

Promises and pitfalls of Indonesia's faith in multilateralism

President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo has just finished his South Asian tour, which took him to Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. His stop in India to attend the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit was particularly noteworthy, as he laid out Indonesia's vision for a “stable, peaceful and prosperous” Indo-Pacific regional architecture based on the principles of openness, transparency and inclusion.

Jokowi also called for development and connection between ASEAN-led mechanisms (e.g. the East Asia Summit, or EAS) and instruments (e.g. the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, or TAC) with the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) to “bridge and integrate” the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Let us think of this Indo-Pacific multilateral architecture as the “Indo-Pacific with Indonesian characteristics.” Whether and how Jakarta can bring this grand strategic vision to life remains to be seen, but at the very least it has put forth a distinct Indo-Pacific vision.

This vision is an alternative to

and could coexist with other Indo-Pacific geopolitical constructs, from China's Belt and Road Initiative to India's Act East and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific. It, too, does not challenge other mechanisms, such as the revived Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between India, Japan, Australia and the United States.

Indeed, as Foreign Minister Retno Lestari Priansari Marsudi noted in her annual foreign policy speech in January, Indonesia wants an “Indo-Pacific cooperation umbrella.”

This alternative Indo-Pacific vision, however, rests on our foreign policymakers' conviction that institutions, particularly multilateral forums, are the answer to our foreign policy questions. As many of our foreign policy accomplishments were made through such institutions, they instinctively tend to be our first response to geopolitical challenges.

After all, as international relations scholars tell us, international institutions essentially help states reduce uncertainty, lower transaction costs and solve collective-action problems. Multilateral forums, in short, are sup-

INSIGHT



Evan A. Laksmana

SEATTLE,
WASHINGTON

posed to make it easier, cheaper and more effective for states to cooperate on a set of common concerns.

Indonesia's regional and global profile has been indeed built around this logic for the past several decades, from ASEAN to the United Nations and the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC). ASEAN in particular has offered added benefits.

During the Cold War, ASEAN provided assurance to Indonesia's smaller neighbors that it did not seek to become an aggressive hegemon. Indonesian strategists used to say that ASEAN provided a *cordon sanitaire* necessary for the economy to grow but only if, on principle, it was on equal footing with its neighbors. The col-

lective logic of institutions, in a sense, had a beneficial signaling effect that stabilized Southeast Asia and allowed it to prosper.

ASEAN also allowed Indonesia to gradually and collectively exercise its regional leadership. Over the years, in the eyes of regional powers, Indonesia has become a more attractive partner if it can exercise constructive leadership over a united ASEAN.

Perhaps more importantly, multilateral institutions also allow Indonesia to underinvest in its strategic resources but still keep its regional and global voice.

The Foreign Ministry's budget hovered around US\$305 million (on average) between 1999 and 2014. Most of the defense budget (roughly \$6 billion to 8 billion recently) goes to personnel. Economic resources have been geared for domestic growth rather than geo-economic interests.

As such, Indonesia does not have the resources to be geopolitically agile in its own right, nor does it have the strategic wherewithal to play great power politics. Its regional and global profile are thus best served and amplified through multilateral forums

like ASEAN and IORA — and why Jokowi's Indo-Pacific vision seems built around them.

But multilateralism has its drawbacks too. For one thing, investing small but expecting big returns makes sense if you invest in a select few multilateral forums. Indonesia, however, is a member of 198 international institutions. With stretched resources, it is little wonder that in late 2016, Jokowi ordered a review of Indonesia's role in at least 75 of them.

For another, regional groupings across the Indo-Pacific are constrained by their members' incredibly diverse if not asymmetrical strategic, economic and political interests. Sitting together regularly to agree on commonly accepted normative goals like peace or growth centers does not wish away these interests. In fact, managing them requires either strong leadership from a few members or a fully institutionalized set of enforceable rules.

And yet, in ASEAN and IORA, informal habits, norms and performative meetings take precedent, even as each member exercises veto powers. Regional

leaders, meanwhile, cannot always be relied on to proactively manage day-to-day geopolitical challenges when the imperatives of domestic politics are paramount.

As the recent crises in the Indo-Pacific have shown — from the South China Sea, to the Doklam standoff, to the Rohingya humanitarian disaster and North Korea's nuclear crisis — time is a strategic commodity that multilateralism often cannot deliver.

Under Jokowi, an Indo-Pacific with Indonesian characteristics might emerge; whether we can push for an ASEAN-IORA “strategic handshake” (to borrow former US defense secretary Ash Carter's term) is a big question mark. But we should not put all our eggs in a (multilateral) basket as a blind act of faith. Lest we forget, faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

The writer is a senior researcher with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Jakarta, Indonesia, and is currently a visiting fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research in Seattle, Washington.