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ASEAN's Sempiternal Challenge: Maintaining Centrality in the Indo-Pacific

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MARIE KWON, NOV 21 2024

The latest 'ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for the Future-Ready ASEAN and ASEAN-Centered Regional Architecture' may have a lengthy title, but its core message is clear: the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) aims to remain the principal regional organization addressing Asia's regional challenges. Released on October 9, 2024, during the 44th and 45th ASEAN Summits in Vientiane, this declaration emphasizes ASEAN's commitment to fostering a peaceful environment amid regional and global uncertainties. Consistent with previous statements, it underscores ASEAN's role in promoting inclusive cooperation, preserving peace, upholding international law, and fostering regionalism and multilateralism. At its core, the declaration reiterates ASEAN's commitment to "ASEAN centrality," particularly in light of shifting geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific.

This year's declaration, with its emphasis on peace and stability, stands in stark contrast to those of 2023. Among the seven statements issued at the 43rd ASEAN Summit in 2023, the *ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on ASEAN as an Epicentrum of Growth* presented the Leader's main message. While it started with acknowledging the disruptive power of geostrategic shifts, the declaration largely focused on resilience and growth, it outlined areas for improvement in a wide range of areas including health, climate change, disaster preparedness, food security, energy systems, macroeconomic stability, and supply chain connectivity. It introduced drivers of growth, including global supply chains, digital transformation, and efforts toward a green, blue, creative, and inclusive economy. In view of this, the 2023 declaration positioned ASEAN as "epicentrum of growth," prioritizing economic and socio-cultural resilience over political-security concerns. In contrast, the 2024 declaration shifts its focus, elevating the political-security pillar to prominence—a notable recalibration of ASEAN's priorities within a single year.

The 2024 declaration revisits familiar ASEAN themes, now with a much stronger emphasis on security. It reaffirms ASEAN's leadership in maintaining regional stability, emphasizes ASEAN-led mechanisms, and champions regionalism as a pathway to peaceful dispute resolution. The declaration underscores ASEAN's commitment to international law, referencing key texts such as the UN Charter, the ASEAN Charter, and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). It also promotes inclusive cooperation and seeks support from regional partners. However, it makes an unambiguous statement that the Indo-Pacific regional architecture must remain firmly ASEAN-centred, highlighting ASEAN's indispensable role in the region.

Why does ASEAN's centrality require such strong reaffirmation? In recent years, the rise of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic framework has challenged ASEAN's role as the Asia-Pacific's primary regional organisation. Critics have questioned whether ASEAN's slow decision-making and limited enforcement powers undermine its ability to address the Indo-Pacific's complex security landscape. However, such criticisms, sometimes the result of a comparative bias in regional studies, tend to be quick to forget ASEAN's distinct role as a regional actor. Unlike the European Union (EU)—a supranational organization focused on deep integration—ASEAN was founded as an intergovernmental organization with the primary aim of fostering regional peace, security, and mutual respect. While both organizations promote peace through economic development, ASEAN prioritizes preserving the national sovereignty of its diverse member states as opposed to pooling their sovereignty.

The emphasis on sovereignty creates a more complex decision-making process, which may limit ASEAN's flexibility.

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Yet, this very structure highlights ASEAN's strength: its capacity to build consensus and serve as a vital platform for dialogue. The ASEAN Way, which prioritizes non-interference, mutual respect, and consensus-building, has been instrumental in maintaining regional stability and dialogue between great powers. In the Indo-Pacific era, ASEAN's convening power—its ability to bring together diverse actors for dialogue and cooperation—remains its greatest asset. The uniqueness of the organisation's convening ability, demonstrated by the ASEAN Regional Forum for instance, is central to ASEAN's enduring relevance in an increasingly competitive geopolitical landscape marked notably by tensions between the United States and China. Amid heightening levels of polarisation, the organisation's historical closeness to non-alignment also enhances its potential to navigate the Indo-Pacific as area of expanding great power competition.

The Indo-Pacific is often framed as a transformative shift in Asia's geopolitical landscape. However, ASEAN's engagement with the Indo-Pacific—primarily through the 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)—suggests continuity rather than disruption. The decision of Southeast Asian countries to collectively define their stance on the Indo-Pacific by adopting the AOIP as a regional strategy, rather than pursuing individual domestic strategies, perfectly exemplifies this continuity.

Recent debates about the future of Indonesia's foreign policy echo the widespread emphasis on novelty associated with the Indo-Pacific and provide valuable insights into how ASEAN's centrality in the Indo-Pacific is currently being discussed. As the primary advocate for the adoption of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), Indonesia has played a pivotal role in aligning the new Indo-Pacific concept with existing ASEAN values of stability, cooperation, and inclusivity. Some analysts, however, speculate that Indonesia might pivot away from the Indo-Pacific under the Prabowo administration which came into power a month ago. This perspective reflects a disciplinary tendency to approach regional studies primarily from the perspective of great power politics. As both ASEAN's geographic and institutional heart, Indonesia cannot "pivot away" from its own neighbourhood, and the emergence of the Indo-Pacific will not change that. Despite embracing the terminology, ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific reflects Indonesia's commitment to embedding ASEAN values in the Indo-Pacific framework, making it a reinforcement of ASEAN's principles rather than a paradigm shift.

Under the former President Joko Widodo, Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, led by Retno Marsudi, championed the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) as a key element of Indonesia's foreign policy. This advocacy reflects Indonesia's view of the Indo-Pacific as a natural extension of ASEAN's centrality. While each successive Indonesian administration may seek to distinguish its foreign policy with new landmark concepts, the AOIP's grounding in ASEAN's longstanding principle of centrality ensures its continued relevance for both Indonesia and ASEAN. From an external perspective, the adoption of Indo-Pacific terminology by ASEAN might appear as a significant shift. When in reality, for political elites involved in the AOIP's development and institutionalisation, the Indo-Pacific concept strongly reaffirms ASEAN's role as a stabilising force rather than introducing radical change. In other words, the document signals a reassertion of ASEAN's—and by extension, Indonesia's—commitment to the organisation's enduring centrality in addressing matters critical to Southeast Asian countries, regardless of whether one frames Southeast Asia as part of the Indo-Pacific or not.

The above-mentioned Declaration exemplifies ASEAN's ongoing efforts to remain central in regional affairs, even in a much enlarged Indo-Pacific region. By emphasizing centrality, stability, and inclusive cooperation, the leader's declaration reiterates ASEAN's readiness to address contemporary regional challenges and its pivotal role in shaping the Indo-Pacific regional architecture. It also extends an invitation to external partners to support the AOIP in alignment with ASEAN's principles. This reaffirmation of ASEAN's role is not a departure from tradition but rather a continuation of its longstanding dedication to Asian regionalism.

ASEAN's vision for the Indo-Pacific remains firmly anchored in its core principles of centrality, multilateralism, and inclusivity. While the idea of the Indo-Pacific has gained global traction for thinking about contemporary Asia, ASEAN's commitment to (regional) multilateralism ensures its relevance as a prime regional convener. Simultaneously, declaration such as the 2024 leader's declaration underscore the organisation's commitment to peace, connectivity, and cooperation, reinforcing its enduring role in Asia's regional architecture. Amid geopolitical uncertainties, ASEAN's "sempiternal" message of centrality remains as vital as ever in the Indo-Pacific.

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