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**MASTER'S PROGRAMS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
FACULTY OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SCIENCE  
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## **Donald Trump's Spheres of Influence Strategic Doctrine: What is it? And What Are the Global Consequences of it?**

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*The second Trump administration is disrupting both longstanding U.S. foreign policy and the foundations of the liberal world order. Under Trump 2.0, America has junked its strategic policy of global liberal hegemony in favor of a doctrine of spheres of influence. At bottom, Washington now pursues a coercive, rapacious, power-driven approach to the broader Western hemisphere, threatening and bullying neighbors and allies, while at the same time leaving Russia and China with the requisite space and freedom to do as they wish in their own geopolitical backyards. The dramatic transformation in U.S. foreign policy is rapidly ushering in a new global order that is grounded in a tripolar structure (U.S., Russia, and China) that privileges great power interests and aggression at the expense of the old rules, norms, and institutions of the post-WWII era. As the old order is weakened if not wiped clean away, the international system today lacks firm guardrails, and the security of the global weak is especially at risk. What can somewhat ameliorate this emerging problem is a non-aggression compact, or even a concert, among the three superpowers, as this could dampen the prospect of a hegemonic war and keep each out of the others' sphere of influence.*

Donald Trump is now roughly five months into his second non-consecutive term as U.S. president, and in that short time his administration has made a number of foreign policy statements and actions that have drawn considerable scrutiny and ire—inside America and abroad. While it is very early in Trump's second term, it is worth the effort to determine what the words and deeds of the Trump administration might mean for U.S. foreign policy and beyond.

The foreign policy of Trump's first term was a mishmash of unilateralism, transactionalism, economic nationalism, and nascent retrenchment. Trump's inexperience and the presence of pro-establishment senior level officials in his inner circle, in combination, served to stymie the kind of clear, decisive bold change in U.S.

foreign policy that he promised on the campaign trail. At the end of Trump's first term in office, the foreign policy status quo largely, though shakily, held. Surely, America's overseas commitments were questioned by allies, the U.S. seemed to be a half-hearted supporter of the existing global order, and even minor appeals to human rights and democracy were abandoned, still, America under Trump mostly continued to pursue a policy of liberal hegemony. The U.S. remained the dominant global power and projected it around the world as it desired—as evidenced by the use of force in Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen, and Iraq (where Iranian General Qassem Soleimani was killed in a brazen attack).

In contrast to Trump 1.0, the early signs of Trump's second term clearly show that he and his team are fully intent on moving the U.S. in a different direction. Trump 2.0 is embracing a set of foreign policies that can be collectively best described as a “spheres of influence”<sup>1</sup> doctrine. Specifically, I argue that The White House is actively pursuing a doctrine of American dominance in the Western Hemisphere and retrenchment from most of the rest of the world, effectively ceding those areas to Russia and Chinese expansionism in exchange for more tranquil bilateral ties. The effect is that the U.S. is actively weakening and abandoning the post-World War II collaborative, Western-dominated order, which gave rise to a host of international laws, rules, and norms, it crucially helped to create and support, in favor of a tripolar world (the U.S., Russia, and China) dominated by power, force, and coercion.

This paper proceeds in three parts. First, I discuss the domestic factors that have caused or enabled Donald Trump to push the U.S. away from its longstanding policy of global leadership, support for human rights and democracy, and strengthening and propping up the liberal world order and toward a spheres of influence doctrine. Second, I explicate the nuts and bolts of Trump's spheres of influence doctrine, showing how U.S. policy might play out in the broader Americas, Europe, the Indo-Pacific, the Middle East, and Africa. Finally, the paper distills the possible tsunamic implications of a spheres of influence doctrine for the global order.

### **Domestic Sources of U.S. Foreign Policy Change**

For the bulk of the post-cold war era, the U.S. has pursued a strategic policy that has been widely labeled as “liberal hegemony” (Walt, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2018). This

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<sup>1</sup> Following on the work of scholars such as Hans Morgenthau (1948) and John Mearsheimer (2001), I define spheres of influence as regions, or parts of regions, in which the great powers exercise significant diplomatic, economic, military influence over foreign nations' external policies and behavior and at times over their internal domestic processes and policies. The great powers seek spheres of influence because of the strategic benefits they can provide or enhance, such as resources, raw materials, buffer zones, power projection capabilities, and security, among other things.

policy was all about supporting democratic movements and strengthening existing democracies, standing up for global human rights, encouraging free trade, and working through regional and global international institutions and agreements. Liberal hegemony aimed to refashion the international order to serve U.S. interests and to remake countries in America's image. Still, the last 35 years of U.S. foreign policy, no matter how well intentioned, has wrought considerable excesses and overexpansion through perpetual wars, foreign occupations, and endless military missions. That, in turn, over the last 10 to 15 years, has sparked a political backlash inside the U.S. against an active, interventionist, global foreign policy among citizens and elites who think America has devoted far too much time and resources overseas and believe it needs to better attend to domestic issues and problems.

Donald Trump capitalized on the shifting foreign policy mood of the American electorate to capture the presidency in 2016. He ran on and tried to implement a policy program of unilateralism, economic nationalism, and retrenchment—the core components of the Trump America First agenda. While Trump's base of political support enthusiastically embraced these policies, the complete implementation of his agenda was domestically stymied and ultimately large parts of liberal hegemony were left intact: the free trading system was upheld, U.S. relations with allies and partners were shaken but maintained, global institutions were heavily criticized but not fatally enervated, and America's foreign troop presence was still large and untouched. At bottom, Trump's first term in office was littered with various internal axes of resistance—from the so-called Deep State, Trump's cabinet, and Democrats in Congress, among others—that protested against downsizing U.S. foreign policy and American national interests. Trump 2.0 faces a radically different domestic political landscape. President Trump is in a much more favorable position, relative to when he first entered office in January 2017, to single-handedly reshaping American foreign policy in line with his America First policy platform.

The below three factors are the necessary conditions that have allowed Trump the possibility to significantly mold U.S. foreign policy around his preferences and attitudes. Without seismic domestic political change in the U.S., Trump could not implement his foreign policy vision as holistically as he has so far.

First, the Trump administration is filled with "Make America Great Again" (or MAGA) loyalists who are unlikely to resist or gum up Trump policy and its implementation; establishment figures are few and far between in Trump's new inner

circle, and those who fit that description, like Secretary of State Marco Rubio, know that loyalty is the key to their continued tenure in office.

Second, the White House has the benefit of learning from Trump 1.0 and has prepared well in-advance a whole-of-government working document—the infamous Project 2025—that offers a template to implement the MAGA agenda across the U.S. government and in various policy domains, including foreign policy (Project 2025). As a result, Team Trump came into office on January 20, 2025 fully prepared to hit the ground running. Regardless of what one thinks of the substance of Trump’s second term foreign policy, a good argument could be made that it has been much more cohesive and integrated than what his administration presented during Trump 1.0.

Third, Trump entered office in 2025 with the political wind at his back. The domestic legal U.S. cases against him have been dismissed. He won the November 2024 election by a bigger margin than he did in 2016. And the Democrats are demoralized, weak politically, and lack effective leadership to counter the barrage of news coming out of the White House on an almost hourly basis. At this point, Trump believes he has a mandate to impose his MAGA agenda on the U.S. government and U.S. domestic and foreign policy—indeed, he has voiced this very argument in public on several occasions. It is in this context that Trump and his team have moved quickly to implement a new policy agenda, before the Democrats, activists, academics and other groups in society even had a chance to fully organize and mobilize against it.

### **Spheres of Influence**

Put simply, the Trump administration is pursuing a spheres of influence doctrine. There are two parts to it. First, the U.S. seeks to dominate its perceived sphere of influence throughout the Americas and beyond. The second part of Trump’s emerging doctrine points toward letting China and Russia do what they want in their own spheres of influence.

#### *Power and Coercion in America’s Backyard*

Whereas the 1823 Monroe Doctrine has been largely interpreted as referring to America’s opposition to rival powers maintaining a physical presence or exerting influence in Latin America and the Caribbean, Trump appears to revive and broaden the term by incorporating upper North America and the Arctic as well (DeYoung, 2025). That Trump has broached the issue of seizing territory of foreign nations, and especially the territory of foreign allies, has understandably triggered fierce criticism—from the leaders of these countries and from foreign policy critics in the U.S. After all, it would violate

international law and settled international norms against territorial aggrandizement. Moreover, the U.S. itself has stood against redrawing the boundaries of countries and conquering territory throughout the post-WW2 era. And it has been a major bulwark against Russia doing that very thing in Ukraine and against Chinese provocative military moves against Taiwan and in the South and East China Seas. Turning against a fairly longstanding and conventional part of U.S. foreign policy worries countries in Trump's target, risks further knock-on violence and conflict over land and access to waterways from a host of revisionist actors worldwide, and threatens to destabilize the entire liberal world order.

Nevertheless, there is a logic that underpins Trump's push for an expanded, upgraded Monroe Doctrine. The ostensible goal is to ramp up U.S. power and block rival nations from encroaching in what the White House sees as America's local sphere of influence. In this case, the White House sees America's sphere of influence as extending from the Arctic, where Canada and Greenland meet those waters, down to the tip of South America, if not beyond. Additionally, to the east and west of the U.S., of course, the North Pacific and Atlantic Oceans also sit within America's sphere of influence. The Trump administration would like to block rival powers, particularly Russia and China, from permanently having a presence anywhere in those areas (Holland, Slattery, and Reid, 2025). Removing the presence of these powers enhances the security of the U.S., quite naturally. It extends the buffer zone which protects the U.S. homeland on all sides, keeping the world's second and third strongest powers effectively at a very long arm's length away from American turf. The remaining countries inside America's sphere of influence are largely weak, docile, and on non-hostile terms with the U.S., and so they pose little security concern to the Trump administration.

At the same time, the threat to seize territory from Panama, Canada, and Greenland (Denmark) has likely been designed to extract raw material power from and tighten America's influence over these nations. Already, Trump has played a role in toppling Justin Trudeau from power in Canada, and in Trudeau's place, Mark Carney, is a more pliant prime minister willing to negotiate with the White House (Murphy, 2025). In other words, the U.S. is coercing and bullying Canada, Mexico, Panama and Greenland (Denmark) with the ostensible goal of reaping a wide set of concessions—economic, political, security, and so on. Trump will likely settle for the creation of more military bases, cheaper shipping rates, changes in the terms of trade to America's advantage, and greater control over natural resources, and the like in/from these nations, rather than outright conquest or annexation of them. Additionally, with the U.S.



seemingly tightening its grip on the Americas, Trump will likely exert pressure on these countries to limit their public criticism of the U.S. and of the White House in particular.

### *Retrenchment in Europe*

The U.S. plan to retrench starts in Europe. In Trump's first term, he threatened to remove the U.S. from NATO. Weakening America's commitment to NATO is on the table, according to reports, as is downsizing, if not removing—either partially or completely—American troops stationed in Europe (Kube, Lee, and Tsirkin, 2025; Lubold, DeLuce, and Kube, 2025). Retrenchment in Europe is also evident in Trump's efforts to broker peace in Ukraine. Trump has effectively let Putin off the hook for any war crimes or take any blame for the war by portraying Ukraine as an aggressor (Spike, 2025) and blocking a UN resolution condemning Russia action (DeYoung, Hudson, and O'Grady, 2025). The Trump administration, via its Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, has signed off on Russia keeping Crimea and approximately twenty percent of Ukraine's eastern territory (Cook and Copp, 2025). Moreover, the U.S. is uninterested in giving Ukraine any post-war security guarantees or consenting to NATO membership for Ukraine anytime soon, which has caused alarm in Ukraine and European capitals (Gus, Barigazzi, and Kayali, 2025). The Trump administration has made it manifestly clear that it is up to the Europeans to provide military assistance and security guarantees to Ukraine going forward: Trump's position is that the U.S. is done protecting Ukraine, seeing it as not worth further investment and believing that America has gotten ripped off for what it has already contributed to Ukraine's defense.<sup>2</sup>

Trump's abandonment of Ukraine should prompt security experts to recall Thucydides' famous dictum in the Melian Dialog: "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." Ukraine has to suffer the indignities of losing territory because it is a weak, mid-sized country that left itself open and vulnerable to its stronger, more aggressive neighbor in Russia. Trump has adopted a harsh interpretation of international relations that accords respect and legitimacy to what the great powers do in the world, regardless if they violate any sense of moral or international law and human rights.

There are four main drivers of America's whiplash-like shift on the war in Ukraine—from pro-Ukraine and pro-Zelensky under Biden to pro-Russia and pro-Putin

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<sup>2</sup> This is why the Trump administration is seeking the so-called "rare earths minerals deal." There was some initial speculation that U.S. acquisition of such minerals from Ukraine would be exchanged for the presence of U.S. troops there. But instead, Trump sees the minerals deal as pack payment for American military support for Zelensky and his nation.

with Trump back in the White House. First, while much has been written about how Trump likes foreign leaders who flatter him (Kanno-Youngs, 2025), what is even more important in Trump's worldview are the leaders who preside over strong militaries and powerhouse economies. Put simply, Trump respects, admires, and sees as a peer Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping—not because they lead authoritarian states, though Trump undoubtedly would like the domestic freedom to do what he pleases—because they rule formidable, powerful nations, ones that, in Trump's probable estimation, sit alongside the U.S. in the same echelon of great powers. Over the last ten years Trump has consistently used flowery language (“smart,” “genius,” “brilliant”) to praise Putin and Xi. Other leaders who govern weaker states, including U.S. allies, are routinely ridiculed as “losers” and “weak,” and, in Trump's view, are subject to the whims of big foreign powers and should receive little sympathy when bullied and taken advantage.

Second, Trump believes there are strategic benefits to cozying up to Russia. He has stated that he thinks he can split Russia from its rogue's gallery of partners, particularly China. In an October 2024 interview with Tucker Carlson, Trump declared that:

*When I was a young guy, I loved, I always loved the whole thing, the concept of the history, and all of the things that can happen. The one thing — and I had a professor at the Wharton School of Finance, but we had history classes also.*

*He said the one thing you never want to happen is you never want Russia and China uniting. We united them, because of the oil. We united them. Biden united them. It's a shame, the stupidity of what they have done.*

*I'm going to have to un-unite them, and I think I can do that, too. I have to un-unite them. (Roll Call, 2024)*

That is a sensible, laudable goal, given that China is already a formidable power on the world stage and will likely be a full-spectrum peer competitor to the U.S. in the next 25 years if not before then. However, if that really is a serious goal of Trump, he would not—or at least should not—have announced it publicly. Why tell China what the U.S. is going to try to do on his watch? Why give China an incentive to double down on its relationship with Moscow, making even stronger and more durable? Moreover, the so-called “Reverse Nixon” maneuver is unlikely to work, since Russia and China have a very strong relationship, built over decades, and based on a wide array of common

political, economic, and security interests. Plus, even if Russia was willing to let China go in exchange for better longstanding relations with Washington, it is doubtful that China would be content to let Russia leave its side. After all, Russia is China's useful junior partner that frustrates and undermines Europe, covers its back diplomatically in international meetings and institutions, aids and assists like-minded authoritarian regimes around the world, and weakens aspects of the liberal world order.

Instead, there are probably other strategic factors at play. More likely is that Trump sees benefits from upgraded ties and more frequent bilateral cooperation. Improved ties to Moscow means the chances of a U.S.-Russian war dramatically decline. Many on the right for years have lamented America's support for Ukraine because of the fear that escalating conflict between Ukraine and Russia could drag in the U.S., and by extension Europe, which would then put the world on the brink of World War III. Additionally, if the U.S. and Russia could get to the point that they become geopolitical partners, they could cooperate on issues like nuclear non-proliferation, Arctic exploration and resource sharing, counterterrorism, and artificial intelligence. There are also economic benefits that Trump is considering, as it seems like he would like to pursue an economic reset between both countries, particularly jump starting U.S. business and investment opportunities in Russia. And on a related note, Putin himself "said in an interview with Russian state television that he is open to offering the United States access to rare minerals in Russian-occupied territory in Ukraine, as well as in Russia" (Kube, Lee, and De Luce, 2025).

Third, Trump's inner circle on national security is perfectly content to support a Russia-friendly policy. Unlike Trump 1.0, when members of Trump's staff like Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and Chief of Staff John Kelly played "bad cop" to Trump's "good cop" in dealings with and debates about Russia, there is relative harmony and uniformity in America's Russia policy. Trump's national security personnel these days regularly spout platitudes and at times outright falsities about Russia, showing a reluctance to blame Russia for any number of misdeeds abroad and at home. As just one example, in Vice President J.D. Vance's appearance at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, he largely waved off Russian meddling in European political systems (Atkinson, 2025), and Vance has a history of voicing on the record that he cares little about Ukraine and doesn't see Russian behavior as particularly predatory or aggressive (Sampson, 2024). And other Trump key advisers, like National Security Adviser Michael Waltz, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, and Defense chief Pete Hegseth, have publicly shielded Russia from U.S. media criticism, played up the idea of

a U.S.-Russian rapprochement, and lauded Trump's peace initiatives in Ukraine. Maybe these folks question Trump's Russia policy behind closed doors, but probably not, given the heavy emphasis that Trump reportedly put on loyalty—to him and to the America First agenda—in his second term hiring decisions (Keleman and Bowman, 2024; Lee, Madhani, and Colvin, 2025).

Certainly, Trump had good personal rapport and political relations with Putin in his first term, and that has already continued in the early days of his second term. Trump has had several phone calls with Putin, orchestrated prisoner exchanges with Russia, and plans to meet with Putin soon. Recall that in Trump's first term, the U.S. had two Russia policies—one from the White House, which was friendly and grounded in good leader-to-leader relations, and a second one from Congress, the State Department, and the Pentagon, which was firm and tough, aimed at keeping Putin and Russia in a box. Those days are gone. Not only have Trump's national security team adopted a Russia-friendly stance, so has the entire Republican Party (with a few exceptions), which controls both the House and the Senate. Everyone around Trump has fallen in line with respect to Russia and all of the thorny issues that are connected to it. Absent any countervailing arguments or pressure from his national security staff and key advisers and Congress, and so far there are none, Trump's position on Russia and Putin and the war in Ukraine will continue to win the day.

Fourth, we should also consider the affinity that MAGA-world personalities and influencers in the U.S have for Russia. Many of them see Putin and Russia as political darlings and kin—in Putin, United Russia, and the entire Kremlin, they see fellow nationalists and conservatives who unabashedly crack down against political liberals, the LGBTQ+ community, immigrants, and other frowned-upon societal groups and movements (Dixon and Abbakumova, 2024). While this might seem trivial, it is not. These personalities like Tucker Carlson, with their millions of followers and hundreds of millions of page/video-views, drive a narrative of Russia being put upon and put down, misjudged and misunderstood, and a force for good in a world of evil. This narrative about Russia dominates MAGA echo chambers and keeps Trump's base supportive and in sync with his moves to appease and establish friendlier ties with Russia. In short, the right-wing narratives about Putin and Russia reduce the political costs Trump will suffer from pursuing a foreign policy that benefits Moscow.

Ultimately, what does this all add up to? Reports indicate that Russia is justifiably ecstatic with the transition from the Biden/Harris government back to Team Trump (Ramirez and Dickinson, 2025). Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said, "The new

[U.S.] administration is rapidly changing all foreign policy configurations. This largely coincides with our vision.” (Guiffrida, 2025). That is an honest and accurate assessment. By halting military aid to and foregoing a post-war security commitment to Ukraine, the U.S. has left Ukraine vulnerable to continued Russian barrages right now and a second Russian invasion down the road. And by parroting Moscow’s view of the war in Ukraine, the Trump administration has justified Russian expansionism. Plus, remember, during the 2024 presidential campaign, Trump claimed that Russia “can do whatever the hell they want” to any NATO member that hasn’t fulfilled its two percent defense spending pledge (Sullivan, 2024), triggering worries that Trump 2.0 might not adhere to NATO’s Article 5, leaving European countries on the frontline with Russia, like the Baltic States and Poland, vulnerable to a revanchist Russian attack. Altogether, it is clear that Trump’s America has given Russia’s carte blanche to do what it wants, whenever and however it pleases in its “near abroad.”

The upside is that sour U.S.-Russia ties are ending and the prospect of a major conflict breaking out as a result of war in Ukraine are sharply diminishing. Of course, a major issue—and something the Trump administration doesn’t appear to worry about—is how wide and large does Russia view its sphere of influence. Does it include part of Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, and Moldova? That’s something the West might be able to live with. Or does it also include NATO members on its eastern flank? That would be an entirely different story, since the European powers, such as England, France, and Germany, would likely interpret Russian moves against any and all of those nations as a *casus belli*, triggering a full-scale military conflict. It is far less clear, at least right now, how the U.S. would view such Russian encroachment on NATO’s turf.

#### *Economic Confrontation and Lackluster Balancing in the Indo-Pacific*

Some Trump supporters might argue that reducing America’s role in Europe will conceivably allow for the White House to more fully deal head-on with China’s emergence in the Indo-Pacific and worldwide. Yes, that is something that could follow from a rebalancing away from Europe. It is questionable at best whether that will happen, though. Despite the new tariffs and tough talk on the campaign trail and in statements since becoming president again, Trump is probably not looking for a big tussle with China. Instead, the White House is primarily looking to make economic deals with Beijing—with the tariffs as a coercive means to that end—and would prefer a good working relationship with the Xi government. There probably will not be a vigorous,

consistent pushback from Team Trump on China, unless Beijing actively tries to undercut U.S. economic interests throughout the broader Asia.

Take Taiwan as an example. Taiwan is widely seen among academics, think tankers, and policymakers as the prime hotspot in U.S.-China relations that could lead to a great power war in the near future. Trump is not an ardent supporter of Taiwan's sovereignty and has questioned whether defending Taiwan is in America's national interest. In an interview with Bloomberg in the summer of 2024, Trump said: "No. 1, Taiwan. I know the people very well, respect them greatly. They did take about 100% of our chip business. I think, Taiwan should pay us for defense. You know, we're no different than an insurance company. Taiwan doesn't give us anything" (Bloomberg Businessweek, 2024). At the same time, Trump has also made comments that indicate that the U.S. could impose economic and military punishments to frustrate China in the event of an attack on Taiwan (Singh, 2024). Needless to say, Trump has offered mixed messages. At his core, Trump probably does not see Taiwan as a primary U.S. national interest. Nevertheless, a Chinese attack on Taiwan could be problematic for the U.S., though mostly because Trump would likely see it as a personal affront against him—that China opted for war against Taiwan because it believed Trump to be weak, non-confrontational, and afraid to stand up to Beijing.

The 2020 Phase 1 deal is fairly instructive about Trump's motives on China. It came during a tense time—there were existing political tensions between the U.S. and the China, it was the early days of COVID, a catastrophic respiratory disease for which Trump directly blamed China, and he had a group of advisers who were arguably more hawkish on China compared to his current team. At the time, the political headwinds were blowing against U.S.-China cooperation. Nevertheless, Trump eagerly sought an economic deal that was billed at the time as a "historic trade agreement." According to a White House factsheet, "As a result of President Donald J. Trump's leadership, the United States reached a historic and enforceable phase one agreement with China that achieves progress on a number of critical fronts. China has agreed to structural reforms in areas of intellectual property, technology transfer, agriculture, financial services, and currency and foreign exchange. The agreement includes a strong dispute resolution system to ensure effective implementation and enforcement" (Trump White House archives, 2019).

Most of this turned out to be nonsense, though. The Petersen Institute argues that "China bought only 58 percent of the US exports it had committed to purchase under the agreement, not even enough to reach its import levels from before the trade war. Put

differently, China bought *none* of the additional \$200 billion of exports Trump's deal had promised" (Brown, 2022). The main value of the agreement was to prevent the trade war from spiraling to ever higher levels. That is about it. Even so, the lesson here is not that the deal failed, but that Trump sought it to stabilize Sino-U.S. relations, preventing them from spiraling out of control.

Since Trump has been back in the White House, the bulk of the talk on China has centered on the possible future push for diplomacy with Beijing and the ongoing trade war. In fact, these two topics are likely interrelated. Trump has openly said he would like to conduct arms control talks and discussions on jointly lowering defense spending with Beijing and Moscow. Meantime, Trump's tariffs on China, which in April have risen to 145%, has triggered reciprocal tariffs by Beijing and ominous threats of refusing to back down, preferring to "fight to the end" (Bao, 2025). While China appears to have been caught off guard by the speed which with the trade war has escalated, and has dug in its heels because it does not want to be viewed as bending to the will of Trump, the bilateral crisis is not as severe as it seems at first glance. Certainly, there is a risk that the trade war could continue to escalate and spill over into other bilateral issues. A better bet is that Trump is using the tariffs to work toward a new economic agreement that at least partially addresses America's economic issues with China—which would give him a deal that he can market as a political win to Americans and particularly his political base. After all, by the end of April, Trump has suggested that U.S. tariffs on China will "come down significantly" sometime soon, lauded his relationship with Xi Jinping, and expressed optimism that Beijing will come to the negotiating table to end the trade war (Gan and Jaramillo, 2025).

Overall, it is doubtful that Trump will pursue a tough containment policy against China. Freedom of navigation operations (or FONOPs) will continue, and there is a good chance U.S.-India ties will continue to trend upward, given Trump's good personal rapport with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. On the other hand, Trump could pressure South Korea and Japan to pay for their own defense, as he did in his first term. The much-hyped democracy-authoritarian angle that Biden so heavily emphasized as a global rallying point to counter China has been scrapped by Trump. The trade tariffs—including a 10% general tariff, a 25% tariff on cars and auto parts, and a 25% tariff on steel and aluminum—will harm a number of countries throughout the Indo-Pacific, including Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, among others (Bhargava, 2025). And many countries throughout the region could conceivably get spooked by the world markets pinwheeling up and down amid U.S. economic uncertainty. Combined, these factors just

might drive many in the region to seek upgraded economic relations with China, the EU, Latin America, and elsewhere at the expense of the U.S. The end result of which would create a weakened, less cohesive anti-China coalition and thus undercut any U.S.-led balancing efforts against Beijing.

