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Will Good Intentions in Indonesia's Blueprint for Asia-Pacific Security Collide with Harsh Realities?

By Bantarto Bandoro*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Indonesia acknowledges the important role played by the major powers in the Asia-Pacific region, especially in Southeast Asia, and is concerned that their growing strategic competition will destabilise the region. This situation is leading Indonesia to be more proactive in trying to manage this competition and its adverse effects on the region.
- Strategic changes and increased power rivalries have not led Indonesia to abandon its policy of "dynamic equilibrium" between the major powers and the region. Instead, such an equilibrium is seen as more necessary than ever before. To help maintain stability and security in the Asia-Pacific region, Indonesia has proposed an Indo-Pacific treaty of friendship and cooperation.
- Indonesia's prescriptions and efforts for regional security reveal its strategy of building trust to prevent conflict; and its determination not to enter into a military/strategic alliance with any major power.
- However this approach has shortcomings. It makes assumptions about what best serves the interests of other countries, especially the major powers, and neglects the fact that these may be irreconcilable with the way these powers understand the matter.

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INTRODUCTION

The Asia-Pacific region is facing increasing strategic and security challenges. As major powers reassert themselves, Indonesia's role in managing the region's security is expected to become more prominent.

This paper examines the changes occurring in the Asia-Pacific region and shows how Indonesia remains committed to its basic foreign policy principles and objectives, notwithstanding certain new ideas it has introduced for managing regional security. In particular, the country has proposed an Indo-Pacific "Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation" which details Indonesia's approach in getting countries in the region to commit themselves to the peaceful settlement of disputes and to avoid using force against each other. It also touches on some possible shortcomings of the Indonesian approach.

INDONESIAN PERCEPTIONS OF GEOPOLITICAL TRENDS

The past five years have seen the Asia-Pacific region enter an era of fresh strategic competition as well as cooperation. The region has consistently been the most dynamic in the world economically, but intensifying rivalry—especially over maritime rights—and an accelerating arms race have emerged as hard security challenges.¹ For example, rival maritime territorial claims in the East China Sea can potentially lead to a military confrontation between Japan and China.²

According to Indonesia's official statements, the country has identified four strategic developments that should be anticipated and managed.

The first is the rise of China. Its geopolitical manoeuvres in the South and East China Sea and its assertiveness in other policy matters show that an increasingly powerful and self-assured actor has appeared on the scene. Although China needs a peaceful security environment to develop, the continued growth of China's military power has alarmed its neighbours who also depend on China for their own economic growth.³ While some signs of economic weakness in China have been mounting, the country will continue to assert its influence regionally for the foreseeable future.

The second is the US decision to reframe its Asia-Pacific strategy, popularly known as the "pivot" or rebalancing policy towards Asia. Washington has denied that

¹ The accelerating arms race in the region may have been due to rising maritime tensions in the East and South China Seas, and involves Japan and Korea as well as the other great powers.

² See Sheila Smith, "A Sino-Japanese Clash in East China Sea," <http://www.cfr.org/japan/sino-japanese-clash-east-china-sea/p30504>. Accessed 12 August 2013. Such a scenario can spiral into a conflict between China and the US-Japan alliance, with Russia possibly joining the Chinese side later. The entanglement of four of the world's largest economic and military powers in the area should worry the rest of the world.

³ Japan's Foreign Minister, Koichiro Gemba, stated that for Japan, China is the largest trading partner. Japan also has the largest number of businesses investing in China. See "East China Sea Tension. China Conducts Naval Exercise" BBC News, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-19997928>. Accessed 17 August 2013.

the strategy is intended to contain China. While some countries in Southeast Asia think a greater US commitment will boost stability, others see it as a risk to stability. Indonesia has warned that the strengthening and deepening of military alliances and relations (with Australia, the Philippines, Japan, and Vietnam) and expansion as well as diversification of military bases (in Australia, Japan), may provoke a chain of reactions and counter-reactions to create a vicious circle of tension and distrust.⁴

The third are the territorial disputes in South China Sea and the East China Sea. China has declared “indisputable sovereignty” over the South China Sea islands and the surrounding waters. Although Indonesia is not a claimant to the disputed territories in that area, it is concerned about the dangers of confrontation between the disputants.

