

# ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and Indonesia's Indo-Pacific Strategy: What's Next?



## Interview with Dr. Siswo Pramono

Dr. Siswo Pramono is the Director General/Head of the Policy Analysis and Development Agency (PADA) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) of the Republic of Indonesia. Dr. Pramono has served in the diplomatic service for the Republic of Indonesia in various capacities. Previously, he was the Deputy Chief of Mission, Indonesian Embassy in Berlin, Germany; the Director of the Center for Analysis and Development for Asia-Pacific and Africa regions; and the Advisor to the Permanent Representation of the Republic of Indonesia to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in the Hague. Dr. Pramono obtained a post-graduate diploma at the Australian National University (ANU), Canberra, a Master of Law degree from Monash University and a Ph.D in Political Science from ANU in 2003.



## Interviewed by Calvin Khoe | [calvinkhoe@fpcindonesia.org](mailto:calvinkhoe@fpcindonesia.org)

Calvin Khoe is a research associate and program development at the Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (FPCI) since 2018. His research interests surround Indonesian foreign policy, geopolitics, and national security. Prior to FPCI, Calvin was a research assistant at the Indonesian Institute of National Resilience (Lemhanas RI). He assisted Indonesian National Security Fellows at Canberra, Australia (2017).

**1. It has been two years since 2019, when we came up with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), and people are talking about it, complimenting it, and some people are criticizing it. What is the policy update and follow-up to the Outlook by ASEAN and Indonesia? Does the Outlook improve regional maritime cooperation, connectivity, and economic cooperation that involves India and Pacific countries?**

It is not actually two years; it should be minus one and a half years for the COVID-19 pandemic. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific was discussed, consulted, and formulated since mid-2017, mostly at the second-track levels. At the time, the Policy Analysis and Development Agency (BPPK Kemenlu) consulted more than 60 times with think tanks, universities, and government institutions, in one year, abroad and in Indonesia, including with FPCI. Subsequently, the process of the track 1,5 begins in 2018; we started the conversation with the senior officials, both domestic and abroad, in the 'semi' official meetings.

The Outlook was adopted by ASEAN in June 2019, just a couple months before the outbreak of COVID-19. It then became more difficult in the pandemic situation, the pandemic halts business and economic activities, with most of the meetings taking place online. These meetings are effective, but for implementation of the Outlook, you need more face-to-face dialogues that lead to deals.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, Indonesia and ASEAN have been engaging a lot on the mitigations of the virus, and the economic recessions that follow; we are busy with a number of meetings in G20, in the United Nations, in ASEAN etc. So, we are mostly preoccupied with the pandemic.

Actually, we have already attempted some implementations of Indo-Pacific connectivity even before the AOIP was adopted. Such as, In May 2018, we already developed a shared vision of Indonesia-India maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. It was formulated during the visit of Prime Minister Modi to Indonesia. From there, we developed some concrete cooperation on the ground; we promote business connectivity between Andaman and Nicobar, Aceh, and North Sumatra. There were exchanges of visits between chambers of commerce. The one from Andaman visited Aceh and Medan; the one from Aceh visited Port Blair (Andaman) and Chennai. In December 2018, business community in Aceh launched a pilot project of people to people connectivity, of which a local Aceh boat "Milenium" sailed directly to Port Blair with cargo from local SMEs. There was even an exhibition of Aceh products in Port Blair. Until today, we are still working hard on this connectivity. Before the pandemic, Indonesia and India formed bilateral task force, who are now finalizing the air-connectivity. There is a lot of potential for tourism cooperation between Andaman and Nicobar, Aceh and Medan. So, concrete cooperation is underway.



Aside from the development on the ground, we also have a lot of meetings for the development of the concept. The concept is an outlook. Therefore, it needs to be reviewed from time to time. In June 2018, Thailand organized an international symposium “Fostering Regional Connectivity in the Indo-Pacific Region”. It was attended by the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), ASEAN’s Secretariat; and I was there representing Indonesia.

In Indonesia with the support of Policy Analysis and Development Agency (PADA), MoFA, a Center of Indo-Pacific Study was established in National University of Padang (UNP) in November 2018. Another center of Indo-Pacific study is being developed early this year in the University of Cendrawasih, Papua.