Like Russia, China ought to be happy with Trump back in power. Because Beijing tends to take any signs of unfavorable treatment toward China as a personal attack and provocation, there will be tense moments in U.S.-Sino relations in the next four years. Still, China should find Trump highly preferable to Biden or Harris. In Trump, they have a president who is willing to make deals, seems disinclined to embrace rash, militant policies and desires stabilizing the relationship, and ultimately wants to grow the U.S. economy and stay out of other nations', including China's, internal affairs. Like Russia, China will find that it has the requisite space and freedom to do almost everything it wants in its sphere of influence in East, Southeast, and South Asia.

#### *Retrenchment in the Middle East and Africa*

Despite Trump's outrageous claims of America taking over the Gaza strip and turning the area into "the Riviera of the Middle East," which suggests a bigger U.S. footprint in the Middle East, partial retrenchment or at least the status quo is the more likely path for U.S. foreign policy in the region. Trump wanted to pull U.S. troops out of Syria and Iraq during his first term, but faced serious pressure from the military to change his mind. Now that the Syrian civil war is finally over, and with pro-Trump figures in senior positions in the Pentagon, Trump has been able to get his way on force reduction in Syria. The Department of Defense spokesperson Sean Parnell announced in April that the military intends to cut its troop levels in Syria by half, to under 1,000 (Stewart and Volcovici, 2025). With Assad out of power and Iran, along with its proxies Hamas and Hezbollah, rapidly losing regional power and influence and posing less of a dangerous threat to its neighbors, there a compelling reason for Trump to pull the plug on more U.S. forces stationed throughout the Middle East in the days ahead. After all, Israel and the Sunni powers are ascendant, having effectively defanged Iran and rolled back Tehran's influence in Gaza, Syria, and Lebanon, and so there is far less of a need for a U.S. military presence in the region.

Indeed, Iran is so weakened that it has willingly come back to the negotiating table with the U.S. to talk about its nuclear program. Without Iran suffering a series of strategic setbacks over the last two years, along with a withered economy, it would not



have agreed to nuclear talks with the Trump administration—a administration that has been very unfriendly to Tehran. During Trump’s first term, he pulled the U.S. out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, put back into place a raft on sanctions on Iran, and ordered the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani in 2020, among other things. The ongoing talks are a sign that Iran simply recognizes the powerful forces arrayed against it—notably, the U.S. and Israel—and the very likely high political, economic, and military damage that would result from a hot war with Jerusalem and/or Washington. *The New York Times* reports that Iranian clerics view the potential domestic fallout from a war as an existential threat to the Islamic Republic itself that must be avoided (Fassihi, 2025). Meantime, from America’s perspective, diplomacy with Iran just might yield a payoff in a strengthened nuclear deal, which would make Tehran less of a problem in Trump’s eyes and allow the U.S. to de-emphasize the Middle East in the hierarchy of American security priorities. In other words, exploring negotiations with Iran should be viewed as a means to helping America to ease its way of the region.

The Abraham Accords, which normalized relations with countries in the Middle East and North Africa and Israel, were arguably the hallmark foreign policy achievement of Trump’s first term. It is likely that the White House will try to build off of this success and fold more countries into the pact. Given the warm ties that Trump has with both Saudi Arabia and Israel, it is possible that we will see a renewed push to broker a rapprochement between Riyadh and Jerusalem. Given the ongoing war in Gaza and the very uncertain plight of the Palestinians, any Israel-Saudi Arabia deal would be extremely tough to seal at the moment, though Trump, in April 2025, expressed confidence that the Saudis will indeed join the Abraham Accords “very quickly” (Time Staff, 2025). Still, any forward progress toward expanding the Abraham Accords, much like productive talks with Iran, is consistent with the push for retrenchment. Pursuing measures that engender stability through rules and agreements allows the U.S. to maintain its regional interests—in the Gulf, in Israel’s safety—without needing to ramp the use of coercive tools or a large military footprint.

The Trump administration’s efforts to retrench from Africa are even further along. That should not be a surprise, given that Africa was a low priority to Trump during his first term. He failed to visit Africa while president from 2017-2021. “During his four years in the White House, Trump welcomed only two Sub-Saharan African heads of state: Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria and Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya. His administration did not host a US-Africa summit” (Yade, 2024). During Trump 1.0, the main connective tissue to Africa was via the Abraham Accords, as Morocco and Sudan both normalized

relations with Israel via the Trump-brokered agreement. On the campaign trail, Trump, Vance, or their surrogates failed to speak in any detail about Africa.

At this point, Team Trump has moved quickly to downsize America's presence in Africa. For instance, the White House is "considering eliminating U.S. Africa Command as part of downsizing, per two U.S. officials and someone familiar with the discussions. Considering moving AFRICOM to a subcommand position under EUCOM" (Kube, 2025). And Trump's order to scrap USAID, whose center of gravity was arguably in Africa, means U.S. money and various international humanitarian projects and personnel stationed throughout the continent (and in other parts of the world, of course) have stopped/are no longer working. While this will likely lead to an increase in human suffering in conflict zones and destitute areas, a shift away from human rights—which was a part of the State Department and USAID's mission when Joe Biden was president—should endear the Trump administration to African countries that have poor human right records and have criminalized LGBTQ+ people and programs, such as Senegal, Ghana, and Uganda. Furthermore, reports from NBC and CNBC News indicate that the White House is considering downsizing the State Department's presence throughout Africa, closing "non-essential embassies and consulates in Sub-Saharan Africa" (Doherty, 2025). Although Secretary of State Marco Rubio has denied the reports, consolidating and scaling back the State Department's efforts and focus on Africa is consistent with the America First program, which does not view Africa and especially sub-Saharan Africa as a vital American interest, and is thus a credible foreign policy reform that the Trump administration could pursue in his second term.

The unpredictable wrinkle in Trump's Africa policy is the presence of Elon Musk, the South African-born entrepreneur and DOGE administrator. Reports indicate that he is looking to market his commercial empire, particularly his Starlink services, to African leaders and countries (Yade, 2025). At the same time, he has convinced Trump that South Africa is committing genocide against white Afrikaners. In response, Trump issued an executive order on February 7<sup>th</sup> that accused South Africa of racial discrimination and taking "aggressive positions towards the United States and its allies, including accusing Israel, not Hamas, of genocide in the International Court of Justice, and reinvigorating its relations with Iran to develop commercial, military, and nuclear arrangements" (The White House, 2025). The EO cuts aid and assistance to South Africa, offers asylum to white Afrikaners, and marks a hostile turn in ties between the two countries.

As long as Musk is a member of Team Trump, he will likely continue to influence U.S. policy on Africa. What is less clear is what this means for America's role on the continent. For now, it is reasonable to hypothesize that Musk will push for greater economic relations between the U.S. and Africa, especially in ways that can benefit Musk and his businesses, but will stand down if Trump and his national security team press for further reductions in U.S. military forces and commitments to the continent. Put simply, advocating for an increased American military footprint in Africa would mean running counter to the America First agenda and irritating Trump, which could in turn risk Musk's ability to expand his empire. And that is something Musk is unlikely to do.

The one issue that cuts against Trump's preference for retrenchment in both the Middle East and Africa is his administration's enthusiasm for counterterrorism air strikes. After all, so far in 2025, the White House has authorized several air assaults against Houthi positions in Yemen, ISIS in Somalia, and Hurras al-Din in Syria. The appeal of the air strikes makes political sense. They tend to be relatively quick, low-cost counterterror missions, and offer a clear deliverable to domestic audiences. Counterterror air strikes result in the removal of specific terror targets from the battlefield, which the White House can use as evidence that it takes national security seriously and is actively protecting the U.S. against groups that seek to harm Americans and American interests. Still, counterterrorism of this sort likely does not require the roughly U.S. 5,000-10,000 troops in Africa and the Middle East that are focused strictly on terrorism and counterterrorism, and it probably could withstand minor downsizing. To this point, Trump has not commented on the size and duration of American counterterrorism efforts in either region and troop levels remain intact. If Trump's first term is a guide, despite his inclination to bring American troops back home, he could briefly ramp up forces in either or both regions to meet a particular terror threat, such as ISIS or al-Qaeda or the Houthis, and then quickly look extricate the U.S. from the conflict theaters (Burns and Knickmeyer, 2020; BBC, 2019; Lamothe and Gibbons-Neff, 2017; Starr, Browne, Gaouette, 2018; Burns and Miller, 2020).

America's presence in and prioritization of Africa and the Middle East opens or blocks opportunities for Russia and China to enhance their roles in both regions. Given America's strong relationship to Israel and the Sunni powers, the 40 plus U.S. military bases in the Middle East, the fall of Assad, and the high importance the Trump places on directly combatting groups like al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the Houthis, among others, there probably are not many significant pathways for Russia or China to increase their standing and position in the Middle East and usurp America's dominance there. For now, Russia

and China will have to settle for the role of secondary outside power in the Middle East. By contrast, Russia and China have a bigger window of opportunity in Africa. Both powers are already active on the continent. Russia acts as a security backstop for various African governments fighting insurgencies and terror groups, and almost every African nation participates in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and uses Chinese technology. Moreover, Russia and China are connected to Africa through BRICS, which includes South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia as members and Nigeria and Uganda as partner states.

When we combine Russia's and China's activities in Africa with the relatively low level of importance that the Trump administration places on the continent, it is evident that both powers have the ability and sufficient room to expand their relationships with and portfolios on Africa. Plus, it is not as if Team Trump will protest against or seek to counterbalance further encroachments by either power in Africa. The main question, then, is whether Russia or China are interested in taking advantage of the window of opportunity to expand their roles in and commitment to Africa. Russia is fairly strained and exhausted from years of war with Ukraine and still has its hands full there, though it would undoubtedly relish having even stronger diplomatic and economic support from African nations—whether it has the bandwidth to explore such possibilities anytime soon is questionable at best. By contrast, China might dip its toes further in Africa in the near future. It currently has one confirmed military base in Djibouti and could seek dual-use ports in parts of East and West Africa, among others, so as to protect existing trade routes and BRI investments (Nantulya, 2025). If Beijing goes this route, it would help to extend China's global reach, upgrade its military capabilities, and give it the potential to eventually control key waterways, such as the Gulf of Guinea, Red Sea, or Mozambique Channel. That would be a major geopolitical game changer, forcing the White House—whomever is POTUS at this point—to reconsider and possibly elevate Africa's place in U.S. national interests.

### **Implications of the New Trump Doctrine**

This article sees four main consequences of Trump's Spheres of Influence Doctrine. First, the liberal world order is on life support. It is premature to declare it dead and over, because EU and NATO members will likely attempt to keep it alive until a more pro-Europe U.S. president takes office again. But that will be very difficult. And in the meantime, the existing order has been badly damaged. Norms against conquering territory, redrawing boundaries, and that aggressors should pay for their actions have

been shattered. The impending resolution of the war in Ukraine has set a new precedent that conquest does indeed pay, if the stakes and interests are high enough for aggressors. Moreover, the norm that the U.S. stands up for the bullied, for the weak, around the world has been destroyed. These norms, collectively, have played an important part in maintaining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries, and they have reassured smaller, weaker nations that in an anarchic international system, despite the absence of a world government and any international policing and military forces, there can still be a sense of global justice and fairness.

Additionally, the rules and institutions that provide guardrails for the world have been significantly weakened. Over the last six months, the U.S. has pulled out of the UN Human Rights Council, the Paris Climate Accords, The World Health Organization; renounced American commitments to the 1951 Refugee Convention; and knifed the WTO in its heart with various tariffs (Patrick, 2025). And that might not be all. The U.S. could withdraw from NATO, the World Bank, and a number of other overseas commitments, whether bilateral or multilateral. Unfortunately, the structural edifice of the international system that has been created, built up, and sustained since 1945 by the U.S. cannot function much longer without the full-throated support from the White House. Unless Trump changes course on his own or is convinced to do so by U.S. allies sometime soon, the international order will effectively turn into an optional arrangement in which a scattering of countries in the West and around the world agree to play by the old rules and norms while the rest of the globe ignores them and operates according to a might makes right guiding philosophy. That kind of a world order can limp along, but it is one that is mostly performative and hollow, adding little value to the security and prosperity of the entire system.

Second, the world's weak and small countries should be on high alert. In a world in which the weak are constant prey for opportunistic, revisionist, aggressive powers, and have few ways to seek redress for their victimization, these actors will be forced to be awfully creative to attend to their security needs and vulnerabilities. The weak will have to make tough choices about whether it is better to find safety in numbers, with other weaker, vulnerable nations, or to bandwagon with one or two dominant, bullying powers. International relations theory strongly suggests that balancing is the way to go, but unless much of the world ramps up its economic and military capabilities and improves in its ability cooperate on security and military affairs with other countries, then balancing will be difficult in practice. For instance, a Europe that has to balance against Russia without the U.S. would be a very tough spot. Certainly, the EU is by far the

stronger economically than Russia, but it also lags light years behind Russia militarily. EU members spend less on defense, are not battle ready, and are unlikely to work well together on the battlefield without the U.S. as the connective linchpin. Russia could, if it so chose, pose a viable threat to Poland, Scandinavia, and the Baltic States. In this scenario, the EU's best option would probably be to woo China, so that Beijing would pressure Moscow to cool off and back down.

Surely, Taiwan ought to be very nervous. Using the same logic they applied to Ukraine, Trump and his national security staff could decide that Taiwan is not worth the time, effort, and resources to defend in a bloody, costly war with China. Moreover, much like the White House now sees greater strategic benefits in having good relations with Russia than with Ukraine, it could make the same calculation with respect to China and Taiwan, believing that the U.S. gets more politically, economically, and militarily out of good relations with China than with Taiwan. Taipei can try the so-called "porcupine strategy," in which it tries to make itself impenetrable to Chinese forces invading from the air or sea. That might work, as long as Team Trump does not turn off the defense spigot to Taiwan, which it could. Should that happen, Taiwan would really be in a bind. It would very likely have to sue for peace, with the hope that it could negotiate a better agreement with Beijing than Hong Kong has.

Third, some non-great powers now formally tied to the U.S. might decide that going nuclear is the best option given credibility concerns about America (Hirsh, 2025). If the U.S. embarked on complete and total retrenchment from Europe, European NATO members would lack a security umbrella. French President Emmanuel Macron has suggested using France's nuclear arsenal as security shield and deterrence force against aggressors. Unfortunately, for Europe's NATO members, France has less than 300 nuclear weapons—a far cry from America's roughly 5500—which would be inadequate to protect more than two dozen nations. Moreover, non-U.S. NATO's conventional capabilities and war readiness would be massively tested should Russia launch a surprise attack against, say, Poland or the Baltic States. Recognizing the grave security consequences of being abandoned by America, Germany has already discussed the possibility of acquiring nuclear weapons, and frankly it would make sense for any NATO or pro-NATO state on the frontlines with Russia to consider seriously going nuclear.

South Korea and Japan face a similar dilemma. Life without the U.S., or with an indifferent U.S. or downsized American commitment, would be perilous for both countries. They would have to face a growing, assertive China and a rogue North Korea by themselves, alone and vulnerable. Whereas U.S. allies in Europe have NATO to give

them hope that a collective response to Russia—if conflict does occur—could save the day, there is no analogous organization in East Asia, or anywhere in Asia. If regional events go haywire, South Korea and Japan, without the U.S., would face an existential security crisis that far surpasses what non-U.S. NATO would confront in a conflict with Russia. Thus, the security imperative to go nuclear, in this scenario, would be particularly intense. It is no surprise that talk about nuclear weapons in both South Korea and Japan is on the rise, as elites and the public are highly aware of the security stakes and threats. Indeed, support for going nuclear tops 70% in South Korea (Ye Hee Lee, 2022). And while numbers in support in Japan lag behind their Korean counterparts, roughly 85% approve of discussing nuclear sharing with the U.S. (Akiyama, 2024).

There would be several international geopolitical consequences should more countries in the immediate to near-term go nuclear. Proliferation, particularly if several states enter the nuclear club, would irreparably weaken the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and make attempts at arms control agreements even more difficult than they are already are. We would likely see arms racing in Europe and in East Asia, if not beyond. The risk of preventive wars—started by neighboring countries seeking to destroy the facilities and arsenals of new nuclear states—would skyrocket. The overall level of inter-state tensions in Europe and the Indo-Pacific would grow to barely manageable levels and could spill over into other regions in the world. This is the kind of combustible, conflict-prone, Wild West kind of world we could enter as the U.S. steps back from its global security commitments.

Fourth, a Spheres of Influence Doctrine in today's international system empowers the three main great powers in the world—the U.S., Russia, and China. While the system is not tripolar in terms of economic and military capabilities—it is instead bipolar (Lind, 2024)—Trump's doctrine privileges the three global powers on the ground, in the real world, in such a way that it de facto institutionalizes a tripolar system—three dominant global powers, each with their own sphere of influence, each recognized by the others as powerful and their interests legitimate. Indeed, Trump has put out word that he is looking for three-way summit with Putin and Xi “when things calm down.” This summit, according to Trump, would aim to cut nuclear arsenals and defense spending of the three powers, among other things. Trump has a habit in negotiations with foreign countries to seek a grand bargain—something that he has sought at various points with North Korea, China, and Iran.

With that in mind, it is logical to think that Trump is aspirationally looking for something similar with Russia and China in his second term. In fact, might Trump really

be seeking something akin to a three-way informal concert that establishes solid, sustainable ties between the three countries? Stacie Goddard notes that “it should now be clear that Trump’s vision of the world is not one of great-power competition but of great-power collusion: a ‘concert’ system akin to the one that shaped Europe during the nineteenth century. What Trump wants is a world managed by strongmen who work together—not always harmoniously but always purposefully—to impose a shared vision of order on the rest of the world (Goddard, 2025).” For the sake of global stability and order, Trump and his national security team should pursue a three-way great power compact with diplomatic vigor. Below is one brief possible roadmap the White House could follow.

In short, the foundation of an informal concert could be a non-aggression pact among the U.S., Russia, and China that commits the three superpowers to peace with directly each other. That would lower the temperature of potential hostilities between the three and reduce the chances of hegemonic war in this new world order. And from there, it would be useful for the three powers to clarify the boundaries of the three spheres of influence to ensure that they do not get dragged into conflict over unclear lines of demarcation of turf and to rein in meddling in the others’ spheres of influence. Should that diplomatic cooperation prove successful, the U.S., Russia, and China could go even further. They could try to find mutual understandings on key global security threats and challenges, which just might provide the impetus for the three to cooperate as they seek to address them individually as well as collectively. Perhaps out of this hypothetical flurry of diplomatic activity, new, updated norms for the 21<sup>st</sup> century could emerge, which might provide some guardrails on inter-state behavior. If Trump went down this road of engaged diplomacy with Russia and China, the maybe the future of international relations will not be as unpredictable and violent as many Trump critics nowadays worry about and dread. Instead, it would be an effort to create stability and security in a world that lacks both right now. Truly, that would be a Nobel Prize-worthy achievement.

### **Conclusion**

Several issues bear watching going forward. First, a key question is whether America’s new sphere of influence doctrine is enduring, or not. Given Trump’s unpredictable, sometimes whimsical governing style, it is certainly possible that he could abandon his nascent doctrine in favor of something different six months from now. For instance, if Russia and China interpret Trump’s strategy as a lack of interest in the world outside of America’s sphere of influence and begin to expand their influence and physical presence, Trump could view this as a personal slight—as if China and Russia thought him weak



and were thus taking advantage of him. That could motivate Trump to pursue a more globally active and engaged foreign policy, a retreat to a more conventional, establishment-minded U.S. foreign policy.

But let us assume that spheres of influence has some staying power for the U.S. A second issue is the extent to which the White House pursues retrenchment around the world. Does it seek a partial retrenchment, in which America downsizes its commitments to one or more regions? Or does it try to implement a complete retrenchment, in which the U.S. fully comes home? A reasonable hypothesis is that domestic politics and pressure from foreign allies will force the Trump administration to reluctantly adopt partial retrenchment.

A third issue is whether a spheres of influence doctrine outlives Trump 2.0. If the Republicans keep the White House in 2028, does the next president maintain, at least in rough form, the status quo doctrine, or move toward a more old guard, establishment strategic policy? If current Vice President J.D. Vance wins the 2028 presidential election, he is likely to keep and perhaps lean even more into a spheres of influence doctrine. Vance is arguably more of a true believer than Trump in the idea that retrenchment is a good thing for America. If a different Republican is the next president, then America's future direction becomes less clear. But if a Democrat wins in 2028, a new doctrine would certainly be endorsed by the White House. In that case, would the U.S. try to revert back to an Obama-Biden type foreign policy, or adopt a hybrid policy that combines elements of the Trump years with traditional Democratic interests and values? It is way too early to offer a clear speculative answer on that question, given that there is no leading Democratic contender for the next presidential nomination. Much will depend on how world events unfold over the next three plus years, how Trump's foreign policy is judged by the electorate, and where U.S. attitudes are on foreign policy and America's role in the world, among other things.

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## **Australia's Nuclear-Powered Submarine Future: Revisiting the View from Jakarta**

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*In spite of periodic tensions, the Australia-Indonesia relationship has historically been characterized by cooperation instead of competition. However, Jakarta's official expressions of concern in response to Canberra's plans to acquire nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS pact in 2021 prompted a recalibration of bilateral ties. Now, amidst significant upheaval of the global geopolitical landscape, this article revisits Indonesia's reaction to the announcement, the factors that shaped its response, and the security agreement's enduring implications for Australia-Indonesia relations. The article contends that for Australia, AUKUS has become a necessity to reduce the capability gap between itself and China. From the Indonesian perspective, a disconnect exists between official and unofficial views on AUKUS. Within Indonesia's policymaking circles, there is an implicit understanding, communicated through informal channels, of the agreement's potential benefits, despite public expressions of concern. For the Australia-Indonesia bilateral relationship, which has developed from a notably low base, AUKUS ultimately portends both challenges and opportunities in the realm of defence cooperation and beyond.*

**Keywords:** AUKUS, Australia, Indonesia

### **Introduction**

On 16 September 2021, the governments of Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom announced the formation of the trilateral AUKUS security pact. Under the agreement, Canberra flagged its intention to acquire nuclear-powered submarine capabilities, eliciting mixed reactions from global powers, ranging from support, expressions of concern, and outright condemnation. One of Australia's largest and most proximate neighbours, Indonesia, was one such actor that officially voiced its 'deep concern' over the announcement's implications for regional peace and security (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2021). As a result, policymakers and

academics alike have observed that Jakarta's response to AUKUS may merely be the tip of a deeper and more enduring divide between the two regional powers. Important questions were raised concerning the extent to which AUKUS would result in a lasting strategic divergence or a momentary point of disagreement between Australia and Indonesia. Accordingly, then, I revisit Indonesia's initial response to the pact, examining the key factors underpinning its reaction. Furthermore, with the global geopolitical landscape having shifted considerably four years following the agreement's announcement, a recalibration of the Australia-Indonesia bilateral relationship in the context of AUKUS' uncertain future therefore becomes necessary.

Hence, this paper investigates the following question: What factors shaped Indonesia's response to the trilateral AUKUS pact and what does the security agreement portend for the country's bilateral relationship with Australia in the current global geopolitical landscape? Thus, our goal is threefold: (I) to identify the ways in which various circles of Indonesian society responded to the AUKUS announcement; (II) to determine the historical and geopolitical factors that have shaped such responses; and (III) to examine the pact's implications for Australia-Indonesia bilateral ties against the backdrop of mounting tensions in the Asia-Pacific regional security environment. To preview, I argue that Indonesia's response to AUKUS can be best described as muted and non-antagonistic – a product of its historical commitment to non-alignment. While its official response adhered to the tenets of its foreign policy, there was nevertheless an implicit acknowledgment within Indonesia's policymaking circles – expressed through informal channels – of the security partnership's potential benefits for itself, Australia, and the bilateral relationship between both countries. Now, as the United States casts an increasingly polarizing figure under the policies of President Donald Trump, Indonesia and Australia are faced with further opportunities to deepen their strategic partnership, should they first be able to navigate existing fractures in the relationship.

This article is structured as follows. This introduction has outlined the investigation's aims and previewed its main arguments. The following section describes the investigation's research method. The third section introduces neoclassical realism as a theoretical framework to guide the paper's arguments and analysis. Next, I provide background on AUKUS and the reasons Australia pursued this agreement. Then, I conduct a case study of the Indonesian response, examining the reactions of policymakers, the press, the military, and academics. Via SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis, the next section outlines the baseline of Australia-Indonesia relations and underscores the implications of AUKUS for the



bilateral relationship in the current global geopolitical context. Finally, the article concludes with a summary of the research undertaken and provides policy recommendations to deepen Australia-Indonesia ties.

### **Research Method**

This investigation utilizes a qualitative research design to examine the complexities and nuances of Indonesia's response to AUKUS. Given that qualitative research allows for the analysis of 'meaning' attached to various 'social phenomena', it is thus the most appropriate research design for understanding the multi-faceted nature of Indonesia's reaction to Australia's plans to acquire nuclear-powered submarine capabilities (Collingridge and Gantt 2008, 389). The investigation principally draws on primary sources consisting of both Bahasa Indonesia and English-language Indonesian material. This includes news sources, press releases, and polls surveying Indonesian participants. The information is supplemented by secondary sources including: peer-reviewed scholarly articles, opinion articles, and book chapters. Members of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and the Sea Power Centre-Australia (SPC-A) also graciously provided open-source information on the condition that their anonymity be retained due the sensitive nature of their work. The views expressed in this paper however, are solely my own and do not reflect the official position of the RAN, unless explicitly stated otherwise.

