



# Southwest Pacific Dialogue: Indonesia's Newest Leverage in the Asia Pacific\*

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## Introduction

The Asia-Pacific undoubtedly is a very important part of the global landscape. It is the home of more than two thirds of the world's population and encompasses the major powers of the globe, the most advanced industrialized economies as well as some of the least developed countries. The region is endowed with rich cultural, racial and ethnic diversity as well as with abundant human, natural, financial and technological resources.

In the face of deepening interdependence and the surge of globalization and liberalization, the countries of the Asia-Pacific have interacted in such a way that has led to the strengthening of regional solidarity. Regional cooperation, obviously, in the region became a cushion in ensuring the maintenance of smooth bilateral relations and cooperation. There were instances where existing differences or conflicts between nations were tempered to give way to acceptable regional solidarity (Djiwandono, 1997). Countries, particularly the small ones, grouped together in order to have a greater voice in world affairs and collectively be able to deter possible external threat (Xuto, 1973).

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Through the years, the region witnessed the establishment and growth of such cooperative arrangements and forums such as Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC), the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN+3 (ASEAN, China, Japan, Korea). These arrangements and forums have fostered the spirit of cooperation. There have also been security dialogues that encouraged participating countries to discuss and share information on security perceptions, threat assessments and intelligence estimates of regional security developments. Particular issues such as refugee movements, piracy, terrorism, major weapons acquisition programs, military exercises and forward deployments, defense doctrines and operational concepts are also tackled at these meetings (Gurtov, 2002).

Indonesia's views and policies on cooperation with the countries of the Asia-Pacific region have always been based on a careful appraisal of the particular relevance and potentials of such regional cooperation. Thus, the Asia-Pacific region has been Indonesia's main diplomatic arena, with Indonesia initiating and participating in many cooperative arrangements and organizations in the region. One of its initiatives is the newly established Southwest Pacific Dialogue (Shihab, 2001).

### **Indonesia and its Foreign Policy in the Reformasi Era**

With its territorial reach, immense population, and legacy of anti-colonial struggle, Indonesia has been viewed as the heavyweight of Southeast Asia (Case 2002, 20). Indonesia is the largest archipelago in the world. It consists of five major islands and about 30 smaller groups. Altogether there are 13,667 islands and islets of which about 6,000 are inhabited. The archipelago is at a crossroads between two oceans, the Pacific and the Indian oceans, and bridges two continents, Asia and Australia. This strategic position has been said to influence practically all aspects of life of the country (Indonesia 2003 Handbook).

With such geo-cultural importance, Indonesia has embraced an active and independent foreign policy since 1945. Such a move was essentially designed to serve the national interest while simultaneously allowing Indonesia to cooperate with other nations to “abolish colonialism and imperialism in all their forms and manifestations for the sake of world peace and social justice” (Wirajuda, 2001). Times, however, have changed. The ‘reformasi’ government acknowledged that the only way to seize the opportunities offered by globalization and avoid devastation from its negative effects is to narrow the gap between the “domestic” and “international”. To address that challenge, Indonesian diplomacy underwent a mild modification intended to effectively translate national developments to foreign audiences and at the same time to convey efficiently the international realities and ideas in the mainstream of international thought to national constituencies (Wirajuda, 2001).

To pursue such a policy, the People’s Consultative Assembly laid down a resolution on foreign relations in 1993. It was still highly emphasized that foreign relations shall be conducted on the basis of the independent and active foreign policy and for the purpose of establishing a world order based on freedom, lasting peace and social justice. But this was to materialize through the strengthening of multilateral arrangements such as United Nations, ASEAN, the Non- Aligned Movement, the Islamic Conference Organization and many more (Wirajuda, 2001).

The Indonesians also wanted to project a positive image abroad after its image was tainted by human rights violations in the former East Timor. For them, such image can be corrected as well as enhanced by way of cultural activities. Furthermore, Indonesia decided to continue to play a role in settling international problems based on the spirit of the Ten Principles of Bandung (Wirajuda, 2001).

The legislative body also advocated for greater cooperation among the countries of the South Asian and Southwest Pacific regions. This goal later on served as the basis for the birth of the West Pacific Forum, which eventually evolved into the Southwest Pacific Dialogue. Shihab (2001)

opined that the creation of such a forum was an effort to reposition Indonesia to play an appropriate role in the Pacific, a role that was not possible before because of the East Timor issue, but which today could be an important pillar of Indonesian foreign policy as well as a service to the Asia-Pacific region.

