



Constructing a Peaceful Community in the Asia-Pacific Region: Lessons from Indonesia and ASEAN

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Introduction – Trust Deficit in the Asia Pacific Region

In his annual press statement at the beginning of 2014, the then-Indonesian Foreign Minister, Marty Natalegawa declared that Jakarta's key foreign policy priority for the year would be the maintenance of regional peace and security.¹ Describing it as the most fundamental challenge before us, then-Foreign Minister Natalegawa noted the irony that as the ten member-states of ASEAN were entering the final stages towards realising the ASEAN Community 2015 (which aimed to bring peace, stability and prosperity to the concert of Southeast Asian nations), the wider East Asian and Asia-Pacific region was witnessing a rise in tensions and insecurity.²

An obvious case in point was the dispute between China and Japan over island claims in the East China Sea. Temperatures have ratcheted in recent times, especially with Beijing's announcement in 2013 of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over most of the East China Sea airspace, including the disputed islands.³ The immediate response of Japan and the US to openly challenge China's ADIZ by flying military planes through the zone did not help matters with Beijing pushed into deploying warplanes to patrol the ADIZ.⁴ This series of escalations was deeply worrying as a simple miscalculation of intentions or error of judgement between planes flying in the zone may be all it took to spark a major conflict in the region.

Another case in point was Japan's announcement of a new national security strategy in late 2013 that will see it adopt a more forward posture.⁵ Tokyo planned to increase its defence spending (the country's first after a decade of cuts) and purchase drones, submarines, stealth aircraft and

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs – RI (2014). *Pernyataan Pers Tahunan Menteri Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia R.M. Marty M. Natalegawa Tahun 2014*. January 7. p.3. Retrieved from: <http://www.kemlu.go.id/Documents/PPTM%202014/PIDATO%20MENLU%20PPTM%20INDONESIA.pdf> [In Bahasa Indonesia]

² Ibid.

³ BBC (2013). 'China establishes 'air-defence zone' over East China Sea'. November 23. Retrieved from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-25062525>

⁴ Simon Denyer & Chico Harlan (2013). 'China sends warplanes to new air defense zone after U.S., Japan, S. Korea incursions.' *The Washington Post*. November 28. Retrieved from: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/japan-south-korea-military-jets-cross-through-china-air-defense-id-zone/2013/11/28/6285d350-5816-11e3-bdbf-097ab2a3dc2b_story.html

⁵ BBC (2013). 'Japan boosts military forces to counter China'. December 17. Retrieved from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-25411653>

amphibious vehicles over the next five years as well as to develop an amphibious force.^{6 7} While increased defence spending is nothing unusual in itself, noticed has been made of Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's desire to revise the country's post-war pacifist constitution, his questioning/denial of Japan's war-crimes and "aggressor" label during WWII, and his visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in the same year.^{8 9} Indeed the visit drew not only strong criticisms from Japan and South Korea but also an unprecedented sharp rebuke from Japan's closest allies, the US, which expressed its disappointment in Prime Minister Abe's action "that will exacerbate tensions with Japan's neighbors."¹⁰

It should also not be forgotten that earlier in 2013, there was much tensions on the Korean peninsula over North Korea's nuclear tests, as well as the ongoing disputes in the South China Sea.

These cases are indicative of what the then-Indonesian Foreign Minister Natalegawa described as a "trust deficit" in the wider East Asian and Asia-Pacific region and highlighted a worrying trend for countries to adopt unilateral approaches instead of the multilateral approach preferred by ASEAN; of which Indonesia is a founding member.¹¹ As such, these cases demonstrate the enormous challenges that confront us in order to construct a peaceful community in the Asia Pacific region.

The pre-ASEAN Historical Context of Southeast Asia

Despite the irony pointed out by the then-Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa viz-a-viz the different geostrategic climate in ASEAN and East Asia, it should be noted that Southeast Asia was also once beset by a "trust deficit." This was especially so in the years before ASEAN was formed in 1967. Indeed, a key driving factor behind the formation of the regional organization was to address the political and security concerns that were troubling the region at the time.

