

ASEAN as a normative entrepreneur: the circulation of ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific

Introduction

On May 1st, 2023, a The Guardian article ran as a headline: "US and Philippine presidents meet amid China's 'aggressive tactics' (Davidson 2023), after the latest maritime incident between Philippine and China, a "near collision" between a Philippine vessel patrol and a Chinese coastguard ship, gave credit to voiced concerns about China's expansionist policy in the disputed area of the South China Sea. The article goes on highlighting how such occurrence betrays the ongoing battle for influence that pits the US against the PRC in the region, sparking off individual reactions from all regional actors – the nature of which depends on their national interest and existing ties with the two rivals.

A flourishing literature has taken interest in the China-US rivalry and its consequences for the Asia-Pacific since the 2000s, with observers from all schools of International Relations having a say in the conversation, be they realists, liberals or constructivists. The former emphasize the importance of military and economic power, and see competition between the two countries as a struggle for dominance in the Asia-Pacific region. For them, China's fast-growing economy has enabled it to sustain a large and expanding military effort, which should lead to the development and deployment of more capable military systems in the future and threaten US hegemony (Mearsheimer 2001; Christensen 2011). On the other hand, their contenders, the liberals, insist the US-China competition is not a zero-sum game and both countries can benefit from economic cooperation: they support efforts to strengthen international institutions and norms to manage the rivalry, and may see conflict as avoidable if both sides are willing to compromise and seek mutual benefits (Nye 2010; Ikenberry 2018). Constructivists alternatively emphasize that China's growing participation in various international institutions could lead to changes in its strategic culture, the norms of international behaviour that its leaders accept, and their conceptions of national identity (Berger 2000; Johnston and Ross 2005). However, despite the variety of arguments at hand between but also within schools – the very outcome of such rivalry seemingly pitting optimists versus pessimists no matter the side they represent (Friedberg 2005) –, one common denominator remains: that of the importance of power. Observers of the Asia-Pacific have indeed been keen on depicting the region as the epicentre of a Great Powers competition between the US, the regional order's hegemon, and China, its contender, hence building a necessary narrative around the idea of *balance of power* at stake in the region (Roy 2005; Odgaard 2007; Saunders 2014).

The concept of the Indo-Pacific epitomizes the theoretical debate that frames the region. Initially thought as a geographical concept, it has since the 2010s seen its use become more and more political, (He and Li

2020). In 2017, Trump's unveiled his new vision for a "free and open Indo-Pacific region", defining China as a strategic rival threatening the country's position in the area due to its rising influence. He therefore made the issue a priority in the American foreign policy (Hu et Meng 2020), and indelibly stamped the concept of Indo-Pacific as a strategic one. It is therefore no surprise that, despite it gaining momentum within the international community and its growing use even among Asian countries, including Japan but also India, South Korea or Australia, China labelled the notion as a Western construct and refused to use it. Rather, the PRC resorts to the idea of 'Asia-Pacific', which strengthens its own "discursive power" (Denisov et al. 2021, p.78). In 2019, as literature on the Indo-Pacific mostly focused on the Great Powers narrative, the publication of ASEAN's own "Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" was analysed through the lens of the US-China rivalry and understood as a necessary response of smaller powers to the war at play in the region. As such, it was considered as the outline of ASEAN's struggle to maintain neutrality and independence (Castro 2021). The AOIP's normative content was either deemed to be proof that ASEAN leaned more towards one camp or the other depending on interpretations, or perceived as pointless, with the American and Chinese responses to it being qualified of "lip-service" (Liu 2023).

ASEAN is indeed located at the core of the two powers' aforementioned battlefield. Composed of ten Southeast-Asian countries – Timor-Leste, the only non-ASEAN country of the geographic region, has just recently been granted the status of official applicant –, the organization was conceived as a political and economic mechanism of cooperation aimed at reinforcing the countries' respective sovereignty. With that in mind, the aim of this essay is hence first to assess investigate the extent to which one can state that ASEAN has been socialized into the American or Chinese normative frameworks in their AOIP, deconstructing the idea that norm diffusion is a passive process of internalization and underlining the importance of so-called "norm receivers" agency in altering and re-appropriating (localizing) the norms. It will then challenge the very idea that ASEAN's normative paradigm follows Sikkink's model and can solely be understood as a norm receiver, defining what ASEAN's normative framework entails and investigating to what extent it also is a norm-setter by assessing its successful socialization or not of the US and China. Finally, this essay will attempt to challenge the common 'failure' narrative of ASEAN regionalism, with the aim of demonstrating that AOIP is in fact proof that ASEAN is able to develop regionalism, different from the European model yet advancing its own normative framework for the Indo-Pacific and represents the potential for broader multilateral institutions through which it could advance this framework within the Indo-Pacific.

