

### Repositioning Indonesia: thoughts on the Indo-Pacific

Milner, Anthony

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

**Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**

Milner, A. (2019). Repositioning Indonesia: thoughts on the Indo-Pacific. *Journal of ASEAN Studies*, 7(1), 58-72.  
<https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v7i1.5748>

**Nutzungsbedingungen:**

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/deed.de>

**Terms of use:**

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC Licence (Attribution-NonCommercial). For more information see:  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>

# Repositioning Indonesia – Thoughts on the Indo-Pacific

Anthony Milner

*University of Malaya, Malaysia; University of Melbourne; Australian National University, Australia*

## Abstract

*Indonesia's growth has stimulated new strategic ambitions. One example is the conceptualization of a new 'Indo-Pacific' regional structure reaching beyond ASEAN. This essay seeks to describe the changing regional and global environment which Indonesia today confronts - stressing the faltering of globalization and the 'return of history' - and then goes on to examine in some detail current Indonesian thinking on the 'Indo-Pacific'. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this exercise of transformative leadership? While acknowledging that ASEAN has begun to employ the term officially in June 2019, there are reasons for caution in further developing an 'Indo-Pacific' vision. It is already entangled with attempts to counter China, and also with risky proposals for a new regional architecture. Commentators on ASEAN have tended to underestimate the creativity with which ASEAN has already incorporated the large Northeast Asian states - together with India, the United States and Russia - in its institutions. There is danger that 'Indo-Pacific' aspirations might damage ASEAN centrality and, as a result, provoke a greater contest for leadership between the major states. ASEAN-led institutions - which have emerged organically - reflect the current complexity of the region. They have also served Indonesia well - and require strong Indonesian backing.*

Key words: *Indo-Pacific, the return of history, regional architecture, ASEAN Centrality, and globalization.*

## Introduction

Before considering how best to reposition Indonesia in the world – and I will be looking, in particular, at Indonesia's current Indo-Pacific initiative - we need to ask how the world itself has been repositioned. One issue must concern the progress of globalization.

Until the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century the entire Asian region was either under

European colonial rule or strong Western imperial influence. That is how the region was structured – with the great centers of power in London, Paris, The Hague and Washington. After the extraordinary conquests by Japan, which effectively ended the Western imperial project, Asia was quickly drawn into the Cold War. Countries lined up as Communist or Anti-Communist, and some tried to sustain a degree of neutrality or equidistance.

At the end of the Cold War, in the last decade or so of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, as is often commented, there was a unipolar moment – an America-dominated world with a sense of globalization not merely being economic, but also a globalization of ideas. One commentator wrote of the ‘end of history’ – the US had won, he suggested, with its liberal democratic ideology. Communism had been annihilated, and Western liberalism had the ‘wind in its hair’. This said, there were still objections. Dr Mahathir in Malaysia and a number of bright Foreign Ministry intellectuals in Singapore spoke of ‘Asian values’. They said you had to understand these values to explain the great economic transformation taking place in Asian countries – and there was also a need to acknowledge Asian values in the political arena, and not just insist that all societies must develop in the same way. The democracy, human rights, and other supposed responsibilities of government which Westerners have tended to advocate, so it was argued, are not necessarily universal norms.

Mahathir even pushed the idea of an East Asian Economic Group in 1990, saying that if Europeans could have their European regionalism, surely Asians could have theirs. He was advocating the concept of ‘Asia’ or ‘Asian unity’, which had been developed by Indian and Japanese thinkers from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1990, however, the Western influence was too strong for the Mahathir proposal: advocates of APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation), which had begun in 1989, and was an ‘Asia Pacific’ not

‘Asian’ organization – and one dominated by the United States – pushed the Mahathir proposal aside. What is more, in 1997-1998 parts of Asia, including Indonesia, entered a terrible financial crisis – and, as a result, faced an element of ridicule from some Western commentators. Where are your Asian values now? - was the tone of these comments.

Japan and Australia assisted during this crisis – but so did China, especially by maintaining the value of its currency against the US dollar. APEC, for all its promise, was not seen to be helpful, and by the end of the 1990s ASEAN countries were joining China, Japan and South Korea in a new East Asian grouping similar to the Mahathir concept of a decade earlier - and termed ‘ASEAN Plus Three’. Asian countries, in the wake of the crisis, had decided to help one another in an ‘Asian’ not US-dominated ‘Asia Pacific’ organization. In a sense, the ASEAN Plus Three initiative was a triumph for the century-old ‘Asia’ movement. It could be viewed as well as a setback for the process of US-led globalization, and an instance of a renewed potency of historical forces.