### **Southwest Pacific Dialogue: Its Nature and Programs**

The Southwest Pacific Dialogue was likely born out of then President Abdurrahman Wahid's anger against the sharp-tongued statesman of the region, Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew. In the year 2000, Abdurrahman Wahid spontaneously announced his idea of establishing a new multilateral West Pacific grouping after being humiliated by Lee, who had rejected his proposal to include Papua New Guinea and Timor Leste into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Purba, 2002).

After attending the annual ASEAN summit in Singapore in 2000, Wahid pointed out that the West Pacific forum would become a new cornerstone for Indonesia's diplomacy. Upon the instruction of their chief executive, Jakarta's Ministry of Foreign Affairs acted with the knowledge that, at least for the short term, they could use the informal forum to counter the diplomatic campaigns by the Free Papua Movement (OPM) among states in the Pacific, particularly Vanuatu (Purba, 2002).

The idea of establishing a forum for the West Pacific was particularly significant in the face of three important changes that had taken place on the political and economic landscapes of the Asia-Pacific region (Shihab, 2001).

With the independence of Timor Leste in 2000, it was deemed to be the interest of the region that assistance in large amounts be extended to the Timorese so that they can develop their political and economic infrastructure.

Secondly, the separatist movements in the region constituted a direct threat to its stability of the region as well as to good bilateral relations between affected countries.

The third change was the economic devastation caused by the Asian financial crises, which weakened the capability of the region in enhancing their development cooperation. Such cooperation had actually been based on bilateral agreements and at times resulted in disadvantaged situations for some countries (Shihab, 2001).

In response to the new situation, the Wahid Government was convinced that mutual cooperation in the region could be achieved through a forum in which countries can contribute to finding ways and means to solve the problems and concerns besetting the entire region (Shihab, 2001).

As a manifestation, six ministers convened in the Royal City of Jogjakarta to talk about the programs and strategies of the SwPD on October 5, 2002. Dr. N. Hassan Wirajuda, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia served as the chairperson the meeting was attended by Mr. Alexander Downer, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Australia, Mr. Phil Goff, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of New Zealand, Sir Rabbie Namaliu, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Immigration of Papua New Guinea., Mr. Blas F. Ople Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Philippines, and Mr. Jose Ramos-Horta, Senior Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Timor-Leste. At the end of their meeting, they signed a declaration on the establishment of a new forum in the Southwest Pacific region (Southwest Pacific Dialogue 2003).

The main objective of the Southwest Pacific Dialogue is to provide a forum for exchanging views and expertise on regional issues and possible sub-regional response to present and future challenges. The Dialogue will be based on the principles of regionalism, equality of members, non-interference in the domestic affairs, and accommodation. The ministers were to meet regularly and the participating countries will

host the Dialogue on a rotational basis in alphabetical order. A Senior Officials Meeting was to be convened annually to discuss and monitor the implementation of the Ministers' decisions (interview with Prajat, Tambunan).

Collectively, the SwPD member countries through their respective representatives expressed an absolute condemnation of acts of terrorism in whatever form and wherever and by whoever committed. By acknowledging terrorism as a profound threat to national, regional and international peace and security, the ministers agreed to devote their individual and collective energies to counterattack it, either by force or economically through poverty reduction. This declaration, however, clearly clarified that the fight was not targeted at any particular religious or ethnic group (interview with Prajat, Tambunan).

The ministers shared a common view that cooperation in the areas of education and culture should be further promoted through people-to-people contacts (interviews with Irawan, Sarsono, Kuntarto). In this regard, they urged relevant institutions and communities to participate in supporting this cooperation. In June 2003, Indonesia sponsored the 1<sup>st</sup> Southwest Pacific Dialogue Cultural Exchange Scholarship in Bandung and Jogjakarta for young representatives of the member-countries to learn Javanese and Sundanese culture<sup>1</sup>.

Recognizing the need to enhance cooperation among countries in the region on maritime-related issues, it was agreed to explore areas of cooperation such as the promotion of safety of navigation and communication, coordination of search and rescue, and combating piracy and armed robbery. The ministers also stressed the need for the promotion and preservation of the marine environment, as well as for the conduct of marine scientific research (SwPD Handbook, 3).

