

## **Global Maritime Axis: Indonesia, China, and a New Approach to Southeast Asian Regional Resilience**

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### **Abstract**

In the second decade of the 21st century, East and Southeast Asia have become a region fraught with potential hotspots. Rising tensions call for a new initiative in building a security architecture featuring the region's maritime resources. Central to this initiative is the implementation of China's new security concept which needs to consider ASEAN's important role in maintaining peace and security in the region, particularly when tensions in the South China Seas continue to escalate. With its unique geographical position, President Joko Widodo is suggesting the creation of a Global Maritime Axis (or Fulcrum) with Indonesia playing a key role as a maritime power. Such an axis or fulcrum can be a mechanism for a win-win solution towards achieving common stability, security and prosperity in the region while recognising the economic diversity of Asia and beyond. Challenges at both national and regional levels, however, need to be resolved to establish the Global Maritime Fulcrum.

**Keywords:** *China, ASEAN, Indonesia, security, global maritime axis*

### **1. Introduction**

Much has changed in the Southeast/East Asia region in this second decade of the 21st century. It is now a region fraught with potential hotspots and recent disputes between neighbouring countries in East Asia and Southeast Asia highlight the risk of war in the most dynamic region in the world.

The remains of the Cold War in the region still persist in China-Taiwan and in North-South Korea without any sign of reunification or integration, creating fragmented zones, while overlapping claims of sovereignty in the South China Sea and East China Sea have resulted in a new and more complex landscape of geopolitical tensions, marked by expanding nationalisms across the region. Moreover, the claims in the South China

Sea are not just about sovereignty or military offensive actions in territorial waters, but also about economic matters such as fishing rights and oil and gas drilling operations. The seas have become a new battlefield of widening spheres of influence involving not only countries in the region who perceive the region as their core interest, but also external powers who likewise consider Asia-Pacific as vital to their interests. Rising tensions have increased military expenditure among Asian countries anxious to defend themselves. These realities call for a new initiative in building a security architecture featuring the region's maritime resources.

## **2. China's New Security Concept and ASEAN**

Since 9/11 and the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the geopolitical and geo-strategic situation has changed dramatically. We are faced with unprecedented developments in which developed economies have weakened and the US' role as a super power has declined, limiting its ability to provide the security umbrella which has allowed the economic growth in Asia-Pacific since the end of the Cold War. At the same time, new developments in information technology have created a world with no physical borders which in the past dictated the way we analyse global situations (Kaplan, 2012: 24-26). This borderless world has facilitated countries in Asia to cooperate through trade and economic relations, moving towards the integration of an inclusive and dynamic regionalism in an era of free trade.

The rapid changes in the region's political and security environment intensified in 2010 in reaction to US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, stating at the ASEAN Regional Forum that the US will expand and intensify its already significant role in the Asia-Pacific region, especially in the southern part of the region, adding that the surrounding seas in Asia are a core interest of the US. This marked a shift in focus in US foreign policy in anticipation of the fundamental changes affecting the norms and rules in the Asia-Pacific region caused by China emerging as a highly influential regional power (Congressional Research Service, 2012).

China's spectacular economic development at an average of 10 per cent per year in the past few decades, as well as her thorough integration into the regional economy through trade and investment networks, was changing the geopolitical landscape permanently. At the same time, however, countries in the region were also concerned about the growth of China's military spending at a pace that exceeded her economic development (Bader, 2012: 1-8). China's rise combined with the so-called "pivot policy" of the US raised concerns and mixed reactions in the region. Leaders in the region do not wish the Asia-Pacific region to become the stage for great power US-China rivalry. Indonesia makes this point with its "dynamic equilibrium" which seeks to

involve all the major powers within a cooperative framework as a basis for the development of a more inclusive regional architecture, avoiding the “unchecked preponderance of a single state” or the “disorder or uncertainty associated by a multipolar region.”<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, increases in defence budgets, the strengthening of security alliances between the US and Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines and other ASEAN countries, as well as the geopolitical shifts changing regional cooperation in trade, economics and finance – creating alliances of interests such as the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) and Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) – reflect not just economic competition in the region but are also a manifestation of ideas and concepts in search of a new regional architecture in response to the new realities. These are efforts to build a new type of cooperation among Asian nations by increasing their connectivity, not only for the integration into a more inclusive dynamic regionalism, but also for shaping the expansion of economic, trade and business opportunities among nation-states intertwined by a dynamic free trade region.