### **Theoretical Framework: Threat Balancing**

How do states formulate responses to changes in their external security environment? A fundamental neoclassical realist assumption is that states exist within an 'anarchic' international system, constantly struggling to attain relative power advantages over other actors to guarantee their survival (Waltz, 1979). Foreign policy, defined by Heywood (2011, 129) as a means by which states attempt to 'influence or manage' events outside their borders through 'relations with foreign governments', is accordingly often shaped by threats from the international system. For Indonesia, a vast archipelago situated at the centre of global trading routes and strategic chokepoints, the possibility of a neighbouring country acquiring nuclear-powered submarine capabilities is therefore one such challenge its policymakers must contend with. However, whether a country's foreign and security policy response adequately *balances* against potential threats can vary considerably on a case-by-case basis. Some threatened states may balance against 'dangerous accumulations of power' by forming alliances, accelerating their own arms production, or both (Schweller, 2004, 160). On the contrary, others may fail to recognize

a clear and present danger, respond in paltry and imprudent ways, or simply not react to security concerns at all – a behaviour Schweller (2004, 159) terms ‘under-balancing’.

How, then, did Jakarta respond to AUKUS and its potentially destabilizing ramifications for Indonesia’s immediate external security environment? Proponents of neoclassical realism hold that it is a state’s ‘internal characteristics’ and ‘domestic variables’ that determine the range of policies and actions enacted in response to particular pressures from the international system (Lobell, Ripsman, & Taliaferro, 2009, 1, 17). This explains variations in the reactions of different states to similar pressures and challenges, as exemplified by the responses of several Southeast Asian nations to AUKUS, which have ranged from indifference, support, to animosity (Choong & Storey, 2021, 1). At the most superficial level, Indonesia’s official response was shaped by the guiding principles of its independent and active foreign policy. The country’s strict adherence to such principles appeared to drive its decision to not directly balance against the tripartite pact. Though, it is also very likely that Indonesia lacks the ability and will to militarily counterbalance against Australia’s submarine modernization plans, given its well-documented struggles with defence acquisition. It is also important to note that Indonesia, the world’s third-largest democracy, is not a homogeneous entity. Consequently, perspectives and viewpoints across different segments of Indonesian society – ranging from the press, the military, to the general public – can, and have varied to certain extents. Thus, I assert that whilst Indonesia’s official response to AUKUS appears consistent with its historic stance of non-alignment, a more nuanced acknowledgment of the tripartite pact’s potential benefits can be discerned in the reactions of other circles within Indonesian society. Simply put, Indonesia’s response to AUKUS and its associated risks has been anything but unified.

### **Background**

There are myriad interpretations regarding what AUKUS promises and what it portends for the regional security dynamic. Determining what the agreement does and does not entail thus becomes a prerequisite for understanding such perspectives. Accordingly, this section provides an overview of the tripartite pact’s main agreements, its costs, and its benefits.

#### *AUKUS: What It Is and What It Is Not*

AUKUS is a trilateral security pact between the UK, the US, and Australia. As part of the agreement's first initiative – alternatively known as Pillar One – Australia has flagged its intent to 'acquire nuclear-powered submarine (SSN) technology' with assistance from the US and the UK (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2021a). With the new SSN-AUKUS-class fleet of nuclear-powered submarines expected to enter service in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) in the 2040s at the earliest, Washington has also announced the planned sale of up to five Virginia-class SSNs intended to replace Australia's ageing fleet of Collins-class submarines (Financial Times Editors, 2023; Ali, Holland, & Stewart, 2023). It is important to stress however, that beyond the hype of nuclear-propulsion technology, both SSN-AUKUS and Virginia-class submarines will be conventionally armed. Whilst the acquisition of SSN does provide the RAN with a strategic advantage, the pact is by no means arming Australia with a nuclear *ultima ratio*.

Whilst the transfer of nuclear-powered submarine technology does comprise the crux of the AUKUS agreement, it is not its only initiative. Michael Shoebridge (2021, 4) asserts that the deal is not merely about Australia acquiring 'eight of those peak predator deterrent weapons', nor will the pact replace the Five-Eyes intelligence partnership comprising Australia, the US, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK. At its core, AUKUS is essentially a 'trilateral technology accelerator' between the three participating governments aimed at developing artificial intelligence, hypersonic and counter-hypersonic weaponry, cyber and electronic warfare capabilities, quantum technology and undersea capabilities – as summarized in Table I (Shoebridge, 2021, 4; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2022b). In theory, the pursuit of such lines of effort is expected to complement the intelligence focus areas of the Five-Eyes partnership. After all, technological strength underpins both high-end intelligence and military capabilities.

<b>Nuclear Powered Submarines</b>	<b>Advanced Capabilities</b>
Information exchange under the Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information Agreement (ENNPIA)	Undersea capabilities
Nuclear stewardship	Quantum technologies
Australia workforce	Artificial intelligence and autonomy
New submarine base	Advanced cyber
Nuclear-powered submarine construction yard	Hypersonic and counter-hypersonic capabilities
Non-proliferation	Electronic warfare
	Innovation
	Information sharing

*Table I. Lines of effort under AUKUS initiatives.<sup>3</sup>*

*Costs, Consequences, and Concerns*

An agreement of AUKUS' magnitude does not come without significant demands. The material cost of Pillar One alone has been described as 'eye-watering' – with Australia's share of the SSN-AUKUS production program slated to cost taxpayers between AUD \$268-368 billion over the next three decades (Ryan, 2023; Newman, 2023). Former Prime Minister Paul Keating has gone so far as to lambast the pact as the 'worst deal in all history' – arguing that with such lofty figures, 40-50 conventionally-powered submarines could have instead been purchased (Karp, 2023). Keating is not alone in his criticism of the deal, with Greens leader Adam Bandt also raising concerns that AUKUS' AUD \$368 billion price tag may be used as an excuse for 'not spending money on housing, income support, or social services' (Butler, 2023).

Whilst the financial demands of AUKUS are undoubtedly high, the pact's greatest cost arguably came at the expense of Australia's bilateral relationship with France. Under the former Scott Morrison administration, Australia had reneged on an AUD \$90 billion diesel-electric attack submarine deal with France in favour of AUKUS (Tharoor, 2021). In response, France recalled its ambassadors to Australia and the US (Willsher, 2021). France's Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly and Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian condemned the decision as going against 'the spirit of cooperation' that had previously underpinned the France-Australia relationship (Ministère de L'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères, 2021). The latter went so far as to reproach Australia for 'stabbing [France] in the back' – adding that Morrison's defeat in the 2022 Australian federal election 'suits [him] very well' (BBC, 2021). Likewise, although French President Emmanuel Macron refrained from publicly commenting following the agreement's announcement in 2021, he nevertheless hinted at it by expressing hopes to 'rebuild' the bilateral relationship following Morrison's ousting (AFP/ABC, 2022). With the deal carrying such significant financial, political, and human repercussions, questions must be asked concerning the reasons for which Australia adjudged AUKUS to be worth such costs.

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<sup>3</sup> Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2022).

*The Case for Nuclear-Powered Submarines*

As summarized by Table II, the most obvious argument in favour of AUKUS is the SSN's technological superiority over diesel-electric (SSK) alternatives. For example, SSKs 'require air and fuel to operate' – denoting that these submarines must resurface every couple of days (Haddad, 2021). By contrast, SSNs are fuelled by highly-enriched (93%) uranium – which 'doesn't usually require replacing during a 30-year submarine lifecycle' – and even produces its own oxygen and water (Ohff, 2017). In theory, SSNs could remain submerged for years, significantly mitigating the risk of detection (Haddad, 2021). In practice however, SSNs remain submerged for between 70-90 days to account for the food supply of its crew. In addition to longer endurance, SSNs also boast a 'sustained submerged speed of 30 knots' that thus translates into a greater covert mobility output in the open seas than the smaller, slower, and less durable SSKs (Ohff, 2017).

	<b>Nuclear-Powered Attack Submarines (SSN)</b>	<b>Diesel-Electric Attack Submarines (SSK)</b>
<b>Sustained submerged speed</b>	30 knots	10 knots
<b>Average submersion days</b>	90 days	50 days
<b>Required depth beneath keel for navigational safety</b>	50-60 feet	30-40 feet
<b>Displacement (submerged)</b>	7,925 tonnes; 10,363 tonnes with <i>Virginia</i> Payload Module ( <i>Virginia</i> -class)	3,407 tonnes ( <i>Collins</i> -class)

*Table II. Average dimensions, displacement, and performance of SSNs vs SSKs.<sup>4</sup>*

Nevertheless, the SSK is not without its advantages either. First, SSKs are cheaper to maintain, whereas SSNs require expensive and complex infrastructure to handle maintenance and the disposal of nuclear waste (Haddad, 2021; Walker and Kruz, 2018). Second, although SSKs tend to be smaller, this affords them greater manoeuvrability in littoral or shallow-water operating environments. For navigational safety, SSKs only require 30-40 feet of water under its keel; whereas the corresponding depth for SSNs is 50-

<sup>4</sup> Compiled from Haddad (2021); Ohff (2017); Walker and Kruz (2018); and open-source information from author consultation with RAN submariner.

60 feet (Walker and Kruz, 2018). In shallow water, the Virginia class' 7,000+ tonne displacement arguably 'makes it [too big] to operate effectively' (Ohff, 2017). Additionally, whilst SSKs are generally limited to a sustainable speed of around 10 knots, this is not as critical a factor as it is in deeper waters, given that 'a fast-moving sub [cannot easily] take corrective action' when faced with obstacles or impediments (Vego, 2010). Finally, the proximity of the seabed in shallow-waters causes reduced pressure under a submarine's keel – resulting in handling difficulties – and denoting that the smaller SSKs are ultimately better equipped than SSNs to operate in such environments (Tupper, 2004, 272).

Whilst the US Navy (USN) does value the littoral capabilities of the RAN's current fleet of submarines, the production of SSN-AUKUS is set to greatly bolster Australia's naval force projection capabilities beyond its immediate security environment. Given the SSN's superior range, endurance, and speed, they are often tasked with exercising sea control in support of ballistic missile submarines. In any potential conflict over the Taiwan Strait, a fleet of SSN-AUKUS would serve as a 'natural extension' to the USN's nuclear submarine operations (Ohff, 2017). Additionally, the substantial financial and material cost of producing SSNs means the community of states who possess these submarines are small. Currently, only six countries have nuclear-powered submarines, with Australia slated to become the seventh under AUKUS (see Table III). With China maintaining 12 operational SSNs out of a fleet of 59 total submarines, – second only to the US – the planned production of eight SSN-AUKUS will not only reduce the capability gap between the RAN and the Chinese Navy, but also foment a shift in the global military balance (Haddad, 2021).

Country	Nuclear-Powered Attack and Ballistic Submarines (SSNs + SSBNs)	Total Submarines
United States	68	68
China	12	59
Russia	40	49
UK	11	11
France	8	8

*Table III. Countries with nuclear-powered submarine capabilities.<sup>5</sup>*

### The View from Jakarta

Given its size, geography, and proximity, Indonesia has been a historical consideration in Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy. It is important then, to understand the

<sup>5</sup> Compiled from Haddad (2021).

ways in which Jakarta responded to Canberra's announcement of its intentions to acquire nuclear-powered submarine capabilities. This section first examines the tenets of Indonesian foreign policy and how this has shaped the country's official response to AUKUS. Next, it dissects the more *informal* reactions in Indonesia to the tripartite pact, analysing individual, press, military, academic, and broad public perspectives. Overall, it observes a disconnect between the official and unofficial narratives of Indonesia's reception towards the security agreement. Whereas the official response is one of quiet concern, the unofficial reactions range from implicit support to general indifference.

### *Indonesian Foreign Policy: A Brief Overview*

Key to understanding Indonesia's response to Australia's involvement in AUKUS are the tenets of its foreign policy. Historically, Indonesia has been a traditional proponent of non-alignment in international affairs. Since attaining independence in 1945, the country has consistently adhered to a foreign policy that is *Bebas dan Aktif* (independent and active), with Jakarta remaining formally unaligned and unopposed to any preponderant power (Vatikiotis, 1992, 352-353). In the context of Sino-American bipolarity, Indonesia therefore seeks to situate itself in the 'strategic middle-ground' between the two competing powers, a practice Evan Laksmana terms 'pragmatic equidistance' (Sulaiman, Delanova, and Jati, 2021, 155-178; Laksmana, 2017, 4). Consequently, in its bilateral engagements with both countries, Jakarta has consistently pursued a foreign policy that does not outright antagonize neither Beijing nor Washington, instead opting for diplomacy as its 'first line of defence' (Gindarsah, 2016, 336).

Indonesia often stresses its non-alignment at a regional level, usually through the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Non-interference and respect for sovereignty form not only the basis of Indonesian foreign policy, but also the core of the ASEAN Charter. It comes with no surprise then that the bloc has often been referred to as the '*sokguru*' (cornerstone) of Indonesia's foreign outlook (Sukma, 2013, 42). Indeed, ASEAN enables Indonesia and its smaller Southeast Asian peers to avoid shouldering the entire 'weight' of relating with both the US and China on bilateral terms alone (Dunst, 2021, 37-45). For example, Jakarta has consistently reiterated its position as a non-claimant in the South China Sea dispute, with former foreign minister Marty Natalegawa asserting that no such conflict exists, despite clear overlaps between China's nine-dash line and Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the North Natuna Sea (Prabowo, 2014). Nevertheless, Jakarta has consistently spearheaded the bloc's efforts to create a Code of

Conduct on the conflict, demonstrating precedent of ‘non-aligned’ Indonesia adopting a firmer unofficial position through the auspices of ASEAN (Supriyanto, 2016, 25).

### *Political Perspectives*

Indonesia’s official AUKUS response reflected its *Bebas dan Aktif* foreign policy: non-antagonistic, muted, and mild. On 17 September 2021, Indonesia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement emphasizing the following five points:

1. The government takes note of Australia’s planned SSN production ‘cautiously’;
2. It expresses deep concern over the ‘continuing arms race...in the region’;
3. It reminds Australia of its commitment to nuclear non-proliferation;
4. It urges Australia to remain committed to ‘regional peace and security’;
5. And it ‘encourages’ all relevant parties to settle any differences through peaceful dialogue – underscoring respect for the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2021).

Reaffirming such concerns, the country later cancelled a planned visit by then Prime Minister Scott Morrison on the pretext that then Indonesian President Joko ‘Jokowi’ Widodo was occupied with ‘trips’ to provinces outside of the country’s capital (Kusumo, 2021; Sky News, 2021). Likewise, the government also confirmed that it would be seeking a review of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to assess the legality of the transfer of nuclear-propulsion technology to non-nuclearized states (Priyandita and Herscovitch, 2021).

Jokowi has since relaxed his stance on AUKUS, publicly urging ASEAN to view the agreement’s members as ‘partners, and not competitors’ (Connors, 2023). Whilst AUKUS’ members may have ‘partially reassured’ the Jokowi administration, other political and parliamentary elements within Indonesia remain unsatisfied (Connors 2023). The First Commission of the Indonesian House of Representatives – tasked with overseeing defence, foreign, and intelligence affairs – has urged Jokowi to more firmly oppose the pact, reproaching the administration for ‘*cuma bilang khawatir*’ (merely



expressing concern) (Alfons, 2021). Commission member Rizki Aulia Rahman publicly appealed to Jokowi to broach the subject of AUKUS through the auspices of ASEAN, poignantly asserting that the time for '*diplomasi kopi*' (coffee diplomacy) was over (Wakik, 2021; Iswinarno and Ardiansyah, 2021). Whilst Jokowi's official stance regarding AUKUS has softened, earlier reports indicated that the president initially took offence to having been excluded from negotiations 'until the very last minute' (Office of Assistant to Deputy Cabinet Secretary for State Documents & Translation, 2021; Purba, 2022). Questions must then be asked as to what degree of Indonesia's official response to AUKUS reflects its Bebas dan Aktif policy, and how much more may instead be attributed to displeasure over having been left in the dark about the agreement until the eleventh hour.

#### *Press Coverage*

Coverage of the pact by the Indonesian media has only amplified the government's concern, with the themes of regional tension and instability being the most common threads running through in-country reporting on AUKUS (see Table IV for a summary of headlines and English translations). State-owned news agency, Antara, published articles with headlines of Indonesian 'anxiety' over AUKUS being justified, further reporting that the government needs to be 'proactive' in responding to the threat of 'escalating tensions' in the Indo-Pacific (Cindyara, 2021; Hakim, 2021; Pramudyani, 2021). Detik – the most-visited news site in Indonesia – likewise reported of a threat of a second Cold War, and that nuclear-powered submarines are a 'disturbance' to regional stability (Rizqo, 2021; Fathan, 2021). Kompas – second only to Detik in online popularity – described AUKUS as a 'betrayal', further issuing a 'strong reminder' of the 'dangers' of nuclear-powered submarines (Puspaningrum, 2021; Iswara, 2022).

Media coverage of the pact has not only been limited to the 'threat' AUKUS poses to the Southeast Asian security region, it has also extended to calls for Indonesia to implement a variety of measures for mitigating such dangers (Utami, 2021). News site Suara published an article with the headline '*Waktunya Hard Diplomacy*' (Time for Hard Diplomacy) – calling for a 'collective [ASEAN] approach' to opposing the AUKUS pact (Iswinarno and Ardiansyah, 2021). Likewise, a Tribunnews article reported that Indonesians '*jangan kagetan*' (should not be shocked) over AUKUS, advocating in favour of obtaining its own nuclear-powered submarine capability in the near future (Candraditya, 2021). Most alarmingly, however, a separate Tribunnews article published with the

headline, *'Indonesia disarankan merapat ke China'* (Indonesia is advised to move closer to China), echoing the widespread sentiments of Indonesian 'netizens' calling for the country to align itself with China and Russia against the West on social media platforms (Irawan, 2021). As such, while the government's stance has been characterized by a more measured and policy-focused approach, the media coverage has highlighted other factors that resonate more strongly with the public.

News Source	Ownership	Headline (Bahasa Indonesia)	Headline (transl.)
Antara	State-owned	<i>Kemlu: Wajar Bahwa Indonesia Was-Was Soal AUKUS</i>	Ministry of Foreign Affairs: It's Natural That Indonesia is Anxious About AUKUS
Antara	State-owned	<i>Indonesia Perlu pro Aktif Sikapi Aliansi Militer AUKUS</i>	Indonesia Needs to Be Proactive in Responding to the AUKUS Military Alliance
Antara	State-owned	<i>Indonesia Khawatir Ketegangan Meningkat Di Indo-Pasifik Karena AUKUS</i>	Indonesia Worries That Tensions are Escalating in the Indo-Pacific because of AUKUS
Detik	Privately owned	<i>Menlu RI Kutip Sekjen PBB Soal Potensi Perang Dingin Saat Singgung AUKUS</i>	Indonesian Foreign Minister Cites UN Secretary General on the Potential of a Cold War when Alluding to AUKUS
Detik	Privately owned	<i>Wamenlu: Kapal Selam Nuklir Australia Ganggu Stabilitas Kawasan</i>	Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs : Australian Nuclear Submarines Disrupt Regional Security
Kompas	Privately owned	<i>Perancis Dekati Indonesia Dan India Setelah 'Dikhianati' Australia Dengan AUKUS</i>	France Approaches Indonesia and India After Being 'Betrayed' by Australia and AUKUS
Kompas	Privately owned	<i>Indonesia Peringatkan Keras Bahaya Kapal Selam Nuklir, Merujuk</i>	Indonesia Strongly Warns of the Dangers of Nuclear Submarines,

		<i>Ke AUKUS Dan Australia?</i>	Referring to AUKUS and Australia?
Suara	Privately owned	<i>Komisi I DPR Soroti AUKUS: Bukan Lagi Diplomasi Kopi, Waktunya Hard Diplomacy</i>	House of Representatives' First Commission Shines Light on AUKUS: No More Coffee Diplomacy, Time for Hard Diplomacy
Tribunnews	Privately owned	<i>Polemik Kapal Selam Nuklir AUKUS, Pengamat Pertahanan: Jangan Kagetan Indonesia Juga Pasti Butuh</i>	AUKUS Nuclear Submarine Polemic, Defence Commentator: Don't Be Shocked, Indonesia Also Definitely Needs It
Tribunnews	Privately owned	<i>Australia Akan Diperkuat Kapal Selam Nuklir, Indonesia Disarankan Merapat Ke China</i>	Australia to Be Strengthened by Nuclear Submarines, Indonesia advised to Move Closer to China

Table IV. Indonesian news headlines reporting on AUKUS with author translations.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Military and Academic Perspectives*

Although Indonesia's military (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia*, TNI) has likewise expressed concern over the pact, its response to AUKUS has instead focused more on calling for increased defence cooperation between Australia and Indonesia. Admiral Yudo Margono, then Commander of the TNI, publicly appealed to the Australian ambassador to ensure that Indonesia 'not be affected' by the pact in the event that tensions between China and the alliance's members escalate (Achmad, 2023). Nevertheless, Margono also called for increased security cooperation between Indonesia and Australia, asserting that it is in both countries' best interests to continue 'taking care of one another' (Achmad, 2023). Writing for the Indonesian Navy's (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia – Angkatan Laut*, TNI-AL) *Jurnal Maritim Indonesia* (Indonesian Maritime Journal), Lukman Yudho Prakoso similarly posits that although the traditional concerns surrounding AUKUS – potential for an arms race, nuclear proliferation, and regional instability – are not entirely unfounded, the partnership does present opportunities for Indonesia on the global stage (Prakoso,

<sup>6</sup> Compiled from Cindya (2021); Hakim (2021); Pramudyani (2021); Rizqo (2021); Fathan (2021); Puspaningrum (2021); Iswara (2022); Iswinarno and Ardiansyah (2021); Candraditya (2021); Irawan (2021).

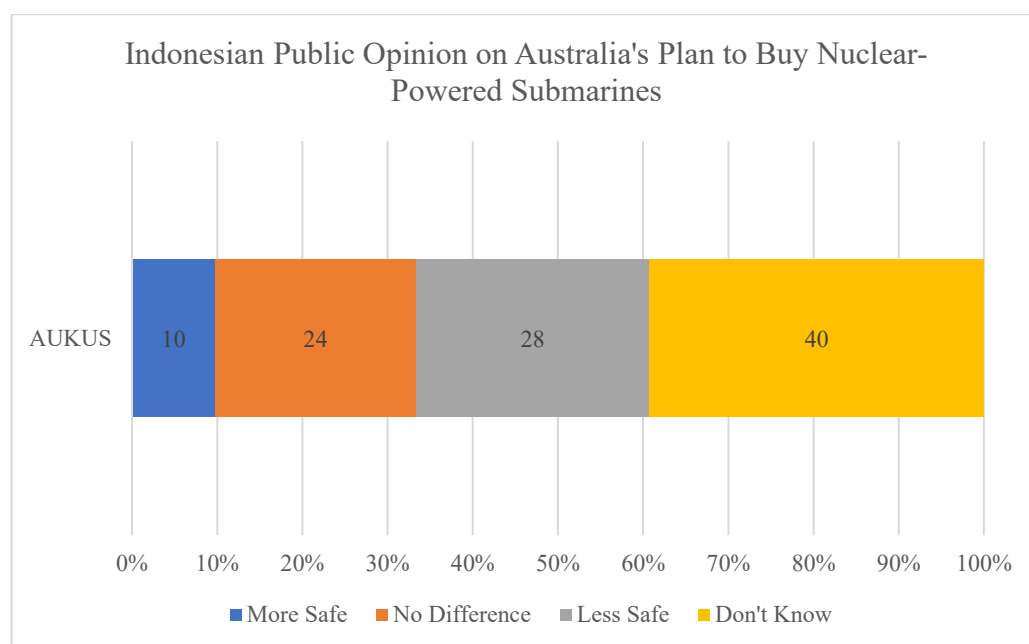
2021, 215). Principally, Prakoso argues that as Southeast Asia finds itself increasingly polarized by mounting tensions between AUKUS and China, Indonesia, as the bloc's largest member, has the opportunity to capitalize on such dynamic by assuming *de facto* leadership of ASEAN and lead efforts to mediate between all parties involved (Prakoso, 2021, 16-18). Should Indonesia be successful in helping bridge the emerging gap between the West and China, not only would its policy of pragmatic equidistance be sustained, but so too would ASEAN centrality.

As other Indonesian academics have pointed out, however, this is easier said than done. Taking charge of ASEAN – in the capacity of chair or otherwise – is no small feat, particularly given the disunity that has come to characterize the bloc as of late. Dinno Patti Djalal (2021, 16) observes that although Malaysia has expressed sentiments akin to Indonesia's concern towards AUKUS, the agreement has nevertheless received mix receptions from other Southeast Asian contemporaries. Singapore's stance is 'somewhat neutral'; Vietnam and the Philippines have welcomed the partnership, perceiving it to be necessary for strategic balancing in the region; and other member states have refrained from commenting at all (Djalal, 2021, 17; Phua, 2021). Evan Laksmana (2021) argues that such disjointed responses are more emblematic of 'strategic fault-lines' in the region, revealing that Indonesia's concerns over AUKUS' 'potentially' polarizing effect on the region have, in fact, already been realized. Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto (2021) similarly argues that ASEAN's response has been 'tepid' at best, adding that Southeast Asia should 'welcome' AUKUS as 'Australia models independence in standing up to China'. Indonesia's main concern about AUKUS ultimately should not be its potential to destabilize the region; after all, ASEAN is already evidently divided in its perceptions of the pact. It should instead redirect its focus to lead the ASEAN effort toward achieving regional consensus in navigating the new strategic equilibrium in Southeast Asia.

