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Indonesia's Trajectory 2014- 2019: An Insider's Forecast

By Farish A. Noor

Synopsis

The release of the book 'Toward 2014-2019: Strengthening Indonesia in a Changing World', published by the Indonesian State Intelligence Agency (BIN), provides an interesting and important insider's look at how Indonesia sees its role in the ASEAN region and the world stage.

Commentary

AS INDONESIA – now under the leadership of President Joko Widodo and Vice-President Jusuf Kalla – looks to the future and re-assesses its place and role in the ASEAN region and the global arena, the country's leaders and major stakeholders have begun to forecast the likely trajectory that it will take in the years to come.

The publication of the book 'Toward 2014-2019: Strengthening Indonesia in a Changing World', by the Indonesian State Intelligence Agency (BIN), provides an interesting and important insider's look at how Indonesia sees its future and what it wishes to achieve over the next five years. The fact that the book was written in English suggests that this is a text that is meant for wider consideration beyond Indonesia: Here it is clear that the Indonesian technocratic elite want their opinions to be known abroad, and taken into account.

Indonesia's assessment of the world

Initiated by the Head of the Indonesian State Intelligence Agency (BIN), Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Marciano Norman and edited by Dr Muhammad A.S. Hikam, former Minister for Research and Technology (1999-2001), the book brings together the combined research of several dozen prominent Indonesian specialists and academics, as well as the findings of many focus group discussions.

Starting from a global perspective, the book begins by offering an Indonesian assessment of the state of global affairs. Citing examples such as the Ukraine crisis and the conflict in Syria, the authors argue that 'old world powers' are still competing on the global geo-strategic stage. Recognising the once-pivotal role played by the United States as the only global power, the authors look at Russia, China and Europe as other sources of power, and argue that Indonesia now exists in a more complex world where alternative developmental models and paradigms present themselves.

It is in this context of an increasingly plural and complex world that Indonesia seeks to find its niche, and align itself with like-minded powers: The authors note that China – unlike the US – happens to be a major power that does not impress its value-system on other allied countries, and is able to accept diversity and difference in political-developmental models. . Conversely, the West’s promotion of democracy in situations such as the Arab Spring uprisings has not yielded clear results.

Between rhetoric about democratisation and real material benefits such as foreign investment, the authors seem more inclined towards the latter, and note that China’s investments in Asia and Africa have led to tangible material results. Thus despite whatever strategic-military reliance Indonesia may have had on its Western allies in the past, the authors veer in the direction of pragmatism and note that in the decades to come Indonesia’s main economic partners are likely to be Asian and that the country will need to fend for itself when securing its energy, food and resources security.

What about ASEAN?

Conscious of the rise of new major powers, the authors argue that ASEAN remains relevant, but needs to “develop not only a modality of internal relations, but also a modality to accommodate the presence of major countries in the region”. Again, pragmatism and national interest dominate the discussion here:

Indonesia is thankful for the peace and stability that ASEAN has created, but now wishes ASEAN to adapt itself to a changing global environment where major powers will begin to play a more visible role in the region, notably China which “carries on recording the highest economic growth”.

In the face of these realities, and aware of Indonesia’s need for investment from neighbouring countries, the authors argue that Indonesia needs to promote its own economic interests first and look towards securing its food, energy and resource security in the future, as it will be one of the most important resource-bases in the world. While Indonesia needs to maintain its friendly links with neighbours and allies, the “protection of the national interest among other countries’ businesses” is emphasised.

Indonesia’s core interests

The authors accept the fact that Indonesia will be faced by unforeseen developments that are new to the country. The country’s ‘Threat Map’ is wide as it is: the internet revolution, increased urbanisation, rise of local ethnic and religious forms of communal solidarity and the threat of religious extremism all pose challenges to the maintenance and perpetuation of the idea of a singular Indonesian republic.

Holding back these centrifugal forces can only be accomplished by a singular state apparatus that caters and fulfils the rising demands and expectations of an increasingly demanding political public.

It is to that end that the authors insist that securing Indonesia’s economic needs is paramount, for Indonesia must achieve economic take-off and be a self-sustaining state for it to remain together. Indonesia must not only overcome the middle-income trap but its political elite need to ensure that its wealth remains in the hands of Indonesians, and not predatory foreign capital.

It is in that context that the maritime policy, the agricultural policy and the energy policy are discussed and linked to the broader goal of nation-building and state-power consolidation.

All in all, the release of this book is both timely and important. It is timely as it comes at the beginning of the Jokowi-Kalla period of leadership, and gives us some insight into the worldview, values and ambitions of the country’s technocratic elite. It is also important as it reminds us that the policy direction that this new government will take is likely to be focused on domestic needs, putting national interest above all else.

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