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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Indonesia's regional diplomacy: Imperative to maintain ASEAN cohesion**

By Leonard C. Sebastian

### **Synopsis**

*Indonesia's more aggressive stance in regional diplomacy following ASEAN's failure to reach a consensus at last week's ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) is motivated by its desire to maintain regional cohesion and autonomy. How does Indonesia view itself in terms of regional groupings like ASEAN?*

### **Commentary**

In an efforts to repair the damage caused by the failure of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Phnom Penh to issue a joint communique, Indonesia's Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa made a two-day tour of five ASEAN capitals with the aim of producing a "statement of unity" on core issues on the South China Sea.

The FM's consultative diplomacy was preceded by a letter from President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to his ASEAN colleagues urging their support for Indonesia's effort, reflecting the serious concern that Indonesia has about this unprecedented ASEAN failure.

For Indonesia, the events in Phnom Penhad diminished the efforts by Jakarta as ASEAN Chair in 2011 in concluding an agreement between ASEAN and China on the Guidelines for the implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. Besides reducing any confidence in their joint commitment with China to manage potential conflict in the SCS through cooperation and dialogue the non-issuance of a communique has left in limbo the status of negotiations on a more binding Code of Conduct. Indonesia is concerned that this episode has damaged ASEAN unity and cohesion and could undermine ASEAN centrality in the regional architecture.

Indonesia is gravely concerned the perception might be created that there is a "vacuum in ASEAN" as the region faces a new era of great power rivalry.

It has long been Indonesia's external security policy that maintenance of regional security is the fundamental right and responsibility of the countries of the region themselves, acting separately and in concert with one another. It derives from a perception that all external powers, however seemingly benign, will in fact seek to dominate smaller and weaker states for their own interests to the extent that these states are vulnerable and divided among themselves.

To safeguard their long-term stability and their independence the states of Southeast Asia must ensure that they are full and active participants in all decisions affecting the region, rather than merely witnessing the

manipulation of events by competing external powers or passively accepting the imposition of some kind of regional arrangement that does not reflect the aspirations and the initiative of the Southeast Asian states themselves.

From the outset, Indonesia, had stressed that the close and dependent security ties of regional countries with external powers carried with it the risk of aggravating great-power rivalry in Southeast Asia. Therefore, ASEAN's primary role since its creation in 1967 was to promote a system of regional order involving a refusal in principle to accept the need for the role of an external power to fill any so-called power vacuum created within Southeast Asia by the retreat of colonialism. Even today, these concerns are genuine and deeply-felt across the full spectrum of elite political opinion in Indonesia.

It is within this context that the very real ambivalence felt by Indonesians for the United States' role in regional affairs becomes understandable. It is not just that the U.S. is considered less than totally reliable or that Indonesia, as a country proud of its history of nationalism, independence and nonalignment, does not want a productive bilateral relationship with the United States. It is also that, in the Indonesian conception of regional order, the intrusion of any external power into the region on behalf of a particular country or countries tends to reduce regional autonomy and, hence, can endanger stability.

Indonesia, with a hard-nosed appreciation of its strategic circumstances, recognises the changing equilibrium of power in Asia; it believes it is not in Indonesia's interest to see an emerging great power dominate Asia, and certainly not Southeast Asia. In part, this is due to the end of comfortable certainties of the Cold War. China's more aggressive posture on the South China Sea since 1995, particularly when Beijing declined to say whether it still held a traditional claim in the area of Indonesia's biggest off-shore natural gas deposit near the Natuna Islands, remains a security concern.

Jakarta's regional diplomacy has the following strategic imperatives: first; the need for neighbours to have credible structures for consultation. Therefore, ASEAN cohesion and unity must be maintained with the aim of preserving its centrality in the management of regional order.

Second, who determines regional order? Will it be the countries of the region or the great powers? Indonesia does not want to be tied to a U.S or China dominated security web. It wants an independent middle-power role to assert itself both regionally and globally. A turbulent and weakened ASEAN will allow a vacuum leading to great power collision thereby leaving Indonesia on its own and vulnerable.

Third, ASEAN thinking on security has to be decisive in order to deal adequately with the long-term challenges a country like Indonesia faces in securing its maritime environment. ASEAN's six point principles on the South China Sea announced in Phnom Penh on 20 July will for the time being assuage Indonesia's concerns.

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