



Indonesia among the powers: Should ASEAN still matter to Indonesia?

See Seng Tan

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

See Seng Tan is an associate professor, deputy director of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, and founding and current head of the Centre for Multilateralism Studies at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. A student of Asian security, he is the author/editor of nine books and has published over forty refereed scholarly papers and book chapters. His most recent book is *The Making of the Asia Pacific: Knowledge Brokers and the Politics of Representation* (Amsterdam University Press, 2013). He has consulted for various international organisations and the Singapore government, and has served as the principal investigator of numerous policy studies on regional security concerns on behalf of those institutions. He is a member of the Singapore chapter of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) and has served as head of delegation for CSCAP Singapore at CSCAP meetings on a number of occasions. He has held visiting appointments at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Asia, the Ritsumeikan Asia-Pacific University, and, as an Australian Research Council CEPS Fellow, at the Australian National University and Griffith University. He has a BA Honours (First) and MA from the University of Manitoba, and a PhD from Arizona State University.

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary rise of Indonesia, 'Asia's third giant' according to a recently released anthology on Indonesia,¹ has in recent times elicited a gush of compliments from pundits about Indonesia's prospects as an economic power—it remains the only Southeast Asian country granted membership in the Group of Twenty (G20), and is a member-designate of the soon-to-be 'BRICS' club of emerging economic titans—and as a diplomatic power.² This has coincided with the country's democratic transition in the post-Suharto era: a difficult one, by most counts.³ Coupled with its historical leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and its claim to fame as the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, Indonesia's transformation has served notice to major and regional powers alike that Jakarta deserves to be courted and welcomed among the ranks of the world's most powerful and privileged nations. Indeed, Indonesia's self-awareness of its growing importance has led it to pursue what one pundit has termed 'confidence' diplomacy, as embodied in its enhanced role in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), increased engagement with the great powers, active use of multilateral diplomacy, and its embrace of peace and democracy as values worth pursuing and advocating.⁴

On the other hand, Indonesia's longstanding role as 'first among equals' in ASEAN has increasingly been frustrated by the obduracy of some member nations of the organisation who resist efforts by Jakarta and others to deepen regional integration and strengthen institutional cohesion. This has led at least one eminent Indonesian political commentator to remonstrate openly about ASEAN countries that 'do not share Indonesia's passion for and commitment to ASEAN,' while urging his nation's leaders to consider the merits of a 'post-ASEAN foreign policy' for Indonesia:

If other ASEAN countries do not share Indonesia's passion for and commitment to ASEAN, then it is indeed time for us to start another round of debate on the merits of a post-ASEAN foreign policy. We have many other important foreign policy agendas to attend to other than just whining and agonizing over ASEAN's failures.⁵

Yet this sense of frustration felt by Indonesian policy elites over their nation's regional aspirations and ASEAN's poor track record of achievements is by no means new. Commenting on the contrast between Indonesia's regional vision and its limited role as 'regional spectator,' Michael Leifer once noted Indonesia's sense of frustration at 'not being able to influence events in the region [which has been] reinforced by the fact that individual members went their own way in foreign policy.'⁶ This evidently led President Suharto to 'express disappointment at ASEAN's limited progress.'⁷

There have been mounting frustrations and allusions to an Indonesian foreign policy no longer necessarily bound by an abiding commitment to ASEAN, the institution that has ostensibly played such a crucial role in Indonesia's regional and, in some ways, extra-regional relations. In view of this, what has been the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) government's foreign policy in regard to the extra-regional world, and more specifically the great powers? Does the concept of 'dynamic equilibrium' advocated by Indonesia's foreign minister, Marty Natalegawa, at all constitute Jakarta's new vision—and, for our purposes, a 'post-ASEAN' vision—of Indonesia's relations with the major powers, or does it reflect an inherent consistency with a more established outlook? Ultimately, how has ASEAN mattered historically in Indonesia's foreign relations, and how, if at all, might it do so in the future?

ARGUMENT

This issue brief makes three interrelated arguments against the backdrop of Indonesia's contemporary emergence as a noteworthy economic and diplomatic player in its own right, its evolving ties with the great and regional powers, and its longstanding vision of Southeast Asia as a region unmolested by external powers and managed foremost by its own residents. The arguments are as follows:

1 See, Anthony Reid, ed., *Indonesia Rising: The Repositioning of Asia's Third Giant*, (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012).

