

## **INDONESIA'S STRATEGIC USE OF ASEAN IN BALANCING REGIONAL AND GLOBAL POWER DYNAMICS**

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### **Abstract**

Indonesia, a prominent emerging power in Southeast Asia, occupies a strategically vital position in the Indo-Pacific region. Under former President Joko Widodo, Indonesia embraced the vision of becoming a "Global Maritime Fulcrum" while striving to assert itself as a global political and economic force. This ambition unfolds amidst the evolving and polarised global order, where the Indo-Pacific emerges as a hotspot for geopolitical rivalries, notably between the United States and China. Strategic initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India's Act East Policy, Russia's Turn to the East, and the United States' Pivot to Asia present both opportunities and challenges to Indonesia's pursuit of its national interests. ASEAN serves as Indonesia's diplomatic instrument to navigate these rivalries. By advocating for ASEAN centrality, Indonesia works to prevent member states from aligning exclusively with rival powers, thereby safeguarding regional stability and protecting its national interests. However, the very principle of ASEAN centrality can also limit Indonesia's ability to prioritise its own strategic objectives independently. This paper examines how Indonesia leverages its leadership role in ASEAN to create a regional sphere of influence while simultaneously engaging with global institutions such as the UN, WTO, G-20, and BRICS. Special attention is given to initiatives like the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) that expand ASEAN's strategic reach. The analysis further explores Indonesia's evolving foreign policy under its newly elected leadership in 2024, which signals a more proactive global engagement while maintaining ASEAN at the forefront of its regional strategy. The paper argues that Indonesia's dual commitment to regional and global organisations reveals both opportunities and constraints in its journey to achieving great power status.

### **Keywords**

Indonesia; ASEAN; Indo-Pacific; Emerging Powers; ASEAN Centrality; Regional Influence.

### **Resumo**

A Indonésia, uma potência emergente proeminente no Sudeste Asiático, ocupa uma posição estrategicamente vital na região Indo-Pacífico. Sob o comando do ex-presidente Joko Widodo, a Indonésia abraçou a visão de se tornar um «Pivô Marítimo Global», enquanto se esforçava para se afirmar como uma força política e económica global. Esta ambição desenrola-se no



meio de uma ordem global em evolução e polarizada, onde o Indo-Pacífico surge como um ponto nevrálgico para rivalidades geopolíticas, nomeadamente entre os Estados Unidos e a China. Iniciativas estratégicas como a Iniciativa Cinturão e Rota (BRI) da China, a Política Act East da Índia, a Virada para o Leste da Rússia e a Virada para a Ásia dos Estados Unidos apresentam oportunidades e desafios para a Indonésia na busca de seus interesses nacionais. A ASEAN serve como instrumento diplomático da Indonésia para navegar por essas rivalidades. Ao defender a centralidade da ASEAN, a Indonésia trabalha para impedir que os Estados-membros se alinhem exclusivamente com potências rivais, salvaguardando assim a estabilidade regional e protegendo os seus interesses nacionais. No entanto, o próprio princípio da centralidade da ASEAN também pode limitar a capacidade da Indonésia de priorizar seus próprios objetivos estratégicos de forma independente. Este artigo examina como a Indonésia aproveita seu papel de liderança na ASEAN para criar uma esfera de influência regional e, ao mesmo tempo, se envolver com instituições globais como a ONU, a OMC, o G-20 e o BRICS. É dada especial atenção a iniciativas como a Visão da ASEAN sobre o Indo-Pacífico (AOIP), que ampliam o alcance estratégico da ASEAN. A análise explora ainda mais a evolução da política externa da Indonésia sob a sua liderança recém-eleita em 2024, que sinaliza um envolvimento global mais proativo, mantendo a ASEAN na vanguarda da sua estratégia regional. O artigo argumenta que o duplo compromisso da Indonésia com organizações regionais e globais revela tanto oportunidades quanto restrições em sua jornada para alcançar o status de grande potência.

#### Palavras-chave

Indonésia; ASEAN; Indo-Pacífico; Potências Emergentes; Centralidade da ASEAN; Influência Regional.

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### **Introduction**

Indonesia, an archipelagic state, is an emerging middle power in an increasingly multipolar world. As the largest country in Southeast Asia and strategically located between the Indian and Pacific oceans, Indonesia occupies a geostrategic position. Being among the founding members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional economic and security grouping of ten Southeast Asian states, Indonesia has established itself as the natural leader of the bloc by consistently playing the role of the "mediator" and "norm-entrepreneur". ASEAN Centrality, a practice to keep ASEAN and its principles at the forefront in deciding the collective interest of the region by the ASEAN member states, has long been a cornerstone of Indonesia's foreign policy. Furthermore, the bloc's commitment to the ASEAN principle of "non-alignment" has played a crucial role in maintaining peace and stability across the Indo-Pacific region.

