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‘Indo-Pacific has been the buzzword for the past 5-10 years’

Shafiah Muhibat from Jakarta on Indonesia’s role in the world, the waning influence of ASEAN and foreign interests in the Indo-Pacific region

Last year, Indonesia’s President Joko Widodo went on a diplomatic mission to Kyiv and Moscow in order to revive the export of grain. In November, he hosted the G20 Summit. What role does Indonesia seek to play on a global scale?

Reflecting solely on that visit, I would not expect too much. The reasons for the visits were mostly domestic interests — you mentioned grain exports. We were having a lot of issues with food and energy prices. There were a lot of protests in Indonesia because the government had to reduce fuel subsidies, and there were already some complaints about the rise of food prices as well. These were some of the impacts we felt with regard to the Ukraine war. The first reason for those visits was trying to address these issues. The second was trying to save the G20 Summit because, at that time, there were threats of boycotts from a lot of European countries; They would not come if Putin showed up or if Zelenskyy was not invited.

Indonesia currently holds the chairmanship of ASEAN. But how relevant is the organisation with regard to the regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific? When we look at conflict resolution in the South China Sea or the implementation of the Myanmar peace plan, we don’t see any progress.

To be frank, these days, ASEAN unfortunately is not very relevant. But we don't have any alternatives. One or two decades ago, ASEAN was the driving force of all dialogues and cooperation, first in Southeast Asia, then expanding to the Indo-Pacific. Now, it's not relevant anymore. Some countries are losing patience with ASEAN, and that's why you now see a lot of other minilateral platforms such as AUKAS or QUAD. And in the future, there might be more. The establishments of these new platforms are an effort to find alternatives

to ASEAN. At the same time, these new platforms also create a lot of resentment from some countries in the region, because they are exclusive.

In Indonesia, there is strong criticism towards ASEAN. A lot of critics say that Indonesia has now become too big for the organisation; We should just leave it and find other platforms for our interest. But then again, until you can find an alternative that can respond to the current challenges, states will still turn to ASEAN, whether it is relevant or not.

The members of ASEAN are very heterogenous, also when it comes to political systems. One of the major principles is non-interference in others' affairs. Do you see any possibility for a reform of the organisation, maybe towards more integration like in the EU?

Does ASEAN need to be reformed? Definitely, but that is very difficult. Some of ASEAN's biggest challenges are the principles that it is based upon. You mentioned non-interference. Also, everything has to be consensual, everything has to be agreed upon by all 10 member states. And then, there's also the highly bureaucratic decision-making process. It's not easy to change this. The 10 countries agreed to group together *because* it is a loose organisation, because they're not threatened by too much interference. If you try to change some aspects, some countries might leave. That's the dilemma here: do you want to keep the 10 countries working together, having a dialogue and maintaining the same – now irrelevant – structure, or do you try to be more advanced and implement reforms with the risk of some members leaving?

How concerned are you about the power rivalry between China and the US in the region? Historically, Indonesia refrains to take any sides. Do you think it will be possible for Jakarta to keep its position of non-alignment in the future?

Reflecting on past experiences and Indonesia's principles of foreign policy, I think there will never be a time when we would openly decide to choose sides. That's not in the DNA of the country. We had a lot of benefits from maintaining good relations with both the US and China, and we would like to keep it that way. It has also been more beneficial for Indonesia when the other countries in Southeast Asia maintained the same strategy, not siding with any blocks. But yes, it's going to be more and more difficult to maintain this position. And there might be things in the future that could change it. On the top of the list would be Taiwan. Should anything happen there, it might be the moment when Southeast Asian states, not only Indonesia, will

have to choose who to side with.

Germany and the EU claim to attach great strategic importance to the Indo-Pacific region and Southeast Asia. What do you expect from the Europeans?

'Indo-Pacific' has been the buzzword for the past 5-10 years. Everybody wants to be involved in the region. Every few months, it seems that new Indo-Pacific documents are being drafted in different countries, and then, their embassies want to hold a seminar or conference and work together with us. On the one hand, it's a good sign that all this attention is on the Indo-Pacific, meaning that the region is becoming more and more important. But on the other hand, it also gets overwhelming. Going through all of these documents, it seems like you're reading the same thing. And it gets a little bit confusing trying to understand what these countries want to achieve in the region.

The US, for example, has been in the Indo-Pacific with its security attachment for a long time. The Japanese have a long history. They offer development and technical assistance and assist countries with trainings. The Chinese were a little late, but they came with their offers of investment in infrastructure. So, there are already successful patterns, and now, it seems as if other countries want to copy this. And my question is: Why would you want to copy things that have been successfully done by other countries? Are you sure you have what it takes to try to replace these countries? Or do you have other interests, other modalities that are strikingly different than those of the other countries so that now, you can actually work together, along with the regional states, and try to build the Indo-Pacific as a stable and prosperous region?

I don't think that this is something that has been well thought-through by a lot of European countries. If you insist on working on the same issues as countries that have been there before, things become ineffective and redundant in a way. Usually, when I make these criticisms, people from countries like Germany ask me: Then tell us what you want from us? But I think that's not the right approach. If you ask us what we want, we can come up with a list; Give us money. We want to build a bridge here, we want to build a port there, we want to build roads. But that's not the way it works. Germany should know what its modalities are, what its interests are. Why would you want to be involved in a region that's far away when you have a conflict right in your backyard? There must be an interest there that you want to follow, and that is something that you need to work on – not reflect on what the countries in the region need.

You just mentioned interests. In Europe, and particularly in Germany, we have a debate about a value-based foreign policy versus an interest-based one. What is your perspective on this?

First of all, every country is free to define its own foreign policy. So, if Germany wants to focus on a value-based foreign policy, of course, it is free to do that. But issues might arise when you interact with other countries that have other positions. It really depends on what issues you want to tackle. There are things that countries are ready to work on with partner, following a value-based line. But there are also some issues that are completely interest-based. For example, Indonesia is looking for investments on infrastructure. Like I said, Germany is free to pursue a value-based foreign policy, but then it must be prepared for other countries or issues not following this logic.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalkis.



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