

THE DISPUTE OF AMBALAT IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF INDONESIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE POST-NEW ORDER ERA

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Abstract

This article analyzes the Ambalat territorial dispute between Indonesia and Malaysia, viewing from the perspective of Indonesian foreign policy in the Post-New Order era. The writer argues that Ambalat is a typical case in which Indonesian foreign policy had been widely influenced by public pressures which force government to take a firm stance against Malaysia. The practices of democratic system, including free media, have become an important factor behind such firm stance, along with the growing nationalism amongst public in the Post-New Order Indonesia. However, in relations with the willingness to maintain a regional influence in ASEAN, the government actually does not really intent to involve in an open war.

Keywords: territorial dispute, foreign policy, democracy, nationalism, ASEAN centrality.

I. INTRODUCTION

Territorial dispute in Ambalat gains a wide attention in Indonesia, especially after several military incidents between Indonesia and Malaysia in 2005. Ambalat itself is a sea block in the Celebes Sea, only some kilometres off coast of Tarakan City, East Borneo province. Geographically, Ambalat is located on the borders of Indonesia and Malaysia, making each of them claiming it as its territory.

The Ambalat and East Ambalat Block, each of them covering area of 10,750 km² and 4,739 km², are economically strategic as they possess massive amount of oil (421.61 million barrel) and natural gas (3.3 trillion cubic feet).¹ It is therefore the Indonesian Government gave exploitation concessions to Italian oil company ENI in 1999 and American company Unocal in 2004. Conflict started at 16 February 2005 when Malaysian Government gave exploration concessions to Shell

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¹ Melda Kamil Ariatno, "Ambalat Milik Siapa?" ("Who Own Ambalat?"), on *Kompas* daily newspaper, 8 March 2005

(British/ Dutch company).

Unfortunately, both Indonesia and Malaysia responded the issue by military might. After Malaysia rejected Indonesian diplomatic note, tension consecutively rouse. At 3 March 2005, Malaysian Super King Aircraft crossed Indonesian border twice in the waters of Tarakan, East Borneo. This reconnaissance aircraft even crossed and manouvered over three Indonesian warship for 10 minutes (KRI Nuku, KRI Wiratno, and KRI Rencong), the latter was on task force duty on the waters. Indonesian government responded by building a lighthouse in Karang Unarang, a coral reef within the area appointed as a new basepoint after the lost of Sipadan and Ligitan Islands to Malaysia.²

At 10 April 2005, tension reached its peak. Provocation between the two navies resulted in the colliding of Indonesian warship of KRI Tedong Naga and Malaysian KD Rencong for three times. The incident grew anxiety as they might get worse into a gunfire. If it was the case, in practice Indonesia and Malaysia would be in war.

Indonesian policy in Ambalat case is extraordinarily exceptional. After the pitfall of New Order in 1997-1998, there was no single border case resulting in mobilization of military might but Ambalat. Moreover, it is only the Ambalat case that warships performed dangerous manouvers and provocation nearly broke into a state of war.

Indonesian response here is different from, for example, its response to the Tanjung Berakit incident in the waters of Bintan, Riau Islands province, in August 2010. The incident involved the detention of 7 Malaysian fishermen by Riau Islands Officers of Marine and Fishery Affairs (the DKP) and 3 DKP officers by Malaysian water police. Far from military clash, both Indonesia and Malaysia resolved the case by diplomatic channel and clarification, in which both parties sent their 'custody' home.³ The Ambalat is also different from Camar Bulan case

² Yophiandi Kurniawan, "Protes Indonesia atas Ambalat" ("Indonesia Protests on Ambalat"), last modified at 27 February 2005, retrieved from <http://www/tempoin-teraktif.com/hg/nasional/2005/02/27/brk,20050227,id.htm> at 28 August 2013, 05:22 PM

³ "Insiden Tanjung Berakit Tidak Bisa Diproses Hukum" ("Tanjung Berakit Incident Cannot Be Legally Processed"), last modified at 17 August 2010, retrieved from <http://www.antaranews.com/berita/216617/insiden-tanjung-berakit-tidak-bisa-diproses-hu->

in the borders of West Borneo in October 2011. The incident involved allegation that Malaysia removed border markers to Indonesian side, yet it ended with no military manner. Response to Ambalat case is far from what Indonesian public continuously accuses their government stances to Malaysia of being indecisive, too lenient, hesitant, and compromised.⁴

Therefore, it is important to learn on Indonesian policy toward Ambalat dispute. Indonesian firm stances here, as a foreign policy, show that there is a special treatment unfound in any other border cases. The paper seeks to identify factors affecting this particular Indonesian policy. Some questions brought here are: (1) How to explain Ambalat dispute from the perspective of foreign policy decision making in the post-New Order Indonesia?; and (2) What kind of factors influencing Indonesia's firm behavior on the case?