Acharya (2014) argues that neo-realism and liberal theories fail to take into account "perceptual, ideational and cultural factors" in the study of international relations and only focus on material factors like power and wealth. Drawing on constructivism, he states that the interplay of these non-material factors influences the formulation of foreign policies of security communities like ASEAN. This paper illustrates the constructivist perspective by examining the impact of religio-cultural factors in Indonesia's domestic politics on its foreign policy, particularly in relation to the Rohingya issue and its relations with the US and China. Similar to Acharya, Goh (2013) emphasises the intrinsic social nature of the international system. However, unlike Acharya, who views the regional order in Southeast Asia on the basis of common norms, interests and culture, Goh stresses that the East Asian regional order is shaped by the broader US-led liberal order. Viewing the increasing challenge posed by China and Russia to the US's global hegemony through Goh's lens, the power shift will be framed as "order transition" rather than "power transition". While a power transition implies a forceful attempt by a challenger state to change the global order, potentially through violence, an order transition reflects a more constructive process in which the challenger, hegemon, and other key actors negotiate and adjust without disrupting the overall global framework. Goh's theory is supported by the fact that, to date, no significant power redistribution has occurred, a point that is also acknowledged by Breslin (2013). Breslin states that in the process of re-distribution of power, China will shape its strategy around its identity



as an “emerging power” and will seek “alliances of the dissatisfied” with other distributive-minded states” like the BRICS members, which include Indonesia (Breslin, 2013, p. 617). Hence, in the context of intensifying US-China and US-Russia rivalry, Goh’s theory manifests through initiatives such as China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the imposition of coercive tariffs, efforts to secure new markets, and the increasing significance of multilateral forums like ASEAN and BRICS.

Within this complex environment, Indonesia’s behaviour within ASEAN is typical of middle powers, particularly through its focus on mediating and norm-setting. Middle powers have been defined on the basis of multiple factors like role, capability, function and norms or any or all of them. The “role theory” by Thies and Sari (2018) emphasises the “role” of a middle power, which they define as “ ‘positions’ in an organised group and any socially recognised category of actors, i.e., the kinds of people it is possible to be in a society”(p. 402). Thies and Sari (2018) are of the view that the primary functions of a middle power include backing multilateralism, preserving the established international order, and embodying the qualities of a good international citizen. Anwar (2020) states that Indonesia is a “Kantian middle power,” which is one of the three categories introduced by De Swielande. He explains that middle powers aligned with Kantian principles are defined by their propensity for bridge-building, cooperation, and mediation. They share the “Hobbesian” understanding of an anarchic global arena, yet they interpret this state positively, concentrating on matters of low politics, unlike “Hobbesian” powers, who interpret it negatively and prioritise high politics. Anwar substantiates his argument by emphasising that Indonesia’s promotion of the AOIP is based on the spirit of cooperation rather than competition, reflecting its positive outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Carr (as cited in Abbondanza & Wilkins, 2022) puts forward the idea of middle powers as “norm entrepreneurs,” which means the ability of the state to introduce norms and maintain them in global affairs.

This paper posits that Indonesia's role as a Kantian middle power and a norm entrepreneur has been critical in the Indo-Pacific, contributing significantly to dispute resolution among ASEAN states and the introduction of regional norms, ultimately establishing a strong sphere of influence in the region. This includes drafting and proposal of ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which “provides a guide for ASEAN’s engagement in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions” (ASEAN, 2019, para 21). The paper further argues that while leading regional politics, Indonesia simultaneously interacts with global institutions like the United Nations (UN), G-20, and recently with BRICS. The paper further supports the shift in foreign policy under the newly elected Indonesian President, Mr Prabowo Subianto, highlighting his proactive approach to global engagement and multi-alignment strategy while countering allegations that he is sidelining ASEAN.

The paper concludes that Subianto’s approach to foreign policy can fuel Indonesia’s aspiration to achieve global power status with the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific. Indonesia’s dual commitment to regional and global organisations reveals both opportunities and constraints in its journey to achieving great power status. Subianto’s greatest challenge remains strengthening multilateral ties beyond ASEAN without letting ASEAN fall into irrelevance. A careless zeal to establish a global presence can compromise ASEAN centrality, which has long been a cornerstone of Indonesia’s foreign policy and is



crucial amid geopolitical tensions to maintain regional stability and security. Indonesia's strategy should not be pursuing multi-alignment independently, but as a regional leader, supporting a collective shift within ASEAN from non-alignment to a more coordinated multi-alignment.

## Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative-descriptive approach. The primary sources consist of ASEAN Chair statements, summit communiqués, UN treaties, and G20 declarations. Secondary sources include news reports, academic journal articles, policy papers, and surveys. Specific cases have been selected as representative moments to trace Indonesia's evolving regional and global posture. Indonesia's ASEAN Chairmanship has been examined to evaluate the country's actions and efforts when it is in a position to directly shape ASEAN's agenda. Particular emphasis is placed on the formulation and implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which serves as the key document promoting a collective ASEAN stance in the Indo-Pacific, testing Indonesia's ability to retain regional control amid competing global strategies. Additionally, Indonesia's entry into the BRICS grouping and its participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have been analysed to assess how the country navigates the principle of non-alignment in the context of the intensifying US-China rivalry.

## Competing Economic and Security Agendas in the Indo-Pacific

Since the end of World War II, a strategic trend among post-colonial developing nations has been to adopt 'non-alignment' in their foreign policies and regional groupings. ASEAN stands by this principle amid the intensifying US-Russia rivalry and US-China rivalry. The Indo-Pacific region has become a subject of various overlapping and conflicting strategic initiatives of powerful states. The 'Pivot to Asia', initiated under the Obama administration in 2011, shifted the focus of the United States (US) administration to Asia from Europe with the goals of establishing influence in the Indo-Pacific. A major consideration of this policy was to deal with the challenge posed by the emerging power – China. However, the policy yielded little success due to the US's political distractions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Trump, in his first term, failed to have a comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategy, and his second term has been marked by coercive reciprocal tariffs towards all its trade partners. In contrast, Chinese President Xi Jinping continues to pursue his highly ambitious infrastructural initiative called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or New Silk Road, initiated in 2013. The latter has two components: Firstly, 'The Silk Road Economic Belt', which aims to connect China with Europe and secondly, 'Maritime Silk Road', which seeks to connect China with Southeast Asia. As of 2023, over 150 countries have joined the initiative, demonstrating widespread confidence in China's economic vision (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2023).

