

DANCING WITH GIANTS: INDONESIA AND ITS INCLUSIVE APPROACH IN THE INDO-PACIFIC AFTER BRICS ACCEPTANCE

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Abstract

The growing multipolarity in global politics has prompted emerging powers to utilise regional and international organisations as strategic tools to navigate major power rivals. This article investigates how Indonesia uses an inclusive approach in the Indo-Pacific through its membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and BRICS and its membership proposal for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) amid the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific region. This study addresses the key question of how Indonesia capitalises on ASEAN leadership and BRICS membership to enhance its OECD membership proposal and geopolitical standing. The investigation is anchored on neorealism in analysing regional power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific as Indonesia's response through its inclusive approach. This study employed qualitative research methods. The findings suggest that Indonesia's foreign policy doctrine of *Bebas Aktif* (independent and active) is not only aligned with, but also acts as a pivotal influence on ASEAN's inclusivity principles under the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Under these circumstances, Indonesia and other ASEAN members (AMS) engage in soft economic alliances, including BRICS and OECD, as a balancing act between the US and China. Additionally, Indonesia's BRICS membership enhances its bargaining power to pursue OECD membership, while maintaining cooperative relationships with the United States and its allies. This study contributes to understanding how emerging powers exercise dual alignment as a balancing act by using multilateral platforms to assert their influence and achieve strategic objectives in a multipolar world.

Keywords

Indonesia, Indo-Pacific, ASEAN, BRICS, OECD, Neorealism, Multipolarity, US-China Rivalry, *Bebas Aktif*.

Resumo

A crescente multipolaridade na política global levou as potências emergentes a utilizar organizações regionais e internacionais como ferramentas estratégicas para lidar com as principais potências rivais. Este artigo investiga como a Indonésia utiliza uma abordagem



inclusiva no Indo-Pacífico através da sua adesão à Associação das Nações do Sudeste Asiático (ASEAN) e ao BRICS, bem como da sua proposta de adesão à Organização para a Cooperação e Desenvolvimento Económico (OCDE), num contexto de rivalidade crescente entre os Estados Unidos e a China na região do Indo-Pacífico. Este estudo aborda a questão fundamental de como a Indonésia capitaliza a liderança da ASEAN e a adesão ao BRICS para reforçar a sua proposta de adesão à OCDE e a sua posição geopolítica. A investigação baseia-se no neorrealismo para analisar a dinâmica do poder regional no Indo-Pacífico como resposta da Indonésia através da sua abordagem inclusiva. Este estudo utilizou métodos de investigação qualitativos. As conclusões sugerem que a doutrina de política externa da Indonésia, Bebas Aktif (independente e ativa), não só está alinhada com os princípios de inclusão da ASEAN no âmbito da Visão da ASEAN sobre o Indo-Pacífico (AOIP), como também exerce uma influência fundamental sobre os mesmos. Nestas circunstâncias, a Indonésia e outros membros da ASEAN (AMS) envolvem-se em alianças económicas suaves, incluindo o BRICS e a OCDE, como um ato de equilíbrio entre os EUA e a China. Além disso, a adesão da Indonésia ao BRICS aumenta o seu poder de negociação para buscar a adesão à OCDE, mantendo relações de cooperação com os Estados Unidos e seus aliados. Este estudo contribui para a compreensão de como as potências emergentes exercem o duplo alinhamento como um ato de equilíbrio, usando plataformas multilaterais para afirmar a sua influência e alcançar objetivos estratégicos em um mundo multipolar.

Palavras-chave

Indonésia, Indo-Pacífico, ASEAN, BRICS, OCDE, Neorrealismo, Multipolaridade, Rivalidade EUA-China, Bebas Aktif.