This article consists of several parts. First, the dynamics of Indonesia-Malaysia relations would be highlighted, especially on the 'emotional' element influencing the two countries' sentiment. Second, Ambalat dispute is put in the domestic context of Indonesian foreign policy decision making, especially in regards to the flourishing nationalism and democratization in the post-New Order Indonesia. Third, it discusses the significance of Ambalat to the direction of Indonesia's post-New Order foreign policy, namely the "ASEAN Centrality" principle. Fourth, this paper would end with conclusion.

II. EMOTIONAL RELATIONS BETWEEN INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA

Indonesia-Malaysia relations, although belong to the same cultural and racial lineage (widely known as *negara serumpun*), do not always go smooth. Both harmony and conflict draw pictures of relations among

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⁴ Pinkey Triputra, "Inferioritas Indonesia: *Framing Analysis* Hubungan Indonesia dan Malaysia dalam Media" ("Indonesian Inferiority: Framing Analysis on Indonesia-Malaysia Relations on the Media"), in Evi Fitriani (ed.), *Hubungan Indonesia-Malaysia dalam Perspektif Sosial, Budaya, Negara, dan Media: Kasus Perbatasan dan Pekerja Migran (Indonesia-Malaysia Relations in Social, Cultural, State, and Media Perspective: Border Issues and Migrant Workers)* (Jakarta: UI Press, 2012), p. 192

the two countries, spanning from annexations, territorial disputes and regional arrangement to economic relations and cultural claims. On certain extent, it is safe to say that rivalry among neighboring countries, like Japan and China, is continuously existed between Indonesia and Malaysia.

Historically, as two sovereign nations, Indonesia and Malaysia started their relations in harmonious manner. In the early Malaysian independence (1957), Indonesia was the first country outside the commonwealth nations to establish its representative office. A year later, both countries also signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cultural Agreement, which became the Malaysian first friendship agreement after its independence.⁵

Paddles on both countries relations started to appear in the first half of 1960s. Indonesia-Malaysia relations reached its lowest point when Indonesian president at the time, Soekarno, launched politics of *Konfrontasi* with Malaysia in the early 1960s. In the meantime, Indonesia felt insecure with Malaysia's attempt to integrate Singapore, Serawak, Sabah, and Brunei into its federation. Growing with past background of continuous confrontation with ruling colonials, President Soekarno alleged Malaysia as 'agent of neocolonialism' aiming to annex regions which should claim self-determination status. He was clearly suspicious on British manouver behind Malaysia's action. Soekarno, underlining the importance of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism as his ultimate political goals, put Malaysia as target of his ambitious foreign policy. Soekarno even made the famous slogan *Ganyang* Malaysia (Crush Malaysia). Such charismatic Soekarno is surely in the heart of many Indonesians that the slogan is always raised in every conflict with Malaysia nowadays, including the Ambalat in the post-New Order era.

After Soekarno lost his power, harmonious relations started to flourish through the establishment of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the middle of 1960s. As both countries are its founding father, harmony in both countries are necessarily central to reach

⁵ *Malaya-Indonesia Relations 31st August 1957 to 15th September 1963* (Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Chetak Kerajaan, 1963), pp. 1-2, as cited in Evi Fitriani, "Evolusi Hubungan Indonesia-Malaysia" ("Evolution of Indonesia-Malaysia Relations"), in Evi Fitriani (ed.), *Op. Cit.*, pp. 21-22

ASEAN's ultimate goal of stable and peaceful region. Economically, both countries also started growing close ties. In 2005, trade in both countries reached US\$ 5.5 billion and in 2008, it even reached US\$ 15.3 billion.⁶ After Singapore, Malaysia is Indonesia's largest trading partner in Southeast Asia. Malaysia also becomes source of foreign direct investment amounting to as much as US\$ 407.6 million in 2006.⁷

Among this growing interdependence however, Indonesia-Malaysia relations become too emotional as it comes to migrant worker issue. Tension in this sector is caused by development gap among the two countries. "The poor Indonesia" and "the rich Malaysia" have become both push and pull factors of workers migrating from the former to the latter. This becomes more complex as Indonesian workers can only access on uneducated or low skill jobs, such as plantation labors, construction workers, and housemaid. This turns to perception gap among the two countries, constructed as subordinate relations of 'labor' and 'employers'.⁸ Thus, it is no wonder that there are so many cases such as abuses of labors by their employers, labors killing his/ her employers, and so on. The abuse of Indonesian female migrant worker Nirmala Bonat in 2004 and death sentence to 78 Indonesian workers in 2011 are some of the most referred cases to describe this emotional relations.

