



Ear to Asia Podcast

Title: Principle or pragmatism in Indonesia's foreign policy choices?

Description:

VOICEOVER:

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Sami Shah:

Hello. I'm Sami Shah. This is *Ear to Asia*.

Radityo Dharmaputra:

This is a repeated pattern. When the government, especially the presidents and the executive, decided on what course Indonesia would take without consulting, not even the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, not the public, obviously not the scholars outside. And then all the criticism came. And then after that, there is a discussion which apparently just there to justify whatever the government did.

Aristyo Darmawan:

And as a result of that assumptions that Prabowo is the geopolitical masters, this foreign policy making decisions, infrastructures or process is not allowed. There's anyone to challenge the president, right? We don't have a strong foreign ministers who don't have a strong and solid background in diplomacy, whether it's knowledge and experience. And we don't have the senior advisers. We don't have those kind of things. So he left himself alone in making these tough decisions. And I think it's very dangerous.

Sami Shah:

In this episode, principle or pragmatism in Indonesia's foreign policy choices. *Ear to Asia* is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

Indonesia has long defined its place in the world through the principle of *bebas dan aktif*, a foreign policy that is both independent and engaged. For decades, Jakarta has sought to maintain strategic autonomy, positioning itself as a bridge between major powers while avoiding formal alignment with any one bloc. But that approach has become harder to sustain. Rising geopolitical tensions, a fast evolving global order, and intensifying competition in the Indo-Pacific are placing new demands on Indonesia's diplomatic posture. Since taking office in October 2024, President Prabowo Subianto has brought a more visible and personalised style to foreign policy, marked by frequent overseas visits and swift engagement with global powers. Moves such as Indonesia's entry into BRICs and closer ties with a range of partners suggest a more active and outward facing

international role. So is Indonesia still practising the cautious consultative diplomacy it has long been known for, or adapting its approach to a more fluid and contested environment? How is it navigating relationships with China, the United States and others amid growing rivalry, and how does it respond to global flashpoints without compromising its long held commitment to non-alignment? In a more uncertain world, can Indonesia remain both free and active?

Joining me to discuss are Radityo Dharmaputra, a senior researcher at the Centre for European and Eurasian Studies at Universitas Airlangga in Indonesia, and Aristyo Darmawan, a lecturer in the Faculty of Law at Universitas Indonesia, as well as PhD scholar at Australian National University. Welcome to *Ear to Asia*, Radityo and Aristyo.

Aristyo Darmawan:

Thanks. Great for having me.

Radityo Dharmaputra:

Thank you sir.

Sami Shah:

So, Radityo, let's start with you. How does Indonesia understand its role in the international system today?

Radityo Dharmaputra:

Yes, thank you, Sami, for the question. I think before we ask ourselves how Indonesia understand its role, especially in the international system today, we need to trace it back to history, right? And there are several major principles that Indonesia always holds. First off, of course, it's this idea that Indonesia is always non-aligned. But at the same time, autonomy. And another aspect would be bridge building. Let me just go through that in a sense. So one is the tradition that we can trace to Bandung conference back in 1955, this idea that Indonesia will not be aligned to any great powers. But at the same time, it's also a voice for the repressed, for the newly independent country back then, the voice for the global South in nowadays world. And also, if you look at how especially the current president, President Prabowo, look at how Indonesia's position itself, it's this idea of being a bridge builder: a bridge builder between north and south, bridge builder between east and west, bridge builder between all the developing and developed countries. So this idea I think one of the most important at the moment for Indonesia's position. But also different presidents, I would say each of Indonesia's president has their own, let's say, personalised view. So if you look at Sukarno, for example, especially in the early days of Indonesia's independence, this idea that Indonesia should be one of the leaders of the global South, Indonesia should be active. This idea of performative activism, right? Especially during Bandung conference. But also if you look at the subsequent phase of Indonesia's foreign policy. So after Sukarno, we had Suharto with a very different views, focused more on ASEAN, focused more on development, focused more on this status quo order-preserving, again focusing on the region. And then you have different presidents. Let's just move to Jokowi, for example, Joko Widodo, focused on economic first. So I think now, even though we have this all autonomy, all this non-aligned visions, this bridge builder visions, again, you need to look at each president because they will have their own views, their own flavour, so to say. And Prabowo will brings his own visions to Indonesia's view of world order. But I think even though there are personalised view, there is still this constant, that Indonesia keeps non-aligned, at least the image of being a non-aligned, neither inside any camp, but also not willing to commit to any of the other camp. And I've written about it that now Indonesia is, especially with the current situation, the current world order, Indonesia is an in-between state. Indonesia doesn't want to

be pulled into one of the camps, but at the same time, it turns into this identity of Indonesia. Indonesia not only doesn't want to be positioned in one of the camps, but that is basically Indonesia's position. It used to be Indonesia's strategy to achieve something. But now it's Indonesia's own identity. You look at how the the president, how the ministers of foreign affairs argued about Indonesian foreign policy. They always return to this idea that Indonesia is neither there nor here. It's always in the middle.

Sami Shah:

Aristyo, Radityo has just given us a list of things that are hallmarks of foreign policy of Indonesian governments, including non-alignment, autonomy and bridge building. Is there anything else that might be added to that list?

