
Indonesia's Foreign Policy Trajectory Under President Prabowo Subianto: Balancing Assertiveness and Pragmatism in an Evolving Global Order

Asep Setiawan

Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta, Indonesia

*Email: asep.setiawan@umj.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Indonesia's foreign policy trajectory under the leadership of President Prabowo Subianto presents both opportunities and uncertainties for regional and global diplomacy. Despite Indonesia's established "*bebas aktif*" foreign policy doctrine, Prabowo's prior statements and tenure as Defense Minister suggest a potential shift toward a more assertive and hands-on approach. This study aims to analyze the likely direction of Indonesia's foreign policy during Prabowo's presidency, focusing on regional engagement, relations with major powers, and defense and diplomatic strategies. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the research draws on document analysis of public speeches, policy statements, and historical actions of Prabowo, combined with secondary literature on Indonesian foreign policy. The results indicate that Prabowo is likely to prioritize strengthening Indonesia's role within ASEAN, balancing relations with the United States and China, enhancing defense capabilities, and positioning Indonesia as an influential middle power. However, domestic constraints and limited hard power resources are expected to temper ambitious initiatives. The study implies that Prabowo's foreign policy will blend nationalist rhetoric with pragmatic engagement, aiming to expand Indonesia's strategic autonomy and global influence amid a shifting geopolitical landscape.

Keywords: Indonesia, foreign policy, Prabowo Subianto, ASEAN, great power competition, middle power diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

The inauguration of Prabowo Subianto as Indonesia's eighth president on October 20, 2024, marked a potential inflection point for the country's foreign policy orientation. As a former general and defense minister with a reputation for nationalist rhetoric, Prabowo's ascension to the presidency has sparked speculation about a more assertive Indonesian approach on the global stage (Jakartapost.com and Hema Nadarajah, Alberto Iskandar, Sasha Lee, 2024). Indonesia, as the world's third-largest democracy and a pivotal member of *ASEAN*, plays a crucial role in Southeast Asian geopolitics and the broader Indo-Pacific region (Julia Lau, 2024). The country's foreign policy choices under Prabowo will have significant implications not only for Indonesia's national interests but also for regional stability and the evolving balance of power between the United States and China (Salma, 2024). As such, understanding the potential shifts and continuities in Indonesia's diplomatic approach is vital for policymakers, scholars, and stakeholders across the Indo-Pacific.

Previous studies have examined Indonesia's foreign policy under nationalist leaders. For example, Harsono (2020) analyzed Indonesia's foreign policy under President Jokowi, emphasizing economic diplomacy and *ASEAN*-centered multilateralism but did not account for a more assertive defense-oriented approach. Similarly, Putra and Widodo (2022) explored Indonesia's role as a middle power in balancing US-China competition, yet their study focused on historical trends rather than projecting policy shifts under new leadership. These studies provide foundational insights but leave a gap in understanding the likely trajectory of Indonesia's foreign policy under Prabowo, whose military

background and early presidential actions suggest a unique blend of nationalist assertiveness and pragmatic diplomacy.

This study draws on a comprehensive analysis of Prabowo's past statements, his tenure as Defense Minister, early presidential actions, and expert assessments to project Indonesia's foreign policy direction. The article is structured around key themes and challenges that are likely to shape Indonesia's international engagement under the new administration. These include the evolution of Indonesia's "*bebas aktif*" foreign policy doctrine, Indonesia's role within *ASEAN* and regional diplomacy, navigating great power competition between the US and China, defense policy and military modernization efforts, economic diplomacy and trade relations, and Indonesia's aspirations as a middle power and global actor.

This study aims to analyze and project the likely trajectory of Indonesia's foreign policy under Prabowo's leadership, examining how the new administration may navigate key regional and global challenges while balancing domestic imperatives. By examining these critical areas, this article aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the opportunities and constraints that will influence Indonesia's foreign policy trajectory under President Prabowo Subianto. The study offers practical benefits for policymakers in anticipating strategic priorities, for scholars in contributing to contemporary foreign policy literature, and for stakeholders assessing Indonesia's role in regional stability and global affairs.

METHOD

This study employs a neo-classical realist theoretical framework to analyze Indonesia's foreign policy under Prabowo. Neo-classical realism posits that a state's foreign policy is shaped by both systemic factors (international structure and relative power distribution) and unit-level variables (domestic politics, leader perceptions, and state-society relations) (Yang, Y., Machmudi, Y., & Rofii, M. S., 2023). This approach allows for a comprehensive examination of how Prabowo's leadership style and domestic political considerations may interact with regional and global dynamics to influence Indonesia's international behavior.

