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Long-Term External Security Threats from Indonesia's Perspective - Part 2: Australia and ASEAN Stability

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Key Points

- Some Indonesian officials are suspicious of Australia's strategic goals in the region based on past actions that opposed Jakarta's interests.
- The unlikely possibility that Australia will support an independent West Papua may become a cause for concern if international focus on the independence movement continues to grow.
- Territorial disputes in the South China Sea, rapidly-increasing tensions and the possibility of a Cold War between China and the United States could cause divisions between South-East Asian countries.
- ASEAN members appear more likely to maintain loose bonds to the organisation rather than integrate more closely in the long-term future, meaning that divisions caused by external pressures could become a catalyst for issues such as regional boundary disputes to escalate.

Summary

Most of Indonesia's current security concerns do not stem from traditional sources of geopolitical conflict, but rather internal instability caused by terrorism, separatism and ethnic and religious conflict. In the long term, however, that may change. This paper is the second part of a series that looks at some of the possible concerns from Indonesia's perspective of threats to its security that may arise in the long-term future.

Analysis

Australia

While it may seem unlikely from Canberra's perspective, Australia does pose a potential long-term security concern for some Indonesian officials. That concern stems primarily from suspicions about Australia's strategic goals in the region. Canberra has opposed Jakarta's interests in the past, albeit reluctantly, through supporting East Timor's independence and the formation of Malaysia during *Konfrontasi*, which saw limited conflict between Australian and Indonesian troops. Among some Indonesian officials, those past actions justify their suspicions of Australia today. One of those officials is a former commander of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI), Gatot Nurmantyo. In 2015, Gatot, who is known for his frequent warnings of proxy wars against Indonesia, [told university students](#) that East Timor's independence was part of a proxy war by Australia to secure the Greater Sunrise oil field from Indonesia.

It is unclear how far those suspicions may be spread among Indonesian officials, although it does seem unlikely that many would hold views as strong as Gatot. For example, in 2016, Major-General Yoedhi Swastano [told](#) Australian Defence Minister Marise Payne that 'We are not only a neighbour country but we should be brothers... So for us Australia is not a threat. We don't have big issues. There are some small ones [which] is pretty normal to happen between two neighbour countries.' In the current context, there are few geostrategic pressures that would inflame those suspicions about Australia's strategic ambitions. Following his meeting with Ms Payne, however, Major-General Yoedhi did add: 'Of course we asked what their political stance is, especially in Papua... you see we have a little bit of problems in Papua.' Writing in the [Journal of Political Risk](#), Vanuatu-based photojournalist Ben Bohane expounded further on that problem, arguing that following Australia's actions in East Timor, 'no amount of Australian assurances of Indonesian sovereignty will ever convince Jakarta's generals that Australia does not have designs on West Papua'.

As noted in a previous [Strategic Analysis Paper](#), separatism has been a major security concern for the government in its relatively short history. The Indonesian Government was reluctant to grant East Timor's independence for fear that it could inspire other secessionist movements in resource-rich regions such as Aceh, Riau and West Papua (West Papua includes two provinces, Papua and West Papua, located in Western New Guinea). While the threat of separatism in those provinces is significantly lower than it has been, they still constitute a long-term security concern. That is especially true for West Papua, where there has been growing international attention on the push for independence in that province, and concern for the human rights of its populace. Additionally, unlike the rest of Indonesia, West Papua is 83 per cent Christian, making its population a religious minority. For that reason, West Papuan independence is much more likely to receive international support from Western countries such as Australia than Aceh, which is often criticised in Western media for its discriminatory policies and human rights abuses involving the application of Sharia statutes.

It is, however, highly unlikely that Australia will show explicit support for West Papuan independence for some time. The approach of the Australian Government, so far, has been

to play down concerns surrounding West Papua in the interests of respecting Indonesian sovereignty and preserving bilateral relations. That stance is unlikely to change any time soon, unless the strategic benefit of supporting West Papuan independence outweighs the cost that that decision will have on diplomatic relations with Indonesia. Several factors will need to come into play for that to happen, including: a reduction in the economic and strategic importance of the province to Indonesia, whether that be through the depletion of West Papua's natural resources or strong economic growth in Indonesia's other provinces; the risk that conflict will ensue following independence and the resulting influx of refugees is very low; and that independent West Papua will be stable, which, in Jakarta's perspective, implies a greater West Papuan reliance on Indonesia for economic and military support rather than on Australia.

External pressures on ASEAN stability

The stability of countries that make up the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) will remain a priority for Indonesia, as the breaking up of that grouping could elevate the risk of conflict in the long term. While ASEAN is often criticised for its policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of its member-states, some experts have suggested that the group has made an important contribution to regional security by fostering an environment in which shared challenges can be discussed. [According to Murray Hiebert](#), senior advisor and deputy director of the Southeast Asia Program at the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 'In Asia, talking and relationship building is half the challenge to solving problems.' Without that environment, misunderstandings between ASEAN countries have a greater chance of creating regional friction.

Several factors could lead to the dissolution of ASEAN. As covered by a previous [Strategic Weekly Analysis](#), one of those is the rising geopolitical tension between China and the United States. Attempts by Washington and Beijing to exert influence in the region could sow division among ASEAN countries. China's continued attempt to claim swathes of the South China Sea through building artificial islands also aggravate those divisions. Despite the fact that China's actions are a considerable concern for many ASEAN countries, they have yet to adopt a unified stance on the issue and it is unlikely that they will do so.