### **The Return of History**

In the decades after the Asian Financial Crisis, China has been rising in wealth and confidence, with the United States in relative decline – and the competition between these powers has been the preoccupation of international relations commentary. The change underway, however, has concerned far more than a shift in power. In one area

after another we have been witnessing a 'return of history' which counters the flow of globalization. The prospects of a more or less homogenous world appear to be increasingly weak, and the likelihood of developing turmoil is growing.

President Trump, in rejecting "globalism", has seen the alternative as the "doctrine of patriotism" (Sachs, 2018) – but there are many other possibilities. One consequence of the return of history, it might be argued, is that it brings into question established ways of thinking about international relations issues. The framework that is so often employed, of course, was designed for a Western world. It assumes a society of numerous states, locked in struggle with one another, and driven by more or less the same motives – particularly the quest for power. Seldom do Western analysts of foreign relations factor in history – or religious and philosophic drivers. In a recent book, Bilahari Kausikan - the former head of the Singapore Foreign Ministry – explained that he had studied International Relations but after being a diplomat for thirty years decided that this training was not useful. Its theory, he said, was too mechanical – and he found "history, literature and philosophy" were "better preparations for understanding international affairs" (Kausikan, 2016).

In Asia today, the analyst certainly needs to be able to deal with philosophic and sociological developments. To speak of history in today's Asian region is not to insist that the times are static, or backward-looking – rather, historical

processes seem to be working their way forward, drawing from the past but tackling current issues and challenging dominant ideas. In Indonesia, for instance, religious processes in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – Salafi processes described by Azyumardi Azra (Azra, 2014) and Merle Ricklefs (Ricklefs, 2006) - promoted a strengthening of religious observance and the specific role of Islamic Law. These developments were hindered or moderated in the Dutch colonial period – as Islamization was also resisted by the British on the Malay Peninsula – and one aspect of the return of history has been the revival of the Salafi movement in recent years, as Western influence has waned in Southeast Asia. The growing demand today for reforming Indonesian society on religious grounds has in particular entailed trenchant criticism of liberal values.

The Salafi movement is intensely modern, not only in the matters it addresses, but also in the way it harnesses the internet and social media. Research by Indonesia's State Islamic University has indicated that Jakarta tweets more than any other city in the world, and the rise of Islamic religiosity benefits from this technological development (Lindsey, 2018, pp. 87).

In what ways, one must begin to ask, will changing demands from the Islamic community begin to influence more sharply how Indonesia – or Malaysia – will behave in the international sphere? Is it possible that Islamic concepts will eventually damage the primacy of the

nation state – the man-made, Dutch-colonial-influenced state - or at least the character of that state? Students of ‘international’ relations might find they need to look beyond the state-to-state structure when examining future developments in the Southeast Asian region. In particular, they will need to know how religious beliefs may foster forms of community and identity that do not sit comfortably in national categories.

To take another example of history’s possible role in reconfiguring the Asian region, foreign affairs analysts are also being challenged by developments in the South China sea – and, more broadly, in Southeast Asia-China relations. Faced with a rising China, some commentators have assumed that Southeast Asian countries will seek ways to balance against that power – that is, they will seek allies, such as the United States, Japan and Australia, to help them. They are assumed to wish to form an anti-China alliance. If they do not act in this way – so the analysis proceeds - then their other option is to appease or bandwagon with China, conceding what China wants. Balance or bandwagon – these are the stark options in this International Relations, Western realist, view of the world. But other types of approach to inter-state relations are also possible – some rooted in historical experience.

There are indications, for instance, that present-day Southeast Asia-China interaction may be being shadowed by an older form of inter-state relations in Asia – one offering an alternative to the post-

Westphalian equal-sovereignty structure that arose in Europe and was imposed across Asia. Although at one level the countries of the region today behave as sovereign states in an international community, at another level both China and Southeast Asian countries are influenced by pre-modern ideas, particularly relating to hierarchy. Given the experience of a hierarchical Asian world in which many Malay Archipelago states looked up to China and other major powers, it may be that modern ASEAN countries are unusually comfortable today in the face of a rising China. The way Prime Minister Mahathir – in his August 2018 visit to China – not only negotiated hard with China over economic matters, but also talked of Malaysia being only a “small” country and expressed respect for China’s regional role (Mahathir, 2018), is representative of this relaxed approach. In Southeast Asia, on the one hand, there does not seem to be an automatic reaction to balance against China; and, on the other, there is no obvious, passive acceptance of Chinese demands - no subservient band wagoning.