The fourth are Japan’s strategic initiatives. The end of July 2013 saw the release of Japan’s Defence White Paper that calls for an increase in the country’s military capabilities and a more assertive role in regional security in response to increased threats from China and North Korea.⁵ The report argues that China’s military and maritime activities are a threat to regional peace and stability, and urges Japan to step up its capacity to respond. Japan has also called for closer military cooperation with Australia and South Korea.⁶

Indonesia cannot turn a blind eye to these developments because of their long-term security implications for the region. Geostrategic miscalculations can spark conflict.⁷

There are other trends beyond these four, such as the rise of India and the competition for resources. These developments are a clear expression of wider strategic shifts and rivalry in the Asia-Pacific region which threaten to make geopolitical ties more fluid and challenging.

While few believe that the major powers will seek war, maritime disputes can nevertheless drag the claimants into open albeit limited military clashes. At the very least, one will witness increased strategic balancing, stronger military presence and manoeuvres in the western Pacific, the creation of new alliances, preparation of new military bases and facilities, and more joint exercises.

A power play in the Asia-Pacific region is underway and, as Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa has noted, this is happening at a time when the region suffers a deficit in “strategic trust”.⁸

⁴ Jakarta is of the opinion that when a decision of this type is taken, it is important that there is transparency on the scenarios being envisaged. This is to minimize misunderstandings. See <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-11-17/china-indonesia-wary-of-us-troops-in-darwin/3675866>. Accessed 17 August 2013.

⁵ Today, 27 July 2013.

⁶ Martin Fackler, “Japanese Prime Minister Proposes More Active Military Presence in Region,” *The New York Times*, 26 July 2013.

⁷ Such a scenario is evident in Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa’s idea about a Indo-Pacific treaty.

⁸ This message was carried in Marty Natalegawa’s proposal for an Indo-Pacific treaty.

The US pivot to the Asia Pacific may have been designed to counteract China's rise and its perceived bid for regional hegemony, but Indonesia is of the opinion that the increasing importance of China is not necessarily a negative development. Despite their rivalry, Indonesia remains optimistic about the ability of both China and the US to manage the changing strategic landscape. In an interview with *The Sydney Morning Herald* (16 March 2012), Natalegawa said that countries should not react to the rise of China through traditional alliances and fault lines. This was a concealed reference to the deployment of US Marines to Darwin, a decision he had criticized in 2012.

WILL INDONESIA'S PRESCRIPTIONS WORK?

Indonesia has been engaged in building trust among states in the region over the past three years or so, and the preservation of regional peace and security remains the core of Indonesia's foreign policy.

While acknowledging the central role the major powers play in regional security as well as the importance of Indonesia's bilateral relations with them, Jakarta's position has consistently been that of not leaning towards one side or the other. Instead, it wants the major powers to develop and maintain a cooperative relationship and avoid rivalry for influence in the region. Maintaining peace and stability in a "dynamic equilibrium" thus lies at the heart of Indonesia's foreign policy, and is as important as the maintaining of its relations with the major powers.

However, the concept of dynamic equilibrium seems to ignore the fact that there is a fragmented distribution of political power in the region. Moreover, since these major powers are and will continue to be in the region—and are likely occasionally to perceive dangers to their interests—Indonesia should not overlook the possibility of increased competition for a dominant position in the region, which would upset whatever power equilibrium that is in place. Hegemony-seeking on the part of the major powers may seem unlikely at the moment, but should it happen, Indonesia will have to contend with the inherent shortcomings of its dynamic equilibrium approach.

When President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono delivered his inauguration speech in 2009 before numerous foreign representatives, he said that the nation had "a million friends and zero enemies". In short, Indonesia was in a fortunate strategic environment where no country perceived it as an enemy and it did not consider any country its enemy.⁹

The idea of "a million friends and zero enemies", however, is not a prescription for managing regional security. It is more a reflection of Indonesia's outlook towards other countries. The main message is that although Indonesia may have problems with

⁹ An editorial piece in *The Jakarta Post* described the speech as assertive. See *The Jakarta Post*, 21 October 2009. See also the *Inaugural Speech of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono*, *The Jakarta Globe*, and 20 October 2009.

other countries, including its neighbours, it does not view them as hostile. Instead, President Yudhoyono advocates the establishment of strategic partnerships with a number of countries in accordance with national and common interests.¹⁰ With “zero enemies”, Indonesia wishes to create an extensive network of friends and partners at a time when power shifts are taking place internationally.