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Introduction

The 21st century is characterized by a global power shift from the Trans-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, as well as a shift in the global power dynamic towards a multipolar international system amid the decline of the rise of China, challenging the hegemonic power of the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) as the winner of the Cold War (Mearsheimer, 2014). This shift presents both opportunities and challenges for middle powers in the Indo-Pacific as the paramount stage of the intensifying rivalry between the US and the People's Republic of China (Bisley, 2020; White, 2010). In this context, middle powers, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, must recalculate their strategic alignment amid dynamic power shifts not only between the two superpowers of the US and China but also with international organisations. This is essential not only to survive in terms of the realist perspective but also to amplify their influence, safeguard their interests, and maintain strategic autonomy (Abbondanza, 2022; Chaisse & Hsieh, 2023; Cooper & Flandes, 2013; Juned & Sutiono, 2024).

Emerging powers, such as Indonesia, particularly those situated in strategically vital regions, such as Southeast Asia, find themselves at the confluence of these great power dynamics. They face the dual challenge of navigating the pressures emanating from major power competition while simultaneously seeking opportunities to enhance their geopolitical standing and pursue their national interests. In this context, regional and international organisations have become increasingly important. These multilateral platforms offer avenues for dialogue, cooperation, and the collective assertion of interests, providing smaller and middle powers with mechanisms to amplify their voices and manage the complexities of a multipolar world (Abbondanza, 2022; Acharya, 2014; Juned & Sutiono, 2024).

Indonesia, Southeast Asia's largest economy and a key archipelagic nation, is a prominent example of an emerging power actively shaping its regional environment. Its foreign policy tradition, encapsulated in the doctrine of *Bebas Aktif* (independent and active), emphasises a non-aligned yet proactive approach to international affairs (Anwar, 2020; Dannhauer, 2024). This doctrine has historically guided Indonesia's engagement



with the world, including its foundational role in the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN). More recently, Indonesia's strategic calculation embraced membership in the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, along with newly invited members) amid its pursuit of accession to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), as well as the US's negative sentiment towards members of the BRICS (Martin, 2025; Takahashi, 2024). Previously, Abbondanza (2022) and Juned & Setiono (2024) argue that Indonesia incorporates pragmatism in its contemporary application of *Bebas Aktif*, nuanced in an inclusive approach that allows it to actively engage with diverse economic cooperation with diverse actors, which is well reflected in its approach to the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific as well as the recently agreed EUI-CEPA agreement with the EU.

With further development by 2025, Indonesia was officially accepted as a member of BRICS on 6th January 2025 (Shofa, 2025). This milestone marks a new chapter in the nation's approach to navigating the complexities of the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in the context of its long-standing *Bebas Aktif* doctrine to 'dance with the giants' in the Indo-Pacific region. His new affiliation does not signify a shift away from Indonesia's non-aligned principles but rather an evolution of its strategy to actively engage with influential global actors to promote its interests and contribute to regional stability in the dynamic Indo-Pacific landscape. In this regard, Indonesia translates the doctrine of 'Bebas Aktif' into active engagement with two distinct global economic governance structures rather than being passive by not joining any economic regimes as a form of its strategic evolution of the non-alignment doctrine (Juned & Sutiono, 2024).

Indonesia is also pursuing permanent membership in the OECD, which is perceived as a Euro-American economic regime that promotes its economic standards (Maulana & Azis, 2025; Strangio, 2024). We perceive that it will generate further challenges for Indonesia in the coming years to strategically leverage its BRICS membership in its proposal to join the OECD and strengthen its position and inclusive approach in the region. In this regard, while BRICS membership opens opportunities for trade expansion and alternative funding, it will also attract opposition from the US and its allies towards Indonesia. In a recent case, Indonesia's BRICS membership has generated extra tariffs from the Trump administration-led US protectionist policy (Martin, 2025). On the other hand, the finalisation of the long-postponed EUI-CEPA shortly after Indonesia joined BRICS displays the opposing effect of how BRICS membership became its leverage to overcome the deadlock in the EUI-CEPA negotiation (Juned & Sutiono, 2024; Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2025). These two examples represent the challenges Indonesia faces in managing uncertainty amid the different interests and calculations of the related actors.

