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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Indonesia's New Partial Multialignment Strategy: A Conceptual and Empirical Analysis

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Abstract
The nature of Indonesia's foreign policy has long been understood as non-aligned. It has been associated with the basic tenet of *bebas aktif* (being independent and active) and the evolving international relations of the state, which demonstrated continuity in its non-side-taking position in the Cold War. However, recently, new trends in Indonesia's regional and global conduct have emerged, including the diversification of multilateral engagements beyond ASEAN, the strengthening of various forms of strategic partnerships with major Indo-Pacific powers, and the adoption of normative hedging policies in response to sensitive international issues. What explains these developments? The conception of Indonesian foreign policy as being defined by non-alignment is no longer appropriate. This article argues that Indonesia now employs a *partial* multi-alignment strategy. Nevertheless, limited national power and persistent threat perceptions prevent the state from pursuing a fully multi-aligned strategy.

Keywords: Indonesia; Foreign policy; Indo-Pacific; Multiplex order; Partial multi-alignment

Introduction

Indonesia was one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and played a significant role in developing non-aligned policy during the Cold War. Even after the East/West dichotomy of the Cold War became obsolete, Jakarta celebrated the relevance of nonalignment by hosting the NAM summit in 1992. A non-aligned stance against rival powers has thus been traditionally deemed the most effective strategy for achieving the goal of being *bebas aktif* (independent and active) as its foreign policy ideal. A historical connection existed between independent and active foreign policy and nonalignment. During the Indonesian revolution and the early stage of the Cold War, Vice President and Foreign Minister Mohammad Hatta initiated the country's commitment to adopting an independent and active foreign policy in 1948. Hatta (1953) posited that in the conflict between the capitalist and socialist blocs, the nascent Republic of Indonesia should not ally with anyone in particular, and should disentangle itself from the drivers and effects of military power polarisation.

The key rationale for nonalignment was inward-looking. It was that nonalignment could prevent the newly born state from disintegrating due to domestic ideological conflicts among socialist, secular nationalist and Islamist forces, which could potentially incentivise foreign actors to intervene in Indonesian internal affairs (Sukma 1995: 305-306). Hatta's middle-way stance, positioning Indonesia

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outside of the conflict between the two blocs, informed the ongoing adoption of nonalignment policies. By being a non-aligned country in the Cold War, Indonesia could enhance economic cooperation with, and seek technical assistance from, diverse actors, including the developed countries and multilateral financial institutions (Mason 2010).

However, since the mid-1990s, new trends have arisen in Indonesia's regional and global relations. The three most important ones are as follows: firstly, Indonesia now engages in a wide range of multilateral institutions beyond its traditional foreign policy vehicles, i.e., the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and NAM. Under the leadership of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014) and President Joko Widodo (2014–2024), Indonesia signalled a more significant interest in advancing its partnerships and roles within organisations like Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Group of Twenty (G20), and more recently Jakarta has applied to join the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Secondly, multiple strategic partnership schemes have been developed between Indonesia and select major powers in the Indo-Pacific region. Thirdly, Indonesia increasingly promotes its vision and values concerning critical international issues, often those related to democracy and human rights. These developments are unequivocally *not* consistent with a nonaligned foreign policy stance.

The authors argue that Indonesia is moving towards *partial* multi-alignment, departing, albeit steadily and subtly, from its traditional, nonaligned foreign policy approach. The domestic political landscape, relatively free of internal ideological conflicts, and the emergence of a multiplex regional order in the Indo-Pacific, have reduced the significance and effectiveness of nonalignment as Indonesia's core foreign policy strategy. Indonesia is pursuing a *partially* multi-aligned position by diversifying and intensifying its multilateral diplomacy with China and the US, promoting strategic partnerships with selective major regional powers, and undertaking normative hedging. Nevertheless, resource limitations and perceptions of imminent threats constrain the adoption of a fully multi-aligned policy approach.

This paper maps out its argument in five sections. Following this introduction, an understanding of the conceptual and practical instantiations of multi-alignment is developed. Section three then discusses the emerging irrelevance and ineffectiveness of nonalignment in the case of Indonesia. The fourth section analyses how Indonesia has developed a moderately multi-aligned strategy. The fifth section explores the critical constraints that Indonesia faces in pursuing an explicit and formalised multi-aligned foreign policy. The paper concludes by summarising the core argument and briefly looking back at the key themes it has discussed.

This article adds conceptual and theoretical value to the study of foreign policy by exploring practical changes made by Indonesian foreign policymakers and arguing that the established approach to comprehending Indonesian policy as fundamentally nonaligned is outdated. Key works on the evolution of Indonesia's foreign policy, such as those developed by Acharya (2014), Agung (1973), Leifer (1983), Suryadinata (1996), Ruland (2018), Smith (2000), Weatherbee (2005, 2017), and Weinstein (1976), highlight that the state's objectives and its priorities in world affairs have changed from time to time, yet they have arguably failed to properly examine the conditions that have made changes in foreign policy strategy possible. This study attempts to integrate just such an examination into its analysis. Because of the prolonged dominance of theories of Indonesia's foreign policy which conceptualise it as nonaligned, research on changes has revolved around discerning factors that have led to the persistence of Jakarta's nonaligned policy approach (see, for instance: Novotny 2010; Sebastian and Marzuki 2023). The study expands on this research, highlighting important geopolitical events and global changes that have prompted a shift towards multi-alignment in Indonesian foreign policy. Finally, this paper broadens the scope of, and adds nuance to, multi-alignment scholarship by positing the notion of *partial* multi-alignment, exploring how nonalignment and multi-alignment strategies at times coexist.

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The Concept and Practice of Multi-Alignment

The term 'multi-alignment' was first introduced by Shashi Tharoor (2013) to describe India's foreign policy trend since the 1990s. Multi-alignment involves the implementation of a plethora of pragmatic foreign policies which align at varying times and to varying degrees with the interests of other states (that at times have competing agendas). It seeks to bridge the economic, defence and security interests of a country in a pragmatic way, in the context of the complex interrelationships that prevail between great powers at both regional and global levels. Multi-alignment became the primary strategic stance of India in the era of Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2014–present); this in part explains India's actions in developing multilateral diplomatic fora with major players in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific (Raghavan 2017). However, empirical analysis of multi-aligned post-Cold War foreign policy is not limited to scholarship pertaining to India. The concept and practices of multi-alignment have been deployed by several countries in other regions, especially those poised uncomfortably between two competing great powers (Chapman 2017; Strakes 2013; Vanderhill *et al.* 2020). Despite being a leading power in Eurasia with competing interests to those of China, even Russia behaves at times as a multi-aligned actor, opting to foster its relations with China when this can serve to counter Western dominance (Rowe and Torjesen 2008; Schmitt 2020).

