

RI foreign policy needs to focus more on impact than process

Last weekend, Indonesia successfully hosted the 11th Bali Democracy Forum (BDF). Since its inception in 2008, the BDF has been a staple of Indonesia's growing regional and global profile.

The BDF envisions “progressive democratic architecture” in the Asia-Pacific region. But Indonesia's immediate environment has demonstrated the resilience of varying authoritarianism.

Thailand is under military rule, Cambodia may have destroyed the opposition and Myanmar faces an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Vietnam remains under single-party rule, Brunei's monarchy persists, and the Philippines under President Rodrigo Duterte struggles with a bloody drug war.

This gap between the BDF's mission and the regional realities illustrate a deeper problem in Indonesian foreign policy: the primacy of process over outcomes.

If Indonesia had focused on outcomes, we might expect the Foreign Ministry to make “improving regional democratic indicators within two decades” a key BDF target — beyond, for in-

stance, how many regional leaders attended and how many of the ministry's proposals were accepted, as the ministry's various public statements imply.

More broadly, the ministry's strategic planning documents and performance reports over the past decade suggest it has focused less on achieving regional strategic outcomes and more on meeting bureaucratically feasible “strategic targets”.

The ministry devises a five-year strategic plan based on the president's goals at the beginning of a Cabinet term. “Strategic targets” are then formulated to guide foreign policy processes and activities and key performance indicators would be formulated for each.

Under former minister Marty Natalegawa (2009-2014), the ministry focused on Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN, multilateral diplomacy, international cooperation, the international and domestic image and improving the quality of international agreements as well as consular and protocol services.

Foreign Minister Retno LP Marsudi, whose current term ends next year, modified and ex-

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panded these six targets into 14. Some of these were foreign policy-related, including a high-quality foreign policy, strong maritime and border as well as economic diplomacy, an increasingly significant leadership at ASEAN, a growing global role and excellent overseas business and citizen protection and services.

Other targets are related to bureaucratic reform, involving human resource development, good governance, work environment, an integrated information management system and an optimum budget.

These targets reflect the administration's “global maritime fulcrum” outlook under the administration of President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo as well as the President's penchant for low-key,

concrete issues like economic cooperation or citizen protection.

The targets also reflect the ministry's attempt to strengthen its policymaking system — some described Marty's tenure as “personalistic”, while others lamented the active role of former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's foreign affairs special staff that overshadowed the ministry at times.

Nevertheless, the strategic targets set under the two foreign ministers are process-oriented rather than (regional or global) outcome-driven.

Take the target of “boosting Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN” — central to both the programs of Marty and Retno. The ministry has never clearly measured this target based on strategic outcomes, such as the signing of an ASEAN-China South China Sea Code of Conduct. It focuses instead on bureaucratically feasible benchmarks, primarily the percentage of Indonesian recommendations and initiatives accepted at ASEAN meetings.

On maritime diplomacy, the key indicator is not the annual decline in maritime incidents, il-

legal fishing or piracy. According to its annual reports, the ministry instead counts the numbers of agreements on maritime and border negotiations, accepted recommendations on maritime and border issues, and maritime cooperation forum activities.

The ministry also measures Indonesia's “global influence” based on how many multilateral forums Indonesia chairs, how many Indonesians sit on the board of international organizations and how many Indonesian proposals these forums “accept”.

These indicators point to a process-oriented foreign policy through multilateralism.

But numerous countries with divergent interests need to “accept” proposals in multilateral forums. If so, diplomats are likely to propose generic and normative positions without specific policies that lead to observable outcomes. The goal is to create the path of least resistance.

Indonesia gives hundreds of ASEAN-related recommendations each year, simply because ASEAN has hundreds of meetings. But according to the ministry's records, some of these pro-

posals were the lowest common denominators, such as reemphasizing ASEAN centrality or the benefits of mutual cooperation.

It is hard to argue that inserting such phrases into communiqués constitutes genuine regional leadership. Such processes may pass the bureaucratic performance bar and may be necessary for a functioning foreign ministry, but they are neither signs of a progressive leadership nor sufficient in defending Indonesia's strategic interests.

Whoever becomes president next year, the Foreign Ministry should formulate a set of strategic outcomes it would like to see in the next five to 10 years, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Such outcomes of course depend on the policies of other regional countries, too, but does that mean we should not raise the bar and push the envelope?

An independent and active foreign policy should also mean escaping our bureaucratic quicksand.

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