Given these changes, China has formulated a new, comprehensive security concept or 新安全觀 (*xin anquan guan*) encompassing bilateral and multilateral relations (Shih, 2002: 3). This new concept explains China’s approach to various contemporary global issues in anticipation of a growing multipolar world. It details China’s expanding strategic culture, the dynamic international environment supporting economic growth, and reviews its strategy to ensure stability to protect China’s national interests. China’s regional leadership aspirations are formulated in the universal ideas of creating a peaceful environment and a more transparent and appropriate security mechanism.<sup>2</sup>

The concept covers four aspects bearing in mind China’s position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and the second biggest economic power in the world: 共同安全安全觀 (*gongtong anquan*, common security), 综合性的安全 (*zonghexing anquan*, comprehensive security), 合作安全 (*hezuo anquan*, security cooperation), and 可持续安全 (*kechixu anquan*, sustainable security). The concept is based on a logic which is China-centred; avoids the traditional security concept which it considers as limiting its allies and foes; mutually beneficial cooperation among countries bound by collective security alliances; group security; stresses on deterrence, containment, and other ways to limit the potential of enemies (Ma, 2014). It is a concept which combines national security with international security to build harmony within China and through consultation, cooperation, and the search for common security and prosperity.

China’s new security concept is comprehensive, covering military issues, politics, economics, energy, research and technology integrated in such a way

so as to effectively deal with both traditional and non-traditional security threats. It also refers to standards and norms of the UN Charter and the Five Principals of Peaceful Co-existence in managing international relations in a globalised, multipolar and interdependent world. At the Fourth Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building in Asia (CICA) in Shanghai, Chinese President Xi Jinping explained that the new security concept should be understood as a new form of politics and security with “Chinese characteristics” as a projection of China’s rise, as well as a comprehensive approach to realising China’s maritime ambitions. In his speech, he also emphasised that Asia’s problems should be resolved by Asians without the intervention of extra-regional powers.

In formulating its new security concept and new great power relations vis-à-vis the US, however, China has to consider ASEAN’s force as an economic and trade regional organisation straddling the world’s most strategic sea lanes of communication. ASEAN as a cohesive, united bloc has a role to play in maintaining peace and security in the region. China cannot expect ASEAN countries to accept China’s position that, “China is a big country, other countries, only a small country, this is an indisputable fact” (中国是一个大国, 其他国家只是小国, 这就是不可争辩的事实).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, ASEAN member states realise that bilaterally they are no match for China but it also does not mean that ASEAN is creating an alliance against China.

When tensions escalate in the South China Sea (SCS), ASEAN is being tested. China has stated that the SCS is its core national interest which has to be defended and refuses to resolve the overlapping claims through ASEAN, preferring a bilateral approach. The issue of the “9-dash line” which encompasses a greater part of the SCS has for more than 20 years been disputed by many ASEAN member states as contravening the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that China is also a signatory. Finding a resolution to the dispute is complicated by several aspects: first, it is a conflict between China and ASEAN member states not between ASEAN; secondly, it is a conflict between an existing power (US) and a rising power (PRC); thirdly, it is a question of China wanting to resolve the issue bilaterally with the respective ASEAN member states and Indonesia’s initiative to resolve the issue through a yet-to-be-realised Code of Conduct (COC). ASEAN has to therefore convince China to accept the COC and to explain what China means by wanting to negotiate only when conditions are “ripe”.<sup>4</sup> ASEAN also needs to know how to respond should China take a divisive approach by treating claimants differently<sup>5</sup> and anticipate how to respond should China act bilaterally among ASEAN member states or with ASEAN as a regional entity.

