



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Indonesia's foreign policy priorities and predicaments

Description: Caught between China's geopolitical ambitions and the United States' questionable commitment to the region, can Indonesia stick to its long-held position of not forming alliances with major powers? Political scientists and Indonesia watchers Dr Dave McRae and Dr Evi Fitriani unpack Indonesia's foreign policy, and explore the options and challenges ahead.

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Ali Moore: Hello. I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

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In this episode, the foreign policy priorities and predicaments of Indonesia.

Ear To Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialist at the University of Melbourne. In Ear Asia, we talk with Asia researchers about the issues behind the news headlines in a region that rapidly changing the world.

In the seven decades since it became an independent republic, Indonesia has consistently tried to get along with other nations. There are, of course, notable exceptions: military confrontation with Malaysia in the 1960s, and the invasion and annexation of East Timor in 1975. Still, the nation has long described its brand of foreign policy as "free and active." But can it remain so in an increasingly challenging regional and global environment?

Flexing its economic and military muscle, China unilaterally claims up to 90 percent of the South China Sea, including parts of what Indonesia considers its exclusive economic zone. Meanwhile, for Southeast Asian states including Indonesia, there's growing uncertainty about the dependability of the United States and its commitment to the region under Donald Trump.

In the future, how will China's increasing assertiveness and Donald Trump's temperament shape Indonesia's foreign policy? And as Indonesia gears up for elections in 2019, what role will domestic politics, including political Islam, play in how Jakarta deals with the world?



To take us on a deep dive into the state of Indonesia's foreign policy are Indonesia watchers and political scientists Dr Dave McRae from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. He's also the co-host of the Talking Indonesia podcast. And Dr Evi Fitriani from the International Relations department of Universitas Indonesia. Evi joins our conversation via Skype from Jakarta. Welcome, Evi and Dave.

Dave McRae: Pleasure to be here.

Evi Fitriani: Hi.

Ali Moore: Let's start with the big picture. What are the priorities for Indonesia's foreign policy right now? What are the objectives? And how consistent have they been over recent decades? Dave?

Dave McRae: I think, much like any nation, probably Indonesia's three broadest foreign policy priorities are regional stability, its own national security, and economic growth and development. And in that context, I think for a long time the US has been Indonesia's most important security partner, although not through an alliance like Australia holds with the United States. And China has been the most important economic partner.

When you talk about consistency of approach, the underlying principle is that of a free and active foreign policy. Basically this translates to avoiding domination by any one major power and not entering into security alliances with much bigger powers like China and the United States. That's an approach it first formulated in the context of the Cold War, but which it maintains to the present day.

Ali Moore: Evi, do you see continuity in foreign policy, or do you see more recent policy as, I guess, more practical than ideological?

Evi Fitriani: Well, actually Indonesia has been pursuing, more or less, practical foreign policy since President Suharto. At that time he tried to get a lot of support from Western countries. So in term of practicality, it has been started from President Suharto at the end of 1960s. So in this case, it's quite consistent from Suharto up to President Jokowi, that they're all pursuing practical foreign policy.

Ali Moore: And do you see China as the most important economic partner and the US as the most important security partner? Are those two relationships the most important ones for Indonesia to get right, Evi?

Evi Fitriani: I would prefer to say that China is the most important economic partner, but United States is not really the most important security partner. Because our relationship with United States very different from Australia-Indonesian



relations. Indonesia do not rely its security on United States and we don't have close relationship with United States, even though we may have good relation. But not in the term of alliance. We prefer to say that we depend on the good relation with all big powers, not only with the United States.

Ali Moore: Which does rather raise a question, doesn't it, of how Indonesia can protect its own interests in an environment where there are these great powers and increasing challenges between the great powers. As Evi says, it's part of I guess the "free and active" policy; there's no security agreement, there's no alliance with the US. Dave, how does Indonesia protect its interests?

Dave McRae: When the "free and active" foreign policy was first promulgated, the Indonesian vice president at the time, back in the late 1940s, Mohammad Hatta, explicitly cited that Indonesia was geographically removed from the main belligerents in the Cold War. And this presented it with the opportunity to pursue a free and active foreign policy rather than aligning itself with one or the other side. Obviously as geo-strategic competition has evolved over the decades, Asia has become a much more important theater of the rivalry that's now developing between China and the United States.