2 Santo Darmosumarto, 'Indonesia: A new 'middle power'', *The Jakarta Post*, 11 November 2012, Richard Dobbs, Fraser Thompson, and Arief Budiman, '5 Reasons to Believe in the Indonesian Miracle: Why this amazing archipelago is on track to be the world's seventh largest economy', *Foreign Policy*, 21 September 2012, accessed 12 January 2013, available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/21/5_reasons_to_believe_in_the_indonesian_miracle?page=full, 'Everybody's friend: Indonesia deserves a better image', *The Economist*, 11 September 2009, Hugh White, 'Indonesia's rise is the big story we're missing', *The Age*, 29 May 2012.

3 See, for example, Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner, eds., *Problems of Democratization in Indonesia: Elections, Institutions and Society*, (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012).

4 Those elements are discussed in Jiang Zhida, 'Indonesia's 'Confidence' Diplomacy under the Yudhoyono Government', *China Institute of International Studies*, 31 December 2012, accessed 17 January 2013, available at: http://www.cis.org.cn/english/2012-12/31/content_5638110.htm.

5 Rizal Sukma, 'Insight: Without unity, no centrality', *The Jakarta Post*, 17 July 2012, Rizal Sukma, 'Indonesia needs a post-ASEAN foreign policy', *The Jakarta Post*, 30 June 2009, Rizal Sukma, 'A post-ASEAN foreign policy for a post-G8 world', *The Jakarta Post*, 5 October 2009, Jusuf Wanandi, 'Indonesia's Foreign Policy and the Meaning of ASEAN', *PacNet No.27*, 15 May 2008.

6 Leifer, cited in Dewi Fortuna Anwar, *Indonesia in ASEAN: Foreign Policy and Regionalism*, (Singapore: ISEAS, 1994), p. 9.

7 *Ibid.*

1. Indonesia will continue to hedge against the major powers, especially China and the United States

First, Indonesia's perdurable concern that its regional environment should be as secure and stable as possible—in short, conditions most suited for developing an Indonesia that is 'sovereign, independent, just and prosperous'⁸ and, it might be added, democratic—has remained fundamentally unchanged. Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natalegawa's concept of 'dynamic equilibrium',⁹ which urges peaceful coexistence among the great powers in Asia, is the most recent expression of that longstanding aspiration. Nor, as a consequence of its contemporary transformation, has Indonesia's enduring predilection for strategic hedging been replaced by an explicit policy to bandwagon with or to balance against particular powers.¹⁰ According to Rizal Sukma, Indonesia's strategic partnerships with extra-regional countries such as Australia, India, Japan and South Korea 'clearly reflects Jakarta's desire to see that the emerging regional order would not be dominated only by the US and China.'¹¹ Going further, Leonard Sebastian has argued that 'Indonesia does not want to be tied to a US or China dominated security web. It wants an independent middle-power role to assert itself both regionally and globally.'¹² This implies Indonesia's long-held aim of having a 'free and active' (*Bebas-Aktif*) foreign policy, first articulated by Vice President Mohammad Hatta in a speech in September 1948 and originally designed to mitigate persistent domestic tensions between secular nationalism and religious nationalism,¹³ which continues to guide the country's approach to its external relations despite its democratic transition in the post-Suharto period.

Jakarta has held firmly to the notion that the management of regional order in Southeast Asia is best left to the region's countries themselves. As Adam Malik, former Indonesian foreign minister, observed in 1971:

The nations of Southeast Asia should consciously work toward the day when security in their own region will be the primary responsibility of the Southeast Asian nations themselves. Not through big power alignments, not through the building of contending military pacts or military arsenals but through strengthening the state of respective endurance, through effective regional cooperation with other states sharing this basic view on world affairs.¹⁴

In other words, regional security is to be achieved through intramural cooperation rather than through dependence on external powers. At the same time, the realisation of such an approach to regional security—'regional solutions to regional problems,' as the mantra goes¹⁵—has always been subject to the competing preferences of individual Southeast Asian countries, on the one hand, and the limits of national capacity on the other.¹⁶