Similarly, India's 'Act East' policy, launched in 2014 by the Modi government, focused on the larger Indo-Pacific region than its ancestor 'Look East' Policy launched in 1991 by PM Narasimha Rao. Act East Policy remains ASEAN-centric and has been involved specifically in political and security competition under the ASEAN-India Dialogue Relations. In



addition to strategic objectives, India has increasingly employed cultural diplomacy, such as temple restoration and Buddhist linkages, as a tool of soft power to strengthen ties with Southeast Asian states, reinforcing civilizational connections and enhancing its regional presence (Mahaseth et al., 2023). Russia's "Turn to East" emerged after the commencement of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014. In an attempt to move away from the adversarial West, Russia turned to the East to strengthen political and economic cooperation with Asia-Pacific countries and African and Latin American countries. Furthermore, the Indo-Pacific is crowded with overlapping security arrangements. This includes the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (US, India, Australia, Japan) and AUKUS (US, UK, Australia), which undermine the authority of ASEAN by creating parallel strategic frameworks.

While the growing global interest in the Indo-Pacific offers new economic and political opportunities to Southeast Asian states, it also places them in a highly precarious position. In an endeavour to advance individual national interests, ASEAN member states risk aligning with rival global powers, which could place them at odds with each other. In a polarised world, ASEAN Centrality means avoiding exclusive ties with China, the US, or Russia, favouring a unified approach instead.

### **Indonesia's influence in Southeast Asia and ASEAN**

In the context of rising tensions among global powers, ASEAN Centrality serves as a mechanism to prevent the region from being swept up in global rivalries. By mediating between disputing member states and shaping ASEAN's policies, Indonesia fosters a regional sphere of influence in Southeast Asia. While the former characteristic is reflective of Indonesia's existence as a "good international citizen", given by Thies and Sari's theory, and as a "mediator" by Anwar's application of Kantian middle power theory, the latter highlights Indonesia's role as a "norm entrepreneur" as proposed by Carr.

In June 2008, armed conflict between Cambodia and Thailand over the disputed area surrounding the Temple of Preah Vihear prompted Indonesia to intervene in efforts to restore peace in the region. In compliance with the United Nations Security Council's orders, Indonesia, under its ASEAN Chairmanship, hosted an ASEAN Foreign Ministerial Meeting in Jakarta, which was attended by all foreign ministers of ASEAN members on February 22, 2011 (ASEAN, 2011). Regardless of the fact that the meeting ultimately failed to bear fruit and the matter was referred to the International Court of Justice, the event reflected Indonesia's readiness to lead the Indo-Pacific region and also play the role of a mediator to ensure peace between ASEAN members.

In 2023, during its Chairmanship of ASEAN, Indonesia had focused on two major problems in the Indo-Pacific: The Myanmar Crisis and the South China Sea Dispute. Apart from the Rohingya refugee crisis, the takeover of Myanmar by the military junta in 2021 further added to the regional instability in Southeast Asia. In 2021, the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting was hosted by Indonesia, which resulted in the 5-Point Consensus (PC). The latter was a strategic peace plan which aimed to restore stability in Myanmar. The plan included the appointment of a special envoy to the Myanmar military junta and also its engagement with all stakeholders, enabling humanitarian aid, dialogue among parties and calls for putting an immediate end to the violence. While the success of the 5-PC is



debatable, Indonesia's proactive initiatives to address regional problems reflect its capacity to effectively lead the region. Under the Chairmanship of Indonesia in 2023, the 5-PC were reviewed and additional decisions were taken including urging "Myanmar Armed Forces in particular, and all related parties concerned in Myanmar to de-escalate violence and stop targeted attacks on civilians, houses and public facilities, such as schools, hospitals, markets, churches and monasteries" and mobilising "further support from External Partners and the International Community to ASEAN efforts on humanitarian assistance" (ASEAN, 2023a, para. 11& 17).

However, to properly weigh the extent of influence Indonesia possesses within ASEAN, it is important to look into the effect of internal fragmentation of the organisation. For instance, only Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam hold bilateral ties with Myanmar, while the rest of the ASEAN members do not. The varying individual interests have the potential to weaken the regional cohesion. In June 2021, divisions within ASEAN became apparent when several members abstained from voting on a UN General Assembly resolution concerning the deteriorating political atmosphere of Myanmar. The resolution appreciated ASEAN's adoption of the 5-PC and urged its swift implementation while condemning the violence inflicted upon the peaceful demonstrators and calling for an end to the same. Although six ASEAN members voted in favour, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand abstained from voting. Samet (2021) observes that the draft resolution was strongly worded and included a call for a global arms embargo, which has been omitted in the final resolution. It was the Southeast Asian states that had requested, through a letter, to soften the language in order "to make the text acceptable". Hence, the divergence in positions reflects how national economic interests outweigh collective action. As a result, ASEAN is bound to adopt diluted measures to ensure consensus, avoiding harsher steps such as an arms embargo. While this makes the outcome acceptable to all members, it hurts the effectiveness of the action plans.

