Indonesian Foreign Policy and Beyond

An Interview with Marty Natalegawa

Indonesia’s gradual transition from a developing nation under authoritarian rule into a vibrant democracy is an aspiring tale for Asia and the rest of the world. As one of the most articulate members of the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), how do geopolitical and geoeconomic changes shape Indonesia’s contemporary foreign policy? What interests do domestic actors have on international issues? The Journal invited Dr. Marty Natalegawa, former Foreign Minister of Indonesia, to discuss Indonesia’s democratic reform and transition and the impact the country’s leadership had on the ASEAN community. Dr. Natalegawa also spoke about Southeast Asian regionalism, Indonesian leadership, and internal political dynamics as they affect foreign policy, including the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic.

Journal: How did you get to where you are and who or what are the things that you thought were the most important to you in reaching your position? What part of your work are you most proud of?

Dr. Natalegawa: Each of us have our own unique circumstance and background and there is really no one size fits all. I’ve been very fortunate in the sense that, when I was still young, I had a clear sense of what really interests me and what drives me. Fortunately, in the subsequent years, I was able to more or less materialize and realize those interests and motivations. The principal motivation, to put it simply, has always been one of public service. I was fortunate enough to have opportunities to pursue varied experience in my studies, including overseas. I went to middle school onwards in the United Kingdom up to my master’s level, and then did my PhD in Australia. I felt it was incumbent on me, having had such a precious opportunity, to give back and serve my community, my country, and the interest of the wider public—and that motivation towards public service has been extremely important for me.

At the same time, an area that interests me a great deal is international relations. It’s been my keen interest since I was little. Upon finishing my graduate school in the United Kingdom, I gravitated to it and joined Indonesia’s Foreign Ministry. Having spent more than a decade overseas in the United Kingdom, returning was not easy in
terms of adjusting and adapting to how things are done, but that’s just how it is and you have to persevere.

In terms of what kind of things are important, I would say that you wouldn’t want to underestimate your capacity to make a difference. Each one of us, in our own ways, can make a positive difference—and you should never underestimate your ability to make such a difference. That’s what I’ve been striving to do in my various capacities. To respond immediately to your question about what the highlights of my past career were—and I would respond here obviously only of my professional career in terms of the Foreign Ministry—is rather difficult since I have had a rather varied experience.

My first posting was as a Third Secretary and then subsequently as Ambassador at the United Nations. I also served in a bilateral setting as Ambassador to the United Kingdom and Ireland. A considerable portion of my diplomatic career was also expended within the ASEAN setting. Each of those situations brought its own unique circumstance. I joined the Indonesian Foreign Ministry in 1986 as a twenty-two-year-old, and Indonesia of 1986 is very different to Indonesia of today as it has subsequently developed. At the time, Indonesia was without doubt an authoritarian state with a lack of civil liberties and space. You can well imagine that when I returned home, having been overseas for such a long time and spending quite a lot of my formative years abroad, coming back and joining the civil service was not the easiest of experiences. Occasions would arise where you have a sense of conflicting values between your personal inclinations and how the system was at the time. I chose to be within the system to affect change.

Like I said before, you shouldn’t underestimate your capacity to make a difference. Within such a system and political culture, you try to make sure you’re not corrupted or co-opted, that you don’t become what you aren’t as a person, and that you continue to live by your values. Fortunately, in my case, Indonesia itself went through changes. As you know, by 1998 we had what was called the multi-dimensional crisis. Initially it was a financial crisis, but it became a wider economic crisis in 1998, and then became a full-blown political crisis. As a result, Indonesia began its democratic reform process. Hence, from 1999 onwards, in terms of my career, I was able to basically start on a blank canvas as Indonesia was transforming into becoming a democratic state. I had a blank canvas to manifest Indonesia’s democratic changes internally in its foreign policy.

