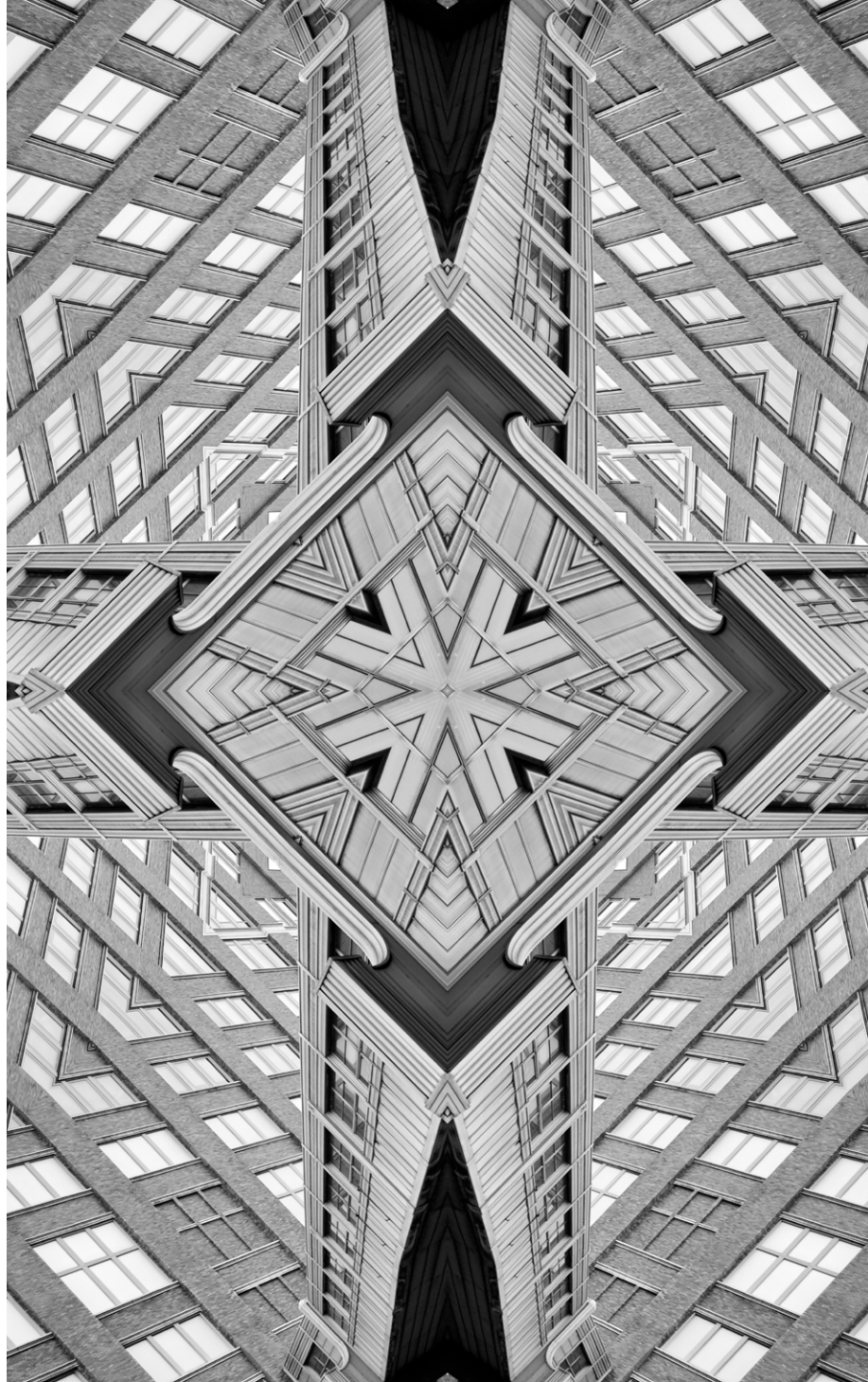


Issue

Brief

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Indonesia's Triumphs and Limitations as It Stakes Claim to Leadership in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Since the creation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967, Indonesia has endeavoured to play a leading role in shaping Southeast Asia's regional security architecture; this continues to be true amidst the more recent shifts taking place in the global geopolitical landscape. Accordingly, the nature of Jakarta's contributions towards Southeast Asian security reflects the dynamics of its national foreign policy decision-making. As Indonesia's domestic political configurations evolve, so do its perceptions of the region's security. This brief seeks to understand the evolution of Indonesia's role in Southeast Asia, its successes, and the constraints that impede its appropriation of a greater role.

