

ANALYSIS

Indonesia Unprepared as Great Powers Clash in Indo-Pacific

Jakarta is Asia's greatest geopolitical prize. But its foreign-policy reflexes are long outdated.

By **Evan A. Laksmana**, a senior research fellow at the Centre on Asia and Globalisation at the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

AUGUST 26, 2021, 12:47 PM

Indonesia could tilt the strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific. It's the largest archipelagic state in the world and sits at the heart of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The country's growing economic power, tradition of regional leadership, and control over critical sea lanes seem to predestine it to be a strategic fulcrum in the era of U.S.-Chinese great-power competition.

Getting Jakarta to align with either Beijing or Washington therefore seems like a logical step in the unfolding geopolitical drama. Indonesia's every move—from military exercises to vaccine diplomacy—is scrutinized through this lens. Depending on who you ask in Beijing or Washington, Indonesia's choice seems obvious. One offers growth and prosperity, despite bullying the region. The other has built a global network of enduring security relationships, though its commitments are often doubtful, inconsistent, or come with strings attached.

So why won't Indonesia pick one over the other? One reason is deep-seated mistrust. Indonesia does not believe one great power is inherently superior, whether economically, militarily, or morally. After all, throughout Indonesia's strategic history, every great power has undermined Indonesia's domestic order or acted contrary to its strategic interests.

With such experience, Indonesia has developed a vision of regional order fixated on

maintaining stability and legitimacy at home, seeking strategic autonomy, and denying great powers hegemony over the region. These goals underpin an Indonesian foreign policy that is largely negative—it has a list of what it does not want. Although such a strategy of avoidance has served Jakarta well in the past, it is no longer suited to an era of renewed great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific.

You can support *Foreign Policy* by becoming a subscriber.

SUBSCRIBE TODAY

Indonesian governments have long avoided engaging with great powers in any way that could undermine domestic legitimacy. Domestic constituencies—not broader geopolitical interests—often determine which great power matters more. When domestic turmoil requires close support of the Indonesian military, the government might favor engagement with the great power that provides military hardware or training—usually the United States. At other times, when the government sees its legitimacy tied to economic growth, major business groups and state-owned companies successfully push for deals with another great power—usually China.

Indonesia also doesn't want engagement with a great power to limit how it defines and defends its interests. If the United States tries to prod Indonesia to “stand up to China” in the North Natuna Sea, as it has done through backchannel diplomacy in the past, some policymakers might perceive that as infringing on Jakarta's strategic autonomy—even if they quietly agree Beijing is indeed a destabilizing force in the region. In pure reactive mode, they would seek to maintain the façade of strategic autonomy by rehashing the mantra that Indonesia doesn't want to choose.

ASEAN has become an excuse for Indonesia to pass the buck and avoid addressing great-power politics in the Indo-Pacific.

Finally, Indonesia does not want great powers calling the shots in its vicinity. Indonesian policymakers cling to the self-perception their country is a “big nation” and “regional leader.” But they want neither to shoulder the burden of managing the

regional order in a proactive way nor to support other regional powers in doing so. In other words, Indonesia wants regional agenda-setting power minus the responsibility of following through.

We can see these negative visions more clearly in Indonesia's preferred mechanisms to manage regional order. First, Indonesian policymakers are deeply wedded to the idea of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the country's primary tool for strategic engagement. And ASEAN has indeed been useful for Jakarta, despite the bloc's many weaknesses and divisions.

In the past, being embedded in a regional structure reduced tensions with neighbors, giving Indonesia the necessary strategic space to focus on domestic stability. By helping create ASEAN in 1967, Southeast Asia's largest and most populous country signaled strategic self-restraint and showed it would not be a bully. The advent of ASEAN ended Indonesia's disastrous policy of confrontation with Singapore and Malaysia, which had raised regional tensions and severely drained the Indonesian economy.

Over time, ASEAN became a buffer against great-power politics and a strategic amplifier for Indonesian ambitions beyond the region. Coordination among ASEAN members has helped Indonesia deny hegemony in Southeast Asia to any great power during and after much of the Cold War. This was largely done by enmeshing the United States and China into ASEAN's web of regional institutions, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit, and ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus. The hope is for these institutions to draw the major powers into ASEAN's way of doing business, increase their stake in the group, accept ASEAN's agenda over time as their own, and counterbalance each other.

As Indonesia sought to raise its regional and global profile in recent decades, the country has also found it carries more weight with external powers when it leads ASEAN. In other words, Indonesia has been able to use ASEAN as a multiplier for its interests beyond Southeast Asia. Indeed, Beijing and Washington often cite Indonesia's leadership of ASEAN as one of the reasons for their engagement with Jakarta.

But ASEAN has recently taken on another function, closely tied to Indonesia's negative approach to foreign policy. The bloc has become an excuse for Indonesia to pass the

buck and avoid addressing great-power politics in the Indo-Pacific.