In this regard, we perceive that the discussion on how Indonesia utilises the BRICS membership as leverage for the OECD membership proposal, as well as navigating the Indo-Pacific's dynamics, cannot be separated from the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN)'s position in the region. In this regard, Indonesia, as a founder and dominant power in ASEAN, has powerful influences on regional organisations due to its population, GDP, and pivotal roles in shaping the official regional perspective of the Indo-Pacific region with the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) (Anwar, 2020). Recently, Indonesia became the first ASEAN country to be accepted into BRICS and was also



proposed for OECD membership (Shofa, 2025). Utilising ASEAN is essential in the power dynamics of the Indo-Pacific as it represents the major powers in the region without a hard alignment with either the US or China (Abbondanza, 2022; Chaisse & Hsieh, 2023). We perceive that Indonesia is leveraging its dominant influence in ASEAN to maximise the potential benefits of its inclusive approach to Indo-Pacific power dynamics and its proposal to join the OECD after its BRICS membership is accepted.

This study investigates how Indonesia utilises its leadership within ASEAN and its newfound membership in BRICS as leverage in the context of the OECD proposal amid the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. It seeks to answer the central research question: How does Indonesia utilise its position in BRICS as a power leverage in its bid for OECD membership amid the US-China rivalry? By adopting a neorealist theoretical lens and employing qualitative research methods, this study analyses Indonesia's diplomatic manoeuvring and its implications for regional stability and the broader international order (the West). This article argues that Indonesia strategically aligns its *Bebas Aktif* principle with ASEAN's inclusive framework, notably the AOIP, to foster diverse economic partnerships, including with BRICS and potentially with the OECD, thereby mitigating the pressure of great power competition. Furthermore, BRICS membership is posited as a tool to enhance Indonesia's bargaining position in its OECD aspirations while seeking to maintain constructive ties with the US and its allies.

Literature Review

Neorealism, or structural realism, posits that the anarchic nature of the international system is the primary determinant of state behaviour (Waltz, 1979). States, as rational and unitary actors, prioritise their survival and security in self-help systems. Power, primarily in material terms, is the key currency, and states constantly assess the balance of power to ensure their security (Mearsheimer, 2001). Although classical realism and neorealism agree on the state of anarchy between states, neorealism emphasises the systemic level of anarchy as the main determinant of state actions.

Neorealism has two distinct variants of offensive and defensive neorealism on perceiving how nation-states should act in an anarchical system (Juned & Sutiono, 2024). Offensive neorealism posits that under the system of anarchy, states should actively pursue relative power as an ultimate guarantee of survival instead of being defensive and waiting for alignment initiation from others. In this regard, this study uses Mearsheimer's offensive neorealism, which suggests that states seek to maximise their relative power to ensure survival, often through alliance formation and institutional participation (Mearsheimer, 2001). This perspective is essential for explaining Indonesia's strategic use of multilateral platforms to enhance its bargaining power amid the Indo-Pacific's shifting power dynamics. These actions are preceded by rational calculations to enhance security in a self-help world.

Indonesia's strategic engagement with multilateral platforms can be understood as a unique case of offensive realism, in which a middle power pursues its interests by initiating a dual alignment strategy for both superpowers rather than passively choosing one of the available alignments offered by the superpowers. By actively participating in



these organisations and using their membership as leverage, Indonesia strategically aimed to amplify its bargaining power over the superpowers and other middle powers of the region. This approach has allowed Indonesia to navigate complex Indo-Pacific power dynamics while preserving its strategic approach based on *Bebas Aktif*. In this regard, Indonesia uses multilateralism as a tool to advance its interests and ensure its security in a competitive international environment, instead of the use of bilateralism, which is not only less effective but also attracts biased perceptions from other actors. This strategic deployment of institutional participation underscores a calculated effort to maximise influence and maintain freedom of action, aligning with the core principles of offensive realism.

Indonesia's inclusive approach can be seen as a power balancing act aimed at mitigating vulnerabilities while maximising opportunities in a polarised Indo-Pacific system dominated by the US and China. Middle powers, such as Indonesia, can engage in power balancing with systemic powers. This involves strategic acts that are proportional to their capabilities and circumstances (Abbondanza, 2022). However, the inclusive approach has a different meaning than a balanced approach, as it focuses more on how Indonesia, as an actor in the regional structure, opens itself to cooperation with diverse actors according to existing circumstances rather than rigidly balancing itself, which would be difficult to calculate precisely.