Subsequently, in March 2019, we organized an international seminar on the Indo-Pacific Connectivity Outlook, in the Center of Indo-Pacific Study in the National University of Padang. Experts from the United States, Australia, India, Japan, Germany, South Korea, France, Russia and ASEAN countries attended the seminar.

Following from that, we also organized the first-track high level dialogues on Indo-Pacific cooperation, in Jakarta, also in March 2019, just a week after Padang’s seminar. Delegations from Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, and New Zealand were headed by their respective foreign ministers. Others were headed by deputy ministers, including China, India, Japan, South Korea, and some ASEAN member countries. US delegation was headed by a high ranking official at director general level. The meeting discussed the future direction of the cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. After that, we had visits from the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) and Australian technical delegations. The purpose of the visits was to meet with the business community in Indonesia; and to see how their version of Indo-Pacific can be synergized with the ASEAN Outlook, and thus produce tangible results on the ground.

In September 2020, last year, we actually planned to have one big economic event with the World Economic Forum, on the topic: the ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook, especially the development of infrastructure. It was intended to be a summit with 35 countries and 700 CEOs, but unfortunately, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the plan cannot be materialized. Instead of having a very big event, we had a webinar on the World Economic Forum on Indonesia. It was attended online by 50 CEOs, and President Jokowi also attended the meeting.

Therefore, if the question is whether the ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook improved maritime cooperation then, yes. We already have some projects on the ground, even though on initial steps, including works on Andaman-Nicobar, Aceh, and Medan business and air connectivity.

Hopefully, once we overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, we are going to resume all of the necessary activities to promote the Indo-Pacific Outlook.

## **2. You have said that COVID-19 has disrupted everything, including the Indo-Pacific related works. Do you agree with the assumptions that Indo-Pacific discourse in ASEAN was neglected because of COVID-19?**

No, because there are activities even during COVID-19 too. Last November’s ASEAN-Japan summit discussed cooperation on the Indo-Pacific. AOIP is about guidelines and vision. The implementation of AOIP is mostly through the ASEAN-plus-one mechanism. ASEAN and its partners have already discussed a lot; such as, the aspect of Indo-Pacific connectivity and how would such connectivity be synergized with ASEAN’s Master-Plan of ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC). All these activities were undertaken during COVID-19, thus we have a lot of discussion (mostly online) which hopefully can be materialized into deliverables when the pandemic is over.

## **3. Looking at the very wide spectrum of Indo-Pacific and approaching the year 2023 where Indonesia will have the chair of ASEAN, what is Indonesia’s strategy on Indo-Pacific? What would be the priority within the Indo-Pacific cooperation?**

There are two developments of vision; the first vision is the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific. It is an outlook – a visionary perspective. At the same time, we are still developing the second vision, our visionary perspective on the global maritime fulcrum. We already have the President’s Decree on that (Global Maritime Fulcrum), but for its implementation we still have a lot of things to do.

Infrastructure development is still the priority of the government until 2024. If you look at this situation now, even during the pandemic, the development of infrastructure is still being pursued, such as the development of toll roads, harbors – it continues.

If you look at the Indo-Pacific within the scope of Indonesia’s interest and the development of the MPAC in ASEAN, most of the project is heavily in the western parts of ASEAN. However, at the same time, we still have a lot of work to do in the eastern part of ASEAN, for instance,



connectivity between the eastern part of Indonesia and the southern part of the Philippines. Hence, development in the eastern part of ASEAN is also part of our national project in the eastern part of Indonesia. Thus, our effort is also be part of the AOIP, or even the Master-Plan on ASEAN Connectivity.

Therefore, from the Indonesian perspective, we are moving more towards the East; development of the eastern part of Indonesia such as the new deep sea-port of Bitung, development of industrial complexes and special economic zones in Sulawesi. We attract investments from China and America for development in the eastern part of Indonesia.

Bearing in mind, we are in the Asian century now. East Asia, including ASEAN, has become the center of global economic gravity. Therefore, we need to have more cooperation in that direction; the eastern part of Indonesia and the eastern part of ASEAN, toward the Pacific. Indonesia has invested to the development of its eastern region. So, Indonesia is promoting economic development in conjunction with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

#### 4.Regarding the two visions, Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum and the Indo-Pacific - can you elaborate more on the link between the two visions?