Another major concern for Southeast Asia is the South China dispute, which dates back to the 1970s. Article 47 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982) states that the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) shall not extend beyond 200 nautical miles from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured. As per Article 56 of UNCLOS (1982), the coastal state has sovereign right of exploring, exploiting, conserving, and managing the natural marine resources located within the exclusive economic zone, among other rights. China, drawing on its historical territories, claims beyond this internationally set limit. The area claimed by China in the South China Sea overlaps with the EEZ of several ASEAN member states and is termed the "Nine-dash Line". In the 1970s, China militarily seized 3 islands beyond its EEZ (Putra, 2015). This military activity was a direct encroachment on the international maritime rights of the neighbouring Southeast Asian Countries, including Brunei, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and also Indonesia, with respect to the Natuna Islands. Subsequently, the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) was signed between ASEAN members and the government of the People's Republic of China on 4<sup>th</sup> November 2002. The declaration reaffirmed the commitment to principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the UNCLOS, and other universally accepted principles of international law. The declaration also emphasised resolving their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means and not through threat or use of force (ASEAN, 2012).



Regardless, the geopolitical tensions subsist in the South China Sea. China's illegal fishing in Natuna waters has been fiercely retaliated against by Indonesia through military actions in the past. Indonesia, in consonance with its zero-tolerance policy, went as far as renaming its EEZ as the "North Natuna Sea" in 2017, apart from imposing stricter penalties for illegal fishing (Wisnugroho, 2024). In October 2024, after President Subianto came to power, Chinese coast guard vessels were driven out of Indonesian waters twice ("Indonesia says Chinese", 2024). Both President Subianto and former president Joko Widodo (also known as 'Jokowi') share an assertive stance on safeguarding the territorial integrity of Indonesia along with the ASIAN member states against a major power in the region.

Post the DOC, an agreement to implement the DOC was decided upon in 2011. However, almost two decades of negotiations between ASEAN and China have not yielded much. During its ASEAN Chairmanship in 2023, Indonesia called for the acceleration of negotiations under the Code of Conduct (COC), which will be a legally binding document to establish rules around maritime interactions in the South China Sea ("ASEAN Chair Indonesia", 2023) and subsequently, an agreement was reached. The Asean Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) 10+1 Sessions With The Dialogue Partners, ASEAN and China "reaffirmed the aspiration to work towards the early conclusion of an effective and substantive COC ...and adopted the Guidelines for Accelerating the Early Conclusion of an Effective and Substantive Code of Conduct in the South China Sea" (ASEAN, 2023c, para. 70). However, materialisation of the COC remains a distant dream for ASEAN. The lack of an effective action plan once again exposes the fragmentation within ASEAN. Firstly, not all ASEAN states are equally affected by the tensions in the South China Sea. The Philippines and Vietnam have more extensive territorial claims in the disputed waters than Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia. Others remain directly unaffected by the dispute. Secondly, many ASEAN states, particularly those that do not have much at stake, remain reluctant to jeopardise the significant economic opportunities that China provides. In 2012, for instance, despite the clash between a Philippine navy vessel and Chinese fishing vessels at Scarborough Shoal, Cambodia, the then ASEAN chair refused to include the issue in the communique, prompting the Philippines' Foreign Minister to walk out of the summit (York, 2015). More recently, US warships were deployed in support of its ally, the Philippines, following a deadly clash that cost the lives of two Chinese coastal guards (Heydarian, 2025). However, while the progress on the South China Sea issue is slow, it is not completely unachievable, especially through the mediation of relatively stronger economies like Indonesia and Malaysia. Although Indonesia's interest in the South China Sea is confined to the area surrounding the Natuna Islands, its active efforts to address the broader dispute and the trust it has earned from other affected ASEAN members reflect its effective regional leadership. Thies and Sari state that the role of "peacekeeper or intermediary in international conflicts or regional-subsystem collaborator" is an indicator of a "good international citizen". Indonesia's involvement in the Cambodian-Thailand temple dispute, Myanmar crisis and South China dispute reflects this criterion, affirming its role as a good international citizen.

Similarly, Indonesia's efforts to formulate a collective strategy in the Indo-Pacific made the adoption of the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) possible. In terms of timing, AOIP can be viewed as a response to the Western strategic vision put forward by the then US president Donald Trump, who launched Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) in



2017. The need for AOIP arises due to the conflicting interests of the global powers in the region, which could destabilise the region and also risk undermining Indonesia's regional influence. This is reflected by Jokowi's vision of Indonesia as a Global Maritime Fulcrum, which, beyond its emphasis on maritime development, also serves as a reassertion of the nation's presence and power in the region. AOIP had initially faced persistent reluctance by the ASEAN members, and it was only after vigorous lobbying by Indonesia that AOIP was realised on 23<sup>rd</sup> June, 2019, at the 34<sup>th</sup> summit of ASEAN in Bangkok. This reflects that while Indonesia holds sufficient influence to introduce new norms in the region, it often finds itself as the sole driver of such norms, as initiatives like AOIP have struggled to garner similar enthusiasm from other member states. There could be two reasons for the latter. Firstly, the growing global interest in the Indo-Pacific might appear as an opportunity to further individual national goals of the particular ASEAN members. Crystallising the AOIP can limit their individual aspirations. Secondly, expanding ASEAN's domain from the narrower Asia-Pacific to wider Indo-Pacific is a slight deviation from the existing status quo, if not the introduction of an entirely new norm. Any such effort is bound to face hindrance as explained by Finnemore and Sikkink (1996) in their 'Norm Life Cycle theory'. ASEAN acknowledged that "economic growth of the region opens up possibilities of cooperation to alleviate poverty and elevate living standards of millions of people," while also in the face of rise of economic and military powers "requires avoiding the deepening of mistrust, miscalculation, and patterns of behaviour based on a zero-sum game"(ASEAN, 2019, para. 1). The key elements of the AOIP are as follows:

*A perspective of viewing the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, not as contiguous territorial spaces but as a closely integrated and interconnected region, with ASEAN playing a central and strategic role; An Indo-Pacific region of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry; An Indo-Pacific region of development and prosperity for all; The importance of the maritime domain and perspective in the evolving regional architecture (ASEAN, 2019, para. 10-12).*

AOIP cleverly avoids naming any particular major power as the object of concern which is in line with its policy of non-alignment. A key aim, highlighted as one of four, within the AOIP is to enhance the ASEAN Community building process and to fortify current ASEAN-led frameworks like the East Asia Summit. The specific mention of East Asia Summit is significant as it is the only forum that brings the heads of state of global rival powers i.e., China, the US, and Russia on a negotiating plane. Hence, strengthening of EAS can help ease tensions in the Indo-Pacific and avoid potential military or politico-economic confrontations in the region. AOIP, thus, reflects a collective effort of ASEAN to foster Indo-Pacific cooperation and diffuse regional tensions.

