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In recent times, the United States, Japan and Australia have all promoted extremely similar visions of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific as the central organizing concept to guide their efforts in the region. The concept is essentially a reaffirmation of the security and economic rules-based order which was cobbled together after the Second World War - especially as it relates to freedom of the regional and global commons such as sea, air and cyberspace, and the way nations conduct economic relations. Be that as it may, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific is an updated vision of collective action to defend, strengthen and advance that order. It signals a greater acceptance by the two regional allies of the U.S. of their security burden and takes into account the realities of China's rise and the relative decline in dominance of the U.S. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its member states continue to delay any definitive response to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept. Although its principles are attractive to many ASEAN member states, long-held conceptions of ASEAN centrality and its meaning gives the organization apparent reason for hesitation. The reasons include fears of diminished centrality and relevance, and reluctance to endorse a more confrontational mindset being adopted by the U.S. and its allies - including the revival of the Quadrilateral grouping with India - with respect to China. The reality is that while ASEAN and major member states are focused primarily on the risks of action, there are considerable risks of inaction and hesitation. The current era will either enhance or lessen the relevance of ASEAN in the eyes of these three countries in the years ahead depending on how the organisation and its key member states respond. Indeed, this Trends paper argues that ASEAN is more likely to be left behind by strategic events and developments if it remains passive, and that the ball is in ASEAN's court in terms of the future of its regional 'centrality'.