That was a really tremendous opportunity. The salient manifestation has been on ASEAN. “As a young foreign service officer, it was precious to have almost like a blank canvas for the opportunity to realize your own personal values both in terms of democratization and respect of human rights—both on your own country’s foreign policy and then even on the region’s architecture.” That is why in early 2002 to 2003, Indonesia began to introduce the lexicon and the language of political reform, of democratization, of democratic principles, and of human
rights within ASEAN. Basically, while not trying to impose its internal values outside, deliberate efforts were made in ensuring that Indonesia's democratic transformation went hand-in-hand with a progressively changing region; that there was a sense of convergence and no disconnect. As a young foreign service officer, it was precious to have almost like a blank canvas for the opportunity to realize your own personal values both in terms of democratization and respect of human rights—both on your own country’s foreign policy and then even on the region’s architecture. So that’s why I said wherever you are at whatever different stages of your career, you must never underestimate your capacity to make a difference. While not all your expectations will be realized, it’s best to try, fail, and learn rather than not to try it or have a go at it.

**Journal:** What is it like working towards a more functional democracy? What was the process of safeguarding that democracy and how has that changed? How have you seen the relationships change between Indonesia and the rest of ASEAN as those processes moved forward?

**Dr. Natalegawa:** I think that reform and democratic transformation is a process and not an event. It’s one that requires nurturing, constant investment of efforts, and certainly there cannot be complacency. Especially for people like ourselves who are interested in international affairs, one thing that I realized is how the traditional distinction between internal and external domain or environment becomes extremely fragile and extremely difficult to differentiate. Indonesia’s democratization process was obviously triggered by internal dynamics and internal developments. From the outset, we, meaning people like myself at the time in the Foreign Ministry, realized that this is inherently an internal process and we must sustain it. However, there was also recognition of the need to ensure that there is synergy between the internal and external domains. Hence, among our priorities was the need to cooperate with external democratic partners on capacity building. In the limited time that we had at the beginning, the main focus was on creating all the various institutions which a functioning democracy would normally rely on in terms of capacity building.

“"I think that reform and democratic transformation is a process and not an event. It’s one that requires nurturing, constant investment of efforts, and certainly there cannot be complacency.""
absence of such an effort could easily lead to backtracking with institutions becoming dormant and sidelined.

Essentially, in other words, our foreign policy sought to solidify Indonesia's democratization process through creating partnerships and cooperation and building networks of cooperation with other democracies to strengthen our democratic institutions. But, in doing so, Indonesia always emphasized that each country has its own roadmap, its own unique situation, and that sometimes less can be more. You don't want to be too suffocating in your goodwill efforts if it doesn't create a sense of national ownership and national participation in the endeavor.

We've seen many instances in the past where the international community focuses on one country as it engages in its transformation. But because it was so overwhelming, there wasn't sufficient sense of local and national participation. As a result, when that kind of attention declines, the effort is not sustainable, and it quickly grinds to a halt. As I said before, one dimension is how to utilize foreign policy in strengthening and solidifying Indonesia's democratic reform. Another is how to ensure that Indonesia's democratic changes go hand-in-hand with the region's in ASEAN.

I must say reflecting on this endeavor, one is reminded at the time of the challenge we faced in the region. At the time when we began to introduce the idea of an ASEAN political security community, not only economic, not only social and cultural, there were a number of countries in the region that didn't respond to this positively. Not only that but also within Indonesia itself, even some very well-meaning civil society groups did not respond positively. They said, “Why is Indonesia being such a busybody outside? We should consolidate first within. We should solidify our internal process before we turn globally to the wider region.” But, our response was that these things cannot be done in a neat, sequential manner. It's not as if we seek perfection within and then we press on overseas, but rather this must be something that's done simultaneously and in a synergistic way. That was the main point I was trying to say, that the distinction between internal and external becomes increasingly diffused and becomes fragile nowadays.