With the changing dynamics in the region overall (in the East China Sea between China, Japan, and South Korea, and in the South China Sea between

China and the Philippines), ASEAN needs to find a way to ensure that it “remains relevant and self-confident and resilient in the unfolding power game in the wider region of East Asia” and “maintains the centrality and proactive role of ASEAN as the primary driving force in its relations and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture that is open, transparent and inclusive”.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. A Possible Solution: Indonesia as a Maritime Power and its Maritime Axis

As an archipelago in the middle of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, Indonesia controls strategic points of sea lanes of communication (SLOC) through several choke points in the Strait of Malacca, the Sunda Strait, Lombok Strait, and the Ombai-Wetar Strait. The geographical position of Indonesia offers opportunities for Indonesia to play a significant role as a maritime power in maintaining regional peace and stability amid geostrategic changes.

In his inaugural speech, Indonesian President Joko Widodo emphasised that Indonesians have to work hard, “to restore Indonesia as a maritime power. The oceans, the seas, the straits and the bays are the future of our civilisation. For far too long, we have turned our backs on the seas, the oceans, the straits and the bays to restore *Jalesveva Jayamahe* (at sea we are victorious), the motto of our forefathers. We should return back to sailing the seas.” He ended his speech by referring to President Soekarno, who “...once said that to make Indonesia a great, strong, prosperous and peaceful nation, we need to have the spirit of the *cakrawarti* (brave sailors), who confronted the great tides and the mighty rolling waves.” Metaphorically, President Joko Widodo sees himself as, “the captain entrusted by the people” and appeals to the people to “come on board the Republic of Indonesia vessel and together we will sail toward Great Indonesia. We will roll open the stout sails. We will face all the ocean tides and waves with our own strength.” In the same speech he also noted that, “Indonesia as the third-largest democracy in the world, as the country with the largest Muslim population, as an archipelagic state, and as the largest country in Southeast Asia, will continue to pursue its independent-active foreign policy, dedicated to national interests, and to taking part in creating an international order that respects independence, eternal peace and social justice.”

For the next five years, President Joko Widodo’s vision is to create a “sovereign, independent Indonesia with character based on the principle of “*gotong royong*” – mutual assistance.<sup>7</sup> Although unclear of what this would entail in foreign policy terms, *gotong royong* is an important characteristic of the Indonesian people which has long been abandoned by the New Order

era of Soeharto and which Joko Widodo wants to revive as a principal ideal. Hence, the spirit of *gotong royong* should also be reflected in Indonesia's foreign policy.

President Widodo is suggesting the creation of a Global Maritime Axis based on his understanding and vision of the global geopolitical map which is marked by an economic shift from Europe and America to Asia with Indonesia right in the midst of it.<sup>8</sup> It harks back to the 7th century era of Sriwijaya and the 14th century Majapahit era, meant to instil a sense of nationalism for Indonesia as a maritime state and to capitalise on the geopolitical reality that Indonesia straddles between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans.<sup>9</sup> Its nationalistic strains are similar to President Xi Jinping's idea to create a Maritime Silk Road (海上丝绸之路) inspired by Admiral Zheng He of the Ming Dynasty. Xi's Maritime Silk Road is a reaction to ward off external pressure, particularly vis-à-vis Southeast Asia, as a win-win solution through cooperation in economic, trade, and financial cooperation, including developing marine resources which are a source of livelihood for many in the region. At the same time, it is a concept which aims to mitigate the disputes with small countries.<sup>10</sup>

In achieving these ideals, Indonesia is faced with tremendous challenges in the years ahead. By underlining Indonesia as an archipelagic nation in Indonesia's diplomacy and international cooperation and using the concept of Global Maritime Axis or fulcrum as the core of domestic and regional development policies, it would be difficult to implement the modern Indonesian foreign policy of the 21st century based on "*gotong royong*". The reality is that Indonesia's foreign policy implementation will be constrained by the interaction of geopolitical changes of big power national interests of China, India, the US and Japan expanding their spheres of influence. If the argument posed is that Indonesia is an archipelago, Indonesia has to be able to achieve greater economic development of its many islands to ensure that what it aims to project regionally and globally is supported by what is achieved domestically. In other words, interconnectivity between Indonesia's many islands has to be achieved in order that Indonesia can take advantage of the ASEAN community. The strategic connectivity that can be achieved by 2025 will provide ample opportunity for Indonesia to actively play an important role regionally and globally. Hence the future of maritime connectivity becomes extremely crucial for the economy, trade, food and energy security in the region, particularly when interconnectivity within ASEAN is also crucial for creating a political, economic, and social community.

