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Southeast Asia, ASEAN, and Great Power's Grand Strategy in the Indo-Pacific Region: Questing the Role of Türkiye

“Indo-pacific region becomes contestation of many countries for achieving geostrategic, geopolitical and geoeconomic domination in the region. (...) In Indo-Pacific region, more countries have been increasing its presence and ambition since the region own vast economic opportunity and resource but then it raises questions on how certain country have qualifications as well as limitations to pose their power in the region.”



Indo-pacific region becomes contestation of many countries for achieving geostrategic, geopolitical and geoeconomic domination in the region. In terms of historical aspect, it could be seen that oceans often become central domain of the great power competition as well as regional and global hegemonies.¹ For centuries, world's economy and trade have been carried out by the sea way, as more globalization and the rise of middle countries power take place alongside with major power countries as actor globally, the emphasize of free, secure and open maritime domain remain relevant. According to Geoffrey Till, to achieve success in maritime dominion one clownery should be able to realize a huge advantage of associating economic aspect and military power, combining four virtuous aspects circle which are maritime trade, maritime resources, naval strength, and maritime supremacy.² In Indo-Pacific region, more countries have been increasing

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1 Ariel G. L, Great Power Competition in the Southern Oceans from the Indo-Pacific to the South Atlantic, 2023, P.1.

2 Geoffrey Till, Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century, 2004, P.34.

“While Indo-pacific region contains three of the world’s largest economies; China, India and Japan, the great power competition in Indo-pacific region is dominated by three structural geopolitical dynamics: the rise of China as hegemony power in Asia, the rise of India, and U.S. response towards China’s rise.”

its presence and ambition since the region own vast economic opportunity and resource but then it raises questions on how certain country have qualifications as well as limitations to pose their power in the region. Further, global transformation on hegemonic power in Indo-pacific region imposed how countries plan, decide, and implement strategy to project their power and protect interest in the region.³ The great power competition in Indo-Pacific region contains two key dimensions which are the structural change of global power and threat perception.⁴ The economic and trade expansion of China, for example, posing a threat to U.S and its allies in Indo-pacific region, hence the U.S. and its allies should increase their presence in order to create “balance of power” in the region. The strategy developed to respond to the current turmoil in the region as well as to present diplomatic power in the form of “initiatives” to pursue the goal in Indo-Pacific. While Indo-pacific region contains three of the world’s largest economies; China, India and Japan, the great power competition in Indo-pacific region is dominated by three structural geopolitical dynamics: the rise of China as hegemony power in Asia, the rise of India, and U.S. response towards China’s rise.



China-U.S. Grand Strategy in Indo-Pacific Region and its Implication on ASEAN

The Indo-pacific region is highly geopolitically driven; U.S. and China coexist as the extra-regional global powers alongside with the surrounding countries in the region. Structural transformation of post-cold war especially in Asia challenged U.S. strategic narrative from Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation to the guidance of institutionalization of ASEAN.⁵ The Japanese Prime Minister back in 2007 highlighted the confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans which later initiated the formation of official documents initiatives and declaration as well as the creation of QUAD that consists of U.S., Australia, India, and Japan. Further in 2017 during Trump administration, the “free and open Indo-pacific” initiative was endorsed, and Japan included this strategy in their foreign policy strategy. On the other hand, China also develops initiatives to increase military modernization, influence operations and predatory economic to coerce surrounding countries to reorder Indo-pacific region according to their advantage⁶. Free and open

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³ Ariel G. L, *Ibid*, P.5.

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Serbin, Andrés, El Indo-Pacífico y América Latina en el marco de la disputa geoestratégica entre Estados Unidos y China, *Pensamiento Propio*, 54, 2021, pp. 10–37.

⁶ Ariel G. L, *Ibid*, P.161.

“Although with the rise of China in the region, the U.S. remains supremacy holder in the region mostly by three factors; extensive network of military bases, superior technological capabilities, and existence of long-term alliances hence become a more reliable partner in the Indo-pacific region.”