### *Public Opinion*

The contrasting perspectives of Indonesia's political, journalistic, military, and academic circles surrounding AUKUS are indicative of a broader disconnect between the official and unofficial narratives of Indonesia's reception towards the pact. For the broader body politic, however, perceptions of Australia and AUKUS seem to be characterized more so by indifference and unfamiliarity. In 2021, the Lowy Institute conducted a poll surveying 3000 Indonesian adults on their views about AUKUS (see Figure I). The study revealed that 28% of participants believe that Australia's planned acquisition of SSNs 'makes Indonesia less safe', whereas a comparable 24% perceive the agreement to be

inconsequential to the country's security (Lowy Institute, 2022a). Most glaringly, however, the poll revealed that the majority of Indonesians are either unaware of Australia's planned acquisition of SSNs – with a mere 11% of participants having heard of such plan in spite of extensive media coverage – or are unsure (40%) of its consequences for Indonesian interests (Lowy Institute, 2022a). Whilst a sample size of 3000 adults out of a total population of 270 million does not definitively represent the sentiments of Indonesians as a whole toward AUKUS, the survey nevertheless provides key insights into the broader public perception – or the lack thereof – of the rhetoric espoused by the country's politicians, media, military, and academics.



*Figure I. Indonesian public opinion on whether AUKUS makes Indonesia more 'safe, less safe, bears no difference, or don't know'.<sup>7</sup>*

### Indonesia – Australia Relations: What Next?

AUKUS carries with it significant implications for Australia-Indonesia ties, not least amidst ongoing changes in the global geopolitical landscape under Trump's second term in the White House. Via SWOT analysis, this section determines the repercussions of AUKUS on the bilateral relationship. First, it establishes a baseline of ties by examining existing *strengths* and *weaknesses* in the Jakarta-Canberra partnership. Next, it discusses what AUKUS portends for Australia-Indonesia relations by discussing the tripartite pact's

<sup>7</sup> Compiled from Lowy Institute (2022a); Bland, Laksmana, and Kassam (2022).

threats and opportunities for both countries. It finds that although relational dynamics between both nations have never been stronger than where it is at present, general Indonesian trust in Australia as a neighbour remains low. For the bilateral relationship, which has evolved to what it is today from such a low base, there is indeed the risk that AUKUS destabilizes relations and alienates Indonesia from the Western powers. Nevertheless, with the pact itself facing an uncertain future under an increasingly protectionist US, there is ample opportunity for the Australia-Indonesia strategic partnership to be deepened, not in spite of AUKUS, but because of it.

### *Strengths*

The Indonesia-Australia defence relationship has, in fact, been at its 'strongest' in a long time (Laksmana, 2021). At the 2 + 2 meeting prior to the AUKUS announcement, Indonesian and Australian representatives agreed to upgrade the two countries' Defence Cooperation Agreement (Laksmana, 2023). In 2022, the TNI-US Armed Forces combined arms exercise, Garuda Shield, was expanded to accommodate Australia and seven other allied countries (McBeth, 2022). Its latest iteration, Super Garuda Shield, will be held once more in Indonesia in 2025 (Sinaga, 2025). Likewise, since 2012, the Indonesian Air Force (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia – Angkatan Udara*, TNI-AU) has participated in the biennial joint military exercise, Pitch Black – hosted by the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) – on three separate occasions (Murdoch and Bachelard, 2012). Former Commander of the TNI Admiral Yudo Margono, maintained a strong relationship with Australia; having been appointed the same year of his inauguration in 2022 as a Member of the Order of Australia's Military Division for 'exceptional service' in fostering ties between the RAN and the TNI-AL (Darmawan, 2022). Whilst incumbent Commander of the TNI General Agus Subiyanto has yet to receive similar recognition, there is nevertheless an established history of cooperation and respect between the upper echelons of Australia and Indonesia's armed forces.

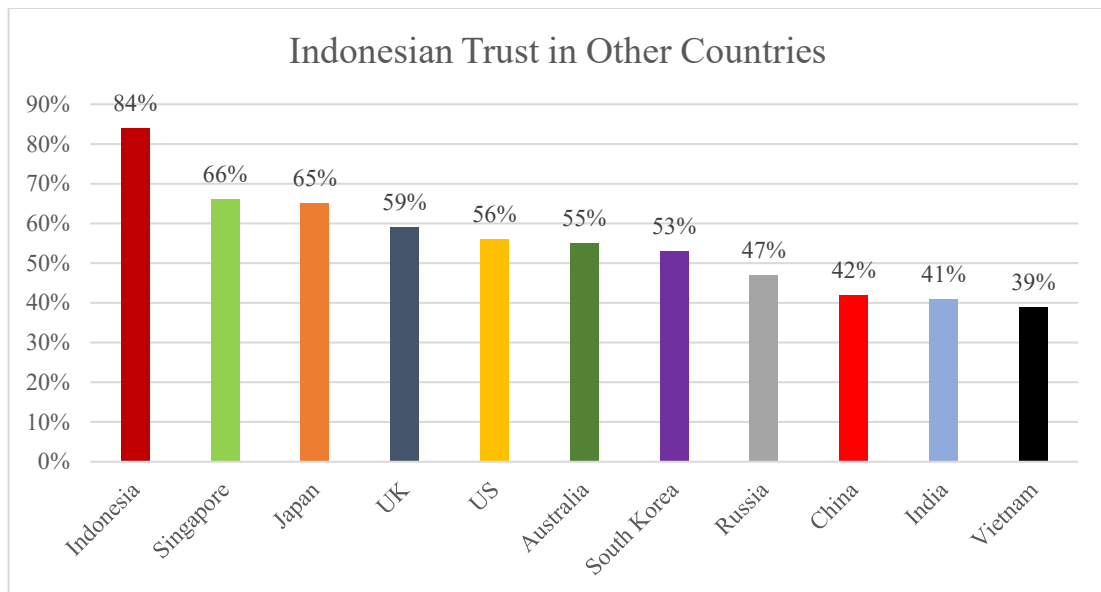
Strategic cooperation between Indonesia and Australia is also likely to remain on course, given the shortcomings of the TNI. Indonesia's muted official response to AUKUS was not solely a product of its *Bebas dan Aktif* foreign policy, but was likely also a reflection of its limited capacity to counterbalance the pact militarily. In particular, Indonesia does not possess the adequate capacity to acquire a military apparatus capable of balancing against a potential SSN fleet. For the past decade, the Indonesian defence sector has been consistently hampered by constrained finances, with the average annual expenditure stagnating below 1 percent of the GDP (Ng, 2024). According to the Stockholm

International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), this ranks the country amongst ‘the lowest’ of the region’s emerging-market economies (Reuters, 2023). Additionally, with the ‘lion’s share’ of defence expenditure going to the army and ground forces, the TNI remains more concerned with maintaining influence within its borders than projecting power outwards into its regional security environment (Sambhi, 2021). Consequently, the TNI’s key air and sea platforms have aged to the extent where less than half are deemed ‘combat ready’, let alone operational (Hapsari & Harahap, 2023). As such, coupled with a foreign policy that emphasizes diplomacy, Indonesia’s troubled defence acquisition efforts indicate that the country is unlikely to directly challenge Australia’s planned SSN procurement, thereby aiming to preserve the bilateral relationship to the greatest practicable extent. Simply put, Jakarta is both unwilling and unable to take a firmer stance against Canberra and AUKUS.

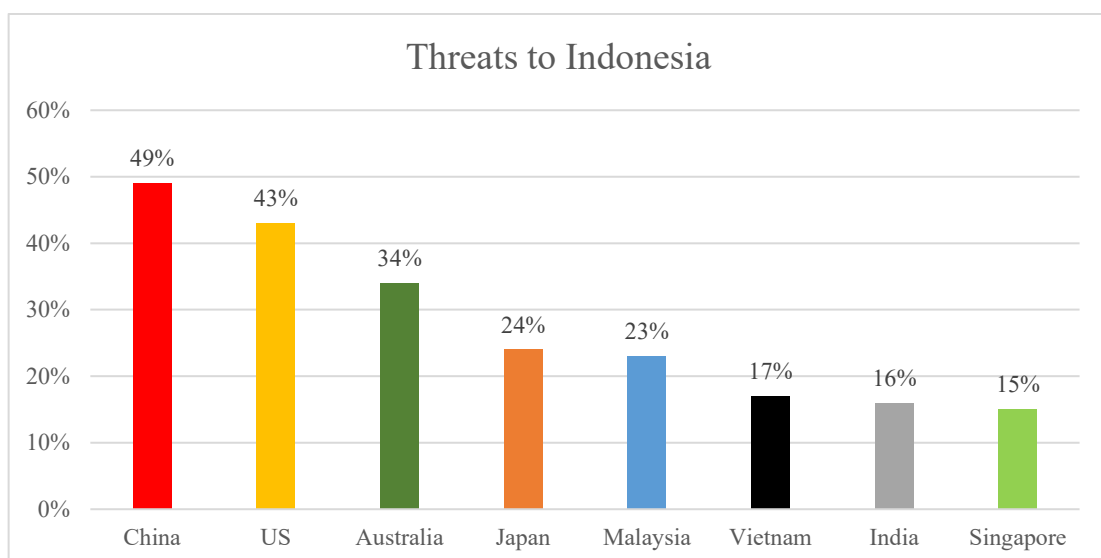
### *Weaknesses*

Whilst the strategic partnership between Indonesia and Australia may be strong, one facet of the bilateral relationship that remains considerably underdeveloped is trade. Although a free trade agreement between both countries – the Indonesia-Australia Comprehensive Economic Partnership (IA-CEPA) – was signed in 2019, private Australian businesses remain ‘too cautious’ in investing in Indonesia (Lindsey and Mann, 2022). Perhaps most glaringly, however, Australia does not even rank within Indonesia’s top ten trading partners, with China, the US, and other ASEAN countries placing well ahead (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2023). In 2023, Australian exports accounted for 4.14% of all Indonesian imports (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2023). That same year, Australia was the destination for only 1.38% of all Indonesian exports (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2023).

Concurrently, Indonesian trust in Australia remains low. A Lowy Institute poll revealed that only 55% of Indonesian adults expressed some level of ‘trust’ in Australia to act responsibly on the global stage (see Figure II) (Lowy Institute 2022b). 34% of participants perceive Australia to be a security threat to Indonesia (see Figure III) (Lowy Institute 2022b). Only 38% of participants expressed confidence in then Prime Minister Scott Morrison following the announcement of AUKUS (see Figure 4) (Lowy Institute 2022b). On the Lowy Institute’s ‘feelings thermometer’ Australia registers a relatively warm reading of 58° – which, whilst lukewarm, is only 5° warmer than China, Russia, India, and Afghanistan’s readings of 53° (Lowy Institute 2022b).



*Figure II. Indonesian levels of trust in global powers and regional neighbours.<sup>8</sup>*

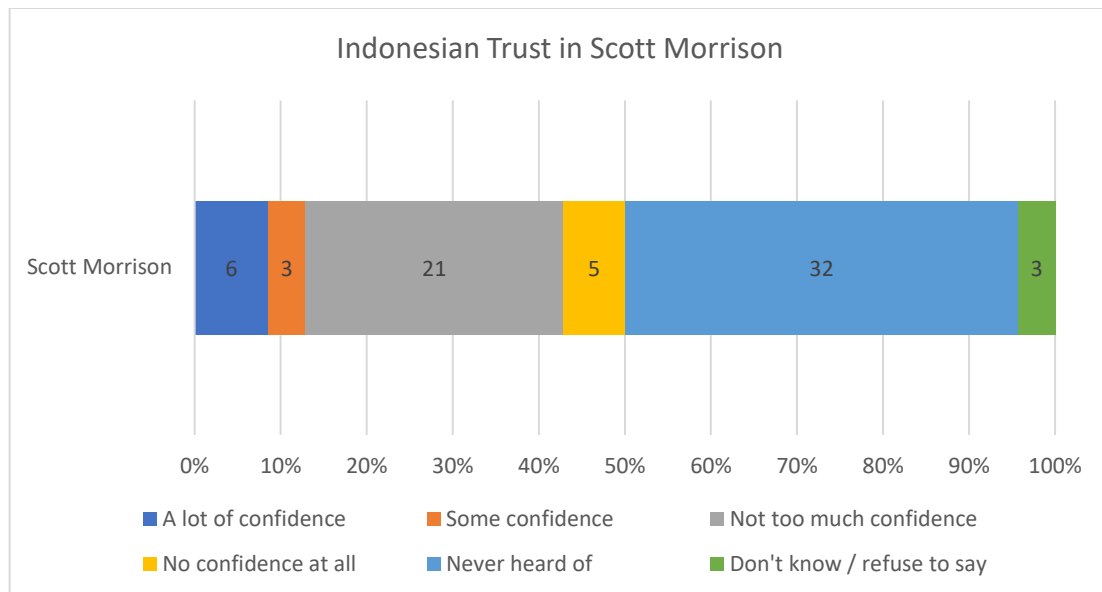


*Figure III. Indonesian perceptions of which countries pose a threat to Indonesia.<sup>9</sup>*

<sup>8</sup> Compiled from Lowy Institute (2022b); Bland, Laksmana, and Kassam (2022).

<sup>9</sup> Compiled from Lowy Institute (2022b); Bland, Laksmana, and Kassam (2022).





*Figure IV. Indonesian trust in former Prime Minister Scott Morrison to act responsibly on the global stage.<sup>10</sup>*

### *Threats*

Academics have raised concerns over the possibility that Indonesia may elect to deny access to Australia's future fleet of nuclear-powered submarines through vital chokepoints in its territorial waters. Much reference has been made to UNCLOS 1982 – to which Indonesia is party – which guarantees rights for all maritime vessels to navigate through archipelagic sea-lanes and waters for 'innocent passage' (United Nations, 1982). Consequently, given perceptions in Jakarta that the production of SSN-AUKUS 'relates to war' or the preparation leading up towards it, there have been calls for Indonesia to suspend the right of archipelagic sea-lanes passage for the RAN's future fleet of nuclear-powered submarines (Barrett and Rompies, 2023). It is worth emphasizing, however, that whilst foreign SSNs are indeed 'subject to stricter requirements' when exercising the right of innocent passage, UNCLOS itself contains 'no provision' that permits states to 'suspend the right of archipelagic sea lanes passage' through its waters (Lilliansa, 2023).

Whilst the law of naval warfare supersedes UNCLOS in wartime for belligerents, the latter continues to govern conduct 'between neutral and belligerent states', and 'among neutral states' (Lilliansa, 2023; Kraska and Pedrozo, 2022, 15-42). The main concern for Australia, then, is whether Indonesia denies its SSNs passage should the existing tensions

<sup>10</sup> Compiled from Lowy Institute (2022b); Bland, Laksmana, and Kassam (2022).

in the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait escalate into armed conflict. The popular view in Indonesia has long echoed Admiral Margono's sentiments of remaining 'unaffected' in any military conflict between China and AUKUS' members (Achmad, 2023). There is 'overwhelming consensus' amongst Indonesians that Indonesia should remain neutral – with 84% of participants in a Lowy Institute poll expressing a desire to support neither side should war break out (Lowy Institute, 2021).

Whilst there is little to suggest Indonesia would side with China in the event of any armed conflict, Jakarta's relations with Beijing in realms beyond defence are already well established and may pose some level of concern for Australia. Since 2009, China has been both Indonesia's largest market for exports, and its top source of imported goods (Rakhmat, 2021). As part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the two countries also signed five contracts worth a total of USD \$23.3 billion for the development of industry and energy infrastructure (The Jakarta Post News Desk, 2018). Recently, Indonesia has expanded relations with the broader Eastern bloc as a whole. In January 2025, Indonesia formally joined the BRICS group, which includes Russia and China, and is often viewed as a 'counterweight' to the West (Al Jazeera, 2025). In April of the same year, reports emerged that Russia had requested permission for its aircraft to be based at the Manuhua Air Force Base in Papua, just 1300 kilometres away from Darwin (Sussex, 2025). These reports followed the first-ever joint naval exercises between Russia and Indonesia held in late 2024 (Mahdi, 2025). While it is unlikely that Jakarta fully aligns itself militarily with the likes of China and Russia in the near future, Matthew Sussex (2025) nevertheless argues that Australia should realise that its neighbours may have 'friends we don't like'. Overall, then, Australia has reason to be cautious about further alienating Indonesia and pushing it closer to Eastern powers, whether through AUKUS or other means.

### *Opportunities*

Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that the trajectory of Indonesia-Australia relations is on an upwards trend. Irrespective of the country's proclaimed neutrality on the global stage, Indonesia's military is nevertheless 'tilting ever more towards the West', with the recent Super Garuda Shield manoeuvres – a staple in the Indonesian-US defence relationship since 2009 – indicating as such (McBeth, 2022). In fact, there has long been an implicit acknowledgement of *Pax Americana* 'without any complaints' amongst the country's policymaking and military elite (McRae, 2014). In spite of the country's official expressions of concern relating to the initial AUKUS announcement, incumbent President Prabowo Subianto is 'accepting', having publicly stated that he understands Australia's

urge to ‘protect their national interest’ (Cook, 2024). For Canberra’s Indo-Pacific strategy, Indonesia’s Western-friendly armed forces, particularly its navy, may prove invaluable in compensating for ‘Australia’s sea-air gap defences’ in its northern approaches against potential military encroachment from Chinese forces (Chai, 2018).

Of course, Australia must remember that Indonesia ‘is unlikely’ to ever see the US the same way it does – as a ‘benevolent provider of regional security’ (Laksmana, 2023). In fact, following Trump’s sweeping imposition of steep protective tariffs on nearly all goods imported into the US, such a perception has perhaps become even less likely. Whilst Jakarta too must remain cognizant of the fact that ASEAN will ‘never’ be as central to Canberra as its relationship with Washington, Trump’s growing protectionism may compel Australia to at least assign greater importance to its relations with its Southeast Asian neighbours (Laksmana, 2021). In fact, there have been growing concerns regarding the future of AUKUS as a whole. Alison Broinowski argues that Australia does not know what ‘Trump’s going to do’, leaving the country ‘fearing the worst’ with no control over the tripartite pact’s future (Doherty, 2025). Jennifer Parker (2025) notes that the agreement carries the risk of whether, amidst the Trump administration’s move away from the US’ ‘traditional’ European allies, there remains the political will to continue with the partnership. Such developments have no doubt factored into incumbent Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s decision to recently advocate for the importance of ‘Indonesia and ASEAN’ to Australia’s future (Stewart & Campbell, 2025). In the second age of Trump, then, it appears that AUKUS – and the uncertainty surrounding its future – may ultimately be a boon to Australia-Indonesia relations

### **Conclusion**

This preceding analysis ultimately yields three key points. First, the strategic advantages of an SSN fleet offset the material and diplomatic costs of the AUKUS pact for Australia – especially in the context of the rise of Sino-American bipolarity in the Asia-Pacific security landscape. Second, Indonesia’s AUKUS response has been anything but unified – whilst officially it is concerned by the agreement’s potential to destabilize its surrounding security environment, there nevertheless exists an implicit acknowledgement that AUKUS does present opportunities for the country to further its regional standing. Third, the Indonesia-Australia relationship has developed into the strongest it has ever been – albeit from a very low base. Whilst the risk of Indonesia denying archipelagic sea-lane access to Australia’s nuclear powered submarines remains low, it is by no means negligible. Nevertheless, TNI’s inclination towards the West does at least open the possibility for

deeper multilateral defence and security cooperation between Indonesia, Australia, and other Western allies. Bilaterally, Australia and Indonesia have the opportunity to foster stronger ties amidst increasing American protectionism under Trump's sweeping tariffs.

Whilst the future of AUKUS remains uncertain, what is clear is that now is a time for reconciliation and greater unity between Jakarta and Canberra. To do so, it would be advisable for Australia to explore the possibility of incorporating not only Indonesia, but also its ASEAN peers into a 'joint AUKUS + cooperative arrangement' (Thomas, 2022, 230). After all, the SSN-AUKUS is but one of seven branches of technological cooperation; and with US officials continuing to explore the possibility of New Zealand being incorporated into the pact's non-nuclear aspects, there is little reason to once again exclude Australia's largest and most proximate democratic neighbour – Indonesia – from exploratory discussions (The Guardian Staff, 2023).

Ultimately, there can be no doubt that Indonesia's initial response to AUKUS did indeed present a setback to Australia-Indonesia relations. Canberra should not be under any illusion that Jakarta's softening stance on AUKUS represents the country's full support for the tripartite pact, nor should it by any means conflate Indonesian apprehension towards China as an endorsement of US hegemony. Nevertheless, as this investigation has highlighted, there is no shortage of opportunities for Australia-Indonesia ties to blossom, both in the realm of defence and beyond. In an increasingly anarchic global geopolitical landscape dominated by armed conflicts and trade wars, Australia and Indonesia would be wise to avoid further strategic estrangement, prioritize rebuilding trust, and actively foster a stronger and more consolidated bilateral relationship.

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## **Social Media Engagement & Listening: Core Components for Strategic Public Diplomacy**

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*Since its conception, public diplomacy has been about communicating with foreign publics in order to achieve foreign policy goals. Until the end of the Cold War, this meant governments using the traditional media to push down information to foreign publics to influence them and subsequently their governments. Near the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, geopolitical shifts, the spread of democracy, the rise of global NGOs and especially the emergence of new communication technologies, such as the internet and the social media, have forced a new public diplomacy model based on relationship building, engagement and active listening. To cope with the new challenging international environment, governments need to adopt new strategies for planning, implementing and evaluating their public diplomacy campaigns to optimize their effectiveness. With social media becoming a dominant public interaction platform, providing a wide range of monitoring and analytical tools, we identify Social Media Engagement and Social Media Listening as two central components of a strategic approach to public diplomacy which can enhance its scope and effectiveness.*

**Keywords:** Strategic communication, Public Diplomacy, Engagement, Listening, social media.

### **Introduction**

For the last three decades, due to changes in communication technologies and the trend of democratization following the outcome of the Cold War, public diplomacy has been suspended between the concepts of short-term political information, with the purpose of exerting influence on attitudes of foreign audiences, and long-term relationship building, based on dialogue and mutual understanding. The first concept favors a strategic approach to public diplomacy with persuasion, targeted audiences, opinion research, media relations

and policy advocacy as key components, while the latter, more contemporary model, has been focusing on dialogue, mutual understanding and convergence.

As public diplomacy becomes an integral and substantive part of the policymaking process and a significant factor in the foreign policies of many states (Melissen, 2005; Gregory, 2005; Mor, 2006; Pamment, 2013), and with governments investing considerably in it- in some cases exceeding \$2.4 billion (Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, 2023), PD officials come under increasing pressure to improve their policies' effectiveness, which calls for adding more strategic ingredients to their public diplomacy policy mix, such as goal setting, measurable outcomes and action plans. Social media, with their capacity for user interaction and their analytical and data processing capabilities allow the convergence between the strategic and the dialogic models of public diplomacy, shaping a strategic public diplomacy paradigm that combines effectiveness with participation.

This article focuses on the role of two elements of social media interaction, *Social Media Engagement* and *Social Media Listening*, as the two main components of such a strategic-communicative approach to public diplomacy. To support this concept, we will first draw on public diplomacy theory and follow its' development as an instrument of political communication in the geopolitical context. In the next step, we will identify the role of the communication medium, and in particular the social media, in communication and the implementation of public diplomacy policies. Then we will identify the similarities, the differences and the connection between public diplomacy and strategic communication, especially in the contemporary era of media convergence. Based on that, we will show how Engagement and Listening, especially through the social media, supports an effective and participatory public diplomacy communication model.

### **Analysis**

Public diplomacy is the communication of an international actor's policies to citizens of foreign countries (Pamment, 2013). It differs from traditional diplomacy in terms of who it addresses and who it wants to influence and persuade. Whereas traditional diplomacy involves personal communication between diplomats, public diplomacy is addressed to *the citizens* of a foreign country (Ingenhoff, Klein, 2018). These foreign citizens might include civil society representatives, non-governmental organizations, multinationals, journalists and media institutions, and members of the general public.

Public diplomacy involves fostering understanding of a state's cultures, attitudes and behavior abroad; building and managing relationships; influencing foreign citizens

and mobilizing actions in order to advance its own interests and values (Gregory, 2011). At its core lies the objective of influencing foreign citizens and groups whose opinions, values, activities and interests may help sway favorably another government's position. Foreign publics are typically engaged through communication methods such as conferences and expert lectures, collaborative projects and exchanges of culture, education, sports, students or personnel, and media outreach through books and literature, films, radio and TV programs and, more recently, the internet and social media (Nakamura & Weed, 2009).

Communication is at the center of public diplomacy since the early days of its conception. One of the earlier brochures of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University states that public diplomacy "encompasses [...] communication between those whose job is communication, as between diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the processes of inter-cultural communications" (Parliament of Australia, n.d.). Not surprisingly, major developments in communications and international relations have shaped public diplomacy theory over the years.

The term 'public diplomacy' originally indicated "open" against secretive diplomacy (Cull, 2006) and had been sporadically used during and after the First World War. It re-emerged in 1965, referring to government communication activities targeting foreign publics, as the U.S. sought an alternative benign term for its propaganda activities during the Cold War.

The early models of public diplomacy viewed communication as shaper of public opinion. Malone (1985) describes public diplomacy as "direct communication with foreign peoples, with the aim of affecting their thinking and, ultimately, that of their governments", suggesting a two-step influence process (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). Tuch (1990) views it as "a government's process of communication with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and policies". Public diplomacy here is seen as a one-way flow of information in which the state actor controls the message by making instrumental use of media channels, with specific short-term objectives (Pamment, 2013). Feedback is only useful to help governments optimize their messages, and interaction with the public is neither pursued nor required.