As a growing Asian middle power, Indonesia plays a significant role in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and towards the security of the region. Since ASEAN's creation in 1967, Indonesia has been quietly demonstrating its leadership within the bloc. It does so with a certain degree of credibility, having the largest economy and population in the region and possessing formidable military capabilities as well. Adding heft to its geopolitical significance not only in Southeast Asia, but in the greater Indo-Pacific, is its strategic geographical position at the intersection of the Indian and Pacific Oceans and proximity to the Strait of Malacca.

To be sure, Indonesia's role in securing the Southeast Asian region has evolved over time, based on both, the shifts in its national foreign policy decision-making and its vision for the region. Throughout the 20th century, Indonesia's commitment to non-alignment under the administrations of Ahmed Sukarno and Haji Mohammad Suharto served as impetus for its desire to shape ASEAN and Southeast Asia in a particular manner that excluded entanglements with extra-regional powers. Jakarta recalibrated its foreign policy in the 21st century, from a non-aligned approach to a largely multi-aligned posture, as it realised the necessity of engaging the power dynamics of current geopolitics to maximise its ambitions as a middle power and regional leader.

This brief analyses the manner in which Indonesia has demonstrated its leadership in ASEAN and the larger security architecture of Southeast Asia since 1967. It highlights three key themes. The first section evaluates the role of Indonesia, under the leadership of former President Suharto, in shaping ASEAN's overall strategic direction. The next two sections will centre on Indonesia's contemporary contributions under the current administration of President Joko Widodo. Accordingly, two areas will be underlined: Indonesia's role in forging the *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (AOIP), and its attempts to harness a more robust intra-Southeast Asian maritime security cooperation. The brief concludes by outlining the challenges that continue to impede Indonesia's desire to solidify its leadership role in Southeast Asia.

“Indonesia's role in securing Southeast Asia has evolved over time, based on shifts in its foreign policy and its vision for the region.”

Non-Alignment and Indonesia's Role in ASEAN's Direction in the 20th Century

Upon Indonesia's proclamation of independence from Dutch colonial rule in 1945, its first vice president, Mohammad Hatta characterised Indonesian foreign policy as *bebas aktif*, which translates to being "free and active".¹ While this conceptualisation remains relevant, the context in which it was incorporated during the 20th century is different from how it is utilised today. Drawing from anti-colonial and anti-imperialist ideologies, both Sukarno and Suharto sought to forge a path of non-alignment vis-à-vis the great powers, and Indonesia became a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement. With the rise of the Suharto regime in the late 1960s, Indonesia sought to play a bigger role in regional affairs to harness a collective and organic front amid the intensifying power competition between the United States (US) and the Soviet Union.

This perception in Jakarta served as a prerequisite for the eventual creation of ASEAN. Indonesia's realisation of the need for an organisation that is Southeast Asia-centric was crucial to pushing effective intra-regional cooperation amid the structural geopolitical turbulence of that time. Jakarta's desire for a regional body rested on its perceived need to forge stable relations with the non-communist states of Southeast Asia while reducing the region's dependency on extra-regional powers. However, Jakarta faced challenges in pushing its aim of institutional intra-regional cooperation: the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) and the MAPHILINDO between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, were obstructed by rivalries between the members.²

Upon the normalisation of ties between the Philippines and Malaysia, and Indonesia and Malaysia in 1966, the convergence of their interests, in addition to those of Singapore and Thailand, led to the creation of ASEAN in 1967 with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration in Bangkok.³ Throughout the remaining decades of the 20th century, Indonesia sought to contribute to regional affairs by attempting to provide ASEAN with direction that reflected its *bebas aktif* approach, coupled with its adherence to anti-communist and non-aligned principles. Indonesian foreign policy during this period also capitalised on a policy of self-restraint to signal its intentions for peace in Southeast Asia.