The research methodology combines qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources with expert interviews and comparative historical analysis. Primary sources include Prabowo's speeches, policy statements, and official government documents. Secondary sources encompass academic literature, think tank reports, and media analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Evolution of Indonesia's "Free and Active" Foreign Policy

Indonesia's foreign policy has long been anchored in the principle of *bebas-aktif* (free and active), a doctrine introduced by Mohammad Hatta in 1948. This doctrine has guided Indonesia's approach to international relations by emphasizing strategic autonomy and non-alignment while actively engaging in international forums to promote peace, justice, and development (Kilic, 2024). Rooted in Indonesia's post-colonial aspirations, *bebas-aktif* reflects a vision of balancing sovereignty with a proactive role in global and regional affairs.

Under President Joko Widodo (Jokowi), Indonesia's foreign policy adopted a pragmatic and economically driven approach. Jokowi's administration prioritized domestic economic growth through enhanced trade relations, infrastructure development, and foreign investment. This marked a shift from the more multilateral and global-oriented diplomacy of his predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, to a focus on practical economic benefits. For instance, Jokowi's "Global Maritime Fulcrum" initiative

sought to position Indonesia as a key player in the Indo-Pacific by leveraging its strategic maritime position (Connelly, 2020). While the bebas-aktif principle continued to underpin Indonesia's foreign policy, Jokowi's economic diplomacy often overshadowed traditional diplomatic initiatives.

Jokowi's administration also focused on ASEAN as a platform to assert Indonesia's leadership in regional stability. His government actively engaged in mediating disputes, such as those in the South China Sea, and promoting regional economic integration (Dewi & McRae, 2022). However, critics argue that the administration's inward focus limited its contributions to broader global issues, such as climate change and global security challenges (Weatherbee, 2019). Jokowi's prioritization of infrastructure diplomacy, often involving China through the Belt and Road Initiative, demonstrated a pragmatic balancing act between maintaining Indonesia's autonomy and securing much-needed foreign investment.

Prabowo's ascension to the presidency signals a potential shift towards a more assertive interpretation of the "free and active" doctrine. During his presidential campaign and early presidency, Prabowo has emphasized the need for Indonesia to play a more prominent role in shaping regional and global affairs (Julia Lau, 2024). This suggests a return to a more activist foreign policy reminiscent of Indonesia's approach under previous administrations like that of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

With Prabowo Subianto assuming the presidency, Indonesia's foreign policy is expected to retain the bebas-aktif doctrine while addressing new challenges and priorities. Prabowo's tenure will likely emphasize continuity in maintaining Indonesia's strategic autonomy, particularly in an increasingly polarized global landscape. However, his leadership style and policy priorities suggest potential shifts in emphasis.

Prabowo is likely to maintain Jokowi's focus on economic diplomacy, with a renewed emphasis on ensuring that foreign investments align with national interests. His military background may also shape a more assertive stance in security and defense diplomacy, especially concerning territorial sovereignty in the South China Sea and counterterrorism efforts (Weatherbee, 2023). Prabowo's administration may also enhance Indonesia's role in multilateral platforms like ASEAN and the G20, aiming to solidify Indonesia's leadership in regional and global governance.

In addition, Prabowo has expressed a commitment to diversifying Indonesia's strategic partnerships. While maintaining close economic ties with China, his government is likely to strengthen relations with other major powers such as the United States, Japan, and India, to reduce dependency on any single partner (Laksmana, 2021). This approach aligns with the bebas-aktif principle, allowing Indonesia to navigate complex global dynamics without compromising its independence.

However, it is important to note that the core principles of "bebas-aktif" are likely to remain intact. Prabowo has repeatedly affirmed his commitment to this foundational doctrine, stating that Indonesia will maintain its strategic autonomy while actively contributing to global peace and stability (Julia Lau, 2024). The key difference lies in the style and intensity of engagement, with Prabowo expected to take a more hands-on approach to diplomacy and seek opportunities to elevate Indonesia's international profile.

Indonesia's Role within ASEAN and Regional Diplomacy

ASEAN has traditionally been a cornerstone of Indonesian foreign policy, with the country playing a leading role in shaping the organization's agenda and promoting regional integration (indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu). Under Prabowo, Indonesia is likely to continue prioritizing

ASEAN as a key platform for regional diplomacy, but with a renewed focus on strengthening the organization's cohesion and effectiveness.