Another issues gaining tension is the unilateral claim of cultural product. As *negara serumpun*, it is no wonder that there are cultural similarities among the two countries, such as traditional song, clothes, dances, foods, and so on. However, there are growing perceptions that Malaysian arrogantly uses those cultural symbol for their own sake. In 2007, Indonesian medias constructed that Malaysian unilaterally recognized the *Rasa Sayange* song (from Indonesian province of Moluccas), *Reog* dance (from Ponorogo, East Java), and *Batik* clothes (from Java

⁶ *Statistik Perdagangan Luar Negeri Indonesia, Ekspor, Jilid I 2006 (Indonesian Foreign Trade Statistics, Export, Part I 2006)* (Jakarta: BPS, 2006), p. xiv and *Statistik Perdagangan Luar Negeri Indonesia, Ekspor 2008, Jilid I (Indonesian Foreign Trade Statistics, Export 2008, Part I)* (Jakarta: BPS, 2008), p. xiv

⁷ Retrieved from www.bkpm.go.id at 16 April 2013, 7.00 AM

⁸ Syamsul Hadi, "Persoalan Tenaga Kerja Indonesia di Malaysia dan Pentingnya Reorientasi Pembangunan Ekonomi Indonesia" ("Indonesian Migrant Worker Issues and The Importance of Reorientation on Indonesian Economic Development"), in Fitriani (ed.), *Op. Cit.*, p. 75

and Sumatera) as its own. Public anger grew even more as Malaysian government used the *Pendet* dance from Indonesian resort island of Bali as its tourism icon.

Territorial disputes are another obstacles. As adjacent countries, there are so many areas belong to such, both on the land and the sea. Most of them are located along the land borders in Borneo islands and waters of Malacca Straits, Riau Islands, and Celebes Cea. In the last area, Indonesian public has yet to forget the lost of Sipadan and Ligitan Island to Malaysia. Running tough negotiation since 1960s, Joint Committee from both countries and High Commission from ASEAN failed to conclude any deals.⁹ This made them to undergo legal action, in which in 2002 the International Court of Justice (ICJ) decided that Malaysia has full sovereignty on the two islands based on effective occupation status. The case causes deep bitterness among Indonesian and still lingers on the following territorial disputes, especially on Ambalat in 2005.

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DEMOCRACY AND NATIONALISM

An important variable to analyze the Ambalat dispute is the democracy factor growing in the Post-New Order Indonesia. Previously within the grip of authoritarian rule where President Soeharto became the most dominant power, democracy marked the beginning of freedom and plurality on contemporary Indonesia. Starting from reform in 1997-1998, Indonesia has been transforming its political system, especially on the establishment of institutional democracy by creating political parties (multiparty system), supporting free and independent media and non-governmental organization, conducting national election, strengthening legislative roles to control the executive, and so on. In this era, democracy has brought euphoria of freedom especially on the freedom of information, opinion, and political participation, which sometimes lead to extreme direction.

Such euphoria affects directly to decision making of public policy. Political actors are increasingly plural so that decision making can no

⁹ Fitriani, "Evolusi Hubungan Indonesia-Malaysia" ("Evolution of Indonesia-Malaysia Relations"), *Op. Cit.*, p. 40 and 49-50

longer be monolithic nor unilateral. In the context of Ambalat dispute, such public dimension has significant influence on the government's firm stance. It is as President SBY has been forced to follow public angers, that gave him no choice other than firm and 'confrontational' stances.

Government policy at that time was therefore cannot be detached from the growing negative sentiment among societies. There were so many demonstrations against Malaysian activities in Ambalat during March-June 2005, as seen in big cities such as Jakarta, Surabaya, Yogyakarta, Bandung, Semarang, Solo, Pekanbaru, Ambon, Medan, and Makassar. In some cities like Jakarta, Surabaya, and Makassar, some groups even established command posts using the *Ganyang Malaysia* as its name to register volunteers willing to be combatant as soon as war in Ambalat starts. In Makassar alone, there were 3,800 volunteers in March 2005, including former Indonesian Ambassador to United Kingdom and brother of former President B.J. Habibie, Fanny Habibie. There were also some groups committing on internet hacking on various Malaysian ministries, bodies, organization, and universities. This particular issue rouse a distinct perception of threat on Malaysian sovereignty in digital era.¹⁰

The Ambalat dispute itself was not only happening in 2005. In February 2007, tension rouse again as Malaysian warship entered Indonesian waters for three times and even moved as close as 300 yard from baseline. At 7 March 2007, there was an incident in which Indonesian fishermen was guarded to exit Ambalat Block by Malaysian warship.¹¹ In March 2009, more incidents happened as Malaysian warship and helicopter entered Ambalat waters at various times. Those incident are practically followed by harsh reaction from Indonesian side. Demonstration in front of Malaysian embassy in Kuningan district, Jakarta is

