

Indonesia in Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper

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This comment examines how Australia assesses Indonesia's strategic value and the nature of the bilateral relationship by comparing the 2016 Defence White Paper (DWP2016) with its 2013 and 2009 predecessors. As a whole, DWP2016 mentioned or referenced Indonesia twenty-eight times, while the 2013 and 2009 White Papers did so thirty-two and twenty-one times, respectively.¹ Seen through this simplistic benchmark, there seems to be no significant changes in how Canberra sees Jakarta. Upon closer examination, however, we can discern the subtle evolution of Canberra's assessments.

As Canberra gradually abandons traditional security-centric assumptions about Indonesia, the DWP2016 sets the tone of the bilateral relationship in geo-economic terms. While DWP2016 provides a broader space for cooperation by highlighting the strategic goal of common prosperity, the changing strategic landscape—particularly the South China Sea and the US-China strategic rivalry—casts a long shadow over assessments of Jakarta's regional leadership. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, the evolving common security challenges remains intertwined with Indonesia's domestic political landscape and the nature of civil-military relations. The following sections elaborate and expand these arguments.

Changing the Terms of Reference

In setting the tone for Australia-Indonesia relations, DWP2016 defines Indonesia's importance firstly through an economic lens: "Its ... economic development [and] ... growth presents opportunities to build prosperity for both Australia and Indonesia." (para 2.81). Unlike this "common prosperity" tone, the 2013 White Paper looks at Indonesia firstly in terms of strategic geography:

Denying an adversary our air and sea approaches in the archipelago [to Australia's north] is vitally important for deterring and defeating attacks on Australian territory ... As Indonesia comprises much of this archipelago,

¹ See Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009); *Defence White Paper 2013* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2013); *2016 Defence White Paper* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2016).

Australia's strong partnership with Indonesia remains our most important regional strategic relationship.²

Similarly, in 2009, “the security, stability and cohesion of our immediate neighbourhood, which we share with Indonesia ... [matters in that] they are not a source of threat to Australia, and that no major military power ... has access to bases in our neighbourhood from which to project force against us.”³

This shift in setting the terms of reference through which Australia sees Indonesia is important as it highlights the intertwined geo-economic trajectories of both countries. It further suggests that the Turnbull Government is more willing to view Indonesia beyond the traditional—if not outdated—lenses of military geography and security threats. As the Prime Minister argued in his first visit to Jakarta, “the overwhelming concern in Jakarta [and] Canberra is about growth, economic growth, investment and jobs.”⁴ While improving bilateral economic ties has always been a priority for successive prime ministers, placing common prosperity as the strategic signpost is noteworthy and politically refreshing. Whether or not this vision can withstand the domestic posturing in both capitals over various economic or political issues remains to be seen.

No More Faith in Regional Institutions?

Unlike the step forward of setting the geo-economic tone, regional institutions took a step backward in DWP2016. It no longer mentions Indonesia's influence within and importance for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—or other multilateral institutions such as the East Asia Summit, APEC and G-20—in regional architecture building.⁵ Instead, it defines Indonesia's influence in terms of its military spending and the fact that both countries “share many common security interests, including a shared maritime border, a commitment to combatting terrorism, promoting peace and stability in our region and working to strengthen the regional security architecture.” (para 2.82) There is nothing fundamentally disagreeable about this position.

However, given the prominence of Jakarta's leadership of ASEAN and other multilateral institutions in regional architecture building in the 2009 and 2013 White Papers, its omission is noteworthy. Instead, DWP2016 first mentions regional architecture, including ASEAN, ADMM-Plus and East Asia Summit,

² Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper 2013*, p. 11.

³ Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century*, p. 12. To be fair, DWP2016 initially mentioned Indonesia in security terms (p. 33), but it was part of a broader discussion of the maritime domain and common regional security challenges.

⁴ See Mark Kenny, ‘Malcolm Turnbull Lands in Jakarta for his Indonesian Rescue’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 November 2015.