Indonesia in particular, was a major source of regional instability and uncertainty having taken an aggressive military posture against neighbouring Malaysia (and Singapore who were then a part of the Federation of Malaysia) with the diplomatic support of the Philippines.¹² Known as "*Konfrontasi*", the military hostility lasted 4 years and in addition to Jakarta's use of military force to integrate West Papua into the Republic as well as its annexation of East Timor, Indonesia was

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ BBC (2013). 'China denounces Japanese military strategy.' December 21. Retrieved from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-25475418>

⁸ BBC (2013). 'Japan's military revolution hints at Shinzo Abe's nationalist aims.' December 17. Retrieved from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-25414430>

⁹ Tessa Morris-Suzuki. (2013). 'What was Abe thinking, going to Yasukuni?' *East Asia Forum*. December 29. Retrieved from: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/12/29/what-was-abe-thinking-going-to-yasukuni/>

¹⁰ Embassy of the United States to Tokyo, Japan (2013). *Statement on Prime Minister Abe's December 26 Visit to Yasukuni Shrine*. December 26. Retrieved from: <http://japan.usembassy.gov/e/p/tp-20131226-01.html>

¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs – RI (2014). *Pernyataan Pers Tahunan* Op.cit. p.3.

¹² Hamilton-Hart, N. (2009). "Indonesia and Singapore: Structure, Politics and Interests." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* Vol. 31, No.2 pp.249-71

very much seen as a “significant source of regional trauma” and as having “perceived expansionist tendencies.”^{13 14}

However, for many policy makers in the region, these conflicts left a lasting impact by demonstrating clearly that armed aggression – rather than an effective tool for achieving national interests – was in fact detrimental for the nation. One academic highlights how Indonesian history textbooks make the frank assessment that:

“Indonesia, and not Malaysia, paid the higher cost for the event: Indonesia’s economy collapsed as a result of an international boycott, its international image was ruined as it was seen and cast in the light of an aggressor, and Indonesia was so effectively isolated that it later left the United Nations.”¹⁵

It was this hard truth that made Jakarta and its counterparts in Southeast Asia come to the conclusion that the construction of a peaceful community was a more effective way for them to advance their respective national interests. In other words, by ensuring the governments in the region were not distracted by foreign policy concerns, Southeast Asian countries could concentrate on securing domestic peace, prosperity and stability. This was especially so given that the period was also dominated by the geo-political context of the Cold War in which Southeast Asian nations not only faced threats posed by the Soviet Union and Communist China but also by internal communist movements.

The Indonesian/ASEAN Approach to Constructing a Peaceful Community

Since abandoning its “perceived expansionist tendencies”, Jakarta has positioned itself as the *primus inter pares* (first amongst equals) in the Southeast Asian region and as a responsible member of ASEAN. Here emphasis should be placed on the fact that as “equals” Jakarta has sited itself on a level field as its much smaller neighbors in ASEAN even if this is sometimes problematic for Indonesia. Jakarta has for the most part refused to impose its will on others, despite frustrations from within the country over the refusal of its fellow ASEAN neighbors to follow Jakarta’s lead, and the public feeling that Indonesia had consistently been forced into a compromise and/or that its policies were “largely ignored.”¹⁶

A hallmark of Indonesia’s relationship with ASEAN is its commitment to multilateralism and norm-based approaches – something that has been taken up by ASEAN as a whole. The multilateral approach is in accordance with the liberalist school of international relations, in particular the liberal view that international institutions can provide a platform for increasing trust and faith among nation-states – a critical element for the construction of a peaceful

¹³ Elson, R.E. (2006). “Indonesia and the West: an Ambivalent, Misunderstood Engagement” *Australian Journal of Politics and History*: Volume 52, Number 2, 2006, pp. 261-271.

¹⁴ Emmers, R. (2005). “Regional Hegemonies and the Exercise of Power in Southeast Asia: A Study of Indonesia and Vietnam.” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (July/August 2005). pp.650-1.

¹⁵ Noor, Farish A. (2012). “How Indonesia Sees ASEAN and the World: A Cursory Survey of the Social Studies and History textbooks of Indonesia, from Primary to Secondary Level.” *RSIS Working Paper No. 233* p.27.

¹⁶ Anwar, Dewi Fortuna (2010). “The Impact of Domestic and Asian Regional Changes on Indonesian Foreign Policy”. *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2010.

community.¹⁷ For example, one academic explained that institutions can, “help to improve communication between states, reducing uncertainty about intentions and increasing the capacity of governments to make credible, binding commitments to one another.”¹⁸

ASEAN’s norm-based approach reflects the liberalist notion that the main cause of conflict is the lack of central processes to regulate competition that leads to conflict.¹⁹ Furthermore this notion proposes that a state’s interstate behaviour is determined by “the pacifying power of three interrelated and mutually reinforcing causal mechanisms: economic interdependence, international institutions, and democratization”.²⁰ The second causal mechanism – international institutions – is particularly relevant for ASEAN as it positions itself as a vehicle for increasing trust and faith among its member-states.