Multi-alignment, as a comprehensive stance, has several characteristics contrary to those of non-alignment. Wilkins (2012: 56) distinguishes between alignment and alliance – two concepts that have often been used interchangeably. Alignment refers to multidimensional behaviours of agreeing (though not formalising this in written declaration) to collaborate in various fields, and to pursue shared (or at least congruent) economic, political, cultural, security or military objectives. It involves setting out valid expectations to receive predictable, reciprocal support or opposition from each other in future interactions. Alignment also suggests that states build policy coordination on critical security issues, which will be applied under specified conditions. A binding military alignment, formalised in official terms and treaties, is referred to as an alliance. As part of an alliance, states are *obliged*, when certain conditions are in place, to defend each other against threats and belligerent actors by collaborating and jointly mobilising their military resources. In doing so, alliance members can launch unilateral military operations or consult with other members regarding the mobilisation of armed forces. Nonalignment can be understood as a general policy of *not* making binding commitments in terms of military alliances (and sometimes other cooperation areas) with other states. A non-aligned actor avoids making formalised agreements on military alliances and does not pledge to unequivocally support or oppose certain actors on specific issues in the future. NAM states demonstrated this non-committal approach in navigating conflicts between the communist East and the liberal-capitalist West during the Cold War (Benvenuti 2024; Dinkel 2018). As a non-bloc country, Indonesia built cordial relations with the Soviet bloc during the Sukarno administration and shifted towards the US under Suharto. However, Jakarta did not commit to a military pact with either. No commitment was made to support or oppose any particular state in Indonesia's interactions with the US and the Soviet Union (Arora 1981).

Multi-aligned countries will consistently declare what is in their strategic interests. Meanwhile, nonaligned states try to obscure, or even hide, their strategic interests, despite often forging cordial relationships with a specific major power (O'Donnell and Papa 2021: 806). Cold War nonalignment involved the establishment of bilateral ties between weaker and stronger states. Even though non-aligned countries form multilateral organisations, for example NAM, they do not aim to influence bilateral issues. NAM is a group that expresses a collective voice on global problems of concern to non-aligned actors; it was not created to serve as an instrument for resolving member-to-member problems. Moreover, if a bilateral problem intersects with a conflict of interest between superpowers, NAM does not even enter the arena. On the contrary, multi-aligned states practise multilateralism in fostering their diplomatic profile and actively protect their international security interests *vis-a-vis* great power contestations. A multi-aligned country is willing to stand by selective parties in a given

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conflict. The Modi government's response to the recent war in Ukraine is a pertinent case in point (Verma 2023).

Multi-alignment aims to increase opportunities and create space to play a significant role in decision-making at regional and global levels. India and Russia use the BRICS forum to enhance their diplomatic leverage and influence when responding to critical developments in international relations. Their shared goal is to participate in moving the direction and dynamics of the world order beyond the liberal international order (Stuenkel 2020). In this paper, multi-alignment is defined as a strategy employed to strengthen the position of weaker states by simultaneously improving relations with two competing great powers. Countries that are multi-aligned deepen their engagement with *both* contesting powers and their allies. A trilateral network is formed where the multi-aligned players are tied relatively equally close to each respective side. Hall (2016) notes that triangular multi-alignment is put into practice by exacting three methods: (1) diversifying and intensifying multilateral cooperation, forging stronger links with both competing powers; (2) advancing bilateral strategic partnerships with selective powerful states in the region; and (3) undertaking "normative hedging". Normative hedging entails avoiding building too strong an attachment with, or dependence on, outcomes of disputes that intersect with certain international norms, such as norms regarding the environment, free markets, human rights and liberal democracy. The purpose of normative hedging is to help the multi-aligned states to avoid falling into the trap of endorsing the double standards of great powers, which invariably appeal to their own professed international norms to undermine their rivals. The normative hedging component of multi-alignment differs from *strategic* hedging, discussed by Haacke (2019) and Kuik (2016), which refers to insurance-seeking behaviours on the part of the smaller states dealing with competing major powers. Strategic hedging, as concept and as practice, is more associated with risk mitigation *vis-a-vis* the uncertainty of power contests.

This study argues that Indonesia is now attempting to develop a multi-aligned stance by fostering its relations with both China *and* the US, although this positioning needs to be completed and substantiated, as it has been in India under Modi. India has built a formalised triangular relationship with Russia and China, but New Delhi also participates in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with the US, Japan and Australia. The Modi government explicitly states that India's strategic interest in engaging in such a triangular nexus is to become a global player (Mishra 2023). Indonesia, however, has yet to openly announce its intention to define itself as a multi-aligned actor, although it has established vehicles for doing so and devised multilateral diplomacy tactics to improve ties with China *and* the US. Jakarta is shifting from being purely *non*-aligned to being partially *multi*-aligned. This change has been visible since the mid-1990s and has become more apparent since the 2000s and 2010s. The following section discusses the internal and external circumstances which make nonalignment a less valid concept in comprehending Indonesia's international relations today, and it highlights the empirical evidence of Indonesia's shift towards partial multi-alignment.

The Declining Relevance of Nonalignment

A non-bloc-aligned strategy was implemented by many third world countries during the Cold War. After the Cold War, however, the benefits of nonalignment came to be questioned (Rana 1997). Various foreign policy studies have examined the post-Cold War non-bloc policy preference, focusing on a diverse range of factors, including elite perceptions, domestic political priorities, and regional dynamics. Kullaa (2012) stresses that the avoidance of ideological confrontations is the fundamental factor justifying states' preference for nonalignment. The following discussion of this highlights the declining relevance of nonalignment in analyses of Indonesia today, noting the absence of an ideological component in Indonesian domestic politics and international relations and flagging up the shift that has taken place towards a multi-alignment strategy in pursuing national interests.

