

## **RSIS SEMINAR NOTES**

### **RSIS Distinguished Public Lecture**

#### **“Indonesia’s Foreign Policy in the *Reformasi* Era”**

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**Venue: Seminar Room 2-3, RSIS, NTU, Singapore**

#### *Background*

The lecture began with an introduction by Assoc. Prof Leonard C. Sebastian about the transition in Indonesia’s foreign policy following the end of the Soeharto era. In general, during the early stage of the transition, Indonesia’s foreign policy was more inward looking due to the fact that the country was more focused on resolving domestic problems related to the democratic transition process and the economic crisis the country underwent. Indonesia’s foreign policy began to take a different outlook in 2003 after Hassan Wirajuda became Foreign Minister, marked by attempts to reconnect with ASEAN and to establish greater presence both in the region and globally.

#### *Indonesia’s Foreign Policy in the Reformasi Era*

Dr. Mulyana in his presentation elaborated the different characteristics of Indonesia’s foreign policy under the different presidencies in the *reformasi* era. During President Habibie’s era, the main foreign policy preoccupation was East Timor. It was also a high time of popular consultation. Several concomitant problems also emerged such as human rights, the plea for autonomy, potential regional disintegration which threatens the unity of the Republic of Indonesia. While the separation of Timor Leste from Indonesia received many criticisms, on the other hand it was also a once-and-for-all solution that is best for Indonesia, for the East Timorese, and the international community.

President Habibie's leadership was unexpectedly brief and he was replaced by President Abdurrahman Wahid in 1999. Gus Dur, as President Wahid was more commonly known in Indonesia, was a visionary figure. He appointed Mr. Alwi Shihab, who has a strong religious background, as Foreign Minister. The concept of 'ecumenical foreign policy' was consequently introduced to Indonesia's foreign policy approach. While previous preoccupations related to the issues of human rights and Timor Leste remained, Gus Dur was very active in promoting Indonesia abroad. He spoke in various multilateral forums - including the World Economic Forum, the World Summit for Social Development, and of course ASEAN - and was particularly very well received in Middle Eastern countries. Another notable characteristic during his presidency is the degree of the government's openness to non state actors, particularly civil society organizations, in foreign policy making. Unfortunately, while Gus Dur had a lot of innovations in mind, the structure of Indonesia's foreign policy establishment at the time was not sufficient enough to accommodate them. As a result, at the end of his presidency, many of his vast ideas were not actualized.

Domestic politic turmoil required Gus Dur to end his presidency, and he was replaced by Megawati Soekarnoputri in 2001. As the daughter of former President Soekarno, Megawati had the privilege of traveling abroad with his father during his tenure and share his interest in the pan Asia-Africa movement, North-South Korea relations and the Non-Alignment Movement. President Megawati appointed Hassan Wirajuda, a career diplomat, as Foreign Minister. In place of ecumenical diplomacy, he introduced the concept of total diplomacy, which essentially entails engaging as many state and non-state actors as possible in the foreign policy making process.

Megawati was replaced by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in 2004. Despite the fact that during the presidential election campaign period no single debate on foreign policy was raised, President Yudhoyono had the advantage of having served as Minister of Energy and Coordinating Minister for Politics and Security in previous presidencies as well as in Bosnia and Korea as part of peacekeeping missions. This has jumpstarted his

quick grasp of foreign policy literacy and he has a clearer direction of what he wanted to do with foreign policy. President Yudhoyono is interested in reinvigorating the *politik bebas aktif* (independent and active policy) doctrine. In his observation, during the past presidencies Indonesia had problematic relations with some countries, notably with Australia, China, the United States and several European countries. He wanted to mend the sour relations and strengthen existing ones to a new level of engagement. With the principle of “million friends, zero enemy”, President Yudhoyono advocated the establishment of comprehensive partnerships with a number of strategic countries.

The first period of President Yudhoyono’s presidency (2004-2009) however was not a smooth one. It marked by uneasy relations with the Parliament, particularly with Commission I, which handles defence and foreign affairs. Tension between the legislative and the executive is apparent in a number of cases, for example the Iran nuclear crisis in 2007. The second period of presidency (2009-2014) seems to be more successful and marked an era of growing confidence. Several factors contributed to this change. Firstly, President Yudhoyono won his second term in office with a decisive victory, winning 60.8 percent votes in the first round of election. Secondly, Indonesia’s economy has begun to recover and managed to withstand the 2008 financial. These two factors allowed Indonesia to have a higher profile and more confidence in carrying out its diplomacy. During this period Indonesia became a member of the economic grouping G20 and took a more serious outlook concerning its chairmanship in ASEAN and leadership in the East Asian Summit (EAS).

### *Challenges in Indonesia’s Foreign Policy*

Despite the fact that the Democrat Party’s victory in the legislative election helped strengthen President Yudhoyono’s foothold in the Parliament, relations with Commission I remain problematic. Pressure against the government was apparent particularly in cases involving the protection of Indonesian workers abroad, as exemplified during the Ruyati case and the Sinar Kudus case. At the bilateral level, relations with two countries in particular remain challenging for Indonesia, namely The Netherlands and Malaysia. At the regional level, the main preoccupation at the moment is the realization of the ASEAN

Community by 2015. Other regional challenges include the building of regional architecture amidst the changing power dynamics in the region, and addressing potential conflicts in the region, particularly border conflict and the South China Sea. At the global level, the challenge for Indonesia's foreign policy is to increase its role in maintaining international peace and security, among others by improving its diplomacy in the Middle East, Korea and Libya.

