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Steering the G20 and ASEAN the *bebas aktif* way

By Leonard C Sebastian and James Guild

SYNOPSIS

*Indonesia's foreign policy remains rooted in the original ideals of the country's founding fathers. Non-alignment, economic well-being, and national resilience underlie current leadership efforts to sustain the country's role in international and regional affairs. This necessitates an appreciation of the *bebas aktif* philosophy.*

COMMENTARY

Indonesia's hosting of the G20 Summit in 2022 was widely viewed as a success, as Indonesia assumed the role of international mediator between global rivals. By establishing itself as a non-aligned entity unbound to a particular ideological or geopolitical bloc, Indonesia was able to credibly broker dialogue between opposing parties.

This success begs the question of whether a similar outcome should be expected with Indonesia's ASEAN chairmanship in 2023.

While the situation in Myanmar will be an important issue, it is unlikely to dominate the agenda. The agenda will likely focus on economic issues, regional consolidation and how best to use ASEAN to achieve certain strategic objectives.

Economic self-interest will likely be the defining feature of Indonesia's ASEAN chairmanship. This reflects the adaptability of Indonesia's independent and active ([*bebas aktif*](#)) foreign policy philosophy.

Bebas aktif, as articulated by Indonesia's first vice president and founding figure, Mohammad Hatta, pursues two objectives.

First: promoting social justice and generating economic prosperity to preserve sovereignty. Prosperous countries have more resources and autonomy and can pursue a free and active foreign policy based on strategic interests.

Second: maintaining peace through active internationalism and eschewing foreign influence. Hatta envisioned a foreign policy predicated on a careful assessment of reality and an aversion to alignment with any geopolitical bloc that might dilute Indonesia's sovereignty.

Indonesia should act in ways that maximise its national interest. A solid understanding of those interests is key to parsing this concept.

Top priority is the economy

Indonesia's national interest is economic development. During former president Suharto's era, Indonesia's international engagement was predicated on the need to build a conducive environment for economic development via ASEAN. Strong national resilience can only be attained through successful economic development.

National resilience as defined in economic terms remains the bedrock of President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo's foreign policy.

This strategy was evident in [Indonesia's handling of the G20 Summit](#). After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there was international pressure from Western countries to isolate Russia. Jokowi engaged with both sides, including taking a trip to [meet with](#) Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin in June 2022, helping set the tone for the summit later in the year.

This was an unusually active role in international politics for Indonesia but it was very much in the country's economic interest to play the mediator role. The United States, Russia and China are all important trade and investment partners for Indonesia. Economic interests, rather than aspirations of becoming a global power broker, drove the bold international diplomacy on display.

ASEAN is important too

This foreign policy strategy has implications for ASEAN. Indonesia will engage with ASEAN differently than it did with the G20 since a different set of interests are at stake. There is a domestic politics dimension driven by President Jokowi too. This dimension focuses on national resilience and Hatta's goal of achieving sovereignty and peace through prosperity and growth.

The Myanmar crisis will feature but will not dominate the agenda because it is intractable and Jokowi is unlikely to waste political capital on an issue that does not benefit his domestic agenda.

[Indonesia's 2023 ASEAN chairmanship](#) carries the theme: 'ASEAN Matters: Epicentrum of Growth'. This is meant to promote ASEAN's economic potential to global trade and investment partners. Jokowi will push ASEAN initiatives on health

architecture, energy and food security, financial stability, regional economy digitalisation and tourism promotion.

Indonesia will place greater emphasis on [quiet diplomacy](#) rather than the bold gestures seen during its G20 leadership. We can also expect efforts to resolve issues that directly impact Indonesian citizens, such as [human trafficking](#).

The second set of interests relate to Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They remain the main stakeholder in the ASEAN process in Indonesia and will seek to forge a coherent vision for the group's future and strengthen ASEAN's institutions. A critical action in this context is putting procedures in place to ensure that regional integration remains unhindered when a member state is paralysed by a national emergency.

Moving the ASEAN agenda forward

Bringing Timor-Leste into the ASEAN fold, working on finalising the signing of the South China Sea [Code of Conduct](#), signing the protocol to the Treaty on Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone and promoting an ASEAN Outlook for addressing maritime disputes will help burnish Indonesia's credentials as a serious driver of Southeast Asian regionalism.

Indonesia's ASEAN chairmanship will market the region as an attractive hub for investment and trade. But it also recognises the group's limitations and that ASEAN is not the best vehicle to resolve all of the region's problems. When Indonesia hosted the G20 Summit, engaging in very public international diplomacy aimed at brokering peace and dialogue between rival great powers served its national interest. The main motivation was to prevent disruption in Indonesia's existing trade and investment deals with those great powers.

Indonesia's strategic calculus for ASEAN is different. It calls for a quieter type of diplomacy that seeks realistic and achievable solutions to a regional crisis while focusing on economic growth and national resilience. This reflects a pragmatism based around national interests and highlights the adaptability of Indonesia's foreign policy, which can be adjusted to fit changing circumstances.

This is the *bebas aktif* way.

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