

Strategic Analysis Paper

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Indonesian Foreign Policy and the Regional Impact of its Maritime Doctrine

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Key Points

- The tense maritime situation near Indonesian waters could be exacerbated by President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo’s assertive maritime policies.
- The ASEAN Economic Community is not likely to be affected by aggressive Indonesian maritime policies, but relations with China could be.
- The maritime doctrine appears to favour unilateral actions above multilateral activity. Regional programmes, such as those designed to tackle piracy, will continue to be impaired by nationalism, trust issues and a lack of coalition-building efforts.
- There is unlikely to be a radical shift in Indonesian foreign policy under the Jokowi Administration.

Summary

While his maritime doctrine is designed primarily to boost the Indonesian economy, Widodo’s signature policy will have wider ramifications for South-East Asia, where maritime issues are particularly salient. Issues of illegal fishing and piracy affect the entire region and are probably best addressed through multilateralism. Designing and implementing collaborative measures to tackle these issues has been challenging, however, given historical tensions between certain states and the strength of regional norms. During the Yudhoyono years, there was a perceptible shift towards forging a regional solution to these problems,

but under the Jokowi Administration this nascent collaborative approach appears to be at risk of stagnating. The president appears to be shunning multilateral solutions by adopting a more forceful, unilateral approach to regional challenges. As a result of this unilateralism, Indonesia could find itself falling out of favour with many of its near neighbours. Some observers have suggested that Indonesia could be [turning away](#) from the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) under the Jokowi Administration in a sharp divergence from the perception of growing internationalism during the Yudhoyono years. As this paper will demonstrate, however, foreign policy under the Jokowi Administration is unlikely to sacrifice Indonesia's position in ASEAN.

Analysis

The Relationship with ASEAN: Could a More Assertive Maritime Policy Derail the Economic Community?

The relationship with the Association of South-East Asian Nations has historically been the cornerstone of Indonesian foreign policy. As the Indonesian economy is the largest within the regional bloc, how it behaves towards other members and how it is perceived by them is of great importance to the organisation. Jokowi's approach towards the organisation could have an impact upon the implementation of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) set to be implemented by 31 December 2015. The AEC is designed to transform the regional bloc into a single market and production base in which the various economies of the regional grouping benefit from each other.

The president has [declared](#) that he will not allow his country to be unfairly treated by other members of ASEAN and that he will consider the impact of the AEC upon Indonesians before considering broader regional outcomes. These comments have contributed to what has been viewed as rising parochialism, protectionism and nationalism under the Jokowi presidency. In her annual press [statement](#), the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Retno Marsudi, has suggested that the first priority for foreign policy will be to maintain Indonesia's sovereignty by firmly responding to any intrusions and settling maritime borders. In December 2014, the Indonesian navy began [sinking](#) foreign vessels that it found illegally fishing within its territorial waters. Jokowi's "shock therapy" response to illegal fishing could also be seen as a move that hinders the construction of closer South-East Asian integration. There is little evidence, however, that this is indeed the case.

The first group of ships to be sunk were Vietnam-flagged; other vessels from Thailand, Papua New Guinea and Malaysia were sunk a few weeks later. While Jokowi's sink-the-boats policy has received harsh reactions from the international media, those countries affected by the policy of sinking fishing vessels have not issued an official response. It is unlikely that ASEAN members will abandon efforts to create the AEC due to Indonesia sinking fishing vessels, although it may be a contributing factor in worsening relations if other displays of Indonesian nationalism emerge.

From a Western perspective, the sinking of foreign fishing vessels appears to be a hard-line measure, which could only provoke an equally aggressive response from the country directly affected. Indonesia has gone to great lengths to inform its ASEAN neighbours that its laws allow it to sink foreign vessels found illegally fishing within its waters. As they are hesitant to interfere with the laws of another sovereign state, Indonesia's neighbours have not directly criticised, or indeed even responded to, the policy.

As the issue of illegal fishing is a regional challenge, it will probably be more difficult for Indonesia to contribute to a broader, multilateral response to the issue. Since such a response is unlikely to be forthcoming, Indonesia has not risked a great deal by targeting the fishing vessels of its ASEAN neighbours. If it begins to aggressively confront Chinese vessels on the other hand, Jakarta could find itself in a far graver situation.

Indonesia and China: On a Collision Course Over Illegal Fishing?

