

Indonesia and ASEAN in the vortex of the Indo-Pacific Geopolitical

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Abstract

Since its emergence, the term Indo-Pacific has received attention from various countries, including big countries such as the United States and China where the two countries are competing the race to spread influence and fulfill its interests in the region through military, economic, and other cooperation. Coupled with the emergence of India, this inevitably creates the potential for instability in the region and friction that can lead to conflict. As a country located right in the middle of the Indo-Pacific, Indonesia does not want the political dynamics in the Indo-Pacific to threaten their security and sustainability. Using a multilateralism approach through ASEAN, Indonesia seeks to encourage dialogue within the framework of ASEAN between Indo-Pacific countries based on the ASEAN Way of Viewing the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). This step is expected to create conditions in the Indo-Pacific region so that the geopolitical climate in the Indo-Pacific prioritizes cooperation over competition. In addition, Indonesia also wants to implement the World Maritime Axis agenda where Indonesia is able to become a mediating country in the region that puts forward a constructive approach in dealing with problems.

Keywords

indo-pacific; Indonesia;
ASEAN; AOIP



I. Introduction

Broadly, the term Indo-Pacific refers to a region that stretches and is connected from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean. Functionally, the Indo-Pacific region is known as an area that has the busiest and most important shipping routes in the world, the largest reserves of natural resources, as well as emerging economic powers. Thus, the Indo-Pacific region is expected to become the center of global dynamics politically and economically (www.thediplomat.com, 2019). Contemporarily, geopolitical issues in the Indo-Pacific can be divided into two: *first*, the competition between the United States (US) and China as two regional hegemonic countries in the Western Pacific Ocean. *Second*, the emergence of India as a new player in the Indian Ocean. In the Pacific Ocean sub-region, China has begun to expand its influence in each other's politics and economy through their claims to the waters of the South China Sea (LTS) and the project the Pacific Ocean. *Belt Road Initiative* (BRI) which emphasizes connectivity and infrastructure development that connects China with other countries in area. China's political efforts in the South China Sea are driven by the development of their armed forces, especially the Navy, which China then uses as a diplomatic tool, while China's economic efforts are supported by China as a strategic trading partner country for major countries in the region and is very active in regional economic cooperation. (ibid, 2019). The economic condition of the population is a condition that describes human life that has economic score (Shah et al, 2020).

From the US side, the rise of China is clearly a direct challenge to their position as a country that has long provided security and maintains stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Unfortunately, the rise of China has not been able to be consistently faced by the US. Unilaterally, they were able to confront China in the Pacific by renaming their Asia-Pacific Fleet to the Indo-Pacific Fleet with the main task of maintaining freedom of navigation there as well as pressuring China to treat the South China Sea as international waters as in their view of international law of the sea because of its naval power. Their sea supports this (Darwis, 2020: 965). However, multilaterally, the US has not been able to reach out to countries in the region to cooperate comprehensively with the US after they withdrew from the establishment of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The US did form a four-nation alliance called the 'Quartet' with India, Japan and Australia as part of an Open and Free Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, but the US has not succeeded in convincing Australia and Japan to truly support them considering the two countries They have a strategic relationship with China that is likely to be sacrificed if both support the US. In addition, the principles of openness and freedom starting from domestic politics in Quartet cooperation are also considered to alienate China considering that China has a closed domestic policy, making comprehensive regional cooperation even more difficult (www.globaltimes.cn, 2021).

In the Indian Ocean sub-region, India has begun to build its military power as a response to the concept of the 'Strand of Pearl' which is an analysis of the potential existence of places that are under Chinese influence politically and economically in the Indo-Pacific region where India views the Bay of Bengal as part of the Indian Ocean of the String of Pearls and has the potential to become the center of a contest between India and China. In addition to building military strength shown through joint military exercises with other countries such as France and the United Kingdom, India has also begun to connect itself with the US in the Pacific Ocean through the Quartet cooperation described above. In addition, India also intends to explore the economic potential, impacts and threats posed by the China BRI project (op cit, 2020:965).