But even then when Indonesia looks at its region, I don't think its defense planners see any particularly direct conventional threats towards Indonesian security. You mentioned the South China Sea before, and certainly that impinges on Indonesia's exclusive economic zone. But it's not a claimant to maritime features in the Spratly and Paracel islands the way that other Southeast Asian nations are. And consequently it hasn't had its access to resources that it would consider its right restricted by Chinese or other nations' military installations, for example.

And I guess in my view what this has produced is fairly superficial security partnerships with other larger nations. If I refer to the United States as Indonesia's most important security partner, I'm not implying that it has an alliance with the United States. I'm simply highlighting it has the very longstanding higher volume of security cooperation with the United States compared to other nations; it exists in a region where over time the United States has been the main security guarantor; and prior to its democratization, in particular certainly the United States would have been its largest supplier of defense equipment. But certainly it's in a position where it's relied more on multilateralism and superficial partnerships and its own geographic location, rather than straight alliances to maintain its security.

Ali Moore: And Evi, if we look at those multilateral relationships and being friends with everyone, if you like, how does Indonesia work in with those multilateral regional institutions, the likes of ASEAN, for example? How important are they to Indonesia?



Evi Fitriani: Our principle of "free and active" foreign policy is very much helpful in this case. Because this principle, we can be in any multilateral arrangement with any countries, especially of course with ASEAN countries but with other big powers like United States, like Japan, and also India and Russia and China, of course. We have also mechanism of ASEAN Plus One and ASEAN Plus Three or ASEAN Regional Forum. So in this kind of mechanism, then we manage to deal with them. And lately ASEAN also developed ASEAN Ministerial Defence forums, ADMM, which is very important, because in these ADMM, all the ministries of defense from ASEAN and partner countries like United States or China are invited. And indeed under ADMM, we do joint exercises and also other activities to reduce the security dilemma for the confidence building.

Ali Moore: Let's look at the bilateral relationship particularly with China. And Dave, can you take us back to the mid-60s, the anti-communist purge that became conflated with the killings of ethnic Chinese, and the impact that those historical events have had on the perception of China today and indeed the perception of ethnic Chinese Indonesians today?

Dave McRae: If you're charting some of the development of attitudes to ethnic Chinese Indonesians, you need to go back even further beyond 1965 to the sort of different positions that the Dutch colonial regime afforded to different ethnicities within the colony. And the sort of privileged economic position given to those of Chinese descent compared to those of other ethnicities. And this was something that continued on through the authoritarian period into Suharto's government.

As you mentioned, the Suharto regime, borne out of the these mass killings of people accused as communist sympathizers. This caused a rupture in relations with China as well, because of perceptions within Indonesia that China had meddled in Indonesian affairs through allegations of support to Indonesian communists. That produced a situation where Chinese Indonesians were largely restricted from a political role under the Suharto regime, restricted also from expressing basic elements of their identity such as the use of Chinese language. But they were placed in a position as a privileged economic class.

This doesn't apply to all Chinese Indonesians, particularly in some of the outer islands like West Kalimantan, you'd find Chinese Indonesians living in sort of modest rural circumstances. But many of the large businesses in Indonesia over the authoritarian period were controlled by Chinese Indonesian business people relying on access to the state. And so I guess this has produced a situation of entrenched prejudices towards the Chinese. The authoritarian government would often use them as a buffer against broader society when there was dissatisfaction with the g



government. And you had a long sequence of anti-Chinese riots under authoritarianism.

That complicates relations with China, even though diplomatic relations have been restored, because when you do have situations like the anti-Chinese riots in 1998 accompanying the fall of Suharto, other violence or discrimination against ethnic Chinese, any statement of support from China will always provoke a negative reaction from Indonesia.

Ali Moore: Evi, do you agree that there are continuing underlying tensions, if you like?

Evi Fitriani: Current situation is actually much better for Chinese, especially after Abdurrahman Wahid, Gus Dur, introduced more tolerant policy. But the current political circumstances is quite delicate too, because as some of the parties, some of the politicians, use the sentiment against China for their own gains. And this kind of revived the anti-Chinese sentiment in Indonesian politics.

Ali Moore: And to what extent does it depend on which group of Indonesian or which section of Indonesian society that you're talking to? If you look at the relationship with China, do different layers of society have different views on that relationship?