One area where Prabowo may seek to assert Indonesian leadership within ASEAN is in addressing regional security challenges, particularly the ongoing crisis in Myanmar and territorial disputes in the South China Sea (Abdurofiq, A., Putra, G. R. A., & Yunus, N. R., 2024). As Defense Minister, Prabowo demonstrated a willingness to engage on these issues, and as President, he may push for more robust ASEAN-led initiatives to promote stability and conflict resolution.

Additionally, Prabowo has expressed interest in enhancing ASEAN's economic integration and collective bargaining power on the global stage. This could involve efforts to accelerate the implementation of the ASEAN Economic Community blueprint and strengthen the organization's negotiating position in trade talks with major partners like China, the US, and the European Union.

However, Prabowo's more assertive approach within ASEAN may also face challenges. Some member states may be wary of perceived Indonesian dominance, and divergent national interests could complicate efforts to forge consensus on sensitive issues. Balancing Indonesia's leadership ambitions with the need to maintain ASEAN unity and centrality will be a key challenge for Prabowo's regional diplomacy.

Navigating Great Power Competition: Balancing US and China Relations

One of the most critical foreign policy challenges facing Indonesia under Prabowo is navigating the intensifying strategic competition between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific. As Defense Minister, Prabowo demonstrated a pragmatic approach to balancing relations with both powers, seeking to maximize benefits for Indonesia while avoiding entanglement in their rivalries.

With regard to China, Prabowo is likely to continue Indonesia's policy of economic engagement while maintaining a firm stance on territorial integrity and maritime rights in the North Natuna Sea. This approach reflects a pragmatic balancing act, where economic benefits are pursued without compromising Indonesia's sovereignty. The North Natuna Sea, a region of strategic importance and rich natural resources, has been a focal point in Indonesia-China relations due to overlapping claims and Beijing's expansive assertions in the South China Sea. Indonesia, while not a claimant state in the South China Sea disputes, has consistently reaffirmed its sovereignty over the North Natuna Sea, rejecting China's claims under the nine-dash line.

In line with this policy, Prabowo may seek to leverage China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments to support Indonesia's infrastructure development goals. The BRI has played a significant role in financing critical projects, such as the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway. Such investments are expected to continue under Prabowo, particularly in sectors such as energy, transportation, and digital infrastructure. However, to avoid excessive dependence on Beijing, Prabowo is likely to diversify economic partnerships. This diversification may involve strengthening ties with countries like the United States, Japan, and India, which offer alternative investment and trade opportunities.

Recent developments also underline the complexity of Indonesia-China relations. In 2024, Indonesia and China signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to enhance cooperation in areas near the Natuna Islands. While the agreement focuses on joint maritime development, including fisheries and energy exploration, Indonesia has firmly maintained that it does not recognize China's territorial claims in the region (Kilic, 2024; Connelly, 2020). Critics have argued that such agreements, while economically beneficial, could risk legitimizing China's claims, potentially undermining Indonesia's sovereignty (Weatherbee, 2019).

In relations with the United States, Prabowo Subianto is expected to build on the progress made during his tenure as Indonesia's Defense Minister, when he played a pivotal role in strengthening military-to-military ties and securing arms deals. His tenure was marked by significant advancements, including discussions on acquiring F-15EX fighter jets to modernize Indonesia's defense capabilities and enhance its strategic deterrence. These initiatives reflected Indonesia's commitment to bolstering its defense posture while fostering deeper ties with the United States (RFA, 2022).

As President, Prabowo is likely to expand strategic cooperation with the United States, with a particular focus on maritime security and counterterrorism. The United States and Indonesia share mutual concerns over regional stability, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, where maritime disputes and non-traditional security threats such as piracy and terrorism remain pressing issues. Prabowo's leadership may see an increase in joint military exercises, capacity-building programs, and enhanced intelligence sharing, building on existing frameworks such as the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercises (U.S. State Department, 2024).

However, Prabowo is expected to approach this partnership with caution, maintaining Indonesia's traditional non-aligned stance. This pragmatic approach reflects Indonesia's long-standing commitment to strategic autonomy under its *bebas-aktif* (free and active) foreign policy doctrine. While fostering ties with the United States, Prabowo is likely to continue engaging with other major powers, such as China, ensuring that Indonesia does not overly align with any single bloc (The Diplomat, 2024).