Under Indonesia's chairmanship 2023, concrete steps were taken for implementation of the AOIP in contrast with the limited attention it received in previous and subsequent chairmanships (ASEAN, 2023b, para. 38, 28, 29 & 57). The chairman's statement of the 43<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN Summit welcomed the convening of "ASEAN-Indo Pacific Forum: Implementation of AOIP" in Jakarta, Indonesia and specifically mentioned it as "Indonesia's Initiative" (ASEAN, 2023b, para. 38). Another achievement for AOIP was



the adoption of the ASEAN-New Zealand Joint Statement on Cooperation on the AOIP. The Chairman's statement encouraged adoption of similar Joint Statements with the United States, the Republic of Korea, and China. Furthermore, "ASEAN-Indo-Pacific Workshop on Marine Plastic Debris" was co-hosted by Indonesia and New Zealand in June 2023 and the "EAS Workshop on Developing Coastal Economy" in August 2023 in Bali, Indonesia (ASEAN, 2023b, para. 29). A similar Indo-Pacific Workshop was co-hosted by Indonesia and Australia on the "Use of Technology for Sustainable Aquaculture" in October 2023 in Bali. There was also conversations on the "development of the Concept Paper on the Implementation of the AOIP from a Defence Perspective" (ASEAN, 2023b, para. 57).

Laos further carried Indonesia's spirit regarding AOIP under its Chairmanship in 2024. ASEAN adopted 'ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific' which focussed on improving connectivity specifically through implementation of Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 (MPAC), ensuring sustainable development goals and deepening economic partnerships (ASEAN, 2024a; ASEAN, 2024b). While the AOIP is gradually getting internalised as a norm within ASEAN and has attracted positive engagement by the non-ASEAN partners, its implementation has been limited to areas such as technology, sustainable development and physical connectivity. Little progress has been made with regard to regional security concerns. AOIP neither articulates concrete strategies for managing security concerns with regard to the threat posed by AUKUS and QUAD, nor has ASEAN carried out any substantive action in this regard. Perhaps, over time, with collective and consistent efforts of the ASEAN members, Indonesia's Indo-Pacific vision can be accomplished through effective implementation of the AOIP. If Indonesia manages to continue winning the confidence of non-ASEAN global powers with respect to the AOIP specially on the regional security front, it will not only increase its regional influence, but also bring Indonesia closer to its aspiration of becoming a global power.

### **Indonesia's Expanding Global Engagement and Representation of ASEAN's Interests**

Indonesia has actively been engaged in world affairs through various institutions of global importance like the UN, G-20 and recently BRICS. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, global intergovernmental institutions occupy a fundamental role in shaping international policy-making and facilitating both bilateral and multilateral ties between global actors. Indonesia has not only projected its own national interests in the global platforms but also frequently acted as a representative of ASEAN, voicing the region's collective concerns and priorities.

The G-20, a global forum created in 1999, gathers major industrial and developing economies to foster discussions on global economic and financial stability. The G-20 currently consists of 19 member countries and two regional associations which includes China, Russia, United States and the European Union. This intergovernmental organisation includes the world's leading economies, accounting for up to 85% of the world's Gross Domestic Product, and is devoted to solving global economic and financial issues (Overview, n.d.). Indonesia is the only Southeast Asian



nation that has a membership in the G20, giving it the capacity to use the platform not only to forward its interest but also the region's collective interest.

In 2022, under the Indonesian presidency, the G20 Summit focused on three aspects: global health care, sustainable energy transition and digital transformation. The resulting Bali Declaration (G20, 2022) focused on many subjects of interest to the developing South. The declaration reiterated their commitment to supporting the developing countries in responding to global challenges and implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. Moreover, the declaration addressed several key areas, such as food security, climate finance for developing countries to support UN climate objectives, strengthening developing nations' ability to manage future pandemics with support from the World Bank's Financial Intermediary Fund, and ensuring equitable access to medical countermeasures like vaccines, particularly in developing regions.

On July 8, 2022, in Bali, Retno L.P. Marsudi, Indonesia's former foreign Minister, addressed the opening session of the second day of the G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting, emphasising the importance of multilateral cooperation, trust, and bridge-building. Addressing concerns over the Russia-Ukraine war, she brings attention to the unequal impact the developing and low-income states will suffer. She stated that "The voices of all countries – big and small, North and South, developed and developing – must be heard" and proudly announced about the historic first-time invitation extended to representatives of small island developing countries, namely, the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), along with the African Union ("G20 FMM", 2022, para. 12). By offering the opportunity to be heard to the globally neglected island states in the Indo-Pacific, Indonesia not only stands as the champion of the Global South but also attempts to gain more influence in the region and further strengthen Indonesia's vision of the Indo-Pacific.