Globalisation and democratisation have created a situation utterly distinct to that experienced by Indonesia at the beginning of its independence. As mentioned in the introduction, the decision to

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not ally itself with a single bloc during the Cold War was motivated by the fledgling country's interest in securing national integration, which was vulnerable to local conflicts between ideological groups, chiefly socialists, secular nationalists, and Islamists. To prevent external powers from intervening in, and exploiting, internal problems, a foreign policy direction that was neutral with regard to the two great powers was pursued. Current domestic politics, as a result of the process of democratic consolidation after the fall of Suharto in 1998, is of a different nature. The New Order regime had formally eliminated the communist party. Although several activists and politicians sought to rebuild a socialist party, it did not gain public support. After the Cold War ended, there were no communist powers in the region or at the international level that were capable of igniting the re-emergence of communism as a global-scale political force. Hence, in today's Indonesia, only secular nationalism and Islamism remain as key ideological players in the public space, and they have little impact on elite decision-making process.

Post-Suharto Indonesian politics is more concerned with serving the pragmatic interests of the political party elites. It is thus very relatively divorced from ideological factionalism. There is no permanent coalition between parties. Some periods have seen the secular nationalist and Islamist politicians join forces, for example in support of the government under President Yudhoyono, suggesting differences between the two rival factions are at times more rhetorical than practical. In addition, despite the 2014 presidential election having created polarisation between populist ideas, with rife competition between technocrats, chauvinists and Islamists, these issues did not ultimately affect the state's functioning and they did not distort the general trend of the state's factions towards relative consensus and cooperation. Populist polarities were reintroduced in 2019 after the technocratic leader President Widodo accommodated the ultranationalist opposition leader Prabowo Subianto in the cabinet (Mietzner 2020) and the Islamists were marginalised from formal politics. Islamist actors have promoted a foreign policy that is pro-Muslim, oriented towards supporting the struggle of Muslim countries against Western domination. However, this discourse sparks little enthusiasm in modern Indonesian pluralist society, except on issues pertinent to the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Rohingya crisis. Even these issues have tended to erupt then fade relatively quickly, losing political momentum. Islam-related or Muslim-specific international events catch the attention of foreign policymakers and parliamentarians during election campaigns as the political elite wants to attract the sympathy and vote of the Muslim majority, yet Islam, and Indonesia's relations with the Muslim world, are not the government's consistent priority (Perwita 2007; Sukma 2003). Nor does the secular nationalist elite enact foreign policies based on its ideology. Although under the presidencies of Yudhoyono and Widodo there was an increasing tendency towards trade protectionism, this was not linked to nationalistic ideas so much as pragmatism, based on the belief that it aligned with the ruling elite's economic and political interests (Patunru and Rahardja 2015; Wicaksana 2021). Although populism has become a bigger theme in politics, the populist agenda does not shape Indonesian foreign policy. No significant change has occurred in the orientation and substance of Indonesia's external relations. This is consistent with the wider trend in countries led by populists, such as Brazil, the Philippines, Turkey, and the US under Trump, which have demonstrated anti-establishment characteristics. Indonesia continues to enhance its cooperation with all actors, including both China and the US (Wicaksana 2022b). The proposition that Indonesia pursues non-aligned foreign policies to avoid ideological clashes within the country is, overall, lacking relevance in the contemporary era.

The non-bloc stance is not relevant to the multiplex world order, which is now marked by the decentralisation of power and the pluralisation of key actors. This is radically distinct from the bipolar system of the Cold War (Acharya *et al.* 2023). In the Indo-Pacific region, multiplicity has created a hierarchy of power fuelled by the main regional actors' overlapping capabilities, interactions and interests. The US and China are the two strongest countries in terms of brute economic and military power in the Indo-Pacific, so they occupy the first and second layers of the hierarchy. In the third layer are Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, Russia and the ASEAN states, which have smaller capacities

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but can develop collaborative networks with the more powerful players in the higher strata (Goh 2013). For example, as third-tier states, Japan and Russia engage in a complex series of horizontal and vertical relations. Since 2016, Moscow and Tokyo have achieved a rapprochement, building on their economic and political ties. At the same time, Japan is enhancing defence collaboration with the US and, together with Australia and India, is revitalising the Quad. Russia has strengthened its strategic connections with China, and when the war in Ukraine broke out, both pledged to support each other without reserve. What characterises the Indo-Pacific security architecture today is a complex web of strategic hedging, multipolar dynamics and pragmatic foreign policies involving countries across all levels of the hierarchy (Suhito and Wicaksana 2024), not a bipolar competition between China and the US.

Economically, the contested hierarchical order of the Indo-Pacific has been driven by transnational production networks connecting large industries from Southeast Asian countries to East Asia and the US. Japan pioneered the development of transnational production networks in the 1980s, encouraging the regionalisation of trade and investment involving almost all the new economic powers in Asia (Dent 2016). The surge in East Asian-led regionalism was followed by China's economic rise in the 1990s, accelerating financial integration projects in the region. Until now, the financial sector has been unifying the economies of China, India, Japan, South Korea and ASEAN (De Grauwe and Zhang 2016; Fry-McKibbin *et al.* 2018). This development of large-scale economic interconnectedness influences decision-making in terms of security policy, whereby disputes and tensions that can lead to armed confrontations must be managed as effectively as possible because the consequences are highly costly for economic growth and productivity throughout Asia. Therefore, the great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific is defined more by careful institutional balancing (He 2015) than by an arms race between China and the US, though both blocs are seeking to build and empower their favoured regional institutions to influence the regional order. China wants a developmentalist order, while the US defends its liberal one (Stubbs 2018).

There is no NATO in the Indo-Pacific, notwithstanding the fact that the US and its treaty allies continue to function as one of the pillars of regional security, supporting the liberal order. Recently, the US, Australia and the UK have reinvigorated their military collaboration under AUKUS, and many believe this pact is designed to counter China's expanding military presence. However, the AUKUS-vs-China dynamic is not a new Cold War. Beijing did not respond to AUKUS by building up a military pact with the pro-China states, such as Cambodia and Myanmar, in Southeast Asia. Moreover, although China and the US have occasionally opposed each other in dealing with regional issues, they have not acted beyond the use of diplomatic pressure. The region's current dynamic differs to that of the Cold War period, whereby the US and the Soviet Union engaged in destructive proxy wars, exploiting third world internal conflicts to pursue hegemonic agendas.