We need to start with the continental and the maritime visions that have contributed to the development in Asia-Pacific regions. APEC's narrative represents more the landscape side of the Asia-Pacific; the Pacific Rim, this means the edge of the continent. Thus, we have the Asian continent at one edge, and the American continent at the other edge. This Pacific Rim is actually part of the traditional landscape perspective.

Indo-Pacific is more a sea-scape perspective; we are talking about Indian Ocean; we are talking about Oceania, and the larger Pacific Ocean. And for this sea-scape theater, Indonesia is the fulcrum. Indonesia is right in the middle; it forms waterways that connect the two oceans. This is why the Sea-lane of Communications (SLOCs) in Indonesia are strategically important. This is true not only for the Malacca strait, but also for the sea-lanes in the eastern part of Indonesia, which are growingly more accessible.

That is why, in the implementation of the vision of maritime fulcrum, President Joko Widodo starts with the development of nautical highways or sea toll roads. Indonesia needs to develop effective connectivity within the archipelago before she connects herself with the rest

of the world. As such, for Indonesia, infrastructure is strategically important.

As Indonesia is adopting more green policy for sustainable development, there has been more integration on the development of ports, port-cities, industrial parks sustained by green energy, such as hydropower, bio-fuel, or wind.

Therefore, you can see the connectivity between hydropower development and the development of industrial parks. The products --goods or services-- produced by green energy such as hydropower will be considered as a green product as well, because the industry is sustained by renewable energy. You need to burn less fossil fuels, but you use more green energy from the water.

That is why the AOIP promotes the implementation of UN SDGs as one of the 4 clusters of cooperation. All in all, Indonesia believes in development which is interrelated; deep harbors, industrial parts, green energy and green products.

#### 5.As we know, MPAC was there on the table before the outlook on Indo-Pacific. Now that we have AOIP, has the AOIP made the implementation of MPAC any different? Does the outlook open a new channel of cooperation and funding, of course, from other partners, such as the Quad or even from outside the Quad, in regards to the MPAC?

We need to remember, the nature of AOIP as a document. So, if we are talking about ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific, this is an outlook, not a master plan. So that's why even until today, there is no a plan of action in the ASEAN Outlook.

I still remember in one of the senior official meetings, some representatives of ASEAN countries argued that this Outlook is a guidance or something visionary that we need to follow. That's why the AOIP is only more or less five pages. If you compare with the Master Plan of ASEAN Connectivity, the latter document is almost a book with many pages.

So, the ASEAN outlook is an outlook; the way ASEAN looks at the Indo-Pacific. The master plan of ASEAN connectivity is more program oriented, it is thus more technical.

In the Master Plan, you are talking about digital connectivity, you are talking about infrastructure, you are talking about how to make it happen.



AOIP is the way of how you envision, and how the cooperation must be conducted, according to the ASEAN perspective, on the Indo-Pacific. If you look at other visions of Indo-Pacific offered by other countries, for instance, they are mostly about defense, security, even containment. In our case, it will be about cooperation, the principle of win-win solution, and we also refer to the UN charter as well as the ASEAN charter.

So, AOIP and MPAC are complementary; but the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific is more like a guiding star, and then the master plan is like a vessel in which you are really doing things according to agreed plans and programs.

But the guiding star is very important so you will not be falling into the trap of proxy war and rivalries; so business and economic cooperation can navigate in these turbulent waters and produce results.

**6. Let's move on to discuss more about the geopolitics of Indo-Pacific. As we know that China and Russia do not object to the outlook, yet they are seemingly reluctant to join or even name the region with the Indo-Pacific. However we've heard China has their own term about the Indo-Pacific itself. In your opinion, what will be the benefit for China and Russia to join, to jump on board in the Indo-Pacific, and, in your opinion, why they should be in the concept?**

You should remember, the geopolitics and geo-economics surrounding the birth of various concepts of the Indo-Pacific. There are concepts from Japan, the US, India, Australia, and now even from France and Germany, which later might be adopted as an EU's concept on the Indo-Pacific. Even the UK and Canada are preparing ones.

