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## ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and Persian Gulf Stability

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In mid-2019, tension between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Persian Gulf region began to escalate. Already poor, their relationship deteriorated when the United States blamed Iran for the attacks on commercial ships and oil tankers near the Strait of Hormuz, a worsening of relations that culminated in the assassination of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani in January 2020.<sup>1</sup> Also around the same time, ASEAN member states revealed

their joint *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (AOIP) document, which confirmed the mutual understanding of ASEAN countries on the importance of peace, security, and stability for enhancing prosperity in this vast region stretching from the Western Indian Ocean to the Asia-Pacific.

While the Persian Gulf states suffer due to the presence of external powers in their region, Southeast Asian countries enjoy the benefits of expanding their scope of cooperation and partnerships with countries beyond their region. Even when these external parties led to increased geopolitical tensions in the region at times, ASEAN has proven able to successfully prevent them from escalating through dialogues and joint communiques. For example, ASEAN succeeded in encouraging China and Japan to work together in the ASEAN Regional Forum. Despite Beijing and Tokyo being embroiled in sovereignty disputes in regarding the East China Sea, both countries committed to cooperation in the maritime sector. Can ASEAN export its proclivity for partnerships to the Persian Gulf states, helping rival countries to build mutual understanding and pursue cooperation?

The states of Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Persian Gulf

regions deal with similar challenges in three areas: the struggle for natural resources, particularly at sea; the necessity of freedom of navigation for economic growth, transportation, and trade; and the geopolitical complications brought on by the involvement of external powers to the respective regions. To deal with such challenges, ASEAN might offer important lessons for the states of the Persian Gulf region when it comes to maintaining peace, security, stability, and prosperity for all. The ASEAN-inspired mechanisms may be a prudent way to complement existing regional initiatives, to say the least.

## **The Significance of Persian Gulf to ASEAN**

Collectively, ASEAN member states perceive the Indo-Pacific not merely as a group of countries located in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean but also as a unified regional space with common economic and political connectivity. From ASEAN's perspective, four main attributes solidify its belonging to the Indo-Pacific: (1) it is a dynamic area that is closely integrated and interconnected; (2) it is a region that requires a common mechanism to foster dialogues and cooperation in maintaining peace, security, and stability; (3) it has

been a center of economic growth for the past three decades, with the potential to drive and expand economic opportunities; and (4) its maritime security and related regional and international order-building projects are crucial factor that affects future stability of the region and beyond.<sup>2</sup> These prospects of the Indo-Pacific imply that more strategic value may be placed on ASEAN and its role as the network facilitator.

It is important to note that ASEAN and other Indo-Pacific countries such as China, India, and Indonesia have transformed their policies, taking more “outward-looking” approaches since 2014. Such policies across various sectors drive these states to protect their national interests and secure their mutual interests in the region.<sup>3</sup> As Geoffrey Till argues, “In a globalized world, it is less a question of ‘securing’ the sea in the sense of appropriating it for one’s use, and more of ‘making it secure’ for everyone but the enemies of the system to use[,]” the region shows a similar trend.<sup>4</sup>

The importance and interconnectivity of oceanic space and sea power make the AOIP highly relevant to the states of the Persian Gulf. As littoral states of the South China Sea know, stable and secure seascapes are essential to exploiting the ocean’s abundant natural

resources (e.g., fisheries, marine plants, and oil and gas reserves beneath the seabed). National goals are frustrated, however, when boundary disputes and transnational crimes get in the way. This is a well-known issue in the South China Sea, but it also has spillover effects that puts constraints on economic activities in the Persian Gulf. For example, Iran and the Arab states in the Gulf all seek to exploit oil reserves from their waters, but their efforts are affected by political instability, the threat of war, and ongoing maritime disputes.<sup>5</sup>

Persian Gulf states and ASEAN members also have in common the fact that stability in their respective regions is essential to a global sea-based trading system and transportation routes. The importance of the Strait of Malacca to world trade is matched by the Strait of Hormuz, which connects the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean through the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman. These waters connect oil-exporting countries with the Asia-Pacific, an area highly dependent upon energy imports. As a transit route for energy, the Gulf is one of the most critical waterways (and the most significant crude oil sea-based trading route) in the world.

According to research compiled by

the Robert Strauss Center at the University of Texas at Austin, the Persian Gulf states export “approximately 18.2 million barrels of oil per day.” Of the amount, nearly “17 million barrels per day transit through the Strait of Hormuz and 15.2 million barrels pass the Strait of Malacca.” In addition, over “3.5 billion cubic feet of natural gas and almost 18% of world shipments travel through the Strait.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, any blockades, piracy attacks, or armed robberies against oil tankers in these waters have the clear potential to disrupt the global economy. Although there have been only five cases of such incidents in the past few years,<sup>7</sup> the impact of these attacks evoked stern reactions from the major powers.