I- Positioning ASEAN in the Great Powers' rivalry narrative

1. US versus Chinese normative paradigms : where does ASEAN stand?

Resorting to the power politics framework, with the US as a regional hegemon and China as its contender, the two of them being great powers fighting for the command of southeast Asia as a sphere of influence, smaller power's agency has traditionally been limited to that of "balancing" versus "bandwagoning"

(Waltz 1979). The former refers to a strategy employed by smaller powers to counterbalance the power of stronger states. This strategy involves forming alliances or building up military capabilities to deter potential threats from the stronger state (Walt 2009). On the other hand, bandwagoning occurs when a weaker state aligns itself with a stronger state or coalition of states, in order to benefit from their protection and to gain advantages in the international system (Mearsheimer 2001). Such a framework has notably been applied by Roy (2005), who concluded, based on a state-level analysis, that Southeast Asian states majoritarily balance China despite its attempts at cultivating the image of a peacefully rising power, for the countries fear the increasingly assertive Chinese foreign policy and its incursions in the South and East China Seas. This conclusion seems to be supported by the Philippines' recent decision to grant the US four new military bases on its territory, reaching a total of nine, as well as by the conduct of the Balikatan exercises (Lendon 2023). On the other hand, the 1st of May marked the conclusion of Singapore and China's own maritime cooperation exercises, at the occasion of which were highlighted the two countries' desire to strengthen "mutual trust and understanding" (Cna 2023) which, following such logic, should be interpreted as Singapore bandwagoning with China and seeking its protection.

Should one therefore perceive the Southeast Asian nations as a disharmonious ensemble, or failed regionalism, incapable of speaking with one voice and being mostly concerned with the idea of non-interference? Some scholars have indeed highlighted how ASEAN has been "socialized" into Beijing's normative framework, that is, a China-led regional order (Ha 2022). A third way to look at the region, and most specifically the organization's position, is however that of hedging. Hedging takes as a premiss that great powers' rivalry, rather than a dilemma, is a situation that allows weaker third countries to benefit from an ideal position where they can benefit from strategic partnerships and investments from a variety of actors by maintaining a balance of power (Paul 2009). Not only does this strategy allow us to make sense of Southeast Asian countries' individual behaviours, and notably the fact that Manilla and Beijing's leaders met three days after the US were granted access to new military bases to talk about cooperation and ties strengthening (Venzon 2023). Even more so, it grants relevance to the regional lens as, by unveiling the common thread to the various countries' position, it legitimizes the regionalism process that has given birth to ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific longing for "An Indo-Pacific region of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry" (ASEAN 2019, p.2)

2. ASEAN's actorness in the norm socialization process

The concept of "norm-diffusion" was initially framed by Finnemore and Sikkink as a process of norm emergence, cascade and internalization (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). The first stage, "norm emergence", occurs when a new norm is introduced into the international system by a group of states or other actors. This can happen through a variety of means, such as through the creation of international treaties or the advocacy efforts of non-governmental organizations. The second stage, "norm cascade", occurs when the new norm gains widespread acceptance and begins to be adopted by a larger number of states and other

actors. This can happen through a variety of means, such as the creation of new international institutions or the inclusion of the norm in national laws and policies. The third and final stage, “norm internalization”, occurs when the norm becomes deeply ingrained in the values and beliefs of individuals and societies, leading to lasting changes in behaviour and policy. At this stage, the norm is no longer seen as a new or contested idea, but rather as an established principle that is widely accepted and followed. The diffusion of the idea of the Indo-Pacific can be interpreted through that framework, with its emergence being located between Shinzo Abe’s first mention of the “confluence of two seas” in 2007 (Abe 2007) and Trump’s “US Indo-Pacific Command”. The following creation of India’s Indo-Pacific desk, Macron’s 2018 Garden Island speech and Germany and the Netherlands’ formulation of their own Indo-Pacific strategies in 2020 seem to indicate that the concept has gone through a cascade process, and might have reached the internalization stage.

