



STRATEGIC REVIEW



The Indonesian Journal of
Leadership, Policy and World Affairs

OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2017/VOLUME 7/NUMBER 4
www.sr-indonesia.com

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**The politics
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Rp125.000

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The end of a supraregional entity?

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British voters' decision to exit from the European Union, better known as "Brexit," in a June 2016 referendum, was, in short, a massive shock, not only for the British public but also the world. It not only ruptured domestic politics by forcing the resignation of David Cameron as prime minister, who has been replaced by Theresa May, but rattled international markets and leaves the future of Europe under a cloud of uncertainty.

It was in another referendum only 42 years ago, in 1975, that 67 percent of British voters overwhelmingly supported moves to create a formal community of European nations. This time it was much different. While the vote was close, Britons showed a unique yet controversial desire to walk away from one of the world's most solid supranational organizations, the EU.

The Brexit option was initially believed to only have support among

a minority of the British population. Thus, Cameron confidently pushed forward with the 2016 referendum. He was sure that by giving people the opportunity to vote, they would choose to stay in the EU and the matter would be settled. Nonetheless, a few days prior to the big day, surveys indicated that there had been a substantial change in public opinion in favor of the leave option, including among older citizens from the “baby boomer” generation. And the final result, 52 percent to 48 percent for Brexit, bore that out.

There are a number of reasons Britain took the Brexit option. First, citizens perceived that membership in the EU limited the country’s sovereignty. Second, EU membership prevented the private sector from operating efficiently due to a myriad of EU regulations to be adopted by member countries. And third, the immigration problem in Britain has been significantly affected by the EU’s immigration regulations. Britain intends to restrict the flow of immigrants, but its EU membership hindered the country from enacting new policies.

Having observed firsthand developments in Britain after the Brexit referendum, I believe it is likely the decision could create a domestic and regional “domino effect.” Prime Minister May signed an official letter in late March regarding Britain’s departure from the EU, worsening relations between the two. In response to May’s actions, Nicola Sturgeon, the first minister of Scotland, called for another independence referendum from Britain, but has since temporarily shelved the idea.

Additionally, there are fears of other EU

members following Britain’s path. Among them is Sweden and the idea of “Swexit,” while groups in Denmark and Norway have also contemplated leaving the EU. Similarly, French

Indonesia relies on the unity of its regional partners, which is manifested through Asean.

and Dutch groups are promoting “Frexit” and “Nexit,” despite their governments officially regretting the decision by British voters. Could this trigger internal instability within Europe and the EU grouping? Brexit has certainly initiated a new chapter of mistrust of supranational organizations such as the EU.

For decades, the EU was acknowledged as the most solid supranational organization in the world. Today, there are fears the grouping may break up. If this occurs, then one may wonder what might happen to other supranational organizations such as the African Union (AU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean).

For Indonesia, Asean is very important. It has been the cornerstone of Indonesia’s foreign policy since the early stages of the Soeharto regime. In dealing with its Asean neighbors, Indonesia implements both bilateral and multilateral approaches. There are four considerations that embolden the country to engage with Southeast Asia’s supraregional



entity. First is the introduction of a new chapter of regional structure in the region. Second, the conducive relations among member countries during the past two decades. (This facilitates peace and stability.) Third, the common interest in the mutual policy of “anti-communist and Western-oriented.” And fourth, continuous, cooperative relations within Asean over the decades have established a sound footing for future success.

In the wake of Brexit, Asean to some extent may face greater challenges to its own relevance. Sustaining Asean as a supranational organization will likely be difficult should any member withdraw, triggering a “worst-case” scenario of a potential breakup. Indonesia relies on the unity of its regional partners,

which is manifested through Asean. As a neutral country, having friends and strategic partnerships will help Indonesia maintain its international role and safeguard its national interests. Asean also serves as a critical buffer for Indonesia. As one of the founding members of this supranational organization, Indonesia has demonstrated its influence through Asean. Jakarta has used the grouping to address numerous bilateral issues and ease regional tensions. This includes the establishment of the Asean Defense Ministers Meeting Plus, which includes non-Asean countries such as the United States, China and India. Additionally, Asean has pushed the strategy of dealing with the South China Sea issue through a code of conduct.

Brexit has shown that national interests play the more important role in driving a country's policy. It has also shown that there is no eternal and lasting collective interest on the European continent. For Asean, the Brexit phenomenon may possibly pose a challenge. With the current battle between the United States and China in Asia, Asean has its common hedging strategy, engaging with

Any move by one member to withdraw from Asean could trigger others to do so.

both Washington and Beijing. In other words, being friends with both sides. This complex environment could entrap Asean, however, and could impact every member state including Indonesia.

Any move by one member to withdraw from Asean could trigger others to do so. If improperly managed, this could create disorder

in the region. Trade, diplomatic relations and other field of cooperation could suffer amid the turbulence.

For Asean, Brexit could serve as a good lesson and as a test of its unity and cohesion. As one of Asean's founding fathers and largest members, Indonesia must lead in maintaining the grouping's integrity and solidarity. Despite criticism of Asean's policy of nonintervention in the internal affairs of its members, the grouping has helped facilitate the mutual and common interests of its members, including Indonesia, and their extraregional partners. However, the big question is how Indonesia and other Asean members cushion themselves from any fallout from Brexit. This could require a concrete plan.

Asean celebrated its 50th anniversary in August and Indonesia's continued belief in Asean will drive how the organization moves forward. Any miscalculation at the strategic level in interacting with Asean may backfire or even threaten Jakarta's own interests. Thus, Jakarta should be a leader to facilitate the smooth continuation of a Southeast Asian supraregional organization that has served Indonesia's interests since its establishment in 1967. ●