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Consensual Leadership in ASEAN: Will It Endure Under Jokowi?

By Emirza Adi Syailendra

Synopsis

Since President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) assumed office, many have been wondering whether ASEAN will still be the cornerstone of Indonesia's foreign policy or merely just a vacuous diplomatic formality.

Commentary

ASEAN CENTRALITY has always been a dominant theme in Indonesian foreign policy. Despite deficiencies of ASEAN in providing Indonesia with a suitable dispute settlement mechanism with its members, Indonesia's foreign-policy makers continued to maintain their usual stance emphasising ASEAN Centrality in its foreign policy. For example, ASEAN had paid little attention to Indonesia's notes of protest during its boundary dispute over the Sipadan-Ligitan with Malaysia.

Indonesia's interests have sometimes been compromised for the sake of ASEAN, such as its view on the adoption of a peacekeeping force within the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) framework. Nevertheless, during Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's administration (2004-2014), ASEAN Centrality had been the main thrust of his policy of 'dynamic equilibrium' that sought to promote the grouping as the main vehicle of the evolving regional architecture in the Asia Pacific Region.

Jokowi's new focus

Under President Joko Widodo (Jokowi), foreign policy appears to be increasingly high-profile as Jakarta seeks to tighten bilateral relations with Pacific and Indian Ocean major powers, with a heavy focus on the domestic-economic dimension. This is in opposition to the focus on multilateralism and norms promotion that were stressed during Yudhoyono's administration. How would ASEAN be positioned under the Jokowi government's foreign policy?

As Indonesia's global profile rises, the choices of partners are expanding but doubts have also resurfaced on whether ASEAN is still the bedrock of its foreign policy. With foreign policy given a high profile – in contrast to earlier predictions by some analysts that President Jokowi would be more inward-looking - it is tempting to argue that Indonesia's foreign policy priorities are shifting beyond ASEAN.

For example, Jokowi's new maritime doctrine of 'global maritime fulcrum' has highlighted Indonesia's intention to 'Look West' in terms of deepening relations with major players in the Indian Ocean such as India and South Africa. Strengthening bilateral ties with Pacific powers is also becoming a major agenda instead of multilateralism. The emergence of a more nationalistic approach has further underscored these shifts.

According to Retno Marsudi, the new foreign minister, the current policy focus would be people-oriented. This statement was echoed by Jokowi during a discussion on the implementation of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). The President said Indonesia would not be supportive of the AEC's goal of a single market and production base by end 2015 if it puts Indonesia at a disadvantage by merely being a market for goods produced by neighbouring countries. Several other policies such as the sinking of the illegal fishing vessels in Indonesian waters have been interpreted as signals that Indonesia would not hesitate to defend its national interest at the expense of ASEAN.

Reframing ASEAN?

These emerging trends are worrying as ASEAN is entering a deeper phase of integration and the proactive role of Indonesia is being awaited. However, it is not unfair to oppose the view that point to several nationalistic approaches as confirming Indonesia's apparent move away from ASEAN. The continued commitment toward ASEAN with regard to the community building process has been reasserted by the Indonesian Ambassador to ASEAN, Rahmat Pramono, in December 2014.

Historical trajectories have steered Indonesia's willingness to maintain the centrality of ASEAN. However, Indonesia has perceived ASEAN differently from a mere buffer zone of neutrality as in the past to a forum that is able to accommodate its bigger goal to maintain its relevance. Indonesia's ability to position itself as the main mover of ASEAN norms and identity has buttressed its stature as the natural leader of ASEAN, as acknowledged in policy circles as well as the academic literature.

For external powers, ASEAN is also important as the most comprehensive venue of interaction in the Asia Pacific due to its capacity to enmesh many prominent powers within its overarching structures. Perceptions of other members of Indonesian activism in norm promotion and its facilitating of dispute settlement in the region is one of the biggest factors that contribute to Indonesia's international image as the leader of ASEAN.

Indonesia's strategic positioning in ASEAN has led to an unprecedented surge of partnerships with key countries, including the United States, China, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and the European Union.

Consensual leadership and its implications

However, considering the consensual nature of ASEAN, Indonesia has to negotiate its positions to gain the support of other members in making ASEAN as the main driver of the Pacific and Indian Ocean regional architecture. "Bargaining" is required in terms of providing public goods such as being at the forefront to strengthen ASEAN unity, working together with the member states to push for deeper integration of the institution, resolving conflicts between members in the region, and promoting norms such as human right and democracy.

The point to stress here is that Indonesia's proactive and consensual leadership in ASEAN will endure during Jokowi's administration. However, pragmatism will be its defining feature. A recent effort by Indonesia to push ASEAN as the centre of the regional architecture was its proposal to expand the ASEAN Chiefs of Defence Forces Informal Meeting (ACDFIM) into an *ACDFIM Plus* that includes counterparts from key players like the US and China in the Asia-Pacific. The proposal underscores the interest of Indonesia to expand scope of ASEAN into a more inclusive and accessible forum extending to major Pacific and Indian Ocean countries.

With the present security environment in the region marked by many flashpoints, exacerbated by external pressures arising from the US-China rivalry, Indonesia is concerned about ASEAN's ability to speak with one voice. Considering that the benefits Indonesia gains depends on how effective it is in

rallying ASEAN, a break on ASEAN unity will have implications on Indonesia's image as the first among equals.

In this regard, pragmatic shifts in Indonesia's foreign policy will be a reflection of its 'free and active' foreign policy while keeping ASEAN Centrality unbroken, harmonising interests, and making normative bargains. Indeed, this positioning is very important as a prerequisite for reaching the vision of ASEAN as the heart of Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regionalism - which is also an important element in the current 'Global Maritime Fulcrum' strategy.

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