The role of the middle power states in the third tier of the Indo-Pacific hierarchy in maintaining order is worth noting. The middle powers have succeeded in pursuing their security strategies via policies that go beyond forging alliances with the great powers. As Emmers and Teo (2015) observe, middle powers, such as Australia, Indonesia, South Korea and Vietnam, have employed two main approaches in protecting their regional security interests: one is quintessentially functional (whereby the middle powers use their resources to overcome a particular challenge) and the other is strategic and behavioural (whereby the middle powers seek to promote the norms of multilateralism, despite the great powers imposing diplomatic superiority). These middle power strategies work to save the Asia-Pacific region from the devastating effects of geopolitical competition and tensions. In the case of Indonesia, the state's agency and relative freedom should now be factored into analyses of the country's strategy against the backdrop of this contested hierarchy. Portrayals of Indonesia as a middle-path, passive actor are outdated, with contemporary Indonesia becoming more proactive and decisive amid the fluidity and plurality of the new Indo-Pacific order.

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Indonesia's Shift Towards Multi-Alignment

Changes in Indonesia's foreign policy strategy have emerged since the mid-1990s. Formally, Jakarta has stated that it is independent and active. Indonesia continues to adopt an impartial stance when faced with concrete problems requiring a specific, immediate response, like international conflicts. This consistency in not taking sides has led many observers and researchers to claim that the same non-bloc policy position that defined pre-1990s Indonesia is being maintained. In fact, behind the non-alignment that appears on the surface when international events necessitate factional positions to be taken, there is a current of change towards a multi-aligned position, though this has not been officially stated or formalised in state documentation. Signs of a multi-aligned strategy have appeared since the foreign policy elite in Jakarta noted the importance of embracing all the major powers in the Asia-Pacific region, indicating that Indonesia no longer needed to lean heavily on one party. Senior policymakers began to indicate that Indonesia need not rely solely on the US, which during the 1970s and 1980s had become Indonesia's most important economic and military partner, nor on China, which was rapidly developing into an Asian economic and military giant. Building equally strong relations with the two blocs has been the orientation of Indonesia's post-Cold War foreign policy (Alatas 1996), but this orientation has been accompanied by the development of diplomatic instruments and cooperation mechanisms which differ from those utilised during the Cold War period of nonalignment. Table 1 shows critical changes from which we can discern the gradual change from full nonalignment to partial multi-alignment. An additional column for complete multi-alignment has been added, to demonstrate the modest nature of its existing multi-alignment strategy.

Diversifying and Intensifying Multilateral Diplomacy

During the New Order period, Indonesia's multilateral diplomacy relied on ASEAN. The ASEAN vision was to create stability in Southeast Asia and support members' national economic development. To achieve this goal, Indonesia encouraged Southeast Asian regional problems to be resolved by Southeast Asians themselves, which meant rejecting the involvement of foreign actors, especially those who had the potential to make the region an arena for military ventures designed to further their own interests. Therefore, in 1971, Indonesia sponsored the formation of the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Denuclearization (ZOPFAN) as a collective platform of demilitarisation. ASEAN refused to link itself with any defence arrangements organised by the superpowers. Furthermore, the first ASEAN heads of government summit in 1976, as well as marking the birth of the ASEAN Treaty of Amity

Table 1. Foreign Policy Approaches: From Pure Nonalignment to Partial Multi-Alignment (and Complete Multi-Alignment)

Elements of the Strategy	Pure Nonalignment	Partial Multi-Alignment	Complete Multi-Alignment
Multilateralism	Excluding the great powers from multilateral institutions formed under Indonesian initiatives	Embracing all major Indo-Pacific powers in ASEAN regional bodies working on economic and security affairs	Joining a formally declared security organisation alongside the great powers
Bilateral relations	Stratified, depending on the scale of priority	Building strategic partnerships with Indo-Pacific's major states to strengthen economic and security relations	Expressing clear support for the great powers' policies on critical strategic issues
Attitude towards international norms	Avoiding and refusing the adoption of international norms perceived as the extension of superpowers' foreign policy	Undertaking selective diffusion of international norms to maintain strong relationships with the bigger states, particularly China and the US	Adopting the great powers' favoured norms and supporting their position on international norms

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and Cooperation (TAC), saw Indonesia promote the concept of national and regional resilience as ASEAN's comprehensive security outlook, prioritising the protection of national sovereignty and ASEAN's strategic autonomy.

ASEAN's role as the spearhead of Indonesia's multilateral diplomacy continued and developed significantly in the 1980s, with the country promoting ASEAN as a critical means of maintaining regional stability and supporting members' national economic development. After the Cold War, however, Indonesia's approach towards the great powers altered, from excluding the major regional players, particularly China and the US, to enmeshing them into the matrix of its foreign policies. This strategic alteration was articulated by the Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas (1996): "Indonesia must enhance relations with all important economic and military powers in East Asia and the Pacific". Alatas even claimed that every country in the Asia-Pacific region would naturally try to get closer to the two largest powers.

In the context of this emerging ideal of embracing the great powers, Indonesia started to adopt a multi-aligned strategy, though policymakers and politicians did not articulate this in formal terms. Through several new institutional mechanisms built beyond the traditional framework of ASEAN, Indonesia became more proactive in diplomatic exchanges, seeking to influence evolving dynamics in the economic and security environments of the Asia-Pacific region. After joining APEC in 1989, Indonesia supported the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994, ASEAN Plus Three (APT) in 1997 (which included China, Japan and South Korea), and then the East Asia Summit (EAS), founded in 2005. In 2011, EAS successfully integrated the US and Russia. ARF and EAS are now the two main multilateral diplomatic fora covering all major states in the Indo-Pacific. ARF focuses more on security dialogue, while EAS covers a broader range of policy areas, including finance, public health, development and the environment. Indonesia initiated the founding of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) in 2006, which focuses on promoting regional defence diplomacy programmes. From 2010 onwards, ASEAN has succeeded in recruiting the armed forces of the most powerful countries in the Indo-Pacific region, notably China and the US, to participate in regular meetings, cooperation schemes and joint exercises via another platform called ADMM Plus. Even without a treaty alliance between ASEAN and the non-Southeast Asian participants of ADMM Plus, this Indo-Pacific defence diplomacy has proven effective. More importantly, collaborative engagement by China, India, Japan and the US, despite their different objectives in terms of the nature of the regional order, affirms the more agential and effective role that Indonesia is occupying through ASEAN (Wicaksana 2022a).

