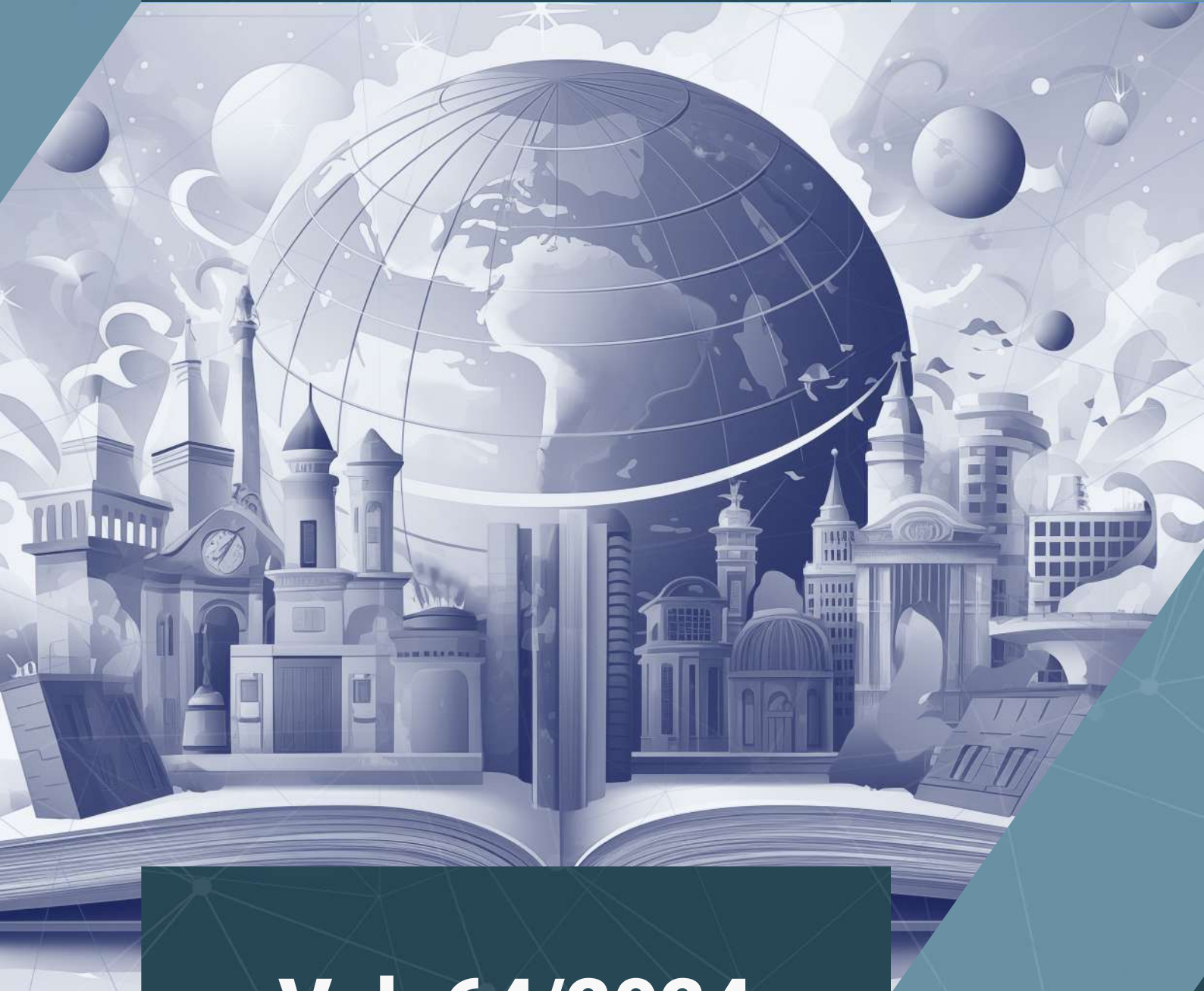




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"Navigating the Seas of Diplomacy: ASEAN's Role in Shaping the Indo-Pacific Outlook"