ASEAN's headquarters and secretariat were set up in Jakarta, and Indonesia hosted the first ASEAN Summit in 1976. This highly relevant and equally symbolic event witnessed the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), in which Indonesia played a large role.⁴ However, as a reflection of its desire to limit great-power competition from spilling over to Southeast Asia and to maximise its role as a regional leader, Indonesia initially objected to attempts by Singapore and Thailand during the Singapore summit to invite the five

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permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)^a to sign the TAC.⁵

Indonesia also led the proposal for the creation of the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (SEANWFZ) in 1983, which sought to regulate assertive manoeuvres of the great powers in the region. However, due to the diverse interests of ASEAN members, Indonesia faced challenges in achieving a collective ASEAN approach towards promoting the SEANWFZ due to Washington's rejection of such a policy.^b Thus, the divergences within the bloc resulted in the fragility of the SEANWFZ in the face of great-power politics.

During this period, Indonesia sought to demonstrate its role in the region by acting as a mediator in the context of the Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict (1979-1991). To Indonesia's frustration, the crisis saw the involvement of extra-regional powers such as the Soviet Union and China.⁶ For fear of being marginalised, Indonesia actively participated in managing the crisis by contributing towards the March 1980 Kuantan statement, which highlighted a practical understanding of each party's sensitivities and sought to forward an inclusive and organic process for conciliation.⁷ Additionally, Indonesia was able to spearhead negotiations with both Phnom Penh and Hanoi, and it served as co-chair at the International Conference on Cambodia in 1991 which would eventually conclude the conflict.⁸

Towards the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, calls were made from within the bloc to initiate an ASEAN-led security dialogue that can serve as a platform for states across Asia and the Pacific. This coincided with the eventual expansion of ASEAN membership. However, Indonesia was initially reluctant to accommodate such views given its wariness towards more vehement extra-regional involvement in Southeast Asia. Thus, the 1991 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) failed to reach a consensus on the subject of spearheading such a security dialogue framework. As Jakarta began to acknowledge the threat posed by a rising and unchecked China, it consequently supported the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994, with an emphasis on the logic of 'balance of power'.⁹

As the 20th century came to a close, Indonesia's domestic political instability and the economic fallout of the Asian Financial Crisis impacted its foreign policy and, consequently, its role in Southeast Asia.

a The five permanent members of the UNSC during this period were the US, the Soviet Union, China, the United Kingdom, and France.

b Washington had close ties with Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand. While the latter two are US treaty allies, Singapore supported a more active balancing role from Washington in the region.

Multi-Alignment and Indonesia's Bid for Greater ASEAN Role in the Indo-Pacific

In the late 1990s, Indonesia's economy was critically impacted by the fallout of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and domestic unrest due to calls for government reforms. The fall of Suharto in 1998 and the rise of democratic reforms and movements in the country provided a reinvigorated opportunity for Jakarta to reclaim its leading role in Southeast Asian affairs. As the world entered the 21st century, Indonesia's economy managed to sustain notable growth rates over the years, until the massive disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in early 2020.¹⁰ The country, nonetheless, has maintained its material preponderance in Southeast Asia by possessing the largest economy (in terms of gross domestic product) and population, and also because of its military capability.

The 21st century also brought with it new fluctuations in the overarching international distribution of power. The steady rise of China's material capabilities became an increasingly critical development, particularly in Southeast Asia given the region's proximity to Beijing. To be sure, Indonesia was against the idea of accommodating extra-regional power competition in Southeast Asia by going against consensus vis-à-vis related proposals within ASEAN. However, the dynamics of 21st-century geopolitics and the domestic-level shifts taking place in Indonesia catalysed a recalibrated focus in Jakarta's foreign policy approach towards ASEAN and the Southeast Asian region.

Indonesia's foreign policy throughout the 21st century can be understood based on three interrelated objectives. The first lies in harnessing ASEAN's intraregional cooperation; the second delves into enhancing the bloc's participation throughout Asia; and the third centres on strengthening Indonesia's role as a key middle power of the continent. Consequently, a post-Suharto Indonesia has also been steadily embracing the realities of the contemporary distribution of power through multi-alignment, rather than non-alignment. Such policy shifts have also shaped Indonesia's role in ASEAN and towards Southeast Asian security.

Indonesia has embraced a multi-aligned foreign policy vision to complement its desire to maximise its position as an Asian middle power. Unlike its non-aligned approach in the past, Indonesia realises the need to be more proactive, rather than reactive, in engaging within the churning power dynamics of Asia to enhance its own credentials as a middle power. Accordingly, throughout the 21st century, Indonesia has enhanced strategic relations with key powers like the US, Russia, China, Japan, and India. At the core of its multi-aligned strategy has been to tread an independent foreign policy approach that will not constrain its manoeuvrability in Southeast Asia and the greater continent.