India's move to pay attention to China is not without reason. Since launching the BRI program in 2013, China has increasingly intensified cooperation with countries in Asia so as to create port cities that China can use as a gateway for trade in these countries. These port cities will also be comprehensively connected with port cities in China as part of the Maritime Silk Road project which is also included in the BRI. In BRI, the Indian Ocean is an area that is considered to have strategic value because it is able to reduce China's dependence on the Malacca Strait as an international trade route. If China is able to control the Indian Ocean, then India could potentially be surrounded by Chinese military bases where China can use its military to strengthen its position against India. Given that the relationship between India and China is not very good, China's presence in the Indian Ocean is considered a threat to India. In addition, China's presence can also strengthen China's relations with Pakistan as well as strengthen Pakistan directly and indirectly so that India is in a tight position considering that the relationship between India and Pakistan has long been inharmonious (Khan and Khalid, 2018: 247-251).

II. Review of Literature

The dynamics of relations between countries in the Indo-Pacific cannot be denied the potential to build connectivity and create opportunities for cooperation in the region, especially in the economic field. On the other hand, these dynamics can create security and peace instability in the region considering that countries in the Indo-Pacific are competing to spread influence and build their military power. Given the position of ASEAN countries which are located between two oceans in the Indo-Pacific, it is important for them to also establish a multilateral cooperation in the Indo-Pacific to avoid tensions and potential

conflicts, especially between the US and China because both countries are very close to other countries. in the Indo-Pacific in terms of defense and trade respectively. In June 2019, ASEAN adopted the so-called 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific' (AOIP) which on paper intends to promote ASEAN-centred rules-based regional security and emphasize ASEAN mechanisms to strengthen regional cooperation and achieve common interests in Indo-Pacific (Chauhan *et al.*, 2020:6-8).

Indonesia has long paid attention to Indo-Pacific issues. Indonesia first used the term Indo-Pacific to refer to the region in 2013 when Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa delivered a speech at the CSIS event in Washington DC. Pacific and the strategic value of the region for Indonesia given Indonesia's geographical position which is located between the two oceans. Furthermore, he also mentioned that the stability of ASEAN, including Indonesia, depends on stability and peace in the Indo-Pacific so there is a need for an official agreement on cooperation and peace in the Indo-Pacific (Suryadinata, 2018:4). In its development, Natalegawa's idea above was developed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi in 2018 at the East Asia Summit where she stated that Indonesia and ASEAN are ready to play an important role in efforts to create free, open, inclusive and comprehensive peace and cooperation in the region. Indo-Pacific through capacity and trust building (ibid, 2018:5).

III. Results and Discussion

3.1 Ideas' Asean's View

Broadly speaking, the AOIP is the official view of ASEAN countries on the Indo-Pacific concept. AOIP serves as a guide for ASEAN countries in determining the direction of cooperation that will be developed between ASEAN countries and partner countries regarding the Indo-Pacific and responding to challenges to the Indo-Pacific concept promoted by ASEAN. The AOIP also contains ASEAN's strategy in protecting and advancing their interests in the Indo-Pacific region (Roza, 2019:9). ASEAN's official view of the Indo-Pacific itself consists of four elements. *First*, the integration of the Pacific Ocean region with the Indian Ocean. *Second*, prioritizing dialogue and cooperation over rivalry in problem solving. *Third*, the promotion of development and welfare for all parties. *Fourth*, emphasize the importance of maritime for regional development. Through this view, the Indo-Pacific concept in ASEAN's perspective is an integrated and connected region, so it is important to maintain stability in the region so that there is no power rivalry that is feared to spread to other sectors. In this view, ASEAN also mentions four areas of cooperation that are most likely to be developed based on this view, namely maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development and the economy (ibid, 2019:10).

Basically, AOIP is an old thing wrapped up in a new package. AOIP still adheres to the principles of openness, transparency, inclusiveness and respect for international law that has long been owned by ASEAN. AOIP also places ASEAN as a mediator for various interests in the region that embraces all countries, especially large countries, to work within an ASEAN framework that promotes dialogue and cooperation, encourages restraint, and uses capabilities and resources to deal with common problems (Hoang, 2019 :2). An example of the implementation of the ASEAN way is the use of multilateral forums such as the East Asia Summit and the Asian Regional Forum as a place for countries to meet for dialogue and determine mutual agreements on related issues, in this case the Indo-Pacific. AOIP itself is not an ASEAN effort to create a new mechanism or replace the old way of dealing with Indo-Pacific issues, but rather an ASEAN effort to strengthen and optimize ASEAN's way of dealing with Indo-Pacific issues. (ibid, 2019:3).