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ABSTRACT

The Indo-Pacific region has become essential for global trade and security, with its significance increasing due to the emergence of China and India. ASEAN, as a regional organization consisting of ten Southeast Asian countries, plays a vital role in shaping the region's outlook by fostering regional cooperation, economic integration, and security. This paper explores the challenges and opportunities ASEAN faces in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook and seeks strategies for ASEAN to effectively navigate diplomatic waters. Through a normative legal method, it is found that ASEAN encounters challenges such as conflicts involving major powers, potential disputes over member sovereignty, and the necessity to respond assertively to external pressures. ASEAN's inclusive and consensus-based approach is appreciated by many regional actors. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) emphasizes inclusivity and cooperation, aligning with the interests of both major powers and smaller states. To navigate diplomatic challenges and shape the Indo-Pacific outlook, ASEAN can actively participate in regional and international forums, promote dialogue and cooperation, and utilize its existing mechanisms and networks.

Keywords: *diplomacy, ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, global trade, regional security, sovereignty.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The integration plan of ASEAN member states has been in place since 2020. The combined population of the ten ASEAN countries exceeds 600 million people. According to *Eurostat*, between 2011 and 2021, imports of goods from the Indo-Pacific region to the EU have grown considerably, more than exports, which also displayed a steady growth. Imports have increased from €515 billion in 2011 to €844 billion in 2021 (+64%), while exports grew from €407 billion to €583 billion in the same period (+44%). With extra-EU imports growing more than exports, the EU's trade deficit with the Indo-Pacific region reached €261 billion, the highest value since 2011 (€109 billion).

While the potential is clear, significant weaknesses and obstacles stand in the way of successful integration. The member states have

numerous differences, including conflict, suspicion, governance issues, varying levels of development, and diverse foreign policy interests [1].

These internal challenges often outweigh external threats. Despite plans for an integrated ASEAN resembling a single market and security community, the ASEAN member states (AMS) remain committed to the principle of non-interference [2]. For both regional and international observers, reconciling non-interference with the need for legal frameworks to support functional trade agreements is increasingly difficult. It is curious that ASEAN would set such ambitious goals in light of these challenges.

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) aims to strengthen an inclusive regional framework and promote cooperation over competition [3]. It serves as a blueprint for

ASEAN's involvement in the broader Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, providing a foundation for enhanced cooperation between ASEAN and the United States through their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP).

The Indo-Pacific region has become crucial for global trade and security, with its significance increasing due to the rise of China and India. ASEAN, comprising ten Southeast Asian countries, plays a vital role in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook. This concept encompasses the Indian Ocean and the western and central Pacific Ocean, home to some of the world's busiest shipping lanes, making it essential for global trade and security. The Indo-Pacific outlook influences the strategic environment in the region, affecting the interests of major powers like the United States, China, and Japan [4].

ASEAN has been key in promoting regional cooperation, economic integration, and security, and in fostering dialogue and cooperation among major powers in the region. However, ASEAN faces challenges such as increasing competition among major powers and a lack of consensus among its member states.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This article was researched through normative legal method which uses descriptive qualitative approach, aiming to provide a clear depiction of the issue being investigated. This approach enables researchers to thoroughly understand the phenomenon under examination through comprehensive normative data collection. The researcher briefly analyze the international laws regarding diplomacy, and utilizes ASEAN regional decisions in navigating its role, to find correct answer about how they shape the Indo-Pacific Outlook and overcome its challenges.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. Overview of The Indo-Pacific Outlook and its Importance.

The Indo-Pacific outlook is a concept that refers to the region that encompasses the Indian Ocean and the western and central Pacific Ocean. The concept has gained traction in recent years due to the increasing economic and strategic importance of the region. The Indo-Pacific outlook is important because it is a key driver of global economic growth and a critical area for regional security [5].