In a multipolar system, such as the one emerging today, the distribution of power is more diffuse, with several major poles of influence. This can lead to more complex alliance patterns and potentially greater instability as states manoeuvre for advantage (Waltz, 1979). Neorealism suggests that emerging powers such as Indonesia seek to maximise their relative power and security. One way to achieve this is through strategic engagement with international and regional organisations. While neorealism traditionally views international institutions as secondary to power politics and often reflects the interests of great powers, they can also serve as arenas for balancing, signalling, and enhancing a state's influence (Mearsheimer, 1994).

For middle or emerging powers, these institutions can serve as tools to achieve several strategic objectives. First, aggregate power by forming coalitions or blocs: less powerful states can collectively exert greater influence than they can individually exert. Second, the Great Powers were constrained by the norms and rules within institutions. Third, enhancing status and legitimacy by achieving membership and leadership roles in recognised organisations can bolster a state's international standing. Fourth, diversifying dependencies by engaging with multiple platforms reduces reliance on a single source of power, thereby increasing strategic autonomy.

Indonesia's engagement with ASEAN, BRICS, and its pursuit of OECD membership can be interpreted through this neorealist lens as a strategic move to navigate the pressures of the US-China rivalry, enhance its own security and influence, and maintain its "independent and active" foreign policy stance in a system where power considerations remain paramount.



Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative investigation to thoroughly examine Indonesia's strategic engagement with ASEAN, BRICS, and its membership proposal for the OECD within the complex dynamics of the ongoing strategic competition between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific. By employing a qualitative research approach, this study constructs a robust framework for the nuanced exploration of intricate geopolitics and geoeconomics phenomena. This approach is essential for a deep understanding of the underlying motivations and strategic calculations that guide Indonesia's actions in navigating the complexities of a shifting global order. In this regard, Bryman (2016) argues that qualitative methodologies provide rich contextual understanding and in-depth insights into the social and political processes under study, making them relevant for investigating Indonesia's strategic manoeuvring in the Indo-Pacific. This research uses a wide range of qualitative data derived from policy documents, official statements, news coverage, and academic documents to provide a comprehensive understanding of Indonesia's inclusive approach.

This research uses diverse primary and secondary data in its investigation. The primary data sources in this research are relevant official government documents, statements, and reports from international organisations such as ASEAN, BRICS, and OECD. Furthermore, this research employs secondary data sources from academic literature, journal articles, and books, as well as reputable news analysis and commentaries. The data were selected based on their relevance and recency to the research topic. In selecting the data source, source bias and data source reflexivity, as well as the authors' reflexivity, were considered and acknowledged.

Furthermore, this study employs data triangulation from diverse data sources as the foundation for answering the research question and drawing conclusions. Data triangulation is essential to ensure the validity of the data amid potential bias due to data source reflexivity. Triangulation is also essential as the foundation of the analysis and drawing of research conclusions. This approach enables a rigorous examination of Indonesia's balancing act within the broader geopolitical context, facilitating a nuanced analysis of the interplay between Indonesia's strategic interests, regional power structures, and institutionalism (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Findings and Discussion

Indonesia's Foreign Policy: Bebas Aktif and ASEAN Centrality in Indo-Pacific

Bebas Aktif is the principal doctrine of Indonesia's foreign policy since its early independence amid the Cold War. *Bebas* (independent) signifies Indonesia's refusal to align with any global power block during the Cold War, while *Aktif* (active) underscores its commitment to proactively engage in the promotion and protection of world peace and justice (Anwar, 2020; Leifer, 1983). In the contemporary era, the implementation of *Bebas Aktif* has become more relevant and important as Indonesia's strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific has become the centre tenet of the global political



economy, characterised by the rivalry between the US and China (Anwar, 2020; Juned & Sutiono, 2024).