On paper, AOIP is expected to further strengthen ASEAN member countries' views on the Indo-Pacific to be more uniform with each other, but in reality ASEAN member countries are still not able to fully internalize AOIP into their foreign policy. This can be seen from the different views on the use of AOIP between Indonesia and Vietnam. On the one hand, Indonesia wants AOIP to be a driving factor for parties in the Indo-Pacific region to approach ASEAN. On the other hand, Vietnam sees AOIP as a tool to further strengthen its own security and prefers to engage in negotiations outside the ASEAN framework. In addition, there are concerns about the potential for strengthening of the geopolitical narrative about the Indo-Pacific that the US and its allies have built if ASEAN fails to strengthen the AOIP considering that the Indo-Pacific concept was indeed initiated by the US and its allies, especially Japan (Hoang, 2021:3-6).

3.2 Indonesia's Role and Position

The success of leadership is partly determined by the ability of leaders to develop their organizational culture (Arif, 2019). Initially, Indonesia's move in the Indo-Pacific was based on the concept of *dynamic equilibrium* that emerged during the leadership of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. The concept of *dynamic equilibrium* is a condition in which there is no single dominant power in the region due to relations between countries based on shared security, common prosperity and mutual stability instead of political blocs. This concept can be said to be a free and active principle in Indonesia's foreign policy which was brought to the regional level as an effort by Indonesia to create harmony in cooperation between countries in peaceful interaction and create benefits for each other without the presence of a single dominant power in the region. During the leadership of Joko Widodo, this concept was later developed through the concept of the World Maritime Axis which aims to make Indonesia the center of world maritime activities by taking advantage of Indonesia's geographical position which is located between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. (Pangestu et al., 2021:12-13).

In dealing with the Indo-Pacific issue, Indonesia prioritizes the use of norms instead of soft and hard power. Apart from the fact that Indonesia's soft and hard power is still relatively low compared to countries in the Indo-Pacific, the use of norms in Indonesia's foreign policy also has the potential to reach more stakeholders because it uses a persuasive approach to act according to the norms prevailing in international relations. This has been done by Indonesia since handling the South China Sea (LTS) dispute where Indonesia initiated negotiations to prevent conflicts in the South China Sea which resulted in the formation of a Declaration on the Code of Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea through ASEAN (Pertiwi, 2020:18). With this approach, there are at least two things that Indonesia wants to bring to the Indo-Pacific issue. *First*, efforts to solve problems that uphold peace and mutual respect and restraint. *Second*, the promotion of multilateralism is the main method of dialogue for the parties involved. In this second case, Indonesia wants to create ASEAN centrality by making ASEAN the main instrument in dealing with Indo-Pacific issues, including the formation of the AOIP (Qudsiati and Sholeh, 2020:45-48).

As a country that is the main driving force for ASEAN, Indonesia has played a significant role in the formation of the AOIP. This is inseparable from Indonesia's foreign policy which relies on ASEAN as the main vehicle in multilateral cooperation concerning regional issues so that the Indo-Pacific issue can be raised by Indonesia in multilateral forums such as the East Asia Summit through ASEAN. In addition, the Indo-Pacific issue is also important for Indonesia because the geopolitical challenges facing Indonesia are closely related to the shift in economic growth that is in line with the transformation of the strategic environment in the region (Saputra and Sudirman, 2020: 220). Geographically,

Indonesia is a country that is located right at the crossroads between the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. This geographical location makes Indonesia aware of the existence of major countries in the Indo-Pacific and the potential for conflicts of interest that can disrupt regional stability and security in addition to the prospect of regional cooperation. For Indonesia, this is a threat to the economy and security of those who are bound to the region both politically and geographically. For ASEAN, the presence of major countries in the Indo-Pacific is considered to undermine their position as the main security actor in the region and threaten ASEAN's centrality. That is why Indonesia is trying to develop their geopolitical influence with ASEAN as an instrument (Weatherbee, 2019:2).