The Indo-Pacific region is home to some of the world's fastest-growing economies, and it is a critical area for global trade. The region's importance for global trade and security makes it essential for countries to play an active role in shaping its future. The Indo-Pacific outlook can help promote regional cooperation and stability, which is essential for economic growth and development. The outlook can also help address regional security challenges, such as maritime security and territorial disputes.

The Indo-Pacific region is also important because it is a critical area for global energy security [6]. The region is home to some of the world's largest oil and gas reserves, and it is a critical area for the transportation of energy resources. The region's importance for energy security makes it essential for countries to play an active role in shaping its future.

Critics, particularly those from the realist school of international relations theory, have asserted that multilateral institutions such as ASEAN and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) did not meet their objectives. More comprehensive multilateral security dialogues in the region followed with the inception of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in the early 1990s and the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005. If states conclude they have little to gain from collaborating on regional or international security problems there is little prospect that they will play the 'long game' demanded by diffuse reciprocity or adhere to general organizing principles sufficiently binding to ensure their strategic restraint [7].

Many Asian sovereignties were the products of accelerated postwar decolonisation and many of their territorial, irredentist and ideological differences which generated profound security dilemmas. Under such conditions, the prospects for Indo-Pacific multilateral security politics were dim. As John Ruggie (perhaps somewhat ruefully) observed, a 'reasonably stable' balance of power underpinned by the superpowers' embrace of bilateral alliances became a predominant mode of Asian security politics [8].

ASEAN has played a significant role in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook through its ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) initiative [9]. The AOIP promotes the principles of openness, inclusiveness, transparency, respect for international law, and ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific region. ASEAN's role in shaping the

Indo-Pacific outlook is crucial because the region's importance for global trade and security makes it essential for countries to play an active role in shaping its future.

One of the main challenges in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook is the rivalry between the United States and China in the region. The rivalry has created new, more complex tensions that have made it difficult for ASEAN to maintain its centrality in the region. Another challenge is the need to balance the interests of different countries in the region, which can be difficult given the diversity of the region.

As with a number of other influential ways of conceptualizing regional security relations, the idea that strategic partnerships might play a significant part in determining security outcomes in regional security relationships is intuitively appealing, but as with a number of other conceptual innovations such as 'security communities' and the idea of security governance itself, the reality can often be somewhat less impressive.

For all the discussion of a Southeast Asian security community—much less and East Asian version—for example, the impact of norms, culture and identity formation is hard to discern. Given the inability of the ASEAN states to achieve a common position on the implications of China's rise and its concomitant territorial claims, the impact of common views would seem to be negligible when faced with real material challenges—even within the limited confines of the ASEAN grouping. The ability of 'Asian' norms to influence or constrain the behavior of China in particular looks even more limited at this stage—an especially noteworthy possibility given China's significance in the putative Indo-Pacific region.

If it has proved difficult for the Asia-Pacific's/Southeast Asia's most enduring and supposedly influential organization to exert any sort of normative influence or develop a collective position in relation to China's territorial claims—which is arguably the most important challenge since ASEAN's inception—how much more difficult will it be to develop an Indo-Pacific perspective where none has ever existed before?

Despite these challenges, ASEAN has opportunities to shape the Indo-Pacific outlook. One of the opportunities is the growing interest in the region from other countries, such as Japan, India, and Australia. These countries have their

own initiatives for the Indo-Pacific region, and ASEAN can work with them to promote regional cooperation and stability. Another opportunity is the increasing importance of soft power in shaping the region's outlook. ASEAN can use its soft power approach to promote its interests and values in the region.

To navigate the seas of diplomacy and shape the Indo-Pacific outlook, ASEAN can use several strategies. One strategy is to promote regional cooperation and integration through initiatives such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area and the ASEAN Economic Community. Another strategy is to strengthen its institutional capacity to deal with regional challenges, such as maritime security and environmental issues. ASEAN can also work with other countries in the region to promote regional stability and security.

The Indo-Pacific outlook is a critical area for global trade and security, and ASEAN's role in shaping it is crucial. Despite the challenges, ASEAN has opportunities to promote regional cooperation and stability. By navigating the seas of diplomacy and using its soft power approach, ASEAN can shape the Indo-Pacific outlook in a way that promotes its interests and values.

