



## Understanding ASEAN's "Language"

By

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### Introduction

ASEAN had a tough year, and challenges will hardly be overcome within a year. Probably Cambodia, the ASEAN Chair of 2022, anticipated tantamount challenges ahead, hence the kingdom unveiled the theme, Addressing Challenges Together or A.C.T in short. Perhaps partially subdued, but the conundrum of Myanmar, pandemic, geopolitical competition will still matter. The coup usurped the democratically elected government in Myanmar on the dawn of February 2021. As usual, the media has grilled distressing Tatmadaw. Worse, the pandemic did not seem to get any better. Nevertheless, the governments in the region are seen as almost bewildered and hesitant to continue 'lockdown' concerning discontents of poor economic performance, which may dissipate the miracle of the regional economic development.

### The Proliferation of Indo-Pacific Initiatives and ASEAN-Skeptics

Looking back in 2021, ASEAN has faced arrays of new initiatives, mostly led by external partners. It has started from the Quad Summit held virtually in March 2021, then [Global Britain's strategy](#)<sup>1</sup> focusing on the Indo-Pacific realm while sugar-coating ASEAN at the center of the UK's strategy and [the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy](#)<sup>2</sup> which came to fruition on 16 September 2021. The day before, three Anglo-Saxon countries announced AUKUS in Washington DC. Quad, AUKUS, various Indo-Pacific initiatives from elsewhere made the geopolitical calculation unpredictable and even murky. Bruneian diplomats have demonstrated political adroitness in moderation; 2021, however, seemed one of the most challenging years to keep their agendas going forward. Being snowed under internal conundrums, never-ending Indo-Pacific initiatives and China's push, the Chair barely kept its head above the water.



Seemingly, ASEAN could barely escape from burnout. ASEAN did not claw back on counter-arguing ASEAN Centrality facing the overflowing Indo-Pacific initiatives and China's push. They even missed the due date to issue Foreign Ministers' Statement on the Kabul attack. On the surface, ASEAN was seen in an abyss and fatigue. But are they?

ASEAN skeptics have been even more vocal in criticizing ASEAN by attacking a whole region for being incapable of solving their own problems. Some moderate critics, including [Rizal Sukma](#),<sup>3</sup> expressed concerns over ASEAN's indecisive pattern, which might lead the region to irrelevance. Will ASEAN lose its grip in the future?

## **Grey, ASEAN's "Language"**

A simple answer will be no. Looking back on how ASEAN has paved its way to posit itself as an independent sovereign states' association, it has chosen its own way to emphasize inclusivity and versatility. Inclusivity in ASEAN's term does not only mean 'no one left behind,' but also allows multiple interpretations. ASEAN hardly draws the line between 'us' and 'them'. This notion – 'us' versus 'them' – is derived from 'political correctness,' which is particularly prevalent in Western Democracy.<sup>4</sup>

Since ASEAN has become a ten-nation intergovernmental organization, it has seldom promoted this 'us from them' discourse. Considering the fact that ASEAN has accommodated multiple ideologies, religions, and territorial features – maritime and mainland, it is a dire task to distinguish us from them within itself. Instead, ASEAN has chosen an alternative way to reach consensus, often called a common denominator, ensuring every member state feels fairly comfortable. For this reason, understanding ASEAN's "language" often demands unbearable patience from external partners. ASEAN would not say yes or no. Alternatively, they would articulate poetic rhetoric, meaningful on the surface but hollow underneath. Interpretation is up to the listeners. [Prof. Amitav Acharya](#),<sup>5</sup> therefore, argues that the best-expected outcome for ASEAN is 'a multiplex world' where various ideas, notions, and systems organically interact and intertwine. This is indeed a metaphysical concept, again demanding unwearied patience to decode multiple messages. ASEAN is not trained or tamed to find one absolute answer to let every member state fit in. They can agree to disagree.

