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Developing Trust in Asia Amidst New US Military Deployments: An Indonesian Perspective

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Maria Monica Wihardja, Researcher at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Jakarta, and Lecturer at the Department of Economics, University of Indonesia, argues that the announcement of a rotating US Marine deployment to northern Australia has “generated a mixed reaction in the region, including in Indonesia and China.”

The sixth East Asia Summit (EAS) was held in Bali, Indonesia, on November 19, with US President Barack Obama in attendance for the first time. Three days before the summit, Obama announced that from mid-2012 a build-up to 2,500 US Marines rotating through Darwin, in northern Australia, will begin. This generated a mixed reaction in the region, including in Indonesia and China. On the one hand, the new US access to Australian naval bases can be understood as an act to contain China. Recent Chinese activity in the South China Sea (SCS) has been perceived as being assertive, or even aggressive, especially pertaining to Vietnam and the Philippines.

To restore a "dynamic equilibrium" with "no single power dominance" and where "one's gain must not cause another's loss," a balance of power is warranted. On the other hand, this new US military build-up, located just 800 km from Indonesian waters, does raise suspicions for neighboring countries. The real US agenda is hard to determine.

ASEAN as a group has not yet discussed this issue. But one thing is clear, just like with the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) initiative the United States seems to be offering "an alternative" to Chinese-led structures in the region. Against this geopolitical setting, maintaining prosperity, stability, security and peace across the region seems to be an impossible task. The EAS is one potential forum to fill in the perceived absence of a leaders-led regional institutional architecture to discuss security issues. However, as the EAS Declaration states, ASEAN is the “driving force” of that institution. Regarding the evolving regional security architecture, the EAS is expected to be a game setter or changer that will transform what would have been a "zero- or negative-sum game" into a "positive-sum game" for all actors in the Asia-Pacific.

Good diplomacy is essential here, but it needs to be credible and transparent. ASEAN claimants to the South China Sea—Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei—have all said on many occasions that they are concerned about what they perceive to be aggressive Chinese unilateral moves in the SCS. Similarly, recent media reports claim that ASEAN countries are still unclear about the US military agenda for the region. Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa echoed this when he said that the region must avoid the vicious cycle of distrust and tension since the US announcement of its military base in Darwin.

Moreover, there has to be a self-reinforcing mechanism in which trust and cooperation can be sustained. This involves clear "rules of the game," otherwise there will be no cooperation. For example, EAS leaders recognize the "international law of the sea" as a



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crucial norm. It would have read the "UN Convention of the Law of the Sea" (UNCLOS) if the US Congress had ratified this convention. Therefore, it would be very helpful if the United States—and Cambodia—ratified UNCLOS, as there would then be a common denominator for all to adhere to.

By the end of this year, ASEAN will be endorsing a new protocol concerning a Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ), including agreeing on the interpretation of the maritime continental shelf and Exclusive Economic Zone. Previous disagreement between ASEAN countries on these boundaries created a barrier which prevented the five nuclear powers from signing the treaty, which India should also be invited to sign.

Another important "rule of the game" and maybe the most difficult one is a more binding Code-of-Conduct (CoC) for the South China Sea. In mid-July, China said that it would agree to a more binding CoC when the "time and conditions were appropriate." However, ASEAN has decided to move forward with the process, and worked on some "elements," but not yet the substance, of an agreement. During the ASEAN-China Summit this November, China agreed to participate in formulating such an agreement. However, China's participation still needs further illumination since the current CoC under review does not address the issue of competing claims, but just how to cope with them, which can be seen as "salami tactics" by China.

ASEAN also needs to speak with a unified voice, while acknowledging the diverse political, economic, and social structures within the organization. However, for matters that have already been agreed on, all ASEAN countries must abide by those agreements. For example, four ASEAN countries—Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Brunei—are participating in the TPP negotiations. While the TPP is one route towards a regional US-led economic integration system for the Asia-Pacific, another possible avenue is the "ASEAN Route," as outlined at November's ASEAN Summit.

This "ASEAN Route" appears to be more subtle and ambitious than just another FTA. The proposal envisions consolidating all ASEAN Plus One FTAs and working towards one Comprehensive Economic Partnership in East Asia (CEPEA). If the TPP is found to be a threat to the ASEAN integration, ASEAN should choose the "ASEAN Route" of economic integration and members should withdraw from the current TPP negotiations. However, if the United States offers concessional access to its market for ASEAN members ahead of China, this could alter the situation.

Finally, EAS members must actively and creatively find joint economic and security cooperation mechanisms that can generate a win-win solution. Indonesia's recommendation for joint military exercises for humanitarian assistance between the United States, China, Japan and Indonesia is one way to improve cooperation. This is one way the United States can contribute to regional peace and security, instead of creating suspicions, tensions, and threats especially on behalf of China, as has been the case with the announcement of the deployment of US Marines to Darwin.

With its renewed engagement in Asia, the United States is using the EAS and other fora to provide options and win trust in the region. Transparent and credible diplomacy matters here. Setting a common platform or "rules of the game," ASEAN speaking with one unified voice, along with creating mechanisms for a win-win situation will help to build and sustain the virtuous cycle of trust and cooperation required for the region.

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