



## Anchoring US Engagement in Southeast Asia: What Indonesia Can Do?

By

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### Introduction

On 14 December 2021, the United States Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken delivered the speech on “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) during his first diplomatic visit to Jakarta. The speech was expected to herald Biden era’s Indo-Pacific strategy and promised a renewal of the US’ diplomacy in Southeast Asia. Despite the growing recognition of Indonesia’s importance, Blinken’s speech invited various criticism including lack of specificity and underwhelming economic engagement.<sup>1</sup> While these shortcomings require attentions from Washington, it raises an equally important question of how Indonesia could also strengthen the US engagement. Notwithstanding their differences, a robust and sustained presence of the US is vital for Southeast Asia. What Indonesia can offer to link the US Strategy will be crucial to maintain Indonesia centrality in the region.

### Reconciling Strategic Objectives

Indonesia and the US have an overlapping yet fundamentally different approach to the Indo-Pacific. The latter’s approach – articulated in the Trump era’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” and the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) – emphasizes strategic competition against China. On the other hand, Indonesia attempted to maintain its centrality through ASEAN by keeping the region “open” and “inclusive” for all.<sup>2</sup> This vision is encapsulated in ASEAN’s Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) that manifests Jakarta “free and active” doctrine.



Despite its homage to ASEAN centrality, it is evident that the US pursues different strategic ends from Indonesia. The 2017 NSS explicitly names China as a Washington “strategic competitor” and “revisionist power”<sup>3</sup> that must be contained. While the current administration puts more emphasis on “guardrails”, its competition with China is still at the forefront. Put it bluntly; it is unrealistic to decouple the “China factor” from US presence in the region.

However, the ability of Indonesia to maintain its autonomy is contingent on the strong relations it can cultivate from its many partners. The US position is irreplaceable in this context, against Indonesia military and economic imbalance with China. Thus, an equally strong US presence is essential.

The two sides have underlying potential. Indonesia had previously established a “Comprehensive Partnership” with the US in 2010, and with Obama’s “Pivot to Asia”, which was later strengthened into a “Strategic Partnership” in 2015. After four years of abeyance during Trump’s administration, analysts have high expectations that the two sides could finally reboot<sup>4</sup> their strategic partnership. The visitation of the Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi to Washington DC in August 2021, the first visit from a Southeast Asian country in Biden’s office, provided the momentum.

Fortunately, the US has increasingly recognized the indispensability of Indonesia. Retno’s dialogue was reciprocated by a number of high-level official diplomatic visits, including Deputy State Secretary, Wendy Sherman, Defense Secretary, Lloyd Austin, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, Daniel Kritenbrink, and State Secretary, Blinken last December. Although the trips fell short with platitudes,<sup>5</sup> it sent a clear message that the US was seeking some common grounds with Indonesia. Blinken’s engagement, however incremental, features positive development.

Indonesia could capitalize on the opportunity by better advancing its central role as a regional leader. By providing a more palatable framework for cooperation, the US engagements are concomitant. As noted by Ben Bland from Australia Strategic Policy Institute, “A stronger, wealthier, democratic Indonesia won’t always agree with the US — but it will add a critical counterweight to China in Asia.”

## **Substantiating the Indo-Pacific Outlook**

Indonesia’s current approach to the Indo-Pacific heavily relies on the AOIP. The document asserts the centrality of ASEAN-led institutions and advances key areas of cooperation to anchor the region, including maritime, connectivity, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and economic cooperation.<sup>6</sup>





Despite the support, US engagement falls short of realizing the Outlook's goals. This gap between commitment and actual action in substantiating the AOIP is attributed to not only Washington diplomatic lethargy but also inherent flaws ascribed to the document.

The AOIP, which is only a 5-pages document, has not provided a detailed framework for implementation or sufficient resources to carry thereof. It makes Indonesia current posture overly dependent on its normative leadership while leaving the strategic policies underinvested. As criticized by Evan Laksmana, a senior fellow at the National University of Singapore, AOIP currently is "more aspirational than a policy proposal."<sup>7</sup> Substantiating the Outlook will provide a clear area where the US could link in its strategy.

