CSIS BRIEFS

Between Two Reefs

Indonesia's Strategic Culture in the Twenty-First Century

By Gregory B. Poling and Andreyka Natalegawa

DECEMBER 2025

This brief is part of a larger project on the Global South, led by the Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy. It includes an edited volume entitled Fulcrums of Order: Rising States and the Struggle for the Future. You can find more about the project ***here****.*

INTRODUCTION

In a landmark 1948 speech, Indonesia's first vice president, Mohammad Hatta, proclaimed, "The best policy to adopt is one which does not make us the object of an international conflict. On the contrary, we must remain the subject who reserves the right to decide our own destiny and fight for our own goal, which is independence for the whole of Indonesia."[1] While Hatta spoke of the Cold War and the choice of aligning with either the Soviet Union or the United States, his conception of Indonesia as rowing between two reefs (*mendayung antara dua karang*) has remained a guiding principle of Indonesian foreign policy in the decades since the country's independence.

As the world's third-largest democracy, the largest Muslim-majority nation, a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and a leading figure in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Indonesia has been characterized as a rising middle power and a central player in the emergent Global South. As a sovereign country, Indonesia has pursued what analysts and policymakers describe as a *bebas aktif*, or free and active, foreign policy—free because the country does not side with world powers, and active because it does not take passive or reactive stances on global issues but does seek to operate in a diplomatic role.[2]

With a free and active foreign policy forming the root of the country's strategic culture, Indonesia has forged a path of nonalignment, pursuing a strategy of what former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono described as "a million friends and zero enemies."[3] This has remained true even for Indonesia's outlook toward current geopolitical tensions between the United States and China. Former President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo held to it while in office from 2014 to 2024, and his successor Prabowo Subianto has adopted his own spin on Yudhoyono's mantra: "A thousand friends are too few, one enemy is too many."[4] But it remains to be seen whether this approach will be sufficient in safeguarding Indonesian interests while reducing the risk of conflict and promoting peace and prosperity in the region.

HISTORY, GRIEVANCES, AND ASPIRATIONS

Following Indonesia's declaration of independence on August 17, 1945, the nation's early strategic culture was defined by its commitment to anticolonialism and its pursuit of agency and sovereignty through diplomatic engagement. Foreign policy in the early years under Sukarno, Indonesia's first president, was marked by efforts to secure international support for Indonesia's independence in the face of the Netherlands'

campaign to reassert control over its former colonial subject. Indonesia's strategic culture in the decade following the conclusion of the Indonesian National Revolution in 1949 could be characterized as being primarily invested in maintaining its independence and showing it off on the global stage, rather than attempting to achieve other objectives. By the mid-1950s, Indonesia began to more actively use its international platform to advance an anticolonial agenda, resulting in the landmark Asian-African Conference in Bandung in 1955 and the subsequent establishment of the NAM in 1961.

Under Sukarno, anticolonialism was also a manifestation of his most pressing internal priority: countering the centrifugal forces that threatened to split the new nation. Unlike most of the newly independent states of Southeast Asia, there was no precolonial polity or shared culture on which to build an Indonesian national identity. Sukarno, therefore, resisted calls to root the nation's founding principles in either Islam or the culture and language of Java, where most of its citizens lived, reasoning that those would only encourage disunity. Instead, the nation was founded on a pluralistic creed, dubbed Pancasila, and an official language that none of its citizens spoke at home, the simplified Malay trade language now called Bahasa Indonesia.[5]

Official myth building was necessary to forge a sense of national unity, but it also led Indonesia to pursue what its leaders imagined to be their natural borders. One of Indonesia's first real forays into international affairs was to force negotiations with the Netherlands, backed by military threats, over the status of the Dutch half of New Guinea, which led to the incorporation of the territories into Indonesia as Irian Barat (now Papua). Then came a low-level and ultimately unsuccessful military campaign, dubbed Konfrontasi, to prevent the formation of Malaysia. This was driven in part by Indonesia's desire to incorporate the former British colonies of Sabah and Sarawak, which border its own Kalimantan region on the island of Borneo. Indonesia would later invade Timor-Leste upon its independence from Portugal to unify the island of Timor.

The ouster of President Sukarno and the transition to the Suharto-led New Order regime in the mid-1960s led to consequential shifts in Indonesia's strategic culture and foreign policy. While still nominally neutral in the Cold War, the Suharto government was avowedly anti-communist and sought a "moderate, pragmatic approach to Indonesia's serious economic problems," which, in turn, led it to improve ties with the United States and its allies in a bid for much-needed investment and economic engagement.[6] The Suharto era was also marked by the 1967 founding of ASEAN, then consisting of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.[7] The bloc was initially established to stem the spread of communism in the region and to prevent disagreements between the members from breaking out into violence, as they had during Konfrontasi. The group proved quite successful at both, not least by giving Indonesia a platform to advance its goal of regional leadership without violence. ASEAN today forms the nominal cornerstone of Indonesian foreign policy, with the country repeatedly reaffirming the importance of "ASEAN centrality," even as the organization faces a multitude of crises and strategic drift.[8]

The collapse of the Suharto government in 1998 and the onset of the democratic *reformasi* period led to seismic shifts in Indonesian policy, including the swift decentralization of power from the national government to local authorities and the redefining of Indonesia's foreign policy priorities to reflect the democratic transition.[9] The domestic debate over the basis of Indonesian nationhood widened, and while the security services remained fixated on perceived threats to national unity, the state made compromises unthinkable during the Suharto years. Timor-Leste was allowed to vote for independence in 1999 after decades of insurgency, though the process was marred by violence.[10] The westernmost province of Aceh, which calls itself "Mecca's veranda," won special autonomy and the right to impose sharia law in 2001 after a long insurgency.[11] The Papuan provinces were also granted special autonomy that same year, but implementation was piecemeal, and the insurgency there is arguably now stronger than ever.[12] On the national level, Islamist parties were allowed to compete in elections starting in 1999, and though their overall vote share has remained relatively low, they have pulled national politics steadily in their direction.[13]

Indonesia's approach to foreign affairs since the democratic transition has walked a narrow line between global pressures and internal political dynamics.

