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Global Maritime Nexus: Towards A Grand Strategy for Indonesia?

By Yohanes Sulaiman

Synopsis

On 23 February 2017, Indonesia published a presidential regulation concerning Indonesian maritime policy (Perpres 16/2017). Since President Jokowi first unveiled his vision of Poros Maritim Dunia (Global Maritime Fulcrum) on 15 November 2014, the concept has been dormant. Yet there remain conceptual and policy problems with this vision, especially with regard to the South China Sea.

Commentary

SINCE IT was first unveiled by then newly-elected President Joko Widodo ('Jokowi') on 15 November 2014, the concept of the Global Maritime Fulcrum – *Poros Maritim Dunia* – has been dormant as a national policy. Indeed, there have been some fundamental problems with the idea itself.

To begin with, the very word "*Poros*" has been poorly defined and thought through, especially in its translation from Indonesian to English. When President Jokowi first announced his concept of the *Global Maritime Fulcrum*, both the Jakarta Post and the Jakarta Globe translated the word *Poros* as *Axis*.

Conceptual Problems

The word *Axis* itself, however, has some implications based on the historical precedent; notably 'Axis' is basically a military alignment with some countries. In 1965, then President Sukarno proclaimed the creation of the Jakarta-Peking-

Pyongyang-Hanoi-Phnom Penh Axis. While it never really took off, this was supposedly an anti-colonialist front.

Thus the question arose as to who Indonesia's military allies in this new "Axis" were and who Indonesia was balancing against. Considering Indonesia's own strategic culture that abhorred the creation of military alliances, the idea of an "Axis" to refer to the vision of Indonesia playing a global maritime role should be dead on arrival.

The other translation is *fulcrum*, which is advocated by Andi Wijayanto and Rizal Sukma, the brains behind this concept, and used by the Indonesian foreign ministry. *Fulcrum* has less militaristic implications compared to axis, while the definition of *fulcrum* is "the point on which a lever rests or is supported and on which it pivots".

In a sense, for Indonesian foreign policy to behave as a fulcrum, Indonesia must actually actively confront and balance any power that seems to disturb the regional balance. That is actually the goal of Mr. Wijayanto and Mr Sukma in using the word fulcrum, that they want Indonesian foreign policy to be actively engaged with global developments.

There are, however, two main problems with this definition. First is the simple fact that as a *fulcrum*, Indonesia will, in the end, only react to other countries' foreign policies. To some degree, this is in line with Indonesia's own strategic culture of prioritising the principle of non-interference and its stated foreign policy goal in the *Preamble* of its constitution, notably "to contribute to the establishment of world order". But, in my opinion, this definition, in essence, limits our foreign policy options.

The second problem is that Indonesia needs to reorient both its foreign and military policies to support the idea of being a *fulcrum*. That, unfortunately, is not evident from the recently published presidential regulation on Indonesian Maritime Policy.

"Fulcrum" or "Nexus"?

It is not that the regulation itself is problematic. There are 23 action plans for the foreign ministry and some, crucially, stress the need for Indonesia to definitely settle border and territorial disputes with its neighbours. But many of the action plans are already in process, such as cooperation and training between Indonesian and other countries' navies, dealing with border disputes, etc.

While the regulation mentions the growing tensions in the South China Sea, there is no concrete action plan being proposed aside from "optimising diplomacy," "active participation" in various international organisations, and "safeguarding Indonesia's interests and enforcing Indonesia's sovereignty in the South China Sea".

Granted, Indonesia has been well involved in many maritime-oriented diplomatic activities, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Behind the scenes, Indonesia has also been playing a lot of important roles in trying to defuse the South China Sea tensions.

The problem, however, is that it is unclear whether those activities are really a part of

a much bigger strategic plan to deal with the challenge of increasing regional and international instability, or simply ad-hoc policies.

Similarly on the issue of “Maritime Defence and Security,” while the regulation stresses the need to modernise and increase the number of ships in the Indonesian navy and upgrading its existing facilities, there is no explicit mention at all concerning adapting Indonesian military force to manage the instability in the South China Sea. In other words, there is simply not enough credible force to back Indonesia’s diplomacy should push comes to shove.

In essence, the current action plan is ill-suited to fulfill the goals of Indonesia as a fulcrum as both the plans for Indonesian foreign and military policies, to put it bluntly, simply fail to act as a fulcrum. Unlike in the past, Indonesian foreign and military policies seem inward-looking instead of dealing with regional security issues head-on, considering Indonesia’s strong geostrategic position.

Therefore, *nexus* is a more appropriate concept. As a *nexus*, Indonesia puts itself as a centre, a focus of maritime diplomacy but at the same time, maintaining its freedom of actions that it will pursue in regard to its national interests.

Grand Strategy

This, however, requires Indonesia to have a defined goal in both its foreign and military policies. In other words, Jakarta needs a *grand strategy*, which is defined by historian Geoffrey Parker as “the decisions of a given state about its overall security”. This encompasses the threats it perceives, the ways it confronts them, and the steps it takes to match ends and means.

It involves ‘the integration of the state’s overall political, economic, and military aims, both in peace and war, to preserve long-term interests, including management of ends and means, diplomacy and national morale and political culture in both the military and civilian spheres’.

The current presidential regulation concerning Indonesian Maritime Policy, while a good start, needs a clearer enunciation of Indonesia’s strategic interests and goals and how to coordinate the policies of various ministries and institutions to achieve that goal. Otherwise Indonesia’s current policies remain a patchwork of preexisting bureaucratic action plans stitched together.

It is hoped that the concept of *Global Maritime Nexus* in the end could be a starting point for the creation of an Indonesian grand strategy that clearly defines its national interests and foreign and military policies in short, medium, and long terms.

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