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## Key Takeaways

### FPCI-GRIPS Virtual Public Forum

# “Addressing Geopolitical Challenges in the Region and Beyond through ASEAN-Led Mechanisms”

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Speaker:

- **H.E. Ong Keng Yong**, Executive Deputy Chairman of S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies; Secretary-General of ASEAN (2003 - 2007)
- **H.E. Robert Matheus Michael Tene**, Deputy Secretary General for ASEAN Political Security Community (2021-2024)
- **Prof. Tsutomu Kikuchi**, Professor Emeritus at Aoyama Gakuin University

**Key Takeaways:**

1. ASEAN has contributed to the stability and development in Asia over many years and the organization has begun to take a proactive stance towards contributing to the world through ASEAN-led frameworks such as the East Asia Summit, and ASEAN Regional Forum.
2. ASEAN member states have a sense of agency that binds them together. The development of ASEAN's political security community as part of ASEAN's three community pillars is concrete evidence that ASEAN member states are willing to face challenges in different sectors together.
3. ASEAN-led mechanisms are not only made for internal ASEAN community building, some mechanisms are designed to engage ASEAN with external partners. Arrangements such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Three, East Asia Summit becomes a venue where countries join together under the leading role of ASEAN-led mechanisms in order to deepen cooperation between ASEAN countries and their external partners.
4. Until recently, there were still hesitations from some member states of the East Asia Summit to bring the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) to the main platform of the East Asia Summit. If the relation between the AOIP and the East Asia Summit were

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to be developed further, the policy agendas within the AOIP could be more effectively implemented in the region.

5. The ASEAN Indo-Pacific Forum was established as a concrete means to implement cooperation within the Indo-Pacific region based on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).
6. Following a change into a more pluralistic international order, ASEAN is expected to play a pivotal role in influencing major powers like the US and China in the Asia Pacific region. However, this changing international order has not been utilized well by ASEAN due to its attachment to ASEAN centrality. In order to develop more active and influential regional policies in the Asia Pacific region, ASEAN centrality needs to undergo a change from a rhetorical centrality into a substantial centrality.
7. Adaptations still need to be made to ASEAN-led mechanisms, especially in ensuring their continuity over periods of chairmanship changes. Certain challenges still arise from chairmanship changes, such as discrepancies in terms of what topics should be prioritized and continued from the previous chairmanship.
8. The AOIP is regarded as ASEAN's only commonly endorsed document that guides ASEAN on how to deal with Indo Pacific regional affairs. Therefore, ASEAN member countries need to continue to implement, update, and review the AOIP with the goal of advancing multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific region.

## **Discussion Summary:**

### **How ASEAN Addresses Security Challenges**

H.E. Ong Keng Yong introduced ASEAN as a group of countries that have a sense of agency. When faced with a certain set of challenges, ASEAN countries tend to ask themselves “what can we do as an individual ASEAN member state and as an organization?” He recalled that in 2003, ASEAN member states came together to organize the ASEAN political security community, a collection of all the ASEAN member states coming together to tackle political and security related challenges in the region.

The first step needed to establish the ASEAN political security community was to come to an agreement through understanding the different characteristics of the ASEAN community and putting together a single ‘ASEAN position.’ H.E. Ong Keng Yong commended ASEAN, stating that the good thing about ASEAN is even if the leaders of each country may initially disagree with one another, they will sit down and find a way forward. With that commitment, ASEAN was

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able to knock together a set of different ideas into a plan called the ASEAN political security community blueprint.

H.E. Ong Keng Yong remarks that the ASEAN political security community is now quite well established after all these years. Other than the political security community, ASEAN also has a generally positive cooperation through the ASEAN economic community and ASEAN socio-cultural community as part of the three community pillars. However, he remarks that we also see many new challenges facing the ASEAN region. Dialogue and planning between ASEAN member states are also not as easy as they used to be because of how much each member state has democratized, but the dynamism keeps H.E. Ong Keng Yong optimistic nonetheless.

### **The Establishment of the ASEAN Indo-Pacific Forum (APF)**

H.E. Robert Matheus Michael Tene explained that AOIP itself was developed as a response to the geopolitical challenges that ASEAN faces. First, the deep distrust among major powers that has deepened the strategic rivalry, confrontations, and the fault line among countries. Second, the overlapping claims of territorial sovereignty or territorial jurisdiction. Third, the so-called nontraditional security challenges. The AOIP was designed to respond to these challenges and to offer the narrative of cooperation as an alternate narrative against rivalry or confrontations.

The type of cooperation that the AOIP envisages consists of two parts. First part consists of goals, principles, norms that we would like ASEAN to promote in the Indo-Pacific region, principles, goals, and norms that are already adhered to in previous documents. Second part contains the actual type of cooperation that we are promoting. Which are not new, namely maritime cooperation, economic cooperation, achievement attaining the sustainable development goals (SDGs), and strengthening connectivity.

H.E. Robert Matheus Michael Tene added that the APF is a means to bring about the concrete implementation of the second part of the AOIP, which are the four priority areas. The purpose of the forum is to bring them all together to have a comprehensive view and picture about the type of cooperation that we can develop under the Indo-Pacific region. It is a separate forum because until last year, there was still a certain hesitancy from some of the members of the East Asia summit to bring the AOIP to the main platform of framework and cooperation under the East Asia summit.

### **The Role of the East Asia Forum in Easing Tensions between the US and China**

Professor Tsutomu Kikuchi prefaced his discussion by stating that the Indo-Pacific is now in the early stage of development in a new pluralistic international order. An order that is not only composed of big developed countries but also small and medium-sized countries. In this new order, ASEAN is expected to play a pivotal role. Traditionally, big power politics defined regional

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orders. However, the traditional narrative of big power politics like the US-China rivalry is now against the existing reality of the Indo Pacific. The Indo Pacific is more than the US and China, now there are more powerful and influential countries emerging in it.