Indonesia's approach to foreign affairs since the democratic transition has walked a narrow line between

global pressures and internal political dynamics.[14] The now-routine changes in administration in the country have also contributed to the changing shape and nature of Indonesia's strategic culture.

President Yudhoyono, who served from 2004 to 2014, was the first post-reformasi leader to really seek to elevate Indonesia's role in world affairs.[15] He embraced Indonesia's emergence as a middle power, particularly during its hosting of the G20, as well as ASEAN and East Asia Summits during his tenure. Yudhoyono's government sought, among other objectives, to play a much more active role in regional affairs, including in the South China Sea disputes between fellow ASEAN members and China, and even offered to send Indonesian peacekeepers when a border dispute between Cambodia and Thailand turned violent.[16] His successor, Jokowi, was by comparison less interested in international affairs beyond the ability to attract foreign investment. Prabowo, however, has a vision for Indonesia's role in the world at least as ambitious as that of Yudhoyono. But despite their differences, across all periods of Indonesia's history, from the Sukarno and Suharto eras to the *reformasi* period, the conception of a free and active diplomacy has remained a critical guiding principle and the foundation of Indonesia's strategic culture.

NATIONAL DEBATE

Despite Indonesia's vibrant democracy, public debate over the role of the country on the international stage remains limited. For instance, foreign policy issues were not a major factor in the country's 2024 presidential elections, with many voters instead casting their ballots based on perceptions of the economy.[17]

The lack of a consistent public debate on Indonesia's foreign policy is rooted in the fact that the general population has remained consistent in its views of Indonesia's core priorities. In the Lowy Institute's Indonesia Poll 2021, respondents identified "protecting Indonesian citizens abroad," "strengthening the Indonesian economy," and "protecting the jobs of Indonesian workers" as the country's top foreign policy priorities, nearly identical to the survey's results in 2011.[18] The survey revealed that "Indonesians also see global and regional challenges as important goals, but place a lower priority on them than domestic and trade-related concerns," with respondents identifying "strengthening international institutions, peace and conflict resolution and other related foreign policy goals as 'fairly important' rather than 'very important.'"[19] These findings reflect the fact that for most of Indonesia's history, foreign policy was the bailiwick of the country's elites. While the post-*reformasi* period has brought greater public interest in international affairs, the democratization of Indonesian foreign policy remains a gradual process.

Most Indonesian elites share similar foreign policy priorities with the public. In the 2025 iteration of its annual survey of Southeast Asian strategic elites (defined here as policymakers, academics, civil society representatives, and private sector executives), the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (ISEAS) found that Indonesian respondents generally identified "unemployment and economic recession," "widening socio-economic gaps and rising income disparity," and "climate change and extreme weather events" as the primary challenges facing the region.[20] Where there are debates within elite circles on issues related to foreign policy, such as over how to triangulate Indonesia's relationships with the United States and China, disagreements are often grounded in parochial domestic or economic considerations rather than norms or values. By and large—and perhaps reflective of the "big-tent" governance style adopted by most of Indonesia's post-*reformasi* leaders—there is a considerable degree of consensus among Indonesian elites on foreign policy. With a few exceptions, the foreign policy platforms of candidates in Indonesia's 2024 presidential elections were strikingly similar, each rooted in the country's long-standing *bebas aktif* approach.[21]

That both the public and elites view Indonesia's foreign policy agenda as a corollary to a domestic economic agenda in some ways reflects the country's growing pains as an emerging economy and its anxieties regarding economic recovery following the Covid-19 pandemic. These anxieties may in turn be compounded by the impact of the second Trump administration's trade agenda, with Washington announcing a 32 percent tariff on Indonesian goods on "Liberation Day."[22] But this more focused definition of Indonesia's interests narrows the aperture of the country's strategic culture, with Indonesian diplomats more often serving as "salesmen" and as facilitators of trade and investment rather than as emissaries for a more ambitious foreign policy.[23]

Despite this dynamic, most Indonesian elites have a bullish view of the country's role in regional affairs. The 2025 ISEAS survey found that, when asked which ASEAN member state has made the biggest contribution to the

region's development and progress, almost 80 percent of Indonesian respondents selected Indonesia itself.[24] And in a 2020 survey of strategic elites in Southeast Asia conducted by CSIS, nearly 50 percent of Indonesian respondents identified their country as holding significant political power and influence in the region, with this figure rising to over 60 percent when Indonesian respondents were asked to identify countries that will hold significant political power and influence in 2030.[25] Indonesian elites clearly evince a degree of pride and optimism toward their country's leadership role in Southeast Asia, but this optimism exists in tension with the fact that Indonesian foreign policy has for the past decade been frequently described as "punching under its weight."[26]

ECONOMICS

Indonesia's economy can be described as a mixed economy, one in which free market principles are balanced by a degree of centralized economic planning, protectionist impulses, and the outsized role of state-owned enterprises (SOEs). This reflects a deep-seated pattern of economic nationalism that grew out of the anticolonial struggle for independence from the Netherlands, whose rule began not under the Dutch government but the shareholders of the Dutch East India Company. That legacy colored the economic policies of both the Sukarno and Suharto administrations; the former flirted with Soviet-inspired central planning, whereas the latter pursued Western-oriented free market reforms, mainly for the benefit of a close circle of cronies.