¹⁰ Compiled from Ahmad Nizar Yaakub, *Dances with Garuda: Malaysia-Indonesia Bilateral Relations* (Kuching: UNIMAS Publisher, 2013), pp. 161-162

¹¹ "Mily Chief Denies Tightening Security in RI-Malaysia Border Areas", retrieved from <http://www.antara.co.id/en/arc/2007/3/2/mily-chief-denied-tightening-security-in-ri-malaysia-border-areas/> at 17 December 2007, 06:05 PM and "Malaysian Warships Chase Away Indonesian Fishermen from Ambalat", retrieved from <http://www.antara.co.id/en/arc/2007/3/7/malaysian-warships-chase-away-indonesian-fishermen-from-ambalat/> at 17 December 2007, 05:58 PM

a daily show whenever tension arises. In many times, demonstration goes anarchic and, in the view of Malaysians, goes too far as it includes flag-burnings.

Not only the so called people in the streets, other ‘formal’ stakeholders also showed stern reactions. The military also took part, in which the most influential bodies within them, the Indonesian Army (TNI AD), expressed their readiness to deploy forces in Ambalat. As stated by Army Chief Joko Santoso, the Indonesian Army saw Ambalat dispute as a violation on Indonesia’s sovereignty. However referring to its function within democratic state, Santoso expressed that his institution would adhere to any political decision taken by the president.¹² Meanwhile the parliament members, triggered typically by the desire to gain public sympathy by taking advantages of sensitive issues, also expressed their tough stance. They said that they provided political support to mobilize large number of army in Ambalat.¹³ One of them, Djoko Susilo stated that ‘firm stances’ and ‘forces deployment’ should be delivered to emphasize Indonesia’s integrity in Ambalat. Moreover, another parliament member, Yorrys Raweyai, also supported the ‘confrontation as long as it is necessary’.¹⁴ Such members stances have been carried out to the parliament’s stance as whole, whereas in June 2009 there were five representatives from the Commission I of Indonesian House of Representative to conduct official visit to Malaysian parliament in order to emphasize the former’s claim over Ambalat.¹⁵

¹² “KSAD: TNI AD Siap Dikirim ke Ambalat” (“Army Chief: Army Ready to Deploy in Ambalat”), last modified at 8 March 2005, retrieved from <http://www tempo.co/read/news/2005/03/08/05557639/KSAD-TNI-AD-Siap-Dikirim-ke-Ambalat> at 30 August 2013, 5:23 PM

¹³ “DPR Beri Dukungan Politik Pengerahan Pasukan TNI di Ambalat” (“Parliament Gave Political Support for Army Deployment in Ambalat”), last modified at 5 April 2005, retrieved from <http://news.detik.com/index.php/detik.read/tahun/2005/bulan/04/tgl/05/time/181637/idnews/335290/idkanal/10> at 30 August 2013, 05:10 PM

¹⁴ “Pemerintah Masih Kompromi Tangani Kasus Ambalat” (“Gov Still Compromises on Ambalat”), last modified at 5 March 2005, retrieved from <http://www tempo.co/read/news/2005/03/05/05657536/Pemerintah-Masih-Kompromi-Tangani-Kasus-Ambalat> at 30 August 2013, 5.00 PM

¹⁵ “Di Depan Parlemen Malaysia, Komisi I DPR Tegaskan Ambalat Milik RI” (“In Front of Malaysian Parliament, Commission I of House of Representative Emphasized Indonesia’s Possession on Ambalat”), last modified at 9 June 2009, retrieved from <http://www tempo.co/read/news/2009/06/09/078180923/Didepan-Parlemen->

In a certain degree, harsh stances taken by various stakeholders in society actually reflected the growing nationalism in Indonesia after the New Order. After the pitfall of Suharto regime in 1997-1998, Indonesia has been undergoing many humiliating drama putting it on underdog and even inferior position. The economic crisis in 1997-1998 caused profound economic impact in the society, such as the continuous declining of Indonesian currency, prolonged economic intervention by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), widespread poverty and unemployment, and ethnic conflicts. Democratic euphoria in this era has also strengthened the disintegration sentiment in various provinces, as seen in Aceh, Papua, the Moluccas, and even Riau.

Indonesians were in general shaken when the East Timor residents voted to disintegrate in the referendum of 1998.¹⁶ The lost of Sipadan and Ligitan Island to Malaysia in 2002 gave subsequent shock and worsened collective wounds within the society. In such situation, there was a growing psychological mood that Indonesia is in the process of collapsing. Accumulated disappointment, more problems from one to another, and the seemingly incapacitated democracy bringing no solution have made public in high frustration.