To navigate this power shift, the role of ASEAN, which has been the cornerstone of Indonesia's foreign policy since its establishment, became pivotal. As a founding member and the largest nation in the bloc, Indonesia has an essential leadership role in influencing the rules and norms within the regional organisation, including managing regional affairs and engaging with external powers (Haacke, 2005). In this regard, Indonesia's centrality in ASEAN is also well reflected in the fact that the ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC) is located in Jakarta, Indonesia, and in the formulation of the AOIP, which is also based on the *Bebas Aktif* foreign policy doctrine. This commitment is driven by the understanding that a stable and prosperous Southeast Asia is crucial to Indonesia's security and development.

Under President Joko Widodo's leadership (2014-2024), Indonesia adopted a more proactive and confident stance in its foreign policy engagements, a notable shift, while steadily adhering to its long-standing principle of non-alignment (Connelly, 2014; Irsadanar, 2023). Furthermore, under President Prabowo Subianto from 2024 to the present, Indonesia has tried to expand its influence as an official member of BRICS using the same approach as *Bebas Aktif's* foreign policy. Regardless of the actual evolution of the *Bebas Aktif* implementation, which is becoming more pragmatic, Indonesia remains consistent with this approach, including in the formulation of the AOIP, which has become the ASEAN main principle of inclusivity amid the power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. Through the AOIP, Indonesia, through ASEAN, promotes regional cooperation and stability based on inclusivity and leverages its influential position to foster dialogue and address shared challenges. Indonesia is scaling up this approach beyond ASEAN by actively participating in multilateral forums and constructively contributing to the global discourse. This enhanced international standing allowed Indonesia to play a prominent role in shaping regional norms and contributing to a balanced and inclusive Indo-Pacific order.

The AOIP, adopted in 2019, can be perceived as a manifestation of *Bebas Aktif* in a regional context that promotes inclusivity in the Indo-Pacific amid the tendency of polarisation (ASEAN, 2024). The AOIP emphasises principles such as inclusivity, dialogue, cooperation, and respect for international law, seeking to create an open and rule-based regional architecture to act as a bridge for the contesting powers of the region. It explicitly rejects the vision of a single superpower's dominion over the Indo-Pacific and instead promotes ASEAN-led mechanisms as a fulcrum for regional engagement. In the greater context, the AOIP's emphasis on inclusivity leverages the implementation of Indonesia's *Bebas Aktif* doctrine, allowing Indonesia to proactively engage in strategic alignment with the US and China without the obligation to engage in hard alignment. This framework enables ASEAN members, including Indonesia, to pursue soft economic alignment and diverse partnerships using their inclusivity-based foreign policy as bargaining power.

Using this approach, Indonesia constructively engages with both the US-based IPEF and China's Belt and Road Initiative without choosing sides. This approach is in line with the AOIP's four key areas of cooperation—maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable



development goals, and economic cooperation—that allow engagement with diverse partners (ASEAN, 2019). In this regard, Indonesia has demonstrated its inclusive approach to the Indo-Pacific by remaining cooperative with the tariff demands from the US and finalising the EUI CEPA with the EU following its BRICS acceptance (Juned & Sutiono, 2024). In the larger context, the AOIP, through its four primary areas of cooperation, also offers concrete avenues for collaboration with a wide array of regional and global partners, such as the AMS' dual proposal towards BRICS and OECD.

The Rise of BRICS and Indonesia's Strategic Engagement

The BRICS economic bloc, which was initially coined by Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill, has significantly evolved into a global economic bloc challenging the US-led economic regimes since its formation in 2001 (Goldman Sachs, 2001). It represents the Global South's collective aspiration to reshape aspects of global governance and provide alternative platforms for economic cooperation, financial funding, and forums for political dialogue, often perceived as challenging the Western-dominated international order (Stuenkel, 2020). The recent expansion of BRICS, with the acceptance of Indonesia in January 2025, signals its growing appeal and potential to influence global economic and political landscapes, particularly the emerging powers and the Global South, amid the intensifying trade wars initiated by the US under the Trump administration.