The country's GDP is about $1.54 trillion, with an annual growth rate of approximately 5 percent, as of 2023.[27] Inequality remains a core challenge for Indonesia, with a Gini coefficient of 38.3 and approximately 9.4 percent of the population below the national poverty line in 2023.[28] Unsurprisingly, economics are a key driver of Indonesian foreign policy. This dynamic has sharpened in recent years, with hopes for Indonesia's demographic dividend balanced against fears of falling into the middle-income trap informing the country's economic statecraft and foreign policy.[29]

Indonesia's abundance of natural resources means that its exports are dominated by commodities and raw materials. Mineral products, including coal briquettes, petroleum gas, copper ore, and other materials, accounted for more than 27 percent of Indonesia's export value in 2022.[30] Animal and vegetable by-products are also a critical industry, and Indonesia ranks as the world's top exporter of palm oil, which accounts for about 9 percent of the country's exports by value.[31] Indonesia's top export destinations as of 2022 were China (28.5 percent of overall export value), the United States (9.7 percent), Japan (8.5 percent), India (8.0 percent), and Malaysia (5.3 percent). Meanwhile, in terms of imports, top partners as of 2022 were China (28.5 percent of overall import value), Singapore (8.2 percent), Japan (7.2 percent), Malaysia (5.3 percent), and South Korea (4.9 percent).[32]

The long-term viability of Indonesia's reliance on the export of raw commodities has come under increased scrutiny from Jakarta in recent years, with the Jokowi administration pursuing an ambitious—and controversial—campaign to accelerate the country's industrialization in a bid to avoid the "resource curse."[33] These efforts included a 2020 ban on the export of nickel ore, a move primarily aimed at encouraging companies to process the resource onshore "so more value accrues to Indonesia."[34] Indonesia is the world's top exporter of nickel, which is vital in many industries, including batteries and electric vehicles.

This strain of resource nationalism, as well as a broadly protectionist streak among Indonesian policymakers, sometimes leads to incompatibility between Indonesian foreign policy and international efforts toward trade integration. While Indonesia played a leading role in the establishment of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement between the 10 ASEAN countries and five of its dialogue partners, including China and Japan, the country initially refrained from joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and its successor, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).[35] Moreover, Indonesia has been remarkably less ambitious than its peers when it comes to next-generation trade frameworks, including those that its ASEAN neighbors are pioneering in the digital space.[36] But Indonesia has lately shown an increased appetite for multilateral, rules-based trade arrangements, albeit not those at the cutting edge. Jakarta joined the Biden administration's modest Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity and has championed the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement, which the grouping hopes to conclude by the end of 2025. Most importantly, the Prabowo administration announced that Indonesia will finally bid to join the CPTPP.

GREAT POWER COMPETITION

In line with its free and active foreign policy, Indonesia has firmly refused to take sides in great power competition, with President Prabowo remarking, "Our guiding philosophy is to be friends with all countries."[37] Elite and public opinion polls suggest this desire for balance is widely held. The Lowy Institute's 2021 survey indicated the United States enjoyed more trust than China among the Indonesian public, but not by the considerable margins seen in the Philippines or Vietnam, which are more directly confronted by Chinese bullying.[38] Both Lowy's public polling and elite surveys by groups including ISEAS and the Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia show a strong preference to remain neutral in U.S.-China tensions.

In line with its free and active foreign policy, Indonesia has firmly refused to take sides in great power competition, with President Prabowo remarking, "Our guiding philosophy is to be friends with all countries."

This is in part reflective of the strength of China-Indonesia relations. The two sides upgraded their relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2013, and China has been Indonesia's top trading partner for over a decade.[39] China also routinely ranks as one of Indonesia's top sources of foreign investment and has played a key role in infrastructure development through the Belt and Road Initiative, developing the high-profile Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project, among others.[40] Public opinion surveys conducted by Gallup in 2024 indicate that 29 percent of Indonesians surveyed approved of China's leadership while 49 percent disapproved—compared to 24 percent of respondents who approved of U.S. leadership and 58 percent who disapproved.[41] China and Indonesia also share a degree of alignment in international fora—across votes in the UN General Assembly identified by the U.S. State Department as being strategically significant to Washington, Indonesia and China maintained an average voting coincidence of 78.3 percent between 2008 and 2024, in contrast to Indonesia's voting coincidence of 33.0 percent with the United States in the same period.[42]

There are limits to this equanimity, however, and Indonesians are not blind to potential threats—economic, environmental, or military—particularly from China. While Indonesians generally welcome Chinese trade and investment, and attracting more of it was probably the foremost priority of the Jokowi administration, polling also shows considerable anxiety about the environmental and social tolls of irresponsible investment. Most citizens in Indonesia, like everywhere else, have relatively little time to worry about geopolitics amid the struggles of daily life. But they do see plenty of stories of exploitative business practices by Chinese employers, importation of Chinese labor to construct Belt and Road Initiative projects, and environmental crimes like the dumping of toxic tailings from Chinese nickel mines into the sea.[43]

On the security front, Indonesia does not feel threatened by China in the same way the Philippines or Vietnam do. But Indonesia is a party to the South China Sea disputes, as much as Jakarta has traditionally denied it, and public anger has risen as China has engaged in coercive behavior at sea with increasing frequency. Public opinion appears to be on the side of those, mainly in the security services, who want a stronger response to this growing harassment. A recent survey by the Indonesia Strategic and Defence Studies (ISDS) think tank showed that more than 70 percent of members of the Indonesian defense community believe China represents a military threat to Indonesia in the South China Sea. Further, majorities support strengthening military capabilities and working more closely with neighbors and outside parties like the United States (in the latter case by smaller margins) to confront that threat.[44]

It is also unclear how much impact the Israel-Hamas war and the reelection of Donald Trump are having on Indonesian perceptions of the United States or how lasting the damage will be. Anecdotally, the image of the United States in Indonesia has suffered since October 2023, but there is no public polling and very little elite polling to indicate by how much.[45] The damage is not likely to be as severe as in neighboring Malaysia and Brunei, the other two Muslim-majority states of Southeast Asia, but that may be partly because the Palestinian cause, while salient, does not have the same profile in Indonesia as it does in Malaysia. Malaysia has hosted a Hamas representative office for years, and it publicly supports the group. Meanwhile, Indonesia has distanced itself from Hamas, allowing only a Palestinian Liberation Organization office.