These countries, it would seem, do not want intervention in their domestic affairs on the part of China or any other major power. They do not want to be attacked militarily by China on their islets or rocks in the South China Sea. But they are open to negotiation. They look at the whole range of dimensions in their China relationship – and seek not to push China back, but to embrace China, attempting also to soften its demands. In a sense, these countries aim to bring China closer

to Southeast Asia, engaging it in ways that will bring benefit to Southeast Asia. As they have done for centuries, the Southeast Asian leaders seem to be seeking a 'smart accommodation' with China. Embrace not push-back, working with hierarchy not insisting on sovereign equality – these are old Indonesian/Malay foreign-relations preferences, and they do not fit comfortably into the usual International Relations way of viewing things (Milner, 2017b; Milner, 2017c).

Let me mention one more case of the potency of historical forces in this time of structural as well as power transition. This is the particular manner in which ASEAN has been developing. I stress this theme partly because I intend to come back to ASEAN when I arrive at the question of exactly how Indonesia might best position itself in the world. ASEAN has much in common with other regional organizations – and one feature of recent decades is the growing role of regions, and not just states, as players in the global community. Certain features of ASEAN, however, have a local or indigenous character.

At one level the creation of ASEAN was just a sensible, practical initiative – an initiative that helped bring stability to Southeast Asia, and also to foster prosperity. At another level, ASEAN is the product of specific, Asian historic processes – including the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century attempts to promote a sense of pan-Asian community. Even in the 1940s, some Southeast Asian leaders saw the promotion of unity in their immediate

region as a step toward creating a larger Asian community. Another local factor was highlighted by the Malaysian foreign policy leader, Ghazali Shafie. He argued that the concept of *berkampung* or 'togetherness' was deeply rooted in Malay/Indonesian societies. He suggested too that the bamboo plant had long reinforced this value – a single reed, he reminded his readers, can be broken by a "single gust" of wind, but growing in a cluster bamboo can stand firm (Shafie, 2000, pp. 205-206, 220, 355). ASEAN has sought to be such a cluster – and was, in part, a result of this seeming instinct for uniting together, for gaining strength through community-building.

Another indigenous, historical dimension of ASEAN behavior has been the assumption – again, almost an instinct – that it is appropriate to build friendships in any and every direction, and regardless of differences in culture and ideology (Nazrin, 2018). There is plenty of evidence in the early history of the Malay Archipelago of rulers doing this – seeking to be open, balanced and friendly to all sides (Milner, 2015) - and in the case of ASEAN it helps to explain why the original non-Communist ASEAN countries were so willing to incorporate the Communist countries, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, into the grouping. In Europe, there were different foreign relations traditions, so that today the EU remains strongly at odds with Russia.

A third local feature of ASEAN concerns the handling of major powers in general, and not just China. Seemingly

comfortable in acknowledging their weakness with respect to such countries, the ASEAN states find ways to maintain their autonomy, their room for maneuver (and their independence in domestic affairs). It is here we see the quest for smart accommodation in the region's hierarchy diplomacy. In the old writings of the region, the image conveyed by this diplomatic ingenuity is that of the wily mousedeer (*pelandok jenaka*), who employs all types of tactic to survive among the big animals of the forest (Milner, 2016, pp. 33-36). This 'small state' imperative in Southeast Asia has been noted by Bilahari Kausikan, explaining that the "preferred strategy for the countries of Southeast Asia [has been] to maximize autonomy by keeping options open and maintaining the best possible relationship with all the major powers" (Kausikan, 2017). In this mousedeer ambition, Southeast Asian countries seek an "omnidirectional state of equilibrium between all major powers that allows the countries of the region maximal room to maneuver and autonomy" (Kausikan, 2017).

Summing up, I am suggesting that the Asian region is not only in flux because of shifts in power, especially the relative decline of the United States and the great growth of China. Despite all that was once thought about the likely influence of globalization and the coming dominance of Western liberal (including post-Westphalian) thought, the region is now also being destabilized by a return of history - influencing in complex ways the behavior of different regional states. It is not that the region is moving backward;

rather, historical forces are impacting on state behavior, moving that behavior beyond the familiar nation-state and interstate structure - underpinned as it has been by liberal values, and established by Western powers primarily in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The emerging reconfiguration of Asia is unlikely to replicate closely pre-Western structures; still, it will probably entail the working out of historical forces that go far more deeply than Dutch, British and United States influence.

