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Indonesia's Leadership Transition: Will Jakarta's Foreign Policy Change?

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Synopsis

The forthcoming leadership transition in Indonesia will not result in a radical foreign policy change. However, Indonesia is likely to diversify its foreign policy choices by promoting its emerging middle power status. This article continues a series on this year's national elections.

Commentary

INDONESIA will undergo a significant transformation this year as the country will hold national elections to choose new legislators at both the national and regional levels and elect a new president to succeed incumbent Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who has been in power since 2004.

During his presidency which spans two terms, Yudhoyono has been lauded for reviving activism in Indonesia's foreign policy after years of difficulty following the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis and the fall of President Suharto. Will the forthcoming leadership transition result in a drastic change in Indonesia's foreign policy?

Continuity rather than change

Some analysts of Indonesia's foreign policy are worried that the new president may be inward-looking and more interested in pursuing a nationalistic agenda. This prediction is somewhat exaggerated. While the new president may be more nationalistic, he or she will be unlikely to radically change Indonesia's foreign policy direction. There are three reasons for this.

First of all, just as in the case of domestic politics, foreign policy issues involve a broad range of domestic aspirations, from a more protectionist trade policy to human rights and democracy promotion; from a more active stance in ASEAN to one that is more globally-oriented. The new president, like the incumbent, will likely choose the middle ground by continuing Indonesia's current diplomacy. He or she will not do any extreme foreign policy makeover and will prefer to satisfy demands from diverse foreign policy interests inside the country.

Secondly, Indonesia does not urgently need to pursue an aggressive foreign policy, which requires energy and resources. Indonesia has been criticised for not taking a proactive leadership role in ASEAN during difficult times. For instance, Indonesia did not take a firm stand towards China over the territorial disputes in the South China Sea - until after ASEAN foreign ministers were in disarray over the issue following their annual meeting in

Cambodia in 2012.

Nonetheless, this position is understandable because adopting an aggressive policy toward China would not only incur economic costs with China but would also require a huge effort to rival China's dominant economic influence in some ASEAN members such as Cambodia and Laos, something Indonesia current lacks.

Thirdly, the new president will not become an inward-looking president because he/she will be driven by domestic aspiration to see Indonesia play a constructive role in world politics. Indonesians are increasingly getting more mature and rational in responding to international affairs because many of them have international exposure. More government officials from various agencies, including at the regional level, and parliament members have more experience in networking from their involvement in international fora.

The private sector is also intensifying its lobby of the government for more participation in economic diplomacy. It is true that when there was political tension between Indonesia and its neighbours, such as with Malaysia over Indonesian migrant workers, some protests followed in front of the Malaysian embassy in Jakarta. Nonetheless, nationalist rhetoric of a few groups does not necessarily reflect the real public interest and concern. The public in general prefer to see increasing mutual trade, cultural exchanges, and people-to-people relations despite some difficulty in bilateral relations.

Likely future foreign policy

The next president will likely try to play a more active and innovative role in global affairs, but this will not be accomplished by exercising an obsolete "*Konfrontasi*" spirit. There are indications to support this prediction. Some presidential candidates have tried to convey to both domestic constituents and foreign observers that they are able to manage foreign relations well.

Jakarta Governor Joko Widodo or "Jokowi", the front runner for the presidency according to surveys, initiated the first-ever meeting between the governors and mayors of ASEAN's capital cities a few months ago, a signal that he aims to promote the growth of a Southeast Asian community. Former Trade Minister Gita Wirjawan, who is running for nomination as the Democratic Party's presidential candidate, has been portrayed as a capable negotiator in difficult meetings of the WTO last December.

Previously, Aburizal Bakrie, the Golkar Party chairman, toured Australia, Malaysia and Thailand to meet leaders of the ruling parties in those countries, apparently to raise his profile as a strong internationalist. Even Prabowo Subianto, who often advocates more protectionist and nationalistic policies, was also declared by his brother, Hashim Djojohadikusumo, to support foreign investment.

Moves of an emerging power?

While there will likely be no substantial and ideological change in Indonesia's foreign policy under the new leadership after this year's elections, the next president will need to deal with both regional and global developments which will influence Indonesia's strategic choices. In Southeast Asia, despite progress towards ASEAN Community 2015, some countries in the region are facing the threat of domestic instability. The political stalemate in Thailand, unresolved protests in Phnom Penh and other internal tensions could weaken enthusiasm for regional integration.

In the broader region, there are tendencies of conservatism and self-serving nationalistic agendas, such as growing tension between China and Japan over territorial dispute and the controversial "stop-the-boat" policy in Australia.

Amidst an uncertain and unpredictable regional and global situation, Indonesia will strategically try to refocus its foreign policy. It will likely reduce its diplomatic weight from traditional, but increasingly less effective organisations such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) - two groups in which Indonesia was very active between 1960s and 1990s. ASEAN will still be important for Indonesia, but Jakarta may seek to diversify its foreign policy orientation as a consequence of its self-perceived status as an emerging middle power.

For example, together with Mexico, Korea, Turkey and Australia, Indonesia formed an informal consultative group dubbed MIKTA last year. It is too early to predict whether MIKTA could have significant influence in world politics, especially within the G-20, but MIKTA countries have started to meet regularly at the working group level.

As shown by its move on MIKTA, Indonesia in 2014 and beyond will creatively either initiate or join informal groupings, which is a new phenomenon in world politics. For any future Indonesian president, joining the club of

middle and emerging powers across different regions will not be entirely aimed at influencing global governance. More importantly, it will have a domestic goal. If the new leader intensifies efforts to raise Indonesia's image as an emerging power, he or she will be regarded by constituents at home as a competent leader of this big and complex nation.

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