As such ASEAN has introduced a whole raft of regional instruments that includes the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation of 1976, the ASEAN Regional Forum which was first established in 1994, and the East Asian Summit, which first met in 2005. An interesting point to note is the way in which ASEAN has attempted to address issues that threaten its construction of a peaceful community and the way the conceptions of such threats have evolved. While Northern American and Western European nations organised themselves into a military alliance in the form of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) and the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies organised themselves into the Warsaw Pact, ASEAN did not constitute a mutual defence alliance. Indeed the Bangkok Declaration of 1967 stated,

“all foreign bases are temporary and remain only with the expressed concurrence of the countries concerned and are not intended to be used directly or indirectly to subvert the national independence and freedom of States in the area or prejudice the orderly processes of their national development.”²¹

One scholar, Emmers adds the ASEAN Declaration on the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) of 1971 and the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) of 1976 articulated the Association’s desire for a regional order that was managed by the region itself and free of external interference.²² Emmers further highlights how the TAC established a “norm-based code of conduct for regional interstate relations and introduced as ASEAN’s central principles the idea of respect for national sovereignty and non-interference in the affairs of other states.”²³

¹⁷ Friedberg, A.L. (2005), “The Future of US-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?” *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 2, p.13.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Rourke, J.T. (2007). *International Politics on the World Stage*, Twelfth Edition (Boston: McGraw Hill). p.19.

²⁰ Friedberg, A.L. (2005). “The Future of US-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?”, *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 2. p.12

²¹ ASEAN (1967). “The Asean Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) Bangkok, 8 August 1967”. Retrieved from <http://www.asean.org/news/item/the-asean-declaration-bangkok-declaration>

²² Emmers, R. (2005). “Regional Hegemonies and the Exercise of Power in Southeast Asia: A Study of Indonesia and Vietnam.” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (July/August 2005). pp.650-1.

²³ Ibid.

Regarding the evolution of how threats to ASEAN's construction of a peaceful community have been conceived and evolved in the region, it should be noted that while the original Bangkok Declaration of 1967 saw threats to the regional order emanating from classical sources (i.e. other nation-states and state actors, etc.), there has been growing acceptance within the region of the political and security threats posed by non-traditional sources. This was particularly highlighted by the Asian Financial Crisis of the 1990s that brought economic hardship, social unrest and eventually the political downfall of Indonesia's General Suharto. While the crisis originally started with currency speculation on the Thai Baht, Indonesia would eventually be impacted the most, demonstrating clearly what the United Nations' calls "Problems without Passports."²⁴ These referred to challenges that have increasingly become more common since the end of the Cold War and which no longer limit themselves to the boundaries of national sovereignties. Based on ASEAN's painful experiences of the 1990s, there is now a much broader conception of what constitutes risks to the Southeast Asian region's peaceful community. A look at the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint reveals that,

The APSC subscribes to a comprehensive approach to security, which acknowledges the interwoven relationships of political, economic, social-cultural and environmental dimensions of development."²⁵

In this sense, Indonesia and ASEAN's construction of a peaceful community focused on a commitment to multilateralism and a norm-based approach that does not require a mutual defense alliance and that subscribes to a comprehensive conception of a peaceful community (and all the threats it must face). These points are important to underline. Responding to threats to a peaceful community by employing peaceful methods - such as through dialogue and diplomacy - means avoiding punitive military actions that only bring suffering to the people and exacerbate tensions rather than reducing them. Moreover by subscribing to a more comprehensive approach means engaging all parties and stakeholders involved. It could be argued that one cannot resolve the South China Sea by not talking with China, nor can one promote security in the Asia Pacific region by excluding North Korea, in the same way one cannot tackle Islamist extremism by not addressing the root causes that give birth to radical thinking.