Partly because the Persian Gulf is so vital to global energy market, external powers such as the United States, China, and the United Kingdom have seen fit to deploy their navies to the region, keen to protect their access to energy supplies. Yet, such involvement from outsiders comes at the cost of provoking unwanted tensions, particularly among Iran, its Arab neighbors, and the United States.

## **A Role for ASEAN and the Relevance of the AOIP**

ASEAN might offer its outlook on

the Indo-Pacific to the Persian Gulf region with five rationales. First, there is the possibility of highlighting the value of dialogue. As mentioned above, naval forces from the Gulf States and various external powers keep the Persian Gulf safe in pursuit of their commercial interests, ensuring the flow of oil to the rest of the world. However, the militarization of the Gulf intensifies the tension and the potential for conflicts. Drawing on its own experience with dialogue in Southeast Asia, ASEAN could help to build intraregional trust and mutual trust between the Gulf and the United States as well as reduce perceived threats between Persian Gulf states and external powers. Indeed, ASEAN has already attempted to minimize tension in the Indo-Pacific region utilizing various ASEAN-led mechanisms such as ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Three, ASEAN Plus Six, ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus Eight, and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum. The principle for international cooperation of ASEAN, as outlined in the AOIP document, could serve as a promising model for promoting win-win cooperation in terms of economic cooperation and development. The possible benefits of fisheries, oil reserves, and other maritime natural resources will be

significantly diminished for Iran and its Arab neighbors if they cannot find strategies and frameworks for cooperation. ASEAN's experience at the other side of the Indo-Pacific may yet provide an inspiration for improving regional governance.

Beyond economics, ASEAN can provide direct leadership when it comes to promoting peace, security, and stability in the Persian Gulf. Certainly, the status quo in the Persian Gulf does not seem to be successful at peacebuilding. From the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018, the re-imposition of economic sanctions on Iran, to Tehran's decision to enrich more uranium and the problem of military insecurity seems to be worsening in the region. One problem is that there are few security mechanisms to serve as forums for the Gulf States and external powers to foster dialogue. The region could do far worse than consulting the AOIP, given that ASEAN's experience might provide a blueprint for economic growth, mutual respect, and non-interference. The extension of AOIP precepts and principles could help to bring peace, stability, and security to the region.

Since its formation, ASEAN has been successful at maintaining security and stability in Southeast

Asia and promoting such values in the wider Asia-Pacific. More recently, ASEAN has begun to exert greater influence over the incipient Indo-Pacific megaregion. It would not be a break with history, then, for ASEAN to play a role in the Persian Gulf.

Finally, it is worth noting that there are selfish reasons for ASEAN states to seek an extended role in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere in the Greater Indo-Pacific: doing so will enhance ASEAN's status regionally and globally by establishing a foothold and influence in another critical subregion of the larger Indo-Pacific space. Its member states will subsequently enjoy economic opportunities along with enhanced prospects of peace and stability. The region is a promising market for Indo-Pacific countries, with nearly 200 million residents and a relatively young, dynamic population. The Persian Gulf also consists of mostly oil-producing countries that are important to ASEAN's economic development. In all, there are some enormous mutual benefits—at least, potential ones—to be gained from greater ASEAN involvement with its far neighbors on the other side of the Indian Ocean. ■

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Reed, “How Tanker Attacks in the Strait of Hormuz Could Affect Oil Prices,” *New York Times*, 13 June 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific 2019,” ASEAN, <https://asean2019.go.th/>.

<sup>3</sup> Angel Damayanti, “Indo Pacific Connectivity: Toward Competition or Cooperation?” *Asia Studies International Journal* 1, no. 1 (2019): 1–7.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2018), 7–12.

<sup>5</sup> Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh and Bahador Zarei, “Maritime Boundary Delimitation in the Persian Gulf,” *International Studies Journal* 14, no. 2 (2017): 49–66.

<sup>6</sup> “Strait of Hormuz: Assessing the Threat to Oil Flows through the Strait,” Robert Strauss Center, <https://www.strausscenter.org/>. See also Leslie Hayward, “Infographic: The World’s Oil Transit Chokepoints,” *The Fuse*, 2 October 2015, <https://energyfuse.org/>.

<sup>7</sup> ICC International Maritime Bureau, “Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships,” July 2021, <https://www.icc-ccs.org/>.