⁵ See Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century*, p. 35; Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper 2013*, pp. 12, 26.

within the context of US-China relationship (para 2.15). Indeed, even when stating Australia's support for the "contribution of the ASEAN-led regional security architecture" for Southeast Asian stability, it was preceded by noting the "pivotal role of the United States" and its alliance with Thailand and the Philippines (para 2.74).

Thus, it is not farfetched to argue that ASEAN centrality—particularly within the context of regional architecture building—may have been eclipsed by or subsumed within the broader, changing strategic landscape. Particularly salient is the US-China strategic rivalry, as seen in the tit-for-tat militarisation of the South China Sea by both parties. As Beijing's regional economic ties and Washington's regional alliance system further complicates the strategic equation, Canberra is right to point out in DWP2016 that ASEAN and China should agree on a Code of Conduct as soon as possible (para 2.79).

This is why the decoupling of ASEAN (and ASEAN-led regional architecture) from Indonesia's leadership is not insignificant. For one thing, it is hard to imagine ASEAN regaining centrality in managing regional order without Jakarta's leadership. If Canberra genuinely believes in ASEAN's potential to become a strategic partner in its own right, it should have emphasised Jakarta's regional leadership more, not less, in DWP2016. For another, the decoupling—seen in light of the dominant US-China rivalry undertones—could be misconstrued as Canberra prioritising Washington's regional agenda over ASEAN's architecture building, or even a subtle but perceptible lack of trust in Jakarta's foreign policy trajectory under the administration of President Widodo.⁶

Evolving Security Challenges?

While the changing strategic landscape seemingly looms large behind DWP2016, some security challenges between Indonesia and Australia have been de-emphasised. One notable change is the absence of Australia's statement of support for Indonesia's territorial integrity (see in the 2009 White Paper).⁷ In fact, we can notice an overall absence of assessments on Indonesia's domestic political and security challenges in DWP2016. The 2009 and 2013 White Papers noted, for example, how Indonesia's influence is associated with its ability to manage democratic transition, economic reform, and stem the tide of "poverty and failing state institutions".⁸

⁶ Analysts have noted Widodo's foreign policy aloofness and the dimming lights of Indonesia's regional and global diplomatic profile. See Donald E. Weatherbee, 'The Incredible Shrinking Indonesia', *PacNet*, no. 64, 23 September 2015; Aaron Connelly, *Indonesian Foreign Policy under President Jokowi*, Lowy Analysis Paper (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2014).

⁷ See Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century*, p. 42.

⁸ See Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century*, p. 35. The 2013 White Paper de-emphasised Indonesia's domestic challenges but retains some of same

This shift in emphasis could be indicative of the belief in Indonesia's ability to overcome its post-authoritarian domestic challenges over the past eighteen years. But one can also argue that DWP2016 is consciously and strategically choosing to be forward-looking by defining a bilateral space in which both countries can build on the existing strengths of the relationship on equal terms, rather than preconditioned on Jakarta's ability to get its house in order. We can see this more clearly in the section that focused on the different defence engagement activities with Indonesia (paras 5.34-5.37).

This shift is also a more fundamental departure than what has been suggested of the 2013 White Paper as the "post-Indonesia guidance document" assuming little to no possibility of a conflict with Indonesia.⁹ While this analysis is accurate when it comes force planning in the case of a direct conflict, the 2013 White Paper still subtly expressed concern about Indonesia's domestic challenges. In other words, it saw a possibility in which Indonesia could not overcome those challenges and become a source of regional instability requiring Australian action; rather than Australian forces going toe-to-toe with Indonesian forces in a direct military conflict *per se*.

Another small, but not insignificant change, is the absence of "Islamist terrorists" (used in the 2013 White Paper) as a way to describe the common regional and bilateral challenges. In counter-terrorism problem framing matters, and erasing the Islamist adjective could go a long way towards grasping the threat landscape—while signalling that Canberra does not view the problem as inherently Islamic. This signal is important given the prominence of Australian assistance in sustaining Indonesia's counter-terrorism capabilities.