Chinese fishing vessels also traverse Indonesian waters but, unlike the fishing vessels of other regional states, these vessels are widely seen as being utilised for strategic ends. Civilian vessels plying disputed waters are believed to co-ordinate their activities with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). In the past, fishing vessels were seen as key component of a strategy to defend and assert Chinese sovereignty in waters near its coast. During the 1990s, fishing vessels were used as irregular forces to barricade the islands of Matsu and Jinmen to put pressure on Taiwan during a period of political tension. In more recent years, however, such civilian vessels have been seen as a tool to further Chinese influence, power and sovereignty in the East China Sea and the South China Sea.

Beijing's so-called "cabbage strategy" has garnered increased attention in recent years. The strategy was [described](#) by the *New York Times* as the wrapping of contested islands in layers of Chinese vessels, including fishing boats, marine surveillance ships and navy warships, thereby limiting the ability of other claimant states to gain control of maritime territory. The cabbage strategy was utilised in 2012 to gain control over Scarborough Shoal, an unoccupied reef in the South China Sea, after a standoff with the Philippines. It was also used against Vietnam in 2013 when China deployed a deep sea oil rig off the coast of the Paracel Islands, within the Vietnamese exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The oil rig was surrounded by layers of Chinese military, coast guard and fishing vessels. PLAN ships also attempted to prevent Filipino ships from delivering supplies to their military outpost on Second Thomas Shoal, a submerged reef in the Spratly Island chain. Since Beijing has utilised fishing vessels for strategic ends in the past, it is only natural that Indonesia will be wary of Chinese vessels operating within its territorial waters.

While Indonesia makes no official claims to territory in the South China Sea, part of its 12 nautical mile EEZ, off the coast of Natuna Island, falls within the Chinese nine-dash line. Understandably, this has caused Indonesia to feel threatened by Chinese intentions in the region. Jokowi's aggressive response to illegal fishing within the Indonesian EEZ could put his law enforcement agencies on a collision course with Beijing. In early December 2014, Indonesian authorities sought to capture 22 Chinese fishing vessels but, according to [media reports](#), only eight such vessels were actually apprehended.

Jokowi appears to highly value the relationship with Beijing and will be wary of outwardly doing anything that could jeopardise it. A desire to maintain the relationship has not prevented Rizal Sukma, one of Jokowi's close advisors and a leading Indonesian strategist, from speculating that 'We sank Vietnamese boats last week ... maybe we will sink Chinese boats after that also.' If the Indonesian Navy follows through with such a threat, it can expect a rapid response from Beijing. For that reason, it is unlikely that Jakarta will utilise force against a much stronger regional state.



Instead of sinking Chinese ships, Indonesia has taken a softer approach. Jakarta has rescinded recent privileges granted to China to fish in Indonesian waters. A deal was signed in 2013 that would have granted Chinese fishing operators an advantage over other countries fishing in Indonesian waters. The deal allowed Chinese fishery companies to operate joint ventures with Indonesian companies, including the establishment of an integrated fisheries estate in Natuna. Under the new regulations, this partnership has been scrapped. It would seem that Jakarta will take a more measured approach towards a regional power that is becoming more assertive.

Piracy in South-East Asia: Limited Regional Co-operation will Continue

While global piracy has declined to its lowest level in eight years, it remains an issue of great concern within South-East Asia. Acts of piracy in the waterways between Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia increased in 2014, despite regional co-operation and maritime patrols designed to tackle the problem. The Strait of Malacca, in particular, is at heightened risk of pirate attacks and Indonesian ports and territorial waters have been identified by the International Maritime Bureau as the most pirate-infested in South-East Asia.

Issues of trust, territorial disputes and a strong commitment to sovereignty among regional states made efforts to construct a multilateral solution to the problem difficult to achieve. Regional norms, such as the "ASEAN Way", limit the adoption of co-operative measures as they promote a culture that values sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. Malaysia and Indonesia see piracy as a domestic issue that can be tackled primarily through internal measures without foreign interference. As these two states border most of the Malacca Strait, their acquiescence to any multilateral effort is vital, but past attempts at coalition-building have proven to be underwhelming.