These early public diplomacy concepts are deterministic in their interpretations of the effects of political communication on audiences. They tend to rely on the so-called transmission communication model which considers communication's primary role as

being the strategic promotion of an agenda through strategically selected mass media efforts (Manheim, 1994; Wang & Chang, 2004), and is usually associated with formulations of persuasion (Hayden, 2010), or with modernist models of strategic communication which view the transmission of information and the creation of networks as means to achieve compliance or ensure the predominance of the organization in its relations with the public (Hallahan et al., 2007).

A transition to public diplomacy theoretical development occurred between the end of the Cold War and the turn of the 21st century, when the internet and global connectedness started becoming the norm. Public diplomacy expanded to include more actors, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and individuals who were now seeking global support for their causes through the use of global news networks and media events (Gilboa, 2008), with considerable skill and success (Ross, 2002). Public diplomacy scholarship gradually shifted emphasis from transmission to constitutive models of communication and to the creation of *Meaning*. Meaning is central in communication (Berlo, 1960). Communication involves generating meaning through messages (Hartley, 2003) and does not happen without meaning (Littlejohn, 1983). In the early transmission communication models, such as Shannon and Weaver's mathematical model (Shannon & Weaver, 1949), communication is one-way, from the active transmitter to the passive receiver (Nicotera, 2009). Meaning in this case is supposedly embedded in the message and is perceived by the receiver after the message has been decoded. By contrast, in subsequent two-way communication models, meanings are thought to be created *within* or *between* the communicators, with communication being a participatory process of perpetual new meanings production (van Ruler, 2018).

For some scholars, the creation of meaning defines the distance between public diplomacy and propaganda. Whereas propaganda communicates with a predetermined, non-negotiable message that offers no room for different interpretation, and encompasses a range of instrumental and strategic actions oriented toward achieving solely the propagandist's predetermined goal (Zaharna, Arsenault & Fisher, 2013), public diplomacy accepts pluralism in the message's decoding; meaning is assumed to be attributed, not received (Nicotera, 2009). Taylor and Kent (2014) identify public diplomacy with dialogue, and propaganda with monologue, arguing that the continuum between them defines the spectrum of communication in public diplomacy. Almost a century ago, Mikhail Bakhtin (1963) had placed the ideal dialogue, as total engagement



(Littlejohn, Foss, 2011, 240) at one end of the continuum of human communication, with monologue at the other, as the absence of interaction.

As public diplomacy theory expanded, scholars began studying its' relation with other communication disciplines. Signitzer and Coombs (1992) pointed to similarities between public relations and public diplomacy arguing that they pursue similar objectives and employ similar tools. Wilcox, Ault, and Agee (1992) reflected on the boundaries between public diplomacy and international public relations, defining the latter as "the planned and organized effort of a company, institution or government to establish mutually beneficial relations with the policies of other nations". Gilboa (2008) makes a further point in the relation between public diplomacy and public relations noting that governments would hire PR firms or foreign lobbyists to achieve their objectives, as direct government-sponsored public diplomacy may be viewed by foreign audiences with suspicion.

The research headed by James E. Grunig on best practice in public relations, provided also valuable input to the development of communication and public diplomacy theory. Grunig (2001) examined communication models through the concept of communicative symmetry and the balance between the interests of an organization and the public. Symmetry here is defined by the extent to which each side is willing to satisfy the interests of the other. The more symmetrical the communication, the more each party is equally capable of influencing the other. According to Grunig, one-way communication models are always asymmetric because the sender is only interested in the transmission of its own message and does not take into account the receiver. As a result, two-way symmetric communication produces better long-term relationships with publics than other models and is more ethical (Grunig, Dozier, & Grunig, 2002) because it produces outcomes that balance the interests of organizations and publics.

Another discipline that contributed to the development of public diplomacy theory is nation branding. Country image, nation branding and public diplomacy share common elements in the promotion of a positive national image, national identity, culture and values (Szondi, 2008). Anholt (2006) originally classified public diplomacy as a component of national branding. He later revised, arguing that they are both "master disciplines" for differently developed countries, and eventually suggested (Anholt, 2008) that public diplomacy adopts a more strategic approach as a policy instrument rather than a communication method, focusing on enhancing national reputation. He proposed the term "competitive identity" (Anholt, 2007), which integrates public diplomacy with nation branding and trade, investment, tourism and export promotion in order to

improve national competitiveness in a global environment. Manor & Segev (2015) have referred to the use of digital diplomacy in nation branding activities as “selfie diplomacy”, arguing that the two disciplines are distinct yet overlapping, sharing elements of positive image creation, promotion of a national identity, culture and national values through the strategic use of digital channels such as a nation’s social media accounts.

From the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and on, scholars and practitioners have employed the term “new public diplomacy” to adjust to the changes brought about by the global trend of democratization after the Cold War and the revolution in the means of communication, which broke down previous barriers, globalizing and homogenizing data, perceptions, images, and knowledge (Mor, 2006) and led to the expansion of the municipality of stakeholders (Hudson, 2009). Individuals could now express their views on global matters and influence large numbers of people through social networking, challenging the importance of traditional media and the role of official institutions as sole or dominant actors in communicating foreign policy. This changing environment produced a “new” public diplomacy paradigm, which breaks away from the previous one-way communication model and uses the new media (internet, social media) to establish two-way communication and promote relationship building, dialogue, networks and cooperation with foreign publics (Dale, 2009) with the purpose of bringing out mutual benefits for all stakeholders (Yun, 2006). Public diplomacy here is conceived as a key mechanism through which nations strengthen mutual trust and productive relationships and is vital to building a secure global environment (USC Center for Public Diplomacy, n.d.). It is global in nature and involves a multitude of actors and networks. It is diachronic, and continues work even when traditional diplomacy fails and formal diplomatic relations are broken (Metzgar, 2012). As *relational communication*, rooted in the Relational Dialectics Theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) became the new communication paradigm, replacing the former “interpersonal communication” model, focus shifted to the study of the relationship rather than the face-to-face context in communication. Terms like “engagement”, “dialogue” and “reciprocity” replaced “information transmission” or “influence” as key words in public diplomacy (Gonesh & Melissen, 2005). In this new context, two-way communication isn’t only the goal for public diplomacy in order to build and maintain relationships (Szondi, 2008), it becomes its’ very essence (Pamment, 2013).

The conflict between the “old” and “new” public diplomacy models refers to Habermas’ (1985) influential analysis of the public sphere and his twofold analysis of

human action, which identifies between *strategic action*, or action that is based in the realization of specific ends, and *communicative action*, or action oriented toward achieving a rational consensus. Accordingly, Deetz (1992) argues that all communication has always been suspended between the goals or ideals of participation and effectiveness. Paul (2011b) identifies three areas of tensions between the two basic communication models: a) between “broadcast”, where the aim is to “say our message louder, and clearer, on more channels”, and “engagement”, with an emphasis on relationships, two-way understanding and listening to what others have to say, b) between complete and pluralistic control of the message, and c) between informing and influencing.

Cowan and Arsenault (2008) converged influence and participation in public diplomacy in a third “collaborative model”, which involves dialogue between participants and stakeholders, “and specific and usually easily identifiable goals and outcomes that provide a useful basis and structure upon which longer-term relationships can be formed”. The two scholars don’t dismiss dialogue or monologue in public diplomacy communication, but argue that each should be used tactically in order to achieve the best foreign policy outcome. Monologue, for example, can be an essential advocacy tool for informing about a country’s policies, identities or values, and dialogue can be useful for promoting public diplomacy objectives, since “sometimes the very act of sharing information or showing a willingness to share information can lay the foundations for deeper ties”. The “collaborative” model is best suited for initiatives and outreach campaigns in situations where citizens from different countries try to complete a common project or achieve a common goal. Anne-Marie Slaughter gave her own definition of collaborative power in the foreign policy frontier as a third path beyond the traditional classification of hard and soft power (Slaughter, 2011), identifying it by its’ forms as *mobilization*, to exercise power through not a command but a call to action; *connection*, which avoids controlling a specific set of choices, but connects as many people to one another and to a common purpose as possible; and *adaptation*, which reflects willingness to shift one’s own views enough to enter into meaningful dialogue with others.

### *The role of the communication medium*

Public diplomacy actors communicate with foreign publics usually through mass communication channels (media, cinema, internet, social media, etc.). Yet, any form of interaction which exceeds embodied mutual presence requires the extension of one or

more communicative faculties (Holmes, 2005). Any medium which enables such extension will necessarily transform the content, form and possibility of what can be communicated. Therefore, the PD actor needs to strategically choose the appropriate means to communicate with foreign publics (Daft, 1987) taking into account the available channels of mass communication, the distribution of access to those channels and the favorability of those channels to certain styles of messaging (Hwang, 2017). For example, the cultural background of the audience is related to media use. In individualistic cultures, people read more than in collectivistic cultures therefore press media could be more effective channels of influence (Mooij, 2008). In collectivistic cultures, where people tend to be more visually oriented, television is a more important medium. This has also implications on new media as well: website design in Asia, Latin America and Africa is less verbal and more visual.

In his Integrated Public Diplomacy Model, Golan (2013) notes the use of global news media in mediating government-to-citizen engagement (p. 1251). Cull (2008) underscores the importance of media use in public diplomacy by connecting it to two out of his five core components of public diplomacy, namely advocacy and international broadcasting. Advocacy, as an international communication activity to promote policies, ideas, or national interests in the minds of a foreign public has been traditionally the work of embassies and press officers through press relations and informational work. International Broadcasting refers to an institution's attempt to manage the international environment using radio, television and internet technologies to interact with foreign audiences (Cull, 2008). This role was eagerly pursued by states during the Second World War and the Cold War that followed, with the continued development of states' overseas services such as the BBC, Voice of America, Radio Moscow, Deutsche Welle, etc.

Based on media use in the conduct of foreign policy and international negotiations, Gilboa (2001) identifies three conceptual models: a) public diplomacy, where state and non-state actors use the media and other communication channels to influence foreign public opinion; b) media diplomacy, where officials use the media to communicate with counterparts abroad and promote conflict resolution; and c) media-broker diplomacy, where journalists and media take on the role of mediator in cases of international terrorism or crises. Further, he distinguishes between three time dimensions of government communication with foreign publics (Gilboa, 2008): immediate, where the purpose is to react within hours or a few days to developing events, and where advocacy, international broadcasting, and cyber public diplomacy are more suitable; intermediate, which is conducted during periods lasting between a few weeks and a few

months and is based on techniques of strategic communication, and favors IPR, corporate diplomacy and Diaspora public diplomacy; and long-term, which is the closest to traditional public diplomacy and is designed to produce long-term results of attitude change among foreign publics, relying on cultural diplomacy, international exchanges and branding. Deibel and Roberts (1976) divided public diplomacy into two schools based partially on the type of media they use. The tough-minded school, which considers that the purpose of public diplomacy is to influence the attitudes of foreign audiences through persuasion, and uses for its purposes the “fast” media (television, radio, press and news magazines); the tender-minded school, which sees public diplomacy mainly as a cultural function, aims to create a climate of mutual understanding, and uses the “slow” media, such as films, exhibitions, language teaching, academic and artistic exchanges.

Research has shown that media influence the perceptions of foreign audiences about a country and help build and maintain its image (Gilboa, 2008), which is why public diplomacy actors have traditionally pursued good media relations. Before and during World War II, mass media were thought to have the ability to regulate public behavior at will, like a ‘hypodermic needle’ or ‘magic bullet’ (Berlo, 1960). The post-war research of Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948) challenged this notion, but showed that the media were indeed involved, at least indirectly, in shaping people’s views, in two or more stages. Other studies have linked the influence of the media to the time of media consumption (Gerbner, 1973), highlighted their decisive role in agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, (1972), framing and priming, or shown that countries that enjoy greater media coverage are perceived by foreign audiences as more important for their country's interests, while negative reports generate negative opinions about a country (Wanta, Golan & Lee, 2004). In the 1990s, the so-called “CNN effect”, which claims that global television networks are a decisive factor in determining foreign policies (Gilboa, 2005), revived attention to the media as an influence tool.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the emergence of the internet and the social media as a new form of communication reshaped communication, confronting governments with the need to include foreign audiences as more active partners in their communication activities (Hocking, 2005). Some saw the “new” media as the ultimate “modern soft power tool”, and drew parallels with the “Rock 'n Roll” of the 1960s and 1970s (Kounalakis & Simonyi, 2011), which had a significant influence on young people behind the “iron curtain”. Internet’s role in the Middle East political upheavals in 2011 contributed decisively to this perception, prompting many scholars to focus their research on the untapped potential of social media in mobilizing social and political activism.

However, the events in the Middle East also inspired a collaborative approach in communication (Slaughter, 2011), which views the internet as a tool for decentralized cooperation and for collective action. This approach capitalizes on internet typology which lacks a clear center and relies on horizontal interconnection, shifting the notion of influence from the one (actor) to many (audience) models of traditional public diplomacy to the many-to-many model of collective influence.

Today, social media use continues to expand allowing diplomats to connect with a potential public of 5.24 billion individuals worldwide (Petrosyan, 2025). With their ability to promote dialogue, direct engagement, two-way symmetrical communication with online foreign audiences (Bjola & Jiang, 2015; Adesina, 2017), and forms of interaction that the “old” media could not offer (Littlejohn, Foss, 2011), they are seen as an expression of the “new public diplomacy” model (Kampf, Manor Segev, 2015). Zhang (2013) links social media with the strategic management of public diplomacy issues, including, among others, issue identification, issue analysis, audience segmentation and targeting and evaluation of results, and asserts that they are essential in achieving long-term policy goals and organizational missions.

### ***Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication***

Strategic communication is defined by the deliberate communication practice of an actor (government, organization, business, cause, social movement etc.) with the purpose of advancing its mission (Hallahan et al., 2007). Although models vary, typically strategic communication may include prior research to identify a problem or issue, audience analysis, message strategy, channel choice, program assessment and measurable goals and objectives. Hallahan (2004) points to six professional disciplines that are involved in strategic communication: Management Communication, Marketing Communication, Public Relations, Technical Communication, Information/Social Marketing Campaigns and Political Communication. The latter, Political Communication on the international level, includes communications in support of public diplomacy.

The connection between public diplomacy and strategic communication has been variably interpreted over the years, which might be attributed partly to the fact that both disciplines lack an agreed definition, and their meanings, boundaries and priorities often vary (Löffelholz et al., 2014).

Some authors consider strategic communication as the overarching concept (e.g., U.S. Department of State, 2007; Glassman, 2010) and view public diplomacy as a subordinate

tool that can help a state to achieve its foreign diplomacy strategic goals. Others, subordinate strategic communication to public diplomacy. Leonard et al. (2002), for example, describe strategic communication as one of the three dimensions of public diplomacy beside news management and relationship building.

Other authors regard public diplomacy and strategic communication as distinct concepts, that can be even conflicting at times. Powers (2017) claims that strategic communication is associated with management and revenue generation which is incompatible or may not be well-suited when applied to the context of relational public diplomacy. Dulek and Campbell (2015) argue that strategy in communication “focuses on achieving the sender’s predetermined aim” and “shifts the focus from context and the recipient to purpose and the sender”. According to Leonard et al. (2002) strategic communication is different from relationship-building as it involves activities that resemble those of a political campaign, such as strategic messaging and planning (p. 15).

Still others (e.g., Gregory, 2005) view public diplomacy and strategic communication as analogous concepts which commonly refer to government, organization, group or individual activities to a) identify and understand public attitudes and cultures, b) broadcast information to or engage in relationships with publics and institutions, and c) influence public attitudes and behavior through strategies and means intended to persuade. Löffelholz (2014) identifies three broader areas of agreement between public diplomacy and strategic communication as both may employ a) direct or mass-mediated communication activities to reach foreign governments and/or foreign publics, b) aim at reducing negative clichés, misconceptions and prejudices, and generating sympathy and understanding for an organization or a nation, and c) aim at building positive images and relationships, facilitating closer political ties and promoting tourism and foreign direct investments. Noting that “all public diplomacy is instrumental at its core” as it can’t be separated from foreign policy purposes, Gregory (2005) bridges the two disciplines acknowledging *dialogue* as applicable to elements of public diplomacy that emphasize engagement and the exchange of people and ideas, and *instrumental communication* as applicable to those elements of public diplomacy that emphasize persuasion, targeted audiences, opinion research, media relations, and policy advocacy. Similarly, Hallahan et al. (2007) refer to integrated communication which involves strategic activities that focus on the audience’s needs, concerns, and interests—not merely those of organizational communicators or managers. Pamment (2013) also relates the two disciplines pointing to strategic concepts in the field of public diplomacy such as

“relationship management”, “data-steered decision-making”, the “management of discourse” and use of social media, particularly in an interactive way.

### *Strategic Public Diplomacy*

Manheim (1994) defines strategic public diplomacy as “refined” (Hocking, 2005) propaganda, “informed by empirical research into human motivation and behavior”. In the years that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks and into the Iraq War (2003-11), U.S. public diplomacy concluded that it needed a new strategic approach to public diplomacy (Peterson, 2005). It proposed strategic public diplomacy that was connected to national security issues and embraced management, marketing, branding and communications techniques to formulate and communicate policy “in a more effective and better understood and accepted way” (Peterson, 2005). Glassman (2010) connects strategic public diplomacy even closer to national security and away from “public relations”, with focus on specific foreign policy objectives instead of “vague, feel-good improvements in the far-off future”.

On the other side of the spectrum, Zaharna (2005) offers a participatory perspective on strategic public diplomacy, with networking as a key concept, and argues that the U.S. should switch its strategic focus to building bridges and forging a network with international publics. She argues that strategic public diplomacy should evaluate the quality of relationships and take advantage of the interactive features of modern technology.

For the purpose of this paper, we describe strategic public diplomacy as a PD actor’s communication with foreign publics, defined by elements of both communicative and strategic functions, for the accomplishment of foreign policy goals. Two core elements of this strategic public diplomacy approach are Social Media Engagement and Social Media Listening.

### **Discussion**

Holtzhausen (2008) argues that new media platforms, such as the Internet and social media, provide space for both persuasive and collaborative communication with the public, with the use of a wide variety of communication techniques. This paper identifies Social Media Engagement and Social Media Listening as the two elements that can support such argument.



### *Listening*

Listening is the subject of a wide range of communication-related research. Nye (2008) describes effective public diplomacy as a two-way street that involves both speaking and listening. Leading American psychologist, Carl Rogers considered listening central to any relationship (Broome, 2009). Listening, with respect for differences, increases the likelihood that communication will improve and that relationships will become more creative, fruitful and satisfying, contributing to the promotion of mutual respect and understanding (Broome, *ibid.*). It also enhances a country's reputation (Stewart, 2006), is at the basis of participatory communication and is central to the practice of effective cultural diplomacy (Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, 2005). Macnamara (2015) considers it the basis of engagement, trust, healthy democracy, social equity and business responsibility and suggests that organizations should create a competent listening architecture.

Cull (2008) places listening in a privileged position compared to his other four components of public diplomacy (Advocacy, Culture, Exchanges, International Broadcasting), because “it precedes all successful public diplomacy”. He defines it as an agency's attempt to manage the international environment by gathering and contrasting evidence about foreign publics and their views, and using that evidence to redirect the agency's policy or broader approach to its public diplomacy. He warns though that effective listening must be linked to policy making and should ensure that foreign opinion is weighed in the foreign policy process (Cull, 2008b), otherwise it can quickly be interpreted as an attempt to patronize or manipulate and become counterproductive.

Strategic listening places communication at the heart of the policy process, and engages with people “to get their views about how to make policy work best” (Bird, 2008), while endorsing more interactive, collaborative and experiential communication styles. Macnamara and Gregory (2018) suggest that open listening is crucial for the *evaluation* and setting of communication objectives, as well as for measuring outcomes and impact of strategic communication. Strategic listening involves prior research, surveys, pre-testing, consultation, social media monitoring and analysis, and supports the continuous evaluation of the ongoing communication campaign for the prompt adjustment of strategy, if required.

Listening is an important element in the evaluation organizational process. Indeed, evaluation of public diplomacy communication activities has so far been

notoriously problematic for at least a dozen reasons, ranging from the long-term effects of public diplomacy to its intangible nature to its time, labour, and cost intensive methods (Banks, 2011). Governments have been monitoring foreign publics to evaluate their own efforts since the beginning of the twentieth century (Arsenault, 2015). On one hand, they monitored the impact of their own communication efforts abroad and on the other, they collected information regarding their image abroad and what foreign media were saying about their country. Monitoring, at this point, was directed mostly towards the foreign elites and opinion leaders or vocal groups and its main objective was to provide headquarters with information. But listening in contemporary public diplomacy goes beyond traditional monitoring. The “new” public diplomacy views listening as a core component for building and managing relationships by creating an invitational environment where communication can thrive (Lipari, 2010). In this ideal listening environment, it is presupposed that all communication partners are equally prepared to change problematic points that are brought to light by listening to the others. And, although states would never let their foreign policy be driven by the whims of their foreign audience (Cull, 2008), they should nevertheless do well to identify where foreign opinion and their own policy diverge and try to fill this gap or explain the reasons behind the divergence.

#### *In social media*

Social media provide digital analytical tools that allow qualitative and quantitative listening that was impossible with the “old” media. The spectrum of listening in social media stresses between “social media listening” and “social media monitoring” (Williams, 2024). “Social media listening” or “social listening” refers to the collection and analysis of discussions on various social media platforms, in order to draw useful conclusions for long-term trends and current debates abroad, and to identify communication opportunities and patterns of interdependence with foreign audiences (Grundel, Stenberg, 2019, March). “Social media monitoring” involves tracking social media messages, comments and conversations directly related to a government and responding to those engagements. In other words, monitoring lets an organization know “what” is being said about it, and listening “why” it is being said.

Macnamara (2015) also identified two types of social media listening, one communicative and one instrumental. In an interview with a senior social media manager, she described them as *engagement*, which is to hear what people are saying and

what they are concerned about so as to respond to and interact with them, which often leads to multiple exchanges and conversation; and *intelligence*, which uses what people are saying to inform strategy and tactics, often not acknowledging or responding to them.

Di Martino (2020) defines his own spectrum of social media listening in public diplomacy. It ranges from the ideal type of Apophatic listening to Surreptitious listening, which is linked to surveillance and spying. In the continuum created by these two extremes, he places Active Listening, which promotes trust and understanding and aims to implement long-term strategies; Tactical Listening with short-term objectives, such as addressing misunderstandings and misconceptions, and instrumental monitoring of issues or factors that can create problems for the state's image; Listening In, which focuses on measuring the reach of the actor's message using social media measurement tools; and Background or Casual Listening, in which public diplomacy actors scroll through social media content to find sources of information for diplomatic briefing.

Although Di Martino views listening mainly from the actor's perspective- while listening, as a bidirectional process involves all communication participants- he offers a useful framework for understanding the function of social media listening in public diplomacy. Still, his model could be expanded to include other forms of social media listening, such as a "Moderator" type of listening, where a PD actor moderates a social media community discussions to upkeep the community standards; or a "Peer" type of listening, where an actor monitors the social media activity of other competing or non-competing PD actors in order to keep abreast of interesting developments, identify opportunities for cooperation or intervene to counter misinformation, protect its image, etc.

### *Engagement*

Engagement in contemporary public diplomacy is a commonly used term that is rarely defined but carries always positive value. Scholarship literature suggests that *engaged* public diplomacy is sensitive to values-based behavior (Murphy, 2008). It is based on ideas and knowledge, on dialogue with other stakeholders and on the development of solutions to common problems (Murphy, *ibid.*). It involves building partnerships and networks, and working together with citizens, groups, and organizations (U.S. Department of State, 2010). Through engagement, organizations and communities can make decisions that build social capital (Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Engagement is an important element in strategic communication as well. Gregory (2011) mentions that strategic communication uses tools of “deliberate communication” and “engagement”, including those implemented “by public affairs, public diplomacy, and information operations professionals” to achieve specific objectives. Paul (2011a) defines strategic communication as “coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signaling or *engagement* intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences to support national objectives”.

Taylor and Kent (2014) focus on the dialogic engagement between organizations and their audiences, which ensures an ethical communication environment. In dialogic engagement, the other person must be treated as a valuable human being rather than a strategic resource. The aim of this type of engagement is to drive organizations and audiences to action, to help them make better decisions, to keep citizens informed and to empower all parties involved. To achieve this form of engagement, dialogue should be based on reciprocity, proximity, empathy, risk and commitment. The latter in particular, commitment, i.e. the extent to which each party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote (Huang, 2001), is a key component for measuring successful long-term relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

Gregory (2011) singles out engagement and advocacy as excellent components of public diplomacy. For him, engagement is based on networks and participation in cross-border relationships, and it prioritizes dialogue, reasoned argument, openness to the views and opinions of others, learning through questioning and finding common meanings. While it seeks to serve foreign policy objectives, it doesn't negate dissent. On the contrary, dissent is welcome, because it is only through the dialectic interaction of concerned parties that the framework for managing contradictions and achieving unity in diversity may be formed (Littlejohn, Foss, 2011).

Taylor and Kent (1998) identify five measurable components of social media engagement between an organization and stakeholders: a) contact a secondary research before beginning the interaction, in order to understand the key publics, underlying social conditions, cultural variables, etc. associated with the topic of interest, b) show respect for the other and demonstrate clearly a positive regard for the stakeholders input, experiences and needs, c) extend the interaction for relational purposes outside the immediate problem or issue, d) be ready to accept stakeholders advice and counsel on issues of organizational/ public/ community concern, e) interact with stakeholders for the good of the community. Engagement here is not an instant result of the dialectic organization-public relationship but a process that expands in a continuum between two

approaches. The first favors long-term relationships, where the actor values reciprocity, considers political outcomes as of secondary importance and is prepared to relinquish control. In the second approach, actors focus more on political objectives and place greater emphasis on the control of communication, using engagement to encourage certain public attitudes or to mobilize action to their short-term advantage.