In an attempt to broaden the strength and reach of its international engagements, Indonesia became a member of the G20 in 1999, representing the Southeast Asian economy. Between 2021 and 2022, Indonesia took over the G20 presidency from Italy amid the war in Ukraine. President Widodo tried to persuade the conflicting parties in Ukraine to hold a peace process, but failed to make this materialise. Two years later, the Widodo government proposed that Indonesia become a full member of the OECD, moving from its current status as an accession state to obtaining full membership of the organisation. At the same time, however, Indonesia has accepted the invitation from the BRICS nations to participate as a partner state. These parallel policy actions have are good examples of a workable, more empowering Indonesian diplomatic strategy. On the one hand, Jakarta is seeking to build a closer relationship with the liberal world, while on the other hand, it is by no means casting itself as a dogmatic ally of the West.

Diversifying and intensifying multilateral diplomacy beyond ASEAN is different to hedging; many Southeast Asianists see hedging as a viable strategy for mitigating the risk posed by competition between great powers for the security of weaker states. Instead, diversified and intensified multilateral diplomacy involves the construction of multiple channels through which multi-aligned relationships can develop. Indonesia sustains and improves its multilateral connections with China and the US through the aforementioned regional and global institutions. It builds on areas of existing cooperation and attempts to find improved models to better cope with ongoing problems. Indonesia has

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sought to foster parallel relationships with both China and the US, whilst nurturing relations with other important Indo-Pacific powers. This differs from strategic nonalignment, whereby Indonesia has assumed a passive middle-path stance between China and the US, avoiding any assertiveness or proactiveness. Indonesia's approach of partial multi-alignment capitalises on the country's influence over multilateral organisations. Indonesia seeks to more proactively manage a web of multilateral activities and networks involving a range of competing great powers.

Building Strategic Partnerships

Under the New Order government, Indonesia's international relations with respective states were arranged in concentric circles, and this underpinned the importance of bilateral relationships. The core of the concentric circles was Indonesia's domestic politics, defined in terms of development and stability. The first layer beyond the centre was ASEAN, reflecting the most important geopolitical arena which influences Indonesian internal politics. Indonesia at this time adhered to the regional doctrine that ASEAN's central role is to be a keeper of stability so as to facilitate national economic development. Beyond the ASEAN circle were the wealthy Asia-Pacific countries, mainly Japan and the US, upon which the Indonesian economy depended for financial and technical aid. The outermost ring included other states, such as members of NAM (Kusumaatmadja 1983). This management model for its external relations conveyed the message that the non-aligned Indonesia was focused fundamentally on the economic benefits of positive international relations, whereby the mobilisation of external resources to support the domestic economy was the most important goal of foreign policy. One novel development occurred in the mid-1980s, when Suharto sought to balance relations with the superpowers by improving ties with the Soviet Union (Singh 1986: 290-298). However, the relationship with Moscow was never formally declared as comprising a key element of the concentric layers model. The consecutive post-Suharto governments still refer to the concentric model, although they have rearranged the configuration of external actors. China is in the same circle as the US and Japan, indicating the continued prioritisation of economic relations in Indonesia's foreign policymaking. In addition, bilateral relations have been modified into key strategic partnerships.

In 1990, diplomatic links between Indonesia and China were normalised, and both sides have enjoyed improved economic cooperation since. In response to China's growing regional influence in the 2000s, Indonesia initiated certain strategic partnership schemes with China, which China welcomed. Beginning in 2005, Indonesia and China deepened their economic ties via multiple trade and investment deals. In 2009 and 2011, the scope of these bilateral agreements was expanded to capture financial sectors and enable capital flows between the two sides. During the state visit of President Xi Jinping to Jakarta in October 2013, China and Indonesia declared they would go even further, developing a comprehensive strategic partnership which would broaden and strengthen China-Indonesia political and business ties (Ministry of State Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia 2013). In 2015, President Widodo announced his government's plan to connect Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum infrastructure projects with China's Maritime Silk Road initiative. The commitment to boosting Indonesia-China economic connectivity was reaffirmed in the joint statement made by the governments of the two countries following Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Jakarta in May 2018 (*China Daily* 2018). Since 2018, the partnership between Indonesia and China has become not only about economic development collaborations; Jakarta and Beijing have both committed themselves to adopting congruent, if not identical, stances on security and geopolitical affairs in the region, both parties seeking to keep the regions stable and peaceful by ensuring states respect each other's national sovereignty (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia 2023a).

In parallel, bilateral relations between the US and Indonesia have entered a strategic partnership phase. In the early 1990s, Washington suspended its defence cooperation with Indonesia after the Indonesian military's violent crackdown on demonstrators in East Timor. Human rights became a sensitive international issue for Jakarta. However, in 2006, the US military embargo on Indonesia was

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suspended, with a more intensive military collaboration arranged at both the bilateral and regional levels. Various new economic agreements accompanied this improvement in military relations. In 2008, President Yudhoyono proposed that bilateral ties with the US be cemented in a comprehensive strategic partnership. On President Barack Obama's visit to Jakarta in November 2010 (The White House 2010), this was enacted. In 2015, President Widodo built further on the scope of the Indonesia-US comprehensive partnership to embrace maritime security policy, in line with Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum policy. Widodo and Obama noted their shared views on bilateral and regional relations, highlighting the importance of preserving peace and stability based on agreed rules (The White House 2015). Under the presidency of Donald Trump, although some commentators argued that Indonesia was not considered as much of an important partner by the new administration, bilateral economic, security and political relations remained cordial. They even improved somewhat in the field of security policy. Indonesia-US military collaborations were expanded during the administration of President Joe Biden; joint exercises were held in 2021 and 2022, involving armed forces from Indonesia, the US, and the American Indo-Pacific allies. The US supports Indonesian military modernisation programmes led by Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Indonesia 2022).

