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ASEAN's Balancing Act: Views from the FPCI-ERIA Perception Survey 2023¹

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ASEAN walks a fine line with its key dialogue partners, a recent ASEAN peoples' perception survey jointly conducted by the Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (FPCI) and the Economic Research Institute for East Asia (ERIA) says.

Collecting data from 1,722 respondents in the ASEAN region and Timor-Leste, the survey examines elites' and the civil society's views and attitudes toward four main players, namely China, India, Japan and the United States. Although the number of respondents are limited and may not represent the perception of the whole region, there are some observations to be highlighted.

In general, the respondents acknowledge the United States as "the most reliable security partner" and China as "the most reliable economic partner". Among the four countries, Japan is the most favourable partner due to its consistency, credibility and compliance with international law.

¹ This article is a revised version of my presentation given at the public debriefing session of *Survey of ASEAN People's Perceptions on China, India, Japan, and the USA* on 5 March 2024. I wish to thank the FPCI and ERIA for their invitation.

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The country was also labeled as “most trustworthy”, “most dependable” and “most loyal partner in supporting ASEAN’s initiatives and mechanisms”. This result is not surprising as Japan has the longest record of engagements with the region since 1973. The country has invested in building and strengthening mechanisms as well as promoting heart-to-heart approach as a backbone of its dialogue partner relationship with ASEAN.

There is a shared idea from the survey that socio-cultural and economic engagements are always welcomed. The result states that education, research and academic exchange is the most satisfied area of cooperation between ASEAN and the four countries, followed by investment (China, India, Japan) and defense and security (United States). On political-security issues, it seems that the respondents are reluctant. Majority of respondents say they “have no opinion” on QUAD and AUKUS. On BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), almost 60% of respondents tick the box of “neutral”. On NATO’s presence in the region, 42.04% opposes NATO countries’ naval operation in the region. Approximately 36% of respondents remain “neutral” on the plan of opening a NATO office in Japan while around 33% opposes the plan.

The survey reaffirms the view that ASEAN peoples prefer projects or initiatives that put forth development and economic priority. In case of China, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Global Development Initiative (GDI) are two most popular initiatives by majority of respondents. Most of them also see Japan’s initiatives, such as official development assistance, Asia-Japan Investing for the Future Initiatives and Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) positively contribute to regional development. On India-led initiatives, Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (TEC) is mostly well-known and welcomed by ASEAN, followed by Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT) and Act East

Policy. The United States is not exceptional. The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) is more receptive than the others.

Not only positive contribution by the four dialogue partners but also challenges were addressed in the survey. Almost half of the respondents (46.75%) see the United States as “the most likely partner to politically interfere in Southeast Asian countries’ affairs” while 57.2% consider China “the most likely to use economic tools for political objectives in its relations with ASEAN member states”. The respondents also express their concerns over nationalism and hegemonic ambitions.

India also faces a challenge, according to the survey, that it is recognised as a country that is reluctant to cooperate. For Japan, there is an issue of sustainability of its approach toward ASEAN. Due to an intensifying geopolitical competition in the region, it is possible that Japan could gear toward more assertive stance on regional issues in the future.

Although the survey’s result provides a glimpse of what the samples think about the four countries, further discussion on the rationale behind the result should be explored. In my opinion, there is a gap between action and perception. Database on the ASEAN Secretariat’s website as well as related statements and declarations display several actions taken by these countries to engage with ASEAN regionally and bilaterally. However, the dissemination of information is limited to a small circle of people. Therefore, it is important for the four countries to invest more in public diplomacy activities that prioritise strategic communication and engagement with stakeholders and non-state actors. There is a sentence in the survey that could be a lesson for other countries and I quote: “Japan’s successful soft diplomacy was relevant to its smooth power projection”. Communication style is key to success.

The survey addresses interesting points not only to the dialogue partners but also to ASEAN countries. At the online debriefing session of the survey, a discussant asked an important question: what does ASEAN really want its dialogue partners to do on regional issues and to improve ASEAN centrality? My response is: ASEAN adheres to rules-based order built on principles in the ASEAN Charter, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), the Declaration on the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) and the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty. Reinforcing these principles by practical and verbal actions is a way to show respect for ASEAN centrality.

To improve the survey in the future, FPCI and ERIA should consider increasing the sampling number and expanding the scope of countries to Australia, European Union, New Zealand and Republic of Korea. The scope of questions should be also broadened. For example, the survey could address a question on peoples' perception toward dialogue partners' roles in sub-regional cooperation, including Mekong cooperation, Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) and Brunei-Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East Asian Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA).

To conclude, the survey is an evidence to prove that ASEAN is able to exercise its “agency” with dialogue partners. The region is not taking side with any powers or operating in any player's backyard.