Navigating turbulent seas

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A session of the Central National Commission on Sept. 2, 1949, Vice President Mohammad Hatta formulated the principle of Indonesia’s foreign policy, namely a free and active foreign policy, reflected in his metaphor “rowing between two reeds”. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the implementation of this foreign policy.

In response to the continuing and rapid changes in our strategic environment, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono introduced his own metaphor: “navigating a turbulent sea”, to describe the challenges facing Indonesian foreign policy.

Vice President Jusuf Kalla then joined the chorus of our foreign policy when, commenting on the current international position of Indonesia under the leadership of President Yudhoyono, he said that Indonesia could be a “rower and shaker” for regional security and world peace (The Jakarta Post, Oct. 19, 2006).

What does all this branding tell us about our foreign policy? Discussion on the country’s foreign policy, particularly during the Yudhoyono government, seems to have been aimed, unintentionally of course, at telling the public here at last three things.

First, to let them know where Indonesia is in the context of the current state of international relations. When Yudhoyono said that the world we live in today is radically different than the one faced by our forefathers, he meant to indicate that the country is now in a particular era of history where foreign policy needs to be adjusted in a way
that meets the expectations of the public. Our forefathers were not exposed to such things as globalization, interdependence and the cyber-world — all things which are part of the country's present-day world.

Second, to let the public know where Indonesia is in its foreign policy discourse. This is used to indicate the standpoint of Indonesia when it faced antagonism between the opposing Eastern Communist and Western Capitalist blocks.

This actually refers to the message carried by Hatta's historic reference to "rowing between two reefs", that Indonesia should avoid choosing sides between the two blocks. "Rowing" perhaps indicates a hard and difficult journey or path for the country. It may be telling us that Indonesia is choosing the hard path. Such a chosen path, however, was able to serve the country's national interests in the following decades.

Third, to let the public know where Indonesia is going in its foreign policy. Referring to Yudhoyono's "turbulent ocean", the public is told of the importance of activism in its foreign policy, meaning that such an "ocean" must be seen as providing ample diplomatic opportunity for Indonesia rather than risk.

This metaphor by Yudhoyono seems to have been based on the assumption that if Indonesia is to make the right decisions, it must understand how things "work" in the "ocean" and how they interact. The major foreign policy decisions the country has taken so far, at the regional as well as global level, reflect the recognition of the role of the "ocean" in the country's life-support system and its value for the prosperity of the people.

Thus, "navigating a turbulent ocean" is assumed to refer to channeling our foreign policy to meet the country's long-term objectives. Navigating the ocean will also allow us to develop extensive and strategic international links that will hopefully secure our external resources for development, as well as for domestic stability.

Perhaps it is within this context that our foreign policy now carries with it a theme which was unthinkable before, namely strategic partnership. Strategic partnerships can be very significant in providing a combined effect to produce intended policy objectives.

As, as we have seen, on the bilateral level we have strategic partnerships with almost all major powers in the world. The seemingly stable and improved domestic conditions serve as a kind of modality for the Yudhoyono government to embark on a new chapter in Indonesia's foreign relations. There is a process of institutional building in the country's foreign relations.

The branding of strategic partnership in our foreign relations has gained popularity — at least in the eyes of our foreign policymakers — at a time when the prospects for Indonesia to become, in the words of Jusuf Kalla, a "mover and shaker" for world peace is becoming more evident, as indicated by its membership on the United Nations Security Council, as well as its role in seeking peace in the Middle East and on the Korean Peninsula.

Given the many fresh foreign policy initiatives, it is no exaggeration to say that Indonesia has actually passed the two reefs. With its rather "new" outlook in foreign relations, Indonesia hopes to gain more strategic benefits by appearing to be different in its approach to solvent foreign policy issues.

By navigating the turbulent ocean, Indonesia is attempting to connect itself with the wider world, which is crucial not only to enhance the performance of our independent and active foreign policy, but also to secure the achievements Indonesia has already gained.

One, however, should not ignore the asymmetrical relationship, if any, between Indonesia and its strategic partners, which in turn might affect the sustainability and effectiveness of these partnerships in the future. Indonesia's partnerships with the U.S., China and Japan seem unequal in terms of resources, skills, size, diplomatic leverage and so forth.

Thus, Yudhoyono's metaphor of "navigating a turbulent ocean" should not be interpreted as automatically directing the country's foreign policy to "safety". Being a smaller partner, Indonesia will face the problem of making its partnerships serve its interests without becoming simply a function of the interests of its partners.

This is to say that to sustain its full international engagement and obtain maximum diplomatic and strategic gains, Indonesia should be able to break through any "hurdles" that might result from expansion of its international transactions. Indonesia's new activism in foreign policy should be managed in such a way so that it will not hit all the reefs.

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