### *In social media*

From all the media, the Internet is unique in its ability to offer an interactive engagement environment that combines the potential for synchronous or asynchronous, unilateral or reciprocal, bilateral or multilateral/cyclical communication, where relationships with foreign publics can be created and maintained. Social media provide PD actors with the necessary interaction and engagement environment for fostering dialogic communication with key publics on topics of mutual interest (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009). Taylor & Kent (1998) identify the core principles underlying online relationships as (a) facilitating a dialogic loop, which creates space for feedback and allows the public to query organizations to its questions and concerns; (b) providing relevant, well-structured and hierarchical information to the general public; (c) fostering repeated visits to a website by creating interesting and regularly updated content; (d) creating a concise and easy to use interface that provides ease of access to online content; and (e) encouraging visitor retention, by posting links that keep visitors within the website, and avoiding distractions or the use of external links that take visitors to other websites.

Social media quickly attracted professional and academic attention due to their potential for engaging with the public and their ability to offer quantifiable data and the analytical tools to assess them (Mariani et al., 2018; Munoz-Expósito et al., 2017). Studies on measuring social media engagement are categorized into four groups (Trunfio and Rossi, 2021). The “Quantitative metrics” group, which constitutes the vast majority of the literature, proposes a straightforward assessment of the impact of social media engagement, based on the number of comments, likes, shares, followers, etc. The second group of “Normalized indexes”, provides a quantitative assessment of the engagement generated by a piece of content in relation to the number of people to whom that content has been displayed. The third group of studies focuses on “sets of indexes”, which measure users’ involvement in the social media content by assessing different weights to different interactive actions, such as liking, sharing, or commenting. A fourth group pursues qualitative approaches, seeking more reliable and in-depth material for critical

analysis while criticizing the quantitative metrics approach of other groups as “vanity metrics” (Rogers, 2018) that only provide a superficial engagement assessment.

Social media services managers use the term Engagement in social media to define for actions that reflect and measure how much social media users interact with a creator’s content. Engagement here may include quantifiable data such as likes, comments and shares, but varies by platform (Sproutsocial, 2022). Typically, it takes the form of:

- Interacting with a Page, such as clicking on a call-to-action button, clicking on an account owner or administrator's profile, clicking on any tab.
- Interacting with posts on a Page, such as comments, expressions of like or dislike of Page content, notifications.
- Interacting with direct messages: sending messages to a Page or replying to a message.
- Interacting with other Pages: references from one Page to another, commenting on other Pages' posts.

Keeping track of engagement in social media allows organizations to:

- receive feedback on their image as a company or a brand,
- benchmark against competitors in the same field of activity,
- mitigate the impact of negative events that may cause reputational damage to the organization,
- increase public loyalty,
- enhance visibility, through the social media algorithms that reward greater public engagement in social posts by displaying them to more people, or through the sharing of positive public testimonials in the organization’s own networks of contacts,
- improve the user experience, and better tailor the content or services offered to the user.

Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011) describe engagement in connection with three types of social media behaviors. Consumption refers to the minimum level of engagement and involves actions like viewing audio, video or images related to a business or organization. Contribution indicates interaction with an organization’s online content (e.g., liking, sharing, commenting). Creation is considered the most essential level of

online engagement and is defined as the spontaneous adaptation of an organization's content by the audience (e.g. publishing content related to the organization, uploading videos, images, audio or writing articles related to an organization).

While public relations and business management have embraced the use of social media metrics to measure engagement, public diplomacy is reluctant. Powers (2017) claims that social media metrics were built for the advertising industry, and as a result, may not be well-suited when applied to the context of PD because they are vulnerable to manipulation and don't measure engagement in any meaningful way. Metzgar (2012) notes that engagement assessment should be based on the quality of the dialogue between the embassy and its followers and not on the number of "likes" on an embassy's social media profile. Still, while social media provide a platform for dialogic engagement with the publics, PD actors don't fully use this potential. Manor (2017), for example, examined the State Department's social media content compliance with the components of dialogic engagement and concluded it was, in fact, limited, as MFAs still favour influence and message dissemination among elite audiences over true engagement with foreign publics and relationship building.

### Conclusion

As communication has been suspended between participation and effectiveness, public diplomacy and strategic communication have been diachronically defined within a bipolar continuum between a model that favors information transmission, persuasion and tangible short-term results and another which is based on dialogue, mutual understanding and long-term relationship building. Although scholars still debate over which model is overarching or about the exact relation between public diplomacy and strategic communication, very few would disagree that Listening and Engagement are important elements for both disciplines. Social media, with their interactive properties and data processing tools, make these elements even more relevant for contemporary public diplomacy, providing a platform for convergence between the relational and instrumental dimensions of communication.

Using such social media tools as *Comments*, *Direct messaging*, and *Mentions*, PD actors have the opportunity to engage in dialogue with foreign publics, to respond to inquiries and concerns, to build relationships, clear misunderstandings, create consensus and overall improve their country's image, serving their PD campaigns' relational long-term goals.

Social media provide also instruments for the management and evaluation of these efforts, such as (but not limited to) *Audience size* and *Audience growth metrics*, which show a PD actor's social network reach; *Engagement metrics*, which reveal the levels of involvement with a PD actor's message; *Sentiment Analysis*, which gives an overall idea of public sentiment towards a PD actor's image; *Demographic data*, which provides basic information about the gender, location, age, etc. of a PD actor's audience. All these social media tools, and many more, may provide support to strategic issues in PD campaigns, such as problem identification, audience analysis, message strategy, program assessment, program evaluation and performance assessment.

Unfortunately, while the tools are already here, research shows that organization-public communication is overwhelmingly comprised of organizational speaking and top-down information dissemination rather than active listening or dialogic engagement (Macnamara, 2015; Manor, 2017). It rests upon PD actors to better integrate social media into their own policies and use them more effectively to serve their goals, for the benefit of their countries' foreign policies and their audiences alike.



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## **The Global South in a Multipolar World Order: The Impact of the Indonesia-China Strategic Partnership**

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*This research examines the dynamics of relations between Indonesia and China in the context of the Global South, with particular emphasis on economic cooperation, diplomacy, and geopolitical influence. It primarily examines the impact of the Indonesia-China strategic partnership on the economic development of Indonesia and the ASEAN region, as evidenced by initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It also explores the potential for economic interdependence and geopolitical conflict in the South China Sea and the implications of this cooperation for developing countries. The study concludes that the Indonesia-China partnership can be a model of South-South collaboration that contributes to a more equitable multipolar global order. However, it requires strategic balance to prevent over-dependence. This conclusion is derived through a qualitative approach.*

**Keywords:** *Indonesia-China, Global South, Belt and Road Initiative, Multipolarity*

### **Introduction**

The Global South as a concept primarily refers to the developing countries of the Southern Hemisphere (Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania), which are today important actors in the geopolitical landscape (Dados & Connell, 2012). The term is not limited to a geographical scope. The concept of the Global South includes a political discourse that has evolved over time. Most Southern countries were colonized nations in the past and represent two-thirds of the world's population, who struggled for independence and went through subsequent stages of decolonization. They were originally labeled Third World countries by Alfred Sauvy in 1952. This referred to the political alignments during the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. According to Vijay Prashad (2007), the Third World is a political project in Asia, Africa, and Latin America with the main demands centered on principles such as peace

and freedom. Undoubtedly, they created many organizations or associations to call for national liberation and build solidarity, including the Asian-African Conference, the Non-Aligned Movement, and GANEFO.

The global political landscape has changed substantially since the Cold War, transitioning from a bipolar world with the United States and the Soviet Union as the dominant powers to a more multipolar structure. During this transition, the emergence of new powers, particularly from the South, has challenged the traditional hegemony of Western countries. Countries in the South have become more prominent and influential in this multipolar world. China, India, Brazil, and South Africa have become significant participants in global affairs, influencing security dynamics, diplomatic negotiations, and economic trends. These changes have enabled countries of the South to assert their interests and perspectives more effectively on the global stage.

It is important to understand the historical context of these transitions to comprehend the dynamics of the Global South today. The legacy of colonialism has influenced these countries' political identities and aspirations, their struggle for independence, and their efforts to avoid entanglement with a single state. As a result of the transition to multipolarity, the South has been given new opportunities to pursue its goals of global justice, development, and sovereignty.

There are many obstacles that countries in the South must face, such as political instability, economic underdevelopment, social inequality, and environmental vulnerability. Despite these challenges, the region has great potential for growth and development. A growing young population, rapid urbanization, technological advancement, and abundant natural resources characterize the region. In addition, global trade and investment patterns are being transformed by the increasing influence of emerging market economies in the Global South (Haibin, 2023).

However, to take full advantage of these opportunities, the South must overcome its internal barriers and navigate the intricacies of the international political economy. This requires policies that prioritize equitable participation in global governance structures, sustainable development, and good governance. In this context, regional powers such as China and Indonesia are crucial, as their economic and diplomatic engagement can serve as models of cooperation and solidarity among Southern countries.

This research aims to investigate the dynamics of the Global South, with a particular emphasis on the strategic partnership between China and Indonesia. The

research seeks to comprehensively understand the cooperation between the two countries as a model for Southern countries to emulate in building strategic partnerships with each other by analyzing the historical context, current developments, and future prospects of the relationship.

Indonesia and China, as leading members of the Global South, maintain an outstanding partnership that epitomizes the principles of South-South and non-aligned cooperation, as well as the ethos of the Bandung Conference. Their bilateral relationship has grown substantially over the years, as evidenced by the development of strategic partnerships, diplomatic engagements, and economic connections. The potential of Indonesia-China relations to become a model of cooperation and solidarity among developing countries underscores its importance to the South. Economic collaboration between China and Indonesia, characterized by large trade volumes and investment flows, can provide valuable insights for enhancing economic partnerships to promote mutual development. In addition, their diplomatic coordination in regional and international forums, including the United Nations and ASEAN, demonstrates the potential for collective negotiation and representation of the interests of the Global South (Fitriani, 2021).

Moreover, Indonesia and China's agreement on key global issues, including climate change, sustainable development, and multilateralism, emphasizes the potential to bring together voices from the South in setting the global agenda. Their collaboration has the potential to motivate other countries in the South to build strategic alliances that transcend conventional geopolitical divisions and advocate for a more just and inclusive global order.

### **Scope and Methodology**

This study explores the evolution of Indonesia-China relations, tracing their historical foundations and examining how the partnership has developed in response to shifting domestic priorities and global geopolitical pressures. The research aims to identify key patterns and challenges in the bilateral relationship, with a particular focus on how both countries engage in cooperative efforts across economic, diplomatic, and strategic dimensions. The ultimate objective is to propose a framework for strengthening future collaboration between Indonesia and other countries in the Global South.

To achieve this, the research adopts a qualitative approach, using case studies as the primary method of inquiry. This allows for a detailed examination of selected

instances of Indonesia-China cooperation, particularly in areas such as investment, trade, foreign policy, and regional diplomacy. Data is drawn from a combination of official documents—such as reports from Indonesia’s Ministry of Investment and Ministry of Foreign Affairs—and a range of secondary sources, including academic literature, news articles, and online media. These materials offer valuable insights into both the opportunities and the tensions that characterize the relationship.

The study also engages with theoretical frameworks from international relations, especially neorealism, to better understand the motivations and strategies behind each country’s foreign policy. In this context, the Indonesia-China relationship is viewed not simply as a bilateral exchange but as part of a broader effort to navigate and reshape the global order. This includes efforts to build trust, maintain balance,<sup>54</sup> and pursue common interests within a multipolar world, particularly in the context of ASEAN and the wider Global South.

## **Theoretical Overview**

### **The Global South and Multipolarity**

The transition of the world system from one era to another has been discussed in the background. The bipolar world system is a term used to describe the Cold War era, which was characterized by the dominance of two great powers—the United States and the Soviet Union. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States has been the sole dominant entity in terms of economic, military, and political power. This is referred to as the unipolar world system.

Today, however, the dynamics and structure of international politics are transitioning toward multipolarity. This term denotes a global system that includes multiple centers of influence in international relations (Agashe, 2021). The United States' status as the sole superpower is currently being challenged and facing significant resistance. Various alliances have been formed in different regions of the world, significantly impacting the evolution of international geopolitics. For example, the alliance formed by China, Russia, and various other developing countries is known as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). The alliance is committed to promoting dialogue and cooperation among developing countries in a gradual, proactive, pragmatic, open, and transparent manner, contributing to the establishment of a harmonious world with shared prosperity and lasting peace (Anonymous, 2024).

BRICS is concrete evidence of the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world. As a new economic alliance, the number of actors involved in it is increasing. It demonstrates the decentralization of power with the main foundation of economic and military capabilities. BRICS provides evidence of the neorealist approach, which posits that power is a combined capability distributed across states that will help define structure and change in the international system (Waltz, 1990). In this context, it challenges the monopoly of power of superpowers, such as the United States, by forming alliances with Southern countries.

The spread of power also encourages many countries to compete to improve their position in the regional and global spheres. According to neorealists, this impacts the race of countries to enhance their capabilities to balance others or achieve power balancing. This can be seen in the strategic competition between India and China for influence in the Asian region. India is particularly wary of the expansion of the BRI project across the region, which threatens its security. This demonstrates an important neorealist thesis: that the primary concern of states is not power but their security (Waltz, 1990).

The multipolar system, according to the neorealist approach, also has other implications, particularly regarding the dynamic and shifting nature of alliances or cooperation (Agashe, 2021). This leads to uncertainty at the global level and makes it difficult to build trust among states. Countries may shift alliances, as recently many BRICS members have continued to negotiate against Trump's tariff policies, which shows their lack of commitment to forming a permanent alliance against U.S. hegemony. The case of China can be ruled out, as it is powerfully balanced with its opponents.

The expansion of South-South cooperation has also impacted the position of the Global South in international politics. Cooperation between developing countries aims to advocate for sustainable development, emphasizing that development and security cannot be separated (Zhou, 2024). In addition, South-South cooperation also aims to strengthen the Global South's collective identity while promoting the multipolarization of international politics and the democratization of international relations (Zhou, 2024).

In the context of a multipolar world system defined by the rise of the Global South, China is a country of great influence. In addition to its active participation in BRICS, the Chinese government initiated the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. The BRI is an infrastructure investment project that aims to improve connectivity, trade, and communication by building a variety of infrastructure, including airports, ports, power plants, bridges, railroads, highways, and telecommunications networks (Tsuji, 2024).

BRI infrastructure projects connect China with different parts of the world: by land with regions such as Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, and Europe, and by sea with coastal regions, including Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa.

The BRI initiative is evidence of the Chinese government's aspiration to establish itself as a significant player in the international political sphere. To achieve this goal, China needs support from various countries, including those in the ASEAN region. A population of 663,850 thousand in 2021 shows that the region has significant economic potential (Sidi, 2023). Of these, Indonesia has the largest population at 272,248.4 thousand people. Indonesia also has a significant influence on the regional economy and is the fourth largest economy in ASEAN. Politically, Indonesia is one of the five countries that initiated the formation of ASEAN (Ministry of Communication and Information of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023).

The investment provided by the Chinese government through the BRI project received a positive response from the government of the Republic of Indonesia (Saraswati, 2019). The two countries have agreed on several infrastructure development cooperation projects, such as the Morowali Industrial Estate, the construction of the Puruk Cahu-Batanjung-Bangkuang Coal Transport Railway, the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway project, and so on. This cooperation is expected to contribute to the economic growth of the Republic of Indonesia.

The partnership between China and Indonesia demonstrates the growing complexity of global dynamics in an increasingly multipolar world. China has emerged as Indonesia's main economic partner. Indonesia's exports to China reached USD 16.58 billion during the January-March 2023 period, while Indonesia's imports from China reached USD 15.34 billion (Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023). Meanwhile, China is the second most invested country in Indonesia, with an investment value of USD 7.4 billion (Ministry of Investment/BKPM, 2024). To maintain sovereignty and maximize the benefits of cooperation, Indonesia seeks to maintain a balance between China and other powers, including the United States and Japan, in a multipolar context.

The consequences of this collaboration for countries in the South are profound. Indonesia and China's collaboration allows developing countries to use their partnership as a model for expanding trade and building infrastructure without relying solely on Western countries. However, it also presents challenges, including China's potential

economic dominance in the region and debt dependency, which require prudent economic policies and careful diplomacy.

### **Neorealism Theory and Its Implementation in Indonesia-China Relations**

Neorealist theory serves as the main analytical tool in examining the bilateral relationship between China and Indonesia and its implications for countries in the South. One of the basic assumptions of neorealism is that states are the main actors in an anarchic international environment where there is no central authority to regulate state behavior. In this context, each state seeks to enhance its security and survival by forging external strategic alliances and strengthening internal capabilities (military and economic).

In a world that is becoming more multipolar, states often face a security dilemma where the growing authority of one state is perceived as a threat by another. This results in a scenario where each state is forced to rely on its resources (self-help system) and optimize its security through various mechanisms, such as creating international alliances or enhancing national capabilities. Kenneth N. Waltz elaborates:

*"The self-help system is one in which those who do not help themselves, or who do so less effectively than others, will fail to prosper, will expose themselves to danger, and will suffer." (Waltz, 1979).*

The anarchic nature of the international system and the interactions between states confined within the self-help system have resulted in feelings of insecurity rooted in suspicion. The implication is that states compete for increased authority to ensure their security. Neorealist theory primarily concerns these motivations to achieve security in the international system.

Neorealism can be used to explain the dynamics that emerge in Indonesia-PRC relations, particularly in safeguarding economic and security interests. Based on the previous review, Indonesia's economic development is influenced by the expansion of economic cooperation between China and Indonesia.

Nevertheless, Indonesia must increase its vigilance in response to China's growing regional influence. A multipolar world system affects power competition at the international level. To mitigate threats to its sovereignty and stability, Indonesia must maintain alliances with other major powers, such as the United States, while still maintaining a balance in its relations with China. This demonstrates the country's efforts



to uphold national interests and ensure security in accordance with the theory of neorealism.

### **Historical Overview of Diplomatic Relations between Indonesia and China**

Indonesia and China commemorate 75 years of diplomatic relations this year. Various ups and downs and pauses have characterized the relationship over these seven decades. The early era of diplomatic relations between the two countries was marked by a series of challenges, followed by close friendship, turmoil, and, ultimately, mutual suspicion and hostility (Sukma, 2009).

Indonesia officially opened diplomatic relations with China in July 1950, becoming the first country in Southeast Asia to do so (Sukma, 2009). Relations between the two grew closer after the Asian-African Conference (AAC) in Bandung in 1955. The AAC took place during the global Cold War. Zhou Enlai, Premier of the People's Republic of China (PRC), attended the conference from April 18–25, 1955. The conference was initiated by Indonesia, Burma, India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan, collectively called the “Colombo Powers.” The AAC was also China's first international event, with the Soviet Union absent. Many Asian and African countries participated (Utama, 2017). The AAC also allowed China to address specific issues that caused tension during the early Cold War (Utama, 2017).

A meeting was held on the sidelines of the AAC between Zhou Enlai and Sunario, who represented Indonesia. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the issue of dual citizenship among ethnic Chinese in Indonesia and to identify potential solutions. In fact, this had been the subject of discussion in Peking since November 1954 and was further elaborated in Jakarta and Bandung in March and April 1955 (Utama, 2017). These meetings resulted in the decision for ethnic Chinese in Indonesia to choose citizenship in one country within two years of the signing of the treaty.

Relations between Indonesia and China grew closer after the AAC. Moreover, Indonesia's progressive foreign policy was in line with China's revolutionary policy under Mao Zedong. In the mid-1960s, a diplomatic axis was also established between Beijing, Pyongyang, Hanoi, Phnom Penh, and Jakarta.

The close relationship between Indonesia and China was further characterized by China's support for Indonesia's proposal to host the second volume of the AAC and the concept of New Emerging Forces (NEFOS), in addition to the previously mentioned diplomatic axis. On November 10–22, 1963, China also served as Jakarta's main sponsor and supporter of the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFO). China provided US\$18 million to cover the transportation costs of the entire GANEFO delegation, in addition to giving them the opportunity to participate in international athletic events as part of the event (Rundjan, 2024).

Indonesia's domestic political situation contracted as this relationship improved in the 1960s. The Army's support for Soekarno's revolutionary policies eroded due to his growing tilt toward the PKI, which had a large mass base. Some leading military officers began to question Soekarno's overall policy direction, as they feared that his attraction to communism would permanently change Indonesia (Smith, 2000).

The events of the September 30th Movement (G30S) in Indonesia marked a significant turning point in relations between Indonesia and China. The G30S was a foiled coup carried out by a small group of middle-ranking officers who kidnapped the generals. The Army suspected the PKI was responsible for the coup and was sponsored by China. Anti-communist and anti-Chinese sentiment increased in Indonesia as a result of these events, which legitimized the transition of power from Soekarno to Soeharto. Indonesia, therefore, experienced significant turmoil.

In 1967, Soeharto, then president, responded to China by freezing diplomatic relations between the two countries. Indonesia officially announced this freeze on October 23, 1967, and China followed suit on October 28, 1967 (Sukma, 2009). The New Order under Soeharto's leadership certainly needed legitimacy to build public trust. Therefore, the issue of communism became the main focus of the government to maintain its power. Consequently, the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two was hampered, as Indonesia had no intention of restoring ties. However, China had restored relations with the United States in 1972 and had established diplomatic relations with Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines by the mid-1970s (Storey, 2000).

Their rapprochement was influenced by the easing of Cold War conflict that began to subside in the mid-1980s. From the mid-1980s onward, bilateral relations progressively improved due to Indonesia's domestic factors and China's more pragmatic foreign policy under Deng Xiaoping. Diplomatic relations were restored in 1990, and direct trade between the two countries was resumed in 1985 (Storey, 2000).

Sentiments between the two countries, particularly in Indonesia, did not necessarily change due to the development of this relationship. This was evident during the April 1994 riots in Medan, which resulted in the destruction of a number of shops and companies owned by ethnic Chinese and the death of an Indonesian citizen of Chinese descent. In a statement issued by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, the Indonesian government was urged to stop the anti-Chinese riots. This statement was widely criticized by Indonesian officials, who saw it as an attempt to interfere in Indonesia's internal affairs (Storey, 2000). China was hesitant to be accused of interfering in Indonesia's internal affairs, which made them more cautious in their response to the May 1998 riots in Jakarta, in which many Chinese were killed and raped.

Indonesia-PRC relations began to improve after Soeharto's resignation. President Abdurrahman Wahid was specifically responsible for resolving the impasse. On his first official visit, Gus Dur's initial destination was China, which became evidence of improved bilateral relations (Smith, 2000). Domestically, Gus Dur also repealed various discriminatory regulations against ethnic Chinese, including a regulation that recognized Chinese New Year as a national holiday.

The same action was taken by Megawati Soekarnoputri, who succeeded Gus Dur. Indonesia's sensitivity to Beijing's concerns over Taiwan increased during Megawati's presidency. For example, in December 2002, Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda rejected a request from then-Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian to visit Indonesia (Sukma, 2009). This action reaffirmed Indonesia's dedication to the concept of one mainland China.

China and Indonesia established a strategic partnership during the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono administration. This collaboration covers a wide range of functions, such as investment, defense technology, and trade. Thanks to these

agreements, relations between China and Indonesia have reached a high point (Sukma, 2009).

Joko Widodo, SBY's successor, also maintained diplomatic relations with China. In Indonesia, Chinese investment has continued to increase during Jokowi's tenure. For example, Indonesia ranked third in terms of total investment, with China accounting for 16% of the total, according to 2020 Investment Coordinating Board data. China Development Bank also provided a US\$4.5 billion loan for the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project between Indonesia and China. This initiative is also a component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Therefore, investments from China related to the Belt and Road Initiative are encouraged, provided they comply with Indonesian regulations. The Jakarta-Bandung HSR is an implicit flagship project in Indonesia under the BRI. The project requires a loan, with the main risk borne by the PRC (Putten & Petkova, 2021).

The historical trajectory of Indonesia's relations, if analyzed using the lens of neorealism, shows an effort to build an alternative balancing network between the two powers at the time, namely the US and the Soviet Union. Although pioneering the way toward a multipolar global system, it turns out that alliances such as the AAC and NEFOS also show the weakness of the commitment of the countries present. The existence of outside interventions that influenced many countries led to a series of cases of alliance changes in the future. Indonesia, for instance, froze relations with China after a change of power in the country. Changes in domestic power were the result of the increasingly tense Cold War. According to Waltz, this shows that state behavior responds more to external conditions than internal ones when the changes outside are significant (Waltz, 2000). This was especially true after Indonesia initiated the development of ASEAN as a vehicle to strengthen its position in the Southeast Asian region.

A new rapprochement took place after the end of the Cold War. The fall of Soeharto led Indonesia to start thinking about development partners that could provide investment. This relationship culminated under Joko Widodo, who positioned China as Indonesia's main economic development partner. This is inseparable from global dynamics, where Trump, who took office in 2016, did not prioritize economic assistance for countries in the Asian region.

The next section will discuss the impact of this relationship on both countries' diplomatic strategies and economic development. Furthermore, it will discuss the broader relationship with India's rise as another power in the region.

### **Current State of Indonesia-PRC Relations**

Under the leadership of President Joko Widodo, relations between Indonesia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have greatly improved in the past decade. The relationship is strong across a range of sectors, including economics, diplomacy, and security. This section will discuss the dynamics of the current relationship between the two countries and emphasize the challenges and opportunities resulting from this improved relationship.