Aristyo Darmawan:

I mean, if I might add a little bit on the contemporary -- I think Prabowo foreign policy and how we view the role of Indonesia in the world. I should say that he very much really want to bring Indonesia as a global player in a sense that he abandoned the traditional Indonesia foreign policy, which always anchored on ASEAN. Right? If you look at the whole of Indonesia's presidents since Suharto, the comfort level of game is always the ASEAN in which to conceive its role as the leader of ASEAN and so on and so forth. But now, Prabowo, since he came to office, he often repeatedly say that we are a great nation, *kita adalah besar*, we are respected everywhere, and those kind of narratives. And he tried to put Indonesian foreign policies broader than us, and that's why he joined BRICs and so on and so forth. And that's what's the first, I think, characteristic on how he view the role of Indonesia in the world. And I think in that sense, in particular, if we look at the the rivalries of the United States and China, I think he very much aware of that geopolitical situations. And he want to try to engage with both the US and China deeply. I think he visited Washington, I think the US a few times and he visited Beijing, I think more often. So he tried to want to open this China communication. And he really want to show that oh we we can both engage with the US and China. But what I'm afraid of is that he engage with this, he want to show this free and active foreign policies, he want to show that we can engage with both the superpower, but without a very clear boundaries and limitation on where should be the limits of cooperations, and what do we really want to want to achieve in these cooperations. I think that is my takes on that. But, he's certainly view that Indonesia is a global player now. We haven't really seen any strong initiative or engagement from Prabowo in the ASEAN level, unlike Jokowi, for example. So, that's what I observed with the current Prabowo foreign policies and on respect to Indonesia's positions in the world.

Sami Shah:

So *bebas dan aktif*, which translates as *free and active*, is a phrase often heard in Indonesian foreign policy circles. Aristyo, what does free and active actually mean in practical terms then?

Aristyo Darmawan:

Well, I think certainly Radityo can can speak more about this. But if we look at different active foreign policies, it's essentially that Indonesia can have the free to engage with the world. We don't want to bound ourselves to align a particular pool of alliances. We want to we engage with the world based on our national interests. Well, every president, though, have a very different interpretations on free and active foreign policy. If we look at it from Sukarno to Suharto and so on and so forth, they might have a very different interpretations. Sukarno certainly built the strong relationship with the communist bloc, Jakarta-Pyongyang, Jakarta-Hanoi, Jakarta-Beijing, while he still claimed that Indonesia is a free and active foreign policy country. He still assert that. And

Suharto, he contradicts Sukarno foreign policy. He shifts the policies towards Washington and cut all the Communist ties. But he can still claim that his foreign policy is free and active. So I don't think there's a very solid or strict definitions on what free and active foreign policies. I think it is not necessarily same with non-alignment. We're not always neutral in every issues of the world have faced. We're not certainly neutral in the Israel and Palestinian issues. We're pro-Palestine. We're clear about that. So it's the abilities to independently engage with the world based on our national interests, not based on our alignment with other countries or based on what other country told us to do so. So that's the, I think the essence, which I'm sure Radityo can add more on that.

Sami Shah:

Radityo?

Radityo Dharmaputra:

So I think building up on what Aristyo already mentioned, I think free and active or this *bebas dan aktif*, again, we have to look back in the first instance when Vice President, or then Vice President, Mohammad Hatta basically offer this or proposed this idea of principles, right? So “free” meanings that Indonesia, as Aristyo mentioned, Indonesia can choose its own partner. But I think the most important thing is that whoever Indonesia choose, its based on its own national interests. So we are not forced to, let's say, to choose the US or China in this case, but it is always based on Indonesia's own interests. So maybe in one instance, for example, under Suharto, Indonesia's interest back then was to gain more investment, was to gain better relations with the West. That's why Suharto move closer to the US, right? So that's the idea. So we can basically choose which partner we want according to our own interest. The “active” part will mean Indonesia remain active in all, you know, all the global arena, in multilateral forums and so on. But now, if you look at the again, Aristyo already mentioned this, different presidents will bring its own visions, right? Its own understanding. And if you look at the current situation with the current president, President Prabowo, I think, again, Prabowo is a very different president compared to the others. One thing for sure, he is the most active in terms of visiting other countries, maybe only equal to Abdurrahman Wahid back in the [19]98, 99, 98, 2000 period. So Prabowo visited a lot of countries almost more than 100 days. During his one and a half year presidency, he visited more than 20 countries, a lot of meetings. Again, this hyper mobility, moving. He even visited France just last week. Another visit, if not the fourth, is the fifth time he visited France. And all this idea of visiting other countries, it's a symbolic presence in a way, because he wants, again quoting Aristyo before, he wants to be seen in multilateral forums, in this idea of national parades. He went to Beijing for the anniversary, the 80th anniversary of World War. He went to France for Bastille Day celebrations. So all this idea of being there, being a symbolic presence, especially with very Sukarno style clothing. So this idea of a great leader visiting other countries, right? But at the same time, we ask, I think in Indonesia, especially in this foreign policy circles, we ask what this means, right? Is this the kind of *bebas* or free that we are envisioning? Or is this the kind of activity that we want Prabowo to engage in? And unfortunately, until this moment, for example, if this is how he balanced great power, as Aristyo mentioned before, he only visited China twice, which is very interesting. He visited China right after he was inaugurated back in 2024. That's where he signed this Joint Statement. Aristyo can comment on that later. He signed this Joint Statement with China, but then he was absent from China until the invitation to the war celebration, if I'm not mistaken. So again, compare that to how many times he visited France, for example, how many times he visited the UK and met with King Charles. How many times he visited UAE? How many times he visited Russia? And then you compare it how many times he visited Beijing and Washington. Washington, he came only for the UN. I don't think he ever been to Washington for a bilateral meeting with specifically with Donald Trump. So, again, there are a lot of questions, right? Whether all this proposed style foreign policy of visiting countries or engaging with a national parade, with all the symbolic presence in, let's say,