Indonesian media are not unsuccessful in catching such public feeling. In fact, they do more than just reporting the 'objective' realities regarding perception and responses of various Indonesians. Media itself has a distinct power to make public opinion. By doing the reporting, interviews and the like, they construct the people on the weak Indonesia and the incapable government.¹⁷ Regardless on the importance of media within democratic life, it is also a reality that it has worsened feeling of 'inferiority against them' among the society.

In this light, it is no wonder if the Ambalat dispute in 2005 sparked many harsh reponses from various stakeholders. The case should not be seen as a single event, rather it is part of series accumulating from previous events. Harsh stances actually reflected society's deep disappointment since the beginning of *Reformasi*, which then be 'channeled'

[Malaysia-Komisi-I-DPR-Tegaskan-Ambalat-Milik-RI](#) at 30 August 2013, 5:10 PM

¹⁶ Eko Arnada, "Diplomasi atau Perang?" ("Diplomacy or War?"), at *Jawa Pos Daily Newspaper*, 16 March 2005

¹⁷ Triputra, *Op. Cit.*, p. 165

externally to ‘public enemy’ called Malaysia.

The presence of Malaysia as ‘public enemy’ among this very unique momentum triggered harsh stances on Ambalat dispute. As explained before, Malaysia was perceived so negatively as it was described as being arrogant on migrant workers, cultural claim, and territorial dispute issue. Public could point their finger on the Sipadan and Ligitan case, in which many comment that it must not be happening again the future. Therefore, it is understandable that they cannot accept argument delivered by Malaysian government on Ambalat dispute. It was reported that after the inclusion of Sipadan and Ligitan island into Malaysian federation, it needed to redraw its baseline by incorporating Ambalat block. For Indonesian public, such argument reflected another Malaysian arrogance and Indonesia’s eroding national sovereignty.¹⁸

By this logic, it is not a surprise to see that Indonesian society collectively showed the strengthening of nationalism during Ambalat dispute. Harsh statements, demonstrations, and establishment of comand posts were its concrete manifestation. Nationalism is basically an existence of collective loyalty among societies within a nation. It enables them to share common perception and solidarity and consequently takes common responses and actions.¹⁹

It is this nationalism factor that finally transformed by the elite into military action to Ambalat block. The revival of nationalism among Indonesian has become ‘coercive’ instrument to make their government respond in line with it. In this point, military option was taken because of domestic pressure. As mentioned before, Indonesian government then took a response far from its usual manner of diplomacy and being lenient in dealing with international issues.

In different point of view, such response was not only caused by domestic pressures alone, as the political elite, in this regard President SBY, had his own interests in Ambalat issue. By committing military manouver, Presiden SBY hoped to gain popularity among his people.

¹⁸ Territorial dispute issue, regardless of its connection to other following events, is indeed such a sensitive issue that will trigger sentiment of nationalism. The issue directly hit the national sovereignty principle and meet perfectly with the national pride feeling, self-esteem, and we-feeling.

¹⁹ Yaakub, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 135-136

It is clear that Ambalat dispute was used to divert prolonged domestic social, economic, and political problems. At the beginning of his tenure, President SBY faced severe criticisms due to the slow responses toward earthquake and its huge victims in Aceh and increasing unemployment and inflation, as well as tight political pressures from opposition groups. This made his government to be unpopular among public. Ambalat dispute, therefore, had the very motive to increase President's image by taking nationalistic action.²⁰

The leveling up of nationalism after it reached low point on the economic crisis 1997-1998 was a positive sign to solidify support for the ruling regime, which at the meantime prepared an economically unpopular policy, namely rising of the fuel prices. At the meantime, it can be seen that critics from opposition and observers were drowned by emotional nuances brought about by the Ambalat dispute.

In the light of Indonesia's territorial inferiority after the lost of Sipadan and Ligitan, during Ambalat case President SBY tried to signal that Indonesia is in no hesitancy to use military might to defend its integrity. Such action also gave message to domestic separatists, especially those in Aceh and Papua, that the central government is also in no hesitancy to take firm measures against them.

