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ASEAN COHESION: MAKING SENSE OF INDONESIAN REACTIONS TO BILATERAL DISPUTES

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THIS has been a rough first quarter for ASEAN. Following the devastating tsunami on the eve of the new year, the first few months of 2005 has seen new challenges confronting the regional grouping. The ten ASEAN members are currently bracing for a possible diplomatic crisis should Myanmar's chairmanship next year cause the region's Western dialogue partners to boycott the 2006 ASEAN meeting to avoid implicitly endorsing the regime in Yangon. Earlier, on the bilateral front, Thailand and Malaysia had their ties ruffled by a public spat following accusations by Bangkok that Kuala Lumpur was supporting southern Thai separatists – charges the Malaysians had denied. Differences have also emerged between two other ASEAN members when Indonesia alleged that Singapore had dumped "hazardous waste" in Batam - an allegation which Singapore has dismissed. Both countries are now giving diplomacy a chance to sort this problem out.

But a more critical issue is the territorial dispute which erupted recently between Indonesia and Malaysia when the Malaysian state oil company, Petronas, granted a concession for oil and gas exploration in a part of the Sulawesi Sea which Jakarta claims as its territory. The dispute is serious because it almost led to an armed conflict amid loose talk of war. Thankfully, the problem is showing signs of easing as the two sides seek a diplomatic solution to the standoff. But the episode has exposed the inherent fragility within ASEAN of the bilateral relationships among its member states. After all, Indonesia and Malaysia are supposed to be very close given the many things they share in common such as culture, language and religion. The fact that they nearly came to blows demonstrated how inter-state relations within the region must not be taken for granted - notwithstanding the many years of nurturing by the member states to create a region of stability and cohesion.

Territorial dispute

The current tension between Indonesia and Malaysia over the oil and gas-rich waters in the Sulawesi Sea east of Sabah, known as the Ambalat block, began innocently enough with Petronas awarding contracts for hydrocarbon exploration to its subsidiary, Petronas Carigali, and the Dutch oil giant, Shell. What it did not bargain for was the swift reaction from Indonesia which claimed Ambalat to be its territory and that Petronas, therefore, had violated Indonesian sovereignty. Malaysia objected to the Indonesian assertion and insisted that Ambalat is within its jurisdiction following Kuala Lumpur's successful claim of ownership of the nearby islands of Sipadan and Ligitan at the International Court of Justice in 2002. The conflicting claims over maritime territory highlight the potential risks of conflict in the

region. Arising from its 1979 map demarcating Malaysia's maritime boundaries, Kuala Lumpur finds itself with overlapping claims with all its neighbours and the Indonesian response has been the most explosive of such incidents. As nationalist sentiments were raised by the media in Indonesia, both countries came close to the brink of an armed clash, with Jakarta deploying its warships and jetfighters to assert its sovereignty over the disputed waters.

Konfrontasi II?

In the heat of it all, it was unfortunate that the term "Konfrontasi II" was used in the Indonesian media to refer to the Ambalat dispute. The resort to such historical imagery is ironic because the Confrontation of the 1960s was more an act of Indonesian aggression led by the then president Sukarno to "*Ganyang Malaysia*". Sukarno wanted to "*ganyang*" or crush the newly-formed federation of Malaysia in 1963 - which then included Singapore - because he saw it as a neo-colonialist British plot to surround Indonesia. Notwithstanding the loose usage of such emotive language, it does underscore how upset the Indonesians have been over this latest development in the Sulawesi Sea.

Nobody, of course, wishes to see another confrontation in the region. It is just as well that both Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur have sensibly pulled back from the edge in favour of an amicable solution. But the situation is still fluid; amid the diplomatic efforts, reports have emerged of five Malaysians being detained on the Indonesian side of Sebatik island near Sabah for alleged illegal entry. The Ambalat dispute therefore demands the highest level of diplomatic ingenuity and both sides know the risks of not finding a way out. In the meanwhile, how should we read Jakarta's response in recent months towards external developments that it sees as affecting its interests?