Unlike Quad or AUKUS which calls on a straightforward truth of liberal ideas, 'a free and open Indo-Pacific,' the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP), adopted in 2019, is ambiguous and broad which can be interpreted in multiple ways. ASEAN identifies four main areas for cooperation, highlighting





functionality and inclusivity, but the fourth area for cooperation states other 'possible areas of cooperation'. Some naysayers pinpoint that this is 'typical' ASEAN which presents unfinished work for the sake of telling the world that the assignment is done. However, AOIP has proven itself 'very' ASEAN that does not limit areas for cooperation but leaves room for improvement and adjustment, which has taken into account of an irresistibly changing strategic environment.

## Understanding 'We' and 'They'

It is also worth noting to identify the pronoun 'we'. In [the Joint Statement from the Quad Leaders](#),<sup>6</sup> the Quad Leaders are referred to as 'we,' and like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific can be 'with us'. Defining who 'we are' and 'who they are' is common in political discourse to convey a simple message to the public whom 'we' need to be hostile.<sup>7</sup> Looking into the Joint Statement, 'we' are re-classified into different labels. The Joint Statement conjugates 'we' by re-phrasing *our partners, like-minded partners, G7 and G20*. The Quad Leaders specify who 'we' are depending on how similar our values and ideas are. Simply put, ASEAN does not use such language, which can be conveniently trapped in the 'black and white' philosophy. Looking into other initiatives of ASEAN, ASEAN prefers words and phrases that are relatively neutral in nuances and embedding versatility. When ASEAN Community was launched in 2015, ASEAN officials ardently promoted that the Community is not the end, but it works in progress. ASEAN favors words and phrases of metamorphosis.

ASEAN is a de facto intergovernmental regional diplomacy group inviting external parties, including major powers. Language is unarguably the heart of diplomacy. Hence, ASEAN's ambiguous yet subtle use of language matters a lot, especially when they constantly do business with other nations whose tongues are relatively more assertive and vocal. ASEAN has adopted its own language skill to hint at approval or disapproval rather than directly say it out. ASEAN's "language" is designed to maneuver the maze rather than speeding up on the autobahn. Hence, a smart partner of ASEAN understands ASEAN's "language" and is able to convey the explicit message without poking them much.

Pundits are concerned over ASEAN's indecisive and hollow message tactics, but this is the way ASEAN has chosen to survive more than a half-century. Turning ASEAN into a vocal regional organization to tell right and wrong would be hard to imagine. In doing so, ASEAN would lose a driver's seat in the ASEAN-led mechanisms but proliferate enemies.





## Conclusion

Nonetheless, skeptics may smirk and sneer. One thing for sure is that ASEAN has neither been complacent nor blatantly aggressive to sell ideas to replace others. Indeed, no one is an absolute friend or enemy in diplomacy. One thing ASEAN needs to focus on more is probably honing its “language” skill in the future to tighten its grip in the region, but again in a subtle ASEAN way.

## Endnotes

- 1 UK Government (March 2021), “Global Britain in a competitive age,” Retrieved from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/975077/Global\\_Britain\\_in\\_a\\_Competitive\\_Age\\_the\\_Integrated\\_Review\\_of\\_Security\\_Defence\\_Development\\_and\\_Foreign\\_Policy.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age_the_Integrated_Review_of_Security_Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf)
- 2 EU Commission (16 September 2021), “Indo-Pacific Questions and Answers,” Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA\\_21\\_4709](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_21_4709)
- 3 Jakarta Post (30 September 2021), “Is AUKUS a problem or blessing for ASEAN?” Retrieved from: <https://www.the-jakartapost.com/academia/2021/09/30/is-aukus-a-problem-or-blessing-for-asean.html>
- 4 Nicola Woods, “Describing Discourse, A practical Guide to Discourse Analysis” (UK: Routledge, 2006), 51
- 5 The Diplomat (29 September 2021), “Amitav Archarya on ASEAN and Its Discontents,” Retrieved from : <https://the-diplomat.com/2021/09/amitav-acharya-on-asean-and-its-discontents/>
- 6 The White House (24 September 2021), “Joint Statement from Quad Leaders,” Retrieved from : <https://www.white-house.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/joint-statement-from-quad-leaders/>
- 7 Pual Chilton, “Analysing Political Discourse, Theory and Practice,” (UK: Routledge, 2004), 159





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