Indo-pacific lies on the importance of freedom of navigation, strengthening peace and stability to achieve economic prosperity. India, on the other side, highlight the importance of ASEAN as the core of Indo-pacific region hence the centrality, flexibility and positive outlook in the region are very important. While the U.S.’ strategic alliance countries agree to the term of free and open Indo-pacific, China reject that geostrategic narrative. China’s first military expansion in Djibouti and its development of Belt and Road Initiatives have been perceived as regional security imbalance by other global power countries⁷. In defense point of view, China has massive development on defense mechanism as its maritime power projection in the regional level, furthermore the construction of artificial in the South China Sea are clearly perceived as “threat” to the US. To create balance of power in the region, U.S. is pushing its allies on the U.S. Indo-pacific Command through the expansion of Malabar exercise to promote freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. However, U.S. remains its forward presence in Taiwan and other China’s disputed countries (which is including some of ASEAN countries like Vietnam and Philippines) through strengthening military and naval capability. Interestingly, although with the rise of China in the region, the U.S. remains supremacy holder in the region mostly by three factors; extensive network of military bases, superior technological capabilities, and existence of long-term alliances hence become a more reliable partner in the Indo-pacific region.⁸



“ASEAN is consisting of ten countries that is located in the heart of Indo-pacific region. ASEAN region is mainly separated into two main sides, mainland of Southeast Asia and Maritime of Southeast Asia. With the total population of 666.19 million people, ASEAN become one of the highest GDP in the region along with economic, political, and security resources and opportunities.”

ASEAN Role in Indo-pacific Region

ASEAN is consisting of ten countries that is located in the heart of Indo-pacific region. ASEAN region is mainly separated into two main sides, mainland of Southeast Asia and Maritime of Southeast Asia. With the total population of 666.19 million people, ASEAN become one of the highest GDP in the region along with economic, political, and security resources and opportunities. ASEAN as the countries’ association promotes “ASEAN Way” which based on the principle of non-interference and consensus decision making process. In Indo-pacific region, ASEAN promotes to build ASEAN Identity through regional diplomacy to achieve peaceful diplomatic and economic building. More dynamic developments in the region make ASEAN must address the evolving regional and global architecture by remaining united, people-centered approach and strengthening coordination and contribution as cohesive group. ASEAN’s strategic partners in the region are Australia, China, India, Japan and South Korea while the extended strategic partners are U.S., and UK. Addressing the importance of the Indo-pacific region, ASEAN initiates an

⁷ G Khurana, China “String of Pearls” in the Indian Ocean and Its Security Implications, Strategic analysis, 2008, P.1-39.

⁸ Ariel G. L., *Ibid*, P.167.

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ASEAN outlook on the Indo-pacific Region which aims to maintain peace, freedom, and prosperity. The outlook involves strengthening and optimization of ASEAN-led mechanisms as well as to help generate momentum to build strategic trusts with partnering countries and produce a win-win cooperation in the region. There are six main areas of cooperation of ASEAN in Indo-pacific region: maritime cooperation, connectivity, UNSDG 2030, economic cooperation, political-security cooperation, and socio-cultural cooperation. In political and diplomatic priorities, since its establishment in 1967 ASEAN has been the broker for peace and the main driving force in regional and inter-regional dialogues and cooperation. ASEAN also enables critical dialogue with non-member countries through signatories' expansion in cooperation agreements and treaty of amity. The dominant role of Japan and U.S. in Indo-pacific through Free and Open Indo-pacific initiatives could undermine ASEAN centrality and lead to the decline of ASEAN neutrality in the region. ASEAN also concerns with the QUAD growing activities in Indo-pacific region as anti-China movement in the region. The existence of U.S' Free and Open Indo-pacific initiative and China's Belt and Road Initiatives in the region adheres to the centrality of ASEAN and avert a binary choice between China and the U.S. in security dimension in Indo-pacific region, ASEAN faces issues and disputes especially in the South China Sea Issue. In this disputes that affects some ASEAN member states, ASEAN as a group continues effort to bring stability in the South China sea by the consultation with China on a potential code of conduct in the South China Sea dispute. Furthermore, ASEAN sees FOIP as the balance of power tool and a non-threat strategy that uphold a rules-based order in the Indo-pacific region. FOIP aims to prevent power vacuum and blocking China from challenging the status quo by coercion. In the Economic dimension, China remains the largest and the most influential trading partner for most of ASEAN countries. China as the major economic partner has invested in a lot of infrastructure project for the sake of economic growth, one of the investments is trough Belt and Road Initiatives investment that reach 2.8 trillion USD.

