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Aspiring Regional Power: Indonesian Foreign Policy Under Next President

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

Whether it is Prabowo Subianto or Joko Widodo, Indonesia's next president will have to deal with an increasingly assertive China. Tensions in the South China Sea will be his first major test.

Commentary

GROWING TENSIONS in the South China Sea coinciding with a more assertive China is presenting a dramatic backdrop to Indonesia's presidential election now under way. Whether it is Prabowo Subianto or Joko Widodo, the next president will have to deal with the impact of these tensions as leader of Southeast Asia's largest country - with the world's fourth largest population and the potential to be a regional power.

If campaign rhetoric and political platforms are indicators of the contenders' future foreign policy, tensions from these territorial disputes will be a bugbear for the next president. How they intend to deal with them will reflect their foreign policy worldview. While there are nuanced differences between them, clues are emerging from their responses which also point to their aspirations for Indonesia as a regional maritime giant to be reckoned with.

Prabowo's attitude to maritime disputes

For Prabowo, a former special forces general used to strategic thinking, he is clear in his attitude towards regional territorial tensions. The biggest threat to Indonesia, in his view, is external and comes from territorial disputes and overlapping claims. "There are other countries that want to claim our territory, our waters or our islands," he says. The role of the government under his leadership is to protect Indonesia's national interest.

During a televised presidential debate on 22 June 2014, Prabowo declared Indonesia's territorial integrity as a "core national interest" that cannot be compromised. The best way for Indonesia to defend its core national interest is to develop its own national strength by better controlling the country's national wealth, plugging leakages in the system and cutting down on corruption.

Foreign policy, to him, is a mirror of domestic strength. Foreign policy is meaningless if Indonesia is weak domestically. He sees no need to settle disputes through armed conflict, vowing to pursue a "good neighbour policy" and to continue President Yudhoyono's foreign policy of "a thousand friends is not enough, and one enemy is one too many".

Still, it is hard not to get the impression that a Prabowo presidency will respond with a harder line towards China should Beijing continue with its aggressive posture in the region. Tellingly, foreign policy under him, as outlined in his vision statement, will see a significant shift of Jakarta's long-standing principle of "bebas aktif" (independent and active) to "bebas, aktif, tegas" - independent, active, firm.

Joko Widodo and the South China Sea

The attitude of Joko Widodo - better known as Jokowi - towards territorial disputes is more nuanced, even suggestive of a softer line. Asked during the television debate what his strategy would be if Indonesian territory was claimed or occupied by others, his top priority would be diplomacy - especially when the situation was not clear.

But when the claimed territory was clearly Indonesian, he would be firm and "kick up a fuss". "Don't think I can't be firm," he says. Joko, however, generally prefers a cautious approach for Indonesia, balancing its role in problem-solving while preserving its ties with Beijing. "If we can play a role, that's better. But we have to be careful not to spoil our relationship with China. If we are not confident of resolving the problem, we should not step in," he says.

Should this posture become foreign policy, it will be a marked contrast with Indonesia's stance under President Yudhoyono, whose foreign minister Marty Natalegawa has been effective as a regional facilitator in ASEAN's management of the South China Sea disputes with Beijing. It will have implications for ASEAN's stance of collective concern over the disputes while respecting the right of claimant states, which include four ASEAN members, to pursue their own bilateral tracks.

In fact, Prabowo questioned whether Joko's posture was not in conflict with Indonesia's and ASEAN's interests. "Do we abstain or defend our ASEAN partners who are claimants?"

Under pressure, Joko, stuck to his preferred cautious approach for Indonesia - unless Jakarta can clearly help find a solution. "If we can't find a solution, what for? We don't have a conflict there. But if we step in, there should be a solution." This stance may, however, be problematic for Indonesia's defence planners. Indeed, they are reportedly already uneasy about China's maritime claims in the South China Sea creeping into the Natuna Islands which Indonesia asserts it owns.

Joko Widodo's foreign policy worldview

While Joko may not have projected his foreign policy thinking and stance elegantly enough, it does not mean he does not have a foreign policy worldview. Indeed, he is actually backed by a competent team of foreign policy advisers. A closer look at Joko's political platform shows that his team has a foreign policy *weltanschauung* should he come to power.

This revolves around rebuilding Indonesia's international prestige, repositioning Jakarta's role on global issues, and advancing Indonesia's identity as an archipelagic state. This means building up Indonesia as a "regional maritime power that is respected in the East Asian region", according to Joko's Vision and Mission paper.

A Joko Widodo presidency would aim to resolve boundary issues with ten of its neighbours; guarantee Indonesia's territorial integrity and maritime sovereignty; secure Indonesia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ); and suppress maritime rivalry among the major powers by encouraging them to resolve their territorial disputes.

Joko's advisers see Indonesia as a regional power that will advance these objectives through "middle power diplomacy", focusing on the Indo-Pacific region which Indonesia strategically straddles as an archipelagic state.

There are direct implications for ASEAN from this worldview: Under Joko, Indonesia would consolidate its leadership in ASEAN, strengthen ASEAN cooperation and secure ASEAN centrality. Indonesia would also strengthen the regional architecture especially the East Asia Summit (EAS), which the advisers see as a platform that could prevent big power hegemony in East Asia. Indonesia under Joko would also expand bilateral strategic partnerships in ASEAN.

To complete this foreign policy worldview, a Joko Widodo presidency will advance a national defence system which will boost defence spending to 1.5 percent of GDP over the next five years; pursue defence self-reliance by reducing import dependence for defence needs, develop a national defence industry and diversify defence cooperation. The Indonesian defence forces, TNI, will be developed as the backbone of Indonesia as a regional maritime power while a National Security Council will be formed to coordinate all security policies.

It is likely that Indonesia under Prabowo would similarly stick with ASEAN, as intimated by his professed solidarity with the ASEAN claimant states vis-a-vis China. The difference is that his would be a more forceful presidency than Joko's, and Prabowo is likely also to display more independent thinking in foreign policy - which makes him more difficult to predict.

For all these reasons, who will emerge as Indonesia's next leader will be of direct relevance to the region. Managing regional tensions will enter a new phase whether Prabowo or Joko Widodo becomes the seventh president.

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