Therefore, it is understandable that President SBY chose to take firm response. In the next development, such response was not only manifested in military maneuver alone. President SBY himself joined in a warship to patrol Ambalat. He also showed more seriousness by increasing national defence budget as much as Rp 1.7 trillion in May 2005. In December 2005, Indonesian military conducted marine security training involving 40 warships sailing from Surabaya to Celebes Sea through the strait of Makassar. In 2006, defence budget was raised again from Rp 21.6 trillion to Rp 24 trillion.²¹ All those actions showed firm responses by Indonesian government on Ambalat dispute.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 163

²¹ *Ibid.*

IV. AMBALAT DISPUTE AND ASEAN CENTRALITY PRINCIPLE OF INDONESIAN FOREIGN POLICY

From a different point of view, Indonesia's response toward Ambalat dispute cannot be detached from the principle of "ASEAN Centrality" that strongly substantiated the Indonesian foreign policy. The principle has actually grown since the New Order era and but still apply until nowadays. Therefore, this ASEAN factor represents continuing factor in the midst of changing factor represented by the existence of democracy and the incremental rising of nationalism. In Ambalat dispute, as explained later, this ASEAN Centrality factor becomes the most important control variable restraining firm responses not to develop into open war.

ASEAN's importance to Indonesia is the manifestation of President Suharto's foreign policy aiming for stable and peaceful region. The principle came in the midst of various instability and potential military conflicts in Southeast Asia, such as the abovementioned Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation in 1960s. For New Order regime, a stable and dynamic Southeast Asia provides conducive ground for Indonesia's economic development, as well as recover its international reputation by turning over the previously confrontational into a more benign foreign policy. The vision was materialized in the establishment of ASEAN between Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. In its development (including enlargement into 10 members nowadays), ASEAN proves to bring stability and peace in the region, including participates constructively in the settlement of Cambodian conflict. ASEAN has such an important role that it is regarded as the most progressive institution in the Asia Pacific.²²

In the post-New Order era, the Indonesian government still regards ASEAN as its most convenient base for its activities in international relations. In fact, ASEAN enables Indonesia to interact with regional great powers confidently. It is an undeniable fact that Indonesia and its Southeast Asian fellows are actually group of small countries that can fall very easily into sphere of influence of the great powers, such as

²² Mark Beeson, *Institutions of the Asia Pacific: ASEAN, APEC, and Beyond* (Routledge: London and New York, 2009), pp. 37-55

China, Japan, the United States, Australia, and so on.²³ It is interesting to discover that while ASEAN provides some kind of political ‘defence’ against those great powers, the great powers themselves feel convenient to hand on leadership role to them rather than to their rivals.

This systemic and geostrategic perception is then formulated to current political doctrine promoted by Indonesian Foreign Ministry, namely the Doctrine of Natalegawa. Named after Indonesian current Minister of Foreign Affairs Marty Natalegawa, the doctrine basically describes the multipolarity in East Asia in which there are no single dominant power after the Cold War. Military tension is not a dominant issue that it can appear alongside with economic and coordination issues. Such condition provides spaces for ASEAN to be the ‘center’ of the region (the so-called ASEAN Centrality Principle). Nowadays, there are so many initiatives taken with ASEAN as the center, such as the ASEAN+3, ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA), ASEAN-Korea FTA, ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand FTA (AANZ FTA), ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), and many others.²⁴

It is assumed that such “ASEAN Centrality” principle would provide a distinct political prestige to Indonesia. Indonesia is regarded itself as ‘natural leader’ of ASEAN due to its leverage in geographical space, population, and Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Hence the ASEAN-led regionalism is commonly seen as a distinct advantage that Indonesia can enjoy. As the result, Indonesian foreign policy becomes very “pro-ASEAN” in its nature. In line with this, in almost all circumstances, Indonesia always shows its friendly ‘face’ and accomodation towards its neighbors in ASEAN.

In Ambalat dispute, this ASEAN Centrality factor seems not to be dominant in the first place. The principle cannot avoid military manouvers taken by the government, as if it is the democratic and nationalism becoming the most relevant factors. However, the importance

²³ Alice D. Ba, “The Politics and Economics of ‘East Asia’ in China-ASEAN Relations”, in Ho Khai Leong and Samuel C. Y. Ku (eds.), *China and Southeast Asia: Global Changes and Regional Challenges* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2005), p. 179

²⁴ Syamsul Hadi, “Indonesia, ASEAN, and the Rise of China: Indonesia in the Midst of East Asia’s Dynamics in the Post-global Crisis World”, in *International Journal of China Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (August 2012), p. 160

of ASEAN Centrality rests on the fact that Ambalat dispute never becomes an open war between Indonesia and Malaysia. By positioning itself as a leader advancing toward regional stability in ASEAN, an open war option with Malaysia in Ambalat dispute will deny what Indonesia promotes for so long. Concrete manifestation of this ASEAN Centrality Principle can be seen from responses of Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As the main promotor of this principle, it is no wonder to see that this ministry becomes the ultimate ASEAN defender. The ministry seemed to play only moderate role in the Ambalat issue. Different from harsh stances by civil society, army, parliament, mass media, and even President SBY himself, Ministry of Foreign Affairs showed lenient measures by only delivering diplomatic note to Malaysia. Between 1998 to June 2009, it is reported that there were 36 notes sent by Indonesia.²⁵