The importance of developing national strategies and regional cooperation for combating transnational crimes including money laundering, drug trafficking, and trafficking of humans, was also included in the forum's concerns. Illegal migration, for instance, called the attention

of the member-countries since it had become an obvious irritant among neighbors. Indonesia was not spared from it since its vast archipelago is favored by Middle Eastern and Afghan refugees as a jumping off point for Australia. Thousands of illegal immigrants would make the perilous sea voyage south only to end up in desert detention camps in Australia's outback (Sukasorsono, 2002).

### **SWPD as Indonesia's fresh leverage**

The expansion of Indonesia's presence in the South Pacific countries is triggered by the dire need to safeguard its "soft underbelly". The latter refers to former East Timor, Irian Jaya or Papua and also South Moluccas. The attraction of the South Pacific countries to these areas was very strong due to ethnic affinities and geographic proximity (Djalal 2001, 6). Thus, it was Indonesia's desire to seek a solution to these problems through discussions among representatives of neighboring countries rather than leaving it to confrontational negotiations between the Indonesian central government and advocates of regional independence. Moreover, Australia and New Zealand were also concerned with the simmering separatist movements in the Melanesian countries of Fiji and the Solomon Islands, which were both being considered as possible new members of the forum in the future (Letter from Samoa, 2001).

It should be noted that Indonesia is split between the western part, facing the Indian Ocean, and the eastern regions, facing the Pacific Ocean. People in Papua are not much interested in the progress of Singapore or Malaysia, which are too remote from them. Culturally and geographically, they feel much closer to Papua New Guinea. The sufferings of Papuans easily provoke expressions of solidarity from their neighbors. Australia, New Zealand and the smaller states in the Pacific are Papua's closer neighbors (Shihab, 2001).

For the East Nusa Tenggara people, East Timor was their nearest neighbor, with whom the people shared a similar culture, religion and also economic hardships. Although the presence of unwanted refugees

from East Timor is still a big burden for the poor province, a prosperous East Timor will also benefit its closest neighbor. Instability and chaos in the new state will firstly affect East Nusa Tenggara. Australia is another major economic power important to Nusa Tenggara. Moreover, residents of Maluku and North Maluku are also culturally and physically closer to those in the Pacific (Shihab, 2001).

This situation forced the Indonesian government to give more serious attention to the Pacific, although this move was not only directed at minimizing the international support for the Papuan rebels but also to boost economic cooperation between Indonesia's eastern provinces and the Pacific countries. Although many of the countries in the Pacific are small in terms of size or population, they could create problems for Indonesia as in the case of the 1980s, when Jakarta clearly underestimated the position of outspoken Vanuatu. Its government often attacked Indonesia's position on East Timor and Papua, but it was ignored for a long time until the government had no choice but to give more attention to the tiny island (Purba, 2002).

Some common maritime interests (e.g. fishing, prevention of marine pollution, maritime boundaries, marine safety and marine scientific research) between the archipelagic and island countries of the southwest Pacific also justified the establishment of a separate forum (Bateman, 2001). Moreover, the recent amendment to the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia could enable countries outside SEA, including those in the Southwest Pacific, to accede to the treaty (Alatas, 2001). As for Indonesia, close cooperation with the Southwest Pacific countries has featured as an important foreign policy directive in the Guidelines of State Policy since 1978 (Alatas, 2001).

In its economic aspect, it would have been possible to develop within the Southwest Pacific a microcosm of the North-South global partnership for development, with Australia and New Zealand representing the North, while Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines and other developing nations in the region represent the South. It was said that the



economic synergy that could be developed within the forum countries could indeed be tremendous (Alatas, 2001).

The forum is also expected to have a positive impact on the bilateral relations of the countries of the region in the context of promoting peace and security. Three of the Southwest Pacific countries have land borders where bilateral interactions could be difficult to manage if insurgents from either side operate in those border areas, as they do in the case of Papua New Guinea and Indonesia. Moreover, regional action would be much more effective against transnational crimes, such as the trafficking in illicit drugs and human beings, compared to the efforts of any single country (1st Ministerial Meeting, 2002).