Evi Fitriani: I would say that. Because they have different relation with China and some of them enjoy some benefit. For those who enjoy benefit in a relation with China will always have positive opinion and perception towards China. Including those like business people. Indonesians, especially those who are Chinese descendants, they have very good relation with China in term of business. And indeed they're the link of economic relation between Indonesia and China. And they are the one who also persuaded President Suharto to normalize the relation in 1990. So for them, relation with China is very positive and they always have positive perception toward China and always try to maintain the good relation because they're the one who get the best benefit.

But for the rest of the people who didn't really know the relation, they didn't have direct contact with China or any of China's business or China's people, so the relation is very much depend on what the direction in the country. So if some politician use kind of anti-China sentiment for their political purposes, it can easily be sparked around the country. And also because current economic development with China, very active relation with China, have brought a lot of China's product ... influx of China product, influx of China labor to Indonesia. So it has been framed by several people to defame the government or the current president. So that's why those people who don't really have direct relation with China or only know China from a distance can easily be persuaded to be also become anti-China.



Ali Moore: And of course there are some very real tensions that definitely made the headlines in recent years. I'm talking about competing claims in the South China Sea. Indonesia doesn't claim rocks and islands alongside China, but it does claim an exclusive economic zone where China says its Nine-Dash Line also runs and includes the traditional fishing grounds that Indonesia claims.

How far is Indonesia prepared to go to protect that position? We had three maritime skirmishes in 2016. We had Indonesia seizing a Chinese fishing boat. If that was to blow up again, Evi, how far would Indonesia go?

Evi Fitriani: I think at the time being, government will go as far as to catch the illegal fishing vessel to this area. And even if we have to deal with China, we will deal with China in this. Of course, in the higher level, President Jokowi and President Xi Jinping have very good relation. So we know this relation will not get worse. But we also need to tell China that enough is enough. The problem is we never get confirmation from China's side regarding the fixed location of that Nine-Dash Line. They never tell us where it is, so it's quite dangerous if we just let this kind of intrusion in our water continue. So I think current government, especially facing the presidential election next year, will do everything to stop this kind of intrusion.

That's why President Jokowi since last year already ordered the Indonesian Navy to also establish or improve the Navy base in West Kalimantan to be I think one level higher. So that's mean not as high as the one in Jakarta, but at least now to strengthen the Navy base in West Kalimantan close to that area.

Ali Moore: Dave, what's your thoughts on how far Indonesia may go or not go?

Dave McRae: Well, I think in responding to China's challenge in the waters around the Natuna Islands, the Indonesian government is balancing two concerns. One is protection of its sovereignty, and probably along with the issue of Palestinian independence, sovereignty is the one issue that brings foreign policy really into the public consciousness. Any suggestion that an Indonesian government is not sufficiently protecting Indonesia sovereignty is very sensitive domestically.

But on the other hand, you have a situation where, as I said, China is Indonesia's most important economic partner. So what we've seen to date has been moves by Indonesia to signal its resolve on this challenge from China. Under Jokowi that's meant traveling personally to the area and convening a cabinet meeting aboard a warship, being present when large-scale military exercises were conducted in the area. But at the same time having rhetoric from senior members of the government saying sovereignty is non-negotiable but we're still going to remain good friends with all countries, including China.



So I think you see these efforts to signal resolve to China, because Indonesia's Navy cannot consistently patrol the entirety of Indonesia's waters. But at the same time try to compartmentalize that issue in Indonesia's broader relations with China.

Ali Moore: You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore and I'm joined by political scientist Dr. Dave McRae from Asia Institute and Dr. Evi Fitriani, who joins us via Skype from Universitas Indonesia in Jakarta. We're discussing Indonesia's foreign policy priorities and predicaments.

Dave, you mentioned just before how strong a supporter Indonesia is of Palestinian independence. And Indonesia is of course the world's largest Muslim-majority country. Tell us a little about political Islam and how it's affected foreign policy. Because Indonesia's not a theocracy, but it's not a secular society either, is it?

Dave McRae: No, no. So I guess when we talk about political Islam, we're talking about efforts to have state and society regulated according to Islamic doctrine or principles. And really the limit of that push in Indonesia has been the rejection on two occasions of a push by certain Islamic groups to have the constitution require Muslims to follow Islamic law. That's not in the constitution; instead, the state ideology of Pancasila mentions belief in one god as one of the principles of the state.