multilateral forums, also a very personal way of conducting diplomacy. He always went to these big countries. He failed to go to any African countries except Egypt. He went only to the G8 summit in Cairo, I think it was either last year or the year before. So again, you ask questions whether this is similar to the previous one, similar to, for example, Abdurrahman Wahid's trip abroad, or is it similar to how Sukarno, Suharto or even Jokowi Widodo's style of conducting diplomacy, right? So this is an interesting dimension that Prabowo brings to the table. I've said about it before that this is kind of "fear of missing out" diplomacy. He just wanted to be there, especially with great leaders, male leaders, especially if you look at how he met Trump, Prabowo, sorry, Trump, Putin, Xi Jinping, Narendra Modi, Emmanuel Macron, Keir Starmer. So all these great leaders of a male leader of a country. Then you see that he just wants to be there in the room for the status, for the symbolic presence. But the question would be whether it actually fits into Indonesia's own interests. If you go back to the *bebas* part. So if this is part of Indonesia's interest to be everywhere and, you know, joining all the big four.

Sami Shah:

So continuing on from there, then, you've written, Radityo, that Indonesia's foreign policy under Prabowo is increasingly defined by making decisions before doing any consultation. What is the effect of this foreign policy approach and can you give us some specific examples?

Radityo Dharmaputra:

Yes. So this is a very interesting pattern. I look at how Prabowo uses, especially if you look only at the big issues. The Board of Peace episode in Indonesian foreign policy, when we join Board of Peace, for example, he decided that we should join. There were a lot of protests coming from Muslim communities in Indonesia, from scholarly communities, a lot of op-eds being published in different medias in Indonesia, right? Criticism from the civil society as well. And then he invited all these people different times. Of course, he invited foreign minister. He invited scholars to the presidential palace and to his house saying that this is part of a consultation. This is part of a discussion after the decision to join the Board of Peace has been made, right? And if you look at how this is not the first time he did this. Aristyo can also mention probably the China Joint Statement in November 2024. Again, the decision made. He signed the statement. And then with all the criticism, he then probably clarify a lot of things, in finding scholars, in inviting this foreign minister, to his presidential palace or to his house. Again, one of the most interesting episode is The Board of Peace, because that's where all the different combinations of civil society, pressure from academics, from the people, from the Muslim communities came, you know, criticising him. And then the way he responded, the way the government responded, after the decision is to invite all this, asking again, what would you do? This is our, you know, explanations basically, right? And if you have your decisions before you consult or you ask for recommendations, that means you basically justify it during the meeting. So you ask people in the meeting what happened. Basically, it's Prabowo explaining why he took that decision. And if you look after the so-called consultation, most of the people there who went into the press conference changed his positions or change their positions, and then suddenly said, oh, yeah, we support we understand why the president or why the government took that position. And this is a problem because, again, in democratic states or in a democratic government, you need to consult, as at least with your Minister of Foreign Affairs and all the staff, the expert inside the ministry first, before you decide to do things, right? But what happened if you look at the China Joint Statement, you look at this decision to join BRICS, you look at the Board of Peace situation. If you look this discussion about allowing us to fly over Indonesia, this overflight, this blanket overflight episode in Indonesia's discourse. You see that this is a repeated pattern. When the government, especially the presidents and the executives, decided on what course Indonesia would take without consulting, not even the apparatus in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, not the public, obviously not the scholars outside. So just decide first and then all

the criticism came from us, from, you know, the scholars, the civil society. And then after that, there is a discussion which apparently just there to justify whatever the government did. Of course, then you can argue that this has been going on since, you know, since the previous presidency, because they also decided without consulting the public, but at least before Prabowo, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs still holds a very interesting, important positions because they are the one with the expertise. They're the one with the field understanding on what happened in the country that they're, you know, in, countries abroad. So they should be consulted, maybe not us, the scholars or the civil society, but at least the ministry. And without that as well, this could turn Indonesian foreign policy into a very personalistic way of deciding what the president wants at this moment. And the risk with that is that all our reputation, all our expertise in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, all of our, you know, good relations with all countries, with the neighbours will be there, but the president will not use it because he or maybe the team inside the palace will decide what they want without even understanding what actually happened in that country. So that is a big problem for me.

Sami Shah:

Aristyo, how engaged is the broader Indonesian public even in matters of foreign policy? Does this matter to them?

Aristyo Darmawan:

