



RISING ASIA
JOURNAL



RISING ASIA
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INDONESIAN DIPLOMACY

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The Foreign Policy Triad of Jokowi

President Jokowi appears to be focusing his foreign policy on a troika of engagements—with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, archipelagic geopolitics including the Indo-Pacific, and China.

When President Joko Widodo was elected President in 2014, his simplicity, humility and ability to run cities was manifest. The freshness that he brought to politics was welcomed all around with immense hope.

The one area that he was found to be lacking experience was in foreign policy. Here too he chose to run a new path. He started by removing the professional team of Marty Natalegawa and Dinopati Djalal. Both were career diplomats who were perceived close to the former president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, best known as SBY, but both had years to retirement. He brought in new career diplomats who were surprises to the establishment but have served him well. Ibu Retno Marsudi and Pak Abdurrahman Mohammad Fachir led the ministry in the Jokowi I term. Fachir was replaced by SBYs G20 Sherpa Mahendra Siregar in the Jokowi II Cabinet. These choices meant that Joko Widodo, also known as Jokowi, wanted a firm grip on the foreign policy establishment. When Indonesia became independent its

RISING ASIA JOURNAL.

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 1 (WINTER/SPRING) JANUARY TO APRIL 2021.

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founding fathers saw it as a means. Their slogan was “A sovereign, independent, just and prosperous Indonesia.”¹

These foreign policy initiatives were new for the reticent yet perceptive Jokowi. What were the determinants of Jokowi’s policy at this time? There may be several but for the purposes of this paper the focus is on three aspects: The Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN, archipelagic geopolitics including the Indo-Pacific, and China. These three are intertwined.

The ASEAN Continuum

Indonesia chaired ASEAN in 2003 when Megawati Sukarnoputri was president and again in 2011 when SBY was president. Their foreign ministers were the eminent Hassan Wirajuda and Marty Natalegawa, respectively. The Indonesian turn was in 2013 but was swapped with Brunei for the earlier term since in 2013 it also was to host the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) Summit.² The next Indonesian turn will be in 2023 just within the final year of the Jokowi presidency. Indonesia would like to have a major initiative to mark that occasion as a signing off for Jokowi.

During the Jokowi period, Indonesia has largely followed the ASEAN consensus on various issues and played a role which does not create waves. The significant initiative it took was the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” in June 2019.³ Given the history of the concept which was embedded in the formulation of the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indonesia took its time to reach here. Within the EAS there had been varied proposals in 2013 following Marty Natalegawa’s

¹ Mohammad Hatta, “Indonesia’s Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 1953.

² “Indonesia to replace Brunei as ASEAN chair in 2011,” *Forum Asia*, April 16, 2010, <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=5375>, accessed on June 5, 2020.

³ “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” June 23, 2019, ASEAN, <https://asean.org/asean-outlook-indo-pacific/#:~:text=ASEAN%20Outlook%20on%20the%20Indo-Pacific,opportunities%20as%20well%20as%20challenges>, accessed on June 5, 2020.



initiative on the Indo-Pacific. During his first term Jokowi steered clear of it, but by 2018, the United States, Japan, and India—due to Chinese posturing—had stated their own views. Indonesia could have said its own piece too but chose to go the ASEAN way through this “Outlook” which is neither policy nor mandate.



Indonesian President Joko Widodo's 2019 official portrait. By the courtesy of the Ministry of State Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia.

Ideally, Indonesia would like to adopt an ASEAN plus foreign policy—which means getting involved in issues beyond ASEAN positions, such as possible Indonesian association with the Quad—but during Jokowi’s term it has not really tried that. The Indo-Pacific concept was an opportune time to go beyond ASEAN and take a position as an Indo-Pacific power, but it restrained itself. That is perhaps how Jokowi’s personality shapes things—seeking collaboration rather than confrontation and not trying to stand out too much.

