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Indonesia and its Stance on the “Indo-Pacific”

*American President Donald Trump has recently started to use the term “Indo-Pacific” rather than “Asia-Pacific”. The concept was first mooted by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe back in 2007 and in the meantime it has developed into a strategy for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP), promoting closer cooperation between the QUAD (made up of Japan, USA, Australia and India) and ASEAN. It is, in short, the answer from the USA and Japan to the Chinese “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI). In this tug of war, Indonesia plays a pivotal role, as **Leo SURYADINATA**, Visiting Senior Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, argues in this article: Indonesia connects the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, and both the US and China seek to draw Indonesia over to their side.*

Origins of the concept

The Indo-Pacific Strategy has been gaining traction in recent times. On 18 October 2017, US secretary of state Rex Tillerson made mention of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” concept, which was adopted by President Donald Trump in November 2017 during his visit to Asia. The term “Indo-Pacific” rather than “Asia-Pacific” was used in Trump’s speeches. In early May 2018, the US Pacific Command changed its name to the Indo-Pacific Command. An Australian security expert observed then that the concept is meant to be “diluting China’s impact in a larger ocean, in a wider regional context”. From Beijing’s point of view, the change has the aim to “contain China”. Whatever the case, the concept is being expanded by the US from a mere security measure to include an economic dimension.

In fact, “Indo-Pacific” was first mooted by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in his 2007 speech to the Indian parliament. Abe urged India to be active in the Indo-Pacific region together with Western countries in order to guarantee the maritime security of the region and to further economic cooperation. Soon after that, an informal security dialogue group known as QUAD, made up of Japan, USA, Australia and India was established.

Abe’s proposal and Jokowi’s response

Prior to Donald Trump’s inauguration as the 45th President of the USA on 20 January 2017, Shinzo Abe, who was concerned with the uncertainty created by Trump’s foreign policy announcements, decided to cast the net wider in the search for close friends and allies in Asia. At the same time, Abe sought to counter China’s increasing assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region by advancing Japan’s national interest through bolstering security and economic arrangements. It was against this geopolitical backdrop that Abe made several trips abroad, including his two-day maiden state visit to Indonesia on 15 January 2017. He was warmly welcomed by Joko “Jokowi” Widodo who had already met Abe four times since becoming President in 2014.

While Abe was mainly concerned with security matters, Jokowi was primarily interested in economic benefits. With the exception of the project details regarding the Parimban port located near Bekasi in West Java, where quite a number of Japanese companies are concentrated, remarks made by both Abe and Jokowi at the joint press conference after a closed-door meeting in Bogor Palace were rather anodyne, with both leaders merely stressing continued bilateral economic cooperation.

But what was telling from the press conference was Abe saying that Japan attaches huge importance to maintaining and promoting a rules-based order in the South China Sea. He hoped for Japan to secure the cooperation of Indonesia on maritime security, not least in and around the Natunas where Chinese incursions had taken place into Indonesia's exclusive economic zone. This proposition is likely to be rejected altogether as the Jokowi administration, not least the Indonesian navy, would be reluctant to draw a foreign country into patrolling Indonesian waters.

Cooperating with Japan on maritime security in the South China Sea could also generate consternation in Beijing. This is something Jokowi prefers to avoid, given the enhanced Sino-Indonesian economic engagement. Perhaps a less controversial route for Japan to take, as seen by Jokowi, is to enhance its maritime cooperation with member countries of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), currently chaired by Indonesia.

No mention was made of Abe's "Indo-Pacific Strategy Proposal" at the press conference, even though the proposal was reportedly discussed in the closed-door meeting. Abe had sought to promote "cooperation among Japan, ASEAN countries, the US, Australia and India." The Jakarta Post calls it, rather aptly, the "Japanese version of OBOR."

The development of FOIP

The Indo-Pacific approach was not yet Japan's official foreign policy when Abe met Jokowi in January 2017. Only after his return to Japan did his Gaimu-shō begin to develop the concept and to officially propose it in April 2017 as the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" (FOIP) which has since then become the backbone of Shinzo Abe's security policy. In November 2017, seven months after the release of the FOIP in Tokyo, Australia released its 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, promoting, strengthening and defending "an open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific Region". In December 2017, the White House released the National Security Strategy of the United States in which it identified China and Russia as seeking to "challenge American power, influence and interests".

On 22-24 January 2018, US Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis visited Indonesia. He was the second US leader from the Trump Administration to visit Jakarta after Vice-President Mike Pence. Before visiting Jakarta, Mattis had delivered a speech at the Johns Hopkins University, unveiling a shift in US defense priorities. He declared that the primary focus of U.S. national security today was not terrorism, "but great power competition". The Mattis visit to Indonesia should thus be understood in this context.

Mattis met Indonesian foreign minister Retno Marsudi, President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, coordinating minister of political, legal and security affairs Wiranto, and defense minister Ryamizard Ryacudu. As Mattis' major agenda was security, his meeting with Ryamizard was closely watched. After the closed door meeting, Mattis stated to the press that the U.S. was keen to participate in the trilateral joint patrol between Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines in the South China Sea, including the Natuna Sea. This was aimed at preventing crimes.