This model was however contested, as a new wave of literature replaced “norm-receiving” countries’ actorness at the core of the (re)constitution of the international normative order, emphasising the role of local norms in interpreting international normative paradigms (Potter and Biukovic 2011). One concept was notably key in investigating the agency of so-called norms-receiving countries: Amitav Acharya, whose coined the concepts of “localization” which stresses the ability of local agents to reconstruct norms (Acharya 2004), “subsidiarity”, which emphasizes the resistance power of local agents that engenders norms straddling locally entrenched norms and influent international norms (Acharya 2011), and “circulation”, highlighting the agency power of locally adapted or created norms in building the international normative order (Acharya 2013). The application of this framework to the position of ASEAN, between China and the US’ normative paradigms is revealing of the organization’s actorness in the socialization process to which it is core. Namely, the adoption of the organization’s Outlook signified to the international community ASEAN’s socialization to the norm, but also its agency in this internalization process, as the publication of the outlook was the result of an internal negotiation process aiming at the reappropriation of the concept in ASEAN’s own terms and adapted to its own strategic context (Anwar 2020). Its framing should be understood, rather than as the adoption of a Western concept, as a reaction to what was perceived as an exclusionary American strategy and the marginalization of ASEAN by the Quad, hence bringing ASEAN’s agency back at the centre of the region’s politics.

Bearing in mind that ASEAN’s adoption of its own AIOP need not be understood as the result of the organization’s passive socialization to an American norm, but rather, as its reappropriation, should now be investigated the content of this localized norm in the ASEAN context.

II- Revisiting the Sinatra doctrine: ASEAN's 'own Way'

1. Framing the ASEAN normative paradigm

Regionalism is mostly characterized by its teleological condition (namely, the idea that it is an ultimate goal to be reached), and its prescriptive value (it provides with a morally endorsed way of doing politics, what one should do) (Buranelli 2021), meaning that regionalism is meant to provide its organization with a normative framework to work with. ASEAN's architecture should therefore project a certain normative paradigm of its own. Literature has indeed argued that ASEAN is a 'norm entrepreneur' (Katsumata 2010); more specifically, it has been underlined how ASEAN has been able to promote and institutionalize the already practiced regional norms (Stubbs 2008). The norms ASEAN promotes indeed stem from a certain political and structural context that characterized Southeast Asia: for instance, the 'Confrontation' between Indonesia and Malaysia created the necessity for a peace-facilitating architecture whilst colonialism made nationalism necessary for nation-building. The five founding members of ASEAN in 1967, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, therefore developed ideas that are still resonating with the practices of the organization nowadays: "the importance of neutrality as a regional priority; sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference and justice in terms of the equality of nations; peaceful settlement of disputes; informal and non-confrontational deliberations; promoting domestic stability and social harmony" (Stubbs 2008). These are known as the 'ASEAN way', based on the three pillars of non-interference in other member states' domestic affairs, consensus-building rather than legally binding treaties and a preference for national implementation of programmes rather than reliance on strong region-wide democracy (Sani and Hara 2013). The ASEAN way itself can be defined as a normative structure, which is notably enshrined in the legally binding 2007 ASEAN Charter. Key to that normative culture is the very typical decision-making process at play within the organization, which is concomitantly enshrined in the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights but also engraved in the member-states' practice: the consensus approach (Abdel-Monem 2012).