Marsudi has made a similar appeal at the general debate of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly. Observing that "violation of international law has become a norm in pursuit of narrow self-interest", she brings attention to global problems of climate change, inflation, food, and energy shortages (United Nations, 2022, p. 2). Marsudi stated that geopolitical interests should not be given precedence over global recovery, emphasising the vulnerability of developing states to fall into a potential food & energy crisis. She also expressed her concerns about "mini-lateral groupings", which become instruments of proxy wars between global powers. The term appears to be referring to AUKUS, hence condemning its involvement in the Indo-Pacific, which challenges ASEAN's authority. Marsudi reiterates Indonesia's commitment to "reinforce ASEAN's centrality in shaping regional order in the Indo-Pacific; to forge unity as a locomotive for peace, stability, and prosperity in the region; and to ensure ASEAN matters for our peoples, for the region, and for the world" (United Nations, 2022, p. 6).

In 2008, Indonesia's proposal on the General Expenditure Support Fund aided infrastructural development in the underdeveloped countries through the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Gultom, 2024, p. 119). Furthermore, the reconstruction of the IMF through the Seoul Consensus was supported by Indonesia, which gave equal voting power to developing nations.



Indonesia's recently granted membership in BRICS reflects the growing influence and economic power Indonesia holds in the region. BRICS is an intergovernmental partnership between ten states- Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates. Recently, BRICS has been in the limelight, especially following the controversial and arbitrary tariffs imposed by US President Donald Trump. BRICS challenges the Western-dominated global order as it protects and advances the interests of the Global South, which puts ASEAN's policy of non-alignment and Indonesia's relationship with Western Nations into jeopardy. Trump threatened the BRICS member countries with an additional 10% tariffs if they aligned with "anti-American policies" after the bloc had criticised the tariff war and military attacks on Iran ("Donald Trump threatens", 2025). On the economic front, the largest benefit of this strategic move is access to the New Development Bank, which started with the authorised capital of \$ 100 billion and has a paid-up capital of \$ 50 billion. The Bank holds the capacity to fund large-scale infrastructural projects within Indonesia and could potentially lead to technology transfer. Furthermore, the BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement offers financial assistance to member nations in the face of global liquidity challenges. Membership in BRICS offers Indonesia opportunities to engage more closely with other developing economies, such as India, while expanding access to the Chinese and Russian markets. However, critics argue that Indonesia's participation is largely symbolic (Sulaiman, 2025). In the multilateral institution where strong voices already exist, like that of China and Russia, they claim Indonesia is unlikely to wield significant influence. They argue that the move stems from Subianto's personal ambition of international recognition and does not serve the national interest of Indonesia in any substantive way. It will ultimately be Subianto's test to prove that joining BRICS was worth earning the US's wrath.

Indonesia's deepening friendship with China and the former decision to participate in the BRI along with other Southeast Asian States has also been a subject of concern for ASEAN. Under Jokowi, Indonesia became part of this ambitious initiative to fund the infrastructural development, such as roadways, railways, ports, etc., within Indonesia. China has invested over a trillion dollars in various countries through the BRI, and Indonesia has been among its largest trading partners. There has been an increasing concern regarding the BRI loans being predatory towards developing countries, as the BRI offers loans at significantly higher interest rates compared to those provided by the World Bank. The financial assistance provided by both the World Bank and China can be categorised into aid-financed and debt-financed. The World Bank offers aid financed through the International Development Association (IDA) to countries that are below the annually updated threshold calculated through Gross National Income (GNI) per capita on more concessional interest rates. Relatively richer countries are debt-financed through the World Bank's International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) with near-market interest rates. Cheong (2022), in his study, categorises China's development finance flows into similar categories as provided by the World Bank. Drawing on AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance (GCDF) dataset, he finds that aid-financed loans from China carry interest rates that are 1.5% higher, while debt-financed loans have interest rates that are approximately 0.8% higher. Some accuse China of "debt-trap diplomacy," where it will seize the collateral assets of poorer nations unable to pay back, while others believe that China may not use coercive strategies but



aims at subduing the sovereignty of poorer nations (Clark, 2023). The latter accusation is based on the leasing of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port for 99 years to China due to the latter's inability to repay the loan. The absence of transparency in the financial transactions between China and its debtors leaves room for doubt on the credibility and viability of the debt-trap theory.

As of December 2023, there were around seventy-one BRI projects with a combined valuation of \$20.3 billion (Busbarat et al., 2023). The Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway is an example of a highly successful BRI project costing \$7.3 billion, of which approximately 75% was covered through a loan by China Development Bank ("Indonesia Launches", 2023). In September 2023, Jokowi invited Chinese firms to invest in the building of \$32 billion new capital, Nusantara ("Indonesia China Discuss", 2023). The growing dependency on China risks compromising Indonesia's previously held firm stance on the contentious South China Sea issue. A diminished voice on such a critical matter can also weaken Indonesia's image as a strong and independent regional leader.

### **The Way Forward: Jokowi's passive 'Non-alignment' or Subianto's active 'Multi-alignment'**

Non-alignment has been a successful political strategy for many post-colonial states during the bipolar Cold War era. After the fall of the Soviet Union in the late 1900s, the US-led liberal world order came to dominate global politics. However, with the recent rise of China and resurgence of Russia, the global sphere is transitioning into a multipolar world order. In light of these geopolitical changes, traditional non-alignment seems increasingly inefficient, giving way to an evolved approach known as the "multi-alignment" strategy, which has attracted significant attention from policymakers. While the line that separates the two strategies is quite thin, the primary difference between the two appears to be simultaneously aligning with all rival global powers on economic, political and military fronts in case of multi-alignment. The multi-alignment strategy relies on both bilateral and multilateral relationships, with multilateral platforms playing a key role by facilitating collaboration between rival powers and pacifying hostilities. Prabowo Subianto seems to adopt a multi-alignment strategy, in contrast to Jokowi's approach of strict non-alignment.

