In Indo-Pacific strategic flux, where is Indonesia?

The recent resignation of United States President Donald Trump's national security adviser, retired general Michael Flynn, is both unprecedented and not surprising given the administration's frenzied start. The gang-ho surrounding his resignation came on the heels of a relatively good week for Asia policy; Trump reaffirmed the long-held One China policy and backed Japan after Pyongyang launched another missile test. But it seems likely that lunging from one crisis to another might be the new normal for American foreign policy.

This does not bode well for the Indo-Pacific — which scholars see as the strategic system linking the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean region, where the US remains part of the equation alongside China and India as well as Japan, Australia and Indonesia.

Five elements now define the strategic flux taking place in the Indo-Pacific.

One, America spiraling into uncertainty under Trump, whose belief in transactional bilateralism will marginalize ASEAN and send allies and partners scrambling for a steady hand. Not to mention the pandemonium that comes from not knowing who to listen to — is it Steve Bannon, or secretaries Tillerson and Mattis?

Two, China's increasingly hegemonic behavior without fully taking on the responsibilities of maintaining regional order beyond hollow economic projects, especially given Beijing's domestic concerns. Flashpoints in disputed maritime domains are only one out of many concerns over an emerging Pax Sinica, whether by default or by design.

Three, the growing profiles of India, Japan, and Australia, whether individually or in concert with the US, at a time when multilateralism is becoming an afterthought. Driven by the two signs above, these powers are seeking to hedge their strategic future in their own ways — possibly putting them on a zero-sum slippery slope.

Four, the intensifying mix of day-to-day operational demands — from maritime security to counter-trafficking — with the increasing probability of inter-state crises over disputed territories and "unsafe" military encounters at sea and in the air. This mix will further stress-test regional armed forces' professional development and their interactions with one another.

Five, the growing domestic populism of all stripes — from Trump, India's Narendra Modi, to the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte — will push and shove regional states to be more inward-looking and less interested or capable in managing geopolitical change. Expectations that strategic logic can be easily applied in regional affairs will need to be tempered.

One of the indicators — but not the only — of strategic flux is the presence of dueling strategic visions for the Indo-Pacific.

Consider India's Act East policy under Modi, America's rebalance under Barack Obama, and China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) framework under Xi Jinping. Recently, during Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Indonesia, he also offered Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy.

What about President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo's global maritime fulcrum doctrine (GMF)? Unfortunately, since its enunciation in 2014, the doctrine has yet to be enshrined in a full-fledged policy document. The much-anticipated National Ocean Policy White Paper has been drafted but still awaits Jokowi's endorsement through a presidential regulation.

The administration has also emphasized the GMF's internal aspects — maritime economy, resources, and connectivity, for example — rather than its external (foreign policy) dimensions. As such, the GMF never had a clear and coherent Indo-Pacific vision.

In fact, the foreign ministry's 2015-2019 Strategic Planning document does not mention the term "Indo-Pacific," except when referring to the now-defunct Indo-Pacific Treaty that then-foreign minister Natalegawa proposed in 2013.

The Foreign Ministry's focus is now on the Western Pacific region (East and Southeast Asia), rather than the Indian Ocean or how to strategically link the two regions. If there is any Indian Ocean vision, it revolves around the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

In her annual speech earlier this year, Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi claimed that Indonesia seeks to develop the Indian Ocean as the "binder" between Africa and the Pacific and to make IORA the regional architecture fill the "hollowness" of the Indian Ocean. To that effect, Jakarta seeks to develop an IORA Concord as a code of conduct and good governance guideline to be agreed upon at the upcoming IORA summit in Jakarta next month.

While the Indo-Pacific Treaty and IORA Concord are in line with Indonesia's institutionalist diplomatic culture and inclusivist foreign policy, they cannot stabilize the Indo-Pacific.

For one thing, multilateralism remains under-developed in the Indian Ocean region (think of the lackluster South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation). For another, if Indonesia has not shown it can lead ASEAN to strategic relevance in its own area, why should regional powers expect the infusion of the "ASEAN way" to the Indian Ocean be useful?

Indonesia should instead consider strengthening the strategic linkage between the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean first. For far too long, the East Asia Summit as supposedly the "highest" multilateral architecture is devoid of an explicitly Indo-Pacific strategic vision.

Moreover, Indonesia's strategic partnerships have been too focused on the US and China. Jakarta should spend more energy developing and further institutionalizing its other strategic partnerships with Japan, Australia, South Korea, and particularly India.

Overall, if Indonesia still believes in the GMF, policymakers should seriously develop an Indo-Pacific strategic vision and not solely rely on outdated multilateral tunnel visions.

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