Türkiye's Engagement in ASEAN and Indo-Pacific Region

- Türkiye's interest in Indo-Pacific region is based on its interest to expand smart power strategies especially in trade and economic power.⁹
- Türkiye combined political, cultural, economic values and geostrategic location to generate its own integrative power.¹⁰
- Türkiye participated in a lot of business interest group joint organizations in Indo-pacific region.¹¹
- Türkiye is also signing various agreements with Indo-pacific countries to increase trade volume and create regional market more accessible for Turkish businessmen.¹²
- Türkiye is ASEAN's Sectoral Dialogue Partner.¹³ This is aligned with Türkiye's objective in ASEAN as dialogue partner especially in the framework of Indo-Pacific Region.¹⁴

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⁹ Esenbel, S. and Atlı, A., Turkey's Changing Foreign Policy Stance: Getting Closer to Asia? Middle East Institute, 2013. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkeys-changing-foreign-policy-stance-getting-closer-asia>.

¹⁰ Keyman E. F. and Sazak O., Turkish Foreign Policy in the Transatlantic Context: from Soft Power to Smart Power, Strategic Research Center of the Turkish Foreign Ministry, 2012, P.13. http://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Turkey_Transatlantic_Partnership.pdf

¹¹ Kirişçi, Kemal, The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State, New Perspectives on Turkey, no.40, 2009, P.46; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, Turkey's Relations with the Asia-Pacific Region. <http://www.mfa.gov.tr>

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, Turkey's Relations with the Asia-Pacific Region. <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkeys-relations-with-east-asia-and-the-pacific.en.mfa>

¹³ ASEAN, External Relations. <https://asean.org/asean/external-relations/>

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, Turkey's relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). <http://www.mfa.gov.tr>

“Türkiye produced Asia Anew Initiative to address Türkiye’s economic and trade relation with Asia countries through regional sub-regional and country specific approaches.”

- To support ASEAN regional peace and stability, Türkiye supported the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in the Southeast Asia.¹⁵
- Türkiye’s trade volume in ASEAN countries increased to 8.7 billion in 2016.¹⁶
- Türkiye through TİKA provided development assistant with total cost of 147.8 million USD between 2005-2015.¹⁷
- Türkiye-Indonesia business council was founded in 1995 under Türkiye-Asia Pacific Business Council¹⁸, Türkiye-Malaysia business council was founded in 1995 under Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchange of Türkiye¹⁹, and Türkiye-Singapore business council was founded in 2004.²⁰
- Türkiye led economic relations with D8 countries based on major Muslim developing countries in the region.²¹
- Türkiye produced Asia Anew Initiative to address Türkiye’s economic and trade relation with Asia countries through regional sub-regional and country specific approaches.²²

Cooperation Dimension	Country	Description	Type
Defence and Security	Indonesia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PT. Pal – Roketsan MoU signing to increase defence global supply chain, transfer of technology and knowledge of combat system equipment • PT. Pindad – FNSS in the joint production of modern medium-weight tank • TUSAS – Indonesia MoD agreement on unmanned combat aerial vehicle 	10 units of Kaplan Tanks, 12 units of ANKA Drone
	Philippines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FNSS – Philippines MoD on defence vehicle export 	ATAK Helicopters part and components, KUNDUZ Amphibious Armoured Combat Earthmover (ACE)
Economic	Singapore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Singapore – Türkiye Free Trade Agreement 	Increase in bilateral volume trade including goods and services, investment, e-commerce,

¹⁵ ASEAN, The Adopted ASEAN-Turkey Practical Cooperation Areas (2019-2023), 2019. <https://asean.org>

¹⁶ Anadolu Agency, Turkey’s Asia Anew initiative to promote ASEAN region, 2019. <https://www.aa.com.tr>

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ DEİK, Turkey-Indonesia Business Council. <https://www.deik.org.tr>

¹⁹ 4 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, Turkey-Malaysia Economic and Trade Relations. <http://www.mfa.gov.tr>