The change underway in Asia today, therefore, can be expected to be about the 'rules of the game' - the way the region is structured, the manner in which the different players are constituted, and the changing preferences and anxieties of the players. We might ask what exactly 'ASEAN' might mean in 30 years, or how a China-centered region might operate - or even how 'Indonesia', 'Malaysia' or even 'China' itself might be understood as units in the regional and global configuration. One thing is clear, this is a time to think very carefully about policy innovation, considering carefully all possible implications or consequences.

### **The Positioning of Indonesia**

Having set this scene, let us return to the positioning of Indonesia. In the midst of all this change, Indonesian leaders - as one might expect - have been doing some hard thinking. Noting that Indonesia has been growing steadily - with predictions that the country will become a major world economy in the next couple of decades - some in the country's leadership have been tempted to

see Indonesia's future lying beyond ASEAN. There has been talk of ASEAN not as 'the' cornerstone of Indonesian foreign policy (as it continues to be in Malaysia's case), but as 'a' cornerstone (Natalegawa, 2018, pp. 108, 149). Also, the Government has come up with the idea of Indonesia as a "global maritime fulcrum".

Exactly what is meant by a 'global maritime fulcrum' remains somewhat unclear. It does highlight the large maritime dimension of the Indonesian state – of Indonesia's national territory – but it also suggests an ambition for Indonesia to exercise strategic weight beyond Southeast Asia. Such weight, of course, would require the development – the substantial development – of Indonesian naval power (White, 2018, pp. 18).

Another way in which Indonesia has been reaching beyond ASEAN is in the focus being given in recent years to the 'Indo-Pacific' idea – a term relatively new to the region and one which, after much hesitation, has begun to be employed in ASEAN meetings. This 'Indo-Pacific' focus is of added interest right now because of the importance the concept is being given in United States, Japanese, Indian and Australian strategic deliberations. In Indonesia, the current President and Foreign Minister have been thinking aloud about what 'Indo-Pacific' might mean, and former Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa, in a recent and thoughtful book (Natalegawa, 2018) has reminded the international affairs commentariat that Indonesia has been

developing an 'Indo-Pacific' agenda from a relatively early date – at least since 2004. There are problems, however, with the Indo-Pacific project - including in terms of Indonesian interests – and these suggest it may be unwise to re-position Indonesia in this direction.

According to Marty, the Indo-Pacific idea was an aspiration when Indonesia lobbied to involve India – and also Australia and New Zealand – in the East Asia Summit (EAS), which first met in 2005 (Natalegawa, 2018, pp. 89). By contrast, Malaysia and some other states wished to keep the Summit to East Asian countries (China, Japan and South Korea), in addition to ASEAN countries. Marty has also written about his efforts to create an 'Indo-Pacific Treaty' – an agreement, a set of rules for the Indo-Pacific region. True, he says it would be influenced by ASEAN's long-established Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) - the treaty which every country participating in the EAS has to sign - and also by the 2011 EAS Bali Principles, with their stress on peaceful settlement of disputes (Natalegawa, 2018, pp. 154). Nevertheless, having a specific Indo-Pacific Treaty, in Marty's analysis, would move relations among the region's states beyond the current ASEAN 'hub and spokes' structure – the ASEAN Plus X, Y and Z structure. An Indo-Pacific Treaty would be more than an agreement between ASEAN and each of these external countries. It would be an independent code for the whole Indo-Pacific region. (Amitav, 2014, pp. 12-13). This does not mean explicitly that Indonesia would be



pioneering a new regional organization, a new community – standing separately from ASEAN, and larger than ASEAN or even than ASEAN Plus Three. Nevertheless, having such a treaty, a code, it seems to me, could be seen as the basis for a new ambitious grouping – and a grouping, it must be said, in which ASEAN centrality might be seriously threatened.

Statements from the current Indonesian Administration do strengthen the view that a new regional architecture is being seriously considered. The President referred to an “Indo-Pacific regional architecture” when in India in February 2018 (Laksamana, 2018). His Government has also highlighted the aspiration of an “Indo-Pacific Cooperation umbrella” (Foreign Minister Retno Masurdi in Laksamana, 2018). A *Djakarta Post* article referred to the “new regional grouping concept” (13 April 2018).