However, not unlike its Southeast Asian counterparts, Indonesia's aspiration for regional autonomy did not prevent it from engaging, where it deemed necessary, in bilateral security relationships with an external power. In that regard, Indonesia has pursued security ties with the United States since 1951—other than Washington's suspension of the International Military Education and Training (IMET) programme for much of the 1990s into the first half of the 2000s in protest against human rights abuses perpetrated by the Indonesian military¹⁷—and with Australia since the 1990s. And while historical ties with China have in the past been complicated by Jakarta's fears over Beijing's political and ideological influence on Indonesia's Chinese minority—indeed, the project of post-Confrontation regional reconciliation through ASEAN was arguably embraced by Indonesia as a prospective bulwark against the apparent threat posed by China¹⁸—Indonesia normalised ties with China in 1990, and bilateral relations have significantly improved since 1998.¹⁹ Nor has Indonesian disdain towards collective defence systems prevented Jakarta from actively participating in wider regional security arrangements such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), whose membership includes external major powers. If anything, Indonesia's support for the ARF is, as Rizal Sukma has argued, an indication of its willingness to accommodate the legitimate security interests of extra-regional powers in regional affairs.²⁰

8 Mohammad Hatta, 'Indonesia's Foreign Policy', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.31, No.3, April 1953, pp. 441–52.

9 Indonesia's Foreign Affairs Minister, 'Dynamic Equilibrium' in the Asia Pacific: Interview with Marty Natalegawa', *Australia Network*, 23 February 2012, accessed 7 January 2013, available at: <http://australianetwork.com/focus/s3440427.htm>

10 See, Evelyn Goh, 'Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies', *International Security*, Vol.32, No.3 (2007/08), pp. 113–57, Jeongseok Lee, 'Hedging against Uncertain Future: The Response of East Asian Secondary Powers to Rising China', International Political Science Association XXII World Congress of Political Science, Madrid, Spain, 8–12 July 2012.

11 Rizal Sukma, 'Regional Security Order in Southeast Asia: An Indonesian View', paper presented at the Asia-Pacific Roundtable (APR), 28–30 May 2012, p. 5.

12 Leonard Sebastian, 'Indonesia's regional diplomacy: Imperative to maintain ASEAN cohesion', *RSIS Commentaries*, No.132/2012, 23 July 2012.

13 See, Anak Agung Banyu Perwita, *Indonesia and the Muslim World: Islam and Secularism in the Foreign Policy of Soeharto and Beyond* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007); Rizal Sukma, *Islam in Indonesia's Foreign Policy*, (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

14 Cited in Michael Leifer, *Indonesia's Foreign Policy*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983), pp. 148–9.

15 Michael Leifer, 'Regional Solutions to Regional Problems?', in Gerald Segal and David S. G. Goodman, eds., *Towards Recovery in Pacific Asia* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 108–118.

16 Rizal Sukma, 'Indonesia and Regional Security: The Quest for Cooperative Security', in See Seng Tan and Amitav Acharya, eds., *Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation: National Interests and Regional Order*, (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 2004), p. 71.

17 Fabiola Desy Unidjaja, 'Indonesia looks forward to reinstatement of IMET program', *The Jakarta Post*, 30 November 2002.

18 Bernard K. Gordon and Sheldon W. Simon, among others, have emphasised this point.

19 Rizal Sukma, 'Indonesia-China Relations: The Politics of Re-Engagement', *Asian Survey*, Vol.49, Issue 4, (2009), pp. 591–608.

20 Sukma, *Indonesia and Regional Security: The Quest for Cooperative Security*, p. 72.

All this suggests that Indonesia has no interest in seeing the Southeast Asian region, much less the Indonesian archipelago, become a theatre of great power competition. Nor would Indonesia seek to influence the regional balance of power by siding with either the Chinese or the Americans against the other.

2. ASEAN and its wider complex of institutions will remain relevant to Indonesia's engagement of the great powers

Second, while Indonesia's rise and its persistent frustration over the lack of cohesion and progress in ASEAN has led to renewed calls within certain Indonesian quarters for a post-ASEAN foreign policy—further buoyed by suggestions from particular Australians for a regional concert of powers which includes Indonesia but arguably sidelines ASEAN²¹—ASEAN nonetheless remains crucial to Indonesia. It is important not least as a convenient institutional platform through which Indonesia could proactively engage the great and regional powers that regularly dialogue with ASEAN and participate in wider regional arrangements led by ASEAN, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN+3, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+), and—arguably less so as a consequence of this arrangement's waning relevance—the ARF. Crucially, if Sebastian were right about Indonesia's desire to play a 'middle power role' in international affairs commensurate with its rising power and influence,²² then it makes more sense for Jakarta to see ASEAN and its wider complex of region-wide institutions as ready platforms through which Indonesia can fulfil its middle power ambitions. More often than not, middle powers rely on multilateral diplomacy to achieve foreign policy goals,²³ and there is little to suggest that Indonesia will deviate from this norm.