Since 2018, the Indonesian Annual Foreign Policy presentation has continued to have ASEAN as a cornerstone. In 2018, foreign minister Retno spoke about “strengthening the unity of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and promoting peace, stability and prosperity of its member states and the Indo-Pacific region.”⁴ Her 2019 annual press statement focused fully on ASEAN, including the new secretariat building contributed by Indonesia.⁵ This preceded the reference to the non-permanent United Nations Security Council term that Indonesia had just begun. In 2020 the references to ASEAN came on later pages, referring to the Rakhine issue, the role of ASEAN and that “ASEAN must continue to come up with disruptive innovations, to step away from the comfort zone, and stay relevant in responding to current challenges.”⁶

The Rakhine issue has been a test for Indonesia’s ASEAN policy and its bilateral engagement with Myanmar. Indonesia continuously endeavored

⁴ “Indonesia’s 2018 Foreign Policy to Focus on Asean and Indo-Pacific Region,” *Jakarta Globe*, January 9, 2018.

⁵ “2019 Annual Press Statement of the Minister For Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia,” January 9, 2019, <https://kemlu.go.id/download/L1NoYXJlZCUyMERvY3VtZW50cy9oZXJlJTlwZm9yJTlwdGhlJTlwZnVsbCUyMHNjcmlwdC5wZGY=>, accessed on June 5, 2020.

⁶ “Annual Press Statement of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia,” 2020, January 8, 2020, p 4; <https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/946/pidato/annual-press-statement-of-the-minister-for-foreign-affairs-of-the-republic-of-indonesia-2020>, accessed on June 5, 2020.



to be part of the solution to the Rakhine State issue.⁷ Indonesia donated a hospital in Mrauk U, Rakhine State as well as a grant through the ASEAN secretariat to repatriate people from Cox's Bazar to Rakhine in December 2019.⁸ Indonesian policy aimed to create trust within Rakhine State, underscoring that "Indonesia continuously communicates with multiple parties, the Government of Myanmar, Bangladesh, UN Secretary-General, Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General, UNHCR, IOM, ICRC and other related parties to help ensure progress on the field."⁹ This was perhaps Indonesia's finest moment in its two-year UNSC term. It also voiced this issue as the affected people were Muslim in order to assuage local sentiments that were rising. This issue tested Indonesian resolve in dealing with a fellow ASEAN member, Myanmar, and to do so quicker and more effectively than Malaysia. The advent of Rohingya refugees since 2015 in Aceh and other areas had caused Indonesian policy to stop them, allow them to enter Indonesia, and then deal with them. There was alternating between a humanitarian and a political view.¹⁰

Thus, during the Jokowi period, the effort has been to go along with ASEAN and efforts to build an ASEAN plus policy have not been undertaken. The Indo-Pacific was the best opportunity but was not chosen to be such. An ASEAN plus policy has to be centered on an issue on which ASEAN also has a direct interest but on which Indonesia will take steps beyond an ASEAN consensus. Perhaps in the next years to 2023, Indonesia will build on the ASEAN continuum than seek ASEAN plus initiatives.

⁷ Ibid, 3.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Deasy Silvy Sari, Taufik Hidayat, Aliyuna Pratisti, "Indonesian Government Policy on Rohingya Refugees," May 30, 2018, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327413064_INDONESIAN_GOVERNMENT_POLICY_ON_ROHINGYA_REFUGEES, accessed on June 5, 2020.

The Indo-Pacific and the Chinese Tangle

As the world's largest archipelago Indonesia has a natural interest in the seas and in maritime issues including security. Traditionally the Indonesian armed forces have fielded a large army, but a small navy and air force whereas with its archipelagic status the other services would be larger.¹¹ This was mainly for domestic political reasons and the war for independence was fought on land and not on the seas. The army has about 300,000 troops, the navy 74,000 and the air force 35,000. This does not manifest the posture of an ocean centric policy.

When the region's attention was focused on the Straits of Malacca, Lombok and Sunda, the ability to compete with navies in the region was the main determinant of maritime policy. As the Americans withdrew, Indonesia, more than several other ASEAN countries, had to face up to issues of maritime security including illegal migration and humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR). In all these, it was dependent on the assistance of friendly navies. Since Indonesia had no real enemies there were many willing to help.

The push towards a maritime strategy was necessitated by US withdrawal, Chinese aggressive postures on the nine-dash line and increasing requirements of nontraditional threats.¹² In Jokowi 1 this initiative was called the Maritime Axis. This had a focus on connectivity between Indonesian Island clusters; their inclusive economic development particularly infrastructure and in the process, building maritime security. This was posited as an economic development proposition to avoid any

¹¹ Author's notes, "Indonesian Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs Luhut Pandjaitan," speaking at Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, on May 17, 2018.

