

## How Will the Prabowo Administration Shape Indonesia's Foreign Policy as a Middle Power?

By Calvin Khoe

Indonesia's President Joko Widodo, early during his first term of office, declared his country a middle power. However, long before "middle power" became a common phrase in diplomatic and political circles, Indonesia acted like a middle power: building regional institutions, setting norms of international relations, mediating conflict resolution processes, and promoting multilateral dialogue.

What is a middle power? Scholars and pundits cannot seem to agree on a common definition. According to Dr. Dino Patti Djalal, Chairman and Founder of the Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (FPCI), a middle power must meet three criteria: size, in terms of population and territorial expanse; weight, in terms of economic strength and military capability; and ambition, in terms of agenda-setting power and preeminence in international affairs and initiatives.

Indonesia easily meets these criteria. It boasts the world's fourth-largest population and fifteenth-largest territory; its economy is the biggest among the ten countries in Southeast Asia and the sixteenth-largest in the world; its military strength is unequaled in Southeast Asia. As to Indonesia's ambitions, it has been so active in norm-setting and institution-building in Southeast Asia that it is regarded as "primus inter pares"—first among equals—in ASEAN. It is the seventh biggest contributor to United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations out of 120 countries. Its track record as a peace mediator is secure, having initiated and co-led, along with France, the Cambodian Peace Process. This process was instrumental in the rebirth of the Kingdom of Cambodia. Indonesia also mediated the Bangsamoro Peace Talks that led to the Final Peace Agreement, which ended decades of separatist rebellion in the Philippines. Today, it is strongly pushing for the implementation of the ASEAN Five-point Consensus aimed at resolving the Myanmar crisis.

Indonesia enjoys several comparative advantages that empower it as an activist nation and differentiate it as a middle power. First, its location: Indonesia is situated in Southeast Asia, a relatively stable and prosperous region at the center of the Indo-Pacific, a macro-region of ever-increasing strategic significance. Through ASEAN, Southeast Asia is structured as a security community. This means all countries in the region enjoy relative trust and confidence in one another, unlike other middle powers located in volatile and dangerous areas. Such as Türkiye and Iran in the Middle East as well as South Korea in East Asia.

Second, Indonesia is not involved in any military alliance and has no enemies. The Indonesian constitution precludes the country from joining any military alliance. And since Timor-Leste broke away in 2002 and then reconciled with Indonesia in 2004, Indonesia has no interstate adversaries. Thus, the country has no political baggage and is totally free to exercise strategic autonomy. Furthermore, Indonesia has developed strategic partnerships with all five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Hence, Indonesia is better off than many of its peers that are bound to military alliances or in a state of tension or even conflict with other countries.

Third, Indonesia is one of the fastest-growing economies among the middle powers. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated Indonesia's GDP growth at purchasing power parity (PPP) to be around 5.2 percent in 2024, putting it ahead of the economies of Australia, Brazil, Mexico, Türkiye and South Africa.

**Mr. Calvin Khoe,** Lead Analyst at FPCI Research & Analysis, explains that "Indonesia enjoys several comparative advantages that empower it as an activist nation and differentiate it as a middle power," and wagers that "President Prabowo will strive to make Indonesia an even more influential middle power."

These qualities and advantages have empowered Indonesia to serve as a force for stability and collaboration for progress in its region and beyond.

The question is: will Indonesia keep playing its middle power role in the years ahead? In this regard, the policies of the incoming president-elect are a new factor to consider. In elections held last February, the incumbent Minister of Defense, retired General Prabowo Subianto, was elected president by a wide margin and will take office in October of this year. How will his policies impact Indonesia's role and status as a middle power?

In a social media post, one of Prabowo's predecessors, Dr. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Indonesia's president from 2004 to 2014, confidently asserted that Prabowo will be a foreign policy president. There is strong support for that prediction.

As defense minister, Prabowo effectively navigated the dynamics of international security. Since his proclamation as president-elect, he has visited the capitals of China, France, Russia, and other consequential middle powers, including Tokyo, Ankara, Amman, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Qatar, and Amman. In an interview with Newsweek just before the elections this year, he said Indonesia must "become more assertive in its foreign policy, bilaterally or multilaterally through its engagement in the UN, OIC [Organization of Islamic Cooperation], ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations], etc., and more responsive to shaping the geopolitical realities of our region."

He has also signaled that Indonesia will play a more active role in promoting and facilitating international peace processes. In the recent International Conference on Gaza in Jordan and the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, President-elect Prabowo announced Indonesia's commitment to support, contribute to, and facilitate all efforts toward the realization of a two-state solution and ending the conflict between Israel and Palestine. He also announced Indonesia's readiness to deploy peacekeeping troops, air assets, and medical personnel to man a field hospital in Palestine. He also offered to send a ship hospital to the territory. Indonesia will also help evacuate injured civilians, especially children and wards of orphanages from Gaza.

On the war between Russia and Ukraine, he reiterated his call for a truce so that negotiations toward a peaceful solution could begin in earnest. Since there is no military solution to the conflict, he has stressed that both sides must stop the killing and start negotiating.

Regarding US-China strategic competition, he appealed to China and the United States to be responsible global powers. He argued that the major powers can co-exist, cooperate, and collaborate. Indonesia, he has said, is committed to promoting this kind of engagement between the major powers.

In the region, Indonesia will continue to promote stability. Speaking before the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Indonesia during the campaign, he committed himself to the principle of good neighbor diplomacy, which stresses the importance of building a network of strong friendships with all countries in the region in order to ensure stability and economic growth.

When aggregated, these comments confirm that as President Prabowo will strive to make Indonesia an even more influential middle power. But with the passing of time, will he maintain his position on global issues and carry out all the initiatives he said he would pursue? Once again, Prabowo's own words provide an answer to this question, "Indonesian people know that I am a man of my word," he told Newsweek during an interview last January, "They know that I do what I say." That statement should provide reassurance enough that Indonesia will grow as a middle power during the Prabowo presidency.

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