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Indonesia and Indo-Pacific: Seeking the Proper Response to Great Power Politics

Draft Paper

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Introduction: Indonesia's Foreign Policy and the Great Powers

The “independent and active” doctrine has served as a permanent compass in guiding Indonesia's foreign affairs since its independence. ‘Independent,’ sometimes also translated as ‘free,’¹ is understood as not taking sides over two opposing blocs,² and ‘active’ means advancing peaceful measures eagerly to settle any potential tension.³

During the Cold War, where smaller countries were forced to follow a certain ideological camp led by either the United States or by the Soviet Union, Indonesia's founding fathers perceived that the newly independent country should not side with any particular block. In terms of foreign policy, this is translated into working together with fellow smaller countries in a regional grouping instead of voluntarily complying with the great powers' leadership. Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is one concrete example. Indonesia initiated the establishment of ASEAN together with its Southeast Asian counterparts, and then was one of the strong advocates for the first ASEAN Summit in 1976 and the ASEAN Political Security Community in 2003.

For Indonesia, ASEAN serves as its traditional diplomatic vehicle. Act No. 38/2008 on the ratification of ASEAN Charter explicitly highlights ASEAN as the cornerstone of Indonesia's Foreign Politics.⁴ This special position of ASEAN is also supported by the fact that no other charters of any regional organization politically-legally ratified by Indonesia. There-

¹ The Indonesian word ‘bebas,’ means both independent and free in the English language.

² Mohammad Hatta, “Indonesia's Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Apr. 1953), p. 441-452.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 444

⁴ “Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 38 Tahun 2008 tentang Pengesahan Charter of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Piagam Perhimpunan Bangsa-Bangsa Asia Tenggara),” Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 6 November 2018, <https://sipuu.setkab.go.id/PUUdoc/16500/UU0382008.pdf>.

fore, it should be understandable that Jakarta's interests are to advance ASEAN in the initial attempt of settling international issues and to advocate the centrality of ASEAN among the international community.

Indonesia and the Indo-Pacific

As an archipelago, the connectivity of its maritime surroundings is an indispensable part of Indonesia's strategic thought. The recognition for the connectedness of the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean has been in the Indonesian lexicon even as early as the 1930s. A bold discussion on 'Indo-Pacific' was then gradually started to readjust the existing narrative with the current great power competition. It was the former Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa who played the initial role when delivering a speech on Indonesia's Indo-Pacific Perspective in Washington D.C., May 2013.

This discussion embarked on a significant step when Joko Widodo during his presidential campaign in 2014 introduced his vision on the Global Maritime Fulcrum, aimed at making Indonesia as a significant player in 'Indo-Pacific' geostrategic environment. President Widodo also shared his Global Maritime Fulcrum with regional counterparts at the 9th East Asian Summit in hoping that Southeast Asian countries could work together to create favourable atmosphere in the Indo-Pacific region.

Systematic efforts are since taken to boost awareness on 'Indo-Pacific' both at the domestic and international levels. 'Indo-Pacific' term was deployed for the first time in the five-year strategic plan of Indonesia's Foreign Ministry published on April 2015. Two years later, Indonesia also hosted the historical Indian Ocean Rim Association High-Level Forum. But not until 2018, where Indonesia finally thought that a collective outlook on Indo-Pacific was much more demanded in addressing the gravity of the situation. Therefore, the term was finally used for the first time in the 2018 annual statement of Indonesia's Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi with 7-times repetition, while President Widodo also paid a diplomatic tour to five South Asian countries as a way to show Indonesia's serious attention towards the Indian Ocean.

Great Power Politics

Indonesia's efforts to promote a collective outlook can be seen as a response to the increasing tension due to great power rivalry. Since China introduced its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has been the major player in the infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia. Although Indonesia has been positively welcoming BRI, there is a concern regarding how other countries might respond to it.