Since the outset of the war in Gaza, the Malaysian government under Anwar Ibrahim has rallied public support for Hamas and has condemned both Israel and the West at large, while the Indonesian government has been more measured. Indonesian officials have decried Israeli attacks on civilians, especially on the Indonesian-run hospital in Gaza, but have not publicly supported Hamas. They have also been careful not to blame the United States directly for Israel's actions and have tried to try to keep the war from poisoning U.S.-Indonesia relations. Jokowi, for instance, had a state visit to the White House in 2023 that minimized tensions over Gaza in favor of focusing on bilateral cooperation.[46] More recently, then-president-elect Prabowo publicly welcomed a Biden administration ceasefire deal while U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken thanked Prabowo for Indonesia's humanitarian assistance in Gaza.[47]

In keeping with its nonaligned foreign policy, Indonesia has also tried to navigate Russia's war in Ukraine without entirely alienating either side.[48] Indonesia maintains robust relations with Russia, with the two countries upgrading their relations to a strategic partnership in June 2025.[49] In terms of economic relations, bilateral trade between Indonesia and Russia amounted to $3.3 billion in 2023—the two countries are also now in the process of negotiating a free trade treaty between Indonesia and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).[50] Russia has also historically played a significant role in Indonesian defense procurement, though this has ebbed and flowed in recent years due to concerns within Jakarta regarding the threat of secondary sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). Meanwhile, in terms of public sentiment toward Russia, nationally representative public opinion surveys conducted by Gallup in 2024 found that 29 percent of Indonesian respondents approved of Russia's leadership and 48 percent disapproved—compared to the 24 percent of respondents who approved of U.S. leadership and the 58 percent who disapproved.[51] And in the United Nations, across votes in the UN General Assembly identified by the U.S. State Department as being strategically significant to Washington, Indonesia and Russia maintained an average voting coincidence of 66.7 percent between 2008 and 2024, in contrast to Indonesia's voting coincidence of 33.0 percent with the United States in the same period.[52]

There is little polling to indicate how Indonesians feel about the war, but anecdotal evidence suggests Russian disinformation operations have found more success in Indonesia than elsewhere in Southeast Asia, particularly on TikTok. Many Indonesians appear to admire Russian President Vladimir Putin for his perceived strength, though there is no way of telling just how much of the population shares such sentiments. The Indonesian government has not supported sanctions on Russia and has continued to buy Russian oil. But Indonesia supported three of the four UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia, abstaining only on the resolution to evict Russia from the UN Human Rights Council.[53]

Indonesia was hit particularly hard by the spike in food and cooking oil costs that resulted from the Russian invasion. As a result, Jokowi made stabilizing food and fuel prices a major focus of his chairmanship of the G20 in 2022.[54] He was determined to have both sides present at the summit in Bali that fall and started by making unsuccessful, and perhaps naive, trips to Kyiv and Moscow early in the year.[55] He succeeded, however, in promoting Indonesia as an honest broker and obtaining enough representation from each side at the G20 summit—Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, but not President Vladimir Putin, for the Russians, and a video address by President Volodymyr Zelensky for Ukraine—that no one boycotted the meeting and the parties could issue a joint communique. The breakthrough was hardly major, but more than most international bodies managed that year.

VISIONS OF GLOBAL ORDER

Much like other Global South countries, Indonesia holds a mixed view of the rules-based international order, simultaneously benefiting from its institutions while also critiquing such bodies for their perceived inequities. For instance, Indonesia has long sought to advance the reform agenda in the United Nations, with a central focus on "efforts to make the Security Council more democratic and representative."[56] Despite widely shared criticisms of the UN Security Council, Indonesia has remained firmly committed to the United Nations. The Lowy Institute's polling and elite surveys from ISEAS show that Indonesian citizens and elites prioritize the United Nations only slightly less than they do ASEAN as a pillar of the nation's foreign policy.[57]

Indonesia has also played an unusually important role in the development of the UN system. It did not get a say in the original charter or the creation of the Security Council, but it had a hand in creating most of what came after. For instance,

Indonesia played a leading role among the Asian and African states at the first two UN Conferences on the Law of the Sea in 1958 and 1960. Indonesia, alongside the Philippines, was the first to advance the concept of an "archipelagic state" entitled to rights over its internal waters.[58] It refused to ratify any conventions that did not include that new concept, championing it through to the conclusion of the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea in 1982—a major victory over both Soviet and Western opposition.

As the world's largest archipelagic state, Indonesia continues to champion international maritime law. Its foremost jurist on the subject, the late Hasjim Djalal, served as the first president of the International Seabed Authority in the mid-1990s and helped write the rules governing deep seabed mining, which are prevalent in the news today. In the South China Sea, until the Philippines filed its landmark arbitration case in 2013, Indonesia had crafted the most detailed legal arguments against the nine-dash line. Even as Jokowi refused to publicly endorse the Philippine victory in that arbitration, his government quietly incorporated it into Indonesian domestic law, redrawing its maritime claims maps in accordance with the court's findings. On this and many other fronts, Indonesia may prefer to argue quietly behind closed doors rather than make public pronouncements, but it is a firm champion of the international laws it helped write.