Right, so if I might just add a little bit with what Radityo mentioned before, which I found very interesting, is that I think this whole problems and issues is because of the assumptions when Prabowo come to office, that he's the masters of geopolitics. Yes, he might understand geopolitics better than some of the presidents, or he might have an interest in international politics. But when it comes to foreign policies, I don't think there's one leaders can determine all things by himself because a lot of issues involved, there's a lot of bureaucracies involved. There are a lot of different issues which the president might not very much aware of, including some international law issues that Radityo mentions with China. So I think that is the thing. So bureaucracy, I think legal advisers, I think it should be important. And as a result of that, assumptions that Prabowo is the geopolitical masters, the structure, the foreign policymaking decisions, infrastructures or process is not allowed. There's anyone to challenge the president, right? We don't have a strong foreign ministers who have who don't have a strong and solid background in diplomacy, whether it's knowledge and experience, right? It's very different with SBY, for example, Hassan Wirajuda as a foreign minister, or Jokowi's Retno Marsudi, who is a all time seasons diplomats who have the capacity to challenge the president. Now, we don't have a very strong foreign ministers, and we don't have the senior advisors. SBY used to have Ali Alatas, as the senior presidential advisors, we don't have those kind of things. So he left himself alone in making these tough decisions. And I think it's very dangerous because a personalised foreign policies and decisions to join a treaty, for examples, have a long lasting consequences, right? Whether it's joining, whether creating a treaty with China or BRICS or anything, it will be continue to remain even after Prabowo was not in the positions, right? So I think that is a the dangerous of having a too personalised foreign policies within the president. And I think it's very much consequential, right? And if we talk about, and that's very consequential. For example, let me talk a little bit about the China Joint Statement is that the China Joint Statement proposal is not, it's not new. So even since Jokowi came to office, China has already proposed a joint development in the North Natuna Sea, and the legal advisers at the Foreign Ministry at that time successfully ensure Luhut [Binsar Pandjaitan] and Retno Marsudi do not accept to any proposal from China because it might have a legal consequences. And they success in pursuing Luhut and Retno. And we Indonesia keep rejecting the joint proposal. Well, then the new president come to office, Pak Prabowo, and the foreign policy decision making process is different. No one can able to challenge. I think we finally caught up with the Joint Statement. But if we talk about the broader public. Well, I think like in most countries, foreign policy is not always become the

priorities of public awareness, right? It's not something like prices and so on and so forth. Also, I think the public is not very much aware of, and I think this is also become an issue that the public participation in decision making process might not very bold and significant. Yes, if we look at Radityo already mentions that, yes, Prabowo invited foreign policy experts, a few number of scholars, ex-foreign ministers to the office. But it's not a way that they want to get an aspirations or advice, but more like this is what the policy that we choose and so on and so forth. More like an explanations rather than a two-way discussions, right? So I think again, the structure of foreign policy making under Prabowo is very much centralised. And I would say it's dangerous and it's very much consequential.

Sami Shah:

One of the things, Aristyo, that you mentioned early on was Prabowo's stances, for example, on Israel and Palestine. Can we widen that conversation a bit more to what are Indonesia and Prabowo's stances then on some of the other notable international flash points of the day, as we speak in June of 2026. There's the US-Israel war on Iran, for example, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Where does Indonesia sit on these?

Aristyo Darmawan:

Right, I think a lot of different issues Indonesia or Prabowo might have a different positions. On the Palestine, I think it's always the case that Indonesia will always pro-Palestine. At least that was going to be what he's saying to the public, that we're going to be pro-Palestine and will help Palestine and so on and so forth. Yes, we give some of support to Palestine and so on and so forth. But we haven't really seen a very significant bold. Some of the statement even, which then pushed by the public is that we Indonesia and Prabowo ready to recognise Israel as a state when Israel recognised Palestine as a state. So there's a lot of statements which might not necessarily show that he genuinely pro-Palestine and so on and so forth, right? And in term of Russia and Ukraine, I think Radityo is certainly the expert on this, but I think he still want to have a good relationship with Putin, with Russia, right? So it makes him and Indonesia very careful in terms of making a statements or condemnations and so on and so forth, right? So it's been a tricky there. The same goes with the US, China, for example, or in Iran, for example, in the US, right? Prabowo, I think, his trajectory he desperately want to have a good relationship with Trump for whatever reasons. And that makes that he afraid to really support Iran. I think member of Parliament or I think the former vice president, Jusuf Kalla, traditionally, Indonesia should support Iran because there is a Muslim countries and so on and so forth, right? And it's arguably suppressed by the US. But after the late Iran supreme leader's death, Indonesia is not even soon giving the letter of condolences, right? I think because probably Indonesia want to respect or want to build a relationship with the US and so on and so forth. So, I think that's Indonesia, it's really, I should say, trying to balance and be neutral. But I think Indonesia lose its principle and leverage because of really want to engage both parties.

Sami Shah:

Radityo, how do these official stances differ from the unofficial and off-the-record views, then?

Radityo Dharmaputra:

Yes, so let me just because Aristyo already mentioned it before, let me just focus on how Indonesia's position on Russia and Ukraine. So this idea that even under Jokowi, Indonesia's official position is always supporting Ukrainian territorial sovereignty, right? That's the bedrock of Indonesia's legal principles or the principles of foreign policy: the importance of territorial sovereignty. If you look at Indonesia's voting records in the UN, it's always fairly consistent votes for support of Ukraine