Since 2019, Southeast Asia has been the receiving end of competing narratives on Indo-Pacific driven by major actors. The concern, however, was that the competing narratives did not really serve Southeast Asia's interests yet massively impact the region. Indonesia views that the U.S. Indo-Pacific approach, as stated in the 2017 US National Security Strategy, which implicitly chanted the Indo-Pacific region as a main battle ground vis-à-vis its so-called adversaries and competitors, is a threat to ASEAN centrality. Moreover, the Quad narrative, which was presented as a potential strategic coalition (of US, India, Japan, and Australia), sent a strong signal that it might contest ASEAN Centrality when the time

comes. This pushes Indonesia to initiate talks with regional counterparts on adjusting its geostrategic environment as an imminent response.

These narratives, at the same time, received strong reactions from China. Coupled with also the growing concern of impacts of over-dependence on China's BRI, the great power politics have truly influenced the politics of Southeast Asia. Taking into account the cancellations of three mega hydroelectricity projects —Pakistan, Nepal, and Myanmar— due to the financing terms later that year, this convinced Indonesia to have a discussion with its regional counterparts on how connectivity projects should be carried out in the future and the necessity of diversifying partners on the subject.

Multi-interpretative values such as —democracy and human rights— as promoted by the great powers' Indo-Pacific narratives could also be inferred as one of the driving forces why Indonesia is eager to have a regional collective outlook. There is an emerging belief that these multi-interpretative values could be easily played as a wild card to deny the engagement of certain Indo-Pacific countries which do not uphold the same standard as the great power. Besides, allowing these values continuously streamed in the Indo-Pacific notion might be understood as an open violation towards the longstanding non-intervention principle, and potentially enabling great powers to meddle domestic business of other countries. In short, indigenous measures are on high-demand during this critical juncture.

Working through ASEAN

Foreign Minister Marsudi during the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Retreat at the beginning of 2018, expressed Indonesia's proposal to collaboratively work on an ASEAN collective outlook. The proposal was also advanced by Indonesia when Jakarta hosted an ASEAN 1.5-Track Workshop on Indo-Pacific around mid-March 2018. A month following this workshop, President Joko Widodo once again pushed forward Indonesia's proposal on Indo-Pacific in front of regional counterparts at the 32nd ASEAN Summit. Three following points on Indo-Pacific were mentioned including a) ASEAN as the driver of Indo-Pacific; b) security challenges must be addressed; and c) the importance of creating a new centre of economic growth in Indian Ocean.

As predicted, responses varied with regards to Indonesia's Indo-Pacific proposal. This could be seen during the 8th East Asian Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting in August 2018 when Indonesian Foreign Ministry distributed an 8-page concept paper. The different term was also used to address Indonesia's proposal vis-à-vis the narratives of dialogue partners in the 51st ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting Joint Communique. Although ASEAN countries once agreed to assign Indonesia in coordinating the development of an ASEAN indigenous collective outlook through its Senior Officials' Meeting Retreat in September 2018, but different stances continued up until the following year. The first ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat under Thailand's chairpersonship did not result in a positive outcome, as Indonesia was deemed failed to convince other ASEAN fellows to formally adopt a common stance on the Indo-Pacific issue.⁵ Another Indonesia-led initiative in March 2019 known as the High-Level Dialogue on Indo-Pacific Cooperation was also only attended by one ASEAN foreign minister —Brunei Darussalam— and four vice foreign ministers —Lao PDR, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam—, while the rest just delegated

⁵ Supalak Ganjanakhundee, "ASEAN Ministers Fail to Reach Consensus on Indo-Pacific Strategy," *The Nation Thailand*, 18 January 2019, <https://www.nationthailand.com/breakingnews/30362539>.

lower officials. Even though this meeting did not really result in anything substantive, but at least the discussion occurred.

After several months of intense effort, including with internal ASEAN challenges,⁶ the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) was finally adopted at the ASEAN Summit on 23 June 2019.

What is in the ASEAN Outlook?