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In parallel to this reoriented foreign policy, Indonesia has sought to shape ASEAN's trajectory in a way that reflects its own strategic vision. The next two sections of this brief will highlight two contemporary and significant contributions of Indonesia towards ASEAN: spearheading ASEAN's incorporation of the Indo-Pacific construct, and promoting intra-Southeast Asian maritime security cooperation. Along with these pivotal contributions, the following sections will also highlight the challenges that Indonesia continues to face given the nature of Southeast Asian affairs.

“Indonesia has embraced a multi-aligned foreign policy vision to complement its desire to maximise its position as an Asian middle power.”

The AOIP as an Indonesian Endeavour

When President Joko Widodo rose to power in 2014, he emphasised the need to bolster Indonesia's maritime security capabilities and project Indonesia as a regional maritime power by drawing on its strategic geography and growing material capabilities. Being positioned at the crossroads of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Indonesia, under the leadership of Widodo, is espousing its geopolitical significance as the *poros maritim dunia* (Global Maritime Fulcrum).

Drawing on such a vision, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi unveiled Indonesia's Indo-Pacific cooperation concept in early May 2018.¹¹ This strategy is centred on an inclusive and open approach that revolves around adherence to international law and the centrality of ASEAN. The unveiling in 2018 was significant, given that Indonesia already presented a rather articulate vision for the Indo-Pacific weeks earlier, which was catalysed by the renaming of the US Pacific Command to the Indo-Pacific Command on May 30 of the same year.

Eventually, with the rise of the Indo-Pacific construct, Indonesia saw this as an opportunity to solidify its regional position and demonstrate its leadership in Southeast Asia by skilfully steering ASEAN towards incorporating the Indo-Pacific in its strategic calculus. Indonesia has thus constantly endeavoured to socialise its vision for the Indo-Pacific among other ASEAN members. At the 13th East Asia Summit (EAS) and the 33rd ASEAN Summit in 2018, for instance, Indonesia emphasised the relevance of the Indian and Pacific Oceans as a "single geostrategic theatre". It stressed on the need for ASEAN to collectively craft a shared strategy for the Indo-Pacific that represents an unwavering adherence to inclusive, rules-based, and open engagements that also promote the utilisation of ASEAN-led norms.¹²

A number of ASEAN members, however, remained wary of using the Indo-Pacific as part of their strategic lexicon due to the perceived potential geopolitical implications brought by the intensifying US-China power competition. Indonesia saw this as another opportunity to carve out a different dimension on 'Indo-Pacific cooperation with ASEAN characteristics'. Along with Jakarta's attempt to individually engage and orient its Southeast Asian neighbours, it also hosted a high-level consultation on the Indo-Pacific in 2019 with the participation of 18 EAS members, including the US, India, and China.¹³ Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla also clarified that ASEAN's Indo-Pacific vision will not be aimed at replacing existing mechanisms for engagement in the region; rather, it will serve as an added value because of its emphasis on positive sum cooperation, inclusivity, and respect for international law.¹⁴

The AOIP as an Indonesian Endeavour

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) was forged at the 34th ASEAN Summit in June 2019. Representing Indonesia's vision of multi-alignment and political independence, the AOIP centred on the importance of inclusivity among all global powers, which can be understood given there was no mention of any 'power' in the document. Accordingly, the AOIP does not use terms such as 'free' to describe its Indo-Pacific vision, given its negative interpretation by Beijing; to balance with US interest, the AOIP also highlights the need to uphold freedom of navigation and maintain the rules-based order.¹⁵ In conclusion, while the AOIP remains a collective ASEAN initiative, the leadership role displayed by Indonesia in formulating its foundations and orienting other ASEAN members is undeniable.

“The Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific centres on the importance of inclusivity among all global powers.”

Indonesia and the Search for Intra-SEA Maritime Security Cooperation

As mentioned earlier, Widodo's rise to power was coupled with the desire to enhance Indonesia's maritime security capabilities. The Global Maritime Fulcrum represents Jakarta's endeavour to present itself as a maritime power with a formidable navy. However, given the geopolitical realities of Southeast Asia's maritime domain, Indonesia continues to face certain security challenges that inhibit its desire to safeguard its sovereignty.

