Indonesia's pivotal role in the US's grand strategy

Evan A. Laksmana, Jakarta

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Is Indonesia rising in global politics? Many seem to think so, especially considering its democratic success story, continued economic growth and increasing global profile and influence in a wide range of issues, from human rights to trade and climate change.

Most recently, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was at the G20 Leaders Summit in Pittsburgh this week to voice not just Indonesia's interests, but also the concerns of the Muslim world and developing nations.

Meanwhile, Indonesia's standing in Southeast Asia also appears unshaken. In fact, when the US signed ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in late July, some speculated that the move was meant to support Indonesia's regional role rather than to benefit the whole region.

It is easy therefore to get caught up in the flurry of excitement as Indonesia seems ready to take on the mantle of global leadership.

However, besides Indonesia's domestic economic and political factors that have won President Yudhoyono much praise, one should not overlook the role of the US's grand strategy in Indonesia's rise.

In this respect, it is hard to fully dismiss the role that US endorsement plays in facilitating Indonesia's global role. After all, in the age of American primacy, how the US views a certain country goes a long way in shaping that country's international standing.

In turn, these views have always been within the corridor of US grand strategy, where military considerations often take precedence.

Understanding those military considerations therefore are often, though not always, crucial to discerning the US's grand strategy.

It is in this context that we should place the US-Indonesia partnership over the last few years, which initially had to address thorny bilateral issues, especially relating to military-to-military relations and the ban on Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and International Military Education and Training (IMET). Once these issues were resolved and sanctions lifted in 2005-2006, US security assistance quickly followed.

By 2008, at more than US$151 million, Indonesia, a non-treaty partner, had received more US economic and security assistance, including FMF and IMET, than Thailand and the Philippines, two key treaty allies.

The Indonesian military also participated in more than 100 joint programs under the aegis of the US Pacific Command's Theater Security Cooperation (TSC), and received funding for its Lebanon peacekeeping mission, to set up the Indonesian Defense University, and to provide coastal radar systems.

On hindsight, it was during these times of rapprochement that Indonesia's global profile seemingly began to grow.
Although some claim that this was merely out of the US's interest in capitalizing on Indonesia's value as a beacon of moderation in the Muslim world, we should not downplay the persistence of military considerations in US grand strategy, especially the preponderance of geographical awareness within the US defense and foreign policy establishment.

This was an awareness that President Barack Obama also felt and further accentuated as he entered office at a time of economic slump, overstretched military forces and strained relations with key allies and partners.

It seems plausible then that the US should selectively choose a few key pivotal states to assume a larger regional and global responsibility as it tries to recover from the strategic slump.

Such pivotal states would also usually be of geostrategic importance for the US and its allies as well, as historian Paul Kennedy noted a decade ago.

These considerations are consequently factored in as the US today tries to continually sustain its military forces in the Arabian Gulf, Middle East and Central Asia, while providing a credible deterrent against China, Iran and North Korea, and safeguards allies in Europe, East Asia and Australia.

To fulfill these tasks, military movements and rotations between the Pacific and Indian Oceans become critical, and given Asia's geostrategic maritime landscape, are best facilitated through naval access and transport.

This requires unimpeded passage through key Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOC).

This is a responsibility that falls under the US Pacific Command and the fleet's five aircraft carrier strike groups, 180 ships and 1,500 aircraft.

With such a large military contingent in such a crucial theater of operations, and under such a strained military condition, maintaining dominance at sea becomes one of the logical conclusions of President Obama's defense principles.

Indonesia enters the strategic equation here by virtue of its control over three key checkpoints controlling SLOCs critical for the US military: the Karimata Strait-Java Sea-Sunda Strait linking the South China Sea and Indian Ocean; the Makassar Strait-Lombok Strait linking the Pacific Ocean, Philippine waters and the Indian Ocean; and the Maluku Sea-Banda Sea-Indian Ocean.

These straits influence US military power projection to the Indian Ocean, East Africa and Persian Gulf regions from bases on the West Coast of the US, Hawaii and forward-basing locations in Asia.

If denied access, as Jakarta tried to do several times during the 1970s and 1990s, a naval battle group transiting from Yokosuka, Japan, to Bahrain, for example, would have to reroute around Australia, costing an extra $7-8 million and 15 days' delay, when rapid US response during a regional crisis is often critical.

Recently, when we consider the need for the US to increase troop rotations and revamp overstretched Orders of Battle (ORBAT) in the Middle East and Central Asia, then ensuring naval passage by using rapprochement tactics and boosting Indonesia's global role makes good geostrategic sense.

Even more so when we consider that today, passage through Indonesian straits determines the economic and energy lifelines of US friends (Japan and Korea) and foes (China and North Korea).

Thus geography has been, and perhaps always will be, a guiding principle for US grand strategy in the region. One would do well to remember that ultimately, as Colin Gray argues, all politics is geopolitics, and all strategy is geostrategy.

The writer is a researcher at the Department of Politics and International Relations, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Jakarta. Parts of this article were recently presented at the 11th ASEAN ISIS-IIR Taiwan Dialogue.