A major breakthrough was made in 2004, when Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore launched MALSINDO, a naval programme that introduced co-ordinated naval patrols. The respective navies are limited to patrolling their own territorial waters and are prevented from pursuing pirates across international borders, as this would be viewed as an infringement of state sovereignty. Thailand joined the patrol in 2005 with an initiative known as “Eye in the Sky”, which involves joint aerial surveillance; however, territorial sovereignty is again a major constraint to the effectiveness of the initiative. Air patrols are only permitted to go as far as three nautical miles into the 12 nautical mile territorial waters of participating states. While all these states are members of ASEAN they remain subject to the ASEAN Way, which prevents them from interfering in the internal affairs of another member state. The multilateral body’s overarching culture often dampens efforts to build closer regional co-operation and leaves the association unable to effectively tackle regional problems.

Indonesia has also been hesitant to join other, non-ASEAN, multilateral efforts to combat piracy within its region. The Regional Co-operation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) was finalised in November 2004 and entered into force in 2006. To date, 20 states have become contracting parties to ReCAAP. All ASEAN states, with the exception of Indonesia and Malaysia, have joined ReCAPP, along with Australia, the US, India and China. The organisation provides a platform for information exchange and assists with furthering co-operation among states and organisations interested in tackling regional piracy. It is unlikely, given his stance on multilateral initiatives, and Indonesia’s long opposition to many of those, that Jokowi will join the network.



Naval co-operation between Indonesia and other regional powers remains under-developed, largely due to issues associated with interoperability and limited capabilities. Also, those states that contribute to the Malacca Strait patrols have their own territorial disputes and rivalries with each other, which does not help matters. These disputes have often been subject to international legal arbitration or naval confrontation. The relationship between Indonesia and Malaysia, for instance, is still shaped by the 1960s *Konfrontasi* campaign in which Indonesia attempted to violently oppose the incorporation of the British Crown

Colonies of Sarawak and Sabah (then British North Borneo) into an expanded Malaysia. Malaysia and Singapore are at loggerheads over the Singaporean land reclamation project in the Johor Straits, Singapore's water supply and the ownership of Pedra Branca Islet. Indonesia has also objected to Singapore's land reclamation project, as it has contributed to the partial submersion of Nipah Island, the baseline for the Indonesian maritime border with Singapore. Jakarta argues that, if the island becomes completely submerged, the international boundary would be altered in its neighbour's favour. Indonesia is also hostile to certain powers operating so close to its territorial waters. Australia, India, Japan, the US and China have all offered to assist in patrolling the Malacca Strait at various times. India has been relegated to patrolling the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal, on the western edge of the Strait. The US attempted to increase its naval presence in South-East Asia in 2002, but was rebuffed by Indonesia and Malaysia. In 2004, it proposed the Regional Maritime Security Initiative, which would have involved joint patrols. That initiative, too, was quashed by Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur.

Multilateral efforts to combat piracy are likely to continue to be limited. Jokowi's maritime doctrine appears to value unilateral action against maritime threats rather than seeking wider, multilateral solutions. Responding to the increase in piracy taking place within Indonesian waters, the president has created a new [coastguard](#) and promised to increase defence spending. As these forces will probably only be able to operate within Indonesian waters, it is unlikely that they will contribute a great deal to a regional problem that transcends international maritime boundaries. It is unlikely, however, that the Jokowi Administration will significantly further efforts to find a solution to the regional piracy problem.

Conclusion

If Jokowi's statements are to be taken at face value, it would appear that Indonesian foreign policy under his Administration is taking a nationalistic turn. The president often uses blunt language while discussing his policies, which has been interpreted as a sign of increasing Indonesian nationalism. Jokowi is not an internationalist and clearly wishes to foster something of a strongman image at home. His foreign policy suggests that he will put the interests of Indonesia ahead of all else, something that most states do, although a usually lot less vocally than the current president. At the same time, however, the Jokowi Administration remains committed to ASEAN unity, as well as peace and stability in South-East Asia, as it is fully aware that doing otherwise will ultimately harm national interests.

At this early point of the Jokowi presidency, it seems that there will not be a radical shift in Indonesian foreign policy. Aggressive actions, such as the sinking of foreign fishing vessels, have not resulted in worsening relations with regional states. Furthermore, given the commitment that regional actors have to ASEAN unity, it is unlikely that such actions will have a significant impact on the South-East Asian political bloc. How the president deals with Chinese actions in Indonesia's near abroad, however, could have a much greater impact upon regional stability and is certainly worthy of close observation.

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