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GEOPOLITICS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC AND THE ROLE OF THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN NGOS

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INDO PACIFIC PROGRAM

ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

The term 'Indo-Pacific' is a multifaceted and highly politicized concept that is vulnerable to manipulation and interpretation by external powers seeking to advance their agendas. In recent years, Southeast Asia has emerged as a pivotal arena in the ongoing discourse surrounding the Indo-Pacific. While debates regarding the Indo-Pacific have traditionally revolved around security and economic considerations, there is a growing acknowledgement of the significant role played by civil society in shaping this narrative. This article endeavours to examine the nuanced repercussions of the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical rivalry on Southeast Asian non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It seeks to shed light on how these NGOs navigate the intricate geopolitical terrain, one increasingly characterized by intense great power competition and clashing interests. By exploring the challenges and opportunities faced by Southeast Asian NGOs in this context, this article offers valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of regional geopolitics and the vital role of civil society in shaping them.

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INTRODUCTION

The discourse surrounding the Indo-Pacific doctrine presents a fascinating subject of inquiry. This concept has elicited diverse responses, with some segments of the international community offering support while others express scepticism.

Moreover, it has evolved into a contentious and vigorously debated term within the broader geopolitical landscape. The significance of terminology cannot be underestimated, as exemplified by China's evident unease with the "Indo-Pacific" nomenclature, perceiving it as suggestive of containment, and the reservations held by Southeast Asia concerning its implications. Historically, the identity of the region predominantly resided within the expansive Asia-Pacific framework.

As the Indo-Pacific discourse is increasingly becoming the focus of world politics and academic research, Southeast Asia has become a focal point for discussions on the Indo-Pacific, revealing how the Indo-Pacific framework has become contentious and politically charged in nature, susceptible to manipulation and interpretation according to the interests and power configurations of external actors.

The initial focus on the Indo-Pacific primarily revolved around foreign policy, economic interests, and security considerations, notably framing China as a central concern. This perspective was evident in US Secretary of State Antony

Blinken's speech on May 26, 2022, outlining the Biden administration's strategy to navigate competition with China, emphasising China's ambition to establish a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific ("The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China").

It is also worth noting that Germany, France, and the UK have each formulated their own Indo-Pacific strategies, marking a significant shift in their foreign policy focuses. These documents emphasize the importance of the Indo-Pacific in global geopolitics, trade, and security. They highlight intentions to bolster partnerships, promote a rules-based order, and enhance economic engagement while also addressing regional security concerns.

Consequently, this situation presents a significant challenge not only for state actors but also for non-state actors, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs). NGOs have long played a recognised role in world politics, advocating for global issues such as human rights, environmental concerns (Newell 18-20), and justice (Della Porta 16-18). They advance these objectives through advocacy directed at governments, intergovernmental decision-making bodies, and corporations, thereby influencing the international agenda.

INDO-PACIFIC DEBATES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The Indo-Pacific remains open to diverse interpretations and warrants continued discourse, allowing any nation to contribute to its formulation. However, the unease and controversies surrounding this framework send a clear signal to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that it should assert its influence over the Indo-Pacific concept, with an unwavering focus on the principle of ASEAN centrality. ASEAN is of the view—that to foster a more inclusive and cooperative approach to addressing global challenges—nations should regard the Indo-Pacific as a collective asset, rather than relegating it to a strategy aimed at constraining specific powers. This perspective gains particular significance when envisioning a more prosperous, modern, developed, stable, and peaceful Indo-Pacific region.

In June 2019, during the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok, ASEAN issued a joint statement—the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). This statement was in response to the escalating strategic competition between the US and China and aimed to underscore the role of ASEAN's institutional mechanisms. The AOIP accentuates the existing norms and mechanisms within ASEAN, bolstering the community-building process, and invigorating established ASEAN-led mechanisms to effectively address challenges and capitalize on opportunities arising from the contemporary and future

regional and global landscapes. This collective endeavour signifies a firm commitment to preserving ASEAN centrality in shaping the Indo-Pacific framework and averting any transformation of the Indo-Pacific into a balance-of-power paradigm.

THE CIVIL SOCIETY'S DILEMMA: NAVIGATING THE INDO-PACIFIC GEOPOLITICAL STRUGGLE

In light of these multifaceted dynamics, it is evident that ASEAN aspires to foster amicable relations with all external powers while preserving regional stability. In this context, it is pertinent to explore the impact of the Indo-Pacific geopolitical struggle on Southeast Asian NGOs. How do these NGOs navigate this intricate geopolitical landscape? To what extent does the rules-based international order figure into the engagement of Southeast Asian NGOs within the construct of the Indo-Pacific framework, notwithstanding its inherent political ambitions?

The 43rd ASEAN Summit held in Indonesia in 2023 featured the inauguration of the ASEAN Indo-Pacific Forum (AIPF), a pivotal initiative falling under the purview of Indonesia's ASEAN Chairmanship. This inaugural forum aimed to stimulate enhanced opportunities and bolster connectivity among ASEAN member states and the broader Indo-Pacific region, albeit with a conspicuous emphasis on economic dimensions ("ASEAN Indo-Pacific Forum").

