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Jokowi's "Look West" Foreign Policy: Expanding Indonesia's Sphere of Influence?

By Leonard C. Sebastian & Emirza Adi Syailendra

Synopsis

While President Jokowi has to contend with intense short-term domestic challenges, it does not mean he will completely decry the internationalist foreign policy outlook of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. His primary strategies will be to turn Indonesia into a "global maritime nexus" and pursue a "Look West" strategy.

Commentary

INDONESIA AIMS to play a bigger role in Asia Pacific Region under President Joko Widodo. The key indicator was his campaign promise that Indonesia under his presidency would adopt a foreign policy stance emphasising Jakarta's role as a "global maritime nexus". In the short-term, domestic political contingencies and concerns over domestic political instability will require him to consolidate his power base. Constrained by such circumstances, how does he aim to shape Indonesia's foreign policy trajectory?

President Jokowi, as he is fondly known, represents a new democratic trend for Indonesia. He defeated a coalition of big parties backing the Prabowo-Hatta ticket. He does not have a military background nor enjoy the status of a prominent figure in his own Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP). Jokowi's victory was a product of voluntarism, behind the scenes business and civil society networks, combined with the multiplier effect of the new media.

The new normal

These developments were no doubt a product of the growing maturity of Indonesia's democracy, but Indonesia now has to contend with the new normal: the growing power of the opposition, the Red-White Coalition (*Koalisi Merah Putih*, KMP); a president with weak control over his political party, the PDI-P; and an increasingly divided population. Jokowi has no option but to utilise a carrot-and-stick approach to deal with the KMP and win a few policy battles in Parliament to boost public confidence in him.

Under such a scenario, it is not unfair to conclude that Jokowi would be too preoccupied with his domestic agenda to focus on grand strategy and would require the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

(KEMLU) to take a stronger lead in foreign policy. An inward-looking stance would dilute the outgoing Yudhoyono government's emphasis to forge leader-to-leader linkages, enhance relations between middle powers beyond ASEAN, and institutionalise ASEAN-centric linkages in line with KEMLU's longstanding traditions.

While he may be preoccupied with domestic politics, President Jokowi wants to expand Indonesia's foreign policy scope to include the Indian Ocean. As a potential middle power, Indonesia has always had two big spheres of interests, namely, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean spheres.

Indonesia's expanding sphere of Influence: Looking west?

Indonesia has consistently supported the creation of norms and order in the Pacific sphere, primarily through ASEAN mechanisms. There has been little interest in the Indian Ocean although Indonesia had strong historical bonds with that region through the Bandung Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement. In the early years of independence under Sukarno, Indonesia looked to the Pacific due to the differing emphasis in foreign policy stances between Indonesia and India. Sukarno was more interested in issues related to decolonisation while Nehru wanted to ease Cold War tensions.

Today the major powers are expanding their interests in the Indian Ocean due to its strategic significance, the need for energy exploration and trade. China has just obtained rights to explore mineral resources in the Western part of the Indian Ocean while the United States has also increased its presence there to support its Middle East policy. These trends also coincide with the growing economies of India and the countries of Africa.

In view of the importance of the Indian Ocean and considering the lack of a security architecture in the region, Indonesia will place importance on the need to look west and become more active in the Indian Ocean. With the advent of the ASEAN Community in 2015 and Indonesia's chairmanship in Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) for the period 2015-2017 looming, it will provide the opportunity for Indonesia to expand its influence in both spheres.

Country in the middle

Jokowi's strategic move to locate Indonesia as the 'global maritime nexus' will promote connectivity between the Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean, thereby positioning Indonesia as the pivotal country promoting stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

The idea follows the logic of strategy adopted by the Srivijaya Kingdom in the 7th century, which positioned itself at the centre of international trade, where all trade between Western Asia and Eastern Asia passed through the sea ports that were dominated by Srivijaya. Their ability to protect the sea lanes from pirates also legitimated Srivijaya's position as the maritime axis of the world.

By this virtue, Srivijaya enjoyed exclusive rights, such as preferential trading rights with Canton and many other territories. Similarly today, while positioning itself as the region's pivotal state straddling both oceans and promoting stability, Indonesia aims to reap political and economic dividends.

To achieve this goal, Indonesia is set to increase its maritime power to secure the important choke points in the Indian Ocean, such as Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok Straits. Indonesia seeks to build norms and institutions that interlock the maritime areas (Pacific and Indian Oceans). Thus far, the proposed Indo-Pacific "Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation" (TFC) is the vehicle to advance Indonesia's aims. Although TFC is not yet an established concept or legal commitment, Indonesia has been socialising the benefits of the treaty to many countries.

The pivotal states being engaged are India, Australia, and South Africa. These countries have huge interests in the Indian Ocean region. India is the major economic power in South Asia. South Africa plays a very important role in Africa, and is officially confirmed as the next Vice Chair and Chair of the IORA following Indonesia in 2017-2019. Similarly, Australia is a major country with a keen interest in establishing a regional architecture in the Indian Ocean.

However, the four middle powers have their own approaches. Indonesia would like to be inclusive,

creating a big umbrella of norms and cooperation incorporating all countries in the Indian Ocean and major countries in the Pacific. However, countries like India will be quite reluctant to support any initiative that includes Pakistan. Harmonising interests among middle powers particularly facilitating communication between leaders - something that Jokowi excels in - will be critical in ensuring the success of Indonesia's agenda.

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