Moreover, the ASEAN Centrality Principle gained more influence in the settlement of the dispute. By taking military manouvers in Ambalat, Indonesian government actually had two options in mind: first, moving up the conflict into an open war, and second, moving down the strategy into diplomatic track. In the subsequent development, it is clear that the first option was never taken by the government. Until now, there is no open war between Indonesia and Malaysia due to Ambalat issue. Therefore, the ASEAN Centrality Principle became the controlling variable determining the response not to be exaggerative. The influence of Ministry of Foreign Affairs is very clear here as it stated that the dispute would never become a military war, as voiced by its spokesman:

*...sikap RI terhadap pelanggaran wilayah yang dilakukan oleh Malaysia di Blok Ambalat sebenarnya sudah cukup tegas yaitu dalam bentuk negosiasi dan patroli laut di wilayah kedaulatan kita. Patroli laut adalah bentuk penegasan terhadap kepemilikan wilayah yang merujuk pada Konvensi Hukum Laut UNCLOS 1982...**Jadi itulah ketegasan yang kita lakukan dan tidak bisa lebih dari itu, karena kita tidak berkeinginan untuk mengarah pada gunboat***

²⁵ "Indonesia Kirim 36 Protes Soal Ambalat" ("Indonesia Sent 36 Protests Regarding Ambalat"), last modified at 5 June 2009, retrieved from <http://bisniskeuangan.kompas.com/read/2009/06/05/13310731/Indonesia.Kirim.36.Protes.soal.Ambalat> at 30 August 2013, 05:00 PM

diplomacy atau penggelaran angkatan laut dan juga aktivitas yang menuju kepada suatu kekerasan. Hal itu yang kita hindari, karena kita mengedepankan negosiasi dan diplomasi, itu merupakan komitmen pemerintah yang sudah disampaikan oleh Presiden...²⁶

...Indonesian response on Malaysia's border violation in Ambalat block is sufficiently firm by conducting negotiation and sea patrols in our own sovereign area. Sea patrol reflects Indonesia's firmness on territorial belonging referring to the UNCLOS 1982 Convention... therefore, it is manifestation of our firmness and it cannot be more than that, since we have no intention to engage in gunboat diplomacy nor navy deployment as well as any violence activities. It is what we avoid, since we prefer negotiation and diplomacy, itself is the government's commitment delivered by the president...

(bold is given by the author as emphasis)

The principle gives 'limit' on how far the military manouvers can go on the Ambalat dispute. Military manouver is allowed to be Indonesia's general response in the dispute as long as it is needed to meet the nationalist' demand from domestic stakeholders. However in the next phase, Indonesian government decided to take diplomatic track and dialog to solve the issue. Bilateral diplomacy became prominent, as seen at 7 March 2005, when President SBY stated that both Indonesia and Malaysia committed to peacefully settle the Ambalat dispute. The statement was delivered after phone call between President SBY and Malaysian Prime Minister (PM) Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.²⁷ Moreover, there was a meeting for ministry of foreign affairs at 9 March 2005, in which Indonesian Hassan Wirajuda dan Malaysian Sri Syeh Hamid Al-bar explained and negotiated their stances on Ambalat dispute.²⁸

²⁶ "Sikap Pemerintah Tegas untuk Ambalat" ("Government is Firm on Ambalat"), in *Tabloid Diplomasi*, June 2009 Edition

²⁷ "Presiden: PM Badawi Janjikan Cara Diplomasi Selesaikan Ambalat" ("President: PM Badawi Promised on Diplomacy to Resolve Ambalat"), at *Kompas Daily Newspaper*, 7 March 2005

²⁸ "Indonesia Tidak Akan Bawa Kasus Ambalat ke ASEAN" ("Indonesia Will Not Bring Ambalat to ASEAN"), retrieved from <http://www.tempointeraktif.com/hg/nasional/2005/03/08/brk,20050308-63,id.html> at 29 October 2008, 8.00 PM

Albar also met President SBY in the National Palace at 11 March 2005. They agreed on the need of both parties to maintain good relations, both in governmental and military leader level.²⁹ Another bilateral diplomacy was conducted through Indonesia-Malaysia technical meeting regarding territorial dispute in Tanjung Benoa, Bali, 22-23 March 2005.³⁰

