Indonesia: Building Norms and Consensus on the World Stage

By Dewi Fortuna Anwar

While much of the world’s focus on Indonesia in recent years has been on its considerable economic achievements and potential, the country has also played a major role in formulating a unique approach to foreign policy that is often overlooked. Dewi Fortuna Anwar provides a historical perspective on Indonesia’s regional and international role as a norm and consensus builder.

I RECEIVED A REQUEST from Global Asia to write an article with the possible provocative title, “Big Economy, But No Vision? What Does Indonesia Stand for Geopolitically?” This idea seems to suggest that despite Indonesia’s growing economic might — it is now ranked 16th in the world and is a member of the Group of 20 nations — in the eyes of some people it is not pulling its weight on the international stage. I do not agree with the assumption that Indonesia has no vision and simply muddles through in its interaction with the outside world without clear principles or goals. In fact, despite the varying foreign policy styles and priorities of successive Indonesian governments, the underlying ideals and vision have remained remarkably consistent.

Of course, within Indonesia too there are critics who say that current Indonesian foreign policy — particularly “one million friends and zero enemies,” a policy enunciated by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono — lacks coherence. After all, in international relations as in everyday life, one is often confronted with difficult choices, and it is difficult to be friends with everyone, particularly when there are real disagreements on matters of principle. The “one million friends and zero enemies” formulation has been dismissed by a number of commentators as a non-policy.

I argue, however, that when one looks at how Indonesia has conducted its foreign policy in the past decade, particularly within the immediate East Asia region, one can clearly trace the legacies of the early independence era, when Indonesia clearly stood for something. The main difference with the earlier time, particularly the Sukarno period when Indonesia carried out a “lighthouse” foreign policy easily discernible from near and far, is that now Jakarta puts a premium on consensus and co-operation rather than on confrontation, as had been the case in the past. President Yudhoyono’s foreign policy formulation may seem naive to some, but it is a clear statement that Indonesia does not automatically divide the outside world into friends and enemies.

In this brief article, I would like to highlight the fact that one of the characteristics of Indonesia’s geopolitical stance is its emphasis on norm-building to achieve its political and security goals rather than on military strength. At the same time, in the past decade Indonesia has also tried to leverage its “free and active” foreign policy to play a role as a consensus-builder among countries with contending strategic interests, such as in developing a more inclusive regional architecture. The achievement of the second would clearly contribute to the attainment of the first goal.

EARLY INFLUENCE

Indonesia entered the international stage as a newly independent country with a backward economy and limited capacity, but at the same time fully conscious of its huge size, strategic position and rich natural resources. A strong sense of nationalism and self-confidence coupled with a fundamental distrust of the intentions of great powers had led Indonesia’s founding fathers to adopt a “free and active” foreign policy doctrine by which Indonesia would chart its own course rather than simply joining one or the other superpower bloc during the Cold War.

In 1955, Indonesia convened the first Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung, bringing together the newly independent countries in Asia and Africa and giving them a voice on a global stage still dominated by their former colonial and imperial rulers. The conference laid the foundation for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), declared in Belgrade in 1961, of which Indonesia was also a founding member.

The 1955 Bandung conference, which took place only five years after the Dutch transferred sovereignty to Indonesia, has continued to resonate to the present day as the first initiative to unite “the Global South,” and marked a high point in Indonesia’s foreign policy. It has loomed large in the national consciousness against which future performances tended to be measured. The success of the Bandung conference made Indonesia confident that to secure better conditions for itself and other countries in similar positions, it should take an active part in changing some of the established rules that are inimical to their interests.

The earliest example, and to date the greatest achievement of Indonesia’s norm-building efforts, was the declaration of the archipelagic principle on Dec. 13, 1957, which was later adopted in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982. Prior to the adoption of UNCLOS, there was no recognition of an archipelagic state, so that a country like Indonesia had no jurisdiction over its internal waters beyond the three miles surrounding each island while the rest of the surrounding seas were international waters. As a country comprising some 13,000 islands and vast expanses of water, including several important sea lanes of communication...
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(SLOCs), located at a crossroad between two oceans in a region that had been subjected to foreign occupation and intervention for centuries, Indonesia clearly felt vulnerable and unprotected by the then-existing international law governing the sea. Thus, long before UNCLOS, Jakarta had unilaterally declared Indonesia’s archipelagic outlook (wawasan nusantara), which envisioned all of the islands and waters surrounding and connecting the archipelago as a unified unit fully under its national jurisdiction. From then on, Indonesia took a leading role in pushing for international acceptance of the archipelagic principle.

Its determination to secure international acceptance of the archipelagic principle reflects the great importance that Indonesia attaches to international laws and multilateralism as exemplified by the United Nations (except during the brief period of confrontation with Malaysia, 1963-1966, which saw President Sukarno pull Indonesia out of the UN in 1965 when Malaysia was accepted as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council), as the best means of protecting its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

LESSONS FROM KONFRONTASI

While in earlier days Indonesia had tended to focus on the global stage, in later decades the emphasis has been more on the immediate region. Indonesia looked back with pride to the early foreign-policy achievements, but the later aggressive policy of konfrontasi carried out by Sukarno, not just towards Malaysia but also against Western countries in general, was regarded as unproductive and fundamentally damaging to Indonesia’s national interests. Instead of enhancing its security, confrontation made Indonesia more vulnerable as it became surrounded by hostile elements, while the economy was bankrupted when investment dried up and too many resources were spent on the military. These were lessons that have never been forgotten by Indonesian policy-makers. For much of the New Order period under President Suharto, Indonesia, in fact, deliberately adopted a low-profile foreign policy while focusing on its internal economic development.