In the Indo-Pacific issue, Indonesia wants ASEAN as a place of cooperation on three issues, namely maritime security, connectivity and sustainable development. Furthermore, through these three issues, Indonesia proposes three steps that ASEAN must take in the Indo-Pacific issue. *First*, ASEAN must be able to create a conducive environment for all partners to cooperate, negotiate and resolve disputes peacefully. *Second*, ASEAN must be able to mobilize and use all resources and efforts to deal with security threats in the region, both traditional and non-traditional. *Third*, ASEAN must be proactive in creating new economic growth centers (op cit, 2020: 220-221). Indonesia also emphasized the importance of ASEAN solidarity and cooperation so that ASEAN could become the center of negotiations and cooperation in the region through taking initiatives by bringing Indo-Pacific geopolitical issues to the ASEAN level. By making ASEAN the center of negotiations and cooperation, it is hoped that ASEAN will not be trapped in the narrative built by both the US and China in the Indo-Pacific while making ASEAN independent from Washington and Beijing in determining economic and security policies (op cit, 2019: 5) .

Based on the free and active principle that Indonesia has always promoted in its foreign policy, the strategy implemented by Indonesia in the Indo-Pacific is the Evasive Strategy. This strategy intends to avoid hostilities and mitigate the risk of the small power possessed by the state in relation to the power of other countries. The policies included in this strategy include taking actions that seem contradictory, such as strengthening the military without causing provocation or showing hostility, increasing participation in bilateral and multilateral cooperation, not showing efforts to balance and taking sides with one of the major powers, and cooperating with major countries simultaneously. This strategy is in line with the principle of being free and active in Indonesia's foreign policy and the three main agendas of Indonesia's defense strategy: building trust, increasing defense capacity and developing the local defense industry (Oktaviano *et al.*, 2020:24). ASEAN centrality is also part of Indonesia's Evasive Strategy because of Indonesia's foreign policy which is mostly oriented towards ASEAN and Indonesia's position as the main driving force for ASEAN. ASEAN's centrality can be seen as Indonesia's effort to create a collective power to counterbalance major powers, including those from outside the region, which can create regional hegemony (ibid, 2020:25). In the Indo-Pacific, Indonesia uses ASEAN to bring the US and their three allied countries in the Quartet (India, Japan, Australia) and China into the framework of ASEAN cooperation to prevent one or both of these countries from dominating the Indo-Pacific while making ASEAN the governing party collective Indo-Pacific stability.

Another Indonesian strategy in the Indo-Pacific is to view the Indo-Pacific as a geostrategic region. This is related to the World Maritime Axis (PMD) project promoted by Joko Widodo in an effort to make Indonesia a strong and influential maritime country. The PMD project itself is based on Indonesia's desire to play a bigger role in the Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean (Agastia, 2020:299). Indonesia's view of the Indo-Pacific means

that Indonesia considers the Indian Ocean as part of the scope of their Indo-Pacific geopolitical strategy. Thus, Indonesia must also face and anticipate the interests of other countries in the Indian Ocean apart from the US and China in the Pacific Ocean. In the Indian Ocean, the country that is trying to expand its influence is India. Given the rise of the rise of India and the factor of India as a US ally in the Quartet, of course Indonesia must not ignore and isolate India in the Indo-Pacific. What Indonesia can do in dealing with India is to use multilateral forums such as the Association of Indian Ocean States (IORA) to build trust with India. In addition, Indonesia must also seek to align India's geopolitical strategy within the framework of ASEAN and other Indo-Pacific countries (ibid, 2020:300-301).

IV. Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific issue poses challenges for both Indonesia and ASEAN. For Indonesia, the presence of big countries such as the US and China in the region with their interests can make Indonesia oscillate in a tug-of-war between the two countries. For ASEAN, the presence of the US and China has the potential to dwarf their position in building regional security constructions. Nevertheless, the Indo-Pacific issue also provides an opportunity for Indonesia to create ASEAN centrality as the main actor in regional security by making ASEAN a forum for conducive and constructive cooperation for countries in the Indo-Pacific without taking sides with one of them. In addition, the Indo-Pacific issue is also influential in Indonesia's domestic agenda in realizing Indonesia as a strong and influential maritime country.

Indonesia's path to creating ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific issue is not easy. Indonesia must embrace various countries ranging from the United States, China, India, Japan to Australia to be willing to negotiate within the ASEAN framework as well as to convince them to accept the AOIP as a reference norm in viewing the Indo-Pacific region. This is not easy considering that the United States and China, the two most powerful and influential countries in the region, certainly want to put forward their respective perspectives and interests. Indonesia must also be able to fulfill its own interests in the agenda of the World Maritime Axis without having to make countries in the Indo-Pacific region feel threatened or competed and prove its credibility as an intermediary country in the Indo-Pacific.

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