Despite stating that ASEAN is expected to play a pivotal role, Professor Kikuchi argued that ASEAN centrality is actually turning ASEAN to be more inward-focused rather than outward. He felt as if ASEAN has lost its flexibility in responding to many serious challenges due to its strong attachment to ASEAN centrality. Looking at the Indo Pacific region in the last ten years, many new multilateral developments have emerged – notably AUKUS and even an India-Indonesia-Australia trilateral cooperation. He regretted to see that ASEAN has not responded well to these new multilateral agreements due to the attachment to its traditional concept of ASEAN centrality. If ASEAN were to tone down ASEAN centrality, it may be able to develop more active policy and relations, paving the way for ASEAN to move from a rhetorical centrality to a more substantial centrality.

By issuing AOIP, Professor Kikuchi believed that ASEAN is clearly demonstrating that they would like to play a pivotal role in shaping regional orders of the Indo Pacific. However, he added that the AOIP is still weak in terms of implementing the variety of its agendas. He stated that since five years has passed since the establishment of the AOIP, there is a necessity to review it, given the many changes made since its first publication.

### **Adaptation needed for ASEAN-led Mechanisms**

H.E. Ong Keng Yong mentions that it is necessary to think about how to make these mechanisms more effective. One diplomatic maneuver is that before the respective chair of ASEAN assumes their responsibility, there should be some form of discussion among the respective chair to find out what is to be the priority topic during their term, and how they can realize the specific objective and goals. Right now, the challenge is every year ASEAN changes the chairmanship according to each country's official name in alphabetical order and very often, there is a discrepancy in terms of what topic to be given priority, what issues should be addressed right away and to be continued from the previous chair. In this respect, the ASEAN secretariat led by the Secretary-General can play a part in ensuring a certain continuity. It is necessary for us to be more structured and maybe more organizationally focused when we pass the chairmanship over to the new ASEAN member country.

Another point is to be prepared to negotiate with ASEAN's panel partners. Looking at many of the specific initiatives, projects, and ambitions of the respective ASEAN chair, there can be more family table discussion to see how a particular idea or project can continue from one ASEAN chair to the next ASEAN chair.

### **The Leading Role of ASEAN-Led Mechanisms in the Forthcoming ASEAN Community Building Process**

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H.E. Robert Matheus Michael Tene stated that ASEAN community building is an ongoing effort and it will never end. There are the internal community building as well as the external elements. Both are closely related, because the prosperity of the ASEAN regions, ASEAN economies, relies not only on the development and strength of its internal economies but also on the global economy. Therefore, it is crucial for ASEAN to have open relations with all the major economic powers to ensure that ASEAN's prosperity can continue to be maintained as well as contribute to the prosperity of the global and regional economy. Security wise, it's the same, and ASEAN has to have a say – ASEAN has to be able to have influence on how the situation in the wider region surrounding Southeast Asia is being managed for our interest can be taken into account.

For ASEAN led mechanisms, there are mechanisms aimed for internal ASEAN community building to further strengthen, widen, and deepen the cooperation among ASEAN countries. But this mechanism is also designed to be able to engage external partners. For instance, at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting, ASEAN Economic Ministers Meeting they also have the plus one meetings with the ministers of our partners as well. We have arrangements like the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Three, East Asia Summit.

The ASEAN Plus Three is one of the important contributions of ASEAN history. The emergence of the trilateral meetings between the plus three countries is a good thing where the plus three countries are able to meet from time to time whenever there is a need to discuss issues that are exclusive to their interests. The ASEAN industry as well as the various ASEAN led-mechanisms contribute to this enhancement of trust and confidence building that allow a trilateral summit among the plus three to be realized. Perhaps the ASEAN-led mechanism cannot serve the whole gamut of the interests of our partners, which is why on certain issues they decided to create the minimal arrangement, bilateral or trilateral arrangements. But those types of arrangements cannot replace the ASEAN-led mechanism in which everyone comes together.

The important role of the chairman of ASEAN is to make use of the flexibility that is inherent in ASEAN-led mechanisms. Without having to make a lot of changes in the mechanisms, as long as the chairman of ASEAN has the willingness, the capabilities, and support from ASEAN domestically, there are a lot of things the chairman of ASEAN can do to promote. The prevention of conflict, management of conflict, or even, efforts to take some steps towards conflict resolution.

### **Advancing Multilateralism in the Asia Pacific Region**

Professor Tsutomu Kikuchi stated that the AOIP is ASEAN's only commonly endorsed document on how to deal with the Indo Pacific regional affairs. He is hopeful that, in the coming years, ASEAN member countries continue to implement and update the AOIP. He further suggested that ASEAN may need to upgrade or review the AOIP, especially noting that it has been five years since its initial publication.

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Professor Kikuchi also hopes that ASEAN countries will more closely identify the relation between AOIP and the East Asia Summit. He added that the East Asia Summit would provide the best venue to implement AOIP and its agendas. He further stated that if the relation between the AOIP and the East Asia Summit were to be developed further, the ASEAN-Indo Pacific Forum may well be included as a part of the East Asia Summit process. Continuing on his point, he gave remarks that the ASEAN Regional Forum should also be reviewed to become a part of the broader East Asia Summit.

If the inclusivity between AOIP and the East Asia Summit were to be further developed, different working groups for each AOIP policy agenda could be established. AOIP included four policy agendas, including those of maritime security and connectivity. Each working group should be co-chaired with member countries. The results found in which should then be reported to the annual East Asia Summit. To conclude his discussion, Professor Kikuchi hopes ASEAN further brushes up the processes and mechanisms to implement AOIP and its agendas.