3.2. ASEAN's Role in Shaping The Indo-Pacific Outlook.

ASEAN's role in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook is multifaceted and significant. Through its ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), ASEAN provides a framework for its member states to collectively approach the region. The AOIP emphasizes ASEAN centrality, unity, and cooperation with external partners, promoting a peaceful, prosperous, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. As a regional organization comprising ten Southeast Asian countries, ASEAN has a collective voice and represents the interests of its member states in regional and global affairs. ASEAN's role in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook is based on its principles of promoting peace, stability, and prosperity in the region through dialogue, cooperation, and consensus-building.

ASEAN's centrality in the Indo-Pacific region allows it to engage with major powers and other stakeholders to shape the regional architecture and promote a rules-based order [10]. ASEAN has established various mechanisms and platforms for dialogue and cooperation, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), which provide opportunities for

ASEAN to express its views, address regional challenges, and promote cooperation among regional and external actors.

ASEAN plays a crucial role in promoting peace and stability in the region. The AOIP highlights the importance of upholding international law, peaceful resolution of disputes, and avoiding unilateral actions that may escalate tensions. By actively engaging with major powers and other stakeholders, ASEAN contributes to shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook as a region that prioritizes dialogue, cooperation, and the rule of law.

Furthermore, ASEAN's principles of non-interference, consensus-building, and inclusivity contribute to its role in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook. ASEAN's approach of engaging all major powers and stakeholders in the region helps to mitigate tensions and promote dialogue, cooperation, and confidence-building measures. ASEAN's efforts in promoting regional integration, connectivity, and economic cooperation also contribute to shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook by fostering economic growth, stability, and development in the region. ASEAN's role in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook lies in fostering regional cooperation and connectivity [11]. The AOIP emphasizes the need to enhance physical and digital connectivity among ASEAN member states and with external partners. By promoting infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and people-to-people exchanges, ASEAN contributes to shaping the Indo-Pacific as an interconnected and economically vibrant region.

ASEAN also plays a crucial role in promoting inclusivity and dialogue in the Indo-Pacific. The AOIP underscores the importance of ASEAN centrality, ensuring that ASEAN remains at the center of regional cooperation and decision-making processes. ASEAN actively engages with major powers and other stakeholders to ensure that all voices are heard and that the interests of ASEAN member states are taken into consideration.

Overall, ASEAN's role in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook is significant as it represents the interests of its member states, promotes dialogue and cooperation, and contributes to the development of a rules-based regional order that ensures peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, ASEAN's role in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook extends to enhancing maritime security and cooperation. The AOIP

recognizes the significance of maintaining a rules-based order in the maritime domain, ensuring freedom of navigation and addressing non-traditional security challenges. ASEAN actively promotes dialogue and cooperation among member states and external partners to enhance maritime security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

ASEAN's role in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook is to foster a peaceful and cooperative regional environment, promote dialogue and engagement, and uphold the principles of ASEAN centrality and unity. Through the AOIP and its active participation in diplomatic meetings and engagements, ASEAN strives to ensure that the interests and concerns of its member states are taken into account in the evolving dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region.

3.3. The Challenges and Opportunities for ASEAN in Shaping The Indo-Pacific Outlook

ASEAN faces both challenges and opportunities in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook. One of the challenges is the diverse and competing visions of the Indo-Pacific among major powers in the region. The United States, China, Japan, India, and Australia each have their own interpretations and strategies for the Indo-Pacific, which can create tensions and disagreements. ASEAN's role in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook is to navigate these competing visions and promote inclusivity and cooperation.

Another challenge is maintaining ASEAN's centrality and unity in the face of power rivalries. ASEAN's strength lies in its ability to bring together diverse actors and facilitate dialogue and cooperation. However, the power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific can sometimes overshadow ASEAN's voice and influence. ASEAN must work to ensure that its interests and perspectives are taken into account in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook.