²⁰ DEİK, Turkey-Singapore Business Council, 2019. <https://www.deik.org.tr>

²¹ D-8, Brief history of D-8. <http://developing8.org>

²² Asia Anew Initiative. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/asia-anew-initiative.en.mfa>

			competition, and transparency
	Indonesia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protocol of Cooperation of Indonesia's National Agency for Export Development and Türkiye's Export Promotion Centre • Türkiye -Indonesia Joint Economic Commission 	Bilateral commercial and economic relation create Indonesia's trade surplus and Türkiye's increasing export volume
	Malaysia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Malaysia – Türkiye Free Trade Agreement 	Liberalization of trade in goods, Malaysia's tariff reduction to 98.86% and Türkiye's duties elimination to 85.89%
	Thailand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Türkiye -Thailand Joint Economic Commission 	Increase volume of export and import in data storage units, motor vehicles, diesel engine parts
	Philippines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Türkiye-Philippines Joint Economic Commission 	Expansion on the foundation agreement of Türkiye Philippines Business Council
	Vietnam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Türkiye-Vietnam Joint Economic Commission 	Expansion of Türkiye's investment project with the total value of 791.48 million dollars.
	Laos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Türkiye-Laos Joint Economic Committee 	Improving export and import volume
	Myanmar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Türkiye-Myanmar Economic and Commercial Cooperation Agreement 	Increasing of export and import volume
	Cambodia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Türkiye-Cambodia Joint Economic Commission 	Agreement on mutual promotion and protection of investment.
	Brunei	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Türkiye-Brunei Bilateral Commercial and Economic Relations 	Import from Brunei in petroleum gas, crude petroleum, refined petroleum and wood
Political and Cultural	Thailand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thailand-TIKA projects • Reciprocal Cultural Year 	Restoration project of Bang Uthiht Mosque, Bangkok, increasing in tourism number in both countries

	Philippines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MoU on tourism 	Turkish airlines and Philippines Department of Tourism MoU on products and service promotion in tourism sector
	Vietnam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Türkiye's Official Development Assistance and Financial Supports • Regional workshop on strategies prevention to combat trafficking in persons 	Development assistance to Vietnam to 770.000 USD and Humanitarian Aid of 50.000 USD
	Laos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laos-TIKA project 	Financial support for hospital construction, medical equipment aid for cardiology and donation of two ambulances.
	Myanmar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Myanmar-TIKA Projects • Türkiye's lifesaving measure for childbirth project, medicine and medical device aid. 	Türkiye's official development assistance to 61,26 million USD, AFAD and Kızılay aid to 13,4 million USD.
	ASEAN Countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN-Türkiye Scholarships 	Scholarship for higher education in Türkiye

“ASEAN is becoming a strategic environment for any other major countries who wants to involve in the Indo-pacific region. For example, Türkiye has slowly built a stronger bond with ASEAN countries to project its influence and maintain its interest in Asia especially in the Indo-pacific region. By considering soft power diplomacy, ASEAN, great power countries as well as Türkiye can benefit from the alliance in the Indo-pacific region especially in economic and trade strategies.”

Policy Recommendation of Türkiye's Future Engagements in Indo-Pacific

- Consider soft-power diplomacy through proactive economic and trade strategies in more countries in Indo-Pacific regions.
- Cooperate in any country that support Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy as international public goods dialogue partner.
- Promoting rule of law, freedom of navigation and market economy in the region as strategic communication partner.
- Contributing to Indo-Pacific peace and security through joint military exercise with major countries in region like US and Australia.
- Supporting connectivity in the region through infrastructure development and financial aid especially in the economic corridor countries.
- Capacity building assistance in the coastal countries in Indo-pacific region.

Conclusion

ASEAN and its centrality in the Indo-pacific region plays an important role as neutral partner amid clash of great power competition in the region. Championing in ASEAN Way to boost

peaceful diplomatic and economic building for its member states, ASEAN remains neutral to promote regional diplomacy with regional and extended strategic partners countries. Both Free and Open Indo-pacific initiatives by the U.S. and its allies along with China's Belt and Road initiatives give political, economic and security advantage to ASEAN, and that is why ASEAN with its neutrality avert from making binary choice between the U.S. and China. ASEAN is also become a strategic environment for any other major countries who wants to involve in the Indo-pacific region. For example, Türkiye has slowly built a stronger bond with ASEAN countries to project its influence and maintain its interest in Asia especially in the Indo-pacific region. By considering soft power diplomacy, ASEAN, great power countries as well as Türkiye can benefit from the alliance in the Indo-pacific region especially in economic and trade strategies.