Diplomacy and dialog are in accordance with the prevailing ASEAN norms in Southeast Asia, in which Indonesia tries to be its focal point. As part of regional ‘code of conduct’, nations here developed principle of Pacific Settlement of Disputes and Non-Violence. In Ambalat dispute, diplomacy and dialog were shown by both parties through phone call between leaders, bilateral meeting, and technical meeting. Moreover, both Indonesia and Malaysia tried to implement the principle of ‘ASEAN Way’ to settle dispute, i.e. by conducting consultation and consensus (*musyawarah dan mufakat*).³¹

All this activities drove towards intensifying dialogue between the two countries. The more the dialogues are, the more intensive the confidence building measures between the conflicting parties, so that the settlement will be likely more constructive and responsible. No matter how robust the emotional pressures are, including the growing nationalism surrounding Ambalat dispute, in the end it is the engrained tradition in ASEAN, founded by Indonesia itself, to become determining variable gradually changed the course of the conflict from confrontation to dialogue and cooperation. The factor went along with the intention of both parties to restrain themselves, as well as the emergence of other domestic issues in Indonesia, such as corruption, cabinet reshuffle, terrorist arrests, and so forth that made the Ambalat dispute old-fashioned.

²⁹ “Sembilan Blok Minyak Rawan Sengketa” (“9 Oil Blocks Are Vulnerable to Territorial Dispute”), in *Koran Tempo* Daily Newspaper, 12 March 2005

³⁰ “Tim Perunding Deplu-RI untuk Kasus Ambalat Didukung Lima Penasihat” (“Indonesian Ministry Foreign Affairs’ Negotiating Team Are Supported by 5 Advisers”), retrieved from [HTTP://WWW.INDONESIA-1.COM/KONTEN.PHP?NAMA=NEWS&OP=DETAIL_NEWS&ID=271](http://www.indonesia-1.com/konten.php?nama=news&op=detail_news&id=271) at 29 October 2008, 8:22 PM

³¹ Besides these three principle, ASEAN also has ‘non-interference in domestic affairs’ and ‘mutual respect for sovereignty of all nations’. See at Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 48

V. CONCLUSION

Indonesian foreign policy in the Post-New Order era seems to be more complex than in the previous era. In the New Order, Indonesian foreign policy was more elitist as the result of authoritarian political system. However in the Post-New Order era, there is an interaction between changing and continuing factors in the policy's decision making process. As seen in Ambalat dispute, changing factors are represented by democracy, e.g. through the emergence of plural actors committing to their own interests and colliding with one another to determine the outcome of a policy. Changing factors are also represented by the growing nationalism resulting from frustration due to long-standing domestic problems. Meanwhile, continuity is represented by the ASEAN Centrality Principle promoted by the ministry of foreign affairs. In one hand, democracy and nationalism have contributed to the government's firm stances through the sending of military force in Ambalat, while in the other hand, "ASEAN Centrality" principle became a controlling variable resisting the dispute not to be an open war.

In the different view, Indonesian foreign policy in the Ambalat dispute should be put in historical context. Ambalat is a good example showing public participation and pressure in determining foreign policy. However, such 'responsiveness' and 'aspirative behaviour' were by no means the product of unique political context at that time, in which public frustration due to long-standing domestic unresolved issues (such as economic crisis, separatism, territorial dispute, cultural claim, and migrant workers) have revived the nationalism, especially at grassroots level.

It means that the 'aspirative' trend of Indonesian foreign policy seems not to be persistent nor repetitive. In other cases, along with the changing priority, economic, social, and political context, the policy trend can develop into its initial format, i.e. 'elitist' and 'at a distance with the public'. At least, it appeared again on Bintan Island incident in 2010 as mentioned in the beginning of the writing, in which Indonesian government took lenient stance by only sending diplomatic notes. During this time, factors such as the peaceful solution in Aceh, economic resilience during the global crisis 2008-2009, domestic political stability, and Indonesia's chairmanship in ASEAN 2011 have made the

government cultivate good image and confidence enabling it to take completely different stances than in the Ambalat. Indonesian minister of foreign affairs, Marti Natalegawa, even frankly stated that Indonesia is widely expected to give good example in the Bintan Island incident as Indonesia would chair ASEAN in 2011.

However, the Ambalat dispute indeed showed that in particular moment and case, the post-New Order Indonesian foreign policy is more dynamic and ‘massive’ in its nature. In one hand, Ambalat dispute clearly showed that public emotion contributed to the heating public discourse, making the case largely discussed. The factor met with political behavior and elite’s interest, in which President SBY saw the dispute as an advantage to cultivate public support. But in the other hand, perception that Indonesia should give good example on inter-nations dispute settlement, as the consequence of Indonesia’s intention to remain acknowledged as “ASEAN leader”, has made all bustles stop as mere rethorics. In its diplomacy, Indonesia still seek pacific settlement and avoid violence measures in this interesting territorial dispute.

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