#### **Economic Relationship**

Indonesia's main trading partner is China. Trade between the two countries was expected to exceed US\$130 billion, or around Rp 2,041 trillion, by 2023 (CNBC Indonesia, 2023). Coal, palm oil, and nickel are among Indonesia's commodities exported to China. Conversely, Indonesia is also a destination for Chinese investment. In 2022, China was the second-largest foreign investor in Indonesia, according to the Investment Coordinating Board (BKPM) and the Ministry of Investment. China recorded a total investment value of US\$8.266 billion, spread across various sectors. The metal industry (US\$2.6326 billion), transportation (US\$2.1918 billion), and chemical industry (US\$1.428 billion) are the three main sectors in which China invests. These investments were spread across Indonesia, with 32.68 percent (US\$2.6882 billion) in Java and 67.32 percent (US\$5.5378 billion) outside Java (Ministry of Investment/BKPM, 2023).

Since the start of President Joko Widodo's administration, Chinese investment has been growing at an unprecedented pace. For example, in 2015, Chinese investment jumped by 26% to reach US\$628 million. The figure then increased by around US\$1 billion in the first quarter of 2016. In 2016, China invested US\$2.7 billion in Indonesia, resulting in 1,734 initiatives (Andika & Aisyah, 2017).

Indonesia has witnessed the commencement of various Chinese-invested infrastructure projects between 2016 and 2019. The following projects are

underway: Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway (2016–2019), Cisumdawu (Cileunyi-Sumedang-Dawuan) toll road sections I and II (2016–2019), Manado-Bitung toll road (2016–2019), Solo-Kertosono toll road (2015–2017), Pisang Island steam power plant (2016), and Riau power plant (2015–2017) (Andika & Aisyah, 2017).

The injection of funds from the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is another mechanism through which PRC investment is channeled into the infrastructure sector. China established the bank as an alternative to Western lending institutions. To date, the AIIB has provided funding for the following initiatives in Indonesia: National Slum Upgrading Project (2016), Regional Infrastructure Development Fund Project (2017), and Dam Operational and Safety Improvement Project Phase II (2017) (Andika & Aisyah, 2017).

In addition to infrastructure, Indonesia-China economic relations also occur in the mining sector, especially nickel commodities. Nickel ore is spread across Indonesia and is found in Sulawesi, Papua, Maluku, and Kalimantan. Of the five regions, around 84 percent, with a record of 273 IUPs and nickel smelters, are spread across South, Central, and Southeast Sulawesi. It is recorded that the most OP nickel mining business licenses (IUPs) are in the Southeast Sulawesi region with 154 licenses, followed by Central Sulawesi with 85 licenses and South Sulawesi with 34 licenses (Fauziyah & Paksi, 2023).

China is one of the export destination countries for Indonesian nickel commodities. The value of Indonesia's nickel exports in 2022 reached US\$1.71 billion, with a volume of 233.8 thousand tons. Exports to China alone are estimated to account for 78% of the total national nickel export volume and 69% of the national export value (Fauziyah & Paksi, 2023). The government has set a downstream target by building smelters in Indonesia to process and refine nickel ore, as the export value of nickel commodities is very profitable for foreign exchange earnings and job creation. The Chinese government enthusiastically welcomes this initiative and is investing in the sector. Indonesia has 20 nickel processing and refining plants, some of which are the result of investment projects with China thanks to this cooperation.

The increasing economic cooperation between China and Indonesia also affects the sociocultural conditions of the people. Indonesia's future dependence

on China is one of the issues that continues to be discussed. The impact of this dependency is evident in the China-Indonesia High-Speed Rail (KCIC) investment. Former President Jokowi signed a loan for this initiative during a visit to Beijing in May 2017. Subsequently, the loan was provided to KCIC, a consortium of Indonesian state-owned enterprises, including KAI, WIKA, Perkebunan Nusantara VIII, and Jasa Marga. The US\$4.5 billion loan will be repaid to China Development Bank by 2067. As both KCIC and China Development Bank are state-owned enterprises, the establishment of this railway initiative indirectly establishes a long-term financial relationship between the Indonesian and Chinese governments (Putten & Petkova, 2021).

In addition to dependency issues, the effects of anti-China sentiment are also increasing in Indonesia. The ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's Indonesia National Survey, conducted through the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI) in July 2022, showed potential distrust of Indonesians toward increased investment and cooperation with China.

The ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute commissioned Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI) to conduct the "Indonesia National Survey" in July 2022. The survey interviewed more than 1,600 respondents on domestic and foreign politics, sociocultural issues, and the economy. The research sample also accurately represented Indonesian society in terms of gender, age, diversity, region, religion, and ethnicity. In general, the results of the study show that there are persistent negative misconceptions about China and, to a lesser extent, Indonesia's Chinese ethnic minority (also known as "Chinese Indonesians"). For example, when asked, "Do you think the rise of China will have a positive or negative impact on Indonesia?" about 25.4 percent of respondents considered it negative, while 20.6 percent considered it positive. The majority, or 29.4 percent, were ambivalent. A total of 24.6 percent said they "don't know" the answer, which could be interpreted as ignorance about international affairs or an unwillingness to share views (Negara & Suryadinata, 2024). The survey also showed that Indonesians' positive view of China declined to 66% in 2020 from 76.7% five years earlier. A total of 41.5% of respondents had concerns about Indonesia's involvement in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project. They believe that the BRI could create a debt trap for

Indonesia and other countries. The crisis in Sri Lanka, which is the result of debt bondage to China, has reinforced this perception (Rakhmat, 2024).

These internal challenges must be emphasized, as they may lead to future conflicts. Failure to address them may result in future violent attacks, as was the case in the May 1998 riots that targeted Chinese individuals in Indonesia. A recent example of the danger of this sentiment is the case of Ahok, or Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, a Christian and ethnic Chinese individual who was reported by Muslim conservatives for blasphemy. This triggered a series of demonstrations and crystallized identity politics in Indonesia. In other words, identity politics caused by anti-Chinese sentiment could jeopardize the country's political and economic stability (Rakhmat, 2024). Furthermore, it could undermine the partnership built on trust between Indonesia and China.

### **Diplomatic Relations**

President Joko Widodo's administration over the past decade has seen warming diplomatic relations between Indonesia and China. Since the beginning of his term, Jokowi symbolically made his first foreign visit to China on November 8, 2014, which coincided with the holding of the APEC Summit in Beijing. Through this visit, several strategic agreements were reached between the two countries. For example, Jokowi expressed his commitment to join China in establishing the AIIB as a China-led international financial institution to finance infrastructure projects, particularly to support the BRI initiative (Andika & Aisyah, 2017).

The relationship was further strengthened after Jokowi's return visit to China on March 25–28, 2015, to celebrate the 65th anniversary of bilateral relations between the two countries. Jokowi and Xi Jinping, in their meeting, discussed many issues of cooperation between the two countries in the economic field, especially in terms of trade, finance, infrastructure, industry, tourism, and Indonesia-China public relations. As a result, eight MoUs were signed, namely: economic cooperation between the Indonesian Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs and China's National Development and Reform Commission; the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail Development Project between the Ministry of SOEs and China's National Development and Reform Commission; maritime and SAR cooperation between Basarnas and China's Ministry of Transportation;



protocol approval cooperation between the governments of China and Indonesia for the prevention of double taxation; 2015–2020 space cooperation framework between Lapan and the China Space Institute; mutual support cooperation between the Ministry of SOEs and China Development Bank; a memorandum of understanding between the governments of China and Indonesia for the prevention of double taxation; and a memorandum of understanding on industrial and infrastructure cooperation between the Ministry of SOEs and China's National Development and Reform Commission (Andika & Aisyah, 2017).

Indonesia and China have signed 36 memoranda of understanding (MoUs) on cooperation from 2014 to 2017. This cooperation covers various sectors, such as economy, culture, tourism, and education. The latest development is that the two countries are building a strategic partnership for the future. Jokowi returned to China to attend the third BRI Forum and a state visit on October 16–18, 2023, at the invitation of Xi Jinping.

Their meeting resulted in several important points that enhance cooperation in various fields. A release from the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs shows a joint statement on deepening strategic cooperation between Indonesia and China in the future. The meeting of the two leaders of developing Asian countries again discussed the maximum implementation of the 2022–2026 Action Plan to strengthen the Indonesia-China strategic partnership. Both sides also reaffirmed the mutual relationship toward their respective goals and visions, namely the vision of “Golden Indonesia 2045” and “China's Centennial Goals.” Indonesia also directly expressed appreciation and will continue to support the BRI initiative as a project developed by China. Both countries also agreed to respect each other's sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity. During the visit, the two sides also signed a number of cooperation documents in various fields, such as joint dialogues at the level of foreign ministers and defense ministers, the establishment of a BRI promotion coordination mechanism, strengthening cooperation on GDI development, rural development, poverty alleviation, sustainable development, investment, economic cooperation, health care and treatment, corruption prevention and eradication, media cooperation, and Indonesia's export of fishery products and edible aquatic animals (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, 2023).

Beyond the framework of diplomatic cooperation between the two countries, both Indonesia and China, at the global level, desire peace in the world and non-interventionism as aligned foreign policies. This alignment can be traced through support for Palestinian independence. Indonesia and China actively pursue the country's independence through various international forums. Historically, this can be traced back to the AAC, when Zhou Enlai unexpectedly pledged China's support for Palestine (Utama, 2017). The conference also resulted in a push to implement UN resolutions on Palestine and resolve the issue through peaceful means (Utama, 2017). Along the way, Indonesia actively pushed for the recognition of Palestinian sovereignty through international forums, such as the OIC and the UN. Meanwhile, China took another step by mediating reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah to form an interim national reconciliation government in the West Bank and Gaza (Wong & Berg, 2024).

Strengthening Indonesia-PRC diplomatic relations also has some challenges. This improved relationship may strain geopolitical alliances with other countries. Indonesia's shift to partners such as China is due to the declining influence of the United States in the Asian region. This shift in influence occurred because the United States failed to implement the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) project as a forum for economic cooperation between countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The TPP program was formed during the administration of President Barack Obama, but Trump was not interested in continuing this project. As is known, Jokowi, in carrying out Indonesia's foreign diplomacy, leans pragmatic and uses an economic cooperation approach; the implication is that China is a rational choice for Indonesia to build strategic alliances in the future.

### **Geopolitics and Security Dynamics**

Geopolitical dynamics in the multipolar era are characterized by a constant struggle for influence and competition. To counter this trend, Indonesia and China must develop a collaborative strategy that positions them as cooperative partners rather than competitors in the contemporary global landscape.

Until now, Indonesia's geopolitical turmoil in the Southeast Asian region, related to claims over the South China Sea, has been directly linked to China's

interests. If unchecked, this issue could cause instability in the region. Although Indonesia is not a claimant state in the South China Sea, the nine-dash line claimed by China intersects with the northern boundary of Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in Natuna waters. This is the source of conflict between Indonesia and China (Andika & Aisyah, 2017).

Indonesia claims that guarding the Natuna region aims to stabilize the Southeast Asian region. So far, President Joko Widodo has implemented a strategy to resolve this conflict by conducting active diplomacy to seek a peaceful settlement so that the dispute does not escalate further (Andika & Aisyah, 2017). China has also taken extra steps to resolve this issue, particularly in Southeast Asian countries. ASEAN countries are more subtly addressing the South China Sea dispute through BRI investment. One example is Malaysia's change of attitude after the US\$15 billion Malaysia-Singapore high-speed rail infrastructure cooperation agreement in 2015. After the agreement, Malaysia expressed its stance to resolve the South China Sea issue peacefully with China (Andika & Aisyah, 2017).

A cooperative approach is needed to prevent similar conflicts from recurring. In their last meeting, Indonesia and China agreed to maintain each other's sovereignty and honor. This agreement has the potential to temporarily reduce the risk of conflict in the Southeast Asian region related to the South China Sea issue.

The Indo-Pacific region presents the most significant challenge due to India's rising influence. The country is keen to establish a presence in two oceans, the Pacific and the Indian, to serve its economic interests. It is widely recognized that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects intersect with this region, potentially creating security tensions in the region. India collaborates with the United States (US) as a strategic partner in developing its military and security infrastructure. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is working to build a defense procurement and production partnership with the United States. The United States anticipates that India will be a reliable counterweight to China's unstoppable and alarming power in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean (Mandhana, 2016).

In the midst of this competition, Indonesia does not need to take sides. Instead, Indonesia can act as a mediator to mitigate future conflicts. The "free and

active” foreign policy doctrine provides flexibility for Indonesia to maintain peace in the Asian region. Cooperative strategies and peaceful diplomacy must continue to be pursued to address the challenges of India and China’s competition in the future.

### **Impact of Indo-China Cooperation on Southern Countries**

In the previous section, we discussed the economic and diplomatic relations between China and Indonesia. Cooperation between China and Indonesia in the economic field has strengthened since China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Song, 2023). This is shown by the high value of goods trade between China and Indonesia, which reached 149.1 billion US dollars in 2022.

In addition, China is actively investing in helping Indonesia implement infrastructure development. The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail cooperation project is the most prominent example. Overall, Chinese investment in Indonesia totals US\$8.2 billion. This makes Indonesia the second-largest investment destination for China in ASEAN (Song, 2023) and one of the 11 partner countries that have reached the highest level of cooperation in the BRI (Song, 2023).

Strengthening China-Indonesia economic cooperation has a domino effect on the ASEAN region. Indonesia’s central role as a major country in ASEAN is crucial for China in promoting broader cooperation in the region (Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023). This can be seen from the realization of ASEAN exports to China reaching 213 billion US dollars by 2022. This shows that China, the world’s most populous country, is an export target for ASEAN countries. In addition, ASEAN is China’s import share with a value of more than 450 billion US dollars, or around 36% (Sidik, 2023).

The data illustrates the close partnership between China and Indonesia and its impact on ASEAN countries. An effort has been made to elevate this partnership to a higher level through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP). This landmark agreement, involving China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, has created a vast market that includes 2.3 billion people, or nearly one-third of the global population, and a cumulative Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 26 trillion US dollars. In addition, this economic integration eliminates tariffs on more than 90% of goods traded between signatory countries, thereby boosting trade and investment.

If we trace its history, RCEP was first initiated by Indonesia in 2011, when the country served as ASEAN chair (Damuri & Friawan, 2022). In 2020, the agreement was

negotiated and came into force in January 2022. Besides expanding trade and attracting investment, RCEP also promotes harmonization of regulations and standards, simplifies cross-border trade, and creates a predictable business environment (Fukuyama, 2024). This agreement has a significant impact on ASEAN countries, as they can save production costs, gain profits, and compete in the global market.

Based on the above findings, China-Indonesia cooperation has far-reaching implications for economic development, especially in relation to trade in the ASEAN region. It also has a positive impact on the existence of the Global South as a major player in international politics. The cooperation established through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the RCEP agreement can bring economic independence to Global South countries as well as improve the bargaining position of developing countries compared to first-world countries.

Meanwhile, diplomatically, the relationship between China and Indonesia has a significant impact. As the largest country in ASEAN, Indonesia often acts as a mediator in various regional issues, especially regarding the South China Sea dispute. In these disputes, Indonesia encourages cooperative rather than confrontational settlements. This attitude is evidenced by Indonesia's initiative to form the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in 2002 in Cambodia. The Declaration pledges to "promote favorable conditions for peaceful and durable solutions to differences and disputes among the countries concerned" (Duong, 2024).

Then, Indonesia also encouraged the disputing parties to agree on a South China Sea code of conduct (Single Draft South China Sea Code of Conduct Negotiating Text), which includes five main focuses, namely: 1) the geographical scope of the South China Sea; 2) dispute resolution efforts; 3) the obligation to cooperate in preserving the maritime environment; 4) the role of third parties in the South China Sea; and 5) the legal status of the code of conduct (Liputan 6, 2024).

Indonesia's role in resolving the South China Sea dispute shows how much influence Indonesia has over China. Indonesia can act as ASEAN's security guard, as it has no direct dispute with China. In addition, Indonesia's experience and expertise in resolving disputes between countries around the world are the main reasons for choosing Indonesia as a mediator. In summary, the South China Sea dispute shows that the relationship between China and Indonesia has a wider impact on the security of the ASEAN region.

Indonesia and China are similar in their approach to the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Both countries condemn the violence that has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. Indonesia views Israel's attacks on Palestinians as

a demonstration of the Israeli government's indifference to achieving peace (Wardah, 2024). On the other hand, the Chinese government condemned and opposed the violence in Gaza, Palestine. Mao Ning, spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated that the Chinese government opposes actions that exacerbate the conflict and undermine regional stability. The Chinese government hopes for a ceasefire to end the war and restore peace as soon as possible (VoA Indonesia, 2024).

The similarity of attitudes between China and Indonesia toward the conflict in Palestine opens opportunities for both countries to become mediators in efforts to resolve the conflict through peaceful means (Utama, 2024). China's growing influence in the Middle East region and Indonesia's consistency in voicing Palestinian rights are assets to realize peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Utama, 2017). In addition, the attitude of China and Indonesia toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a manifestation of their consistency in maintaining the 1955 Bandung Conference resolution, which supports the rights of the Palestinian people and calls for the implementation of UN resolutions related to the Palestinian issue to realize a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Therefore, the China-Indonesia partnership is crucial to developing the South. China's status as a major economic power allows other developing countries to build mutually beneficial partnerships. Indonesia's status as a major country in ASEAN can incentivize other countries in the region to cooperate with China. These partnerships generally facilitate economic integration and connectivity in the South.

Diplomatic relations between China and Indonesia play an important role in promoting regional security, particularly in the ASEAN region. Indonesia serves as a mediator in the South China Sea dispute, which involves China and a number of ASEAN countries. Moreover, due to their vast experience, Indonesia and China have the potential to jointly achieve world peace.

### **Internal Geopolitical Challenges**

Indonesia-China relations present geopolitical challenges for Southern countries, especially in the context of perceptions of regional leadership. Many Southern countries are forced to compete for regional leadership, which can sometimes exacerbate internal political tensions. For example, in the case of Indonesia, some domestic political groups fear that Indonesia's leadership in the ASEAN region will be undermined by its proximity to China. This is supported by an ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak Institute survey in collaboration with LSI, which showed a decline in Indonesians' positive view of China from 76.7% in 2015 to 66% in 2020. In addition, 41.5% of Indonesians are concerned about potential debt traps in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project initiated by China (Rakhmat, 2024).

Countries in the Global South should adopt a cooperative approach that goes beyond conventional leadership paradigms and prioritizes mutually beneficial collaboration. Perceptions of leadership competition often contribute to domestic political instability, especially in countries that have a long history of resistance to foreign influence. For example, in some African and Latin American countries, there is growing dissatisfaction with China's dominant role in their economies.

To address these internal geopolitical challenges, Southern countries should adopt a more participatory and inclusive model of cooperation. For example, regional forums such as ASEAN and SAARC should provide platforms for Southern countries to engage in open dialogue and resolve disputes without getting caught up in leadership rivalries. Public diplomacy and civil society are also important in raising awareness of the importance of cooperation and solidarity among Southern countries.

### **External Geopolitical Challenges**

Indonesia-China relations pose external and internal geopolitical challenges for Southern countries. These challenges relate to balancing their relationships with traditional powers, including the United States and the European Union. In this context, Southern countries are often forced to make complex political alliances.

As discussed earlier, Indonesia plays an important role in the South China Sea disputes. Indonesia's moderate stance is a logical decision. China is a significant trading partner for Indonesia, providing many benefits for infrastructure development, including the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail. Conversely, Indonesia must maintain peace and security as an ASEAN member state in the region. These two factors are the basis of Indonesia's moderate stance on the South China Sea dispute.

However, these challenges are accompanied by opportunities that the South can capitalize on, like two sides of a coin. They should work together to express their concerns regarding global issues, such as economic inequality, climate change, and regional conflicts. This collaboration, in turn, strengthens the South's position in an increasingly multipolar international community.

### **Future Plans**

Indonesia, as the most populous country in the Southeast Asian region, faces a range of strategic choices regarding its relations with China, India, and other global actors. This section will attempt to explore three draft scenarios for Indonesia's future strategic

positioning: (1) deepening cooperation with China, (2) strategic competition between China and India, and (3) Indonesia's shifting alliances with other regional and global powers. Each scenario offers opportunities and challenges for Indonesia that could directly or indirectly affect regional or global stability.

### **Scenario 1: Deepening Indonesia-China Cooperation**

In the past decade of President Joko Widodo's administration, there has been a significant increase in economic cooperation between Indonesia and China. Statistical records show that trade and investment relations have expanded significantly, benefiting Indonesia's domestic economy. For example, trade between the two countries was expected to reach US\$130 billion, or around Rp 2,041 trillion, by 2023 (CNBC Indonesia, 2023). China is an export destination for a range of Indonesian commodities, including coal, palm oil, and nickel.

The metal industry (US\$2.6326 billion), transportation (US\$2.1918 billion), and chemical industry (US\$1.428 billion) are the three main sectors where Chinese investment is concentrated in Indonesia, with 32.68% (US\$2.6882 billion) of the investment located on Java Island and 67.32% (US\$5.5378 billion) located outside Java Island, as reported by the Ministry of Investment and the Investment Coordinating Board (BKPM) (Ministry of Investment/BKPM, 2023).

Several Chinese-assisted infrastructure projects have also been successfully built in Indonesia as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project. The BRI project funding scheme in Indonesia so far has two models, namely direct investment to local governments, as in the case of PT Kereta Cepat Indonesia-China (KCIC), which is 60% owned by a consortium of four Indonesian SOEs (Kereta Api Indonesia, WIKA, Perkebunan Nusantara VIII, and Jasa Marga) and 40% owned by China Railway Construction Corp (CRCC), a Chinese SOE (Putten & Petkova, 2021). Through this structure of majority shareholding held by local entities, the loan is entirely the responsibility of the Indonesian side. The second model is for China to channel loans to companies from its own country to build infrastructure in Indonesia. Examples can be seen in the Batang Toru dam project and the Java 7 power plant, which are majority-owned by Chinese companies. In the Batang Toru Dam, the majority shareholder is Zhefu Holding Company (Zhejiang Fuchunjiang Hydropower Equipment Company). As for the Java 7 power plant, the controlling shareholder is Shenhua Group. Therefore, the loans provided by Chinese financial institutions are loans to Chinese companies (Putten & Petkova, 2021).

The success of various previous Chinese investment projects undoubtedly provides opportunities for further collaboration in the future. Moreover, so far, Indonesia has not



found other economic partners that can help its domestic economic development. One potential area for this collaboration is the extractive natural resources industry sector, particularly nickel. Nickel is a basic component of electric vehicles, including electric cars and motorcycles. In addition, investment in this sector has the potential to facilitate a new energy transition. China can be Indonesia's strategic partner in natural resource downstreaming projects that are being promoted by the Indonesian government.

According to data from the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, Indonesia's nickel reserves are the largest in the world, with total production of more than 800 thousand tons in 2020. The United States Geological Survey (USGS) reports that Indonesia has the largest nickel reserves in the world, with 2.67 million tons produced worldwide. The Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources also reports that nickel reserves in Indonesia have a reserve life of up to 27 years (Fauziyah & Paksi, 2023). Indonesia also protects this commodity by banning the direct export of raw nickel materials. China then assisted Indonesia in the construction of a number of nickel ore processing smelters in various regions.

Expanding cooperation in natural resources, such as the nickel commodity, can benefit both Indonesia and China. For example, state revenues have increased from IDR 17 trillion to IDR 326 trillion, or US\$20.9 billion, in 2021, a 19-fold increase due to the nickel export ban and the development of downstream projects in Indonesia with China's support (Fauziyah & Paksi, 2023).

In addition to assisting Indonesia in building additional smelters to produce high-quality nickel, there is potential for increased cooperation in producing electric vehicles. Data shows that Indonesia has the potential to become a significant market share for electric car products in the future. In the period January to March 2024, national electric car sales have exceeded 30% of total sales in 2023. If this trend continues, sales are likely to surpass the 20,000-unit mark this year. During this period, 5,811 electric cars were sold, which is significantly higher than the 1,795 units sold in the same period last year. This sales figure is an increase of more than 200 percent compared to the same period last year (Krisdamarjati, 2024). The main players in this field are Wuling and Chery, two Chinese electric car manufacturers.

The high market potential can enhance the long-term relationship between the two countries. China can assist Indonesia in technology development for electric car battery production. This will result in reduced production prices and supply chain preservation. Obviously, this will have a huge economic impact for both countries. Indonesia is currently grappling with building an upstream-to-downstream production ecosystem, while China

is grappling with the digital BRI project dedicated to developing future connectivity technologies.

In addition to other global actors, such as the United States and Japan, Indonesia should act as a bridge or link between various interests without overly favoring either party. This action can result in increased regional stability and will influence the development of Indonesia-PRC cooperation in the future. Furthermore, the scenario of increased economic cooperation should be accompanied by increased diplomacy and community exchanges between Indonesia and China to dispel misunderstandings that have developed between the two. China's rising influence could also trigger friction with other ASEAN countries, especially those related to the South China Sea maritime dispute between China, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

### **Scenario 2: Strategic Competition between China and India**

The rivalry between China and India can cause instability in the Asia-Pacific region. In a broader context, it is an important factor in the future dynamics of South Asian countries. Both Asian powers are vying for influence, and India is also trying to limit China's influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

India is interested in maintaining its presence in the Pacific and Indian Oceans for economic reasons. This objective also conflicts with China's interests in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project. In response to this competition, India has chosen to collaborate with the United States (US), a country that is well aware of China's growing influence in the Asia-Pacific region. Japan, which has forged many partnerships with the US, may also be affected by this rivalry. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been working to build a defense procurement and production partnership with the United States since 2016. The United States anticipates that India will serve as a reliable counterweight to China's unstoppable, rampant, and alarming power in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean (Mandhana, 2016).

