



IS INDONESIA'S 'INDO-PACIFIC COOPERATION' STRATEGY A WEAK PLAY?

BY VIBHANSHU SHEKHAR

*Vibhanshu Shekhar (vibesjnu@gmail.com) is a strategic affairs analyst based in Washington DC. He is the author of *Indonesia's Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy in the 21st Century: Rise of an Indo-Pacific Power* (Routledge, 2018)*

In 2018 Indonesia has been diving into the Indo-Pacific discourse. President Joko Widodo, while attending the ASEAN summit retreat in Singapore in April, laid out a new '[Indo-Pacific Cooperation](#)' strategy that used the ASEAN process as its fulcrum. The presidential pronouncement came on the heels of the January 2018 announcement by Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, who declared that Indonesia would seek to build '[an ecosystem of peace, stability, prosperity](#)' in the Indo-Pacific region through an overarching regional architecture. Surprisingly, the Widodo government took more than three years to outline an Indo-Pacific strategy even though it had indicated that it was thinking in those terms in its election manifesto and its maritime vision.

The current strategy is Indonesia's third entry in the Indo-Pacific debates. The other two were (former foreign minister) Marty Natalegawa's 'Pacific Indo-Pacific' doctrine and the Widodo government's 'global maritime fulcrum' narrative that had a pan-Indo-Pacific footprint. Natalegawa, in May 2013, became the first person to propose a treaty-bound normative order through his doctrine of 'Pacific Indo-Pacific.' The Widodo government's maritime vision, an ambitious foreign policy posture, has been relegated to an initiative for the development of domestic maritime infrastructure, popularly known as the *Tol Laut* (maritime highway).

The architecture-driven strategy marks a shift in Indonesia's understanding of and participation in the Indo-Pacific debate. In contrast to the earlier perception of the Indo-Pacific as a spatial framing and a geographical twist, the current approach frames the Indo-Pacific debate as a great power discourse that has a polarizing impact on the regional power structure. Speaking at the 25th PECC General Meeting in May 2018, Minister Marsudi cautioned that '[the concept should not be used as a containment strategy.](#)' Moreover, her January pronouncement came immediately after the revival of the [Australia-India-Japan-US Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue](#) ("the Quad") in November 2017. In this context, Indonesia's Indo-Pacific strategy seems to follow an autonomous path amidst the evolving geopolitics between the US-led Quad and an assertive China.

The 'Indo-Pacific Cooperation' strategy distances itself from the '[Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#),' proposed by [Japan](#) and adopted by [the US](#) and other countries. The foreign minister's January 2018 press statement insisted that the pan-Indo-Pacific architecture should be not only free and open but also (a) inclusive, transparent, and comprehensive; (b) beneficial for the long-term interests of all countries in the region; and (c) based on a joint commitment by countries in the Indo-Pacific to uphold peace, stability, and prosperity. Since then, principles of respect for international laws and ASEAN centrality have been added to the list. These qualifiers emphasize neutrality and autonomy and, for that reason, are important to policy makers in Jakarta.

These principles, however, do not offer much reinforcement against existing issues and, actually underline the challenges Indonesia faces as it pursues an ASEAN-led Indo-Pacific strategy. For example, the principles of transparency and respect for international laws have been discarded in the case of systematic elimination of the Rohingya community in Myanmar. Thailand's military regime – which is going to be the next ASEAN Chair in 2019 – does not help the case for a transparent ASEAN. It is not clear if Thailand's military leaders will follow the Laotian policy of not allowing regional civil society organizations to convene the ASEAN People's Forum during the ASEAN summit.

Similarly, the principles of joint commitment and ASEAN centrality remain precarious when the principal instrument of regional diplomacy, i.e. ASEAN, remains divided. President Widodo warned in September 2016 that ‘ASEAN’s ability to maintain regional peace and stability will erode without ASEAN unity and centrality.’ Minister Marsudi acknowledged in February 2017 that [‘the big challenge within ASEAN was unity’ due to ‘many different interests;](#)’ and reiterated the same caution in May 2018 that [‘there won’t be any ASEAN centrality if no unity.’](#) Interestingly, the Widodo government had shown marginal interest in ASEAN by refusing to take part in some of its proceedings, not actively pursuing the South China Sea dialogue process, and by reducing the budget for ASEAN affairs.

The ASEAN-led approach also positions the group as a leading interlocutor in the context of the Indo-Pacific region, a posture largely acceptable in the geopolitical contexts of Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Asia-Pacific. However, unlike Natalegawa’s [‘Pacific Indo-Pacific’ doctrine,](#) which had a somewhat well-defined goal of developing peace through a legally-binding pan-Indo-Pacific treaty, the current strategy does not add anything to the ASEAN arsenal. The ASEAN-led approach exhibits an important means-ends gap as it does not explain how Indonesia can achieve the goal of regional peace and stability using nearly the same set of ASEAN-led frameworks that have thus far been unable to stem the tide of great power alignments, major power hostilities, and intensifying regional uncertainty.

The architecture-driven Indo-Pacific strategy raises more questions than it answers. It does not explain whether it is an ASEAN-exclusive approach or includes non-ASEAN processes, such as the [Indian Ocean Rim Association](#) (IORA), MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, Korea (ROK), Turkey, and Australia), and other trilateral forums. Though Indonesian policy makers seem to have zeroed in on the [East Asia Summit \(EAS\) as the principal forum for dialogue in the Indo-Pacific region,](#) it is not clear whether Jakarta would be pushing for formalization of the EAS, which could give major powers greater say in agenda setting and weaken ASEAN centrality.

The limitations of Indonesia’s ASEAN-led approach become apparent when compared to Indonesia’s bilateral diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific region. Jakarta has not only strengthened relations with key Asian powers, such as China, India, Japan and South Korea, but also sought to gain leverage from their competition and rivalries. Indonesia’s decisions to offer development of the Sabang port project to India, the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed train project to China, and the Tanjung Priok port project in Jakarta to Japan along with a submarine-building project with South Korea indicate Jakarta’s greater ability to shape bilateral ties with influential regional players.

Indonesia’s ‘Indo-Pacific Cooperation’ strategy is a weak play amidst increasing pressure of great power politics, a divided and powerless ASEAN, unenforceable principles, and a vaguely outlined multilateral approach. Unless all ASEAN member-states are willing to stand together on key issues – a remote possibility – these challenges will continue to “wreck the ASEAN boat” and cripple efforts to develop an ASEAN-centered alternative to the evolving security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Click [here](#) to request a PacNet subscription.