Creeping sense of vulnerability

There are signs that Indonesia in the Yudhoyono era is going through a new sense of vulnerability. Indonesians feel a certain inadequacy following the difficulties of the last seven years since the Asian financial crisis and the subsequent fall of Suharto. Even nature, it seems, is not on their side. After the tsunami, the earthquake of March 28 which devastated Nias island seems to suggest that the pressures on Indonesia are never-ending. President Yudhoyono has even reportedly expressed exasperation. Under the circumstances, Indonesians can be hyper-sensitive to any moves they perceive, rightly or wrongly, as taking advantage of their current weakness. "Indonesia at the moment is very weak, especially with the threat of national disintegration hanging over it," wrote analyst Sudjati Djwandono in *The Jakarta Post*.

As this is also a phase in which the Indonesian elite and public take exception easily, they respond robustly to the most innocent of incidents if these are perceived as affronts to their dignity. The Malaysian repatriation of illegal Indonesian workers has been received in this way in Jakarta, whether or not Kuala Lumpur's action is seen as justified. In moments like these, gestures of neighbourliness can also be easily forgotten. Hence, despite Singapore and Malaysia having been at the forefront of international humanitarian assistance to tsunami-struck Aceh, Jakarta did not hesitate to take issue with them when Indonesian national pride has been hurt. There is a creeping unease in Jakarta that others are not treating the country with respect. If Malaysia's repatriation of Indonesian workers is being seen in this light, is it possible that the fertiliser issue with Singapore has been cast in the same mould?

But the most crucial factor behind Indonesia's current sense of vulnerability is its loss of territory in recent times. After the separation of East Timor, Jakarta lost ownership of Sipadan and Ligitan to Malaysia. When foreign troops landed in Aceh for post-tsunami humanitarian work in December, it raised alarm bells in Jakarta of a possible take-over of that province by foreign forces – baseless as it turned out to be. The fear of losing more territory has been an important driving force behind the Indonesian reactions to the Ambalat issue. That is why, in the words of the Speaker of the Indonesian Parliament DPR, Agung Laksono, all Indonesians, even though they cannot agree on many things, were united against Malaysia over the Sulawesi Sea dispute.

What ASEAN must not do

Rizal Sukma, writing in the Jakarta Post, noted how ASEAN has been absent as an institution throughout this troubled period. There has not been any significant effort from ASEAN to help defuse the tension, he said. At the height of the Ambalat dispute, some Indonesian legislators even called for the disbanding of ASEAN. That is surely an extreme position to take. Why disband ASEAN just because Indonesia, the group's largest member, is embroiled in bilateral disputes with its neighbours? It was, after all, Indonesia that paved the way for the creation of ASEAN in 1967 soon after the end of Konfrontasi in 1965. It should now lead the way to take ASEAN into the future, not dismantle it.

In any case, it was also Indonesia which recently initiated the vision of a single ASEAN Community by 2020. As Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong said during a visit to Jakarta on April 5, Indonesia, as the largest member of ASEAN, had to play an active part in pulling the member states together. Unless this was done, "it will be difficult for ASEAN to regain its vibrancy and dynamism", he added. In other words, Indonesia, as the biggest and most influential member of ASEAN, cannot avoid the burden and expectations of leadership – even during its most difficult moments.

The diplomatic disputes that have emerged this year are yet another test for ASEAN solidarity – and for the new generation of ASEAN leaders who have just taken over. When these new leaders - President Yudhoyono, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi – entered the scene last year, they immediately reached out to each other to rebuild the ASEAN camaraderie which dissipated after the 1997 regional financial crisis. PM Lee and PM Abdullah attended Dr Yudhoyono's presidential swearing-in on October 20 in Jakarta. When the tsunami struck Aceh, both prime ministers mobilised assistance for Indonesia. The spirit of group solidarity that the new generation of leaders is trying to forge must not be sacrificed by the current difficulties. As Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore are at the core of ASEAN, their relationships will continue to set the tone of the grouping as a whole. The new leaders must not begin their own era on the wrong footing. It is therefore a symbolically important gesture that, amid the diplomatic disputes, both Singapore and Malaysia have again offered their hands to Indonesia in the face of the latest natural calamity off Sumatra.

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