



## INDO-PACIFIC – A CHALLENGE FOR ASEAN’S ‘MOUSEDEER DIPLOMACY’

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‘Indo-Pacific’ has increasingly become code for confrontation, or ‘pushback’ – but can Indonesia rescue the ‘Indo-Pacific’ on behalf of ASEAN and regional inclusivity?

In the United States, Australia, Japan, and India much is being said about the ‘Indo-Pacific.’ Strategic concept, forum, regional community – whatever way the idea is developed, it is increasingly seen as a new manner of thinking about the region, and one that dilutes the predominance of China.

The Indonesian leadership, which has been developing its own Indo-Pacific concept for well over a decade, is currently trying to regain control of it. They speak of an ‘Indo-Pacific Treaty’, an ‘Indo-Pacific regional architecture’ and an ‘Indo-Pacific cooperation umbrella’ – and insist it will be inclusive, and not aimed at containing China. Former Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa seeks a ‘dynamic equilibrium’ involving the different regional powers, and he and other Indonesians believe ASEAN can be at the core of the Indo-Pacific, maintaining that equilibrium. The Indonesian formulations are in some ways attractive – and eloquently stated – but are they realistic? There are a number of challenges.

First, the Indo-Pacific idea is already deeply entangled with US-led strategic maneuvering. The ‘Indo-Pacific’ is highlighted in the 2017 US National Security Strategy, and the ‘Pacific Command’ is now the ‘Indo-Pacific Command.’ The Indo-Pacific has also

often been linked to the so-called Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue, or Quad, the moves toward security cooperation between India, Japan, Australia, and the United States – a cooperation said to be based on a common commitment to democratic values (and one to which at least three of the participating countries seem less than fully committed).

Indonesia is wise to try to reassert the more inclusive Indo-Pacific concept – wise in the sense that ASEAN has always been inclusive, uncomfortable with security alliances (most Southeast Asian countries resisted joining the US-led SEATO six decades ago), and opposed to ideology-based associations. At this point, however, it will take much effort to resist the push toward a counter-China, liberal Indo-Pacific.

A second challenge is that protecting specifically ASEAN interests may be very difficult. For a start, the idea of Indo-Pacific is opposed by many in ASEAN – as was evident at the ASEAN special summits with India and Australia this year – and Indonesian policy-makers are as aware as anyone of the need to maintain unity. One reason for ASEAN hesitation is the degree to which ‘Indo-Pacific’ is anti-China in orientation. It is important not to be confused here. True, some ASEAN countries are concerned about disputes in the South China Sea, but ASEAN has in general been positive about the rise of China, and has had long experience of benefitting from China while acknowledging its superior status.

Assuming ASEAN did agree to some form of Indo-Pacific architecture, the next problem would be maintaining a strong measure of ASEAN leadership or centrality. Marty Natalegawa has suggested that an Indo-Pacific Treaty could be based on ASEAN principles. Whether the major powers agree to this is one matter. If they do, then the new Indo-Pacific body, in most formulations, is still likely to be in some sense independent of the ‘ASEAN Plus’ architecture – the ASEAN ‘hub and spokes’ structure – which has been the foundation of such regional institutions as the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Plus Three, and the ASEAN Regional Forum.

In a more open Indo-Pacific gathering, ASEAN countries would be hard pressed to compete with the mega-states in Northeast Asia, India, or the United States. Since 1967, ASEAN – despite international criticism of its careful consultative, consensus-seeking processes – has been remarkable in maintaining a degree of leadership in the wider Asia. Promoting dialogue between far larger, and competing, nations – ASEAN has contributed to

regional peace, and at the same time asserted the agency of weaker states.

In some old writings of Southeast Asia, the image conveyed by such diplomatic ingenuity is that of the wily mousedeer (*pelandok jenaka*), which employs all types of tactic to survive among the big animals of the forest. It is mousedeer diplomacy that Southeast Asians have employed for centuries with respect to China and other great states – and it is still used today on behalf of what Bilahari Kausikan has described as Southeast Asia’s long-term quest for “autonomy” and “maximal room to manoeuvre.”

ASEAN’s influence in Asia and the Asia Pacific has been almost a sleight of hand, but it has one enormous benefit for the regional commons. The question of which major power should rightly lead in the broad Asian/Asia-Pacific region has been set aside. Assuming Indo-Pacific architecture moves beyond the ASEAN ‘hub and spokes’ system, the issue of regional leadership is likely to be starkly present.

A further challenge for the Indo-Pacific idea is its lack of emotive or identity substance. This has long been a matter that confuses Western analysts, who focus on the practical or functional advantages of regional architecture. The importance of regional cooperation on trans-border – economic, police, security, health and so forth – is of course acknowledged in Asian societies, but a more organic understanding of regional architecture is also influential.

The building of the idea of ‘Asia’ has taken place over a century or more, beginning in India and Japan. The ‘Southeast Asia’ and ‘ASEAN’ regional aspiration has been underway during some seven decades, and increasing effort has been put into promoting a ‘people-centred ASEAN.’ The idea of the ‘Asia-Pacific’ has been even more difficult than ‘Asia’ to promote. As Indonesian analyst, Jusuf Wanandi notes, ‘Indo-Pacific’ actually excludes the word ‘Asia’, which covers “the most important part of the region.” In fact, ‘Indo-Pacific’ seems to have no emotive substance whatsoever for the people of the countries concerned. This may be unimportant if it is understood as no more than a strategic framework, but when there is talk of ‘Indo-Pacific regional architecture’ the deficiency matters.

A final consideration concerns the deeper change that seems to be underway in the Asian region – and the capacity of regional institutions to deal with this. The region is experiencing not just a shift in power from the United States to China, but a structural change in

rules, values, and aspirations. The idea of a homogenizing globalization now seems remote – partly, of course, because of the Trump preference for patriotism over globalism, but also as a result of the re-emergence of historical processes from many other directions. Older Asian traditions of hierarchical relations are shadowing inter-state politics; religious changes are promoting new concepts of community and obligation, especially in Indonesia. In some ways, it might be argued, the ASEAN-based institutions might possess a special talent for handling the complexity of the post-globalization era.

Indonesia itself has been a leader in the promotion of ASEAN’s patient diplomacy – and certainly values ‘autonomy’ and ‘maximum room to maneuver’. Marty Natalegawa has been arguing for greater “transformative leadership” from ASEAN – but a transformation away from ‘ASEAN-Plus’ to ‘Indo-Pacific’ architecture is sharply challenging, and may be transformative in dangerous ways.

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