It is also important to note that Indonesia's foreign policy has never been completely independent of its domestic politics. The domestic political dynamics not only shapes what happens within Indonesia but also influences how the country interacts with the world. Hence, the public perception of the Global powers like China and US matters for the ruling parties to frame domestically acceptable foreign policies. "Economic growth" has consistently remained a key focus of Indonesia's domestic agenda, creating a sense of continuity between both Jokowi's and Subianto's domestic policy. Furthermore, as the largest Muslim majority democracy, Indonesia's foreign policy is also influenced by the Islamic values and a sense of global Muslim solidarity. For example, the Pew Global Attitudes survey found that Indonesian public hostility toward the U.S. increased after the Iraq invasion but decreased when U.S. aid arrived following the devastating 2004 tsunami (Wike, 2006). Similarly, Indonesia's strong stance against Myanmar's military



rule reflects a deep sense of brotherhood with the persecuted Rohingya Muslim community.

Jokowi's tenure is characterised by "pro-people diplomacy" where domestic interests are placed at the centre of foreign policy decisions. This means that goal of the foreign policy should be to advance domestic interests. The populist leader, in his first term, focussed on three aspects with respect to its foreign policy: maintaining Indonesia's sovereignty, enhancing the protection of Indonesian citizens, and intensifying economic diplomacy (Indonesian Cabinet Secretariat, 2015). Aligning foreign policy closely with economic development objectives, the then Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi argued that Indonesia would favour bilateral mechanisms over multilateral approaches as a diplomatic instrument (Andika, 2016). This approach is reflected in Jokowi's lack of active participation in the UN General Assembly and actions such as sinking illegal fishing vessels from fellow ASEAN members.

Jokowi's ambitious goal of making Indonesia as a Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) found no mention in his second term. GMF stood on five pillars which are to "rebuild maritime culture, manage marine resources, develop maritime infrastructure and connectivity, advance maritime diplomacy, and boost maritime defense forces" (Laksmana, 2017, para. 2). The reason for the GMF falling into irrelevance is attributed to poorly-designed vision to bureaucratic hurdles in its implementation (Laksmana, 2019). In his second term, Jokowi has focused more on his domestic policy and entrusted the foreign policy to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Jokowi in his foreign policy, stood by Indonesia's longstanding principle of passive non-alignment and neutrally between global power rivals. He focussed less on the multilateral fora, if not completely abandoned them, despite its potential to serve as a concrete platform for pursuing multi-alignment foreign policy. His limited engagement in multilateral settings, along with a preference for bilateral ties with global powers, was largely driven by Indonesia's domestic priorities. For example, Priamarizki (2024) observes that Indonesia's participation in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), launched by President Biden in 2022 with 13 partner countries, was primarily motivated by the desire to "increase trade and investment opportunities, especially for Indonesia's raw materials industries" (p. 29). However, despite fostering closer economic ties with the U.S., Jokowi remained distant from Western-led security arrangements such as the Quad and AUKUS, as they did not align with domestic interests.

Similarly, he notes that Jokowi's participation in China's BRI was motivated by his domestic goal of improving infrastructural development within Indonesia. However, BRI projects have generated significant public grievances, which risk reigniting longstanding anti-Chinese sentiment. BRI projects largely employed Chinese workers, limiting opportunities for local employment and skill transfer. Public frustration was further exacerbated when, during the COVID-19 pandemic, mass layoffs of Indonesian workers occurred while Chinese workers retained their jobs in Chinese firms, prompting the administration to delay some Chinese work permits (Suryadinata, 2020). This discontent is reflected in a Pew Research Center survey, which showed a drop in favorable views toward China from 66% in 2014 to 53% in 2018 (Tamir & Budiman, 2019). Although Jokowi's administration did not witness this discontent materialize into acts of violence,



it now poses a challenge for his successor, Prabowo Subianto, in navigating Sino-Indonesian relations amid growing public disapproval.

Prabowo Subianto came into power in October 2024. Unlike Jokowi, Subianto has a strong background in both business and the military. His domestic policy includes increasing economic growth from 5% to 8%, 28 billion dollar "Free Nutritious Meal" Programme, improving revenue to GDP ratio and continuing the \$ 32 billion capital city relocation project ("What policies to expect", 2024). Unlike Jokowi, Subianto's administration has not clearly linked domestic policy with foreign policy, suggesting that his approach may allow for greater flexibility in foreign affairs, rather than being largely driven by domestic politics.

Subianto has utilised both bilateral and multilateral forums. Indonesia under Subianto has taken a more proactive approach towards world politics, evidenced by his visits to 13 countries, including both China and the United States. The trip to Beijing brought home deals worth 10 billion dollars and also invited controversy over the Joint Statement issued between China and Indonesia on 'Advancing the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the China-Indonesia Community with a Shared Future'. The Joint Statement stated that the "two sides reached an important common understanding on joint development in areas of overlapping claims" and mentioned the establishment of the "Inter-Governmental Joint Steering Committee" to explore and advance cooperation ("Joint Statement Between", 2024, p. 10). Subianto was thus criticised for potentially undermining Indonesia's territorial sovereignty by setting a drastic shift to the former unyielding position of Indonesia with regards to the South China Sea. Indonesia, shortly thereafter, issued a clarification of its position, declaring its non-recognition of China's claims in the South China Sea. (Widiyanto, 2024). The inconsistency in Indonesia's statement can affect its credibility as the regional leader and bring distrust from Southeast Asian states, specifically those who has an interest in the South China Sea. However, on the positive note, both the countries reaffirmed their commitment to implementation of the DOC, and "early conclusion" of COC ("Join Statement Between", 2024, p. 10-11).