Indonesia: Bridging the Region Together

Focusing more specifically on Indonesia, it can be said that Indonesia has always positioned itself as a key actor shaping regional affairs. Indeed, the Preamble to the 1945 Constitution explicitly outlines Indonesia's duty to "participate toward the establishment of a world order based on freedom, perpetual peace and social justice." To pursue this duty, Indonesia's founding fathers developed the "free and active" (*bebas aktif*) foreign policy concept. "Free" meaning Indonesia rejects alignment to any power/bloc/alliance, instead plotting its own course on the international arena. "Active" meaning Indonesia shall engage, contribute, and participate in

²⁴ Weiss, T.G. (2009). *What's Wrong with the United Nations and How to Fix It* (Cambridge: Polity Press)

²⁵ ASEAN (2009). *ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint*. p.2.

global affairs, not just for the country's own national interests but also for the wider interest of global security, justice and prosperity.

Anchored by this constitutional duty and guided by the *bebas aktif* concept, Indonesia has for decades put itself forward as part of the solution and not as part of the problem facing the region. Indonesia's role in helping to open up Myanmar to the international community and embracing human rights and democracy is one example of this. So too was Jakarta's effort in preventing clashes between Thai and Cambodian forces from escalating into open war over the Preah Vihear temple complex a few years ago.

Arguably, in the midst of regional uncertainty and increasing tensions – largely as a result of an unprecedented shift taking place in region's balance of power, Indonesia has a crucial role to play in mitigating some of these uncertainties and tensions by playing the role of a 'bridge country' to foster greater trust and mutual understanding between the major powers in the region.²⁶ Under the Yudhoyono Presidency, Indonesia pursued a foreign policy of 'a thousand friends, zero enemies' (since upgraded to 'a million friends') which arguably makes it a suitable candidate for a 'bridge country.' Such a foreign policy has seen Indonesia develop a Comprehensive Partnership with the US in 2010, and at the same time to develop a Strategic Partnership with China since 2005 (recently upgraded to a Strategic Comprehensive Partnership).

While the term "a million friends and zero enemies" is no longer used by the new Government of President Joko Widodo, the basis for it remains true. Indonesia continues to face a "strategic environment where no country perceives Indonesia as an enemy and there is no country which Indonesia considers an enemy." It should be noted that President Widodo's first state visits outside of the ASEAN region, saw the Indonesian leader call on Tokyo and Beijing immediately after one another. At the same time, at the recently concluded Asian-African Conference Commemoration 2015 held in Indonesia, both Chinese President Xi Jinping and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sat next to President Joko Widodo in a symbolic show of Jakarta's potential to bridge the two sides. Indeed, the Asian-African Conference Commemoration 2015, where as many as 21 Heads of States/Governments gathered to honor the 60th anniversary of Indonesia's 'highest achievement in foreign policy', was a timely reminder of Jakarta's potential to bridge all the various countries not only in the Asia-Pacific region but also that of Africa.²⁷

Conclusion

The goal of constructing a peaceful community in the Asia-Pacific is one that, while desirable to all parties in the region, is nevertheless confronted by a number of challenges and obstacles. Not least is the 'trust deficit' that marks the region and has consequently led to a rise in tensions and insecurity. However, history tells us that Southeast Asia too was once plagued by a similar predicament over half a century ago, and yet by the end of 2015 the ten member-states of

²⁶ Comment made at the ASEAN Foundation-Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs Roundtable on ASEAN-China Cooperation, held in Jakarta on November 13, 2013.

²⁷ The Conversation (2015, April 24). 'The 'Bandung Divide': Australia's lost opportunity in Asia?' Retrieved from: <http://theconversation.com/the-bandung-divide-australias-lost-opportunity-in-asia-40484>

Southeast Asia will soon usher in the ASEAN Community. Indonesia, once the “significant source of regional trauma”, is now ASEAN’s *primus inter pares* which while situating itself as “first” nevertheless considers its fellow ASEAN member-states as “equals”. Time and time again, Jakarta has forwarded itself as part of the solution and not as part of the problem by helping to open up Myanmar to the international community and embracing human rights and democracy, as well as making effort to prevent clashes between Thai and Cambodian forces from escalating into open war.

This was brought about by a focused commitment to multilateralism and a norm-based approach that does not require a mutual defense alliance and that subscribes to a comprehensive conception of a peaceful community (and all the threats it must face). Such commitment was arguably focused from the hard truth that military approaches to resolving tensions and uncertainty - far from being an effective tool for achieving national interests - was in fact detrimental for the nation. As such, in order to construct a peaceful community in the Asia-Pacific region, a key lesson from Indonesia and ASEAN is arguably the hard truth that if governments in the region are not distracted by foreign policy concerns, Asia-Pacific countries could instead devote their time, energy and attention on securing domestic peace, prosperity and stability for the betterment of the peoples of this region.

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