In the long term, it could be in the interests of some major powers to capitalise on a divided ASEAN, as it is easier to exert influence through bilateral relations than through a multilateral body. Some analysts have already accused China of using such a tactic. As Daniel O'Neil, associate professor at Yale University, writes:

While Chinese power by nearly any measure is much greater than that of any single rival claimant, ASEAN stands as a multilateral institution through which these weaker states can balance against China's relative power in negotiations. China, therefore, pursues a divide and conquer strategy against ASEAN member states in order to prevent them from acting collectively on this issue through this multilateral forum. Chinese efforts are

aimed at preventing the consensus among ASEAN member states that is at the heart of the “ASEAN Way.”¹

If ASEAN were to grow in significance and hinder China’s regional interests, Chinese President Xi Jinping would likely employ a strategy similar to that seen in his recent trip to Europe. In April 2019, President Xi made a round trip to various European Union (EU) countries and signed multi-billion dollar contracts with Italy and France. A previous [FDI paper noted that that](#) trip was an outstanding success for Mr Xi, who, by playing on existing frictions between EU member states, further fractured the European Union and made China a larger factor and more influential player in Europe’s decision-making processes.

That being said, the EU and ASEAN are vastly different organisations. While the philosophy behind the EU is to be a more strongly-integrated organisation, ASEAN remains loose and suffers from weak institutionalisation. That difference may work in ASEAN’s favour, however. The firmer bonds of the EU mean that fractures from external forces may put a greater strain on the organisation; ASEAN, however, is more malleable, and can better withstand those forces. Dylan Loh Ming Hui, author and PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge, [expands on that point](#), noting that the looseness of the organisation ‘affords leaders in mainly illiberal democratic Southeast Asia the flexibility and political space to, firstly and primarily, concentrate on nation-building and in securing domestic legitimacy and, secondly, to integrate into ASEAN without compromising its autonomy and sovereignty.’

Internal Pressure on ASEAN Stability

While the looseness of ASEAN may mean that it can survive periods of suspicion and mistrust, it also makes those suspicions difficult to address. For that reason, it seems unlikely that ASEAN members will integrate more closely in the future. As noted by Mathew Davies, Head of the Department of International Relations at the Australian National University’s College of Asia, [ASEAN is dominated by rituals](#) and symbols of unity, which overlay, but do not replace, underlying disagreements and competition. So in the long-term future, while ASEAN may persist, it is likely that suspicions will also persist, and its members will either remain stagnant or drift farther apart.

Those suspicions could raise problems in the context of tensions in the South China Sea, as ASEAN countries begin to place a greater emphasis on maritime defence and on increasing the capacity of their naval forces. There is a dramatic shift from the priorities of ten years ago, when the foreseeable threats faced by most South-East Asian states primarily came from non-state actors. Increasing naval capacity through acquiring warships and even submarines was not relevant to the acute threats faced by those countries at the time. In the long term, however, with a potential power shift towards the Asia-Pacific, those larger naval capacities will become more salient. While greater naval capacity may mean more security, it could also introduce regional frictions, especially if South-East Asian countries build up naval capacities with the intention to match or compete with the navy of their neighbours. One area where such a build-up will likely take place is in enlarged submarine

¹ O’Neil, Daniel C., ‘Dividing ASEAN and Conquering the South China Sea: China’s Financial Power Projection’. Hong Kong Press, September 2018, p. 13.

fleets. So far, only four out of eleven navies in South-East Asia currently operate submarines. As noted in a previous [Strategic Weekly Analysis](#), submarines that are used for covert operations have the potential to amplify suspicions between neighbours and could jeopardise peaceful resolutions to border negotiations.

A local element that may add to the threat of division is the trend of shifting public attitudes towards isolationism. Brexit and “America First” are two recent examples of isolationist foreign policy being fuelled by publics embroiled in divisive propaganda and misinformation campaigns. If those attitudes are adopted in ASEAN countries, they could have a profound impact on the priorities of the governments; as the President of the Council on Foreign Relations, Richard N. Haas, noted, [foreign policy begins at home](#). Indonesia has been shown to be especially vulnerable to fake news and misinformation campaigns in recent years. Those campaigns, often utilised and pushed by political groups, have played a role in a number of arrests including, most notably, that of former Jakarta governor Basuki “Ahok” Tjahaja Purnama in 2017. In such an environment, political actors may be better able to push an isolationist agenda.

Finally, if divisions were to grow, regional boundary and border disputes could catalyse regional instability. Excluding territorial disputes that include China, there are eleven ongoing disputes between ASEAN members. One notable example is the Cambodian-Thai border dispute which turned aggressive in 2011 after several clashes took place between troops on either side. In the two years prior to the clashes, ASEAN members [ignored growing warning signs](#) rather than intervening to de-escalate the situation as quickly as possible. While that incident may have been a cause for concern for ASEAN members, there has been significant progress towards a peaceful resolution and few, if any, long-lasting repercussions on the stability of the region. In the current context, it is unlikely that similar disputes between ASEAN members will escalate beyond what was seen in the Cambodian-Thai dispute and become a catalyst for instability in the region. If divisions were to grow between ASEAN members because of other factors, however, it would be significantly more difficult to resolve border disputes among those members, especially if ASEAN lacks the will and means to take preventative measures, thus making those border confrontations potentially more dangerous.

Conclusion

China’s manoeuvrings in the South China Sea, Australia’s strategic vision for the region, and ASEAN stability represent three possible security concerns from the perspective the Indonesian Government. While it is possible that those seemingly minor concerns may escalate more seriously in the future, it is unlikely that such a “perfect storm” of conditions that are required to plunge the region into turmoil will take place. That being said, those threats could play a significant role in steering Indonesian foreign policy, and could help explain possible future decisions by the Indonesian Government, such as, for example, reducing China’s role in Indonesia’s economy or, while unlikely, pushing for a more integrated ASEAN.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.

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