The confrontation of the early 1960s has been regarded as an aberration in Indonesian foreign policy and once again greater emphasis has been put on norm-building as a means to promote security, particularly regional security. Building norms that others would also support and respect entail good relations with other countries that can best be achieved through co-operation. With the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the cornerstone of its foreign policy since its establishment in 1967, Indonesia has taken a leading role in establishing a regional code of conduct that would preclude the use of force in settling inter-state disputes through the adoption of the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation (TAC) in Southeast Asia in 1976 at the first ASEAN summit in Bali. With its growing achievements and confidence, ASEAN, with Indonesia as its largest member, has widened the scope of the regional code of conduct to countries beyond Southeast Asia. It is important to note that one of the criteria for non-ASEAN countries to be accepted as members of the East Asia Summit is that they accede to the TAC Protocol.

TACKLING THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

An even more ambitious and challenging task that Indonesia and its fellow ASEAN members have undertaken is establishing a code of conduct for peaceful relations in the highly contested South China Sea, claimed by China, Taiwan and four ASEAN states (Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam). In 1992, ASEAN issued the first Declaration on the South China Sea, which did not include the participation of China, and in 2002, a Declaration of Conduct (DoC) of parties in the South China Sea was agreed upon by ASEAN members and China. It was only in 2011, however, when Indonesia was chair of ASEAN, that the terms of reference of the DoC were finally accepted and a process began to draft a more binding code of conduct. In recent years, with China’s increasingly assertive stance toward enforcement of its claims in the South China Sea and the United States’ so-called pivot to Asia, cracks began to emerge within ASEAN, with certain members inclining toward China while others look to Washington for military protection. As a non-claimant, Indonesia has continued to be the primary driver for the development of a South China Sea code of conduct and has worked hard to keep unity among ASEAN members. ASEAN has also declared Southeast Asia as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality and a nuclear weapons-free zone. All of these norms will contribute to the realization of a security community in which the use of force to resolve conflicts between its members would become unthinkable.

From a realist perspective, the emphasis on non-binding norms with no real means of enforcement as a primary means for ensuring regional security would be seen as naive and Pollyannaishly optimistic. But as people say, the proof of the pudding is in the eating and Indonesia’s experience in the past four decades has tended to reinforce its belief in the importance of co-operation and restraint in producing a virtuous circle of security and trust between neighbors within an ever-widening circle, which in turn also contributes to their prosperity.

The contrast in the conditions in Southeast Asia now compared to the earlier period of conflict and fragmentation — or to other regions that are still dominated by security dilemmas — is too stark to be dismissed. While regional codes of conduct may be seen as a good-weather policy — good as long as everyone abides by them — the existence of the norms in themselves tend to act as a restraint against non-compliance in the face of peer pressures.

BUILDING CONSENSUS

Now to the proposition of Indonesia as a consensus-builder. Despite its adherence to a “free and active” foreign policy and non-alignment during the Cold War, Indonesia had at one point leaned more towards China, culminating in the Jakarta-Pyongyang-Peking axis under Sukarno, and then under Suharto towards freezing relations with China and becoming a de facto ally of the US. In the multipolar post-Cold War period, Indonesia has found itself in the happy position of being able to develop close relations with all
powers, regardless of their state of relations with each other, while avoiding over-reliance on a single power. Indonesia’s vision of a peaceful and stable regional order is predicated on the absence of open conflicts between regional members or interference by external powers within the ASEAN region. Lately, this desired regional vision has been extended to embrace the wider East Asian region, in which ASEAN is envisioned as the driver of a regional community-building process that would be inclusive in nature and free from domination by one or more of the major powers with interests in the region.

With its growing economic clout and its credentials as the world’s third-largest democracy and largest Muslim-majority nation, Indonesia has become more active again on the global stage. However, given the fact that the center of economic gravity has shifted to the Asia-Pacific region, which is also marked by the presence of several rival major powers and the existence of many flashpoints of potential conflict, the Asia-Pacific region has remained the focus of Indonesia’s foreign policy and security concerns.

First and foremost, Jakarta has tried to ensure unity within ASEAN, such as by mediating in bilateral conflicts between fellow ASEAN members, as recently occurred between Cambodia and Thailand. Equally important, Indonesia has long tried to develop a more unified response and action by ASEAN vis-à-vis the outside world, as envisioned in the theme of “ASEAN Community in a Global Community of Nations” promoted during Indonesia’s chairmanship of ASEAN in 2011. Within the wider region, Indonesia has also taken a lead in getting the idea of a more flexible definition of East Asia accepted by the key regional members. Believing that a non-racial and more inclusive regional architecture that includes key powers with legitimate interests in the region would be better for peace and stability than an exclusive East Asian community, Indonesia has taken a lead in broadening the membership of the East Asia Summit (EAS) beyond the original ASEAN + 3 countries (China, Japan and South Korea). From the very beginning, Jakarta has wanted a regional architecture that is more inclusive in nature so that the region is not divided into “them” and “us,” and which at the same time will make it difficult for any one country to become too dominant.

Indonesia’s role as a consensus-builder has not been limited to the region. As a developing country that has benefited from its integration into the global economy, Jakarta has generally taken a moderate position on various global issues that often divide the Global North from the Global South. After a 12-year deadlock on the follow-up of the Doha Round of trade talks, it is perhaps not a coincidence that the first agreement reached was during Indonesia’s recent chairmanship of the ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organization in Bali, which produced the Bali Package in December 2013.

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