In this regard, Indonesia's decision to apply for permanent membership and its acceptance as a permanent member of BRICS can be analysed as a strategic act that is not only consistent with its *Bebas Aktif* foreign policy but also mandatory to preserve its autonomy in its external relations. Furthermore, from the perspective of neorealism, diversified partnerships are essential to enhance influence by increasing bargaining power with potential partners. In this regard, BRICS offers access to large and growing markets, investment opportunities, and alternative sources of development finance, such as the New Development Bank (NDB), which works as leverage for its members in their discussions with partners both from BRICS and beyond. BRICS also provides Indonesia with a more prominent platform to articulate its interests and contribute to shaping global norms and institutions alongside other major emerging powers. In the context of the US-China rivalry, BRICS membership offers Indonesia another avenue for engagement by using its BRICS-facilitated economic ties with China as leverage in the recent tariff negotiations of the US protectionist approach under the Trump administration, thereby reinforcing its non-aligned stance and increasing its room for manoeuvre (Faridz, 2024). Furthermore, BRICS aligns with Indonesia's long-standing commitment to solidarity and cooperation among developing nations.

Indonesia's inclusive approach to the Indo-Pacific, particularly in light of its acceptance of BRICS, showcases a strategic posture rooted in a neorealist understanding of middle-power behaviour within a multipolar world. Rather than aligning exclusively with any single bloc, Indonesia has strategically positioned itself to maximise its security and influence. This approach, supported by scholarship on middle-power diplomacy (Abbondanza, 2022; Schweller, 1994), underscores the preference for flexible partnerships over rigid alliances, allowing Indonesia to navigate the complexities of the multipolar system with greater agility. Its capacity to cultivate and sustain relationships



across various institutional frameworks highlights the enduring significance and practical application of non-alignment principles in the current landscape of international relations, thus demonstrating a nuanced and adaptable foreign policy strategy.

By joining BRICS, Indonesia adds another layer to its multifaceted diplomatic engagement and maximises its options and influence in a complex global environment. Furthermore, BRICS membership allows Indonesia to have alternative choices in its trading and economic partners in the era of protectionism under the Trump administration. It is essential to ensure the fulfilment of Indonesia's economic interests amid the more protectionist US, which significantly impacts the global economic order. Indonesia's decision to join BRICS, along with the OECD membership proposal, represents a strategic deepening and widening of its foreign policy, as well as a scaling up of the existing alignment. By embracing BRICS, Indonesia aims to enhance its capacity to navigate an increasingly dynamic power shift on a global scale by having a wider range of strategic choices and amplifying its international standing (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2025).

This expansion of partnerships is particularly significant in the context of evolving global economic power dynamics, as BRICS membership offers Indonesia alternative avenues for trade and economic cooperation amid the rising US-China rivalry and protectionism. This is essential to ensure Indonesia's economic resilience and secure its national economic interests through the diversification of its economic relationships in a disrupted global economic order characterised by more protectionist tendencies in major economies. In this regard, BRICS provides Indonesia with a platform to pursue its economic agenda and mitigate the risks associated with overreliance on traditional partners amid a shifting global economic paradigm.

Navigating the US-China Rivalry: Indonesia's Balancing Act through ASEAN and BRICS

The Indo-Pacific region is the epicentre of the strategic competition between the US and China. This rivalry manifests in various domains, including economic influence, technological dominance, military presence and diplomatic outreach (Mastanduno, 2019). Indonesia, located at the maritime crossroads of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, faces significant challenges and opportunities. The challenge lies in avoiding entanglement in great power conflicts that could destabilise the region and compromise its sovereignty. This opportunity lies in leveraging its strategic position and diplomatic acumen to foster a regional order that serves its interests. In this regard, we argue that Indonesia translates *Bebas Aktif* foreign policy into more pragmatic and interest-based foreign policies while maintaining its inclusive approach, as reflected in Anwar's (2020) research regarding AOIP and Juned and Setiono's (2024) EUI CEPA.