### **The Indo-Pacific Concept**

There are several reasons for caution regarding the Indo-Pacific project – and they suggest that it may not be the right concept for this era. First, the Indo-Pacific initiative has been hijacked by the United States and others, and this will be hard to reverse. The ‘Indo-Pacific’ can easily be decoded as an anti-China move – partly because of the way it is deployed in the 2017 US National Security Strategy, and also the fact that the American naval command in the region is now the ‘Indo-Pacific’ not ‘Pacific’ Command. The Indo-Pacific has also been linked to the so-called Quadrilateral, the moves toward

security cooperation between India, Japan, Australia and the United States - a cooperation said to be based on a common commitment to democratic values (Wanandi, 2018; Bowie, 2018). Some commentators have been quite frank about the Indo-Pacific’s potential China diluting power (Heydarian, 2018).

One difficulty with this strategic, China-encircling concept of Indo-Pacific is that it is currently uncertain just how strongly committed the lead Quadrilateral countries happen to be. The United States leadership, as has often been observed, has made clear that it cannot be trusted to commit to any medium- or long-term international engagement. India has certainly displayed interest in the Quad, but is known to look in many directions, exploring one possibility after another. At present, it is not just contemplating the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization but has actually joined as a full member. Also, the structure of India’s armed forces does not suggest the country has a strong maritime Indo-Pacific capacity. As for Japan, there has clearly been progress in working relations with China, and optimism as well about prospects for the three-cornered – China, Japan, South Korea – meetings. So, it is not clear how seriously Japan would now commit to an anti-China alliance.

Another difficulty with the strategic construction of the US Indo-Pacific project is that it is so antagonistic toward China that some Southeast Asians countries and others have become anxious about undermining relations with their

leading trading partner. It does not help that the trading importance of the United States tends to have been much diminished over the last two decades. As noted already, Southeast Asian countries have a very long history of engaging effectively – of seeking smart accommodation – with China, and it would seem that they can live with the idea of China being at the top of a regional hierarchy, so long as Chinese demands do not become oppressive. In this sense, the return of history which I have discussed above with respect to hierarchical (and mousedeer) diplomacy does not mesh comfortably with the idea of supporting a balance-of-power alliance against China. Furthermore, it is quite against ASEAN tradition – as also noted above – to form alliances on an ideological basis.

Having made these points, it must be acknowledged that Indonesian proponents of the Indo-Pacific see some of this danger. The President has insisted that ‘Indo-Pacific Cooperation’ would include not exclude China (Shekhar, 2018). Also, Marty – certainly among the leading ideas-formulators in modern Southeast Asia – has made clear that he seeks only a “dynamic equilibrium” and “common security in the indivisibility of peace”, not Cold War-type efforts to contain China (Natalegawa, 2017). Despite these reassurances, however, it may be difficult in the developing international discourse to rescue the Indo-Pacific idea – to gain priority for the Indonesian inclusive conceptualization and succeed in disentangling the idea from United States strategic ambitions.

A second reason for caution regarding the Indo-Pacific idea is that creating a new architecture or grouping would open up the question of regional leadership – an issue that the ASEAN hub-and-spokes framework was brilliantly successful in setting aside, and in many ways to the advantage of the major as well as minor states. A debate over leadership could make the Indo-Pacific an arena for contest rather than trust-building; the ASEAN-led institutions, frustrating as they can sometimes be for those who prefer decisive action, have actually provided a forum for peaceful and often collaborative deliberation. The insistence that it is ASEAN that provides leadership has helped overcome the danger of regional architecture exacerbating rather than softening inter-state tension.

### **The threat to ASEAN**

A third reason to be wary of the Indo-Pacific concerns the interests of ASEAN itself. An obvious problem with the Indo-Pacific initiative – even in its specific Indonesian formulation – is the damage it might do to ASEAN. Marty has sought to allay such fears. He insists that the Indo-Pacific had its origin in ASEAN processes, and emphasizes that an Indo-Pacific Treaty would be based on ASEAN principles (Cook, 2018) He and others also argue that the Indo-Pacific should be ASEAN-led, (Wanandi, 2018; Cook, 2018), and Marty insists the Indo-Pacific is in fact an opportunity for ASEAN to display much-needed “transformative” leadership (Natalegawa, 2018, pp. 233-234). The

ambition, evidently, is to have ASEAN continue to be the force that sets the rules in the Asian – or rather, Indo-Pacific – region. But in moving beyond the ASEAN hub-spoke – ASEAN Plus – structure, would ASEAN leadership perhaps become less not more secure? The Indo-Pacific meetings would be likely in the long run to replace the East Asia Summit, and as a result this equal-footed, treaty-based Indo-Pacific Cooperation could sound the death-knell of ASEAN-centered regionalism?