Officials have said that AOIP ought to be viewed as a work in progress, as it is intended to be 'inclusive in terms of ideas and proposals' (see Paragraph 4 of the Outlook). Firstly, it is not a legally-binding instrument. It basically sets general normative outlines on dos and don'ts for any country who would like to engage in the region.

Second, it is a work in progress as officials repeatedly said the AOIP is intended to be inclusive in terms of ideas and proposals. There is no mention of any country or major power, not just China and the United States, and avoids discussion of sensitive political-security issues. There is no categorization which a specific country deems as a friend or an adversary, and there is no mention of any great power as well. It is also inclusive because the discussions depended on the low-hanging fruits instead of sensitive political-security issues.

Thirdly, it stresses reliance on existing ASEAN norms and mechanisms, such as the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, ASEAN Centrality, and the East Asian Summit. It is 'not aimed at creating new mechanisms or replacing existing ones.' In short, there is not much novelty offered by the new document and there is no clear follow-up strategy outlined in the document on how to pursue the proposed key areas of cooperation —maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development goals, economic and other sectors.

The principles outlined in the document are also identical to ASEAN principles: an open regional architecture; connecting ASEAN-led instruments with other existing non-ASEAN-led mechanisms and non-ASEAN countries; and ASEAN traditions. The document uses a lot of symbolic keywords associated with the openness of AOIP including: 'inclusive' which repeated twice, 'inclusivity', 'collective leadership', 'ballast for the current dynamism', and 'inclusiveness'. The AOIP tends to let ASEAN determine their own actions regardless the competing streams led by great powers.

AOIP preserves ASEAN traditions. It includes making ASEAN as an honest broker in the great power competition era by intensifying dialogues and other confidence building measures. ASEAN also highlights the necessity of 'win-win or mutually beneficial cooperation' in the document which has been successfully used by ASEAN countries to repel monstrous military conflicts from the region for over decades. A region-to-region approach is therefore deployed to reach out any regional and sub-regional mechanism across the Asia-Pacific, and the Indian Ocean regions while at the same time enabling ASEAN to optimize its limited individual resources.

⁶ Dian Septiari, "Singapore 'holds back' adoption of ASEAN Indo-Pacific concept," *The Jakarta Post*, 13 June 2019; Resty Woro Yuniar, "Indonesia reveals frustration with Singapore over delay in Asean adopting President Widodo's Indo-Pacific concept," *South China Morning Post*, 16 June 2019.

Reflections: Small and Middle Power Diplomacy

AOIP is best understood as a small/middle power diplomacy amidst great power rivalry and competing Indo-Pacific concepts/strategies. Its manifestation could be seen at least in three following ways: gathering fellow smaller regional countries to agree upon one collective voice in dealing with greater powers, inviting other great powers to rebalance the presence of the existing great powers, and extensively binding all great powers with regional instruments and mechanisms. Therefore, it is necessary for ASEAN to set the rule of the game, but it would be much more sufficient if ASEAN dialogue partners also support it as the driving force

There are two ways at least in which ASEAN counterparts could contribute to the AOIP. First, through normative measures such as officially recognising the AOIP as the main regional rule of the game in the Indo-Pacific era, and endorsing the AOIP in all ASEAN-led mechanisms and the ASEAN+1 frameworks. Second, through practical ways such as providing more financial and technical assistances towards the implementation of the AOIP areas of cooperation. Other than that, joining various dialogues organised by ASEAN are necessary to deepen the mutual understanding.

As the EAS might gain the spotlight of the AOIP, it is highly prescriptive for all ASEAN dialogue partners to enhance its presence while at the same time recalibrate its expectation over this mechanism. EAS might not immediately be expanded, but cooperation engaging outside existing partners are still welcomed. ASEAN dialogue partners and ASEAN members need to be on the same page about the EAS functions which are prescribing and driving more practical cooperation, particularly on the key areas mentioned in AOIP.

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