territorial integrity. But it's always Indonesia's position is always refusing to name Russia. So you look at how Indonesia's different statement, Russia is not there. Even the way Indonesia said about the situation. It's not Russia's invasion or full scale invasion of Ukraine. It's always the Ukraine war. So Russia is not there. So that's always the position from the beginning. So it is consistent in a way in the rhetoric, especially the official rhetoric, right? It's always consistent, but it is incoherent in practice because Indonesia refused to name Russia. And Indonesia's especially with Prabowo, the position that Prabowo took even before he became president during his Shangri-La speech in 2023, he offered or proposed this idea of a peace deal. So demilitarised zone, all the negotiations, UN peacekeepers. Indonesia will, even Indonesia would send some of the peacekeepers to Gaza, to Ukraine. So all this idea Indonesia could be the mediator if that's the same argument, the same proposal that he also sent to Iran as well. So there is this idea of Indonesia very consistent in promoting territorial sovereignty of a state, at the same time being a mediator. But if you compare it with the off-the-record views or the not the official record, the not the official positions, then you have in the case of Russia and Ukraine, you have a closer relations with Russia. You can see Indonesia is getting closer to Russia, especially with, you know, the discussion about importing oil from Russia. All this, especially last year with I think it was the 70th, 75th anniversary of Russia-Indonesia relations. So all these events with Russia last year continuing this year, the joint military state, the exercise, the discussion about using or creating a space port in Biak in Papua, for example. All this idea of Indonesia is getting closer or even more sympathetic, growing more sympathetic towards Russia. It's not only in the elite but also in the society. There were a lot of works being done to show that different surveys, social media analysis has shown that Indonesia's societal position is always more or closer to support Russia, in a way, because of the double standard of especially of the West. So you see whether there are different way of looking at this. So official position is always very safe, that's for sure. As Aristyo mentioned, Indonesia is playing it safe, trying to be neutral, offering mediation plan, offering peace proposal even to some of the conflicts. But at the same time, you look at the not official position, there is a genuine and I think more often it's pro-Russian narrative, anti-Western, if not pro-Russian, anti-Western sentiment. And this idea, especially with Gaza and Palestine, this double standard between Ukraine and Gaza and how the Western countries usually push for us Indonesians to support them on Ukraine. But then flip-flopping on Gaza is always very prevalent in Indonesian societal circles. So that's the different views. If you especially if you look at that and just one thing, one last point on this. Aristyo mentioned before that usually the public is not really engaged in foreign policy issues. That's true to some extent, and I agree. But if the issue is related to some of the very, very basic idea, especially with Palestine and Gaza, then the public will have some pressure to the government. That is absent in the case of Ukraine. So you can see in the case of Ukraine, when Indonesia is neutral, there are not enough pressure to the government because it's just, you know, the public doesn't even care. But when it comes to Gaza and the Board of Peace, for example, then the public will start discussing because it's about Gaza and Palestine. So there are some issues that the public will focus on, and mostly in foreign policy, it's about Palestine. The other thing might be somewhere else, right? But if it's Palestine and to some extent, maybe China, especially when it's related to domestic discourse, domestic issues, then the public will have some voice. And the current situation is that the government is using different arrays of tools. You know, social media influencers, we call them *buzzers*, just this idea of people in the internet, you know, showing support to the government positions, basically flooding the internet with the pro-government supports that's already there, especially in different cases. And again, maybe again, inviting scholars to the presidential palace try to change their mind justifying government decision. This is another way of trying to, let's say, soften the public criticisms. And again, other issues or foreign policy issues might not be in the public's interest, but specifically with Gaza and to some extent, probably China. China's investment in domestic again, related to domestic discourses. That would be one thing or two things that the government will look at, and trying to at least control the narrative in the public.

Sami Shah:

So, Aristyo, if I can ask you, how does Indonesia's self-image as a Muslim majority state, then, factor here?

Aristyo Darmawan:

I think there are a number of research and argument that Indonesia foreign policy is not very much driven with the as the largest Muslim countries. But I think the fact that we are the largest Muslim countries in the world, I think it's inherited the identity of how Indonesia is engage with the world and certainly it influence how we see the world as well. For one of the example of how Indonesia viewed the United States, it is very much influenced by the United States relationship with the Muslim world. I think if we look at the the polls, for example, after the 911 and what the US did in the Iraq war and so on and so forth, Indonesia view negatively the United States because of what the US did in the Middle East. And I think it happens with when the recent what Israel did in Gaza. And I think a lot of Indonesians very angry with the US and Israel. So it's very much driven with the public opinion, which very much matters in the sense, right? A lot of, again, I agree that not many people aware about the tariff agreement with the US or BRICS, things like that. But when it comes to the issues of Palestine, all these like clerics and Muslim organisations, they're very much aware of and really want to push the government that to put more assistance or help towards the Palestine. So I think the fact that we're the largest Muslim countries in the world, it has shaped the identity of Indonesia. And we can't really simply disregard that as a foreign policies. We have been consistent, even though, yes, we are supporting Palestine. It's not only about the religious solidarity, it's about the humanities and so on and so forth. But I think if we look at the broader context, it's very much driven by the public, which driven by the ideas as a Muslim countries, right? So, but I think that's one point. But, I think, yes, we want to have a significant role in the Middle East and so on and so forth. But if you look at Indonesia's role, I think in the Muslim world, whether we the OIC, I think we're not very much, I think, significant, for example, in compared to countries like Turkey. We don't necessarily have the leaderships in the Muslim world. Well, maybe because of we're not speak Arabs as well as the Muslim countries have. But I think we can't really expect and taking for granted that we are the largest Muslim countries. So we have a role in that. No, I think there should be an investment of leadership and engagement by the president if they really want to have more influence or leaderships in Muslim countries, in the Middle East. Yes, Prabowo's travel to Jordan very often, but it's not necessarily as part of that. It's just like a personal interest and personal experience engaging with Jordan. So things like that. So I think it's Indonesia's engagement and the fact that we're the largest Muslim countries put us a huge potentials, but I think we should maximise it with a strategy, what we want to achieve, what how we get there and so on and so forth.

Sami Shah:

You're listening to *Ear to Asia* from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its societies, politics and cultures. It's called the *Melbourne Asia Review*. It's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular *Ear to Asia* guests and by many others. Plus, you can catch recent episodes of *Ear to Asia* at the *Melbourne Asia Review* website, which again, you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au.

I'm Sami Shah, and I'm joined by Indonesia foreign policy researchers Aristyo Darmawan and Radityo Dharmaputra. We're talking about how Indonesia is navigating a changing geopolitical landscape under President Prabowo Subianto.