**Journal:** Do you think that there's a difference between what different political parties think Indonesia’s responsibilities should be towards ASEAN or the international community? Do political parties express differences in what they think Indonesia’s approach should be towards the region and the international sphere or are the parties’ interests somewhat intertwined?

**Dr. Natalegawa:** I think in Indonesia, as far as foreign policy is concerned, there isn't much political differentiation between different political parties. It is largely apolitical in nature, in other words, there is a sufficiently broad national consensus on foreign policy issues. Foreign policy does not normally become a subject of contestation between different political parties.

There are some foreign policy issues that often engage and even divide political opinion
in Indonesia internally. At the top of my head is the issue of the protection of nationals. This is to do with consular issues and the protection of migrant workers such as Indonesian workers overseas who are in the Middle East or neighboring regions. This issue can quickly become a political football. There could easily be a perception that the authorities, the government, or the Foreign Ministry have not done their best to protect nationals overseas and that can quickly become a subject of political debate: whether or to what extent we should be doing better. Another issue that I think often becomes political attention are the developments in the Middle East and anything to do with Palestine issues in Indonesia. It’s a very sensitive issue that engenders a lot of emotions from different political parties. But again, as a whole, there is a basic common view on subject matters. I think there isn’t really much differentiation between the political parties.

Sometimes, vis-à-vis the region, it can be quite challenging because, in my personal view, there can be a misplaced sense of regional entitlement. Because Indonesia is large in terms of a country within ASEAN and within Southeast Asia, there’s an expectation that Indonesia automatically be the leader of the region. Throughout all my career in the Foreign Ministry, I have had to gently remind our domestic constituents that leadership must be earned and not imposed. Just because you have certain attributes, size of population, size of the economy, and geographic size, it doesn’t mean it naturally follows so that you can simply impose leadership. The international system is a system of sovereign states, large and small, hence it’s extremely important for Indonesia to earn its leadership in the region and to not suffocate or not to be imposing on others. This type of cooperative partnership, the projection of a spirit of cooperative partnership, of less is more, and of earning our leadership, has been one that has really instilled our foreign policy for years.

Contrast this to other subregions. In South Asia, India is a major economy and power obviously, but you can arguably say that there are other countries in the subregion like Pakistan that can sort of neutralize India’s ambitions. In South America, you have countries like Brazil, Argentina, Mexico going back and forth between them. But in Indonesia’s case, although we are so objectively overwhelming in the region, because of the pursuit of a diplomacy that is nuanced and earns our leadership, I would like to think that we have allowed regionalism to take foot and to thrive. Indonesia has always tried to give room for ASEAN to thrive and not to mindlessly throw our weight about. For instance, when the border disputes between Thailand and Cambodia occurred in 2011 during Indonesia’s Chairmanship, there was no discomfort by Thailand or Cambodia to seek Indonesia’s facilitating efforts. Not because Indonesia is the largest country in ASEAN, but simply because more than anything else, there is a comfort level that Indonesia can be an objective facilitator in the process. When Indonesia goes missing
in its international or regional engagements, often the countries of the region express hope that Indonesia becomes active once again. This nuanced approach, when leadership is exercised or is projected through earning that leadership through diplomacy, is often not fully understood currently in Indonesia’s domestic setting because they want us to be vocal and to be striving. This is where we need to be saying, “Look, diplomacy is about outcomes and not necessarily about appearance.” But this is very difficult sometimes because all governments must operate within a certain domestic setting.

Journal: You mentioned that democratization is a process but earning and maintaining leadership also seems like a process. Within ASEAN, what is the path forward for Indonesia in your opinion? What is the best way for Indonesia to continue earning and maintaining that position of leadership and that position of deep trust that it has with other ASEAN members?

