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The ASEAN Maritim Outlook: Looking in from the Outside

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On 1 Aug 2023, the first ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO) was launched at the 13th ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF), an event timed to coincide with the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) in Bali. Given the high level of scrutiny typically applied to Southeast Asia's maritime affairs, one would expect this to be evaluated as a milestone event and for wonks to be scraping its 77 pages for insights and how that may play out in this competitive era. Yet, the policy pundits have been basically silent.

The only meaningful commentary about the AMO has been Prashanth Parameswaran's 7 Aug online "WonkDive."¹ Offering its analysis in the form of six text bullets and one chart, the piece

¹ Prashanth Parameswaran, "Assessing ASEAN's New Maritime Outlook," ASEAN Wonk, 7 Aug 2023, <https://www.aseanwonk.com/p/assessing-aseans-new-maritime-outlook-amo>

is insightful but not particularly deep for a dive. As an outsider to ASEAN processes who recently arrived in Jakarta just a few weeks after the AMF, I thought AMO might warrant a closer look.

ASEAN Members Did Not Agree to Take New Actions

Perhaps the lack of attention reflects a lack of meaningful substance in the AMO. Before assuming the ASEAN Chairmanship, Indonesia previewed its plan to create such a document as an activities that support implementation of the 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), a vision document that calls out maritime cooperation as the first of four areas specifically identified as priorities for ASEAN. However, diplomats from the other ASEAN member states report being unsure regarding the original scope of Indonesia's ambition. Once Indonesia assumed its leadership position, it tasked the ASEAN Secretariat to generate the AMO as a report rather than seeking a statement to would mandate action or express a shared vision for the future. The result document is mostly a catalog of pre-existing activities and a rehash of well-understood challenges. Sensitive issues, those that might disrupt relationships within ASEAN or with external powers are addressed only tangentially, if at all.

The AMO is not a strategy and includes no commitments. The closest thing to recommendations are three policy actions that ASEAN *could* do (vice *should* do): (1) “The ASEAN SOM, acting in its capacity as LSB [Lead Sectoral Body] for Maritime Cooperation, could take the lead to coordinate and facilitate cooperation between and among the ASEAN sectoral bodies, mechanisms and processes to advance further cooperation in the maritime domain, including working with external partners under the ambit of the AOIP,” (2) strengthen the AMF, and (3) make greater use of whole-of-community responses similar to that those have been enacted to counter the plastic waste problem.¹

One might wonder if the drafters hoped to compensate for a lack of substance by delivering large volumes. Seventy-seven pages is quite hefty for an ASEAN policy document. In comparison, the heavily discussed AOIP is only two-and-a-half pages. However, to disregard the AMO as a shell would be unfair, overly simplistic, and incorrect. The AOIP was drafted by Indonesian officials and negotiated by diplomats until it reflected the common vision of all ASEAN member states. In contrast, the AMO was more like a status report drafted by the ASEAN Secretariat at the behest of Indonesia as the ASEAN chairman.

The Amo Is a Useful Reference Document

The AMO may not be a path-changing strategic document, but there are many reasons it should not be considered an empty vessel. ASEAN Secretary-General Kao Kim Hourn calls the AMO a stocktaking in his foreword to the document and the 2023 ASEAN Chairman statement describes it as a “practical tool.” As such, the AMO authoritatively documents the cooperation undertaken by ASEAN Sectoral Bodies, mechanisms, and processes to deal with various aspects of maritime-related issues. Such a compilation is useful given the regional proliferation of national maritime strategies and expanded resources that states are allocating to their coast guards, navies, and maritime coordination bodies. These resourcing decisions are not being made on narrow considerations related to competitive great powers but out of respect for a much wider range of maritime challenges, many of which are transnational or can only be addressed through cooperative action. These interrelated challenges – including climate change, marine pollution and debris, transnational organized crime, IUU fishing, depletion of fish stocks, cyberattacks against ships and port facilities, piracy and armed robbery and irregular movement of persons – are becoming more complex and more dire.² This stocktaking is an important step toward building

¹ ASEAN Maritime Outlook, p. 38-9.

