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Resuming Indonesia- China Military Exercises

A Test for Jakarta's Non-Alignment in an
Uncertain World

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AIIES COMMENT

Resuming Indonesia-China Military Exercises A Test for Jakarta's Non-Alignment in an Increasingly Uncertain World

Introduction

As of 2022, China has been Indonesia's largest trading partner for a full decade. China is also Indonesia's second largest source of FDI, while Indonesia remains the second largest destination for Chinese investment among ASEAN member states.¹ Within the world's largest archipelago, Chinese investments encompass a variety of different sectors, including infrastructure, electric vehicles, and renewable energy.² Regardless, the strong partnership between Jakarta and Beijing that grew from 2012 to 2022 did not yet expand to the defense sector.

As far back as the early 2000s, China had promised to help Indonesia to build the Indonesian defense industry. However, the amount of Indonesian military students being sent to train in China hardly even reached a dozen people annually since 2010, whereas the last two decades saw over 7.000 Indonesian students train in around 200 military-education and training programs in the US. Moreover, in 2015, due to China's increasing aggressiveness in the South China Sea, Indonesia decided to suspend its bilateral special forces exercises with China, the Sharp Knife.

In total, from 2003 to 2022, Indonesia and China only had four joint military exercises together. By comparison, the same time period saw Indonesia and the US hold over 100 joint military exer-

cises.³ Nonetheless, the administration of Indonesia's new President, Prabowo Subianto, might see the resumption of bilateral military exercises with China.⁴

Jakarta's Free-and-Active Foreign Policy Doctrine in Defense

In August 2024, around the same time when Indonesia was preparing to hold its annual Super Garuda Shield with the US, and only two months before then-Defense Minister Subianto was inaugurated as President, Indonesia and China met up to discuss the continuation of bilateral military exercises. Abdul Rahman Yaacob, a Southeast Asia expert with the Lowy Institute, stated that if a potential exercise takes place in 2025, it will be meant to show Indonesia's neutrality through its time-honored free-and-active foreign policy doctrine. However, he likewise outlined that the military cooperation between Indonesia and China could extend beyond non-traditional security fields, such as piracy and terrorism in the contested South China Sea waters, in the future. If it now also includes fields such as warfare and interoperability, it may alarm countries like South Korea, Japan, and France.⁵

The last few months of 2024 saw Indonesia continue its free-and-active foreign policy doctrine by holding several joint-military exercises. These included the annual Super Garuda Shield with the US and other countries such

as the UK, France, Japan, Singapore, and Canada, in September, before holding bilateral maritime exercises with three different countries in November: the Orruda 2024 with Russia, the Keris Woomera 2024 with Australia, and the Keris MAREX 2024 with the US. Greg Fealy, an expert of Indonesian Politics from the Australian National University, explained that Subianto's decision to have military exercises with different countries, including Russia and Australia, practically in the same week, highlighted Indonesia's non-aligned stance and reiterated its refusal to align with any specific foreign power.^{6,7}

The free-and-active foreign policy doctrine itself is something Indonesia has been adhering to since the country's earliest days. It is an approach that gives Indonesia freedom to collaborate with anybody it desires to, without having to exclusively align itself to one bloc.⁸ Subianto himself has declared that Indonesia under his leadership will continue this traditional doctrine, including in his inaugural presidential speech on October 20, 2024.⁹ So, this begs the question, for what reason and how should Jakarta prepare for the potential restart of bilateral military exercises between Indonesia and China?

Mind Your Surroundings: What Indonesia Needs to be Aware of

Indonesia should take a lesson from Subianto's visit to China in November 2024. It sparked a debate among observers because of a joint bilateral statement that stated that both countries have reached a crucial common understanding regarding joint development in areas of overlapping claims. After all, Indonesia's long-established stance is that it is not a party to the territorial dispute in the South China Sea, but the statement gave the perception that Indonesia has yielded to China's interests.

Aristyo Rizka Darmawan, a PhD scholar at the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University, noted that with this joint statement, Indonesia appeared to be the first ASEAN member state to implicitly recognize China's nine-dash line claims. Darmawan asserted that, taking into account the fact that China lies far beyond the 200 nm-exclusive economic zone and the 350 nm-continental shelf, Indonesia should never have to negotiate any maritime boundary delimitation with China. The joint-statement is thus a big loss for Indonesia's capability to oversee its own natural resources and a huge win for China.