The Indo-Pacific was not mentioned at the press conference, but was discussed between foreign minister Retno and Mattis. Retno welcomed the Indo-Pacific concept (Indonesian terms: Konsep Arsitektur Indo-Pasifik) that was "based on the principle of openness, spirit of cooperation and a habit of dialogues." Only through these principles could the Indo-Pacific region achieve peace and stability. She also noted that "Indonesia is open to discussing and developing the Indo-Pacific with any country, including the US."

On 9 February 2018, Retno led a delegation to Beijing. The visit, according to her, was to return the 2014 visit made by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and to hold a Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation meeting. Retno was not only welcomed by her Chinese counterpart but also received by Premier Li Keqiang. Retno was reported to have

discussed bilateral relations as well as the regional and global situation with her Chinese counterpart. She also noted that Indonesia-China relations were advancing from year to year, “but what we need to make sure of is that relations should bring mutual benefit and be based on mutual respect.”

Both, the US and China, seek to draw Indonesia over to their side, even as Indonesia tries to conduct an “active and independent” foreign policy. Thus far, Indonesia has avoided an alliance with the US/Japan and domination by China.

Does Indonesia have its own Indo-Pacific concept?

On 19 November 2011, all the countries (including the ASEAN states, China, Russia, India, Japan and Australia) participating at the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bali adopted the “Declaration of the East Asia Summit on the Principles for mutually beneficial relations”, (which include respecting country sovereignty and the use of non-violence to settle issues). Marty Natalegawa, then Indonesia’s foreign minister, was encouraged by this declaration, and wanted to turn the declaration into a formal treaty.

It was only on 16 May 2013, when Marty gave a speech at CSIS in Washington D.C. that he used “the Indo-Pacific region” explicitly.

Marty noted in that speech that he was invited there to talk about an Indonesian perspective of “the Indo-Pacific”. He stated that the term was “increasingly used/common” but “not as prevalent as many others in the lexicon of geopolitics”, and that he was willing to use the term. He pointed out that countries in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean were important while Indonesia was the country which connected these two oceans. ASEAN, Indonesia included, could only be secure and stable if there was also peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. Marty reminded the participants that in 2011, the EAS declaration’s principles for mutually beneficial relations were adopted by Indo-Pacific region countries; he eventually proposed that it be turned into “the Indo-Pacific-wide Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation” to be used as a mechanism to manage regional security affairs.

Rizal Sukma, a leading Indonesian IR scholar, in agreeing with Marty, noted that “international relations based on power alone would lead to pure power politics with devastating implications for regional stability. In this context, the Indo-Pacific treaty could provide a framework for the ‘dynamic equilibrium’ that Marty seeks to establish.”

Marty’s “Indo-Pacific Perspective” is different from Shinzo Abe’s “Indo-Pacific Concept” in that Marty’s concept is inclusive, and not confined to Western “democratic states”. It covers China and Russia, two countries which signed the EAS Declaration in Bali. While the “Indo-Pacific Perspective” as proposed by Marty has not been taken up by any country, Shinzo Abe’s FOIP has on the other hand, been adopted by Trump’s Administration.

Indonesia under Jokowi has had the Global Maritime Fulcrum concept aimed at making Indonesia a maritime power. On 11 January 2018, Jokowi’s foreign minister Retno made a long speech at the UNGA entitled “Partner for Peace, Security and Prosperity” during the campaign for a Non-Permanent Security Seat in the UN, in which she discussed the Indonesian concept of “the Indo-Pacific”. She noted that “with regard to the future regional architecture, ... Indonesia wants the ecosystem of peace, stability, prosperity to be established not only in ASEAN but also in the Indian and Pacific Oceans or the Indo-Pacific”.

She continued: “Therefore, together with ASEAN, Indonesia will continue to contribute in advancing strong positive cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, instead of a cooperation based on suspicion or worse, perception of threat.”

She also said that Indonesia would work with countries in the region to develop an “Indo-Pacific cooperation umbrella” aimed at building confidence cooperation that was meant to be “free, open, inclusive and comprehensive”.

In early August 2018, Retno restated Indonesia’s view on the Indo-Pacific Concept during the Ministerial Meeting of EAS at Singapore Expo, noting that this was “not to create a new mechanism or replace an existing one, but to enhance cooperation using existing mechanisms.” According to the *Globe Tribune*, she distributed to foreign ministers the Indonesian concept paper called the “Indo-Pacific Co-operation Concept”.

Although Retno used rather different languages to present her argument of the Indonesian Indo-Pacific concept, one can see elements of Marty Natalegawa’s earlier thoughts. Both advocate an inclusive Indo-Pacific, the importance of trust/confidence building, and both also stress an ASEAN-led Indo-Pacific. However, unlike Marty, Retno did not propose a conclusion of “the Indo-Pacific-wide Treaty of Friendship of Cooperation”.

Since the Japan-US sponsored “Indo-Pacific Concept” (FOIP) was merely seen as security arrangements rather than aimed at economic development for the region, it has been less attractive compared to China’s BRI proposal. In July 2018 US, Japan and Australia suddenly announced that they were prepared to help build infrastructure in the region. However, the amount of funding announced was very limited.

Retno has noted that she will bring the Indo-Pacific concept to the 13th East Asian Summit (EAS) in November this year. It is difficult for the neutral and inclusive Indo-Pacific concept proposed by Indonesia to be accepted by the EAS participants.

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