¹² I Gede Ngurah Swajaya, "Enhancing Security Cooperation and Addressing Traditional Non-Traditional Security Threats," in *Masala Bumbu*, ed., Gurjit Singh (Jakarta: Berita Satu, 2015), 157.



perception of trying to enhance a security presence.¹³ Port development was an integral part of this but not an increase in naval strength.

The dynamic situation since 2015 was changing quickly. The Chinese push into the South China Sea, the US idea of a pivot, and the Act East Policy of India, together would have made Indonesia think of the Maritime Axis beyond the economic.¹⁴ However, even when Indonesia chaired the IORA (2015–2017) it focused more on raising it to the level of a summit than adding real substance to it. The claim that Indonesia has not seriously set out its foreign policy in the Indian Ocean as a priority can be seen from several facts, such as the lack of established bilateral and regional cooperation with countries in the region. Compared to the regional architecture in the Asia Pacific, the Indonesian cooperation in the Indian Ocean got left behind and remained underdeveloped, according to a commentary on its IORA Chairmanship.¹⁵

Be that as it may, during this period Indonesia became involved with China in a big way for its economic development and opened preferential avenues for it. It did not allow its Indian Ocean or SCS policy to step out of line with its economic preferences. Jokowi tried his personal charisma with Chinese leaders in his first term and took the handshakes to mean economic engagement and lack of strife on maritime issues. While the economic penetration came swiftly, the Indonesian view that it was not a party to the SCS dispute and hence separate from other ASEAN countries was not acknowledged by China.

The Chinese, however, had a fulsome economic run during Jokowi I. They took whatever projects they wanted, declared some to be under Belt and Road Initiative and forced payments through parastatals rather than the

¹³ Ibid, 158.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Sigit Aris Prasetyo, "Indonesia's Chairmanship of IORA 2015–2017 and Beyond," *Jurnal Kajian Wilayah* 7, No. 1 (July 15, 2016), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/235985459.pdf>, accessed on June 5, 2020.

treasury to avoid debt stress which would attract the International Monetary Fund's attention. The high-speed railway to Bandung was taken from the Japanese in a clear manifestation of this surge in 2015. The road part of the BRI was, in fact, announced in Jakarta in 2013 and Jokowi perhaps understands its pitfalls but is willing to ride the tiger and see how to take best advantage of the BRI. The conditions laid down in Jokowi I for projects included sustainability, local labor, transfer of technology, value addition for industries, and private sector led projects independent of sovereign guarantees. China went around these. At the BRI II Forum in April 2019 Indonesia offered 28 projects of US\$ 91 billion to the BRI.¹⁶

In July 2019 Jokowi requested Chinese president Xi Jinping at the Osaka G20 meeting to set up a special fund under BRI for Indonesia. The details are yet unclear, but this is an effort by Indonesia to have a bigger say on how Chinese funds come in and their preference for investment over loans. The Jakarta-Bandung HSR has a Chinese commitment of US\$ 6 billion but is running late. Further, Chinese funds worth US\$ 1.5 billion are committed to a hydro-power plant in the Batang Toru rainforest in Sumatra. Indonesia and China have twenty-three MoUs on investment and trade cooperation encompassing the development of four economic corridors, rapid train research and technology cooperation, and the development of educational research.¹⁷ Since 2015 Chinese companies are involved in nickel smelting in Central Sulawesi, and in 2019 they expanded to other smaller islands around there. The four economic corridors they will develop are in North Sulawesi, North Kalimantan, North Sumatra, and Bali. The Chinese would have vital access to all parts of Indonesia through these. China is now

¹⁶ Prashanth Parameswaran, "Where Is Indonesia on China's Belt and Road Initiative?" *The Diplomat*, July 9, 2019.

¹⁷ Lexy Nantu, "Indonesia, China Agrees on Special Fund under Belt and Road Projects," *The Insider Stories*, July 4, 2019, <http://theinsiderstories.com/indonesia-china-agrees-on-special-fund-under-belt-and-road-projects/>, accessed on June 7, 2020.



Indonesia's leading trading partner with US\$ 72.6 billion in trade and US\$ 2.3 billion in investments in 2018.