Concurrently, civil society groups hailing from Southeast Asia convened during the 43rd ASEAN Summit under the banner of the ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC) and the ASEAN People's Forum (APF). The ACSC/APF constitutes an annual assembly of civil society organisations originating from ASEAN member states, held in tandem with the ASEAN Summit and organized by civil society actors within the ASEAN Chairmanship country. Furthermore, in the broader context of regional dynamics, there exists the Asia Democracy Forum (ADF). This forum serves as a platform for dialogue and collaboration among democracies across Asia, aiming to strengthen democratic governance, human rights, and civil society engagement.

The discourse within these forums should highlight the implications of the Indo-Pacific discourse and to consider its impact on grassroots activism and civil society endeavours. Understanding how geopolitical dynamics intersect with and potentially influence local advocacy is imperative for shaping inclusive and responsive policies within the region. Efforts to bridge this gap in discourse could amplify the voices of civil society and grassroots movements, fostering a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the Indo-Pacific's implications on local communities.

The contentious nature of the Indo-Pacific concept, perceived by many as a framework designed to counterbalance China's influence, remains indisputable.

Although the topic is fraught with discomfort and sensitivity, the expansion of China's economic and political influence has left numerous countries, even those with relatively robust state and civil society structures, grappling with its multifaceted implications. Consequently, heightened scrutiny of China's influence in the Southeast Asian region has gained traction among various state actors, centring on concerns about human rights and governance models.

This scenario rekindles the age-old dichotomy of West versus East, albeit with a focal point on China this time. Pertinent inquiries revolve around China's expansion efforts, including the implications of initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiatives in the Southeast Asian region. Regrettably, the role of civil society often finds itself overshadowed amid the competition among major global powers. However, with the ongoing geopolitical rivalry, commonly referred to as the "New Cold War" between the United States and China, it has become increasingly evident that these tensions can significantly disrupt the operations of NGOs, especially those dedicated to human rights and development causes. This is particularly pronounced given existing tensions surrounding the perception of NGOs as "foreign agents". Critics argue that certain NGOs have ventured into realms of Western propaganda and engage in what is perceived as "China-bashing campaigns" that transcend their core mission of promoting public good.

These intricate interactions unfold within the larger context of the rivalry between the US and China, which has increasingly come to define international order, particularly in Asia. This rivalry shapes strategic discourse and informs tangible political, military, and economic dynamics. The competition between US, Australia, Canada, and others, all proponents of the Indo-Pacific construct, emphasises principles such as freedom, openness, and inclusivity—principles that resonate with the advocacy goals of Southeast Asian regions. Nevertheless, when Southeast Asian NGOs grapple with such challenges, the pertinent question arises: How do these countries championing the Indo-Pacific contribute to the evolving landscape?

In contrast to the optimism characterising the immediate post-Cold War era, we are witnessing mounting concerns regarding the obstacles confronting NGOs. Early literature depicted NGOs as catalysts of a “power shift” (Mathews 55) and as advocates of global democracy. The allusion to democracy is especially salient, given that the Southeast Asian region comprises countries with varying degrees of democratic governance.

Against this backdrop, it is imperative to consider the potential challenges and opportunities confronting Southeast Asian NGOs. NGOs are typically acknowledged as “pressure groups in the global system” (Willetts 35-37), noted for their capacity to influence intergovernmental proceedings and compel governments to alter their

behaviour. Increasingly, NGOs are being recognized as independent political actors, instrumental in setting transnational standards (Keck and Sikkink 92-93). They may also serve as conduits for the projection of power by other actors, including governments and may find themselves susceptible to co-optation when participating in collaborative endeavours with other entities (Stroup 34).

CONCLUSION

In the context of Southeast Asia, the intricate interplay between domestic politics and foreign policy assumes a nuanced dimension amidst the ongoing great power rivalry. Leadership within the region carries significant weight, and matters of domestic governance take on heightened importance, often serving as indicators of the directions these countries choose to pursue. This perspective becomes evident through the speeches and official statements of Southeast Asian leaders, who advocate for a prudent stance that avoids aligning the region too closely with global bloc politics. It is recognized that China’s ascension as a pivotal actor on the global stage cannot be disregarded. Simultaneously, there remains a discernible inclination to sustain engagement with proponents of the Indo-Pacific. This strategic approach is also adopted by certain NGOs in the region, although it does not encompass the entirety of their varied approaches.

Similar to many member states within ASEAN, NGOs in the region assume distinct roles. However, there are

instances where overtly endorsing a contentious concept, such as the Indo-Pacific framework, may prove undesirable. Committing to a particular side in the geopolitical struggle can potentially incur costs for advocacy efforts. As a response, some NGOs opt to concentrate their endeavours on specific issues of concern, rather than directly engaging with the Indo-Pacific geopolitical discussions. Within the current milieu of intensifying regional competition, Southeast Asian NGOs will continue to exercise caution in navigating the complexities of this geopolitical rivalry. Their decisions hinge on multifaceted considerations, including the causes they champion, the nation in which they are situated, and the sources of their funding.

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