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After Jokowi's First Term

Indo-Pacific or Pacindo: Does It Matter?

By René L Pattiradjawane

SYNOPSIS

Indonesia has been one of the earliest proponents of the idea of Indo-Pacific, expanding the long-standing Asia Pacific regional outlook towards the Indian Ocean. As President Joko Widodo enters his second term, what is the future of Pacindo, the Indonesian iteration of the idea?

COMMENTARY

DOES THE idea of the Indo-Pacific matter in Indonesian foreign policy? In the broader context, does the Indo-Pacific region, which President Joko Widodo emphasised in his first term as a single geostrategic theatre, have the capabilities of balancing two mighty forces: China and the United States competing for economic, trade, technological and military supremacy?

There are other burning questions: Do Indonesia and ASEAN, with their conceptions of self-restraint, flexibility, and the Middle Way, have the ability to cope ideologically and politically with the dynamics of local, national, regional, and global interactions?

Next Big Question

This is not all. The next big question is this: Do nation-states in the so-called Indo-Pacific region worry about the ongoing fierce competition that tends to become antagonistic like the China-US trade war or the transactional politics of the big powers? Not to mention the gunboat diplomacy in the name of freedom of navigation operations

(FONOPS) in the South China Sea to ensure that sea lanes of communication will not interrupt access to the regional and global markets.

Since the establishment of ASEAN in 1967, there has been no evidence of state or non-state actors orchestrating maritime violence that disturbs the sea lanes, crippling economic and trade activities of littoral states in the region. In the 21st century, however, the rivalry between the two most significant economic entities on earth will not only undermine the global trading system but also the existence of free governments.

In the beginning, it was easy to understand the Indonesian position after President Joko Widodo's (Jokowi) speech in Naypyidaw, Myanmar in November 2014 on the future of the region straddling the Pacific and Indian Oceans (Pacindo). He reiterated Indonesia's position as a "Global Maritime Axis" marking the emergence of a new maritime power that is strategically located between the two oceans. This in a sense underscored the essence of Jokowi's foreign policy outlook.

Pacindo: Whither Indonesian Foreign Policy?

To be sure, Indonesia was one of the earliest, if not the first, to propose the idea of the Indo-Pacific. Before Jokowi, then foreign minister Marty Natalegawa floated it in 2013, proposing the signing of an "Indo-Pacific Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation". Implicit in it was ASEAN acting as a fulcrum linking and balancing the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

The notion of the Indo-Pacific has developed a largely but not exclusively pro-West security strategy linking the United States, Australia, Japan and India, the so-called Quad of democracies. But with China viewing it as a move to contain its rise, the idea of Indo-Pacific has been stuck in a quagmire of competing concepts.

Pacindo is an antithesis of that strategy, implicitly rejecting the emergence of a security architecture that nullifies China's rise which can potentially undermine ASEAN's own stability and security. Pacindo is Indonesia's conception of ASEAN's collective need for a joint security architecture between small and large countries. The region adopted the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" in Bangkok in June 2019 at the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting.

However, Pacindo as a strategic outlook was not carried well by Jokowi's aides, especially the country's policy foreign makers. Now into Jokowi's second-term, Indonesia's foreign policy is still operating in an old fashioned way, unable to address strategic issues.

Indonesian foreign policy failed to identify the erosion of the country's credibility as a deterrent power; the growing incohesiveness of regional countries; the rapid changes towards a new global superstructure of the 21st century; uncertainties over the roles of Japan, India and European countries as centres of power; shifts in the balance of power; and the competitive capabilities between major industrial countries and the region of Southeast Asia.

Without a doubt, the friction between China and the US in the region is part of the race for influence as the regional hegemon. For five decades ASEAN states have been realistic enough to accommodate the interests of the big powers and the potential role of Pacindo in the geopolitical configuration of the region.

Future of Pacindo

The High-Level Dialogue on Indo-Pacific Cooperation held by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia involving the East Asia Summit (EAS), consisting ASEAN and eight member countries in March this year, failed to produce any strategic outlook on the long game towards justice, truth, idealism and humanitarianism in the Pacindo region.

In short, as a senior Indonesian diplomat in Europe described, how should the region shape a sense of cooperation to forge a new primary platform for peace and security in the region?

The Pacindo strategic outlook needs to project new scenarios based on peace, prosperity and inclusive convergence of the regions. For example, how do we define the rise of China – as the defender or challenger of the existing global and regional order? There is also a need to clarify what does rules-based order mean. Is the international order the core of the world order? Is it possible to have multiple coexistences as a multipolar balance of interdependence?

The Pacindo today is a complex region with a variety of state and non-state actor interactions. The arrangement for coexistence is not only related to the new model of relations between big countries as proposed by China, but also the relations of various other countries in the world to form in unison a regional and global order.

An arrangement of coexistence and equal relationships allows small countries to live and cooperate with major countries in the neighbourhood and with the great powers outside the region.

The dynamic of the region linked by the Pacific and Indian Oceans is such that it is a single geostrategic theatre. Pacindo is not only about a conception of integrity and sovereignty, border control, armed conflict, invasion and war, but also a broader formulation of national economic territories, trade, education, culture and the like.

Pacindo does need a code of conduct as Dr Marty had proposed. The low acceptance of the High-Level Dialogue on Indo-Pacific Cooperation indicates that Indonesian foreign policy would not be able to propose any mechanism for conflict resolution among nations in the Pacindo region.

The Southeast Asian region should remember to continuously build a framework of greater harmony and stability rather than be drawn into new polarisations. In the changing world order, there is no single major power to lead and shape a new international system that drifts towards coercive diplomacy to detriment of ASEAN centrality.

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