It is also noteworthy that the DWP2016 made it clear that:

The modernisation of the Indonesian armed forces ... [is a] positive development that will add to Indonesia's security, and that of the region ... and its growing military capabilities will offer Australia and Indonesia opportunities for more effective cooperation to respond to regional challenges ... (para 2.83)

This is a departure from prior White Papers. The 2009 White Paper was concerned primarily with counter-terrorism, while the 2013 White Paper noted the region's—and Indonesia's—growing military sophistication without clearly spelling out how it could be a directly affect Australia.

The endorsement for modernisation suggests that, on the one hand, Canberra considers the process to be a positive trend for regional security

terminologies: "stability and security" or "success as a democracy and its economic stability", for example. See Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper 2013*, p. 25, 59.

⁹ Stephan Frühling, 'The 2013 Defence White Paper: Strategic Guidance Without Strategy', *Security Challenges*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2013), pp. 46-7.

and interoperability. After all, the more modern the Indonesian military becomes—technologically or organisationally—the more capable it would be to operate alongside advanced regional forces (e.g. Japan or Australia); a vision shared by Jakarta and Canberra under Yudhoyono. On the other hand, Canberra singling out modernisation could be read as a subtle critique on the growing military conservatism (and consequently, the stagnation in modernisation) under Widodo.¹⁰ As some of these defence policy trends include anti-Australian undertones, the endorsement is not surprising.¹¹

Conclusions and the Way Forward

The preceding analysis suggests the evolution of Canberra's assessment of Jakarta's strategic value and the bilateral relationship. DWP2016 hopes to provide space in which concrete cooperation could take place as the defence relationship matures and is further institutionalised. As the DWP2016 focuses on the shared prosperity and geo-economic trajectories while gradually abandoning previously-held security-centric assumptions, it could very well represent the next stage in the bilateral relationship.

However, when and how that occurs depends on Jakarta as well. On the one hand, that many within Indonesia's strategic community responded calmly, if not favourably, to DWP2016 can be attributed to the effectiveness of Canberra's pre-launch consultation mechanisms, as well as Australia's secondary status in the country's strategic calculus.¹² On the other hand, given Widodo's personal lack of interest in defence and foreign policymaking—and the ensuing bureaucratic infighting—Canberra needs to downplay expectations. Gone are the days where a strategic mindset within Indonesia's executive office allowed neighbouring countries to pragmatically deal with regional challenges of the day.

Aside from being cautious in proposing defence engagement activities, and being prepared to recalibrate policies to account for the rapidly changing bureaucratic and domestic politics, Canberra might want to consider expanding its strategic engagement beyond the government-to-government (and military-to-military) exchanges. Re-engaging Jakarta's broader

¹⁰ Widodo has allowed the military and defence ministry to revert back to New Order-styled conservatism and political role. See, for example, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), *The Expanding Role of the Indonesian Military*, IPAC Report no. 19 (Jakarta: IPAC, 2015). For the case against a military comeback, however, see Evan A. Laksmana, 'Indonesia's Modernizing Military', *Foreign Affairs*, 3 September 2015.

¹¹ See Suherdjoko, 'Indonesia Faces Proxy War: Army Chief', *The Jakarta Post*, 10 March 2015. Several Australian analysts and officials have also privately complained to the author about the current state of military politics and defence policy since Widodo took office.

¹² See for example, Anggi M. Lubis, "No Worries" for RI over Australia Defense Spending Hike', *The Jakarta Post*, 27 February 2016; Jewel Topsfield, "Australia Is Not a Threat": Indonesian Defence Official', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 March 2016. For a more critical assessment, however, see Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto, 'DWP 2016: An Indonesian perspective', *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 11 March 2016, <www.aspistrategist.org.au/dwp-2016-an-indonesian-perspective/> [Accessed 1 April 2016].

strategic community—members of parliament, civilian analysts, private businesses and defence companies, as well as universities—might help revive Jakarta’s interest in paying closer attention to Australia. This type of engagement, of course, is not new (educational scholarships have ensured a steady stream of Australian-trained policymakers, for example). What is needed, however, is a series of innovative, sustainable mechanisms through which strategic affairs can be discussed candidly to complement the existing defence engagement activities proposed by the 2016 Defence White Paper.

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