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Will a Trump presidency be disastrous for Indonesia?

INSIGHT

Evan A. Laksmana
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Republican candidate Donald J. Trump is now President-elect of the United States of America. These are not easy words to type, let alone digest and be excited about.

We should be clear-headed, nevertheless, in our assessment of what a Trump presidency could mean for Indonesia's foreign policy and our bilateral relationship.

At this point, however, we are nowhere near to a complete picture of what President Trump's foreign policy will look like. After all, his campaign rhetoric was filled with wild, under-developed positions and incoherent contradictions.

But here's what we can infer so far about what comes next.

Optimists found some solace in Trump's incoherent foreign policy positions — from North Korea, China, NATO, to IS and global trade — because the flaky rhetoric might allow some future policy flexibility. But this depends on the quality of advisers Trump appoints and the extent to which he listens to them.

The problem is that hundreds of senior Republican foreign policy and national security figures publicly declared before the election that Trump was unfit to be Commander-in-Chief. Whether a sense of public duty to prevent more damage or whether the strong enticement of power would eventually sway some of these figures to work with him remains to be seen.

For now, appointing cabinet secretaries will not be the problem. But filling the thousands of bureaucratic posts below them — from the deputy level on down, the real machinery of US' global role — could be. Unfortunately, the likely pool of Trump officials might now come from a second-tier of younger and less experienced people, as reported by *The Daily Beast*.

To make matters worse, reports suggest that Trump shuns advice that contradicts his beliefs, no matter how misguided they may be. Taken together, it seems that the world's superpower will be led by an inexperienced president backed by an inexperienced team of advisers. This combination, according to scholarly research by political scientist Elizabeth Saunders, leads to a dysfunctional foreign policy.

Worse still when Trump's foreign policy beliefs consist of a strong distaste for alliances as well as global engagements and trade — while seemingly sympathetic to authoritarian strongmen — as Thomas Wright argued in a Lowy Institute for International Policy paper.

These alarming signs, however, do not point to an immediate disaster for Indonesia.

First, Indonesia's strategic importance does not change just because the White House has a new occupant. While Obama's departure spells the end of our "special relationship", Indonesia remains the key lynchpin — geopolitically, geostrategically, and geoeconomically — in a burgeoning Indo-Pacific regional order beset by strategic flux.

Despite the outlandish rhetoric on foreign policy, Trump, and presumably the Republican-controlled congress and senate, would not end pragmatic engagement with Indonesia out of spite or total neglect. One can even argue that pragmatism may take precedence over principles — whether they are rules-based order, human rights, or democratic governance.

Whether Jakarta will be energetic at engaging a US president known for his hate-filled rhetoric against Muslims and minorities, however, remains a question mark. If the Bush "war on terror" years provide any indication, it is quite likely that Indonesian public opinion — and therefore domestic politics — will be unfavorable vis-à-vis the US.

Second, US-Indonesia relations — underpinned by the 2010 Comprehensive Partnership and 2015 Strategic Partnership agreements — extend beyond the state-to-state level.

In fact, existing cooperative frameworks were designed to expand and deepen people-to-people relations in a wide range of areas, from political-security, economic development, to sociocultural, educational, and science and technology. They should therefore outlast presidential idiosyncrasies and the waxing and waning of state-to-state engagements.

Third, Trump's strong opposition to and reticence against entangling alliances, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal, and China's hegemonic behavior in Asia may point to potential areas of long-term common interests with Indonesia.

It is likely that the US' Indo-Pacific alliance system will be rocked by waves of uncertainty and anxiety. The region might even split between those half-heartedly tolerating a possible Pax Sinica and those trying to slow down the beginning of the end for Pax Americana.

As nature abhors a vacuum, Kenneth Waltz once claimed, so too does international politics abhor unbalanced power. But if neither a Pax Sinica nor Pax Americana rules the Indo-Pacific order, then Indonesia should push for a Pax ASEANA as an alternative strategic vision.

Analysts have written off an ASEAN-led regional order as the group has been increasingly fractured over the South China Sea. ASEAN may be down but not out — and Indonesia has the political capital, historical obligation, and strategic interest to help it back up to its feet.

The TPP's demise, meanwhile, may halt some of Indonesia's domestic regulatory reform — one of Jokowi's initial reasons for announcing an intention to join the process — but might jumpstart negotiations over the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

The proposed free-trade agreement between ASEAN member states with Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand potentially includes more than 3 billion people with a combined GDP of about US$21.3 trillion — around 40 percent of world trade. RCEP might therefore fill the geoeconomic void left by the TPP's demise.

These potential outcomes, while highly uncertain, point to a possible long-term silver lining of a Trump presidency — that ASEAN with Indonesia's leadership could be jolted back to life even as the region seeks to carve out larger strategic autonomy and hedges against uncertainty.

The writer is a researcher at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Jakarta.