As well as forging these two strategic partnerships, Indonesia has intensified its connections with the most important Indo-Pacific powers beyond the US and China, such as Australia, Japan, India, and Russia. In terms of relations with Australia, the separation of East Timor in 1999 was to their detriment, and there was mass public resentment of the Australian intervention in the referendum. Nonetheless, the Yudhoyono government did not let this hamper the strength of the bilateral relationship between Jakarta and Canberra. In 2010, Indonesia and Australia pledged to entrench economic ties via a set of partnership plans (Australian Embassy Indonesia 2010). In 2018, President Widodo strengthened the partnership with Australia in a comprehensive and strategic plan, which stated that Indonesia and Australia are strategic partners with shared commitments to preserving a rules-based regional order in the Indo-Pacific (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2018). Indonesia's strategic partnerships with India and Japan were agreed upon in 2005 and 2006, respectively (Ministry of External Affairs Government of India 2005; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2006). Under President Widodo, these bilateral cooperation agreements were expanded into comprehensive strategic schemes, pitching maritime security and non-militarised regional order as the core agenda items (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia 2023b). Indonesia's strategic partnership agreement with Russia was finalised in 2016. It identifies the states' key cooperation sectors, such as defence, energy, investment, trade, and tourism (Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia 2016).

These strategic partnerships with major regional actors comprise examples of, and drivers of, Indonesia's shift to multi-alignment in three ways. Firstly, the partnerships have been designed and implemented simultaneously, as part of Jakarta's effort to diversify and intensify multilateralism and create a plurality of diplomatic fora and mechanisms of influence beyond ASEAN. The commitments to pursuing strategic partnerships with China, Japan, India and the US were intended to operate in congruence with the emerging multilateral diplomacy mechanisms within EAS and ADMM Plus. The aim was to leverage complementary bilateral and regional instruments and assume a partially multi-aligned strategic stance. Secondly, subsequent positive developments at the bilateral and regional levels have meant that Indonesia could convey that the economic, security and political connections it has established with China and the US have been carefully organised, and that potential conflicts of interest in terms of Jakarta's commitments to the two superpowers are contained and manageable. The triangularity and multi-alignment pursued by Jakarta has focused on encouraging the bigger states to remain committed to maintaining cooperation with Indonesia, geared to serving mutual objectives and values. Finally, considering the trend in the regional order towards pluralism, Indonesia's multiple strategic partnerships have amplified the value of the (weaker) state to the bigger actors, and granted Jakarta more relative agency, when contrasted with its formerly passive non-aligned strategy.

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In addition, the comprehensive and strategic partnerships have enabled Indonesia to accrue the benefits of stronger relationships with all key actors within the potentially alienating context of the great power polarisation that is emerging in the region and the world at large.

Engaging in Normative Hedging

The normative hedging element of Indonesia's partial multi-alignment strategy is focused on promoting democracy and human rights. Indonesia's attitude to applying international norms around democracy and human rights has undergone a radical change from the approach of the authoritarian New Order regime to that of the democratic post-Suharto government. Under Suharto, one of the tasks of state diplomatic offices abroad was to counter criticism by foreign governments and NGOs of the Indonesian political system, which was undemocratic and frequently violated human rights. Suharto was explicit in his objection to outsider interference in Indonesia's domestic human rights record. The peak of Suharto's opposition to external interest in the issue was marked by his decision in 1992 to disband the Inter-Governmental Group on Indonesia, a forum holding annual meetings of rich countries and international financial organisations seeking to assist Indonesia with its development programmes. It was triggered by the Group's chair, who openly linked loans to Indonesia to cases of human rights violations in East Timor (Mahbubani 1992). The Group was later revived and renamed the Consultative Group on Indonesia, but it ceased engaging in in-depth discourse on Indonesian domestic politics.

Following robust democratisation, however, the Indonesian government's attitude towards the protection of human rights has been notably more amenable to international norms. In 2005, Indonesia was among other ASEAN members which accepted responsibility for protecting universal norms and incorporating these into the Southeast Asian Association. Indonesia proposed that the imperative to protect human rights be stipulated in the ASEAN Charter. Under the Charter, a regional human rights institution was formed in 2011, known as the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. It received strong support from President Yudhoyono, who put the agenda of human rights promotion at the centre of Indonesia's global communications. In terms of democratisation, in 2008 the Yudhoyono government initiated the founding of the Bali Democracy Forum, aimed at hosting dialogue between governments in Asia and facilitating the exchange of ideas around democracy and experiences of dealing with democracy-related challenges. The convening of the Bali Democracy Forum has become one of Indonesia's most significant international mechanisms for promoting its identity as a democratic nation-state. Under Widodo, the scope of discussion within the Bali Democracy Forum has been expanded to cover several aspects of globalisation, social change and environmental problems affecting democracies worldwide. The attendant list is widening, including not only democratic states but also undemocratic ones such as China.

Despite this normative direction in Indonesia's foreign policy, it has not been accompanied by consistent action; this has exposed Indonesia to accusations of half-heartedness and generated a perception that there is a wide distance between the state's practices and its espousal of universal values of democracy and human rights. Indonesia's transition towards democracy and the protection of human rights has been piecemeal and fragmented. This is discernible in the "ASEANisation" and "Indonesianisation", or the purposive contextualisation, of democratic and human rights norms, whereby these norms are adapted to the cultural context of Southeast Asia before being internalised into the state's legislative and law enforcement institutions. This process of contextualisation can entail distortions of established norms when translated into policy, with actual state practices failing to meaningfully realise the abstract values of democracy and human rights. At the ASEAN level, states accused of violations against the human rights norms stipulated in the Charter are not prosecuted. ASEAN allocates such issues to the member governments to resolve them through diplomatic and domestic political processes. For instance, in the prolonged case of democratic setbacks and state violence against the Rohingyas in Myanmar, Indonesia refuses to intervene on the grounds that it has

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a responsibility to protect the victims. Instead, Jakarta has chosen to undertake "quiet diplomacy", inviting the conflicting parties to hold a peace talk while sending humanitarian assistance to the Rohingyas (Rosyidin 2020). Myanmar has not been suspended from ASEAN, as Western governments and human rights activists have insisted it should be, though some restrictions on the Junta's attendance at ASEAN's formal meetings were applied for a limited period of time.