The instances of the nine-dash line overlapping the Natuna waters, the maps appearing on Chinese visas¹⁸ and continued silence whenever Indonesia stated its lack of an issue on the SCS were harbingers of harsher realities. I recall happy faces at the first multilateral Komodo exercise near the Natuna Islands in 2015 when China also participated, and Indonesia continued to see that as a sign that all was well. When Indonesia, under the Fisheries Minister of Jokowi I, Susi Pudjiastuti, started enforcing its EEZ, fishing vessels of many countries were captured and later sunk, and ASEAN countries' vessels were not spared but Chinese vessels were sparingly sunk.

The approach to the Indo-Pacific and the SCS was taken only because China became a major factor. All along, ASEAN had played a waiting game in trying to negotiate a Code of Conduct with China even as Vietnam and the Philippines resisted but the brotherly togetherness was missing in the ASEAN Way. Indonesia stayed very aloof considering its economic partnership with China had insulated it but then realized that China had no such reciprocal thought. In 2016, there were clashes in the waters near the Natuna Islands. These waters are claimed by both China and Indonesia. A year later, Jakarta renamed the contested waters the North Natuna Sea, and has been fortifying military facilities in nearby islands.

In 2019-20 there have been several incidents leading Indonesia to protest Chinese intrusions in the area. In December 2019, 65 Chinese vessels came by into the Natuna Sea EEZ to fish, guarded by two Chinese coast guard vessels.¹⁹ Indonesia protested upon deaf ears. President Jokowi visited the Natuna during this silent invasion and air force jets were seen flying from

¹⁸ "Indonesia protested China passports," *The Bangkok Post*, March 29, 2013.

¹⁹ Tia Asmara, "Indonesia Protests Beijing's Alleged Encroachments Around Natuna Islands," *Benar News*, December 30, 2019, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesian/indonesia-china-12302019153354.html>, accessed on June 7, 2020.

Natuna forward bases.²⁰ The ships left when they were full. In a rare note to the UN secretary-general in May 2020, Indonesia stated that what the country now faces is “Chinese asserting sole sovereignty over the South China Sea, based not just on its claims to land features, but also based on ‘historic rights’ to the waters themselves.”²¹ The note added: “Indonesia reiterates that the Nine-Dash line map implying historic rights claim clearly lacks international legal basis and is tantamount to upsetting UNCLOS 1982,”²² and supported the Philippines’ position won at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016. This was the most explicit that any ASEAN country had been, besides Vietnam’s open criticism of China. Indonesia also complained that such EEZ encroachments affected the Indonesian economy.

The year 2020 marks the 70th anniversary of Indonesia-China diplomatic relations and a visit by Xi was planned. The pause provided by the Covid-19 crisis gives Indonesia time to relook its main engagements with China, ASEAN, and the Indo-Pacific. The note at the UN is a step out of normal Indonesian line. There is, on the one hand, an expectation that Indonesia may play an ASEAN plus role and coordinate better with the Quad and its expanded version which includes South Korea and Vietnam. Indonesia, on the other hand, asks when the Quad would admit China! The contradictions between the three determinants of Jokowi’s foreign policy are sought to be managed through such articulation of queries which reflect not the view of its neighboring friends but its unwillingness to offend China in a multilateral setup.

²⁰ “Stanley Widiyanto: Indonesia Deploys Fighter Jets in Stand-off with China,” Reuters, January 7, 2020.

²¹ In Letter to UN Chief, Indonesia Takes Stand on South China Sea: Radio Free Asia May 28, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/indonesia-southchinasea-05282020190946.html>, accessed on June 7, 2020.

²² Ibid.



Note on the Author

Ambassador Gurjit Singh retired as the Indian ambassador to Germany. He has served as ambassador to Indonesia, ASEAN, Timor-Leste, Ethiopia and The Republic of Djibouti. Currently, he is an Honorary Professor of International Relations Studies at the Indian Institute of Technology, Indore. He holds a Bachelors' degree in politics from St. Xavier's College, Kolkata, and a post-graduate degree in International Studies from the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. A 1980 batch officer of the Indian Foreign Service, he started his career in diplomacy with a posting in Japan and has since been posted in Sri Lanka, Kenya and Italy. Ambassador Singh has authored five books, *The Abalone Factor* on India-Japan business relations; *The Injera and the Paratha* on India and Ethiopia; *Masala Bumbu* and a comic book, *Travels through Time*, both on the India-Indonesia relationship; and *Opportunity Beckons: Adding Momentum to the Indo-German Partnership*.