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Challenges for Indonesia's foreign policy in transition

As it moves from defending an authoritarian regime abroad to promoting economic welfare

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Ahead of US President Barack Obama's visit to Jakarta next month, pundits have been debating the nature and future direction of Indonesia's foreign policy.

Given the strategic importance of the upcoming United States-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership — set to deepen ties in defence, economic, health, and education sectors — some are asking whether this visit could jump-start Indonesia's "post-Asean" foreign policy.

Furthermore, as the country continues to raise its global profile, including its role in the Group of 20, some are wondering if the Association of South-east Asian Nations (Asean) risks becoming irrelevant amid President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's international ambitions. Especially if we consider that economically, politically, and even strategically, Indonesia has yet to truly benefit from Asean in recent times.

Jakarta's exports to Asean rose only around 2 per cent in the last decade, while regional defence partnerships have yet to move beyond bilateral goodwill gestures.

Also, the lack of real progress in Myanmar and the watering-down of Jakarta's agenda to deepen democratic progress in the region continue to highlight the political gap among regional countries.

However, the newly-named Ministry of Foreign Affairs (previously called

the Foreign Affairs Department) under Dr Marty Natalegawa has insisted that Asean remains the cornerstone of the country's foreign policy — as it has been for the past four decades.

If nothing else, Indonesia's global role might be better appreciated if it is seen to be "representing" South-east Asia, rather than simply being on its own, said those who support the ministry's position.

Such conflicting views reflect a foreign policy in transition — from a policy geared to defend an authoritarian regime abroad and strengthen economic development at home, to one that promotes economic welfare and democratic consolidation while reaping the benefits of the changing global dynamics.

This transition began with the introduction of constitutional amendments between 1999 and 2002 that made democracy and human rights an integral part of the nation's way of life.

As such, strengthening democracy at home and abroad became somewhat constitutionally-mandated.

But, as in any transition, opportunities and challenges often merge with continuity and changes — creating fuzzy images along the way.

In this regard, the country's basic "independent and active" foreign policy doctrine remains unshaken. Though critics see the doctrine as "too universal", the founders of the republic had actually envisioned it to be broad and flexible to allow future

leaders to adjust and tweak its implementation but not its spirit.

The challenge here has been on redefining the traditional "concentric-circle" worldview — of which Asean is the closest and most important circle — as the guiding principle of foreign policy priorities to adapt to changing realities.

While such a world view may still hold water from a military perspective — "threats travel faster in proximity" — the increasing flow of economic globalisation and the rise of non-traditional threats are pushing the limits of its validity.

Furthermore, to focus solely on Asean amid a changing world order, where new powers like China and India are rising and traditional powers like the US, Japan and Russia are set to make a comeback, might be counter-productive.

It is logical therefore to assume that while Asean is "a reality of life", as Dr Natalegawa puts it, Jakarta should also find ways to play a larger, more meaningful role in the Asia-Pacific and global arena.

Another challenge is how to capitalise on Indonesia's new-found democratic identity on the international stage.

Apart from the traditional resistance from fellow Asean members who may not share the same appreciation of democratic values, Jakarta has also yet to put its own house in order.

The country's fragile economy continues to be under strain as one political scandal after another breaks out while

concerns over religious pluralism and press freedom have grown.

Also, the growing role of the Parliament in foreign affairs has complicated foreign policy-making.

More importantly, however, fundamental bureaucratic reforms within the Foreign Ministry have yet to be completed. The recent corruption scandal involving high-ranking ministry officials marking-up airline tickets points to the long road ahead for reforms.

The final challenge is how to move from a vague "national interest-based" foreign policy to a "foresight-based" foreign policy that takes into account changes in the country's strategic landscape for the next 10 to 25 years — and how they could influence the country's economic welfare and territorial integrity.

Put it differently, Indonesia needs to focus on concrete, functional deliverables rather than regional leadership ambitions. Issues like border disputes, energy security, overseas migrant worker protection, or defence technological cooperation are worth considering.

Indonesia's foreign policy needs a more concrete strategic direction. Otherwise, it might simply end up going wherever the wind blows. ■

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