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Is Indonesia Outgrowing ASEAN?

By Barry Desker

Synopsis

Indonesia's democratisation has been accompanied by calls for a foreign policy that is not only more assertive but also more autonomous of ASEAN. Is the growing democracy also unleashing forces that will lead to more strident nationalism?

Commentary

IN RECENT months, there has been a debate within Indonesia on whether Indonesian foreign policy should look beyond ASEAN. These observers contend that Indonesia should see itself as a major emerging power like Brazil, South Africa, India and China with global interests and concerns.

Indonesia's post-independence foreign policy has reflected the changes in its political system. In the 1960s, Sukarno's Guided Democracy emphasised the role of the progressive New Emerging Forces and attracted strong support from the communist bloc and newly independent states while engaging in an undeclared war with his closest neighbours who were backed by the West. By contrast, after 1965, Suharto focused on ties with the United States and Japan while consolidating links with states surrounding Indonesia. Indonesia's foreign policy was conceived as a series of concentric circles: ASEAN, the West (as investors and trading partners) and multilateral engagement (United Nations, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, OIC and the Non-Aligned Movement, NAM).

Push for a Shift in Foreign Policy

However, in the post-Suharto era, Indonesia's participation in the G20, the rise of China and the belief that a power shift is occurring from the Atlantic to the Pacific has led Indonesian analysts to argue that Indonesia should play an independent role commensurate with its growing international influence.

Critics of the constraints on Indonesian foreign policy highlight the lack of a capacity to act independently arising from its commitment to ASEAN. Proponents of a post-ASEAN foreign policy such as Rizal Sukma argue that "Indonesia should free itself from any undeserving obligation to follow the wishes of any state or a grouping of states, including ASEAN, if by doing so we sacrifice our own national interests".

Indonesian decision-makers believe that a two-speed ASEAN exists. The newer members of ASEAN such as Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam emphasise state sovereignty, non-interference and non-intervention and approach issues such as human rights, freedom of expression and democracy hesitantly. The older ASEAN members are more positive on these issues which have been raised by Indonesia but they have not

been as willing as Indonesia to push for their inclusion in ASEAN agreements. Critics such as Jusuf Wanandi and Rizal Sukma feel that ASEAN has failed to adjust to the new global environment and is stuck in an authoritarian mind-set. Such critics see Indonesia as an outlier within ASEAN even though it is by far the largest state in the region.

The Pro-ASEAN School

However, key foreign policy makers such as President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Marty Natalegawa contend that ASEAN is central to Indonesian foreign policy, even as Indonesia plays an active role in the G20, the Muslim world and multilateral diplomacy. Its ASEAN membership provides Indonesia with informal influence in these other international forums as it is perceived as representing a much larger ASEAN entity.

Within ASEAN, Indonesian negotiators have been pushing the boundaries of discussions on issues such as democratisation in Myanmar, the need for an effective ASEAN human rights commission and the establishment of an ASEAN peace-keeping force. However, ASEAN's consensual decision-making processes have meant that Indonesia has achieved considerably less than its maximum objectives. This has resulted in domestic Indonesian criticisms of President Yudhoyono as he is perceived as indecisive, lacking conviction and seeking to appease Indonesia's neighbours.

Unlike the autonomy of policymakers during the Suharto era, the new reality is that the Indonesian Government has to pay close attention to domestic opinion as expressed through the media, rowdy street demonstrations and fiery speeches by members of parliament. Critics have been quick to utilise the democratic space created since the fall of Suharto in May 1998. Elected parliamentarians have blocked ratification of agreements reached by the executive branch such as the Defence Cooperation Agreement with Singapore. Indonesian analysts criticised the compromises entailed in reaching agreement on the ASEAN Charter. Relations with Malaysia have recently been strained by the strong public reaction to conflicting territorial claims, maritime boundary disputes, treatment of Indonesian workers in Malaysia and the belief that Malaysians regard Indonesians as poor cousins.

More Strident Nationalism

Used to top-down agreements and Suharto's willingness to provide space for Indonesia's neighbours, the other members of ASEAN, particularly the founding members, have not adjusted easily to the impact of Indonesia's young democracy on bilateral relations. Increased public involvement in decision-making in Indonesia has been accompanied by strident calls for Indonesia's interests to be upheld and mass political mobilisation against perceived slights against Indonesia.

Nevertheless there are continuities in foreign policy which should be noted. Over the generations, Indonesian policy makers and the politically articulate public have shared the view that because of its size, natural resources, strategic location at the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and presence of the world's largest Muslim population who are regarded as religious moderates (a significant factor in a post-9/11 world), Indonesia is entitled to deference in the region and influence internationally. Indonesia's relative weakness because of the strong centrifugal tendencies within the state arising from recurrent conflicts over ethnicity, religion, race and class is forgotten in periods when central authority is strong and Indonesia's international prestige is high.

The picture that emerges is one where democratic governance in the post-Suharto era has led to increased public pressures on the political leadership. The consequence is a more strident nationalism and a focus on the global stage. However, this re-alignment of Indonesian foreign policy will not represent a turn away from ASEAN. Indonesia will be engaged in a continuing quest for leadership within ASEAN while seeking recognition as a leading emerging power through global groupings such as the G20.

Barry Desker is Dean of the S. Rajaratnam school of International Studies (RSIS) and Director Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.