Indonesia, like most in the Global South, seeks revisions to the global order, particularly on economic matters. This has led the country to pursue alternative diplomatic frameworks rooted in cooperation with Global South countries. For instance, on the sidelines of the 2022 UN Climate Change Conference (COP27) summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, Indonesia signed a rainforest protection pact with Brazil and the Democratic Republic of the Congo—collectively home to more than half of the world's tropical rainforests.[59] Indonesia has also spearheaded dialogue among fellow middle powers through the MIKTA grouping (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia), providing these countries with a platform for enhanced cooperation and mutual understanding.[60] But Indonesia's appetite for alternative diplomatic arrangements and institutions outside of its role in ASEAN, which remains the cornerstone of the country's foreign policy, has its limits: Following months of speculation, Indonesia in August 2023 politely refused an invitation to join BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), which would have been seen as an endorsement of China's preferred structures over those of the West.[61] Although the Prabowo administration later reversed this decision and announced Indonesia's intent to join BRICS in October 2024, continued public debate on the challenges and risks associated with the grouping demonstrates a lack of consensus on the matter within Indonesia's strategic elite.[62]

In tandem with its engagement with BRICS, Indonesia has also actively sought membership in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). It has explicitly framed its membership bid as offering the OECD the "existence of the voice of the Global South" in the grouping, demonstrating Indonesia's preference for leveraging its middle-power status to reform, revise, and improve global rules-based institutions rather than break them altogether.[63] These efforts also signify Indonesia's perspective that while ASEAN remains the cornerstone of the country's foreign policy, more is better as it relates to channels of diplomatic engagement.

RECENT ACTIONS

Indonesia's alignment in the global order and its role on the international stage rest at a nexus. Following 10 years of relatively anemic foreign policy under President Widodo, the transition to the Prabowo administration presents an opportunity for Indonesia to take on a more ambitious role both regionally and globally. While the apparent sidelining of the Indonesian Foreign Ministry in the policy process in favor of a more personalistic leadership style under Prabowo poses a risk to the country's pursuit of its foreign policy goals, the myriad challenges that Indonesia now faces in the region could force Jakarta to reimagine and retool its role in international affairs. This could prove most visible in ASEAN, where Indonesia is often seen as a natural leader given its size and economic heft but has been somewhat absent during the last decade.

Moving beyond talk to action will require a constellation of Southeast Asian states pushing at the leader level, with Indonesia a necessary component of any such effort.

However, ASEAN has been in a funk for more than a decade, undermining its oft-stated "centrality" in regional

affairs.[64] The grouping has made virtually no progress on political and security crises, either within itself (the crisis in Myanmar) or between members and external parties (the South China Sea or the Mekong River). On the economic front, ASEAN has had considerable success on traditional issues like reducing barriers to trade and labor mobility, but it has lacked ambition on other issues, including the digital economy. Indonesia has been a leading proponent of a more ambitious ASEAN agenda on issues as diverse as Myanmar and ethics related to artificial intelligence. But moving beyond talk to action will require a constellation of Southeast Asian states pushing at the leader level, with Indonesia a necessary component of any such effort.

The South China Sea is one area where Indonesia has become progressively more engaged but still punches below its weight. China's nine-dash line overlaps with Indonesia's exclusive economic zone. Since the early 1990s, Indonesia has struggled to confront state-sanctioned and often coast guard–escorted fishing fleets from China operating illegally within its waters. During Jokowi's first term, from 2014 to 2019, Fisheries Minister Susi Pudjiastuti publicly called out China's behavior as part of her campaign to crack down on illegal fishing, and on several occasions the Indonesian coast guard had violent run-ins with Chinese fishers and law enforcement vessels.[65] In more recent years, Jokowi was forced to fly to Natuna Besar—the northernmost point of Indonesian territory bordering the South China Sea—and order a flyover of Indonesian fighter jets to convince China to withdraw a large fishing fleet that lingered for weeks in Indonesian waters.[66]

Despite these incidents, when not compelled by a major news cycle, Jokowi and the Indonesian foreign ministry preferred to keep quiet on the South China Sea tensions. The Indonesian security services, however, reached a turning point in late 2021. That year, Indonesia began exploratory drilling to develop a new offshore gas block at the southern edge of the nine-dash line. China responded by sending coast guard vessels to harass the rig and its supply ships, forcing the Indonesian navy and coast guard to deploy several ships to protect the rig.[67] There was no violence, but the cat-and-mouse game went on for three months. In the end, Indonesia succeeded in developing the new gas block. Indonesian coast guard and navy officials have been more vocal on the issue ever since, including calling for greater coordination with fellow Southeast Asian claimants. This bred hopes that as president, Prabowo, who served as defense minister during Jokowi's second administration, might give the security services more room to deepen maritime cooperation with others and push back on China's bullying.

On that front, messages have so far been mixed. Indonesian and Chinese vessels engaged in a weeks-long standoff in October 2024—Prabowo's first month in office—and security services were for the first time allowed to publish videos and photos of Chinese aggression. But a month later, Prabowo visited Beijing and signed a joint statement that offered to share resources in disputed waters of the South China Sea, shocking his own foreign policy apparatus. In less than 48 hours, the foreign ministry clarified that Indonesia does not recognize any legally disputed waters with China, making the joint statement a dead letter. But the result has been whiplash and confusion on Prabowo's approach to Beijing. In the end, Prabowo still seems unlikely to make any major shifts in navigating U.S.-China tensions. He will likely seek to defend Indonesian sovereignty without alienating China or breaching Indonesia's traditional policy of non-alignment.