Indonesia's strategic position between two oceans and the formulation of a maritime state identity will broaden the opportunities to build a modern maritime industry and for maritime security. Abandoning the view of Indonesia as an island nation and instead seeing it as a maritime nation, able

to connect and defend its many islands, and to sustainably exploit its marine resources, requires a change in mind-set as well as a change in strategy. In this context, Indonesia's maritime interests will always be located in the South China Sea. Therefore, it is important to resolve the overlapping claims of sovereignty among neighbouring states and avoid igniting conflict becoming open hostilities. All maritime countries in Southeast Asia have limited alliances in security relations with the United States. For Joko Widodo, the higher intra-regional cooperation, based on a common strategic view which includes bilateral relations with the US, will enhance Indonesia's influence in a wide variety of dialogues, including dialogue with China.

#### **4. The Challenges**

In reality, the Global Maritime Axis which President Joko Widodo currently speaks of refers mainly to domestic demands to improve the maritime infrastructure to support the transportation of goods and improve economic development across the archipelago. The global dimension relates to overcoming the scarcity of resources and the competition for markets in the global economy by opening up sea access to take advantage of the opportunities offered by Asia-Pacific's exponential growth.

Trade between ASEAN and China since the 1990s has become increasingly more important. In 2012, export to China (US\$127.9 billion) surpassed that to the US (US\$106.3 billion), reflecting the importance of both these markets to ASEAN (ASEAN, 2012). Global economic competition of the 21st century will be about securing resources and markets but competition in the next decade will shift to the oceans. The idea of having maritime seas as a fulcrum could be an antithesis to the possibilities of a serious confrontation, thereby reformulating geopolitical elements in a changing world.

The issues of energy and food security within the next 5 to 10 years, for example, are forcing a number of countries to expand their partnership schemes in various sectors of modern life. The new regionalism will also factor in domestic issues of demographics, urbanisation, availability of resources, level of income or income inequality, governance structures, and concerns facing the problem of climate change. This changes the context and it needs to be understood that exponential growth in various sectors of life in the Asia-Pacific region creates new opportunities, like the Indonesian Maritime Axis and Chinese Maritime Silk Road. The scale of changes in this maritime doctrine will also have a long-term impact in shaping strategic military-political planning, when the reconstruction of interstate relations needs an exit from the politics of balance of power.

All countries, except Laos, have coastlines on the South China Sea. Such close proximity has created many problems between ASEAN member states

but the spirit of friendship has succeeded in mitigating the tensions between them. How Joko Widodo's Global Maritime Axis and Xi Jinping's Maritime Silk Road can influence the dynamics in the region is yet to be seen but tensions in the South China Sea can be eased through greater cooperation. This requires Indonesia and China, as well as other countries in the region, to synchronise their interests accordingly if, for example, they want to resolve the issue of overlapping Exclusive Economic Zones and illegal fishing. Asia is currently the biggest producer of fish in the world. Indonesia and China have seen tremendous growth in fishing, up 27 per cent and 13.6 per cent respectively in 2012 or 5.4 million tons for Indonesia and 13.8 million tons for China (Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, 2014). Indonesia, however, is victim to illegal fishing, not just by Chinese vessels but other countries in the region. The major difference is that China is the only country in the region which backs up its fishermen with coercive force.<sup>11</sup> The presence of Chinese fishing vessels in the disputed territory in the SCS has increased. China's naval security forces have had direct contact with Indonesia and various incidents since 2010 show how ineffective Indonesia's security forces have been in pursuing Chinese illegal fishermen operating in economic zones claimed by Indonesia. Efforts to protect Indonesia's jurisdiction over the economic zones have failed and if left unresolved will be detrimental to Indonesia's military deterrence and legal claims.

Indonesia's idea of a Global Maritime Axis is an extension of the dynamic equilibrium philosophy important to maintaining peace and security in the region and should be the new paradigm in the Asia-Pacific. Developments in Southeast Asia and East Asia stresses that change will always be part and parcel of developments in which equilibrium is achieved with no dominant power. The Natalegawa Doctrine should be understood as Indonesia's way to achieve peaceful coexistence with the major powers in Asia, while at the same time create the foundations of a foreign policy which is independent and active and at the same build a Southeast Asia which is stable, safe and prosperous made possible by the three pillars of an ASEAN Community.