Indonesia's half-hearted and at times inconsistent position on the promotion of democracy and human rights indicates that its normative commitments on the international stage are also partially multi-aligned. By taking a principled though pragmatic stance on democracy and human rights, Indonesia can continue to engage with both China and the US, whose normative interests and espoused values are contradictory. China is resistant against the notion that liberal democratic values are universal, and it is reluctant to support the promotion of global norms around human rights. The US ostensibly, if not always in empirical practice, backs the liberal order, supporting the dissemination of democracy and human rights. The inherent contradictions in Indonesia's normative position are evident in how it managed the two superpower's contrary responses to the Myanmar crisis. Indonesia manages the great powers' differences by following the ASEAN Way, accommodating both sides' concerns and creating a mechanism to sustain cooperation with everyone. This is also their approach in the ongoing Bali Democracy Forum. By engaging both democratic states and non-democratic states in dialogue and diplomacy, Indonesia positions itself vis-à-vis China and the US in a pragmatic and flexible place. Indonesia has fostered cordial relationships with both superpowers, ensuring that its democratic achievements cast it in a positive light for liberal partners whilst avoiding exposure to the risks that wholly aligning itself with the liberal order would produce.

Constraints to Implementing Full Multi-Alignment

In this section, the authors examine why Indonesia has, as yet, not been explicit in formally defining itself as a fully multi-aligned actor like India. Jakarta's trajectory towards declared multi-alignment is restrained by Indonesia's inability to efficiently utilise the country's economic resources to affect rapid growth, as well as its limited capacity to accelerate military modernisation. Indonesia is at a disadvantage in terms of economic and military power, which impedes the explicit declaration of full multi-alignment. India, conversely, has been able to address its domestic economic and military constraints. Since the 2010s it has grown into one of the most significant regional economic and military powers, enabling New Delhi to project India's power globally and create multi-alignments with China, Russia and the US. Strategic choices are determined by an assessment of a state's resources and the extent to which that state can harness various sources of power to affect beneficial foreign policies.

Regarding economic power, Indonesia is the wealthiest country in Southeast Asia in terms of natural resources and the most populated member of ASEAN. However, Indonesia's GDP per capita is lower than those of its neighbours, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. Indonesia's national development, GDP growth and productivity lag significantly behind those of these key ASEAN members (Kusnandar 2021). Economists argue that this weakness is closely linked to Indonesia's ongoing skills shortage and deficits in human resource development (Putri 2023). Despite President Yudhoyono's and President Widodo's administrations prioritising human resource development programmes, their implementation has been constrained by the need for better governance, resulting in low quality human capital and decreased competitiveness. Critical analysts warn that the mismatch between Indonesian natural endowments and its level of economic power is linked to the problematic state-capitalism that characterises the economy and its governance, in which the ruling regime and local business elite collude to conserve an economic system that protects their respective interests, with monopolies over domestic markets often being protected. This is to the detriment of potential improvements in efficiency and competitiveness that could result from enabling easier market entry. Consequently, Indonesia cannot increase its economic weight in highly competitive

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global markets, and very few Indonesian business actors or conglomerates can compete with their Southeast Asian counterparts in high-growth sectors such as energy, infrastructure, mining, and advanced technologies (Robison and Hadiz 2017: 889-891).

The military modernisation programmes initiated by Jakarta to date have been hampered by the country's limited revenues, with the necessary funds lacking and the armed forces continuing to be highly politicised. The Yudhoyono government launched a Minimum Essential Force programme accompanied by an increase in the state budget for defence spending from 0.78 per cent of GDP in 2011 to 0.9 per cent in 2014. However, under President Widodo, military expenditure, on average, decreased by 0.1 per cent. It was only 0.73 per cent of the GDP in 2019 (SIPRI 2024). Indonesian military spending is lower than that of Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. Defence scholars have commented that far greater funds are needed to achieve the goal of achieving green water navy build-ups, an established policy goal in Widodo's Global Maritime Fulcrum (Anggen 2017; Yakti 2017). In addition to this simple financial hindrance, the improvement of Indonesian defence remains constrained by civil-military politics, in which the ruling civilian elites often pull active and retired military figures into the domestic political arena or the state bureaucratic functions. The generals are often willing to participate in practical political affairs because they want to protect their long-standing corporate interests (Sebastian *et al.* 2018). This nepotism and cronyism among the civilian and military elites has stalled the process of building modern and professional armed forces.

These limitations in economic and military power prevent Indonesia from formalising and declaring its position as a multi-aligned state because a fully multi-aligned state, which navigates competing but simultaneous relationships with great powers and operates through triangular relationship-building, must possess hard (military) and soft (economic) power to protect its independence from bigger states. India demonstrates that this is the case. With its thriving regional economic and military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region, India is confident it can cooperate with China *and* the US to varying degrees, and at different times, to serve its national interests. Thanks to the strength of India's economy and military, neither Beijing nor Washington can dictate New Delhi's decisions on significant regional and global issues. Conversely, Indonesia has been consistently unable to develop its economic might or professionalise and upgrade its military to reach a level of development that would enable it to project multilateral power like India, Russia, and China. President Widodo had mandated a "beyond ASEAN regional role" for Indonesia, in which the country would utilise EAS and the G20 as vehicles for boosting its international influence. This aspiration was ultimately thwarted by the long-standing problems of Indonesia's limited economic power and its poor military capacity.