So why so many concepts of the Indo-Pacific in the last five years? Just remember that the history of the world --the history of geopolitics of the world--started with European powers. And we experience how the European continental powers developed into colonization of the world. We learn history how Asia were colonized; Indonesia by the Dutch, India by the British, Indo-China by France, The Philippines by the US, and so on. This is the European powers. We can say that at that time, the global economic gravity was in Europe. Then, we plunged into World War II. European order collapsed as Europeans fought Europeans. And then another power came up, the American power --with the Marshall Plan, Washington Consensus etc-- the current back-bone of liberal order.

Today, the world sees the rise of Asia. And the Asian century is real: why? Look at the GDP Purchasing Power

Parity of the G20 members. Remember, the G20 represents the global economy, since all the big economies are there.

If we look at the year 2000, the portion of Asian GDP Purchasing Power Parity in the G20 was only 33%. Now, in the year 2020, it has become 45%. In 2030, ten years from now, it will be 51%. The American and European portions have been rapidly shrinking. So, we have a new constellation of economies at the global level. The global economic gravity has been shifted, rather rapidly, to Asia.

In Asian economy, we have the so-called fast-growers. There are three fast-growers, namely India --which is growing very fast-- Indonesia, and China.

So, there's a little bit of a misperception in the part of the US and European Union. It seems, for them, the rise of Asia, means the "rise of China". No, it's wrong. The rise of Asia means the rise of Asia, not only the rise of China, but also the rise of India and also the rise of Indonesia. Remember, in East Asia and Oceania, there are also three established, yet influential economies, that are still playing a very important role: Japan, South Korea and Australia. They are advanced and sustainable economies. So, the rise of Asia should not be reduced into the rise of China.

The rise of Asia is the opportunity of the world. However, some old establishment have anxiety with the rise of Asia: 'If we have the rise of Asia, what happens to the liberal order? What happens with the world order as we know it today?'

Look at the Security Council --the P5 (Permanents 5)-- they are the "winning powers" from World War II, and Asia is only represented by China. Whereas, the 10 largest contributors of peace keepers in the UN, are in fact all from Asia, including Indonesia, and Africa!

So, yes, with the rise of Asia, there will be an increasing demand about the reform of the current world order. But, it is the Indonesian position, that the reform must be done in the most inclusive and consultative way; just like the very spirit of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. The reform of world order must be discussed in multilateral forum, be it in the UN, or G20, in the spirit of renewed multilateralism. Everyone shall have a share in the making or the reform of the new global order.

Now you can see why major powers are rushing with their Indo-Pacific concepts or strategy. They would like to assure that the rise of Asia will not be prejudicial with the established order. And it is rather unfortunate that the perspective is either myopic or simplistic: the status quo versus revisionist paradigms, rather than inclusive reform.



After all, the US and Europe, I believe, due to their geopolitical nature, tend to see maritime affairs from the angle of imperialist-continental perspectives, which traditionally influenced by old Grotian approach, or Mahan's theory of sea-power. Other powers, such as India and China, or even Australia, are also continental. So, from this context, AOIP is distinctively home grown, of which as the main promotor, Indonesia is the world largest archipelago and also developing country.

All the resources of the rare Earth like lithium, graphite, cobalt - these resources are concentrated in the Indo-Pacific; those are in China, those are in Southeast Asia and those are partly in South America though there are not much, and this will be in the deep seabed. So, we are exploring the deep seabed for cobalt and other resources, and all of these are in the Indo-Pacific region.

As such, the perspective offered by AOIP is not how to dominate the sea (from the angle of hegemonic power) but on how to develop and used maritime domain as assets for national development. And since most of ASEAN member states are developing countries, the legitimate usage of the maritime belts and zones, as granted by the UNCLOS, can at best be optimized through cooperation and partnership with developed economies from Asia, Europe, and North America. That is why, the keywords of AOIP have always been: cooperation and partnership; not rivalry or containment.

This is the opportunity offered by AOIP as guiding principles for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. It is in this very context that China, Russia, as well as other developed economy should support AOIP and work within AOIP.

