

A more active foreign policy



NEW PHASE: *Indonesia is intensifying its relationship with China while enhancing bilateral relations with the US*

With the haze choking our ability to breathe clean air for months now, Malaysians tend to miss the fact that Indonesian President Joko Widodo has just celebrated his first year in office. While his administration has been repeatedly under fire over unpopular domestic policies, there has been special criticism of his rather sedentary foreign policy viewed as focusing on everywhere and nowhere, at the same time.

However, there are some preliminary signs that the president may now be ready to embark on a more active foreign policy agenda. Three recent and ongoing developments warrant consideration.

FIRST, former president Megawati Soekarnoputri's recent visit to China on Oct 12-15. As chairman of Partai Demokrasi Indonesia perjuangan (PDIP) and accompanied by high-ranking party officials, Megawati embarked on a number of engagements including inaugurating the construction of "Rumah Soekarno" in Qin Hai, Shenzhen, delivering a speech at the International Conference of Asian Political Parties (ICAAP) and meeting with President Xi Jinping.

"Rumah Soekarno" is a planned 24-storey building which will serve as a new China-Indonesia cooperation centre focusing on people-to-people and business relations. It was at this launch site that Megawati highlighted the voyage of Admiral Cheng Ho to Indonesia in the 15th century and China's involvement in the Asia-Africa Conference in 1955 as standout points of the bilateral relationship. It would be interesting to assess, over time, the extent to which Rumah Soekarno might come to represent non-state entities' (such as PDIP or other non-governmental organisations related to the party) interest in China. It would be interesting to observe just how much Megawati' and the PDIP, specifically, as well as Indonesia, generally, might gain by strategically placing Rumah Soekarno in one of China's most successful Special Economic Zones.

As party chairman, Megawati paid a courtesy visit to the secretary-general of the Communist Party of China who also happened to be Xi. The two discussed, among others, the possibility of reconciling China's Maritime Silk Road with Indonesia's Maritime Axis vision. She reassured sceptics that while Indonesia was getting closer to China, it did not necessarily translate into the inability of the Indonesian government to remain independent in its undertakings.

SECOND, separately but coincidentally, Minister of Defence Ryamizard Ryacudu was also conducting his own China trip from Oct 13 to 18 to foster defence and security relations. The highlight of the minister's trip was his attendance at the China Asean Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting where he responded positively to Chinese Defence Minister Chang Wanquan's invitation to conduct military exercises on maritime protection and disaster mitigation in the South China Sea (SCS).

Following the minor controversy that followed these remarks, Ryamizard later clarified his stance by stating that while closer Asean China defence cooperation in the SCS was indeed necessary to overcome tension in the region, cooperation would rather take the form of a joint sea patrol than a military exercise.

Anticipating jitters from neighbours, the minister also clearly stated that any joint patrol was for the consideration of China and all Asean states rather than exclusively between China and Indonesia.

THIRD, Joko's own trip to the United States taking place this week. The framework of the visit will be to augment bilateral relations in the field of politics, economics and defence but it should be viewed against the background of the other two recent visits. With Ryamizard fostering a deeper defence connection and Megawati engaging the Chinese at the political level, there seems a general indication that Indonesia is intensifying its relationship with China.

It would be fallacious, however, to assert that Indonesia is exclusively engaging China without considering the substance and expected outcomes of Joko's visit to the United States as well as domestic developments within Indonesia itself. The recent approval by Commission I of the House of Representatives to set aside a whopping RP450 billion (US\$30.7 million) to strengthen the country's military base in Natuna Island, which immediately borders the SCS, is testament to Indonesia's commitment to independently protect its national interest. It is too early to tell whether these and other outreach initiatives by Indonesia will leave a geopolitical impact outlasting the health hazards of the smog-belching forest fires in Sumatera and Kalimantan.

However, two conclusions seem apparent for now: that Indonesia appears to be entering a new phase of "mendayung di antara dua karang"; that is, it is hedging between China and the United States while seeking to preserve its interests. And that although Indonesia might seem to be reactivating its foreign policy, as in the past, it could all fizzle out as soon as the next domestic crisis takes over.

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