In an Indo-Pacific grouping with its own “framework” – even if that framework is based on ASEAN principles, an ASEAN rule-code – ASEAN as a regional player is highly likely to lose its pre-eminence in competition with one or more major powers. An Indo-Pacific Treaty which in effect gives “countries of the wider region”, the Indo-Pacific region (Natalegawa, 2018, pp. 234), independence from ASEAN, and forms the foundation of an ‘Indo-Pacific architecture’ or ‘Indo-Pacific Cooperation’, could lead to the peripheralizing of relatively weak states – such as the member states of ASEAN, including Indonesia. Marty states his long-held view that “power dynamics between the member countries” of “an enlarged non-ASEAN EAS” would “gravitate towards ‘equilibrium’, with ASEAN as its core – constantly working to maintain the equilibrium” (Natalegawa, 2018, pp. 90). In fact, it can be claimed that the current regional architecture – ASEAN, ASEAN Plus Three, the ASEAN-led East Asia Summit and so forth – has been

remarkable in giving ASEAN a degree of leadership in a wide region of megapowers, some of which are vastly stronger than any ASEAN country.

Marty writes powerfully about the need for ASEAN to demonstrate leadership, and with a “transformative outlook” (Natalegawa, 2018, pp. 232) – and he is right to note that such an outlook has been evident in the past. ASEAN’s record, however, needs much highlighting. International Relations analysis often gives too little attention to the complexity of the task of region-building. Even in the case of the concept of ‘Europe’ it is necessary to explore in depth the different forms of influence, experimentation and dialogue – over many centuries – that helped forge the ‘European Union’ as it is today (Pagden, 2002). For the weaker states of Southeast Asia, to have led in the formation of a regional architecture – and a regional code of inter-state behavior – that now not only covers the whole of East Asia but also engages India, the United States, Russia and others, is an immense achievement; and Marty himself has been a very significant player in the ASEAN leadership. The ASEAN architecture has almost been a sleight of hand. In the best tradition of ASEAN small-power, mousedeer diplomacy it has helped to give the relatively weaker Southeast Asian countries a significant degree of strategic ‘space’ (as Marty has put it), or ‘autonomy’ (to use the term Bilahari Kausikan has been employing).

ASEAN has moved gradually, step by step, sensitive to historical and cultural forces, drawing in some ways on the spirit of 'Asia' promoted over the last century. It has paid attention not only to the functional dimension of regionalism – the establishing of practical cooperation in security and economic areas – but also to the identity aspect of regionalism. Its leaders have been working to create a 'People-Centered ASEAN' and have spoken of ASEAN "coursing through our veins" (Milner, 2016, pp. 16). They want ASEAN to have meaning for the people it encompasses. This is an organic understanding of regional community – and one which invokes indigenous thinking about inter-polity relations (including Ghazali Shafie's identifying of the bamboo cluster as a powerful metaphor). Such an organic understanding is influential in the Asian region. Even the local vocabulary of regionalism – the precise Asian-language terms used for regional 'association' or 'community' – tend to convey this emotive quality. Here we encounter a fourth reason for hesitation regarding the Indo-Pacific project – that is the problem that the Indo-Pacific seems to project no emotive value.

It has proved hard enough to foster an 'Asia' or 'ASEAN' sentiment, and still harder to win emotive support for the 'Asia Pacific' (Lee & Milner, 2014, pp. 209-228; Milner, 2017a, pp. 39-48). The idea of 'Indo-Pacific' happens to be one further remove from the experienced reality of most people living in the Asian region. It is not just its geographical and

historical reach – seeking to incorporate a range of societies that have very little in common. 'Indo-Pacific' also possesses no historical authenticity whatsoever. As Jusuf Wanandi has pointed out, the term actually excludes the word 'Asia' – which covers "the most important part of the region" (Wanandi, 2018). The idea of 'Asia', as we have seen, is itself a construct – though one that has been developed carefully over a century and more – and 'Indo-Pacific', highlighting only two oceans, merely drowns out this historical process. This is an affront to the many Asian thought leaders – not merely in China but across the region – who have taken seriously the concept of 'Asia' and 'Asian' priorities.