Remarkably, for all its flaws, ASEAN continues to enjoy the support of major and regional powers, which regard ASEAN-based arrangements like the EAS, despite persistent complaints about their inefficacy, as useful frameworks for regional dialogue and interaction. If anything, such regional cooperative frameworks enable Indonesia to pursue and conceivably realise its goal of dynamic equilibrium. Granted, Indonesia's recent exertions at preventing meltdowns in ASEAN unity have no doubt frustrated Jakarta, but they also highlight the considerable lengths to which Indonesia is prepared to go to redeem the embattled organisation. At the ASEAN annual meeting of foreign ministers in Phnom Penh in July 2012, Natalegawa's frantic shuttle diplomacy in the wake of apparent disharmony helped to produce the six point 'consensus'; similarly, his work and that of his fellow ministers at the summit in November 2012²⁴ underscore the salience ASEAN still holds for Indonesia. Prior to the Phnom Penh fiasco, Indonesia had also served as mediator—and, subsequently, agreed to serve as monitor—when hostilities broke out between Cambodia and Thailand in February 2011 over the land surrounding the Preah Vihear temple near the Cambodian–Thai border.²⁵ These efforts suggest that contrary to advice urged by a number of Jakarta's policy intellectuals, the Yudhoyono government remains more or less committed to ASEAN for the foreseeable future.²⁶ If anything, the Indonesian leadership appears to hold the view that notwithstanding its nation's rising power and influence, without a strong and cohesive ASEAN, Indonesia's quest to become a middle power would be seriously hindered. As one analyst has put it, 'A turbulent and weakened ASEAN will allow a vacuum leading to great power collision thereby leaving Indonesia on its own and vulnerable.'²⁷

21 Refer here to the idea for an Asian concert of powers purportedly suggested by leading Australian security intellectuals such as Michael Wesley, among others, at a Sydney conference in December 2009 dedicated to introducing Kevin Rudd's proposal for an 'Asia–Pacific Community' to policy practitioners and intellectuals from around the Asian region and soliciting their reactions to it. For a recent analysis of the Rudd proposal and its implications for the Asia–Pacific region, refer to See Seng Tan, 'Spectres of Leifer: Insights on Regional Order and Security for Southeast Asia Today', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.34, No.3 (2012), p. 316.

22 Sebastian, *Indonesia's regional diplomacy: Imperative to maintain ASEAN cohesion*.

23 The link between middle power diplomacy and the appropriation of multilateral institutions and initiatives through which to achieve its aims is often acknowledged. See, Sook-Jong Lee, 'South Korea as a New Middle Power: Seeking Complex Diplomacy', *EAI Asia Security Initiative Working Paper*, (Seoul: East Asia Institute, September 2012), Mark Beeson, 'Can Australia Save the World? The Limits and Possibilities of Middle Power Diplomacy', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.65, No.5 (2011), pp. 563–77.

24 Donald K. Emmerson, 'Beyond the six points: How far will Indonesia go?', *East Asia Forum*, 29 July 2011, available at: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/07/29/beyond-the-six-points-how-far-will-indonesia-go/>, accessed 17 January 2013, Don Emmerson, 'ASEAN Stumbles in Phnom Penh', *PacNet*, No.45, 19 July 2012.

25 See, International Crisis Group, 'Waging Peace: ASEAN and the Thai–Cambodian Border Conflict', *Crisis Group Asia Report*, No.215, 6 December 2011.

26 This point is emphatically made in Jiang, 'Indonesia's 'Confidence' Diplomacy under the Yudhoyono Government'.

27 Sebastian, *Indonesia's regional diplomacy: Imperative to maintain ASEAN cohesion*.

3. Indonesian foreign policy has never been ASEAN-centric to the exclusion of other pathways and pillars

The foregoing two points emphasise the appeal of a post-ASEAN foreign policy as useful for clarifying Indonesia's strategic interests and the appropriate modalities through which to achieve its interests. However, it is necessary to recognise that this appeal is misleading because Indonesia's foreign policy has never been centred primarily on ASEAN. To be sure, the received wisdom has long presupposed, with good reason, the centrality of ASEAN to Indonesia's foreign policy. Take, for instance, the following contention by Jusuf Wanandi, a leading Indonesian policy intellectual:

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 neighbours. And Indonesia has achieved that.²⁸