CONCLUSION

A free and active diplomacy—or, to use the favored metaphor, rowing between two reefs—has served as the bedrock for Indonesia's strategic culture and foreign policy since independence. That role is unlikely to change despite how great power competitions has limited the middle ground on which Indonesia hopes to stand. Like most middle powers of the Global South, Indonesia is concerned primarily with preserving its agency and pursuing its national interests, not picking a geopolitical camp. As it did in the Cold War, Indonesia will align most closely with the power that best serves its interests, but the relationship will never be exclusive. The only factor that could change this situation would be overt aggression from China (not just gray zone coercion by coast guard and militia vessels), which is unlikely. Indonesia is an emergent power on the world stage, one whose support will be necessary to advance an agenda on most global challenges. The United States must strengthen its soft power advantages in Indonesia, work with Jakarta where interests overlap, allow space for Indonesian leaders to buck U.S. preferences when they must, and minimize the impact of those disagreements. ■

Gregory B. Poling *is director and a senior fellow of the Southeast Asia Program and Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C.* ***Andreyka Natalegawa*** *is an associate fellow with the CSIS Southeast Asia Program.*

This report is made possible by general support to CSIS. No direct sponsorship contributed to this report.

Photo Source: Anadolu/Getty Images

ENDNOTES

1. "Indonesia's Foreign Policy," Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia, Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d., https://kemlu.go.id/washington/kebijakan/kebijakan-luar-negeri-ri.
2. Ibid.
3. Ted Piccone and Bimo Yusman, "Indonesian Foreign Policy: 'A Million Friends and Zero Enemies'," The Diplomat, February 14, 2014, https://thediplomat.com/2014/02/indonesian-foreign-policy-a-million-friends-and-zero-enemies/.
4. William Jones and Douglas Lee Rhein, "ASEAN's Credibility and Centrality on the Line amid Crisis in Myanmar," East Asia Forum, December 25, 2023, https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/12/25/aseans-credibility-and-centrality-on-the-line-amid-crisis-in-myanmar/.
5. Jalur Rempah, "Origins of Our National Language," *Jakarta Post*, October 20, 2017, https://www.thejakartapost.com/adv/2017/10/20/origins-of-our-national-language.html.
6. "Document 262: National Intelligence Estimate," Office of the Historian, December 31, 1968, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v26/d262.
7. "The Founding of ASEAN," Association of Southeast Asian Nations, n.d., https://asean.org/the-founding-of-asean/.
8. "ASEAN Centrality Key to Facing Global Situation: Indonesia," Antara News, May 22, 2025, https://en.antaranews.com/news/356137/asean-centrality-key-to-facing-global-situation-indonesia; and William J. Jones and Douglas Lee Rhein, "ASEAN's Credibility and Centrality on the Line amid Crisis in Myanmar," East Asia Forum, December 25, 2023, https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/12/25/aseans-credibility-and-centrality-on-the-line-amid-crisis-in-myanmar/.
9. Raden Mohammad Marty Muliana Natalegawa and Mike Green, "Pivotal Player: Marty Natalegawa and U.S.-Indonesia Relations," *The Asia Chessboard Podcast*, CSIS, August 16, 2021, https://www.csis.org/analysis/pivotal-player-marty-natalegawa-and-us-indonesia-relations.
10. Lillian Rangiah, "Timor Leste's Independence Referendum Remembered in Australia 25 Years On," ABC News, September 7, 2024, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-09-08/timor-leste-s-independence-referendum-anniversary-25-years/104323844.
11. Anjali Mitter Duva, "Aceh's Road to Peace and Autonomy," Frontline World, PBS, n.d., https://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/indonesia605/autonomy.html.
12. "Indonesia: Undang-undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 21 Tahun 2001 tentang Otonomi Khusus Bagi Provinsi Papua," Refworld, UNHCR, November 21, 2001, https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/2001/en/94779; and Agustinus Beo Da Costa and Kate Lamb, "Indonesia Parliament Passes Revised Autonomy Law for Restive Papua," Reuters, July 15, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-parliament-passes-revised-autonomy-law-restive-papua-2021-07-15/.
13. Alexander R. Arifianto, "The State of Political Islam in Indonesia: The Historical Antecedent and Future Prospects," *Asia Policy* 15, no. 4 (2020): 111–32, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27023942.
14. Song Xue and Kai He, "Indonesia's Foreign Policy Since the Reformasi," in *The Routledge Handbook of Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 2nd ed., ed. B. J. C. McKercher (New York: Routledge, 2022), 230, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003016625-22.
15. Ulla Fionna, Siwage Dharma Negara, and Deasy Simandjuntak, eds., *Aspirations with Limitations: Indonesia's Foreign Affairs Under Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2018), https://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg/publication/2327.
16. Brian Padden, "Thailand, Cambodia Agree to Indonesian Observers at Border," Voice of America, May 5, 2011, https://www.voanews.com/a/thailand-cambodia-agree-to-indonesian-observers-at-border-121401724/139040.html.
17. James Guild, "The 2024 Indonesian Election Is All About the Economy," The Diplomat, February 13, 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/the-2024-indonesian-election-is-all-about-the-economy/.
18. "Indonesia Poll 2021: Indonesian Foreign Policy," Lowy Institute, https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/indonesia-poll-2021/topic/foreign-policy/.
19. Ibid.
20. Sharon Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia 2024: Survey Report* (Singapore: ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS, April 2024), 1, 12, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/The-State-of-SEA-2024.pdf.
21. Noto Suoneto, "Where Does Anies Baswedan Stand on Indonesia's Foreign Policy?," The Diplomat, January 9, 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/where-does-anies-baswedan-stand-on-indonesias-foreign-policy/.
22. "Indonesia Says to Increase US Imports, Lower Orders from Other Countries," Reuters, April 18, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-says-increase-us-imports-would-divert-orders-elsewhere-2025-04-18/.
23. Dimas Muhamad and Dea Kurniawan, "Getting Down to Business: Jokowi's Salesman Diplomacy," *Jakarta Post*, October 30, 2014, https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/10/30/getting-down-business-jokowi-s-salesman-diplomacy.html; and Yvette Tanamal, "Indonesia's Diplomacy Must Be Value-Led, Not Transactional, Says Anies," *Jakarta Post*, November 8, 2023, https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2023/11/08/indonesias-diplomacy-must-be-value-led-not-transactional-says-anies.html.
24. Sharon Seah et al., "The State of Southeast Asia: 2025 Survey Report," ISEAS: Yusof Ishak Institute, April 3, 2025, 2–74, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/The-State-of-SEA-2025-1.pdf.
25. Michael Green et al., *Powers, Norms, and Institutions: The Future of the Indo-Pacific from a Southeast Asia Perspective - Results of a CSIS Survey of Strategic Elites* (Washington, DC: CSIS, June 2020), 1–37, https://www.csis.org/analysis/powers-norms-and-institutions-future-indo-pacific-southeast-asia-perspective.
26. Stephanie Dunstan, "Indonesia: Punching Below Its Weight,"