Dr. Natalegawa: First and foremost, there must be consolidation within Indonesia itself. There must be a sense of national consensus on how we approach things and how we do things. I use the term “intermestic” to delineate and capture the idea of international and domestic being one. If we are to speak with authority and with credibility externally, we need to ensure that everyone is on board internally. It’s often extremely difficult to ensure that this is actually realized. For instance, next year in 2023 Indonesia will be chairing ASEAN after Cambodia. This year Indonesia is chair of the G20. It is therefore extremely important for foreign policy makers in Jakarta to be able to ensure that there is sufficient domestic appreciation of what chairmanship entails and what the deliverables would be aside from being an efficient host of a meeting. There is a very important distinction between chairmanship and leadership. A country can chair an organization extremely efficiently and effectively. The impact of its chairmanship, however, is not felt beyond its one-year period of responsibility. But if you look at Indonesia’s past chairmanship of ASEAN in 2011 and 2003 before it, and even further back, there’s always transformative changes that Indonesia brought to ASEAN. From the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation to the idea of the ASEAN community with the three pillars in 2003 and the consolidation of the East Asia Summit in 2011. It’s always been transformative contributions and it’s very important for policy makers whether it’s Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, or others, to always have the domestic constituency understand what we are trying to achieve. Nowadays, I’m not so sure because it means the policymakers must have the courage to inform the wider public on how things actually are externally, rather than simply be dictated by what they think the public wants to hear and expect from them. Sometimes, there is a risk of public opinion-led foreign policy. To address this, there is a need for strong basic principles that you pursue relentlessly and with courage.
Journal: With the economic and political fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic being extremely rough on Southeast Asian countries, what are your observations on Indonesia’s COVID-19 response?

Dr. Natalegawa: Rather than the COVID response per se, I would like to suggest what the most recent situation reminds us of in terms of the wider picture. We spoke essentially of the internal-external nexus, how changes within a country manifest itself on its foreign policy and vice versa, and on Indonesia’s experience with the democratic transformations of ‘98, ‘99 and then how that manifests in its foreign policy and vice versa. But, I think the COVID experience reminds us of another level: how foreign policy deals with cross-border, transnational, global issues. These are issues that defy national solutions.

We tend to assume that we operate within neat national borders, and we make assumptions as if we can solve problems neatly within our national borders. But, if you think about it, cases of public health, environmental issues, climate change, and marine pollution, for instance, are transboundary issues. Similarly, natural disasters, like the 2004 tsunami are as well. These issues raise awareness on how we can be more ready and resilient to address transboundary and transborder issues. This is where I feel that there is an international governance deficit. Naturally, Indonesia has engaged in international cooperation to deal with COVID-19, or the SARS beforehand. We made sure that the issue of public health cooperation and communicable diseases became one of the key issues for discussion within the 2005 East Asia Summit. Additionally, ASEAN was quite early in making these topics issues that we all come together to discuss and compare notes on.

The question is, to what extent has this been sufficient? There has not been any shortcoming in terms of commitments and declarations of intent and purposes. But, to what extent will those regional level commitments become operationalized at the national levels? I mean just to take one case, despite all the various ASEAN-level endeavors on the issues of travel restrictions or easing of travel in relation to the pandemic, there is arguably insufficient coherent region-wide approach. Each of our economies, whether it be Singapore, Indonesia, Cambodia, or Malaysia—will have policies that are essentially national level-driven with little actual coordination. Individual countries announced that they were now opening their borders for international tourists again. Others are on a lockdown mode so it’s never all cylinders firing all at the same time.

There are so many regional level efforts but most of the decisions are essentially national in nature. Certainly, there’s no one size fits all and every country’s situation is unique and different. But at the foreign policy level, for foreign policymakers, there has to be an attempt to make sure that there is some degree of convergence and synergy at the regional level. These should not be restricted to public health issues, but environmental issues like the haze, the issue of counterterrorism, the protection of the safety of navigation in the Straits of Malacca, and marine pollution. These are all twenty-first century problems demanding twenty-first century solutions. Unfortunately, we are dealing with
them in a twentieth century mindset.