So let's now look at some of the bilateral relationships Indonesia maintains with key powers. Let's go down the list one by one, starting with China. How would you characterise current relations between Indonesia and China? Radityo?

Radityo Dharmaputra:

I think China is our, if not the most important, then obviously one of the most important partners, especially in terms of the economic. Again, largest trading partners, because investors, especially with Belt and Road infrastructures, but also with the current situation with the EV and nickel. I mean, this is a contentious issue, especially regarding moral values in Indonesia. But I think one of the important thing, that Aristyo will definitely talk more about this, is this claim about North Natuna Sea. Again, this idea of Chinese Nine Dash Line or, you know, historic rights in Natuna Sea Aristyo talk about it later. But I'll stop with this idea that even if China is our most economically, you know, indispensable partner. But there is this notion that if we are too dependent on China, that would make us Indonesia, Jakarta especially reluctant to push back, especially with the situation in the South China Sea or the North Natuna Sea. So there is this idea that we should also diversify to other partners. But the problem with diversifying to other partners, especially in economic terms, that China has already been there here in Indonesia, will not move anywhere because this is one of the closest region to China. So this is a very delicate situation for Indonesia. But I will let Aristyo talk about the maritime legal issues, because that is one of the most important issue for Indonesia.

Sami Shah:

Aristyo, the long running tensions in the South China Sea impact Indonesia less than they do other Southeast Asian countries like Philippines and Vietnam. Yet maritime, economic and security matters are vital to the archipelago nation. China is taking a clear investment and strategic leadership role in maritime matters across the region. What are the foreign policy implications, then, for Indonesia?

Aristyo Darmawan:

Right, so first, of course, I think like all countries in the world now, we see China as a very important counterpart. I think the same goes with Indonesia. The fact that we want to increase the economic growth. We really want to attract a lot of investment and trading partners. And in China simply have the positions on field they choose. But I think one of the issues, of course, in the bilateral relationship between Indonesia and China is always the North Natuna Sea, the South China Sea dispute, and where our exclusive economic zones overlap with China, and Nine Dash Line, which has been ruled illegal under international law. But I think Prabowo will have a different approach in dealing with China, of course, probably want to certainly want to have a very good relationship with China. Probably want to attract a lot of money from Beijing. So then he see this North Natuna Sea should not become an issue that hinder the number of investment and economic relationship. So from his perspective, instead of like we having confrontations with Beijing, why don't we just having a collaborations in this disputed waters. The logic that sounds okay in terms of how countries have good relationships with China. But if you look at the international perspective and the consequences, I think is rather significant because China claim is basically illegal under international law. So if we agree to have a joint development or joint cooperations with something that is illegal under international law, that is an issue under international law itself. It is to disregard ASEAN long standing positions that none of ASEAN countries recognise the China's Nine Dash Line. So if we put an agreement on that, yes, we should make a joint development on the basis of that illegal Nine Dash Line, that is an issue under international law. So that is the logic which I thought that Prabowo might have taken a wrong move or a wrong policies in dealing with China. I think Jokowi also attract a lot of money from Beijing, right? But he set the boundaries very clear that when it comes to Natuna, we don't want to negotiate. We firm with our positions. We firm that

we don't have an overlapping claim and so on and so forth. But Jokowi still successfully attract a lot of money from Beijing, right? So I think that's back again. I think that is the weak, I think part from from Prabowo foreign policy is that because he's not listening to this advice, then he might choose a foreign policies which not necessarily benefit Indonesia in that sense.

Sami Shah:

From China then to the US under Trump. What's changed for Indonesia with Trump's second term as US president? Aristyo?

Aristyo Darmawan:

So I think Prabowo desperately, desperately want to have a good relationship with Trump. I don't know whether he want to get a benefit or be afraid of being like Maduro in Venezuela. You know, for what, for whatever reasons. So he really try to want to please Trump, starting from joining the Board of Peace, for example, to certainly please the United States and with the recent tariff agreement as well. Indonesia was basically say yes to all what the US proposed, right? So I really want to have a good relationship with the US. So I think the sense that I get, there's also, I think, Prabowo want to meet with Eric, with Trump's son Eric and so on and so forth. So well, historically, Prabowo also have a heavy history of getting educated in the US and so on and so forth, right? So that's the thing that I have. And, because Indonesia really want to please, or Prabowo really want to please, Trump with the issues is now with the recent, I think, issues on overflight blanket, where the US Secretary of War proposed to have an overlap overflight blanket access to Indonesia's airspace. So all the US aircraft are passing through the airspace should not need a case-by-case permit. So that's an issue because it's then create issues and questions whether we can be still free and active when foreign policy issues have happened or escalations happen.

Sami Shah:

Radityo, why is this agreement so controversial -- the notion of giving blanket access to US military flights over Indonesian airspace?