Post-China visit Subianto directly flew to Washington DC to meet President Joe Biden, attempting to uphold the Indonesian foreign policy of non-alignment. The globally active President plans to visit Russia in June 2025 to strike a free trade agreement with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (Shofa, 2025). The Union, in addition to Russia, consists of 4 post-Soviet states - Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan. This could enable Indonesia to access alternative markets to US in response to increased tariffs imposed under Trumps Administration. Russia and Indonesia have also held Naval drills in the Indonesian waters – an action which could be unsettling for ASEAN members, given Russia's has continuously undermined of international law in the context of Russian-Ukrainian war ("Russia, ASEAN hold first", 2021). Indonesia followed up with naval military drills with Australia and had earlier hosted its annual 'Super Garuda Shield' drill with the United States (Mahdi, 2025). This, once again, appears to reflect Indonesia's adherence to its long-standing policy of non-alignment. It is under Subianto's leadership that Indonesia has become a member of BRICS and aspires to be part of two transnational economic groupings: the "[Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development](#) (OECD)" and the "[Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-](#)



[Pacific Partnership](#)" ("Indonesia Formally Requests," 2024, para 2; "Ministers welcome Roadmap" , 2024).

Subianto has been criticised for alleged sidelining of ASEAN Centrality, with critics contending that his administration's actions reflect a departure from this longstanding principle. This is evidenced by his initial foreign trips to South Asia, the Middle East, North America and South America rather than to neighbouring ASEAN members states. This symbolically sends an indication that Subianto's preference of pursue national interests over upholding ASEAN unity. Furthermore, the absence of the Foreign Minister Sugiono from the meeting hosted by Thailand to discuss the implementation of ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar – attended by 5 other ASEAN founder states – has been cited as further evidence of disregard towards ASEAN. However, while there are certain shortcomings in Subianto's administration, the claim that the latter is sidelining ASEAN appears premature and somewhat overstated.

Subianto's intention to keep ASEAN at the forefront is clearly reflected in his engagements on the global stage. The Joint Statement by President Biden and President Prabowo Subianto of Indonesia affirmed that they were committed to an "open, transparent, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific regional architecture with ASEAN at the center" ("Joint Statement by President", 2024, para. 3). The Joint Statement between China and the Indonesia, previously referred to, support "strengthening the ASEAN-led cooperation mechanisms in order to build an open, transparent and inclusive regional architecture with ASEAN at its center" and promotion of mutually beneficial BRI and AOIP ("Joint Statement Between", 2024, p. 13). Similarly, after the State visit to India, the India-Indonesia joint Statement promised "to strengthen efforts towards implementation of the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity" and "support for ASEAN Centrality" in the evolving regional architecture (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2025, paras. 44- 47). Furthermore, the carefully calculated strategizing of foreign trips and joint military drills indicates that Subianto does not intend to exclusively align with any single global power. Subianto's proactive approach to world affairs is a shift to a more effective model of "multi-alignment," and it does not contradict ASEAN's non-alignment policy.

Perhaps, the best way forward for Subianto is guide ASEAN into adopting a multi-alignment framework. This would involve transitioning ASEAN's traditional non-alignment stance into a more dynamic multi-alignment approach through ASEAN's institutional mechanisms. In practice, this will require the Southeast Asian states to collectively define the principles and other specifics of a coordinated multi-alignment policy, with Indonesia playing the lead in the process. Surely, a significant challenge will be to aligning varying national interests of different members, however, it is not unfeasible with Indonesia's regional influence and leadership capacity. This move will also help dispel allegations on Indonesia that it is deviating from principle of ASEAN Centrality.

## Conclusion

Indonesia, an archipelagic Kantian middle power and norm entrepreneur, endeavours to carve out a prominent role among global powers in an increasingly multi-polar world order. Its geostrategic placement, nestled between the Indian and Pacific oceans, means



it faces a convergence of frequently opposing geopolitical strategies, offering both potential benefits and significant challenges. Having created a region of influence in the Indo-Pacific and projecting itself as the founding leader of ASEAN on the global stage, Indonesia's ongoing challenge is to sustain this influence and leadership. By participating in international platforms like UN, G-20, and BRICS, Indonesia invites economic and political opportunities not only for itself but for the region as a whole.

With the ascent of Subianto to power, Indonesia's foreign policy deviates from Jokowi's more reserved stance on global affairs. Under Subianto's leadership, Indonesia aims to strengthen bilateral ties with all the major global powers. The increasing global engagements will help attract much-needed investments into Indonesia. BRI has successfully financed numerous infrastructure projects within Indonesia. However, overreliance on foreign loans can jeopardise Indonesia's independence. Therefore, such financial engagements must be approached with caution.

Under Subianto, Indonesia is shifting its from passive non-alignment to active multi-alignment. A well-calibrated multi-alignment strategy will enable Indonesia to maximise its national interests without losing its bargaining power. In the multi-polarising world, there is a need for Southeast Asian states must move beyond post-World War non-alignment movement and to engage with all major global actors. Through the implementation of AOIP, Indonesia can embed a multi-alignment policy within the framework of ASEAN itself. ASEAN should not be seen as a barrier to Indonesia's aspiration of becoming a global power. Instead, if leveraged correctly, it can become a vehicle to realize those ambitions.

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