Besides these economic and military obstacles to Indonesia formally declaring itself to be a multi-aligned state, a popular Indonesian threat perception constrains the full implementation of an exclusively multi-aligned strategy. The historical experience of being a colonised nation fighting for independence has shaped the Indonesian threat perception. It has incited a spirit of nationalism centred around acute sensitivity over territorial sovereignty. The nationalist leaders who founded the Indonesian nation-state viewed international politics as a dangerous and exploitative arena, where the powerful will use all means possible to seize Indonesian wealth. Indonesia must, accordingly, be deeply and equally suspicious about the intentions of all other nations (Weinstein 1971). Suharto maintained this perception that Indonesia operates in a fundamentally hostile external environment populated by exploitative foreigners, although the New Order government built closer ties with the US and Japan (Hein 1988). Even under the presidencies of Yudhoyono and Widodo, when Indonesia's multilateral engagements were expanded and strengthened, this nationalistic, suspicious perception appeared in political, economic and cultural actions, conveying the ongoing presence of a suspicion over anything foreign that is detrimental to Indonesia's success. However, rather than being oriented around territorially-focused nationalism, recent perceptions of external threat are concerned with the perceived weakness of the government elite due to Indonesia being left behind by other regional states in terms of economic growth and military development, with many blaming outsiders for conspiring to block Indonesian progress (Aspinall 2016). To some extent, a sense of inferiority

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and a tendency towards scapegoating impede the state in becoming a fully multi-aligned actor. For instance, instead of developing a more solid multilateralism based around multi-alignment, as India has done as part of a Russia-India-China tripos and as part of Quad, Indonesia still considers ASEAN to be the regional norm-setter. Despite participating in high-profile Indo-Pacific and global institutions, Jakarta remains more comfortable operating in a normatively ambiguous zone, never taking a marked side in great power struggles. Some national figures and intellectuals have suggested that Indonesia should build strategic triangular relations with China and India or create an East Asia strategic axis, including China, India and Japan, because this could lead to more significant economic and military collaborations (see, for instance, Sukma 2019). These policy recommendations have not thus far been heeded. The foreign policymakers in Jakarta are worried about the potential risks of a formalised, declared multi-alignment, which could prompt more powerful states to interfere in Indonesian domestic affairs, endangering national integration and making local markets vulnerable. Indonesia's national consciousness differs to that of multi-aligned India, insofar as the latter's sense of its own history is less plagued by an anxiety around inferiority and a strong tendency towards scapegoating. The so-called Hindu Nationalism in India has successfully mobilised a perception of Indian exceptionalism, with modern India aspiring to achieve global power (Nymalm and Plagemann 2019). New Delhi can create multiple alliances and act pragmatically and at times disruptively in regional and global affairs because of this combination of military-economic power and a strong sense of inherent international importance.

Conclusion

Since the 1990s, there have been significant changes in how the Indonesian government has interacted with, and fostered relations to, major powers in the Indo-Pacific region. Learning partly from the ideas and practices that mark India's foreign policy, Indonesia has tried to iteratively move towards more multi-alignment, although this has not yet been explicitly articulated or formalised as the country's official foreign policy strategy. Because of the end of the Cold War and the replacement of the two-bloc system with a multi-polarised, pluralist system, globalisation and democratisation have reduced the strategic value of nonalignment for Indonesia. Nonaligned foreign policy was geared to navigating the ideological bipolarity between the US and the Soviet Union, not least because in its domestic politics, the newly created Republic of Indonesia faced internal ideological conflicts that jeopardised national integration, so it sought to dissuade foreign powers from exploiting this internal weakness. However, post-Suharto domestic politics is *not* characterised by stark and violent ideological contradictions, so nonalignment can no longer appeal to this rationale. On the regional stage, there is no longer a bipolar enmity structuring the order; the emerging system a multiplex, making multi-alignment more plausible and potentially more effective in securing Indonesian interests.

In the 2000s and 2010s, Indonesia's partially multi-aligned direction materialised in the broadening and deepening of multilateral engagements within and beyond ASEAN (which had initially served as the chief diplomatic mechanism for Indonesia). Indonesia forged institutional cooperation agreements that involved the bigger extra-Southeast Asian regional powers and it engaged in a range of problem-solving mechanisms to address pressing regional issues. Multilateralism within APEC, ARF, EAS, ADMM Plus, and the G20 (and potentially the OECD and BRICS) brings together the competing giants of the region, most importantly China and the US, to meet in diplomatic fora in which Indonesia can foster parallel progress in its various international relationships.

Jakarta has built strategic economic and security partnerships with the leading regional states, such as Australia, China, India, Japan, Russia and the US. These schemes have been upgraded into comprehensive strategic partnerships, strengthening collaboration and ensuring that links with China on the one hand, and the US on the other, can be managed more according to Indonesia's preferences. Multi-alignment Indonesia has avoided having strict attachments to international rules, though this runs the risk of potentially disrupting the stability and progress of its bilateral and multilateral relations with

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competing bigger states. This paper has referred to this as "normative hedging", a composite part of the country's emerging multi-alignment strategy. These three elements of the shift to multi-alignment complement each other. Jakarta is enacting a moderate form of multi-alignment today, but it may yet formalise this approach and adopt multi-alignment as the predominant strategic framework for its foreign policy.

The country's economic and military weakness and its prolonged threat perceptions restrict the embedment and expansion of Indonesia's emerging multi-alignment. Despite Indonesia's potential to develop its national economic and defence powers, this has been thwarted by factors such as poor governance and the prevalence of nepotism and corruption among the elite. Indonesia must put firm and clear power arrangements in place in terms of its triangularised, multi-aligned relationships with China and the US. It must move beyond the normative line endorsed by ASEAN-based multilateralism, even though Indonesia's relations with both China and the US through other organisations are so far thriving. Unlike India, which has formally declared its multi-alignment, Indonesia does not have sufficient economic and military power to bolster such a move. The limitations to its economic and military power prevent it from being able to pursue a fully multi-aligned foreign policy, and this situation is worsened by the fact that a strong sense of suspicion pervades the elite's attitude to foreign actors, with leaders often inadvertently revealing a sense of inferiority and frequently scapegoating others for the country's failure to develop its economic and military power. Nonetheless, partial multi-alignment is now a far more valid description of Indonesia's foreign policy strategy than nonalignment. Though the transition to full multi-alignment is contained by a range of factors, and may be permanently thwarted by the country's inadequate power, we can expect to see this shift from nonalignment to multi-alignment continue. Competition between China, the US, India, Russia and other powerful Indo-Pacific actors will continue to create opportunities that Indonesia can exploit.

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