Instead of a "lip-service," US support should be perceived as an opportunity that is forthcoming if Indonesia could lay a more coherent and implementable framework. The Outlook ought to be further institutionalized in areas where FOIP overlaps, such as maritime security, freedom of navigation, and most importantly, economic cooperation where the US is still lagging behind.<sup>8</sup>

## Investing more in the Key Institutions

To advance such a wide area of cooperation, Jakarta should invest more resources beyond the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) as the spearhead of AOIP's implementations.<sup>9</sup> Thus far, MOFA is the only institution that put considerable effort directed to the Indo-Pacific issues. At the same time, other government bodies under the Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs (*Kemenko Polhukam*) have not carried the same vision. With its institutional constraints and limited budget (only Rp8.1 trillion or US\$ 562 million for 2022),<sup>10</sup> AOIP will remain hollow if Jakarta only relies only on MOFA.

Indonesia can seize the initiative in the economic sector by linking the national or ASEAN Master Plan for Connectivity with the US' signature programs, for instance, the Blue Dot Network to ensure high-quality infrastructure or President Biden's forthcoming Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.

Further increasing ASEAN utility is also crucial. ASEAN has been equipped with a multilateral forum that serves its role as confidence builders, yet its utility has been gradually diminished amidst the new geopolitical landscape. Several proposals have been made, such as further institutionalizing the East Asia Summit and reviewing the ASEAN Charter. As ASEAN's *primus inter pares*, Indonesia could lead the initiative to revitalize ASEAN. By providing more clarity to Indonesia's framework, the US could better translate its commitment into an actual engagement with Indonesia.





## Adding Weight on the Security Dimension

While the Outlook orients more toward economic development, Indonesia leaves the security aspect unaddressed in its Indo-Pacific approach. Key document, such as the Global Maritime Fulcrum (*Poros Maritim Dunia*) emphasizes maritime trade rather than maritime security and has been practically defunct since President Joko Widodo's second term. Jakarta took such an approach to avoid the impression that it is siding with US FOIP, which heavily weighted on the security narrative, lest provoking a negative reaction from Beijing.

However, Indonesia approach gains crucial repercussions. First, Indonesia's indefinite actions makes Washington view its position as less strategic as a regional partner. Despite its strategic location and long-standing status as ASEAN's leader, Indonesia has not been explicitly mentioned in Biden's Interim National Security document. The same document only mentioned Vietnam and Singapore as the key partner from ASEAN,<sup>11</sup> further illustrating Washington's priority in the region.

Second, Indonesia's uncoordinated response – or often “denials”<sup>12</sup> – to China's violations render its position as vulnerable. With or without the need to anchor the US, Indonesia should protect its strategic autonomy by becoming assertive to respond to foreign threats.

In December 2021, for instance, China crossed the “red line” by sending a diplomatic protest over an oil-drilling project in the North Natuna Sea, Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone.<sup>13</sup> The increase of China's “grey-area” operations, such as deploying maritime militia and fishing vessels with coast guards' protection, also indicates that Beijing has begun treating Indonesia similarly to other claimant states. Unlike Trump, Biden's officials are more cognizant of Indonesia's non-alignment principle. During Blinken's speech in Jakarta, he emphasized that the US' goal to defend the rules-based order is “to protect the right of all countries to choose *their own path*.”<sup>14</sup>

The US slightly shifted its approach from fully aligning regional countries to bolstering their strategic autonomy against China. This shift presents an opportunity for Indonesia to push US engagements better while also filling the security gap in its Indo-Pacific approach.





## Conclusion

Both Jakarta and Washington shoulder an equal responsibility to advance their strategic partnership. To better translate the US commitment into an actual engagement, Indonesia can take the initiative by providing a more coherent Indo-Pacific framework to cooperate with. While the ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Outlook has aptly dealt with confidence-building measures, the gap in the security dimension also needs to be filled through non-ASEAN options.

The ideal response is yet to be seen, yet Indonesia has gone in a positive direction. In the aftermath of China's protest, Indonesia took a tougher stance by finishing the oil drilling project in Natuna and increasing coordination with officials in charge of maritime security from ASEAN claimant states.<sup>15</sup> The idea of forming a minilateral coalition to handle the South China Sea has also resurfaced in many public debates.<sup>16</sup> Further commitment is requisite to link the Indo-Pacific visions from both the US and Indonesia.





## Endnotes

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