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Indonesian Political Parties and Foreign Policy in the 2024 General Election

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SYNOPSIS

*Indonesian political parties rarely express their foreign policy views in the run-up to the 2024 general election. **MUHAMAD HARIPIN** and **ADHI PRIAMARIZKI** argue that the underlying problem of the lack of discussion on foreign policy goes beyond the subject's unpopularity.*

COMMENTARY

Recent debates surrounding Indonesia's 2024 general election (GE) mainly revolve around the presidential candidates and how political parties attempt to capitalise on the coattail effect. Conversely, debates on policy platforms are largely absent, let alone discussions of each party's views on foreign policy. In the run-up to the 2024 GE, the extent of Indonesian political parties engaging with external relations is limited to examples of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP)'s [rejection of the Israeli national football team](#) to compete in the U-20 World Cup, which Indonesia was set to host, and the Islam-based Prosperous Justice Party (PKS)'s support for the Palestinian struggle, which the party has been vocal about.

Political parties in many parts of the world play [a role in foreign policymaking](#). The question then is: why do Indonesian political parties give such little attention to foreign policy debates? One possible answer is the lack of interest in foreign policy among the general population. Discussions on foreign affairs only capture some segments of society, primarily the educated urban population, although some issues, such as the Palestinian struggle, generate greater public attention. However, our examination on Indonesian political parties and their external relations reveals that foreign policy

negligence is caused not only by lack of popularity but also political pragmatism and absence of clear foreign policy guidelines within the parties.



Indonesia's political parties appear to give little attention to the country's foreign policy debates, even during the run-up to the 2024 general election. Instead, parties prefer to focus on political pragmatism given the absence of proper foreign policy guidelines. *Image by authors.*

Political Pragmatism and Absence of Guidelines

In the 1950s, political ideology had prompted Indonesian political parties to be actively involved in foreign policymaking. For instance, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) openly proposed closer relations with either the Soviet Union or China, in line with the party's ideology. Meanwhile, nationalist and Islamist parties counterbalanced PKI by forging relations with the Western bloc, notably the United States.

However, such ideological contestation in foreign affairs is almost nonexistent in Indonesian politics today. Since 1998, political ideology has played a small role in shaping electoral strategy and long-term objectives in Indonesian politics, primarily due to [the practice of client politics and the personalistic structure](#) of political parties. Furthermore, securing [control over patronage resources](#), notably the state budget, has been at the core of attention in Indonesia's presidential elections. Transactional politics has largely been the norm, rather than adherence to political ideology. Consequently, the absence of ideology has diminished the drive for political parties to play an active role in foreign policymaking.

While contemporary Indonesian political parties regularly conduct meetings with their foreign counterparts, most of these meetings are aimed at networking or as a form of *silaturahmi*. For instance, PKS occasionally has meetings with the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) on a national and regional level. Nonetheless, regional-level interactions between PKS and PAS mainly occur between regional branches within close proximity, such as PKS Riau Islands and PAS Johor Bahru.

Several Indonesian political parties such as PDIP, Golkar (Party of Functional Groups), Gerindra (Great Indonesia Movement), and Nasdem (National Democrat) have also maintained relations with Malaysia's UMNO (United Malays National Organisation). In May 2023, Golkar and UMNO leaders met and agreed to collaborate on a youth empowerment agenda. Both parties asserted that the young generation plays a salient role in bolstering electoral gains. These types of meetings, nevertheless, are rarely followed up by anything formal. In general, the pattern of interaction between Indonesian political parties and their foreign counterparts indicate pragmatism rather than ideological engagement.

The next issue is the absence of proper foreign policy guidelines. The Memorandum and Article of Association (*Anggaran Dasar dan Anggaran Rumah Tangga*, or AD/ART) of Indonesian political parties rarely outline foreign policy aspirations and objectives. Indonesian political parties in general comprise a foreign affairs division, which provides analyses and recommendations regarding foreign policy. However, unclear guidelines often result in analyses and recommendations formulated on a case-by-case basis rather than products of ideology.

In contrast, personalistic power structures within political parties lead to the domination of internal decision making. For instance, in the wake of escalating violence in Gaza, PDIP Chairwoman Megawati Sukarnoputri instructed the party's secretary-general, Hasto Kristiyanto, to [meet with the Palestinian Ambassador to Indonesia, Zuhair Al-Shun](#), to convey a message of solidarity. Hasto also reiterated PDIP's position in supporting the Palestinian struggle for liberation. Similarly, [Golkar Chairman Airlangga Hartarto](#) condemned the continued Israel-Palestine conflict. He urged the Indonesian government, the United Nations, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to intervene in this issue.

Implications for Indonesia's Foreign Policy

Political parties represent streams of political ideology. The absence of ideology in political parties discourages the creation of a foreign policy agenda. Thus, Indonesia's [strategic pragmatism](#) to foreign policy will persist as there are no real incentives to alter the pattern.

In addition, political pragmatism hinders a more systematic foreign policy. Instead, it allows a more personalistic foreign policy in which external relations depend on the interests and wits of the executive leaders. This restricts the role of foreign policy bureaucracy to merely an executor rather than an architect.

Another consequence is the lack of checks and balances in the implementation of foreign policy. Lack of attention to unpopular foreign policies certainly gives political parties little motivation for thorough supervision. However, political parties may be eager to engage in foreign affairs when the issues attract significant public attention.

The continued neglect of foreign policy reflects the diminishing role of ideology in Indonesian politics. Furthermore, an erratic president could enhance the pragmatic and personalistic nature of Indonesia's foreign policy, and even increase the unpredictability of the country's handling of foreign affairs.

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