At the domestic level, one of the main challenges lies in the management of foreign policy actors. In line with the implementation of Law No. 37/1999, the foreign policy establishment has expanded to encompass more actors, particularly in the policy formulation and policy making process. Another challenge is the management of relations with the Parliament. Members of the Parliament at the national and regional level still lack the foreign policy literacy and know-how. As a consequence, they often do not make objective and well-informed assessments on foreign policies.

As a conclusion to his presentation, Dr Mulyana stated that as has been reflected by several presidencies in the *reformasi* era, Indonesia's foreign policy outlook, approach and priorities will very much depend on and/or influenced by the leadership provided by the president as the head of the state.

### *Q&A Session*

*In what way can Indonesia contribute to the peace process in the Middle East?*

Past experiences taught Indonesia that while Indonesia has been making active contributions to the peace process in the Middle East, the country faced some limitations in that regard. Back in 2007, for example, when Indonesia became a member of the United Nations Security Council, it tried to hold negotiations to encourage peace talks in the region. All the major stakeholders were consulted, but surprisingly the Palestine delegation was unhappy with Indonesia's initiative and didn't endorse its efforts. This gave Indonesia a lesson that a well intended action does not always mean a welcome step

to the party concerned. However, both domestic constituents in Indonesia as well as the Indonesian Government have made it clear that there is always an opportunity to contribute and the Middle East will still be a priority for Indonesia no matter who will become president of the Republic of Indonesia in the future. The position of the Indonesian government on the matter itself is clear, namely Indonesia wants peace that is acceptable to all and support the establishment of the independent state of Palestine within the concept of the two-state vision.

*President Yudhoyono tried to reinvigorate the 'politik bebas aktif' doctrine. As a special staff to the President for international relations, how do you define 'bebas' (independent) in the current environment? Secondly, President Yudhoyono proposed the principle of 'million friends, zero enemy', which is translated into establishing cooperation and strategic partnerships with many countries. On one hand, such strategy may be beneficial, but on the other hand won't it also endanger Indonesia's sovereignty and dignity? Thirdly, President Yudhoyono welcomes the involvement of many interest groups in foreign policy making. How does the government manage their diverse interests?*

The degree of civil society's contribution to the foreign policy making process varies, depending on the nature of the issues and flexibility of the government counterparts. On issues like climate change for example, civil society organization's involvement is high mainly due to the fact that the corresponding counterpart in the government is also more open to their engagement. Another example is on labour issues where there is currently a tripartite mechanism in place. On these cases, civil society's voice carries more weight in affecting the foreign policy agenda. Other sectors where civil society's involvement is also high include health, migrant workers, and the implementation of Millennium Development Goals.

Regarding *politik bebas aktif*, unlike the Truman Doctrine which was produced at the height of the Cold War and its relevance dissipated with the collapse of the bipolar system, the doctrine remains a trademark of Indonesia's foreign policy. The doctrine's parameter of actualization will of course vary from one presidency to another. Under

President Yudhoyono's leadership, 'bebas' is translated into independence in taking actions and in choosing/determining policies.

*During President Yudhoyono's first term in office, Indonesia is often promoted as a moderate muslim country which can be a model for other Muslim countries. However, coming into his second term in office the Natalegawa doctrine became the main idea of Indonesia's foreign policy. Does this shift mirror the change from the Bush government to Obama, where Bush was very focused on the war on terror and Obama is more focused on internationalism and multilateralism? Secondly, the Indonesian people – particularly the youth and the middle class – aspire for Indonesia to become a strong nation. Can the current foreign policy institution – as represented by the Foreign Ministry – bridge what the institution wants to pursue and the people's aspiration?*

In foreign policy study, we differentiate between foreign policy asset and foreign policy doctrine. Moderate Muslim is an asset of Indonesia's diplomacy and foreign policy. For example, when Indonesia tried to vie for the permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council, Indonesia is considered eligible as a candidate because there should be a representative for the Muslim world in the UNSC, Indonesia is a democratic country, and Islam in Indonesia is moderate, it is a source of communal unity that does not tolerate terrorism.

As in many other countries, foreign ministers want to leave their footprints in foreign policy. In Indonesia, when Hassan Wirajuda became foreign minister, he introduced the working concept of 'intermestic', which is essentially a confluence of international and domestic factors. Under his leadership, intermestic became a working perspective and a paradigm for the minister and the ministry to look at foreign policy issues. When Marty Natalegawa became foreign minister, he introduced the working concept of 'dynamic equilibrium'. Therefore, now the ministry sees the theater of international relations in dynamic equilibrium and the concept is translated into various steps in diplomacy. The concepts of course corresponded with or responded to national and international developments that took place during their conception.

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