'Indo-Pacific', it could be argued, is a project more suited to an earlier era – a time when globalization seemed to be able to sweep aside local, indigenous and history-based sentiment, and when political leaders felt few limitations when formulating new visions. It tended to be accepted at that time that we all live in 'imagined communities' (to use Benedict Anderson's phrase) and that the potential for imagination is almost endless. Today, as I suggested in the opening section of this chapter, we are witnessing the development of Chinese, Islamic and Southeast Asian experiments that do not deny – but rather respond to or build upon a range of historical (including religious) perspectives.

With an eye to those current ideational developments in the Asian region – the growing attack on liberalism,

the questioning of the secular state, the apparent willingness to accept some form of Beijing-centered hierarchy, the apparent transcending of balance-of-power imperatives, and so forth – a final caution regarding the Indo-Pacific concerns whether a specifically ‘Indo-Pacific’ forum is likely to be the best venue for deliberating such matters. Will the urgent issues to be faced in the Asian region – grounded as they are in local as well as global dynamics – be handled effectively in a regional structure that could well be preoccupied with United States reactions to Chinese or Russian challenges? Furthermore, as argued above, some current thinking about foreign relations in the Asian region is not only shaped by local imperatives but actually challenges the conceptual categories employed so often by Western analysts.

Such clashes of understanding as well as aspiration might best be handled in the patient processes of ASEAN-led bodies, cultivated over many decades. In an Indo-Pacific architecture – which might potentially operate more or less independently of ASEAN, and probably be dominated by rivalry between global powers - discussion of current issues, shaped by the return of history, might be characterized by frustration, confusion and irritation.

Marty argues that to “remain relevant and central” ASEAN should support the Indo-Pacific initiative (Wanandi, 2018; Cook, 2018). In fact, there is a possibility that doing so could undermine the delicate region-building

which ASEAN has been undertaking since 1967 – a type of regionalism that may, in fact, be more appropriate in the current era.

Putting aside the ultimate merits or otherwise of the Indo-Pacific vision, the task of implementing it may itself have the potential to divide ASEAN – something which the organization has taken such pains to avoid. Discomfort with the Indo-Pacific idea was certainly expressed in a number of ASEAN quarters over the last year – for instance, at the ASEAN Summits with India and Australia (Chongkittavorn, 2018; Bowie, 2018). In June 2019, ASEAN – after much prevarication, pressure and hesitation – decided to “acknowledge the ‘Indo-Pacific’”, while insisting that it merely “reinforces the ASEAN-centered regional architecture” (Thu, 2019). To go beyond acknowledgement and develop the concept in detail is likely to inspire further debate within ASEAN, along lines suggested above – and Marty himself has highlighted the need to maintain ASEAN “unity and cohesion” (Natalegawa, 2018, pp. 229) The bamboo clump, it needs to be recalled, must be truly a ‘clump’.

### Conclusion

Getting back to the title of this essay, ‘Repositioning Indonesia’, my conclusion is that in this time of regional transition – a transition not just of power but of ways of thinking about the regional order, and a transition to some extent running against globalization – the best option for Indonesia might not be to ‘reposition’. What could be more

appropriate in this era is to reaffirm Indonesian commitment to ASEAN unity, and to ASEAN-centered regional projects. Marty is subtle in portraying the Indo-Pacific as consistent with the search for 'dynamic equilibrium' – which is not the same as "containment of a particular power" but the Indo-Pacific project has been hijacked to a large extent by Western policy-makers, driven by balance-of-power calculations, and is in any case a concept of region far removed from current, everyday experience in the Asian region. Indo-Pacific architecture, in fact, might turn out to be better suited to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, not the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The leaders of ASEAN have been working hard to develop a meaningful regionalism – and have also harnessed that regionalism to the task of giving Southeast Asians at least some centrality in the wider Asia. Focusing sharply on the ASEAN project might still be the best option for Indonesia.

Finally, the idea that Indonesia could be better off acting independently of ASEAN – is difficult to take seriously. True, Indonesia is growing fast, but in economic and military terms it is still far behind the United States, China, Japan and India. Operating alone, Indonesia would be less likely than it is now – working as the lead member of ASEAN – to maintain some pre-eminence in an Indo-Pacific forum. Helping to give transformative leadership to ASEAN – helping to maintain the momentum of ASEAN's relationship-building endeavors from India right across to Russia and the United States, might be Indonesia's best

option in this region, and this particular age.