Indeed, recent developments in the region encouraged the utilization of multilateral forums to expand bilateral contacts and promote national interests. But some SwPD members once had serious problems and bitter experiences with Indonesia, as was the case with the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Likewise, many Indonesians feel that they have sacrificed too much for neighbors, who did not assist them enough during its own difficult times. It was also argued that Indonesia is too big to depend only on ASEAN and that Indonesia, perceived as much weaker now, is no longer the anchor of ASEAN (Bandoro, 2003). These are among the reasons why President Wahid had tried to correct the four-decade paradigm that ASEAN was the cornerstone for Indonesia's foreign affairs policy making — a paradigm which had in effect neglected the needs of people living in Indonesia's eastern part (Purba, 2002).

Since its establishment in 1967, ASEAN has been relatively more relevant for the interests of people in western Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei, the Philippines, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar as members, but not for the eastern part of Indonesia particularly North Sulawesi. The people of Sulawesi did not find any tangible benefit from the regional organization and their links with the Philippines were considered even more valuable as its closest foreign neighbor (Purba, 2002).

## Conclusion

To fast track its economic recovery efforts, Indonesia needs a stable, peaceful and prosperous environment. With the change in the political conditions of the Pacific region, especially with the birth of the new state of Timor Leste, and the end of the conflict in Indonesia's eastern part, Indonesia was motivated to make a full swing of its diplomatic strategy in the region.

Through SwPD, Indonesia expects to be able to demand a compromise stand on this issue of separatism, being a revered pluralist society in terms of ethnicity, culture and religion. Scholarship programs such as *tari* (dance) and *gamelan* (music) lessons were offered to young scholars from SwPD member countries. This pilot program for socio-cultural cooperation was held in Jogjakarta and Bandung and financed by the Indonesian government (SwPD Handbook, 2003; Australian MFA, 2003). Such a gesture supports Indonesia's goal of purveying a positive image as well as raising mutual understanding among countries in the Southwest Pacific area.

In the midst of many complicated challenges, a dialogue forum such as SwPD appears to have a potential in finding solutions to the border problems. This is a good venue for the evaluation of "Cross Border Activities" in order to have a mutual understanding of "country border zone" (SwPD Handbook, 2003).

Moreover, being a victim of a terrorist attack on October 12, 2002, Indonesia should be able to employ the SwPD to convince Australia and other Pacific countries that international cooperation to fight terrorism is imperative. More importantly, Indonesia through SwPD will get the support and assistance of the international community to lessen the impact of terrorism as well as to regain the economic confidence of these countries in Indonesia.

In order for Indonesia to succeed in its newest initiative, according to Bantarto (2002), it must observe the following considerations.

Indonesia must be able to maintain stable bilateral and trilateral relations with members of the Forum, a relation which is not contaminated by feelings of past hatred. It must manage also separatist movements in such a way that would not violate human rights.

Since cooperation in the SwPD is quite different from that of ASEAN, Indonesia must introduce a new concept of economic, political and security cooperation to enhance the Forum's credibility. The framework may be one that might neutralize and deter whatever problems may occur. At the same time, it should initiate a fresh approach to solve the territorial disputes between Indonesia and other SwPD members. This is really important if SwPD wants to be freed from unexpected turbulence and if Indonesia wishes to be respected by SwPD.

Indonesia should also initiate a double-edged diplomacy: Current and future policy and diplomacy towards the region must win the hearts of other members of the domestic foreign policy community.

It should be taken into consideration that for these strategies to become effective, they must be coupled with a continuous domestic stability. Indonesia should restore its role in Southeast Asia since the profound benefits in the region flow from extensive partnerships and friendships with the countries in the region.

Now that Indonesia has added SwPD to the list of its Asia Pacific diplomatic priorities, in addition to ASEAN and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC), Indonesia should base its regional diplomacy on rational considerations and in line with the particular geopolitical interests of the participating countries (Shihab, 2001; various interviews).

Indonesia's diplomacy in Asia Pacific particularly the Southwest Pacific region should not be pursued at the expense of its interest in ASEAN. Thus, the success in the diplomacy toward SwPD will depend on its capacity to balance diplomatic concerns. In effect, the success of the forum will greatly rely, among others, on the types of measures Indonesia will initiate to enhance the confidence of other participating countries. After all, SwPD is still largely in its confidence building stages.

### Note

- 1 The Indonesian government offered five cultural bridges such as *karawitan*, *tari* (dance), *gamelan* (music), *wayang golek* (puppet playing) and *angklung* ensemble in West and East Java. Five participants are assigned in Bandung and ten delegates in Jogjakarta. The Philippines has four representatives, Papua New Guinea and Timor Leste have 3 delegates while New Zealand and Australia have one representative respectively.

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