A fresh proposal for managing regional security is Natalegawa’s proposal for an Indo-Pacific treaty of friendship and cooperation¹¹ which he first introduced at a conference organized by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington D.C. on May 2013. Natalegawa argues that such a treaty is necessary if the region is to enjoy continuous peace and stability.

The purpose of the proposed treaty is to help end the vicious cycle of distrust in the region and encourage the building of trust and confidence by making countries work towards common goals. Taking care to maintain the “a million friends and zero enemies” stance, Marty Natalegawa has refrained from mentioning the US or China or other major powers in his proposal. Instead, he has chosen to state that the region does not want the unchecked preponderance of a single nation state.

In short, the proposed treaty is a clear expression of Jakarta’s concern over the region-wide effects of the geopolitical rivalry between the major powers and Indonesia’s view of its own place in the geopolitical future of the region. With the treaty proposal, Marty Natalegawa is also sending a message to the region that the strategic changes require collaborative management.

While the idea behind the treaty is good, it warrants further discussion. The pressing question is whether the treaty can address effectively the three problems of trust deficit, territorial disputes and strategic change, when and if the strategic behaviour of the major powers changes for the worse. Political realism underlines the competitive and aggressive nature of international affairs in which power defines relations, and the Asia Pacific is not exempted from this truism.

Observers have questioned the effectiveness of an Indo-Pacific treaty as an instrument for addressing the treaty’s third goal: the peaceful management of strategic change. In particular, can the treaty guarantee that the rise of new powers will not be at the expense of others and can it address effectively new security dilemmas that will arise in the near future?¹² To handle these concerns, Indonesia cannot overlook the fact that every major power has its own perspective on how strategic change is to be handled. It is not improbable that they will be more and more nation-alistic in their policy initiatives, leaving any Indo-Pacific treaty a paper construct.

¹⁰ See President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s speech at a meeting with the ambassadors of friendly countries and international organizations, Jakarta, 15 February 2012. <http://en.republika.co.id/berita/en/jakarta-region-others/12/2/15/lzfs3c-sby-reiterates-million-friends-zero-enemy>.

¹¹ For the full text of Natalegawa’s speech see Marty Natalegawa, “An Indonesian Perspective on Indo-Pacific,” *The Jakarta Post*, 20 May 2013.

¹² See Rizal Sukma, “Friendship and Cooperation the Indo-Pacific: Will a Treaty Help?” *The Jakarta Post*, 28 May 2013.

Strategic trust is a key word that President Yudhoyono has frequently used in his speeches¹³ and the notion can also be seen in the approach of “dynamic equilibrium” and the proposal for an Indo-Pacific treaty. Strategic trust can be interpreted as the sense of cooperation and confidence that permits countries in the region, particularly the major powers, to work together, initially on issues of common interest. However it will remain only a concept if they, particularly China and the US, are not willing to make the effort to build a genuine foundation for their future strategic relations. This will not be easy as the major powers do not share an agreement—and probably never will—about which direction the Asia Pacific region should go.

The strategic trust that Indonesia is advocating for the major powers is necessary and may be welcomed by them. However, this will not be easy to develop especially at times when they see their strategic objectives and interests under threat. Indonesia must thus establish from the very beginning the foundation stones for a successful building of strategic trust.

CONCLUSION

Indonesia actively seeks to promote regional peace and stability based on trust. This position is in response to the changing security environment in the Asia-Pacific region and is in particular a result of Jakarta’s deep concerns over geopolitical trends in the region. Its prescription for managing regional security, though not without flaws, shows that not only does the country wants to prevent the region from becoming a theatre of power rivalry, but also that it will not in principle enter into a strategic alliance with a major power.

Indonesia’s prescriptions will have to be tested against existing strategic realities and the views of the major powers. It has to work more actively to move the region towards geopolitical cooperation, particularly among the three major powers in the Asia-Pacific region—the US, Japan and China. However, there is no guarantee that these powers will behave as Indonesia expects nor does Indonesia have the capacity to dictate their strategic direction.

¹³ See President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s Keynote Speech at the 11th IISS Asia Security Summit, The Shangri-La Dialogue, 1 June 2012. See also his Keynote Speech at the Jakarta International Defense Dialogue, 21 March 2012.

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