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Realist Indonesia's Drift away from ASEAN

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Vibhanshu Shekhar, Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “The Indonesian leadership views ASEAN as too small, weak, and disunited to adequately represent the country’s national interests in the Indo-Pacific region...[leading] to an increasingly marginal position of ASEAN in Jakarta’s regional diplomacy.”

ASEAN’s nightmares are never-ending. While it is struggling to keep itself united amidst enormous pressure from the members pursuing divergent interests, its largest and most powerful member, Indonesia, is gradually drifting away from the grouping. Indonesian leadership is charting a foreign policy course that is, for the first time since the creation of ASEAN in 1967, no longer predicated on ASEAN leadership and ASEAN centrality. The Indonesian position is identified variously as “post-ASEAN” (Rizal Sukma, *The Jakarta Post*, October 5, 2009), “assertive and autonomous” (Barry Deskar, *RSIS Commentary*, September 29, 2010), “internationalist” (Evelyn Goh, *New Mandala*, July 3, 2015), and “punching above the weight” (Endy Bayuni, *The Straits Times*, May 13, 2015). While a few experts have wondered whether Indonesia is going it alone, some already believe that to be the case.

The Indonesian drift is an outcome of its foreign policy reset highlighting its emerging power worldview and realist turn. The emerging power narrative has challenged the country’s tendency to punch below its weight and its ASEAN confinement. This reset has prompted Indonesian political leaders to decouple the country’s interests from those of other ASEAN members and from the grouping in general. Jakarta, arguably, should not be obligated “to follow the wishes of any state or grouping of states, including ASEAN, if by doing so we sacrifice our own interests.” Indonesia’s somewhat vertical take-off within a very short span of ten years has put an extra spotlight on the disjuncture between the ambitions and interests of Indonesia as an emerging power and ASEAN as a weak and divided grouping of small powers. It is this mismatch that would have inevitably pushed Indonesia and ASEAN in divergent directions over one or another issue.

The Indonesian leadership views ASEAN as too small, weak, and disunited to adequately represent the country’s national interests in the Indo-Pacific region. This reassessment has led to an increasingly marginal position of ASEAN and preference for the EAS (East Asia Summit) in Jakarta’s regional diplomacy. It has been argued that the ASEAN mandate should not interfere with the basic mandate of the EAS, and the latter should have a different secretariat and agenda-setting process (Jusuf Wanandi). President Jokowi unveiled his maritime vision not at the ASEAN summit but rather at the EAS summit in Myanmar in November 2014. Advocating a similar ASEAN-plus approach, he pitched for his maritime idea at the Beijing Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in November 2014. He did not mention ASEAN even once in his first state of the nation address in August 2015, even though he mentioned the Indian Ocean and the Middle East.

Indonesia’s realist turn is evident not only from its diminishing faith in the ASEAN-led cooperative processes but also from its greater attention to power politics, national

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interests, and balancing behavior. The Indonesian leadership has begun to focus on both building and flexing its muscle in the region while pursuing a realpolitik approach of management of great power relations. The Jokowi government’s vision of Indonesia as a maritime power, the current strategy of sinking foreign ships illegally entering Indonesian waters, and the deployment of troops in the South China Sea all indicate the country’s focus on balancing behavior and power play. The recent proposal of “Asian Fulcrum of Four” (Rizal Sukma, *The Jakarta Post*, July 15, 2015), comprising China, India, Indonesia and Japan, testifies to the country’s focus on realpolitik and its desire for seeking parity with other major powers of the region.

The Indonesian drift means a leaderless, more divided, and weak ASEAN. The current Indonesian leadership may abstain from lending its diplomatic capital and regional profile to promote the role and leadership of ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific region. In other words, Jakarta is not going to lose sleep and undertake “Martyesque shuttle diplomacy” in case of a repeat of the Phnom Penh fiasco of April 2012. The conspicuous absence of Indonesian reaction to the recent spat between some ASEAN members and China over the South China Sea during the 26th ASEAN summit in Kuala Lumpur on August 5-6, 2015 highlights Indonesian indifference and its unwillingness to get involved.

A leaderless ASEAN may undermine the already eroding credibility of ASEAN as a representative grouping since the shock has come from the very top of the ASEAN echelon. As is rightly put, “if a democratic, economically dynamic and stable Indonesia does not take ASEAN seriously, neither would the world at large” (Amitav Acharya, *Asian Forum*, June 29, 2015). Moreover, it has reinforced the arguments about ASEAN community being an “illusion,” and ASEAN centrality being a “myth.”

A leaderless ASEAN may intensify an independent pursuit of national interests by different ASEAN members at the cost of the collective image and credibility of the grouping. In 2007, Myanmar chose its own vested interests over ASEAN interests when it successfully truncated the content and mandate of the ASEAN Charter. The internal politics of Thailand convinced its leaders to disregard the ASEAN norms and traditions when pushing for greater military mobilization in 2008 along the Cambodian border in the case of the Preah Vihear dispute. Cambodia returned the favor when it became the ASEAN Chair in 2012. The 48th Ministerial Meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers (August 2015) has seen the mainland Southeast Asian countries (with the exception of Vietnam) aligning with China over the South China Sea issue, with others opposing China.

The Indonesian drift may put to test both the institutional resilience of ASEAN and collective resolve of other members of the grouping in taking the ASEAN process forward. It may also weaken the idea of multilateral approach to the settlement of the South China Sea dispute. The Malaysian chairmanship of 2015 has so far played by the book and maintained the ASEAN momentum. The grouping under Malaysian chairmanship has issued strong statements on the South China Sea issue, proposed an ASEAN peacekeeping force, and sustained the gradual progress toward implementation of the ASEAN Declaration of Code of Conduct in the South China Sea and ASEAN-China Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

The depth of the debate on Indonesian drift and its translation into actual practice during the remainder of the Jokowi presidency will determine whether it is a Jokowi-era phenomenon or a long-term trend. However, it is likely that attempts to switch back to an ASEAN-centrality oriented approach in the future may be viewed as a retrograde step.

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