This has also changed the whole dynamic regarding the hot-button topic of the South China Sea in Southeast Asia, including the negotiations for the Code of Conduct in the waters of the South China Sea. Not even a

statement by the Indonesian foreign ministry released afterwards, declaring that Jakarta still does not recognize China's nine-dash line claims, managed to temper the heat. Critics highlight that the joint-statement was made by Indonesia and China together, whereas the foreign ministry statement was made by Indonesia alone. In other words, China might possibly decide to hold to the interpretation written in the earlier joint-statement regardless.¹⁰

What lesson should Jakarta learn from this while rejuvenating its military ties with Beijing? Indonesia should realize that it is unwise to think that any bilateral military exercise between Indonesia and China is not going to influence regional and international observers. With China's aggression in the South China Sea and the gargantuan geopolitical shift with the Transatlantic Alliance seemingly heading to a bitter end, Indonesia must tread carefully before going through with such a plan.

Applying the Lesson

Rushali Saha, a security risk analyst with Horizon Intelligence, argued that, even after the fiasco with the joint-statement with China or the military exercise with Russia, simplifying Indonesia's stance as "pro-US" or "pro-Beijing" hints at a foundational misreading of the non-alignment concept. She notes that non-alignment is not idealistic and not the same as passive neutrality or disengagement. As the current Indonesian Foreign Minister Sugiono put it, the non-align-

ment stance is a pragmatic approach to induce more alignment in the economic domain.¹¹ Thereby, to maintain these economic alignments for the benefit of every party involved, it becomes a necessity for Indonesia as the largest country in all of Southeast Asia, the geopolitical heart of the Indo-Pacific, to make its intentions clear.

Any military exercise resumption with China should not be misunderstood as another geopolitical win for Beijing or, worse, seen as Jakarta bending the knee to Beijing. Indonesia must take control of the narrative and clarify that a military exercise with China is simply another expression of the free-and-active practice just as much as Indonesia's military exercises with the US, Australia, and Russia are. Jakarta will remain non-aligned and will not side with any party, be it with China or the US, or anyone else.

Then, how should Indonesia proceed? Preferably, Subianto himself ought to visit several partners to convince them of Indonesia's commitment to non-alignment and continued cooperation with other countries, even if it resumes its military cooperation with Beijing. In general, there are several actors Jakarta has to keep in mind.

The first nations for Subianto to visit would be immediate neighbors, especially the likes of Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines who are presently in the middle of territorial disputes with China. Then, the next actor for Indonesia to convince would be the Quad members located

closest to China, which are India, Japan and Australia, since the Quad is largely a move to counter China.¹² After that, it is crucial for Indonesia to properly anticipate the reaction of the US, who is currently Indonesia's top military partner.¹³

It goes without saying that Indonesia should keep in mind the current developments concerning the US, Russia, and Ukraine. The US seems to be more than willing to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty and to even demand Kyiv's subjugation, including its mineral wealth, without including any ally in the negotiations with Russia. Sovereignty is a crucial topic in any South-east Asian country, Indonesia included, and given the region's long colonial past seeing two bigger powers dividing up a smaller nation will not go unnoticed in Southeast Asia.

Indonesia must also not forget how the US recently withdrew millions of dollars of foreign assistance to Myanmar, a fellow ASEAN member state.¹⁴ Indonesia should thus not approach the US with a 'business as usual' mindset and prepare itself for any eventuality as much as possible. Lastly, Subianto should win over countries with whom Indonesia has signed a DCA, such as France, Spain, Slovakia, Saudi Arabia, and South Korea.¹⁵

Partner countries need to be convinced of Indonesia's non-aligned standing, and that Indonesia will continue its security and defense cooperation with other powers. Only then can Indonesia go ahead with resuming

its bilateral military exercises with China. Lastly, ideally, in the month, or even the week, when the joint-exercise between Indonesia and China takes place, Indonesia should repeat what it did with Russia, Australia, and the US in November 2024 and signal its non-aligned stance by holding a concurrent joint-exercise with at least one other Indo-Pacific power.