Balancing relations with Washington and Beijing remains crucial for Indonesia's regional strategy. Prabowo's administration will likely navigate this delicate balance by pursuing strategic partnerships with a range of global actors, including Japan, India, and ASEAN neighbors, to diversify its security and economic ties while preserving its independence in global affairs.

A key challenge for Prabowo will be managing potential tensions between Indonesia's economic interests with China and its security cooperation with the US. This balancing act may require deft diplomacy and strategic ambiguity on certain issues to avoid alienating either power while preserving Indonesia's autonomy.

Defense Policy and Military Modernization

Given Prabowo's military background and focus on national security, defense policy and military modernization are likely to be priorities for his administration. As Defense Minister, Prabowo initiated efforts to upgrade Indonesia's military capabilities, including pursuing high-profile arms acquisitions and emphasizing the development of a domestic defense industry.

As President, Prabowo is expected to accelerate these modernization efforts, potentially increasing defense spending and seeking to enhance Indonesia's naval and air force capabilities. This focus on military modernization aligns with Prabowo's vision of Indonesia as a respected regional power capable of defending its vast archipelagic territory.

However, ambitious defense plans may face budgetary constraints, particularly given competing domestic priorities and economic challenges. Prabowo will need to balance military modernization goals with other national development objectives, potentially leading to a more gradual and targeted approach to defense investments.

In terms of defense diplomacy, Prabowo is likely to continue pursuing a diversified approach, maintaining partnerships with traditional suppliers like Russia and the US while also exploring cooperation with emerging players like South Korea and Turkey. This strategy aims to enhance Indonesia's strategic autonomy and reduce dependence on any single arms supplier.

Economic Diplomacy and Trade Relations

While Prabowo's foreign policy approach may place greater emphasis on security and strategic issues compared to his predecessor, economic diplomacy will remain a crucial component of Indonesia's international engagement. As the world's 16th largest economy with ambitions for continued growth, Indonesia under Prabowo is likely to pursue an active economic diplomacy agenda focused on attracting investment, expanding trade relationships, and securing technology transfers.

One area of potential focus is leveraging Indonesia's membership in various economic forums and trade agreements to advance national interests. This may include a more proactive stance within ASEAN economic initiatives, as well as efforts to maximize benefits from agreements like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Prabowo has also signaled interest in expanding Indonesia's economic partnerships beyond traditional markets, with a particular focus on strengthening ties with emerging economies in Africa, Latin America, and Central Asia. This diversification strategy aims to reduce Indonesia's economic vulnerability to shifts in major power dynamics and global market fluctuations.

However, Prabowo's economic diplomacy may face challenges in balancing openness to foreign investment with nationalist sentiments and protectionist impulses within Indonesia. His administration will need to navigate these competing pressures while pursuing policies that promote sustainable economic growth and technological advancement.

Indonesia's Middle Power Aspirations and Global Engagement

Under President Prabowo Subianto's leadership, Indonesia is poised to adopt a more assertive global posture, aiming to solidify its status as an influential middle power capable of shaping international outcomes. This ambition aligns with Indonesia's historical engagement in multilateral forums such as the G20 and its active participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations. Prabowo's administration is expected to leverage these platforms to enhance Indonesia's diplomatic influence and contribute to global governance.

A critical area for Indonesia's expanded global engagement under Prabowo is climate diplomacy. As one of the world's largest greenhouse gas emitters and a nation highly susceptible to the adverse effects of climate change, Indonesia's proactive involvement in international climate negotiations is imperative. Prabowo's government has signaled a commitment to this cause. Notably, Indonesia plans to develop 75 gigawatts of renewable energy over the next 15 years, aiming for carbon neutrality by 2060 (Reuters, 2024). This initiative underscores Indonesia's dedication to sustainable development and its readiness to assume a leadership role in global climate efforts.

Furthermore, Prabowo's administration has demonstrated a willingness to engage in international climate forums. During his current foreign tour, the Indonesian leader has an opportunity to advocate for the interests of both his own country and the developing world as a whole Reuters. This engagement reflects Indonesia's strategic intent to influence global climate policies and advocate for the interests of developing nations.

Under Prabowo's leadership, Indonesia is expected to pursue a more ambitious global role, emphasizing its position as a middle power with the capacity to influence international outcomes. Climate diplomacy stands out as a focal point in this strategy, with Indonesia actively participating in international negotiations and implementing substantial domestic initiatives to address climate change.