² Scott Edward and John Bradford, “Southeast Asia’s Maritime Security Challenges: An Evolving Tapestry,” CSIS AMTI, 23 March 2023, <https://amti.csis.org/southeast-asias-maritime-security-challenges-an-evolving-tapestry/>

solutions and, as explained by the Director of ASEAN Political Security Cooperation at Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Rolliansyah Soemirat, the AMO will become an important reference point for cooperation between ASEAN states and external partners.³

The AMO should also be assessed as an achievement that testifies to Indonesian leadership during its chairmanship year. In a time when maritime issues have regularly been seen as too hot to handle in ASEAN contexts and it has been hard to find consensus, simply publishing a comprehensive document can be a diplomatic challenge. Few, if any, of the other ASEAN states would have mustered the resolve to negotiate the geo-political rapids and register the areas where consensus does exist. Experts such as my RSIS colleagues Jane Chan and Gilang Kembara wondered if Indonesia would have the strength to deliver the document by the end of the year.⁴ Indonesia rose to the challenge and the resultant AMO provides a next step to realizing the AOIP vision.

Foundations On Which to Build New Cooperation Action

Significantly, the AMO is marked as the first edition and leaders agreed to issue another edition every three years. Thus, its publication initiates a *de facto* iterative process that will serve as a forcing function to bring the member states into a dialogue that determines what consensus they can muster. The next edition will be due in 2026 when the Philippines is the designated chair. That will be during the term of current President Bongbong Marcos, a leader who has leaned into maritime issues including those that aggravate China. The requirement to deliver an update AMO will give his government a platform to push for more substantive action, should Philippine leadership desire. Given the high sensitivities surrounding regional maritime security, it will need any leverage that can. Diplomatic goals such as promoting the rule of law as a path to manage the South China Sea disputes may be a bar too high, but the would be value in even making the effort.

ASEAN requires a process to reach decisions and the AMO creates such a process. Previously, ASEAN relied primarily on the AMF to shepherd maritime cooperation, but that body is tied to the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint and assigned a mandate focused on the safety of navigation and security issues.⁵ As Dr. Parameswaran noted in his WonkDive, the AMO will help break down the silos created by ASEAN's three-pillar system and better account for economic and socio-cultural issues in the maritime domain.

Indonesia's chairmanship activities have been marshaled under the slogan "Epicentrum of Growth." Growth requires stability and investment. While it would be easy to dismiss the AMO as an illustration of how little the ASEAN states can agree on in the maritime domain, a more nuanced review shows that it serves a useful role in advancing comprehensive approaches to improving maritime governance by mapping existing institutions and arrangements. Baby steps may be small, but they are steps, nonetheless. Such steps are essential to moving toward the region's shared goals that Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi spoke of when she told the Expanded AMF: "We must also work together to develop blue economy, promote maritime safety, and support the livelihood of coastal communities."⁶ Progress may not be as fast as the works want, the pundits prefer or the region requires, but geopolitics are making regional maritime security increasingly difficult so something is better than nothing. Hopefully, the AMO establishes

³ Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO): Indonesia's Initiative to Strengthen Comprehensive ASEAN Maritime Cooperation," 31 Aug 2023, <https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/5152/view/asean-maritime-outlook-amo-indonesias-initiative-to-strengthen-comprehensive-asean-maritime-cooperation>

⁴ Jane Chan and Gilang Kembara, ASEAN Maritime Outlook: An Idea Whose Time Has Come? RSIS, IDSS Paper, IP23028, 21 Mar 2023, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip23028-asean-maritime-outlook-an-idea-whose-time-has-come/>

⁵ ASEAN Secretariat, "Maritime Cooperation," <https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/peaceful-secure-and-stable-region/maritime-cooperation/>

⁶ Fajar Nugraha, ASEAN Work Hard to Deny Turning into an Epicentrum of Conflict, 2 Aug 2023, <https://www.medcom.id/english/national/ZkeMoW6k-asean-work-hard-to-deny-turning-into-an-epicentrum-of-conflict>

foundations for the more comprehensive action the people of Southeast Asia need. It may be too much to hope for ASEAN unity on issues that confront external powers, even those that would be fully justified such stating consensus to prioritize the enforcement UNCLOS and the rulings of international tribunals. However, there are a range of issues that should not be too hard. For example, ASEAN could commit to sponsoring future military exercises in the South China Sea, just as it has in the past. Or it could concentrate on coordination the many issues highlighted in the AMO that should not trigger great power sensitivities. Those that support the development of ASEAN's blue economy would be good priorities. Fisheries governance, environmental protection, offshore mining, offshore renewal energy, and the cyber-protection of ports all come up in the AMO and are areas where improvement could establish virtuous socio-economic cycle both at sea and ashore in Southeast Asia.

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