

ASEAN's Role in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy

By Kavi Chongkittavorn

Ever since US President Donald Trump announced the Indo-Pacific strategy at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation leaders' meeting in November, 2017 at Danang, Vietnam, the leaders from of the 10 member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), have been anxious trying to figure out what it really means and to understand the possible long-term regional implications.

Eight months have elapsed and the US has not yet come out with detailed strategic and operational plans, except for some outlines. The US State Department views the Indo-Pacific strategy in an all-encompassing way, which includes security, economic, and social aspects. The Defense Department's version, however, puts more emphasis on strategic matters. Both share key commonalities of an ideal Indo-Pacific region that must be free from any coercion, open for free and competitive trade, abide by rules of law and universal principles. Emphasis is also placed by both on commercial governance as well as high-quality investment in infrastructure and connectivity.

In his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018 in Singapore, Defense Secretary General James Mattis highlighted four pivotal elements of this strategy. First, it has to do with the maritime commons, which requires capacity and capabilities building in naval and law enforcement. It is aimed at improving monitoring and projection of maritime borders and interests within the region. Second, it is about expanding interoperability and establishing a network of allies and partners working together to increase mutual trust between militaries and economies. Third, it aims at strengthening the rule of law, civil society and transparent governance, promoting sustainable economic development. Finally, it foresees an increasing role of private sector in promoting development and finance institutions to be "better, more responsive partners." Transfer of knowledge and technology with end-to-end solutions would also be front and center to this approach without abandoning economic sovereignty of recipient nations.

The essence of US Indo-Pacific strategy has been aptly summarized by General Mattis, who called it a subset of the US broader security strategy: "Make no mistake: America is in the Indo-Pacific to stay. This is our priority theater," he declared. Indeed, the Pacific Command, which oversees security stretching both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, has changed its name to the Indo-Pacific Command. During the informal meeting with ASEAN defense minister on the sidelines of the Shangri-la Dialogue, Gen Mattis praised the group's consensus-making process, which aims to avoid confrontation. He reiterated that ASEAN centrality remains vital to the success of the Indo-Pacific strategy.

Over the past months, Australia, Japan, and India, which are democratic allies of the United States, have also put forward their visions of Indo-Pacific strategy. They comprise similar features to the US concept, emphasizing an international rules-based order and norms, transparency, governance, maritime security, and infrastructure. Furthermore, they also pinpointed ASEAN centrality as a driving force for forging closer cooperation in the region.

Kavi Chongkittavorn
Visiting Fellow at
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However, Japan and India also have broadened the Indo-Pacific's geographic footprints to include not only the two oceans — Indian and Pacific — but also the two continents of Asia and Africa. Obviously, as major Asian economies, they would like to connect the Asian continent and business opportunities with Africa, which has enjoyed impressive growth over the past two decades.

As ASEAN has been accorded a higher profile by major powers, the 10 member-states are also under constant pressure to respond to their clarion calls and prove their mettle. Given the rapid shifts of the regional and international environment, ASEAN has to be more proactive and adopt forward-looking positions on key transnational issues such as the North Korean nuclear crisis, extremism, and cyber security. Most importantly, it must ensure that no one nation should be allowed to dominate the region. This appeal comes at the time when ASEAN is building up its regional security architecture, reliance on its existing security mechanism, and security partnerships.

For the time being, only three countries — Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam — have expressed their individual opinions about the perceived role of ASEAN in the overall Indo-Pacific scheme. Obviously, as the group's biggest economy, Indonesia has been the leading voice on the Indo-Pacific concept. In 2013, former foreign minister Marty Natalegawa proposed that ASEAN and its dialogue partners committed to peace-building and non-use of force to further prevent conflicts in the region, but received lukewarm support. However, the government under President Joko Widodo has decided to revive the idea again after Trump's announcement of Indo-Pacific with a new emphasis that rebranded Indonesia as a maritime power.

To ensure continuity, Jakarta is working closely with Thailand, the upcoming chair of ASEAN. Bangkok will coordinate all ASEAN positions and prepare a report for the members next year. At the 32nd ASEAN summit, the leaders discussed the Indo-Pacific concept but did not come up with any position. In the chairman's statement, it simply said that ASEAN looked forward to further discussing the new concept.

Granted the lack of details from Washington, ASEAN senior officials quickly filled the gap. They have already discussed and exchanged notes on points of convergence that need to be included in the ASEAN Indo-Pacific version. These are some of elements: free and open, rules based, complementary, ASEAN-led mechanism, ASEAN centrality, connectivity, infrastructure, inclusiveness, and not involving a third party.

Meanwhile, the Washington-based ASEAN diplomats have been informed by the US State Department that the details of US Indo-Pacific would soon be available. President Donald Trump is scheduled to take part in the 13th East Asian Summit in early November in Singapore. He expects to outline the contour of the Indo-Pacific strategy himself.

Despite President Trump's decisions to revoke several of the international commitments and cooperative frameworks of his predecessor Barack Obama, including the US-led Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), he has maintained existing programs and activities related to US-ASEAN bilateral cooperation. With continued strong bipartisan support, Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy will be value-added to further strengthening the US interoperability and networks of security partners in the region.

All in all, it is incumbent on ASEAN to reach out to the United States, Japan, India, and Australia to ascertain that all proposed elements are synergized and most importantly, the emerging broader strategy would place ASEAN in the center.

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