But you do have ongoing pressures within Indonesia from I guess supporters of political Islam for a greater role for Islam in public life. The most visible demonstration of that in recent times was the campaign against the then-incumbent governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, or Ahok, in 2016, where you had Islamists saying only a Muslim could be governor of Jakarta. And of course in the wake of a large Islamist protest movement and his prosecution for blasphemy, Ahok did ultimately lose that election to a Muslim candidate, Anies Baswedan.

If we go back to foreign policy, you have a similar situation. Indonesia's foreign policy is not determined by reference to Islamic doctrine or Islamic principles. Muslim-majority countries by and large are not its most important international partners. But you do see a special concern for certain issues to do with Muslims or Islam that you might not in a country like Australia. One is concern for conflict-affected Muslim populations abroad, like the issue of Palestinian independence, the plight of the Rohingya in Indonesia's region, and going back a few years, the conflict-affected populations in countries like Syria and even Egypt during its democratic transition.

The other is you see I guess Indonesia particularly under Yudhoyono promote or propose an international protocol on blasphemy, again reflecting domestic concerns from some of these conservative Islamic groups around challenges or criticism of Islam. So I think you have a situation where pressure from domestic Islamic groups can be a limiting factor on Indonesia's foreign policy, but it doesn't determine all of the positions that Indonesia takes.

Ali Moore: Evi, how do you see the future of the role of Islam in public life in Indonesia and the amount of influence it has on foreign policy?

Evi Fitriani: I just would like to highlight that biggest Islamic population in the world, Indonesia is actually have lot of voices from Muslim community to shape also foreign policy. Especially because in Islam there is the concept of brotherhood, so the solidarity of Islam and Muslim around the world has been revived quite importantly in Indonesia in the last maybe 10 or 20 years. So in this context, if there is international issues that dealing with kind of Islam society like Palestine or anti-Islam policy by President Trump or any other countries including Rohingya, it will truly attract attention of this Muslim society and they try to use the [inaudible] of solidarity as Muslims. In this sense, government policy toward those issues will certainly consider the pressure from those societies.

I just would like to highlight also, those kind of pressure is much bigger in this democratic era now, rather than previously under Suharto. During Suharto period, this kind of pressure from Muslim community is not really play a big role significantly in Suharto's foreign policy. But nowadays under this democratic system, it's very much influenced the foreign policy. And government can easily get criticized from this kind of groups if they mismanage this issue.

Ali Moore: David, if that's the case, what does that potentially mean for what has been continuity in foreign policy?

Dave McRae: I guess it depends on the area of policy you're looking at. I agree completely with Evi that a real difference between the democratic era and the authoritarian era for Indonesia is that under the authoritarian era, protests openly against the government and its foreign policy position would have been almost unthinkable. So Suharto and his foreign minister had great discretion to set foreign policy direction. The reality of foreign policy, though, is that a lot of it takes place largely out of the public attention, largely beyond the concern of Indonesia's political parties. And we see that in the fact that the foreign minister, with only one exception during the democratic era, has been a career diplomat rather than a political party politician. Whereas across many other ministries every appointee would have been a politician sort of throughout the past 20 years.



But certainly once issues reach public salience, then domestic political considerations have to be a concern, just the way they would be in any country. And that's where Australia I guess has really complicated its intentions to sign a free trade agreement with Indonesia by this proposal to potentially move Australia's embassy. Because it's impinged upon one of the few foreign policy issues that consistently can come to public attention in Indonesia, that issue of Palestinian independence. And all the more so done so in a way that was personally embarrassing to Indonesia's foreign minister because this was announced at the time that Indonesia was hosting the Palestinian foreign minister.

Ali Moore: So we touched on the US relationship. Broadly, Dave, how important is that relationship? We've said that it's not a security relationship as such, but ... How important is it for both parties, both the Americans and the Indonesians? And what do the Indonesians make of Trump?

Dave McRae: I don't think there's any great affection for Donald Trump in Indonesia. But by the same token, there's probably been less protests towards Trump than what you might expect in the world's largest Muslim-majority nation. The bans on immigration from various Muslim countries have largely passed unremarked upon, probably because they don't directly affect Indonesia. And it really only was, as you mentioned earlier, the move of the embassy in Israel that provoked large public protests about the US role.