A Global Maritime Axis is a mechanism for a win-win solution towards achieving common stability, security and prosperity while recognising the economic diversity of Asia and countries from beyond the region in facing global challenges. In this context, it aims to address the basic philosophy of the ASEAN Charter. The challenge lies in contextualising the Global Maritime Axis in the existing regional architecture with its various mechanisms, such as the ARF, EAS, ADMM-Plus, in addressing the presence of major powers. The proposal to establish the Indonesian Maritime Partnership Initiative<sup>12</sup> together with Japan, China, India, South Korea, and Singapore raises questions of where ASEAN countries and the US should

position themselves. What role can Indonesia play in maintaining the balance between the four major powers of China, the US, Japan and India in a stable and peaceful Southeast Asia when the rise of China and India has to face off with existing powers, the US and Japan? These questions need to be answered by President Joko Widodo's new government and how the Global Maritime Axis is realised.

## Notes

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1. Address by Dr. RM Marty M. Natalegawa entitled "An Indonesian Perspective on the Indo-Pacific" conveyed at the Conference on Indonesia held in Washington DC, USA in May 2013.
  2. Former Ambassador Sha Zukang emphasised the collective security in the region "should be the fundamental objective" of the PRC to establish a sustainable regional security environment, see <<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/backup/jksbf/cjjk/2622/t15411.htm>>.
  3. René L. Pattiradjawane, "ASEAN Dipecah Belah China" (China disunites ASEAN), *Kompas*, 18 July 2012, p. 10. This statement was made by Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi on a forum at a meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Hanoi on August 2010.
  4. Mark Valencia, "China influences Cambodia as ASEAN host; other members, caught in middle of China-US power struggle, ponder loyalties", *The Japan Times*, 14 August 2012.
  5. See René L. Pattiradjawane, "Draf Nol Indonesia" (Indonesian Draft Zero), *Kompas*, 26 February 2014, p. 10.
  6. ASEAN Charter, Chapter 1, Article 1.15.
  7. The closest literal meaning of "*gotong royong*" is mutual cooperation. It implies that cooperation will be given without reservations in which issues and goals are elaborated before implemented through informal meetings and common interests

are analysed with a step-by-step approach to reach an agreed upon resolution. In Indonesia, and probably in the rest of Southeast Asia, “*gotong royong*” is seen when villagers in remote areas contribute goods and labour to build schools, houses of worship, bridges, roads, and other public needs without government involvement and budgetary assistance. The concept of “*gotong royong*” can also be understood in the context of community empowerment as a form of social capital amplifying institutional resources at the community level. “*Gotong royong*” also contains the meaning of collective action to struggle, self-governing, common goals, and sovereignty. See Pranadji, 2009.

8. See “Ringkasan Debat Capres Jokowi VS Prabowo 22 Juni 2014” (Summary presidential debate Jokowi versus Prabowo 22 June 2014), <<http://politik.kompasiana.com/2014/06/23/ringkasan-debat-capres-jokowi-vs-prabowo-22-juni-2014-668428.html>>.
9. See, Rizal Sukma, “Gagasan Poros Maritim” (The Idea of Maritime Axis), *Kompas*, 20 August 2014, p. 6.
10. See Guo Jiping (国纪平), “To build peace, stability and cooperation in the new Asia” (共同建设和平、稳定与合作的新亚洲), *People’s Daily* (人民日报), 20 May 2014, p. 3.
11. Gao Xingshen and Mo Guangyuan (高新生和牟光远), “Three economic strategy for the oceans focus” (经略海洋的三个着眼点), *Liberation Army Daily* (解放军报), 14 October 2014, p. 6. See also, “Sansha militia battled Vietnamese fishermen and expelled daily US military aircraft reconnaissance” (三沙民兵上阵驱赶越南渔民 美军飞机天天来侦察), *People’s Daily Online* (人民网), <<http://fj.people.com.cn/n/2014/0710/c350372-21627565.html>>.
12. Rizal Sukma, “Gagasan Poros Maritim” (“The Notion of Maritime Axis”), *Kompas*, 20 August 2014, p. 6.

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