As a consequence, the logic persuasively continues, Indonesia need no longer rely solely on ASEAN, but 'for the future, [it] needs to pursue its own national interests, on top of its loyalty and solidarity with ASEAN.'²⁹

On the other hand, ASEAN's very success as a diplomatic community has long been predicated on its achieving the limited aim of ensuring the respect of member nations for one another's sovereignty through their mutual adherence to the principle of non-interference. Put differently, the organisation's *raison d'être*, defined in this minimalist way, effectively legitimated member countries' recourse to their own devices—via the nebulous doctrine of 'national resilience' (*ketahanan nasional*)—so long as their actions did not affect their fellow members' national security and sovereignty in adverse ways. To that extent, the very formation of ASEAN in 1967 was made possible as a consequence of Indonesia's assurance to the other founding member countries of the organisation that they would be able to pursue their foreign policy goals in their own ways without interference from Indonesia, with each effectively minding its own business.³⁰ Not unlike its fellow ASEAN member states, Indonesia has long relied on permutations comprising unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral strategies to its security, and has assiduously avoided placing all of its eggs in the regional basket. (Arguably, any hint of ASEAN centricity in Indonesia's past behaviour, if indeed such existed, probably reflected its lack of national capacity, rather than its will, for a more ambitious and expansive internationalism.) It is for these reasons that commentators such as van der Kroef argue that Indonesia's ASEAN membership has in fact been an insignificant concern for Jakarta.³¹ Going further, Donald McCloud has suggested that historically, Indonesia's regional actions did not reflect any 'grand design [Indonesia might have had] for working through ASEAN to gain control of a broad segment of the region.'³²

The academic debate over the importance of ASEAN to Indonesian foreign policy implies that Indonesia, despite its own political discourse about the centrality of ASEAN in Jakarta's regional affairs, likely advanced—or at least sought to advance—its foreign policy goals through a number of strategies, of which ASEAN was but one. True, ASEAN has been and remains important to Indonesia, but not singularly and unequivocally so, as the contemporary debate about a post-ASEAN foreign policy for Indonesia has unwittingly sought to portray.

28 Wanandi, *Indonesia's Foreign Policy and the Meaning of ASEAN*.
29 *Ibid.*

30 The argument is made in See Seng Tan, 'Herding Cats: The Role of Persuasion in Political Change and Continuity in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol.13, No.2, 2013, pp. 233–65.

31 Justus Maria van der Kroef, *Indonesia After Sukarno*, (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 1971).

32 Donald G. McCloud, *System and Process in Southeast Asia: The Evolution of a Region*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986).

CONCLUSION: INDONESIA DRIVING AND SUFFERING THE REGION?³³

This issue brief has sought to make three interrelated points about Indonesia's contemporary engagement of the great powers in the midst of its own ascendancy to middle power status. First, this issue brief has proposed that Indonesia's longstanding concern that its regional environment should stay as secure and stable as possible has not changed. This raises the prospect that Indonesia is unlikely to alter its traditional reliance on a hedging strategy vis-à-vis China and the United States. Second, the brief contends that while Indonesia's contemporary rise and its persistent frustration over the lack of cohesion in and progress by ASEAN are undeniable, ASEAN and its wider regional cooperative frameworks nonetheless remain useful as modalities for supporting Indonesia's engagements of the great powers. Although Indonesia has long endured the frustration of dealing with fellow ASEAN countries that, in Jakarta's eyes, lack commitment to the Association, ASEAN, for all its visible flaws, still remains the region's closest thing to a 'regional solution' for regional challenges—an unfulfilled aspiration Indonesia has yet to abandon. Third, it has been argued, notwithstanding Indonesia's tireless advocacy on behalf of ASEAN, that Jakarta's foreign policy has, not least on a practical basis, relied on a host of strategies of which ASEAN regionalism has played a key but by no means exclusive modality, nor the most critical one. In this regard, recent appeals for a post-ASEAN foreign policy, while perfectly understandable in the light of Indonesia's newfound pride as a regional powerhouse vigorously courted by the great powers, are somewhat misleading if they suggest that Indonesia's foreign policy has always been principally dedicated to ASEAN.

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33 The phrase is borrowed from the title employed by Michael Leifer in his fifth chapter of his book on Singapore's foreign policy. See, Michael Leifer, 'Driving or Suffering the Region?', in *Singapore's Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability*, (London: Routledge, 2000), Ch.5.

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