I do think the US remains an important partner for Indonesia, both in security terms and economically. It's still a major source of foreign investment. And we've seen when Joko Widodo, the president, has visited the United States, he has typically been keen to meet with the private sector in the United States as a way of demonstrating growing economic ties. I think also when you talk about Indonesia's approach to regional security, and Evi mentioned before the larger multilateral grouping centered on ASEAN, like the East Asia Summit, Indonesia was keen for the US to join the East Asia Summit to offset the influence that China might otherwise enjoy in a multilateral forum like that as the largest other nation.

For the US, I think it has an interest beyond the alliances that it has in Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific to maintain constructive ties with countries like Indonesia, who are influential players in some of the multilateral groupings. Well, certainly for the US I don't think the relationship with Indonesia is top-billing, but it's still a partnership that I think carries some benefits for both sides.

Ali Moore: Evi, what's your thoughts?

Evi Fitriani: United States is important for Indonesia, but we will never rely on United States. In a previous time, Indonesia has had several bad time with United



States and we always found the United States not always reliable partners. So for Indonesia it's important to maintain a good relation with United States, but we should not rely on United States.

In term of security, we learn experience ... bad experience if we buy arms from the States then if the relation get sour there will be problem. So that's why Indonesia tried to differentiate its source of military suppliers. And in term of any other activities, a lot policy of United States is not in line with Indonesian foreign policy. So the perception toward United States under President Trump is quite negative in Indonesia.

Ali Moore: As we start to wind up this conversation, we talked at the outset about the continuity in foreign policy in Indonesia. And I wonder what would throw that continuity off-course? What could be a game-changer for future Indonesian foreign policy? Dave?

Dave McRae: I think if you were talking about change in terms of moving out of that "free and active" sort of sphere altogether, you'd need a really abrupt change in Indonesia's strategic circumstances. You know, much more instability in the region, sort of a very different challenge to Indonesia's own national security as one possible factor.

The other thing I'd highlight would simply be a president who might drag foreign policy much more strongly into the domestic sphere, a sort of overt nationalism platform based on the idea that Indonesia's wealth is leaking overseas, is really the sort of things that a challenger like Prabowo Subianto has highlighted as a way of attacking the current president Joko Widodo. If you did have a president come to power on that sort of ultra-nationalist platform, it may well be that you saw quite a different looking foreign policy as a result of the politicization of many more of Indonesia's foreign policy positions within the country.

Evi Fitriani: Dave, if Prabowo became Indonesian president, do you think he would carry out this kind of nationalist foreign policy?

Dave McRae: I think continuity is still most likely. You know, I guess it's a function of the question that when you're asked to highlight potential factors for change, change to the strategic circumstances or a different president are two of them. I think Prabowo's a mixed bag. On the one hand, you see this ultra-nationalist rhetoric. I think the campaign he ran in 2014 has pushed Indonesia overall in a more nationalist direction since. But on the other hand he certainly also has a strong pragmatic streak.

And you see that both in his approach to the embassy issue, where he said last week that of course he supports Palestinian independence but he feels nations have the right to decide where their embassies should be. And he



did a similar thing around the time of Australia's spying row with Indonesia in 2013, where his public commentary was more of the strain that Indonesia should engage in introspection as to why other countries were able to spy on it, rather than get angry at the fact that the espionage had occurred.

So I think he'd be balancing that nationalist streak that is really the reason he's popular in the first place with obviously the same disposition that any president would have that in their dealings with the outside world, they're looking for what is the best deal they can get for their own administration and for the country as a whole.

Ali Moore: Evi, do you agree about Prabowo?

Evi Fitriani: Well, I see that Indonesian foreign policy has gone quite dynamic. But the principle of "free and active" has always been the core of that. So in any president usually we see a different style, but at the end of the day we always see that all the Indonesian presidents also pursue development and try to never become under any of big powers.

Ali Moore: Well, it is going to be fascinating to watch Indonesia, not just its foreign policy by any stretch of the imagination, but indeed the elections for next year, the presidential elections. An enormous thank you to both Evi in Jakarta and Dave, for talking to us on Ear to Asia.

Dave McRae: Pleasure.

Evi Fitriani: Thank you very much.

Ali Moore: Our guests have been political scientist Dr. Dave McRae of Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. He's also the co-host of the Talking Indonesia podcast. And Dr. Evi Fitriani, from Universitas Indonesia.

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