We argue that Indonesia employs a multipronged strategy to navigate this conflict. First, by strengthening ASEAN Centrality, Indonesia consistently champions ASEAN as the primary vehicle for regional cooperation and security dialogue. Through the AOIP, Indonesia seeks to ensure that the regional architecture remains inclusive and ASEAN-led, thereby preventing the dominance of any external power (Sukma, 2024). This allows



Indonesia and other ASEAN states to engage with both the US and China on their own terms based on shared regional norms. Second, Maintaining Equidistance: Consistent with *Bebas Aktif*, Indonesia strives to maintain a positive and balanced relationship with Washington and Beijing. It engages with US-led initiatives that align with its interests (e.g., the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), OECD, and tariff negotiations) while also deepening economic ties with China by joining BRICS, its largest trading partner, to scale up existing economic cooperation, such as the Belt Road Initiative and ASEAN Plus Three (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, various statements). Third, using BRICS as a counterweight and diversification tool, Indonesia's BRICS membership provides an additional platform for engagement independent of the US-China axis. From a neo-realist perspective, this diversifies Indonesia's partnerships and reduces its potential vulnerability to superpower pressure. This indicates that Indonesia has options and is not solely reliant on Western institutions or the Chinese economic regime. This can subtly enhance Indonesia's bargaining power with both major powers, as neither would want to see Indonesia drift too far into the other's orbit or become too closely aligned with the alternative bloc.

In the context of ASEAN and in the broader sense, Indonesia's strategic behaviour provides insights into how emerging powers are likely to navigate an increasingly multipolar international system. Rather than seeking exclusive alignment with particular power centres, countries such as Indonesia are pursuing portfolio approaches that maximise their strategic options. This trend has significant implications for both traditional alliances and international institutions in the region. As more countries adopt similar strategies, the international system may become characterised by overlapping and competing institutional frameworks rather than clear-cut alliances.

Leveraging BRICS for OECD Aspirations and Broader Engagement

Indonesia formally expressed its ambition to join the OECD, a group predominantly composed of developed economies committed to democratic principles and market economies (OECD, n.d.). Jakarta has seen OECD membership as a means of accelerating domestic reforms, attracting high-quality investments, and integrating Indonesia into the global economy based on high standards of governance and policy (Government of Indonesia, various statements). Indonesia's acceptance of BRICS does not necessarily cancel its proposal to join the OECD, but it is more of a leverage for Indonesia to enhance its relative power to join the economic group of developed nations.

The pursuit of OECD membership while being a member of BRICS might appear contradictory to some, given the different orientations of the two groups. However, from Indonesia's perspective, these are not mutually exclusive endeavours but rather complementary components of its strategy to enhance its international and economic development. In this regard, there are several strategic advantages for Indonesia to join BRICS in its proposal to join the OECD. First, BRICS as a Bargaining Chip leverages Indonesian negotiations with the OECD. This demonstrates Indonesia's significance as a major emerging economy with diverse economic partnerships. This could potentially expedite its accession process or provide it with a stronger negotiating position on certain



terms, as many OECD members are also keen to maintain the multilateralism approach regardless of the growing unilateralism in the contemporary global political economy.

Second, it signals that Indonesia remains committed to the OECD's economic standards based on those of developed nations. By pursuing OECD membership, Indonesia has signalled its willingness to adhere to the high governance, economic, and environmental standards promoted by the organisation. This can help allay Western partners' concerns regarding their engagement with BRICS, demonstrating that Indonesia remains committed to a rule-based international economic order. It also demonstrates Indonesia's consistent image of an inclusive approach to aligning strategic partnerships with actors outside ASEAN.

Third, Indonesia has tried to maintain respectful relations with the US and its allies. Indonesia's OECD bid is also a clear signal of its intent to maintain and deepen cooperative relationships with the US and its allies, many of whom are key OECD members. This balances its engagement with BRICS and reinforces its *Bebas Aktif* policy of constructively engaging with all major players. However, BRICS membership also adds a challenge for better rewards for Indonesia, as we cannot neglect the potential counterproductive impact of Indonesia joining BRICS. Regardless of its status as a BRICS member, its consistent efforts on its proposal, as well as the strategic political economic leverage of an ASEAN and G20 member, reinforce its clear tendency to be a 'bridge' between the two global economic regimes. As noted by Indonesian officials, the pursuit of OECD membership has received support from key Western countries (AntaraNews, 2024).