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific reflects this unique normative paradigm (Yoshimatsu 2022): its negotiated and non-binding nature, based on the idea of sovereignty, reflects the consensus-building model aforementioned, whilst also entailing references to key "ASEAN way" components, including that of "peace, security, stability and prosperity" (ASEAN 2019). A good exemplification of ASEAN normative structure's application is that of Indonesia, who played a key role in the adoption of the AOIP. Indonesia's implementation of the outlook, based on the four priority areas of maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development, and economic cooperation (ASEAN 2019) aligns with its pragmatic foreign policy and the Jakarta Indo-Pacific cooperation concept, which focuses on promoting maritime trade and connectivity and protecting marine resources, rather than engaging in great power rivalry. Indonesia's agency in the promotion of the ASEAN way within the frame of the Indo-Pacific was reflected in its intention to host the Indo-Pacific Infrastructure and Connectivity Forum in 2020 (Ha 2022), which

however never came to realization. Interestingly enough, however, should be noted that the concept of Indo-Pacific represents the first external norm to be adopted and adapted to the ASEAN context within the organization's own normative architecture, which might explain why no new institution was created based on the newly defined Indo-Pacific geographical concept: this could be understood as the organization's desire for the AOIP to fit in the already existing ASEAN-led normative order.

2. ASEAN's socialization of the US and China

The ASEAN-led normative order not only allows ASEAN to assert its agency in the norm diffusion process as a norm-receiver; it also represents the opportunity for the organization, following Acharya's norm "circulation" model, to feedback into the international normative order its own normative preferences (ASEAN 2019). ASEAN has been able to manage Great Power politics and not fall into a bandwagoning/balancing trap by "enmeshing" both the US and China into its regional initiatives through the development of its normative framework. This strategy of "impartial enmeshment" (Goh 2007) entails attempts at enticing the desired actors into cooperating, mitigating material confrontation risks by transforming a zero-sum game into a competitive but positive sum (Yoshimatsu 2022). More concretely, this means that ASEAN actively engages in preventing the possibility of decoupling for the two powers, which is precisely what it states in its AOIP: "avoiding the deepening of mistrust, miscalculation, and patterns of behavior based on a zero-sum game". This normative framework's operativity relies on the fact that it presents attractive features to both contenders.

On the American side, the main attractive feature of ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Outlook is that the adoption of the concept of the Indo-Pacific seemingly gives credit to an anti-Chinese strategy. Additionally, the concepts of "rules-based regional architecture" and "peace, freedom and prosperity" (ASEAN 2019, p.1), highlighting the organization's intent on promoting international and maritime law, meet the US' own narrative. Notably, the Philippines v. China Case in the South China Sea disputes epitomizes such principles, reassuring the power on ASEAN's non-pro-China stance and making it more inclined to further cooperate.

On the other hand, the expansion of ASEAN's normative power represents an alternative to the US-led order, hence appearing particularly attractive to China (Stubbs 2008). Additionally, norms promoted by Southeast-Asian countries actually resonate with China's own normative framework, and, notably, its Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (Severino 2006), making China more prone to positively respond to the organizations' incentives to become a "responsible member of the regional and international community of nation states" (Stubbs 2008). Within the very formulation of the AIOP, can also be found typical features of the Chinese foreign policy and international relations conduct narrative, namely, that of "win-win cooperation" (ASEAN, p.3). It is therefore no surprise that attempts at socializing the country to ASEAN's own norms appears to have been successful: the chairmanship system of the regional institution was notably adopted by China as a way of managing international affairs (Yoshimatsu 2022), highlighting

how ASEAN was actually able to feedback its own norms into the wider international community's normative framework.

Overall the very nature of AOIP's norms being broad yet encompassing enough to include both power, China and the US were able to embrace ASEAN's own normative paradigm, hence mitigating the two countries' material dispute but also allowing for other powers to adopt this newly constructed framework.

III- From 'failed regionalism' to Indo-Pacific-scale institutions?

1. *The institutionalization of ASEAN's paradigm network*

In a situation where great powers are suspicious of each other; ASEAN's comparative advantage is that it is universally acceptable as a regionalism driver. As such, not only was it able to socialize the US and China into adopting its framework as a mitigating strategy to the Great Powers rivalry, but it also was able to gain momentum and reach firmer institutionalization among other actors.

