



## **Indonesia's Foreign Policy and the Meaning of ASEAN** by Jusuf Wanandi

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It is an accepted wisdom that in international relations every nation pursues its own national interest. This notion is based on state sovereignty, the basis of relations between states since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648.

However, this principle has been eroded due to regional and international rules and institutions at the multilateral level, and civil societies and NGOs at the sub-national ones. Nonetheless, national interest and state sovereignty are still the central part of international relations, and it can be argued that globalization pressures, new threats of global/regional terrorism and threats of a non-conventional nature, such as pandemics, energy security and the environment, all will make the role of the state more important.

Indonesia is no exception. First and foremost, national interest should be pursued based on national sovereignty. Second, this could be constrained by regional and international rules and institutions, as national interest and regional/international interest develop in parallel or are integrated. ASEAN is designed as a regional entity, where the national interests of its members can be converged and become regional interests for common purposes. However, it has yet to realize this.

ASEAN was created to unite Southeast Asia, known as the Balkans of East Asia, to prevent conflicts and wars among each other, which had happened before, such as the confrontation in 1963-1965 between Indonesia and Malaysia and Singapore. Regional cooperation was meant to integrate Indonesia, Southeast Asia's biggest member, into a regional entity, with rules and institutions that would guarantee peace and stability among members. This has been achieved in the last 40 years. ASEAN has become a successful Southeast Asian diplomatic entity. In addition, to a limited extent, it also has become an economic entity due to increased integration aimed at creating an economic community in 2015.

New challenges have emerged. Can ASEAN as a diplomatic institution and a limited economic entity face these new challenges, such as the rise of China and India, without deepening cooperation and integration among its members. The answer is obviously no, because ASEAN still consists of 10 sovereign countries as members. This could be acrimonious or limited to the lowest common denominator.

If ASEAN cannot move beyond its lowest common denominator, as defined by Laos or Myanmar, it is likely that Indonesia will seek to become more independent from ASEAN. In the last 40 years, Indonesia has become too dependent on ASEAN as the instrument of its foreign policy, and has constrained its freedom of action and use of other vehicles to implement its free and independent foreign policy. This was right in the first decades of ASEAN, to enable Indonesia to get the trust back from its neighbors. And Indonesia has achieved that. However, for the future, Indonesia needs to pursue its own national interests, on top of its loyalty and solidarity with ASEAN.

Following the regional financial crisis, Indonesia felt that it had been left behind by other ASEAN members. We were taking care of our political development, becoming a democracy. Other ASEAN members thought we had squandered our chances to recover. We should now get our act together and be brave enough to pursue our national interests.

ASEAN has failed to adjust to new challenges, as we found out in the drafting of the ASEAN Charter. Maybe it is true that basic differences in values and political systems will limit ASEAN to cooperation in common diplomatic stands and limited economic integration. This means that we should be more active in strengthening our bilateral relations with the big countries in the region: Japan, China and India, besides the United States. We should strive to develop closer cooperation with the big democracies among developing nations, such as Brazil, India and South Africa.

We should also take our role more seriously as the coordinator for Afro-Asia solidarity and cooperation. Economic cooperation within the Non-Aligned Movement is worthwhile to pursue, especially to promote food self-sufficiency and family planning.

Indonesia, with or without ASEAN's support, should cooperate with China and India to assist Myanmar in its efforts to open up by having a credible roadmap to democracy.

In the meantime ASEAN should be strengthened to be able to play a more important role. What is absolute for Indonesia's public opinion concerning the ASEAN Charter is a credible human rights body. In addition, the ASEAN foreign ministers should assure that decision-making in the grouping should not only be based on consensus. ASEAN should have adequate funding and members' contributions should not be defined by the least able member. Furthermore, sanctions for not living up to the charter and other important decisions should be stronger than simply reporting it to the leaders.

These are the minimum requirements for the ASEAN Charter to be acceptable to the Indonesian public. Without that, it will be difficult for the Indonesian Parliament to sign the treaty, and for civil societies to endorse it.