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Conclusion: Navigating Uncertainty in a Changing World

Indonesia is free to actively exercise its foreign policy interests however it wants, but Jakarta should never forget that it remains Asia's greatest geopolitical prize for a reason. Any country Indonesia exclusively sides with, be it China or the US, or anybody else, will gain a major advantage in the competition for geopolitical dominance in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁶ This point becomes more important since early 2025 saw what may be the most significant geopolitical shift of the last 80 years. The US has practically broken the Transatlantic Alliance to align American foreign policy with Russia, thus forcing Europe after almost 100 years of close partnership to face an entirely new reality.¹⁷

This recalibration by the US will definitely remake the geopolitical landscape in the Indo-Pacific as well, including in Southeast

Asia where Indonesia is considered to be a strategic partner of the US.¹⁸ For this reason, Indonesia should be more aware of the geopolitical power it holds and exercise caution in every step it takes. It needs to answer at least two questions to successfully navigate a world where the US frequently and casually antagonizes countries long believed to be its allies, which risks pushing them closer to China: What risks does having the US as Indonesia's main defense partner entail for Jakarta?¹⁹ And what is the potential fallout from resuming military exercises with China, which has stated that it is prepared for any type of war with the US, for Indonesia and its long-standing non-alignment stance?²⁰

Answering these uncomfortable questions might open Jakarta's eyes to all sorts of new opportunities and threats that it must prepare for. Of course, in a scenario where the US stops being Indonesia's main defense partner altogether, Jakarta might try to find a third option like the EU or Russia. But this is not without its opportunities and challenges either, and neither have the capacity to replace the US. After all, in February 2025, Alexei Zhuravlyov, a Russian lawmaker, already identifies the EU as the main enemy of both Russia and the US together.²¹ This on top of Washington blatantly declaring that same month that the EU was created to "screw the US".²²

To add, Brussels most certainly will not appreciate the White House recognizing Crimea as a Russian territory, as it reportedly

considers, and even pressuring the UN to do the same.²³ The EU, for its part, reacts to the Washington-Moscow hostility, for example by pushing for joint EU defense in a EU blueprint unveiled on March 18, 2025.²⁴ Indonesia might also consider deepening its defense ties with Russia, but Jakarta must realize that Dmitry Kislov, an eminent mouthpiece of the Russian state, has been talking about a new ‘Great Troika’ where the new world structure is carved up between Russia, the US, and China.²⁵

As if that is not enough proof, no less than Dmitry Medvedev, former Russian president who is now the deputy chairman of the Security Council of Russia, declared on March 20, 2025, that the recent White House-Kremlin call established that, “There are only Russia and America in the dining room; the main course is a Schnitzel nach Kiewer Art. Guten Appetit”.²⁶ In other words, the prospect of Jakarta partnering up with Brussels in defense will invite enmity from a potential White House-Kremlin axis, while

increasing Indonesia’s defense partnership with Russia means that Jakarta must expect European dissatisfaction and risks becoming a bargain chip for the others.

Another possibility is amplified by David Hutt, a research fellow at the Central European Institute of Asian Studies. He agreed with the Dutch author Ian Buruma in that the looming end of Pax Americana could possibly mean that there is only one way to stop China from subjugating its neighbors. This would be the creation of an “Asian NATO”, with Japan leading it and Asian countries like South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, and, yes, Indonesia, joining or aligning with it.²⁷ The concept of an Asian NATO will not be something that can easily be realized for a plethora of reasons, not least due to the fact that Japan carries with it the burden of its history of barbaric colonization of many Asian countries.

In fine, these new dynamics create both threats and opportunities for the world’s largest archipelagic state and its cherished non-aligned tradition. What is non-negotiable for Indonesia, since it wishes to remain non-aligned, is that Jakarta must be earnest and ensure that the rest of the world recognizes and accepts all facets of Indonesia’s non-alignment. No misunderstanding or doubt about its seriousness should be allowed to occur again. Be it now or in the future, because the challenges testing Indonesia’s non-alignment resolve will be tougher than ever.

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