

*RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: [RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg) for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Mr Yang Razali Kassim.*

---

## **Sinking the Ships: Indonesia's Foreign Policy under Jokowi**

*By B. A. Hamzah*

### **Synopsis**

*Despite some adverse comments, President Joko Widodo is not about to drastically change Indonesia's "free and active foreign policy". What may change during his tenure is the emphasis, orientation and strategy. His challenge is how to execute his foreign policy without losing friends. Jokowi should start calling on his ASEAN counterparts to continue the traditional regional diplomacy.*

### **Commentary**

OUTWARDLY PRESIDENT Joko Widodo's policy of burning and sinking fishing vessels from friendly states for illegal fishing gives the impression that he cares less for regional diplomacy. His policy is a stark contrast to his predecessor President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's policy of "a million friends and zero enemies". Yudhoyono has assiduously courted many friends over the last decade. In less than one hundred days, his successor, however, seems bent on leaving behind a different legacy.

Although the action of burning fishing vessels is essentially a domestic matter, it has foreign policy implications. For states which have signed Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) with Indonesia on how to treat wayward fishermen, especially in disputed maritime space (such as with Malaysia), the action has ruffled diplomatic feathers as it breaches international norms and possibly the ethics of modern-day diplomacy.

### **What next?**

Coupled with Jokowi's observations on what appears to be Indonesia's conditional support for the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), for example, it is daunting to speculate what he will do in the next five years. Many critics (including Indonesians) have asked whether the new President is changing course, pursuing a new foreign policy orientation, or simply grabbing headlines for domestic consumption.

Notwithstanding all the nuances, I believe President Jokowi will keep Indonesia on an even keel. He is not about to drastically change Indonesia's foreign policy. Jokowi is going to retain Indonesia's independent posture known as the "free and active foreign policy", which has guided Indonesia for so long. What may change during his tenure, though, is the emphasis, orientation and strategy to

achieve the objective while strengthening his political grip domestically. In a way, he may give the impression that he cares less about diplomacy – but is he?

As head of state, he is answerable to the Parliament on many issues. As such, he has to operate within certain institutional bounds. Under President Jokowi, Indonesia is not likely to dump membership in ASEAN, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), United Nations, World Bank or the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

On the contrary, Jakarta is likely to strengthen its role in all the multilateral institutions including the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the East Asia Summit and the Group of Twenty (G20), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and others. Rubbing shoulders with the world's leading politicians is an essential part of diplomacy. More importantly, the national interests of Indonesia are better served by supporting their objectives.

### **Domestic support and diplomatic bridges**

Just like his predecessors, Jokowi would not downplay the relevance of geography and geopolitics in the making of foreign policy. In a nation that is fast emerging as a middle power, Jokowi has to take into account demography and domestic politics, including managing rising nationalist sentiments in foreign-policy making.

To be one among equals in the region, President Jokowi needs to formulate a pragmatic foreign policy. As he goes about strengthening his credentials at home, he should not burn the proverbial diplomatic bridges.

The seizure of the fishing vessels is Jokowi's way of telling Indonesians that he is no pushover when it comes to defending the sovereignty and national resources of the state. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, in the long-run, the Indonesian Parliament is not likely to allow President Jokowi a free hand to undermine further Indonesia's diplomatic credentials. Appealing to nationalist sentiments may have short-term advantages. However, it will not augur well with multilateralism in the global era.

One perennial complaint about Yudhoyono when he was in power was his indecisiveness. President Jokowi wants to be perceived as a decisive person, who does not always dance to the tune of big power politics. He will soon find out whether in an interdependent world, a reclusive nationalist is able to navigate through the rough seas all alone.

In the region, Jokowi will have to tread carefully in ASEAN waters. If he adopts a very aloof policy towards ASEAN, at a time when the organisation needs robust support from all, regional cooperation will take a back seat. Despite recent statements, there is no reason to expect Indonesia to abandon ASEAN, which has contributed positively to the political development of Indonesia since the New Order replaced Sukarno in 1966. To clear the air of uncertainty in the region, Jokowi should start calling on his ASEAN counterparts as traditional diplomacy dictates.

### **Jokowi's three-pronged maritime strategy**

Since the time of President Suharto, Indonesia has had a moderating influence on ASEAN. For example, when the 45th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Phnom Penh in July 2012 failed to adopt the traditional Joint Communiqué, the Indonesian foreign minister stepped in to save the day. Together with his counterpart from Singapore, they drafted ASEAN's Six-Point Principles on the South China Sea disputes.

To its credit, Indonesia has been instrumental in promoting the ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC). Jakarta was also instrumental in establishing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (1976) and Bali Concord II, which provided the foundation for the emerging ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Due to be formalised by the end of this year, the AEC will not be realised without Indonesia.

Over China, President Jokowi walks a tight rope. No one expects Jokowi to shy away from criticising China for its expansive maritime claims that overlaps with Indonesia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) off the Natuna islands. Nevertheless, demography, geopolitics, geography, economics and realpolitik

dictate that Indonesia and China remain the best of friends. Moreover, Indonesia is considered the most acceptable party to engage with an assertive China in the South China Sea. For example, Jakarta can push for the conclusion of the Code of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. It can also help moderate the Sino-US naval rivalry in the region.

President Jokowi's policy of transforming the Indonesian maritime space is three-pronged. The first prong deals with strengthening internal resilience. The crackdown on illegal fishing is just one aspect of it. Upgrading the capabilities of the navy and air force is the second. The third prong involves the construction of some 24 deep-seaports across the entire archipelago as well as improving other support facilities in the maritime sector.

President Jokowi's decision to upgrade the navy may exacerbate the ongoing regional naval arms race and make it more complex to manage regional security problems at sea, including the overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea. Besides Indonesia, Australia, China, India, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam are also expanding their respective submarine fleets.

The challenge for President Jokowi is how to execute a robust maritime policy without losing friends in the region.

---

*B. A. Hamzah is a Senior Lecturer with the Department of Strategic Studies, National Defence University of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. The views are personal. He contributed this specially to RSIS Commentary.*

---

**Nanyang Technological University**  
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)