### About the Author

Anthony Milner is Visiting Professor at the Asia Europe Institute at the University of Malaya. He also holds appointments at the University of Melbourne and the Australian National University. In 2014-2015 he was Tun Hussein Onn Chair at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS MALAYSIA). His publications include (for the last five years) the 'Regionalism in Asia' entry for the annual Routledge publication, *The Far East* and *The Malays* published by Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

### References

- Amitav, A. (2014). *Indonesia matters: Asia's emerging democratic power* (Vol. 1). World Scientific.
- Azra, A. (2004). *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin.
- Bowie, N (2018, August 5). "Indo-Pacific" pitch gets lukewarm reception in SE Asia. *Asia Times*.
- Chongkittavorn, K. (2018, September 3). ASEAN is key to Indo-Pacific: Modi. *Myanmar Times*.
- Cook, E. (2018, February 8). What Does Indonesia's Own Indo-Pacific Strategy Look Like? *The Diplomat*.
- Heydarian, J, R. (2018, June 28). The Indo-Pacific is no Shangri-La. *Policy Forum*.

- Kausikan, B. (2016). *Dealing with an Ambiguous World*. Singapore: World Scientific.
- Kausikan, B. (2017). Dodging and Hedging in Southeast Asia. *The American Interest*. Retrieved from <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/01/12/dodging-and-hedging-in-southeast-asia/>.
- Laksamana, E. (2018, February 6). An Indo-Pacific construct with "Indonesian characteristics". *The Strategist*.
- Lee, S. & A. Milner (2014). Practical vs. Identity Regionalism: Australia's APC initiative, a case study. *Contemporary Politics*. 20(2), 209-228.
- Lindsey, T. (2018). Retreat from democracy?: The rise of Islam and the challenge for Indonesia. *Australian Foreign Affairs*, (3), 69.
- Mahathir. (2018, September 29). Speech text of Dr. Mahathir at 73<sup>rd</sup> UNGA. New Straits Times Press. Retrieved from <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2018/09/415941/speech-text-dr-mahathir-73rd-un-general-assembly>.
- Milner, A. (2015). *Nama, Group-Binding and Moral Balance: Themes and Origins of Malaysian Foreign Policy*. Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Strategic and International Studies.
- Milner, A. (2016). *Will ASEAN Continue to be the Cornerstone of Malaysian Foreign Policy? The "Community-building" Priority*. Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Strategic and International Studies.
- Milner, A. (2017a). Regionalism in Asia', in Juliet Love (ed). (2017). *The Far East and Australasia 2018*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 39-48.
- Milner, A. (2017b). Sovereignty and Normative Integration in the South China Sea: Some Malaysian and Malay Perspectives, in Lowell Dittmer and Ngeow Chow Bing (eds), *Southeast Asia and China: A Contest in Mutual Socialization*. Singapore: World Scientific Press, 229-246.
- Milner. A (2017c). Culture and the International Relations of Asia. *Pacific Review, 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Special Issue*, 857-869.
- Natalegawa, M. (2017, November 30). ASEAN should step up to promote "Indo-Pacific". *Straits Times*.
- Natalegawa, M. (2018). *Does ASEAN matter? A view from within*. Singapore: ISEAS.
- Pagden, A. (ed) (2002). *The Idea of Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ricklefs, M. C. (2006). *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from the Fourteenth to the Early*

*Nineteenth Centuries*. Norwalk, CT: East Bridge Books.

Sachs, J. (2018, October 2). Jeffrey Sachs looks to 'A New Foreign Policy. *MSNBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.msnbc.com/morning-joe/watch/jeffrey-sachs-looks-to-a-new-foreign-policy-1334670915895>.

Shafie, G. (2000). *ASEAN and the New World Order*. Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Shekhar, V. (2018). Is Indonesia's 'Indo-Pacific Cooperation' Strategy a Weak Play?. *PacNet* #47.

Thu, L. H. (2019, June 29). The long and winding way to the Indo-Pacific. *The Strategist*.

Wanandi, J. (2018, May 24). ASEAN deserves central role in Indo-Pacific cooperation. *Jakarta Post*.

White, H. (2018). The Jakarta Switch. *Australian Foreign Affairs*, 3.