritization within the broad field of maritime issues is different. Like the IPS, the AOIP acknowledges that geopolitical flashpoints in the region revolve around unresolved maritime disputes. And while the document refers to freedom of navigation and overflight, it gives comparatively greater weight to less sensitive non-traditional security maritime issues, such as transnational crime, resource management, marine pollution, and scientific cooperation.

### *Form of cooperative arrangements*

Both the AOIP and IPS emphasize practical cooperation as part of their approaches to the Indo-Pacific. While the AOIP is focused on boosting ASEAN’s regional role, the IPS emphasizes cooperation with ASEAN and through what it calls “flexible groupings” such as the Quad. This U.S. approach is found in other key speeches and statements from officials, such as Vice President Kamala

Harris' 2021 speech in Singapore, where she referred to U.S. support for “new, results-oriented groups” such as the Quad and U.S. Mekong Partnership.<sup>31</sup> U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan elaborated on the Biden administration's thinking in a late 2021 speech to the Lowy Institute, where he described the United States as seeking to establish a “flexible latticework” of minilateral institutions and groupings to complement established multilateral groups at both the global and regional levels.<sup>32</sup>

One explanation for these different approaches is that ASEAN countries tend to view practical cooperation as a building block for strategic trust, while the United States tends to take a more “top down” approach. Indeed, much of ASEAN's extensive cooperative agenda built up over the past five decades is premised on the belief that a regional “community” can be established incrementally by building habits of cooperation and dialogue. In this way of thinking, strategic trust is not a precondition for, but rather an outcome of, practical cooperation. The United States by contrast often takes a more “top down” approach. In this way, the United States IPS singles out India as a particular partner for cooperation, motivated by an increasing sense of strategic alignment between the two countries. By contrast, cooperation with China, a strategic competitor, will be more limited.

### *Importance of regional economic arrangements*

While both the AOIP and IPS discuss regional economic arrangements, ASEAN's approach affords relatively higher priority to these than Washington's. While just one of the IPS five pillars is focused on Indo-Pacific prosperity, economic considerations are arguably the primary driver for all four cooperation areas in the AOIP. This is unsurprising: all Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia as the document's key architect, see national economic development as far more important than regional security issues. As Evan Feigenbaum has written, “the business of Asia is still business,”<sup>33</sup> and economic issues are afforded a primacy in regional affairs that challenges a U.S. approach which generally privileges the security dimension of regional strategy.

As a result of these different perspectives, IPEF has received a mixed reception in Southeast Asia. Although it includes seven out of ten ASEAN countries, which indicates strong regional appetite to engage the U.S. on economic issues, leaders and officials have publicly called on the United States to go further and negotiate on market access, in line with the region's own priorities.<sup>34</sup> While IPEF negotiations are yet to play out, Southeast Asian countries may be reluctant to commit to high U.S. standards, for example on labor and environmental issues, without the quid pro quo of access to the U.S. market or large-scale programs of financial and technical assistance.

### *Maintaining the status quo or revising the regional order?*

A final point of potential difference between the U.S. and ASEAN approaches to the Indo-Pacific is on the question of whether they seek to maintain a status quo in the region, or to return to a status quo that has already been lost. Neither document is explicit about this, but the AOIP emphasises that “deepening of mistrust, miscalculation and patterns of behaviour based on a zero-sum game” must be avoided. The Outlook is framed as reinforcing ASEAN’s role and supporting “current dynamism” in the region. Overall, this framing tends to see the role of the AOIP in terms of buttressing a status quo that is under threat.

The IPS, by contrast, frames China as already putting heavy pressure on countries in the Indo-Pacific and undermining human rights and international law in its pursuit of a regional sphere of influence. The U.S. goal is to build a balance of influence that is “maximally favourable to the United States, its allies and partners and the interests and values we share.” This language implies that the United States and its partners must act to arrest trends that are already underway and reverse recent changes to the extent possible. This activism is in contrast to ASEAN’s more limited ambition of upholding an existing order against possible future challenges.

### **Conclusion**

The modest goals of the AOIP, especially the ambition of maintaining an open and inclusive region, are consistent with the Indo-Pacific strategies of the United States and its key allies such as Japan. Yet the AOIP was developed to respond to, rather than to endorse, competing visions of the Indo-Pacific. This context explains why the AOIP diverges so greatly from U.S. approaches to the Indo-Pacific—to the extent that even China has implicitly endorsed it. In fact, this article’s detailed analysis of these differences suggests that AOIP is closer to a critique than an endorsement of U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.

Since 2019, the Indo-Pacific has gained more widespread acceptance, including most recently from South Korea and Canada, as a framework for viewing the broad region encompassing the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Yet it is unclear whether this will lead ASEAN to further develop its own strategy for the region. For example, there has been little response from the region to the Republic of Korea’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, released in December 2022, despite Southeast Asia being a key geographic focus of the strategy. The economically focussed Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative, also announced in December 2022, will be welcome in Southeast Asia. The ROK’s decision to pursue this separate

initiative may suggest that Seoul appreciates the broader geopolitical framing of its Indo-Pacific strategy is unlikely to receive the same level endorsement in Southeast Asia as it has won in the United States.

As ASEAN chair in 2023, Indonesia does not appear to be pursuing an ambitious approach, such as an update or refresh of the 2019 AOIP that would focus more on security goals. Instead, Indonesia's approach to leading ASEAN on the Indo-Pacific is likely to remain cautious and incremental, focussing on the practical application of the concept in areas such as infrastructure connectivity, which are acceptable to all of its major external partners. Indonesia's planned Indo-Pacific infrastructure forum in 2023 will be a major opportunity for these partners to demonstrate the relevance of their Indo-Pacific strategies to the strategically important Southeast Asian countries.

## Endnotes

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