The South China Sea remains a contested flashpoint in Southeast Asian geopolitics at a time when China seeks to translate its vast material capabilities into assertive and expansive regional policies at the cost of the sovereignty and sovereign rights of its Southeast Asian neighbours. While Indonesia does not identify as a claimant to the maritime dispute in the South China Sea, it remains a subject of China's increasing incursions within Indonesian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Natuna Sea. Indeed, in 2016, Beijing went as far as declaring the waters surrounding the Natunas as its "traditional fishing grounds".¹⁶

Acknowledging this, Indonesia's contemporary multi-aligned foreign policy towards global powers reflects a distinct balance between accommodation and pragmatism that underscores the importance of independent decision-making. Indonesia recognises the need to manage relations with a rising and assertive China—its most powerful immediate neighbour. Additionally, China is not only Indonesia's largest trade partner, but the latter is also a pillar of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Southeast Asia.¹⁷ Jakarta thus seeks to leverage its external relations to strengthen its capacity in its immediate neighbourhood, and maximise its role as a regional power without putting its strategic eggs in any other power's basket.

Indonesia also aims to enhance its defence ties with the US and certain European powers to fast-track its military modernisation.¹⁸ However, amidst the simmering geopolitics of the South China Sea and the intensifying US-China power competition, Jakarta has emphasised on several occasions that it will not indulge in bloc politics and compromise its historic relations with established and rising powers by jumping in the bandwagon of one against the other.¹⁹ In line with developing its defence capabilities, Indonesia in 2015 created a task force composed of the navy, marine police, coast guard and attorney general's office to manage and control illicit activities from foreign vessels.

Moreover, to address China's adventurism, Indonesia named the waters to the north of the Natuna Islands as the 'North Natuna Sea' in 2017, while emphasising its plans to construct new and formidable military facilities off Natuna Besar.²⁰ Indeed, at the peak of Chinese incursions in 2020, Indonesia

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swiftly deployed its warships and fighter jets to patrol the South China Sea and send a message to its largest trading partner that it will not tolerate having its sovereignty and sovereign rights undermined.²¹ In addition to its multi-aligned approach, Indonesia also seeks to expand and diversify its strategic partners beyond the traditional US-China dynamics. The past few years have witnessed more enhanced strategic cooperation Between Indonesia and other key states such as India, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).^{22,23}

Drawing from its experience in the Natuna Sea, Indonesia endeavours to contribute towards the consolidation of an organic and intra-Southeast Asian maritime security cooperation framework. Against the backdrop of the brewing US-China power competition, China's increasing militarisation of the South China Sea, and its current ASEAN chairmanship, Indonesia acknowledges the need for Southeast Asian states to increase confidence-building, interoperability, and capacity-building among themselves. These will not only improve the nature of intra-Southeast Asian maritime security coordination but also illustrate a collective commitment in upholding international law.

In December 2022, Indonesia signed a ground-breaking agreement with Vietnam on the demarcation of their EEZ.²⁴ The breakthrough, which coincided with Indonesia's 2023 ASEAN chairmanship, illustrates two points. The first is that such an agreement demonstrates the states' willingness to uphold the sanctity of UNCLOS, while rejecting China's expansive nine-dash line claims in the South China Sea. The second point is a vindication of Indonesia's desire to strengthen intra-regional coordination among Southeast Asian states and improve Southeast Asian-led negotiations for issues impacting the region's states. Such an organic approach is also aimed at strengthening intra-regional capacity-building and decreasing dependence on extra-regional forces that attempt to utilise the region as an arena for power competition. Accordingly, the Indonesian-Vietnamese agreement on delimiting the EEZ was done without any consultation or involvement from China.²⁵

Indonesia has also been trying to encourage its Southeast Asian neighbours to develop and increase the frequency and scope of joint patrols in the South China Sea to address the increasing threat from China.²⁶ In an interview in November 2022, the former chief of the Indonesian National Armed Forces Gen. Andika Perkasa highlighted Indonesia's plans to spearhead joint military drills with Brunei and Malaysia around the Natunas this year.²⁷ Such plans were also reiterated by his successor, with hopes of strengthening Southeast Asian security cooperation in the South China Sea.²⁸ Moreover, to expand and deepen existing partnerships in the region, Indonesia and the Philippines inked an agreement to improve and strengthen maritime security cooperation between