Lowy Institute, February 27, 2014, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/indonesia-punching-below-its-weight; Chris Antsey, "Indonesia Has Been Punching Below Its Weight," Bloomberg, April 9, 2022, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2022-04-09/why-indonesia-is-punching-below-its-weight-new-economy-Saturday; and Nithin Coca, "Indonesia's Hesitancy on the Global Stage," The Diplomat, April 21, 2016, https://thediplomat.com/2016/04/indonesias-hesitancy-on-the-global-stage/.

27. Office of Assistant to Deputy Cabinet Secretary for State Documents and Translation, "Indonesia's Economy Grows 5.05 Percent in 2023 amid Global Challenges," Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, February 6, 2024, https://setkab.go.id/en/indonesias-economy-grows-5-05-percent-in-2023-amid-global-challenges.

28. "Gini Index–Indonesia," World Bank Open Data, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=ID; and "Poverty Data: Indonesia," Asian Development Bank, April 25, 2025, https://www.adb.org/where-we-work/indonesia/poverty.

29. Anne Booth, "Maximising Indonesia's Demographic Dividend," East Asia Forum, June 22, 2021, https://eastasiaforum.org/2021/06/22/maximising-indonesias-demographic-dividend/; and "Can Indonesia Escape the Middle Income Trap?," Fulcrum, August 15, 2023, https://fulcrum.sg/how-can-indonesia-escape-the-middle-income-trap/.

30. "Indonesia," Observatory of Economic Complexity, https://oec.world/en/profile/country/idn.

31. Ibid.; and Lauren Mai, "Palm Oil Powerhouses: Why the EU's Deforestation-Free Regulation Does Not Work in Southeast Asia," CSIS (blog), May 30, 2024, https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/palm-oil-powerhouses-why-eus-deforestation-free-regulation-does-not.

32. UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division, "Trade Data: Indonesia," UN Comtrade Database, 2022, https://comtradeplus.un.org/TradeFlow?Frequency=A&Flows=all&CommodityCodes=TOTAL&Partners=all&Reporters=360&period=2022&AggregateBy=none&BreakdownMode=plus.

33. Shotaro Tani, "Indonesia's Drive to Lift Resource Curse Shakes Global Producers," *Nikkei Asia*, January 25, 2022, https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/Indonesia-s-drive-to-lift-resource-curse-shakes-global-producers.

34. Anshuman Daga, "Indonesia's Nickel Policy Looks Fragile," Reuters, January 26, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/breakingviews/indonesias-nickel-policy-looks-fragile-2024-01-26/.

35. Shotaro Tani, "Indonesia Has 'Lost Interest' in TPP Without US, Vice President Says," *Nikkei Asia*, June 5, 2017, https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Indonesia-has-lost-interest-in-TPP-without-US-vice-president-says2.

36. Andreyka Natalegawa and Gregory B. Poling, *The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and Digital Trade in Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: CSIS, May 2022), https://www.csis.org/analysis/indo-pacific-economic-framework-and-digital-trade-southeast-asia.

37. Bloomberg, "Indonesia Won't Take Sides in US-China Row, Says Incoming President Prabowo, Will Maintain Open Foreign Policy Approach," *South China Morning Post*, May 13, 2024, https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3262493/indonesia-wont-take-sides-us-china-row-says-incoming-president-prabowo-will-maintain-open-foreign.

38. "Global Powers and Leaders," Indonesia Poll 2021, Lowy Institute, https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/indonesia-poll-2021/topic/global-powers-and-leaders/.

39. "China and Indonesia," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, n.d., https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2716_663436/.

40. "2024 Investment Climate Statements," U.S. Department of State, 2024, https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-investment-climate-statements/indonesia.

41. Zacc Ritter and Julie Ray, "China vs. U.S.: Who's Winning Hearts and Minds?," Gallup, May 6, 2024, https://news.gallup.com/poll/644753/china-winning-hearts-minds.aspx.

42. Forthcoming CSIS report, 2025.

43. Hans Nicholas Jong, "Indonesian Nickel Project Harms Environment and Human Rights, Report Says," Mongabay, February 26, 2024, https://news.mongabay.com/2024/02/indonesian-nickel-project-harms-environment-and-human-rights-report-says/.

