A More Activist Foreign Policy?
Indonesia and ASEAN under Jokowi

Briefing Seminar

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For years Indonesia has been a key driver of regional integration processes in South East Asia. Because of its regional leadership role it has been widely regarded to be a key partner for Europe. However, since President Joko Widodo “Jokowi” took office in 2014, Indonesia’s foreign policy has taken a more nationalistic twist, raising concern amongst neighbours and extra-regional partners of a change of course in Jakarta’s foreign policy and a deflection from its regional leadership role in ASEAN.

In order to address these uncertainties and to anticipate change and continuity in Jokowi’s foreign policy, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs – Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) and the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS) organized an expert seminar with Mr Felix Haidux, Associate At SWP Berlin; Mr Steven Everts, Advisor at the Asia-Pacific Department of the European External Action Service; and Mr Bruno Hellendorff, Research fellow at the Group for Research and Information on Peace and Security (GRIP), moderated by Ms Theresa Fallon, Senior Associate of EIAS.
Introduction

The expert exchange on the topic of *Indonesia and ASEAN under Jokowi* focused on foreign policy shifts since Jokowi’s inauguration in 2014 and reviewed Indonesia’s self-proclaimed role as the leader in South East Asia. The panel discussed Indonesia’s ambiguity towards ASEAN under Jokowi as well as potential avenues to strengthen EU-ASEAN relations.

Indonesia and ASEAN

Indonesia is one of the founding members of ASEAN and has shown regional leadership since the organisation’s inception. It holds a status as *primus inter pares* as the “architect” of the ASEAN community. Given its population, geographic size and GDP, Indonesia unofficially carries the power and responsibility of steering regional integration. Prior to Jokowi’s inauguration, ASEAN has been known as a “cornerstone” of Indonesian foreign policy.

The ASEAN community is built on three main pillars: ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). The first pillar focuses on conflict management and counter-terrorism. The second pillar includes labour mobility and open skies (the ASEAN Single Aviation Market), and the last pillar deals with haze and pollution as well as disaster management.

Of the three pillars, Indonesia has shown the most interest in APSC. It displayed leadership in this area by setting the regional agenda and implementing regional agreements. Indonesia has also taken initiatives in regional mediation, such as its contributions in resolving the 2011 Thai-Cambodian border conflict. For Indonesia, ASEAN stands at the core of its regional security policy. In contrast, Indonesia’s approach towards the AEC remains apprehensive. This apprehension is due to a protectionist mindset of shielding local businesses from foreign competition. Indonesia has shown a stronger interest in the ASCC compared to the AEC, though its leadership role remains strongest under APSC. While Indonesia took the initiative in particular policy fields such as human rights and civil society engagement, it was not as engaged in environmental issues such as haze and air pollution.

Foreign Policy under Jokowi and Leadership in ASEAN

Jokowi has espoused a “pro-people” approach towards diplomacy and foreign policy. The three main guiding principles of the approach are: maintaining the country’s sovereignty, enhancing citizen’s protection, and improving the country’s economic diplomacy. The Jokowi administration has also prioritized domestic agendas over an active foreign policy.

Indonesia’s recent focus on bilateral ties and partnerships has raised the question of whether Jakarta is turning its back on ASEAN. Jokowi’s policies demonstrate a shift away from the foreign policy approach of the previous Yudhoyono administration. Jokowi’s indirect foreign policy towards ASEAN worries fellow member states and the EU because it enunciates its step away from ASEAN.
While Indonesia has historically assumed a leadership role in ASEAN, it is worth noting that ASEAN policies are neither determined by Indonesia nor a supranational authority. Cooperation is based on the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs. Decision-making within ASEAN is made via consensus, not majority vote. Given this *modus operandi* known as the “ASEAN Way,” Indonesia’s regional leadership role before Jokowi should be acknowledged but not overstated.

**EU and Indonesia/ASEAN**

The EU has strong economic interests in Indonesia and the wider region around it. However, few indicators suggest that the long-held protectionist attitudes in Jakarta will decrease significantly under Jokowi. Beyond the president’s office, support for opening up the economy also remains scarce.

Regional stability in South East Asia is also a strategic interest of the EU. The EU views Indonesia as a potential proponent of multilateralism to shape the regional security environment. Thus, the EU also hopes for Indonesia to retain its role in peacefully resolving conflicts such as the Thai-Cambodian border conflict on the basis of international law.

The EU has been a supporter of the regional integration process in ASEAN. It also aims to develop a more constructive inter-organisation relationship with ASEAN. Thus, given Jokowi’s heavier focus on bilateral relations rather than focusing on ASEAN as a whole, the EU worries about the de-prioritization of ASEAN integration under the current administration. This concern is exacerbated by the fact that domestic issues remain Jokowi’s declared priority. It remains uncertain whether Jakarta will deliver a clear vision for the future of ASEAN and its own role in leading the community.

**Q&A**

An audience member raised a question about how Indonesia sees the fragmentation that is taking place in ASEAN, given the territorial disputes between China and ASEAN’s maritime member states. Despite the economic ties between China and Indonesia, Indonesia prefers a hedging approach towards regional security, including its approach towards the South China Sea issue. This is due to Indonesia’s delicate relationship balance between China and the US. What Indonesia needs to pursue is maintaining the connectivity with ASEAN member states for the sake of autonomy. This can provide the EU a complementary role in aiding with institutional developments.

One commenter stated that ASEAN will always be the cornerstone of Indonesian foreign policy. Despite the media’s criticism on Jokowi’s introverted foreign policy, the practice of serving ASEAN as a member state will remain. He assured Indonesia’s continuous investment in ASEAN and its contribution in strengthening the institution. While each presidential administration has its own priorities and approach towards these priorities, there should be no fear that Indonesia would “abandon” ASEAN.

*Report Prepared by Yujin Lim and Ian Wu*