So, in particular for China, it is very important to use AOIP as a platform for regional cooperation. For instance, the question of the world future clean energy has also currently been anchored to the exploration and exploitation of rare-earth. China is the leading economy both for the production and control of global rare-earth business. And research has revealed that the largest deposit of rare-earth is in the Indo-Pacific, chief among others, in China, Australia and some ASEAN countries. AOIP will provide an effective platform for rare-earth cooperation.

This is also the case for Russia. Remember that connectivity today very much depends on traditional sea-route. The vital sea-route from Asia to Europe starts with the East China Sea, which is the old center of industrial sites of Japan, China, and South Korea; to the South China Sea, which is the new center of global value chain of ASEAN; then to the Strait of Malacca, the Indian

Ocean, then the Suez Canal, and then finally to Europe. This is 21,000 kilometers sea-route, with increasingly risk of congestion in the Strait of Malacca and Suez Canal.

So, the other possibility is the Northern Sea Route. It's not yet commercialized, but in the future, possibly in 2030, it is likely. This means, from East Asia and Oceania, which industrialization will be boosted by Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership –RCEP— shipments will rather sail north, to the Bering Strait, to the Russian Arctic, and then all the way to Europe. Using the traditional route to the Indian Ocean means 21 thousand kilo meters, while the Northern Sea Route is 12 thousand kilo meters - half the distance. This means saving a lot of fuel and working hours, and thus reducing operation cost and then promising more profits to companies.

This new connectivity will strategically provide room for cooperation in AOIP as it concerns the Russian Arctic and Russian Far East. This is also an opportunity for industrialization of ASEAN, as far as the Indo-Pacific is concerned. Why? Because we are talking about the rise of Asia; in Asia – Europe Meeting (ASEM), Russia is part of Asia. Today for example, the supply of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) from Russia to the Asian market is 6% of the whole exportation of Russian LNG in 2020. Ten or fifteen years from now, 2035, it is projected to be 30%.

As such, it is in the interest of ASEAN, China and Russia to work together using the AOIP platform.

**7. Where do you place the Belt and Road Initiative in the Indo-Pacific? Many people have said that the Belt and Road Initiative is by nature already the Indo-Pacific project, so where do you place the Belt and Road in this bigger vision of Indo-Pacific?**

Since in elementary school, we learn about European 'continent' and Asian 'continent'. While socio-cultural identity matters, but actually Asians and Europeans are on the same continent. We might call it Eurasian Continent, in the new context. Asia is in the eastern tip of the continent and Europe is the western tip of the continent, so whole continent can be called Eurasia.

Now, there are two poles; in the Western Pole we have the European Union, and in the Eastern Pole we have the RCEP, which is the largest economy bloc in the world. Now, how to connect the EU and RCEP? I think you have two ways to do this; from Europe reaching Asia and from Asia reaching Europe.



In 2019, I attended in Brussels the inauguration of Europe-Asia connectivity, that means from Europe into Asia. It was launched by President Juncker, the President of European Commission, and Prime Minister Shinzō Abe of Japan. It was a Japanese and EU project on Europe-Asia connectivity, connecting the West to the East.

However, in the last 5 years, we have also seen another connectivity project that connects the East to the West. This is the Belt and Route Initiative (BRI). My point is that the global demand on infrastructure is now super-high. Through global synergy, cooperation and partnership, we can optimize the rather limited resources to address the pressing needs of connectivity.

In between the East and West, there has developed a Eurasia Free Trade Agreement (FTA), the motors are Russia and central Asia. This is also a strategic part of 'connecting the connectivities'. So, I should say that BRI is also part of the big project of Eurasian connectivity in the new context. How to connect the polar of economic growth and activities in the eastern tip -the RCEP-- and the middle part --Eurasian FTA or CEPA--all the way to western tip --the European Union/ UK.

The good thing is that, with more offers of proposed projects, be it by Asian or Europeans initiators, then you have more options. So, just let them compete and you can have the best offer for the best price and benefit. This is the best thing about connecting connectivity and the competition aspect of it. Not only by one single connectivity, but many connectivity and every single country has all the benefits of choosing the best connectivity that meets their economic needs.

