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South China Sea Disputes: Sovereignty and Indonesian Foreign Policy

By René L Pattiradjawane

Synopsis

President Jokowi's foreign policy vision of Indonesia as a Global Maritime Axis has to relate to China's Maritime Silk Road of the 21st Century. Given these two visions from East Asia's two largest states, how will Indonesia play its part to contribute to the resolution of the South China Sea disputes?

Commentary

PRESIDENT JOKO Widodo's ambition to turn Indonesia into a maritime power in his first five-year term of office is an enormous task not only domestically but also regionally. President Jokowi's vision of Indonesia as a Global Maritime Axis faces a geopolitical environment which is more tense amid a new contest for influence between the great powers of the Asia-Pacific region – the United States and China.

Jokowi's vision has political, economic, trade, military, security and social-cultural goals which have to be projected and supported by a comprehensive foreign policy that will advance Indonesia's interests in the new era of regionalism marked by the emergence of the ASEAN Community in 2015. How will this vision address the challenge of the South China Sea disputes that is rapidly worsening? Is Indonesia under Jokowi up to it?

Fluid region as Indonesia sees it

The Indonesian intelligence agency projects in its new book "Toward 2014-2019: Strengthening Indonesia amidst a Changing World" an opportunity for Indonesia's strategic location in Southeast Asia. This opportunity calls for Indonesia to propose initiatives for security arrangements that could promote the stability of the region.

Given the fluid environment of potential conflicts in the region involving naval power projections with overlapping maritime claims in the South China Sea, it is not surprising that claimant countries have been strengthening their navies through increased procurement of battleships. New conventionally-powered diesel-electric submarines have been developed such as the Yuan-class submarines by China or the Yun Bong-gil-class by South Korea. These are clear indications of offensive strategies.

Against this backdrop, the South China Sea, for President Jokowi, does not seem to be an important agenda in his foreign policy. He is building his image as a new leader with critical domestic priorities and enjoying wide public support because of his populist views. He is a leader who is, however, as naive as his urban electorate concerned only with their immediate environment. A clear example is his aggressive policy of tackling fishery poaching by burning foreign vessels caught fishing illegally in Indonesian waters. This policy risks undermining bilateral and regional ties and is something Indonesia cannot afford at this time of power fluidity.

In a public opinion survey conducted by the Centre for Chinese Studies-Indonesia in September 2014, 1,096 respondents in 15 cities in Indonesia, were asked about the crucial issue of the overlapping claims in the South China Sea. Only 12 percent of the respondents understood this issue. Majority of Indonesia's urban population do not understand the tensions in the South China Sea or that it could lead to an open conflict.

The small 12 percent of the respondents who are familiar with the South China Sea issue agreed that China is moving too slowly in finding a resolution to the tensions. From this perspective, we cannot expect President Jokowi to be trouble-shooting the South China Sea disputes - not even his foreign minister who needs to adjust her position to understand the complex game of power in the region.

Jokowi's Global Maritime Axis and Xi's Maritime Silk Road

While Jokowi's concept of the Global Maritime Axis lacks sufficient articulation of its strategic context, it does share some similarities with President Xi Jinping's vision of the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st Century which he presented to the Indonesian parliament when he visited Jakarta in October 2013. The difference between the two visions is that Xi's ideas are more strategic and larger in scope and reach while Jokowi's Maritime Axis is more domestically-inclined.

President Xi also has the muscle and financial power to support his maritime strategy, including creating the new multilateral Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to entice Southeast Asian nations to upgrade their infrastructural development.

A major part of President Jokowi's strategy is to develop Indonesia's seaports by inviting foreign companies to invest. But it also needs to define the geopolitical outlook and context for the next five years. This is crucial because it will form the strategic environment for his vision of Indonesia as a Maritime Axis. It is still unclear how the maritime diplomacy component will deal with the complicated issues of the South China Sea disputes to ensure freedom and safety of navigation.

President Jokowi and Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi have still not articulated any vision that will guide Indonesian diplomacy on maritime policies, regionally or multilaterally. It is becoming apparent that President Jokowi is abandoning the previous foreign policy, especially the initiative of an Indo-Pacific Treaty proposed by the former Foreign Minister Natalegawa which called for a treaty of amity and cooperation in the larger scope of the two oceans.

New era of maritime diplomacy

ASEAN has been leading the search for a new regional security architecture. This is necessary to provide the overall umbrella to defuse tensions such as in the South China Sea. China has now proposed the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st Century which is designed to transform the potential overlapping conflicts among nations in Southeast Asia into a new era of maritime diplomacy.

There are several noteworthy features of this maritime diplomacy. First, it is an effort to create a new workable economic, trade and political model that would support China's rise as a new great power. So far Beijing's efforts in creating multilateral platforms such as the BRICS or the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) have not been strong enough to counter-balance the existing mechanisms that are legacies of the Cold War.

Second, by using its enormous foreign exchange reserves, China seems to be buying the support of smaller Asian nations through financial assistance for their badly-needed infrastructure development. The China-initiated AIIB's corporate articles show that its purpose is to create wealth instead of

prosperity. In other words, China appears to be using its massive capital to split ASEAN by undermining the group's cohesiveness through infrastructure cooperation.

A clear outcome of this divide-and-rule strategy was seen in the incohesive ASEAN stand on the South China Sea issues. There was actually an attempt by ASEAN in May 2014 in Manila to join the AIIB as a single entity. This was a way to offset China's dominance and minimise the potential for intra-ASEAN conflict.

Third, the disputes in the South China Sea can best be resolved through understanding the root cause of the issue while in parallel upholding the norms and values of international law. ASEAN countries have displayed the effectiveness of this approach in resolving the disputes over the Preah Vihear Temple and Sipadan-Ligitan Islands.

The root of the overlapping claims in the South China Sea is China's nine-dash line claim which was created by the Kuomintang government as an eleven-dash line when they ruled mainland China. In the contemporary policy on the South China Sea of Beijing and Taipei today, both sides had never proclaimed sovereignty over the South China Sea - only sovereignty of the islands in the disputed area.

The South China Sea disputes will only be resolved when both China and Taiwan can sit down and talk with ASEAN to clarify the dash-line claim, including the officially-defined U-Shaped line claim which covers almost the entire South China Sea. A satisfactory clarification by China of its vague claims will contribute to the fundamental resolution of the South China Sea disputes. This will in turn enhance and strengthen the tradition of cooperation in the region for common prosperity.

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