44. "Menjaga Kedaulatan dan Mencari Kawan di Laut China Selatan," YouTube video, posted by ISDS Indonesia, March 18, 2024, 42:31, https://www.youtube.com/live/O3VvNIMNtcc?t=2550s.

45. Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia 2024*.

46. The White House, "Remarks by President Biden and President Joko Widodo of Indonesia Before Bilateral Meeting," press briefing, November 13, 2023, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/11/13/remarks-by-president-biden-and-president-joko-widodo-of-indonesia-before-bilateral-meeting-2/.

47. Tsubasa Suruga, "Indonesia's Prabowo Calls U.S.-Backed Peace Plan in Gaza the 'Right Step'," *Nikkei Asia*, June 1, 2024, https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Middle-East-crisis/Indonesia-s-Prabowo-calls-U.S.-backed-peace-plan-in-Gaza-the-right-step2; and News Desk, "US Thanks Next Indonesia Leader for Gaza Aid," *Jakarta Post*, June 12, 2024, https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2024/06/12/us-thanks-next-indonesia-leader-for-gaza-aid.html.

48. Ann Marie Murphy, "Ukraine War Highlights Differences Between Indonesian and US Foreign Policy Frameworks," East Asia Forum, August 5, 2022, https://eastasiaforum.org/2022/08/05/ukraine-war-highlights-differences-between-indonesian-and-u-s-foreign-policy-frameworks/.

49. Zac Crellin, "Indonesia Inks Strategic Partnership with Russia," DW, June 19, 2025, www.dw.com/en/indonesia-inks-strategic-partnership-with-russia/a-72978138.

50. Stefanno Sulaiman, "Indonesia Expects to Sign Free Trade Deal with Russia-Led Union This Year, Minister Says," Reuters, June 20, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/indonesia-expects-sign-free-trade-deal-with-russia-led-union-this-year-min-

ister-2025-06-20/.

51. "Russia's Image Remains Tarnished in Its Own Backyard," Gallup, May 7, 2024, https://news.gallup.com/poll/644795/russia-image-remains-tarnished-own-backyard.aspx.

52. Forthcoming CSIS report, 2025.

53. Stéphanie Fillion, "With Caution and Tact: How Asian Countries Voted on Ukraine at the UN," *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, February 9, 2023, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/caution-tact-how-asian-countries-voted-ukraine-un; and "UN General Assembly Votes to Suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council," UN News, April 7, 2022, https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115782.

54. Martin Petty and Kate Lamb, "Indonesia Leader Targets Food Crisis During Russia-Ukraine Peace Mission," Reuters, June 30, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-leader-targets-food-crisis-during-russia-ukraine-peace-mission-2022-07-01/.

55. Radityo Dharmaputra, "Jokowi's Visits to Russia and Ukraine Are More About Domestic Gains Than the Global Interest," The Conversation, July 6, 2022, https://theconversation.com/jokowis-visits-to-russia-and-ukraine-are-more-about-domestic-gains-than-the-global-interest-186217.

56. "Indonesia continues to strive for UN reform agenda: Foreign Ministry," Antara News, May 30, 2024, https://en.antaranews.com/news/314769/indonesia-continues-to-strive-for-un-reform-agenda-foreign-ministry.

57. "Indonesian Foreign Policy," Lowy Institute; and Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia 2024*.

58. John G. Butcher and R. E. Elson, "How did Indonesia become an archipelagic state?," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, *The Strategist*, May 11, 2017, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/indonesia-became-archipelagic-state/.

59. Max Bearak and Manuela Andreoni, "Brazil, Indonesia and Congo Sign Rainforest Protection Pact," *New York Times*, November 14, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/14/climate/brazil-indonesia-democratic-congo-rainforest-protection-pact.html.

60. "Indonesian Foreign Minister Encourages MIKTA in Becoming Positive Global Force," Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/5768/berita/indonesian-foreign-minister-encourages-mikta-in-becoming-positive-global-force.

61. Randy Mulyanto, "Why Indonesia Did Not Join BRICS," China Project, September 18, 2023, https://thechinaproject.com/2023/09/15/why-indonesia-did-not-join-brics/.

62. Azry Almi Kaloko, "Indonesia Should Think Twice about Joining BRICS and OECD," *Jakarta Post*, December 5, 2024, https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2024/12/05/indonesia-should-think-twice-about-joining-brics-and-oecd.html.

63. Shigeru Seno, "Indonesia Offers OECD 'the Voice of the Global South': Ambassador," *Nikkei Asia*, February 8, 2024, https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indonesia-offers-OECD-the-voice-of-the-Global-South-ambassador.

64. Aaron Connelly, "The Often-Overlooked Meaning of 'ASEAN Centrality'," International Institutes for Strategic Studies, June 9, 2022, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/06/the-often-overlooked-meaning-of-asean-centrality/.

65. Vincent Bevins, "'I'm Nasty.' How an Indonesian Government Official Won Admirers by Blowing Up Boats," *Washington Post*, September 5, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/09/05/im-nasty-how-an-indonesian-government-official-won-admirers-by-blowing-up-boats/.

66. Linda Yulisman, "Indonesian President Joko Widodo Visits Natuna Islands as Stand-Off with China Continues," *Straits Times*, January 8, 2020, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesian-president-joko-widodo-visits-natuna-islands-as-stand-off-with-china.

67. Evan Laksmana, "Jakarta Gets 'Grey-Zoned' by Beijing," East Asia Forum, August 30, 2022, https://eastasiaforum.org/2022/08/30/jakarta-gets-grey-zoned-by-beijing/.