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The US Rebalancing to Asia: Indonesia's Maritime Dilemma

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Synopsis

Being located at the crossroads of the Indian and Pacific Oceans might seem a geostrategic blessing for Indonesia. But it could be a strategic disaster in the event of a heightened Sino-US maritime competition.

Commentary

THE INDONESIAN archipelago straddles a strategic location at the 'crossroads' of two oceans and two continents – the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and the Asian and Australian continents, respectively. In between, and connecting the two regions, are three critical maritime chokepoints for global trade: the Straits of Malacca-Singapore, Sunda, and Lombok-Makassar.

The Straits of Malacca and Singapore are partly administered by Malaysia and Singapore, while the Sunda and Lombok-Makassar Straits are located within the Indonesian Archipelagic Sea Lanes (ASL). At a glance, these features might seem a geostrategic blessing. Recent developments in the maritime strategic environment, however, could complicate Indonesia's strategic calculus.

The critical chokepoints

The US rebalancing to Asia is proceeding in parallel with China's military rise as a potential US adversary. The military dimension of rebalancing involves the shifting of more American air, naval, and marine forces into the Pacific theatre, and re-deploying them to less vulnerable, but still accessible positions, such as Guam, Hawaii, Australia and Singapore.

Consequentially, the strategic importance of the Malacca-Singapore, Sunda, and Lombok-Makassar Straits would increase. Firstly, the chokepoints would see a heightened and simultaneous presence of different and perhaps, opposing, maritime forces. The growing maritime powers of India and China could extend their naval deployments into the Pacific and Indian Ocean, respectively. A leaked Indian Navy report confirmed that Chinese submarines are already operating in the Indian Ocean.

Despite the bulk of US forces being concentrated in Northeast Asia, there would be a higher likelihood of them making more transits in Southeast Asian waters and airspace, as the Chinese maritime forces venture south into the Indian Ocean corresponding with Beijing's expanding interests in the region. Added with Southeast Asia's own maritime build-ups, this trend could further "saturate" the regional maritime strategic environment.

Secondly, the chokepoints could become the focus of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activities on foreign maritime forces. Heightened presence of maritime forces transiting the chokepoints raises the prospect of increased ISR activities in the area. As a littoral state, Indonesia considers such activities as intrusive and inimical to its national security. Nevertheless, Indonesia's separate cooperation with the US and China to develop coastal surveillance systems along the chokepoints might be attributed to this concern. Improved situational awareness along the chokepoints could assist the Indonesian military to track and monitor foreign maritime forces in transit.

Thirdly, in wartime, the chokepoints could become susceptible to "offshore control" against the adversary's shipping away from its home waters. American analysts such as T. X. Hammes of the US National Defence University argue that offshore control can be applied to deny the adversary the necessary resources for its continuation of war efforts. Control over chokepoints allows the concentration of forces to interdict the adversary's civilian and military shipping, which would otherwise be more dispersed and difficult to interdict in high seas.

Implications for Indonesia

For Jakarta, Washington's military rebalancing to Asia and Beijing's maritime rise are complicating its strategic calculus. Jakarta is concerned that heightened presence and intrusive activities of foreign maritime forces in Indonesian waters could trigger accidents or miscalculation. In this situation, Jakarta could face three options.

Firstly, Jakarta could tacitly support the US camp. This option enables Jakarta to harness US military support as well as aligning itself more closely with US allies, but at a great cost of antagonising Beijing. Although the Indonesian military is unlikely to engage in warfighting operations, it could support ISR activities to monitor Chinese shipping and aircraft within Indonesian waters, while leaving the rest of the job to the US military. The latter in turn could help secure Indonesia's northern flank in the South China Sea. On the flip side, China could conduct clandestine ISR activities or even sabotage in Indonesian waters, including the chokepoints, against the Allied forces.

Secondly, Jakarta could enter into Beijing's maritime orbit, while distancing itself from the US camp. This option envisages a scenario in which China has already showered assistance to Indonesia, and expecting a return of favour. China's courting of Indonesia of late is pronounced. Beijing has agreed to a maritime pact with Jakarta to develop Indonesia's capacity in maritime surveillance, naval armaments, shipbuilding, and oceanography.

Returning the favour means remaining detached from the US and its allies - and even from fellow Southeast Asian states - in any activities inimical to Chinese interests. The downside is Indonesia could face violation of its sovereignty by the Allied forces to conduct unilateral maritime operations within Indonesian waters.

The "neutral" option

Thirdly, Jakarta could aggressively or passively declare its neutrality. Aggressive neutrality means enforcing the 1994 San Remo Manual on Armed Conflicts at Sea, which forbids hostile actions by belligerent forces in waters of a neutral state. There is a strong likelihood that Indonesia's current strategic policy is pursuing this option. However, its enforcement would be painstakingly difficult.

Jakarta's limited military resources could be strained and drained to monitor all belligerents' ships and aircraft. And were there to be lapses which permit incidents to occur between the belligerents - while no-one claims responsibility - all fingers would be pointing toward Jakarta for not being able to strictly enforce its neutrality.

Meanwhile, passive neutrality implies that Jakarta would take little action, if at all, during the hostility out of strict non-involvement. However, the political, economic, military, and environmental costs of passive neutrality would be catastrophic. Hostile encounters between belligerents in Indonesian waters could put Indonesian lives and assets at great risks of collateral damage, while not contributing much to its neutralist credibility.

These options however are not as unique to Indonesia as to other regional countries, which see the looming Sino-US competition as a strategic disaster. But at least Indonesia could start contemplating the "least bad" option that would maintain its position as a key player in the big power game.

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