Efforts to promote the "ASEAN Way" as the *modus operandi* for managing security relations were notably bolstered by the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia and the end of the Cold War, granting ASEAN the flexibility and ground to set for itself a more ambitious agenda. The ASEAN Regional Forum emerged in 1994 as the very first security forum in the Asia-Pacific bringing together all the major powers to discuss regional political and security issues. It is a key platform for promoting dialogue and confidence-building measures, enhancing cooperation, and preventing and managing conflicts. It has notably played an important role in managing tensions in the South China Sea and the Korean Peninsula, among other issues (Stubbs 2008). The institutionalization of regionalism through the ARF is one of the key achievements of ASEAN's normative paradigm. Another proof of ASEAN's capacity to have its normative paradigm endorsed internationally is to be found in the popularity of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) across Southeast Asia: since June 2003, when China first indicated that it would sign the TAC, thirty-nine other countries have also signed on, including India, Japan, South Korea and the US, but also the European Union, which has expressed a growing interest in ASEAN. In fact, France notably joined the ASEANPOL agenda, a regional law enforcement cooperation organization, as an observer, but the European Union's Indo-Pacific Strategy also entails reassertion of the fact that "ASEAN is at the centre of the Indo-Pacific", recognizing how "the ASEAN-led regional architecture has provided a space for dialogue and trust-building across the Indo-Pacific and among countries that see each other as adversaries" ("ASEAN at the Centre of EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy", 2021).

As such, can be stated that ASEAN's paradigm network seems to have successfully expanded within the international community, granting it further legitimacy and more leverage for potential regionalist endeavours.

2. *The potential for an Indo-Pacific regionalism*

Lack of institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific has been attributed to a lack of executive leadership and ideational leadership (He et Feng 2020). Was however highlighted how ASEAN was successfully able not only to reappropriate and mitigate the Great Powers narrative, but also to have its own normative paradigm, developed, promoted and adopted through the concept of Indo-Pacific. Such an argument therefore does not seem convincing, especially as the concept is still gaining momentum within the international community and more and more actors feel the need to develop their own Indo-Pacific strategy. The “malleable” nature of the concept of the Indo-Pacific, as opposed to the Asia-Pacific, makes it open to manipulation and interpretation in accordance with configurations of interest and power (Ha 2021). Still, despite its sometimes criticized shallowness, data seems to show that the concept of Indo-Pacific is a sustainable one, as conducted surveys in South-East Asia highlight how only 13.3% of the respondents in 2020 believe that “the concept will fade away” (Ha 2021).

As such, literature has recently tried to assess the potential for an Indo-Pacific regionalism, notably highlighting the failure of its predecessor, Asia-Pacific, which relied on a fading hub-and-spokes American model (Wirth et Jenne 2022) no longer relevant in an ever-more connected region that now entails actors such as India and Australia and where China posits itself as a contender to US hegemony. One of the key tracks Indo-Pacific therefore could take is that of a bridge between the Quad and ASEAN, providing the minilateral and multilateral formats with a common denominator and, hence, highlighting converging strategic interests, including: “(1) the extent to which regional order depends on multilateral and collective efforts, rather than unilateral power projections; (2) the extent to which regional institutions enhance strategic autonomy, rather than becoming extensions of great- power politics; and (3) the extent to which prosperity and security are not mutually exclusive” (Panda et Gunasekara-Rockwell 2021). As such, if the two formats are able to find common normative grounds for further engagement, they would bolster Indo-Pacific regionalism. Conversely, the Indo-Pacific also has the potential to bolster ASEAN’s regionalism, as the integration of the Quad could enhance cooperative engagement through joint exercises and training, adding a defence and security layer to ASEAN, the nature of which was not conceived for such development, but also boost existing ASEAN initiatives such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership or the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (Laksmna 2020).

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to assess the soundness of ASEAN’s normative power in the Asia-Pacific region, resorting to the concept of Indo-Pacific. Escaping the Great Powers rivalry trap, has been investigated how the adoption of an ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific does not reflect the country’s struggle between the US and China but epitomizes the phenomenon of norm localization, a norm that ASEAN has been able to feed back into the international sphere, not only entailing China and the US but also a wide range of other actors active in the region. The reframing of the Indo-Pacific represents the opportunity for ASEAN to get

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out of the “failed regionalism” narrative which Western observers tend to attribute to the organization and be granted more agency in the conduct of international relations, at a time when regional observers, such as Rizal Sukma, talk about the need of member-states for a “post-ASEAN foreign policy” (Anwar 2020). Such opportunity however still needs to be taken and realized by ASEAN itself, as new infrastructures need to be developed for the concept to fully come to life.

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