This approach not only enhances Indonesia's global standing but also contributes to the broader international effort to combat climate change.

Additionally, Prabowo has expressed interest in positioning Indonesia as a mediator in global conflicts, building on the country's non-aligned status and diverse religious and cultural makeup. This could involve more active engagement in peace processes in regions like the Middle East or efforts to promote dialogue between major powers during periods of tension.

However, realizing these middle power ambitions will require careful allocation of diplomatic resources and strategic prioritization. Indonesia's global engagement under Prabowo will need to balance aspirational goals with pragmatic considerations of the country's capabilities and core national interests.

Challenges and Constraints

Under Prabowo Subianto's leadership, Indonesia's foreign policy is expected to adopt a more assertive and globally oriented approach, signaling ambitions to enhance its role as a middle power. However, several domestic and international factors may constrain Indonesia's ability to fully realize these ambitions. Chief among these are pressing domestic priorities such as economic development, poverty reduction, and infrastructure improvements. With significant resources and political attention devoted to addressing these issues, Indonesia's capacity to expand its international engagement may face limitations. Balancing domestic imperatives with global aspirations will be a critical challenge for Prabowo's administration.

Institutional capacity also poses a potential constraint on Indonesia's foreign policy ambitions. To support a more active global role, Indonesia's foreign policy apparatus may require significant strengthening and modernization. Enhancing the capacity of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, particularly in areas like strategic analysis, multilateral diplomacy, and crisis response, will be essential to align institutional capabilities with foreign policy goals. A more professional and agile diplomatic corps could enable Indonesia to better navigate the complexities of international relations (Weatherbee, 2019).

In the regional context, an overly assertive foreign policy could generate sensitivities among ASEAN neighbors. As a founding member of ASEAN, Indonesia's leadership is vital for maintaining regional unity and stability. However, a perceived shift toward unilateralism or excessive assertiveness may provoke wariness among other member states, potentially complicating regional cooperation efforts. Indonesia must strike a balance between asserting its influence and respecting the principle of consensus that underpins ASEAN diplomacy (Connelly, 2020).

On the global stage, the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China presents another significant challenge. While Indonesia seeks to maintain strategic autonomy under the *bebas-aktif* (free and active) doctrine, great power competition increasingly pressures smaller states to take sides on key issues. Navigating this dynamic will require Prabowo's administration to exercise diplomatic finesse, ensuring that Indonesia remains a credible and neutral actor while safeguarding its national interests (Dewi & McRae, 2022).

Economic vulnerabilities further complicate Indonesia's foreign policy landscape. As an economy heavily reliant on commodity exports, Indonesia remains sensitive to global market fluctuations and external shocks. These vulnerabilities may constrain its ability to pursue fully independent foreign policy choices, as economic stability often dictates the scope and direction of

diplomatic efforts. Diversifying the economy and reducing reliance on volatile commodity markets could strengthen Indonesia's foreign policy independence over the long term (Laksmana, 2021).

Navigating these challenges will require careful calibration of Indonesia's diplomatic approach under Prabowo. Balancing assertiveness with pragmatism and long-term strategic thinking will be critical for sustaining Indonesia's global ambitions. By addressing institutional weaknesses, fostering regional trust, and adapting to evolving great power dynamics, Indonesia can position itself as an influential and respected actor in the international arena.

CONCLUSION

Indonesia's foreign policy under President Prabowo Subianto is likely to be characterized by a more assertive and hands-on approach, seeking to elevate the country's role as an influential middle power while adhering to the foundational "*bebas aktif*" doctrine. Key areas of focus are expected to include strengthening Indonesia's position within *ASEAN*, carefully balancing relations with major powers, boosting defense capabilities, and expanding global engagement on issues like climate change and conflict mediation. However, the realization of these foreign policy ambitions will be tempered by domestic priorities, institutional constraints, and the complex geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific. Prabowo's administration will need to navigate a delicate balance between nationalist rhetoric and pragmatic engagement, leveraging Indonesia's strategic assets while avoiding overreach or entanglement in great power rivalries. As Indonesia continues to rise as a key player in the evolving global order, the success of Prabowo's foreign policy will depend on his ability to articulate a clear strategic vision, build domestic support for international initiatives, and deftly manage relationships with both regional partners and global powers. The coming years will reveal whether Indonesia under Prabowo can translate its middle power aspirations into tangible diplomatic achievements and enhanced global influence.

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