Radityo Dharmaputra:

That is very, very important for Indonesia to be seen, as you know, we don't have a military agreement or at least alignment with any countries. And the idea of giving the US a blanket overflight, basically privileging the US above the other partners, that would be seen again as violating Indonesia's position, non-aligned, you know, position that Indonesia always held. But also at the same time, if you look back at how I think this is not the main issue of the controversy. If you look back from the very beginning of Prabowo's presidency, I still remember when Trump won the US election. Even before Trump was inaugurated in January, Prabowo called Trump when he was in the US, right? He was there visiting President Biden. He called Trump and basically he humiliated himself in Indonesia in front of Trump, saying, you know, repeatedly saying "sir" and basically just humiliate himself. And that's already set the tone that Indonesia is now, especially under Prabowo, will do whatever the United States does and ask of Indonesia. The blanket overflight is one thing. There is another thing now that Pete Hegseth, the Secretary of War, asked his Indonesian counterpart, Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin, to have to give this, I think it's the C-130 repair in Indonesia, concentrating all the repair of these aeroplanes. And Prabowo just say, yeah, use one of the national airport. That's again saying things, saying, you know, talking to Prabowo's position vis a vis Trump, how he sees himself in front of Donald Trump. And this is not a good idea, not a good position again, because basically humiliating, lowering yourself the other. If you look at the Board of Peace meeting a couple of months ago, Prabowo basically holding the certificate of Board of Peace. And maybe that's for us, for me at least personally, it was somewhat humiliating because Indonesian

president holding the certificate in front of the others. And again, Prabowo, I don't know whether he did that deliberately holding that, but that is a sign. So blanket overflight, the other issues are just a continuation of how Prabowo sees himself in front of Donald Trump.

Sami Shah:

Can Indonesia balance, then, its relations with the United States on one hand and China on the other? Does it even really need to? Radityo

Radityo Dharmaputra:

Yeah, that is an interesting question. So whether Indonesia actually needs to balance a US and China. I think Indonesia in a way chose diversification. So, partners, right? You mentioned or I mentioned before Russia and the EU, for example, how Indonesia use other partners to diversify its economic dependence on China. They are trying to diversify its partners. So the way of balancing or trying to hedge between all these two big powers, that's the usual Indonesian foreign policy under Jokowi or under SBY or even before that. But if you look at Prabowo, just looking at how many times he visited countries. I know that this might not signify anything, especially with Prabowo, but look at how often he visited some Western partners. Look at how often he praised Donald Trump. Went to the US couple of times for Board of Peace meeting and so on, whereas he visited China twice. So that's already signalling how Prabowo tries to balance China, in a way. But again, we cannot really get out of China's influence because our economy depended on them. So that's probably another way of the government. If you say it's balancing US and China, I would say trying to diversify partners, trying to have good relations. That's probably that's what the government will say, whether that's effective or not. Especially if US-China tension, especially in Taiwan Strait, became apparent, that would bring Indonesia's position to, you know, a more questionable situation because that means Indonesia will risk hundreds of thousands of its migrant workers in Taiwan, for example. So that would be an interesting dynamics.

Sami Shah:

Indonesia officially joined BRICS in 2025. Radityo, what was the reasoning behind joining now?

Radityo Dharmaputra:

I've written some articles about it. My argument would be that this is for status. Indonesia wants to be there in the club where all the great leaders where the decision for the world is made. He wants Indonesia to be there having a seat at the table because again BRICS used to be or should be an economic cooperation. But again, it's not clear whether Indonesia will have economic benefit. Indonesia already has a lot of good relations with BRICS countries without joining BRICS before that. So when Prabowo was elected, inaugurated and then decided immediately to reverse Jokowi's position because Joko Widodo didn't want to join BRICS at that time. I think Retno Marsudi back then clearly stated that, yeah, this is not Indonesia's interest. But when Prabowo was elected, inaugurated, he immediately changed his position, again showing that there is this idea of Indonesia as great powers, according to his mind. That Indonesia needs a better status, that Indonesia needs to be there. It's more important for him. Again, no clear economic benefit, no clear, you know, even the seat at the table, it's not there, right? But the idea of Indonesia joining the elite club with BRICS, that is important for him.

Sami Shah:

What about, then, ASEAN? What's been the motivation behind that? What role is Indonesia playing now inside ASEAN, and is ASEAN still central to Jakarta's foreign policy?

Aristyo Darmawan:

If I may start on that. I think traditionally ASEAN has always been the epicentre of Indonesian foreign policy. The idea is to create an ASEAN as a buffer for how Indonesia engage with the world. The idea that Indonesia can leverage its leaderships in ASEAN to position itself in a broader international community. I think it's always there. But ever since Prabowo comes to office, we haven't really seen a very strong interest of how he want to project Indonesia foreign policies in ASEAN. What kind of leadership did he want to have -- things like that, right? With the recent conflict in Thailand and Cambodia, we haven't seen any significant role of Prabowo using or utilising as mechanisms to showing leadership and projections, right? We haven't really seen a clear interest, I should say, on ASEAN. Yes, he travelled the world. Yes, he engaged with the US and China, and so on and so forth. But not necessarily engaged with ASEAN. I think if we compare with the previous administrations, Jokowi, he himself, he care about ASEAN. He under his administrations, Indonesia proposed several initiatives on ASEAN. Indonesia take leadership in creating the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and things like that, right? But Prabowo, we haven't really seen any significant foreign policy moves or leadership projections and in that matter. So I don't think that Prabowo really interested in ASEAN, or he might not be very passionate in having this kind of ASEAN way things in dealing with issues. So I can't really expect that we can have a more engagement and leadership under under Prabowo in ASEAN.

Sami Shah:

Aristyo, then, how is Australia Indonesia's relationship evolving under President Prabowo?