I'm referring to a San Francisco 1945 moment for the UN, or a Bangkok 1967 moment for ASEAN. If one was to have a blank canvas, a blank page, and if you were to design an international governance that is faithfully purposeful for today’s challenges and opportunities, what would it look like? At the moment, we’ve been experiencing incremental changes. Take for instance the UN Security Council reform. It’s been discussed for decades yet the permanent members of the UN will never legislate themselves out of influence and power, because they benefit from the current situation. In my humble opinion, thought leaders like yourselves shouldn't simply take things as they are but come up with your own ideas of how, if you were to have a blank canvas and given the types of challenges we face, how would you address governance? I feel at the moment there is a governance deficit in twentieth century institutions dealing with twenty-first century problems and that's why we are where we are.

Journal: What does “intermestic” look like for Indonesia? How do you take the domestic and how do you mesh it with the global?

Dr. Natalegawa: This is something I’m constantly grappling with. We as practitioners and students of international affairs tend to assume that there is a clear delineation. We naturally prioritize our national interests and that becomes factored in our decision making. Once everything is clear, we try to project it and promote it externally. But these things constantly evolve and are in such a fluid situation. While each country’s situation is unique, all of us are affected by international dynamics and international developments, whether it’d be our economy, political stability, etc. The challenge we face as foreign policymakers and practitioners is how to ensure that those external dimensions are brought into the internal policy making process.

There is no “blinkered” approach where you assume that externally, everything is a given and constant, that all we need are simply internal variables. This is of course far from the case. External factors need to be considered in national decision making, not as a sign of weakness, rather to ensure that the policies adopted are fit for purpose and protect and promote the national interests. We must bring all these internal and external factors to the table to ensure that our decisions have a chance of becoming effective, otherwise they become isolated and disconnected from the actual prevailing situation. To me, that is often the most challenging undertaking: how do you bring the domestic audience and stakeholders within government onto the same page? It’s more than about diplomacy and negotiations with external parties. Internal or national consensus are essential.

“Wherever you are and whatever your circumstances, my only request is that you don’t underestimate how much of a positive difference you can make.”
Diplomats of the current period must be both mindful of the external environment and the internal environment. They must on the one hand be attentive to the risk of becoming too much of an internationalist or globalist and on the other hand, the risk of doing things that they think the political domestic audience wants to hear. It’s becoming extremely difficult for diplomats nowadays to forge agreements because often negotiations are conducted with so much publicity that there is not much space for informal discussion. I think there is room for us to suggest new ideas, new perspectives, and paradigms. There is recognition for that realist perspective, the idea that the world is the way it is, an unhappy and dangerous place and countries will continue to go back and forth in very inimical ways. But, at the same time, there must also be a sense of idealism. One cannot simply be despondent. While you recognize prevailing situations, you must also try to effect change. The point I was trying to make is that all of you can make a positive difference. Never underestimate that. There will come a moment when you suddenly realize, “Oh, this is it. This is my chance to affect positive change” and you don’t want to shirk that responsibility. Wherever you are and whatever your circumstances, my only request is that you don’t underestimate how much of a positive difference you can make.

Marty Natalegawa is the former Foreign Minister of Indonesia (2009-2014). He was the Permanent Representative of Indonesia to the UN (2007-2009), Ambassador to the United Kingdom and Ireland (2005-2007), and Indonesia’s Director General for ASEAN Cooperation. He also served in the UN Secretary-General’s High Level Panel on Global Response to Health Crises and as UN President of the General Assembly’s 72nd Session Team of External Advisors. He is currently a member of the UN Secretary-General’s High Level Advisory Board on Mediation and the UN Secretary-General’s Advisory Board on Disarmament and the Board of Trustees of the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research. A lead thinker on Southeast Asian foreign policy and U.S.-ASEAN relations, Dr. Marty Natalegawa has also authored “Does ASEAN Matter? A View from Within” (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018).