Take “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” an official 2019 document originally drafted by Indonesia that rehashes existing goals and familiar areas of cooperation: economic, maritime, technological, and development-related. All are topics ASEAN and its partners have agreed to for the past few decades. Indonesia choosing ASEAN as a platform to articulate an uncontroversial Indo-Pacific vision that studiously avoids greater geostrategic issues shows both Indonesia’s unease as well as its lack of diplomatic, economic, and security resources to independently shape the region. Additionally, as the government of Indonesian President Joko Widodo seems to fear that getting involved in great-power politics could undermine its domestic development agenda, passing the buck to ASEAN allows Indonesia to shift the spotlight even as it continues to claim a leadership role in the Indo-Pacific.

Besides its embrace of ASEAN, Jakarta’s second preferred mechanism for regional order and great-power management is pragmatic equidistance. Indonesia’s strategic outlook is both highly skeptical of overtures by either great power—and, at the same time, deeply pragmatic. On the one hand, Jakarta views all great powers, past and present, in a similar light. Today, that means Indonesia wants neither a Pax Sinica nor a Pax Americana. On the other hand, Jakarta has strived to equally engage the great powers through cooperation in various sectors while being careful not to let one become too close at the expense of the other.

Not choosing sides between the great powers is more than a mantra. It’s an active policy deeply rooted in Indonesia’s “independent and active” doctrine formulated in the 1940s and mandated in its constitution. This approach also complements Indonesia’s reliance on ASEAN in its quest to deny regional hegemony.

But pragmatic equidistance also serves a domestic function. China is now Indonesia’s top trading partner and among the country’s top investors. Interactions between the Chinese Communist Party and major Indonesian political parties have also grown. In

It’s unclear whether China will use its leverage to threaten Indonesia’s strategic interests down the road—but with greater dependence comes greater vulnerability.

Indonesia's oligarchic system, such ties mean key political and economic actors are attuned to Chinese interests. At the same time, close relations with China can paint Widodo as Beijing's lackey and thus be politically damaging, especially given Indonesia's troubled history of communism and violence against the country's ethnic Chinese. Official equidistance helps keep domestic unease regarding growing Chinese influence at bay.

These two mechanisms—ASEAN and pragmatic equidistance—underpin Indonesia's negative vision of regional order. But this vision seems increasingly ill suited to an age of great-power competition.

Routing all foreign policy through ASEAN is no longer sufficient to deal with the Indo-Pacific's strategic flux. With its glacial pace of decision-making and stark differences in its members' interests, ASEAN is of little use when strategic crises and problems—from the South China Sea to Myanmar—require faster reactions or more robust solutions. Instead, Indonesia should seriously consider flexible coalitions for proactive regional order management, perhaps with like-minded middle powers, such as Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea. This can solve the dilemma between overreliance on ASEAN's multilateralism and unease over separate bilateral partnerships.

Similarly, pragmatic equidistance sounds good in theory but has become increasingly untenable. Addressing the nation on Aug. 16, Widodo mentioned almost no foreign-policy issues but emphasized economic recovery and management of the COVID-19 pandemic. For these issues, Indonesia's dependence on China has grown more than policymakers would like to admit. Thus far, Jakarta has compartmentalized its engagement: Vaccine procurement from Beijing does not yet translate into foreign-policy alignment or capitulation on dubious Chinese maritime claims over Indonesian waters. It's unclear whether China will use its growing economic leverage to threaten Indonesia's strategic interests down the road. But with greater dependence comes greater vulnerability.

But rather than finding ways to address Indonesia's strategic dependence and vulnerability, policymakers in Jakarta have been content to stick to their old, passive tactic—and wait for what the great powers might offer. Beijing and Washington are more than happy to oblige, each hoping it can tilt Jakarta. Indonesia, meanwhile, hopes to continue reaping the benefits of playing one great power off the other, with

only ASEAN as a mechanism for maintaining regional order. This is hope, not a strategy.

Evan A. Laksmana is a senior research fellow at the Centre on Asia and Globalisation at the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. Twitter: [@EvanLaksmana](#)

Join the Conversation

Commenting on this and other recent articles is just one benefit of a ***Foreign Policy*** subscription.

Already a subscriber? [Log In](#).

SUBSCRIBE

View 0 Comments

TAGS: CHINA, GEOPOLITICS, INDONESIA, SOUTH CHINA SEA, SOUTHEAST ASIA, UNITED STATES

NEW: EMAIL ALERTS: FP subscribers can now receive alerts when new stories on these topics and regions are published. [Subscribe now](#) | [Sign in](#)

MORE FROM FOREIGN POLICY

China and the Taliban Begin Their Romance

The Taliban Are Breaking Bad

Belarus's Unlikely New Leader

What the Taliban Takeover Means for India

Sign up for Morning Brief

Foreign Policy's flagship daily newsletter with what's coming up around the world today from *Foreign Policy's* newsletter writer **Colm Quinn**.

Enter your email

SIGN UP

- By signing up, I agree to the [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Use](#) and to occasionally receive special offers from Foreign Policy.