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the two neighbours.²⁹ Malaysia and Indonesia have also consolidated non-confrontational naval strategies like shadowing to ward off encroachments by the Chinese Coast Guard.³⁰

Indonesia has also expressed its desire to revive the much-delayed process for a Code of Conduct (CoC) for the South China Sea.³¹ It has pointed to getting China back into the negotiating table and ensuring it follows through with its past commitments. Indonesia would also like to ensure that the operationalisation of the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint 2025 will be done effectively to spearhead regional initiatives to contribute to the stability of the Southeast Asian security architecture. The successful incorporation of the APSC will provide ASEAN states with the needed tools to craft more indigenous frameworks to spearhead intra-regional efforts towards maritime security, capacity building, informational sharing, and enhanced interoperability amid the shifts taking place in the regional geopolitical landscape.

However, all sides acknowledge the need to manage the dispute with China effectively to avoid exacerbating the region's security dilemma further and disrupting vital sea lanes. The practical understanding that there can be no winner at a time of a full-scale armed conflict has served as the guiding mantra of Indonesia's desire to spearhead security cooperation among its Southeast Asian neighbours. It can be expected that Indonesia's 2023 chairmanship of ASEAN will seek to harness intra-regional capacity building and improve interoperability to bolster security and defence cooperation, particularly in the maritime realm.

“Indonesia wants to contribute to the consolidation of an organic and intra-SEA maritime security cooperation framework.”

Challenges to Indonesia's Quest for ASEAN Leadership

Indonesia's contemporary contributions towards ASEAN and Southeast Asian maritime security cooperation are significant and noteworthy. While Jakarta has an impressive track record in gathering consensus on pivotal issues such as the establishment of the AOIP and harnessing better coordination among its Southeast Asian neighbours, a number of challenges remain for Indonesia to maximise its leadership role in Southeast Asia.

At its core, ASEAN remains intergovernmental; it is composed of diverse states with an ardent emphasis on individual autonomy. The 'ASEAN Way'—which rests on consensus, non-interference, and informality—has been a mechanism to limit member states from compromising each other's national interest in the context of various regional issues.³² However, given Southeast Asia's deepening strategic interrelation with the larger international security architecture, such parameters have limited the bloc's ability to progress towards a more unified position on matters of geopolitics and maritime security. Throughout the 20th century, Indonesia's goal of keeping ASEAN autonomous and non-aligned was resisted by other members like Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines due to their political proximity with the US. Today, China's economic and political clout among Southeast Asian states adds layers of complexity towards achieving a unified front. Southeast Asian states such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Brunei are seen to be falling deeper into China's orbit.

The lack of overt participation in consensus-driven ASEAN initiatives towards maritime security has been a persistent obstacle to the bloc's ability to project collective response. The inability of ASEAN to issue a joint statement in 2012 and 2016 on the South China Sea due to Cambodia's veto represents this reality. Inevitably, such a position won Cambodia praises from China, which overlapped with Beijing's provision of US\$500 million worth of loans to the Southeast Asian state.³³

During the Philippines' chairmanship the following year, Manila was also praised by China for excluding any reference to China's expanding military activities in the South China Sea.³⁴ Additionally, despite the enthusiasm towards a robust APSC, most of the senior Task Force members are aware of the impediments that can be faced in operationalising action plans under the blueprint. Thus, a common and practical solution will be to forward the least objectionable policy recommendations despite them being not the most desirable.³⁵

Despite Indonesia's growing stature in regional and international affairs, loopholes remain in its ability to effectively lead ASEAN in both traditional and non-traditional security issues. During the peak of COVID-19 in 2021,

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for instance, Indonesia's poor handling of the pandemic at home illustrated its constraints in proactively leading ASEAN in times of crises, and tarnished its image at the international level.³⁶ How Indonesia moves forward with Myanmar will also be under scrutiny given the military regime's unwillingness to cooperate on ASEAN's prescribed Five-Point Consensus.³⁷

While Jakarta has demonstrated notable leadership in Southeast Asian affairs since the 20th century, its capacity has been marred by gaps brought about by both, domestic constraints, and external pressures. Understanding that Indonesia's role in ASEAN and Southeast Asian security is predominantly area-specific, the need for Jakarta to maximise its proactivity at the national and regional level is necessary to further its standing in Southeast Asia amid the uncertain shifts taking place in regional and international geopolitics. [ORF](#)

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