This dual engagement strategy allows Indonesia to maximise the benefits of different international platforms, reinforcing its image as a "norm entrepreneur" and responsible global citizen capable of bridging divides and fostering cooperation across different geopolitical and economic groupings. The analysis confirms the central proposition that Indonesia strategically leverages its position within ASEAN and its BRICS membership to navigate the complexities of the US-China rivalry and enhance its geopolitical standing in the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

This study examined how Indonesia leverages its pivotal role in ASEAN and its membership in BRICS to navigate the intensifying US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, guided by its *Bebas Aktif* foreign policy and viewed through a neorealist lens. This study suggests that Indonesia strategically uses these multilateral platforms to enhance its geopolitical standing, maintain strategic autonomy, and pursue national interests to mitigate the ongoing rivalry between the US and China, as well as the power dynamics among other middle powers.

Indonesia's commitment to ASEAN Centrality, particularly through the AOIP, provides a crucial framework for promoting an inclusive regional order. This allows Indonesia and other AMS to engage in diverse economic partnerships, including BRICS and the OECD, without being forced into exclusionary alignment by the nature of systemic anarchy based on the struggle for power. Furthermore, Indonesia's BRICS membership is strategically



utilised as a tool to bolster its bargaining power, particularly in its aspiration to join the OECD, while simultaneously seeking to maintain cooperative and respectful relations with the United States and its allies.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how emerging powers, such as Indonesia, are adapting their strategic foreign policy to an increasingly multipolar Indo-Pacific. In this regard, Indonesia is "dancing with giants" by engaging with superpowers, great powers, and other middle powers via its alignment with global and regional institutions. This approach underscores the enduring relevance of strategic hedging and the innovative use of multilateral diplomacy as tools for asserting influence and safeguarding national interests in contemporary global and regional power dynamics. However, due to the recentness of the issue, it is expected that future research could delve deeper into the specific mechanisms through which BRICS membership translates into tangible bargaining power for Indonesia in international forums. Additionally, comparative analyses with other middle powers such as Japan, Australia, or other AMS in navigating the existing condition could scale up the research topic for a country to draw a certain pattern of how middle powers navigate the evolving dynamics of global politics.

Indonesia's strategic behaviour offers valuable perspectives on how emerging powers are likely to operate within an increasingly multipolar international system. Rather than pursuing exclusive alliances with specific power centres, nations such as Indonesia are adopting portfolio strategies to optimise their strategic flexibility. This trend has profound implications for established alliance systems and international institutions. As more states implement analogous strategies, the international system may evolve into a complex network of overlapping and competing institutional frameworks rather than discrete alliance blocs.

However, Indonesia's inclusive approach requires consistent foreign policy implementation based on careful calculations to avoid negative impacts, such as the extra tariff implementation by the US after Indonesia joined BRICS. We perceive that a similar scenario could also occur in the case of the OECD membership proposal. In this regard, Indonesia should deploy a limited proactive approach based on the principles of *Bebas Aktif* according to existing circumstances and momentum in the region to avoid an over-progressive approach that will create counter-productive results to its actual interests.

Amid the recentness and contemporary dynamics of the Indo-Pacific and the global political economy, the research is limited to examining Indonesia's strategic use of its ASEAN leadership and recent BRICS membership to gain leverage in the OECD proposal amid the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific by mid-2025. Given the dynamic nature of the Indo-Pacific and global political economies, existing research on this specific interaction remains limited. Future research should delve deeper into the evolving power dynamics of the Indo-Pacific and the progress of the OECD membership proposal beyond 2025. Furthermore, the qualitative methodology of this study opens avenues for future quantitative and mixed-method approaches, as well as the application of diverse analytical tools.



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