**8. On ASEAN and also the United States - let's start with the United States. What do you wish for President Biden's Indo-Pacific policy? A media report has said that the National Security Team developed by President Biden is one of the largest, even in the history of the modern United States. If we are looking at the composition of the National Security Team, President Biden is supported with a coordinator, specifically for Indo-Pacific and Asia. So, what do you expect from President Biden in Asia and Indo-Pacific policy?**

I think, first and foremost, what we need to do is not to monopolize the economic pie, but to enlarge the economic pie. To enlarge the pie, we need effective cooperation and partnership. This has always been the philosophy behind AOIP. In order to do that, we need to ease rivalry between the US and China – be it in the form of the trade war or technological war. No one is going to win in such a race to the bottom. This is just a lose-lose situation.

If semantic matters, the political term "rivalry" has a negative connotation while the economic term "competition" is more neutral. Therefore, we need to turn rivalry into competition in order to improve the competitiveness advantages.

My point is: stop the rivalries, start the competition. I think President Biden's Indo-Pacific policy will make a more balanced approach between the security and the economy.

As I've mentioned before, if we would like to enlarge the economic pie so that everyone has a bit of share, you need to cooperate. Cooperation also means competition. You need to produce efficiently so that your product will be cheaper and at the same time have better quality as well. In so doing, you will win the competition.

So, I think we still have some expectations, despite the confrontational US-China high-level meeting in Anchorage, Alaska recently. While circumstances are of course different, but we learn from history, about rapprochement between the United States and China, initiated by President Nixon; so, why not today?

We also cannot be naive in believing that the contest of hegemonic power between the US and China will be over anytime soon. However, in order to optimize the global economic pie, I believe that one polar is not enough. We need a multipolar world with strong multilateralism.

The various concepts or strategies of Indo-Pacific must accommodate these multipolarism and multilateralism. Indo-Pacific, as a sea-scape, stretches from American to African continents. You cannot escape the multipolar sea-scape and connectivity. Even Africa is transforming itself into a future polar through an African Continent FTA.

**9. How about ASEAN centrality? I see that ASEAN centrality faces two things. Firstly is the ongoing rivalry between the US and China which is full of tension. Secondly, it is about another powers' approach to the Indo-Pacific; such as the Indo-Pacific approach offered by Japan, India, Australia, French, Germany, and even the UK. My question is, how does ASEAN centrality cope and also navigate with the rivalry and a lot of approaches coming in, while we are literally in the middle of it?**

ASEAN centrality means ASEAN autonomy is respected by others; and ASEAN is able to make decision for its own best interests.



Despite delicate issues such as the South China Sea or Myanmar, I think, in general, ASEAN is getting more resilient from time to time. With all of its limitation, in particular in assuring that all members abide by the ASEAN Charter, ASEAN is getting mature politically. There is a lot of improvement in the Human Development Index of all ASEAN countries. ASEAN is also less fragile than 20 or 10 years ago.

So, what does it mean for ASEAN? It means ASEAN is getting stronger and richer. It is now time for ASEAN to have more self-confidence, to strengthen the autonomy of ASEAN. The conclusion of the AOIP is a proof of such autonomy. We should also remember that AOIP is not the extension of another Indo-Pacific concept offered by other countries. The AOIP is ASEAN made.

ASEAN should send a strong message to the major powers, that they are most welcome to cooperate with ASEAN, but they should not drag any member of ASEAN into their proxy rivalry.

Business community welcomes the positive development of ASEAN. There is strong evidence that more companies are moving into ASEAN region for reasons relating to relocation or diversification of their global value chain. More industrial parks being developed in ASEAN countries than before. What does it mean?

ASEAN centrality is not only a political term that ASEAN declares, but it needs evidence. And ASEAN has such evidence: ASEAN role for maintaining regional stability is respected and expected by others; more international companies are coming because they believe that ASEAN region is stable and that there won't be war in ASEAN or the larger region of East Asia. Indeed, in the last fifty years major inter-state wars have been absent in the region. This is the product of ASEAN centrality in the real term.

ASEAN also does not have to choose between China or the United States, but rather China and the United States should choose ASEAN.

Now, there is early sign that in East Asia and Oceania—at least in most RCEP member countries—the COVID-19 pandemic has been put under-control. Hopefully, by the end of this year (2021), the economy will start move again, so will the AOIP.



## Policy to Watch