On the other hand, there are also opportunities for ASEAN in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook. ASEAN's inclusive and consensus-based approach is valued by many actors in the region. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) emphasizes inclusivity and cooperation, which resonates with the interests of both major powers and smaller states. ASEAN can leverage this approach to promote dialogue, build trust, and foster cooperation among Indo-Pacific actors [12].

Additionally, ASEAN's geographical position as a connector between the Indian and

Pacific Oceans gives it a unique role in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook. ASEAN can serve as a bridge between different regions and facilitate connectivity, trade, and people-to-people exchanges. ASEAN's efforts to enhance connectivity and infrastructure development can contribute to the overall development and integration of the Indo-Pacific region.

In conclusion, while ASEAN faces challenges in navigating competing visions and maintaining its centrality, it also has opportunities to promote inclusivity, cooperation, and connectivity in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook. By leveraging its consensus-based approach and geographical position, ASEAN can play a significant role in shaping a more cooperative and integrated Indo-Pacific region.

3.4 How ASEAN Navigate The Seas of Diplomacy to Shape The Indo-Pacific Outlook

ASEAN can navigate the seas of diplomacy to shape the Indo-Pacific outlook through several strategies. First, ASEAN can strengthen its leadership role by actively promoting regional cooperation and integration. This can be achieved by implementing initiatives such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which aims to establish a harmonized regional outlook and promote collaboration.

Second, ASEAN can engage in diplomatic efforts to address the challenges posed by major powers in the region, particularly the China-US rivalry. ASEAN can play a mediating role and encourage dialogue between these powers to promote stability and prevent conflicts.

Third, ASEAN can enhance its economic diplomacy by strengthening economic cooperation and trade liberalization within the region. This can be achieved by pushing for the adoption of regional trade agreements, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and addressing trade issues and standards.

Fourth, ASEAN can actively engage with other countries and regional organizations to shape the Indo-Pacific outlook. This can involve forging partnerships and alliances with like-minded countries that share ASEAN's vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Fifth, ASEAN can prioritize maritime security and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. This can involve enhancing maritime domain awareness, promoting maritime cooperation

frameworks, and addressing issues such as illegal fishing, piracy, and territorial disputes.

Lastly, ASEAN can leverage its soft power and cultural diplomacy to shape the Indo-Pacific outlook. This can involve promoting cultural exchanges, people-to-people connections, and educational programs to foster understanding and cooperation among countries in the region.

By implementing these strategies, ASEAN can navigate the seas of diplomacy and play a proactive role in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook, promoting regional stability, economic integration, and cooperation among countries in the region.

4. CONCLUSION

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a significant geopolitical and economic hub, encompassing the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Its importance lies in its strategic location, being home to major powers, and serving as a center for trade and investment. ASEAN plays a crucial role in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook through its endorsement of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). The AOIP emphasizes inclusivity and maintaining ASEAN's centrality amid competing visions of the region. ASEAN's role is to enhance and strengthen existing mechanisms, rather than creating new ones.

However, ASEAN faces both challenges and opportunities in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook. Challenges include conflicts involving major powers, potential contestation of ASEAN's member configurations, and the need to assertively respond to external pressures. Opportunities lie in leveraging connectivity, enhancing centrality, and strengthening its position in the external environment [13].

To navigate the seas of diplomacy and shape the Indo-Pacific outlook, ASEAN can actively engage in regional and international forums, promote dialogue and cooperation, and leverage its existing mechanisms and networks. ASEAN's commitment to the AOIP and its role as a norm-setter and bridge-builder can contribute to shaping a peaceful, inclusive, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

In conclusion, ASEAN's role in shaping the Indo-Pacific outlook is significant. Through the AOIP and its commitment to maintaining

centrality, ASEAN can navigate the challenges and opportunities to contribute to a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. However, it must actively engage in diplomacy and leverage its existing mechanisms to effectively shape the region's future.

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