Aristyo Darmawan:

Well, of course, I think Australia has always regarded Indonesia as a very important neighbours and important countries. I mean, we often hear in Canberra that "more Jakarta, less Washington" and so on and so forth. But if you look at the numbers of economic engagement, for example, it's very, very low. Australia is not in the top five or I'm not sure if it's the top ten of trading partner of Indonesia and so on and so forth. So there's a lot of potential that we should or that Prabowo can increase. But we saw that Albanese visit Jakarta, I think, for an official visit. And there's a lot of commitment in improving bilateral relationships. But I think there are a lot of potentials, particularly in the economic sphere, that we can enhance. And I agree with what Radityo mentioned earlier, that it is important Indonesia to engage with other middle powers, to not entrapped between the US and China, and I think Australia should be one of the strong candidates in terms of like building a stronger security relationship and economic relationships. In the past couple of weeks, I think there has been a lot of visit from some of the Australian institutions to Jakarta particularly on maritime issues in building the capacities in detecting UUV law enforcement and so on and so forth. So I think Australia indeed need more enhance and strengthened, but I think Prabowo visited Paris more than Canberra. It's also might tell us a thing and how his commitment in upholding and increasing the bilateral ties with Canberra.

Sami Shah:

Radityo, anything to add there?

Radityo Dharmaputra:

Yes. So just want to add one episode, if I remember correctly, last year when April last year when there was this rumour that Russia will open a base in Indonesia. And then Australia, basically some some people in Australia, put that into a big political issues. Scholars then wrote different articles. I remember one of my friends in Australia wrote an article at *Jakarta Post* for that and then received the response from the Russian embassy here. So I thought back then it was interesting when

Indonesia's Australia relations has this you know, you can see that there is a lack of trust there. Back then, last year. Even a rumour of a Russian base in Indonesia then created this whole, you know, discussion, discourses inside Indonesia and Australia. Which means Indonesia and Australia actually knows that it is, you know, the other countries are important, but we don't have yet that good relations that we want to be. So I agree with Aristyo. We need to develop that further, especially when other countries in the region can have a you know, especially as I mentioned, Russia, they can Russia-Indonesia relation has been building up, right? And that could be a challenge to countries like Australia because with better relations between Indonesia and Russia, for example, then it would presume that would challenge Australia in a way, you know, the presence of Russian navy or even a Russian missiles in Indonesia would then be a threat to Australia. So that entails that we need to discuss things. We need to develop this. And I think we're moving the right way, especially with Prabowo and Albanese signed this defence treaty earlier this year. But again, we need to work smarter and better in developing this relationship because otherwise, as Aristyo mentioned, we need this middle power coalition. We have MIKTA, the Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, Australia as a bloc, but now Indonesia join BRICS. So I don't know whether something will happen with this cooperation, but this is an important coalition of middle powers, again, focusing on norms, focusing on rule of law that could actually balance this great power tensions in the world. But unfortunately, at the moment, I think it's again neither they're not here because it's basically in limbo. So probably Indonesia and Australia can develop that again or redevelop this cooperations. But it remains to be seen whether this is a priority especially for the Indonesian side, because as Aristyo mentioned, Indonesia is looking further ahead to other big powers and somehow forget that there is this neighbour called Australia.

Sami Shah:

Well, that then comes to a really good final question for both of you. Does a more dangerous world give Indonesia more leverage or less room to manoeuvre? And what advice would you give Indonesia's foreign policy establishment about how to navigate these uncertain times? Radityo?

Radityo Dharmaputra:

I think especially with the current situation, the tensions and conflicts erupted everywhere, I don't think it gives Indonesia more room. It actually put pressure into Indonesia, less room to manoeuvre, which is understandable. But therefore the idea at the moment the current government is trying to broaden its focus to all countries. Just to go everywhere. But I think the smart thing would be to choose its partner selectively. Not all partners will be the same. And middle power coalition will be very important. Instead of going to all countries, to big countries, why not focus only on several middle power countries? Again, Turkey is an important partner for Indonesia. Australia is an important partner in the region and South Korea another important partner. Redeveloping or reinvigorating MIKTA is probably one way to go. But one important principle I would like to highlight, I think for Indonesian government especially: focus on its own interests. Like this is what we always ask: what is the interest? What is the goal of going abroad, you know, every couple of days? If it is about Indonesia's interests, then of course Indonesia will support it. But if it's about something else or if it's unclear that we will gain something from this, then probably, you know, stop that, because now we are also having economic not crisis yet, but a weakening economic situation. So focus on the most important interests. Focus on the most important partners, especially in the region, ASEAN, Australia. And if we want to go abroad, then Turkey, South Korea would be, I think, in balance, would be a better coalition because we already have the organisation with MIKTA. But other than that, I think it would be very difficult to keep engaging with all the powers in the world, spending money to visit all the countries, especially with the current economic situation.

Sami Shah:

Aristyo?

Aristyo Darmawan:

Great questions. I think how we can get benefit of this fractured world is I think we have to have a clear strategy because I think without a clear strategy, it's going to be very, we can become the victim of this geopolitical contestations, right? Well, my strategy is, I mean, that we have to be aware of what our national interest, that we want to achieve, and how do we get there And how we build the strategies in our leverages based on our competitive advantage, looking at our strength, our geographical strength, for example, economic strength and so on and so forth. So by leveraging this awareness of our identity and competitive advantage and by aware of what our national interests and goals, we should be very selective in our foreign policies engagement. And we can then have a strategic position and leverage towards other countries, such as the United States and China.

Sami Shah:

Our guests have been Radityo Dharmaputra, a senior researcher at the Centre for European and Eurasian Studies at Universitas Airlangga in Indonesia, and Aristyo Darmawan, lecturer in the Faculty of Law at Universitas Indonesia, as well as PhD scholar at Australian National University. Thank you very much, both.

Radityo Dharmaputra:

Thank you.

Aristyo Darmawan:

Thanks for having me.

Sami Shah:

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