Their rivalry could trigger potential instability, especially in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, the second scenario suggests that Indonesia should be more cautious in determining its future posture. Moreover, China and India's rivalry is not only limited to the economic sphere but also includes military, technological, and geopolitical aspects. Collaborative projects and beneficial cooperation should be encouraged to reduce the potential for violent clashes between the two.

Indonesia can play the role of mediator if the conflict escalates. With a "free and active" foreign policy doctrine dedicated to multilateral principles, Indonesia can promote

cooperation and peace in global forums, including the G20 and ASEAN, as a protective measure against the adverse effects of India and China's rivalry.

This scenario suggests that strategic competition does not substantially benefit countries in the South, including Indonesia. Instead, it has the potential to exacerbate political and economic instability in a region that is vulnerable to geopolitical change. Therefore, Indonesia should encourage initiatives to reduce rivalry and build a cooperative framework that includes China and India. This strategy will reduce the risk of conflict in the region and promote more inclusive and sustainable economic development.

### **Scenario 3: Shifting Alliances in Indonesia**

Indonesia has changed its perspective on global geopolitical dynamics over the past decade. President Joko Widodo's administration has steered Indonesia toward economic cooperation and diplomacy with China, and for good reason. There are two main factors that contribute to Indonesia's growing alliance with global powers: internal and external factors.

Three external factors have influenced the closeness between Indonesia and China in recent years. First, Indonesia's approach to China is closely linked to China's rise as a global economic power in the 21st century. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the Rise of China. Second, there is the One Belt One Road (OBOR) project. Third, the United States failed to participate in the Rebalance to Asia project that aims to enhance regional security and economic development in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region (Andika & Aisyah, 2017).

Indonesia's internal factors are also important in the development of this alliance. First, the closeness between Indonesia and China is a result of Indonesia's need for financial assistance for infrastructure development. Second, leader psychology, particularly Jokowi's perception of China as Indonesia's strategic partner, is a significant factor. Third, Indonesia's closeness to China is also significantly influenced by Jokowi's foreign policy orientation, which is characterized by "down-to-earth diplomacy" or "pro-people diplomacy" (Andika & Aisyah, 2017).

It is clear that countries often engage in shifting alliances in their foreign policies. Indonesia, in particular, has prioritized the development of its domestic economy in recent years, which has made China a strategic partner for trade and investment. In addition, domestic leadership is a factor of proximity, underscoring the importance of presidential transitions in predicting Indonesia's future alliances.

Indonesia is expected to change its alliances with other global powers, such as the United States and the European Union, or with other regional powers, such as Japan and

Australia, in the future. This change could be beneficial for Indonesia in terms of security and economy, especially given the security threats in the Indo-Pacific region.

However, changing alliances present some obstacles. A significant change could erode Indonesia's relationship with traditional partners, such as China or ASEAN. Moreover, alliance changes that are not based on the principle of multilateral cooperation could exacerbate tensions in the region and encourage greater global polarization. Therefore, alliance changes should be made carefully and through mutually beneficial cooperation, not through competition for leadership. For example, alliances based on technological and economic cooperation, such as digital infrastructure development or renewable energy initiatives, can provide long-term benefits for Indonesia. These alliances can also help Indonesia maintain stability in the Indo-Pacific region and strengthen its role as a leader in ASEAN.

China-Indonesia relations show the implementation of neorealism theory in international relations. The spread of power to build a multipolar world is demonstrated by the building of a number of alliances in the past, such as the AAC and NEFOS. This also proves the implications of multipolarity according to this approach, which emphasizes trust and alliances that change over time.

The relationship between the two also shows an effort to continue to maintain a balance of power. The case of Indonesia shows evidence of this, where its role remains neutral and does not want to take sides completely. This step is taken to build trust among other global members, especially in ASEAN.

A collaborative approach to understanding their relationship is particularly relevant in addressing more complex global issues, such as economic inequality and climate change, which are particularly acute for developing countries. This approach is not about jockeying for influence but about creating progress and shared interests. This approach is particularly important for countries in the Global South to promote economic growth and break dependence on large countries.

### **Findings and Implications**

As discussed earlier, there are a few key findings derived from the phenomenon of Indonesia-China relations and its implications for the South.

First, the Indonesia-China economic relationship opens the gates for the involvement of other ASEAN countries. Indonesia, as the Chair of ASEAN and the largest country in the region, showed that economic cooperation with China is a strategic step that can boost domestic economic development. Afterwards, many ASEAN countries

followed suit, as evidenced by the summary of various agreements, such as ACFTA and RCEP. Economic exchanges in the region promote self-reliance and become an alternative partnership for developing countries.

Second, Indonesia-China relations have a positive impact on maintaining security and stability in the South. Although Indonesia's efforts experienced ups and downs as a mediator of South China Sea peace, the partnership between Indonesia and China that has been built before has an impact, showing ASEAN leaders how to accept China's proposal in conflict resolution.

The importance of collaboration in international politics is exemplified by Indonesia-China relations. To build economic and political independence for Southern countries, it is crucial to prioritize the collaborative aspect over the competitive aspect. In a multipolar world order, a collaborative approach must be implemented to achieve the ultimate goal of creating global peace.

### **Policy Implications**

China's economic growth is a prime example of how countries from the Global South can influence international politics. In addition, China is actively collaborating with developing countries through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which provides investments to build physical infrastructure in developing countries. Indonesia is one of the beneficiaries of this ambitious project. Recently, the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail construction project has been finalized between Indonesia and the PRC, which has the potential to boost Indonesia's economic growth.

In a multipolar world, it is imperative to foster and strengthen multilateral cooperation that ensures the interests of developing countries. This cooperation will enable developing countries to reduce economic inequality and break away from economic dependence on developed countries. Therefore, Southern countries should build collaborative relationships rather than compete for leadership.

Several recommendations should be made to encourage these cooperative efforts. First, regional and global economic integration should be encouraged. Indonesia, China, and other Global South countries should enhance economic connectivity and integration. Measures that can be taken include free trade agreements, infrastructure development cooperation, and technology exchange.

Second, it is imperative to enhance multilateral diplomacy to represent the interests of the Global South. International forums, including the UN and G20, should be used to promote developing countries' interests in an inclusive and equitable development agenda.

Finally, Indonesia and China's partnership, particularly their collaborative projects in infrastructure development, can illustrate policies that can stimulate economic growth in developing countries. Infrastructure is a critical component of a country's economic development, and cooperation in this area can reduce dependence on large countries.

### **Conclusion**

The interaction between major economic powers and developing countries in a multipolar world is complexly illustrated in the bilateral relationship between Indonesia and China in the context of the Global South. This discussion may lead to some important conclusions, including the opportunities and challenges faced by Indonesia in building strategic cooperation with China.

#### **The Spirit of South-South Solidarity and Lessons from the KAA**

First, it is important to acknowledge that the Indonesia-PRC relationship must be contextualized within a historical context, specifically the 1955 Asia-Africa Conference (AAC) in Bandung, which brought together the newly independent nations of Asia and Africa. The AAC was an important event in global politics, as it was the moment when developing countries came together to assert their independence from Western hegemony and foster solidarity among countries in the South. The spirit of South-South cooperation sparked at the AAC is still evident in the relationship between Indonesia and China, as both countries show the potential to collaborate to improve the South's international standing.

The continuity of the AAC spirit is exemplified by the cooperation between Indonesia and China in the context of the Global South. The economic collaboration between the two countries, especially through major projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), shows how developing countries can forge mutually beneficial relationships without having to submit to the power of Western countries. This relationship is also a concrete example of how countries in the South can collaborate to accelerate economic development and reduce their dependence on developed countries.

#### **Visible Challenges and Opportunities in the Future**

Indonesia-China cooperation has had a positive impact on various opportunities, especially in accelerating infrastructure development and enhancing Indonesia's economic competitiveness in the Southeast Asian region. For example, BRI projects improve infrastructure and enhance regional connectivity, which is critical to expanding trade and

protecting Indonesia's strategic position. In the context of the Global South, this relationship can serve as a model for other countries on how South-South cooperation can generate inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

However, Indonesia faces major obstacles, including the potential for excessive economic dependence on China. This dependence could undermine Indonesia's economic sovereignty, especially if fair and transparent terms do not accompany Chinese investments. This risk is evident in major projects such as the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail, which raises concerns about the long-term sustainability of this cooperation and the management of its funding. Indonesia must ensure that this cooperation framework remains balanced and mutually beneficial while maintaining sovereignty in economic decision-making.

In addition, Indonesia-China relations also present challenges that must be addressed from a geopolitical security perspective, particularly the South China Sea issue. Although Indonesia is not directly involved in this conflict, China's claim to Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in Natuna waters increases the potential for future conflict. In the context of neorealist theory, great power competition in the region can result in regional instability, requiring vigilance and a sophisticated Indonesian foreign policy.

### **What is the future of the Global South?**

The question that arises in the future is: Quo Vadis Global South? Where does the Global South stand in the increasingly multipolar global geopolitical dynamics? The collaboration between Indonesia and China, as well as other developing countries, shows that the Global South has a significant opportunity to change the global order that has been dominated by Western countries. With the capacity to support each other through South-South cooperation and growing economic strength, the Global South has the potential to build a more just and balanced world order.

However, the future of countries in the South will be greatly influenced by their ability to manage their relationship with a major power like China without sacrificing sovereignty or becoming trapped in economic dependency. To this end, countries in the South, including Indonesia, must continue to strengthen their internal capacity and ensure that international cooperation provides long-term benefits for national development. To maintain its independence in the global political sphere, Indonesia and other developing countries must diversify their international relations. The South will have greater flexibility in negotiating its position in a multipolar world by forming strategic alliances with countries other than China, such as the United States, Japan, and the European Union.

Indonesia has the opportunity to accelerate economic development and enhance the international status of the South through the Indonesia-China relationship. However, to fully capitalize on the benefits of this partnership, Indonesia must address critical challenges, including the risks of economic dependence, potential geopolitical conflicts, and domestic sociopolitical impacts. By diversifying its international relations and implementing a careful strategy, Indonesia can ensure that this collaboration provides direct benefits, strengthens the foundations of national development, and reinforces the Global South's role in building a more inclusive and equitable global order.

Overall, this research shows that Indonesia and China, as two major powers in the Global South, have significant potential to build mutually beneficial relationships and assist other developing countries. By adopting a collaborative approach that prioritizes mutual interests, countries of the South can jointly face regional and global challenges. In the future, this collaboration has the potential to be an important factor in advancing global growth and stability, prioritizing sustainable development and solidarity over interstate competition.



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## Indonesia's Economic Foreign Policy towards Thailand on Cross-Border Payment

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*The payment digitalisation leads to financial integration with the cross-border payment implemented by ASEAN. This implementation is being conducted bilaterally among ASEAN member states, for instance, between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by each central bank since 2022 aims to reduce the US dollar dependency, which shows positive and progressive results. This issue is interesting to be studied further as the transaction of rupiah to ringgit is higher compared to baht, but Indonesia conducted the implementation of cross-border payment using QR Code for the first time with Thailand. Furthermore, there is a currency rate conversion between Indonesia and Thailand from each central bank. This article uses qualitative research methods with qualitative and quantitative data usage. Using the foreign economic policy, which refers to Hiscox (2014) and Yu (2023), this article found that Indonesia has been cooperating with Thailand in using QR Code due to the exchange rate agreement between IDR and THB to maintain the stability of the exchange rates of each currency, people movement to travel that showed an increment in QR Code transactions, to perceive the mutual gains and recovery for the tourism and SMEs sectors, and private sector and independent central bank involvement within this implementation.*

**Keywords:** Cross-border payment; Indonesia; QR Code; Thailand

### Introduction

The presence of globalization enables seamless goods, services, and human movement since cross borders among countries are getting blurrier. Apart from those three things, the technological advances are also directing to seamless transactions either among countries, markets, or people to people. One of the countries' efforts in achieving this stage can be seen from Indonesia's effort in raising its agenda about local currency settlement on G20 or ASEAN. Local currency settlement is a bilateral transaction

conducted through local currency, with its transaction based on jurisdiction from each country (Bank Indonesia, n.d.), and QR code implementation as the payment method is also included in the framework of local currency settlement. Indonesia brings this agenda to boost the economy through the digital economy with better practice, inclusivity, openness, fairness, and no discrimination (Rifky, Nugrahaningsih, & Suratiningsih, 2023), as well as digitalisation acceleration toward economic-financial inclusion, remittances, retail trade, and SMEs (Bank Indonesia, 2022). To realize this, Indonesia, through Bank Indonesia, is working with several partner countries in ASEAN, including Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. In addition, during Indonesia's G20 Presidency in 2022, the G20, together with the Financial Supervisory Board (FSB), agreed to achieve cross-border payment initiation by 2027 (Bank Indonesia, 2022).

After having attempts conducted by Indonesia in the G20 Presidency 2022, Indonesia is trying to implement the digitization of payments proposed to achieve the ASEAN Economic Community (Rilo, 2018). Before Indonesia collaborated with partner countries in ASEAN, Indonesia had signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Malaysia and Thailand on August 25, 2023. The signing of the MoU began with subregional cooperation that had been carried out by the three countries, namely through the IMT-GT (Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle) since 1993 (Supadi, 2021) and represented by each central bank after a trial in the cross-border payment framework between Indonesia and Thailand in 2021, as well as Indonesia and Malaysia in 2022 in the use of QR Code (Bank of Thailand, 2023) (Medina, 2022).

On the other hand, the three countries had previously signed an MoU for the implementation of local currency settlement in 2017, encouraging the use of local currencies in transactions, especially in the Ascot Trade and Investment (ATI). The cooperation between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand is based on efforts to reduce dependence on the US dollar (USD) in transactions, the similarity of historical background, that is, the economic crisis due to currency exchange rate fluctuations, and strengthening the rupiah (IDR), ringgit (MYR), and baht (THB) exchange rates (Syifa, 2024). However, although the three countries signed the MoU to implement local currency settlement in carrying out economic cooperation, the implementation is still conducted bilaterally; hence, the implementation scheme is between Indonesia and Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia, and Thailand and Malaysia.

In addition to several ASEAN member countries, Indonesia also collaborates with other countries, one of which is China, through the People's Bank of China, in implementing local currency settlement. The cooperation was signed on September 30,

2020, and entered into force on September 6, 2021 (The People's Bank of China, 2021). China is one of Indonesia's trading partners; hence, the implementation of local currency settlement can help facilitate transactions in bilateral trade and investment between the two countries using the local currency of each country. This cooperation will also lead to a reduction of the US dollar's usage in bilateral transactions as it can help stabilize both rupiah and yuan exchange rates. Southeast Asian countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are one of the reasons for implementing local currency settlement in the region to expand the initiative to cross-border trade and investment (Jia, 2021).

So far, the implementation of local currency settlement has been carried out bilaterally due to the differences in economic characteristics of each country, which are difficult to equate if implemented trilaterally or multilaterally (Ong, 2023). On the other hand, local currency settlement is closely related to a country's monetary policy, more precisely the currency exchange rate, which can affect a country's domestic economic sector; hence, the local currency settlement is still carried out bilaterally with partner countries (Kementerian Sekretariat Negara RI, 2022). The signing of the MoU regarding local currency settlement can be done multilaterally, but its implementation is still bilateral, as previously explained.

Although local currency settlement has been implemented among Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, export and import transactions were still dominated by the use of US dollars in 2018 (Supadi, 2021). Local currency settlement transactions of ringgit were also higher compared to transactions of baht, which can be seen from 2018 to early 2023. In 2018, local currency settlement transactions of ringgit amounted to US\$22.5 million and increased to US\$49.6 million in 2019. Moreover, in 2021, trade between Indonesia and Malaysia within this framework also showed an increase to US\$19.5 billion, US\$27.9 billion in 2022, and reached US\$7.9 billion in the first quarter of 2023 (Shofa, 2023). On the other hand, local currency settlement transactions between rupiah and baht tend to be lower compared to ringgit. This can be seen since 2018, when transactions amounted to US\$9.2 million per month and showed an increase in 2019 to US\$13.7 million per month. Then, transactions within the framework of local currency settlement also showed an increase in 2021 to US\$16.2 billion and continued to increase to US\$19.2 billion in 2022 (Nofansya & Sidik, 2022).

Initially, local currency settlement was focused on the trade and investment sector, but nowadays it will include tourism and SME sectors to enlarge the scope of local currency settlement usage in cross-border payment (Sutrisno, 2022). Furthermore, the payment digitization effort initiated by Indonesia with partner countries is also

implemented with the QR Code usage. It is intended to achieve fast payment, which is conducted bilaterally and later will be attempted to cover multilateral (Bank Indonesia, 2022). The QR Code usage by Bank Indonesia is one of the implementations of the 2025 Indonesian Payment System blueprint, which is currently being implemented with several countries, one of which is Thailand. The Bank of Thailand stated that the integration of QR Code between Indonesia and Thailand can address the efficiency and inclusivity of cross-border payments so that QRIS and Thai QR Code, or known as Promptpay, can be implemented (IDN Financial, 2022).

With the cooperation between Indonesia and Thailand in the QR Code usage, Bank Indonesia and the Bank of Thailand have referred appointed cross-currency dealers (ACCD) in their respective countries to implement direct quotation in converting each other's exchange rates in transactions. ACCD consists of banks or non-banks as parties that provide currency conversion services between rupiah and baht directly without using foreign exchange conversion to US dollars (Bank Indonesia, 2021). The exchange rate provisions between the rupiah and the baht use floating exchange rate provisions as an effort to reduce the use of US dollars bilaterally between Indonesia and Thailand (Sari, Akbar, Yeni, Putra, & Artha, 2023). In this case, the floating exchange rate is the application of a fluctuating currency exchange rate in response to market demand and supply (Hiscox, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to understand and explain the economic foreign policy of Indonesia towards Thailand on the cross-border payment using the QR Code as the first country to be collaborated with. However, if we look at the data on local currency settlement transactions with partner countries, transactions in ringgit are higher than transactions in baht. Therefore, the research question is, "How is the implementation of Indonesia's foreign economic policy towards Thailand in the use of QR Codes in cross-border payments?"

To emphasize the novelty of this research from the written topic, this article creates two categorizations based on previous literature: 1) the cooperation between Indonesia and Thailand in the financial sector, and 2) local currency settlement implementation of Indonesia and partner countries. The referred previous literature includes Azka (2023), Nofansya and Sidik (2022), Rizki (2022), Sulfarid (2022), and Siahaan (2020), which generally discuss the cooperation effort among Indonesia and partner countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, China, and South Korea according to their respective interests within the framework of local currency settlement as an effort to improve the economy in each country. Nevertheless, there is no specific discussion about



the implementation of Indonesia's foreign economic policy towards Thailand in the QR Code usage for cross-border payments. As previously explained, the QR Code implementation trial as the form of cross-border payment in local currency settlement between Indonesia and Thailand has been conducted since 2021, while Indonesia has just integrated QRIS and DuitNow, Malaysia's QR Code, in 2023 (Bank Indonesia, 2023). It indicates that Thailand is the first country that collaborated with Indonesia in QR Code integration since it is assumed QR Code integration is cheaper and more effective compared to other payment modes (Azka, 2023).

### **Analytical Framework**

In this article, the concept used is Foreign Economic Policy, which refers to Hiscox (2014) in the subchapter "The Domestic Sources of Foreign Economic Policies." He argues that every government in a country needs to make the best choice in managing its economy. To understand how a foreign economic policy is made, there are two things that must be considered. First, identifying policy preferences from every domestic economic group. In this case, every policy preference requires economic analysis because it determines the types of assets a country owns and how the income derived from those assets is affected by various policy choices. Second, making political institution specifications to determine how policy preferences are combined or transformed into policies made by the government. On the other hand, this case requires political analysis, such as looking at how groups lobby the government, how a policy is proposed in the legislature, and how it is conducted by government institutions, which depend on the political institution structure in respective countries. Both of these things are generally referred to as a political economy approach, which combines economic and political analysis at the same time in studying policy outcomes (Hiscox, 2014).

Thirdly, foreign investment. This forms a financial transaction between citizens of different countries that transfers ownership rights of assets, such as a bank in one country lending money to a foreign company. All conducted transactions increase the availability of capital that is available for productive use in one country and decrease the stock of capital in other countries. There are two forms of foreign investment, namely: 1) short-term capital movement, including government bonds, that change rapidly in response to changes in macroeconomic conditions, and 2) long-term capital flows or foreign direct investment (FDI), which are usually carried out by MNCs and have an impact on the economy in the host country that manages its affiliates. Fourthly, exchange rate. In conducting cross-border country transactions, the main thing to consider is

converting the national currency of a country to other national currencies. The basic choice a country can take, according to Hiscox (2014), is: 1) allowing the value of the national currency to fluctuate freely in response to market demand and supply (pure float), or 2) setting the value of a currency based on another currency or an external standard (fixed). In other words, a government may set an official exchange rate and commit to buying the currency at that exchange rate if requested by a private party or foreign government. Between these two options, the government can choose a target value for the exchange rate and simply allow the currency to fluctuate in value within a certain range around the target exchange rate. By eliminating exchange rate fluctuations, price fixing makes international trade and investment cheaper for companies or individuals because they are not affected by sudden and unexpected changes in exchange rates. The essence of fixed and floating exchange rates is the choice between stability and policy control. The governments in advanced countries decide that policy control is more important than exchange rate stability. On the other hand, governments in developing countries choose exchange rate stability as more important than policy control because those countries tend to depend on foreign trade and investment as a source of economic growth (Hiscox, 2014).

In the subchapter, although Hiscox (2014) stated there are four policy preferences, this article will only focus on the exchange rate as the main policy preference. This is because, in the issue that will be discussed, trade, immigration, and foreign investment are not the main preferences in the use of QR Code that is implemented between Indonesia and Thailand. However, after the agreement on the rate exchange, those three things became the factors that supported the occurrence of QR Code transactions as a form of cross-border payment.

Furthermore, after the existence of policy preferences by the government, there are political institutions to be changed as the formation of a country's foreign economic policy. Hiscox (2014) stated that there are at least legislative processes and administrative bodies that involve the formulation and implementation of these policy preferences. However, this article will only focus on administrative and bureaucratic bodies that implement it. The rules made by administrative bodies have a significant impact on the way individuals or groups are incorporated in foreign economic policy. The rules created determine the way new policies are proposed, considered, changed, and voted on. In addition, there are also independent central banks that have full control over monetary policy independent of the political interests of market players. The government can avoid or overcome inflation feared by national or foreign private parties that have a role in the

domestic economy. Independent central banks also have an important role in shaping currency policy in interacting with other countries (Hiscox, 2014).

This article uses foreign economic policy referring to Hiscox (2014) because it assumes that there is suitability and harmony in presenting and explaining the issue of QR Code usage between Indonesia and Thailand. In addition, Hiscox (2014) also explains the importance of independent central banks' role in determining currency policies, which can further help this article to explain the role of Bank Indonesia or Bank of Thailand in implementing cross-border payment using QR Code.

To add a basis for reference in analyzing the writing of this article, the concept of the digital economy is also considered necessary as a conceptual basis. The digital economy refers to economic activities that view digital knowledge and information as the main factors of production, view modern information networks as an important method of delivering data, and are considered to be able to increase efficiency and optimize economic structures. One category of the digital economy is the adoption of a top-down approach that considers the digital economy as a result of several impacts in the era of digital transformation without economic boundaries. The OECD also emphasizes that the digital economy is inclusive of individuals and communities with companies or markets (Yu, 2023). The features of the digital economy are the integration and innovation that can be seen in the discussion of this article, namely Bank Indonesia and Bank of Thailand are trying to integrate QR Codes from each country to reach the wider community in transacting freely at merchants in Indonesia and Thailand. This is intended so that cross-border payments are not only exclusive to economic actors, such as exporters, importers, and investors, but also people in both countries can participate in the integration of cross-border payments in the use of QR Codes.

### **Research Method**

This article will use the qualitative research method referring to Neuman (2014) with an explanatory research type to elaborate and enrich the explanation of the theory or concept used with the topic and issue raised. In addition, the writing of this article will also use deductive qualitative research techniques by using concepts in International Relations in analyzing the phenomena written in this research with empirical evidence as a reinforcement of the analysis (Neuman, 2014).

To support this research, the use of qualitative data consisting of words, images, or objects from secondary sources, such as documents, data, official websites, books, articles, and other supporting data as reinforcement of the writing of this research, which will be collected through qualitative research techniques (Neuman, 2014). However, the author also does not rule out the possibility of using quantitative data, such as statistical data, which can later show the phenomena that occur in the topic raised in this research.

### **Results and Discussion**

As previously explained, one of the objectives of implementing cross-border payment within the local currency settlement framework is to reduce the dependence on US dollars. In this case, both Bank Indonesia and Bank of Thailand attempt to align regulation and payment specifications, including how to convert each country's currency in making transactions, especially when using QR Codes.

#### **Exchange Rate as Indonesia's Economic Foreign Policy Preference towards Thailand in Cross-Border Payment**

The QRIS and Promptpay implementation is based on the local currency settlement framework established by the MoU among Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand on December 11, 2017. Local currency settlement was aimed at addressing the economic crisis that hit Asia in the late 1990s due to dependence on the US dollar, which caused the exchange rates of the currencies of the three countries to weaken, so that the efforts made were to adopt a more flexible exchange rate policy (Sato, 2019). Even though the MoU was signed by the three countries, in practice, it is still conducted bilaterally between countries in the Cooperation Framework to promote bilateral transactions in local currency between countries (Bank of Thailand, 2023).

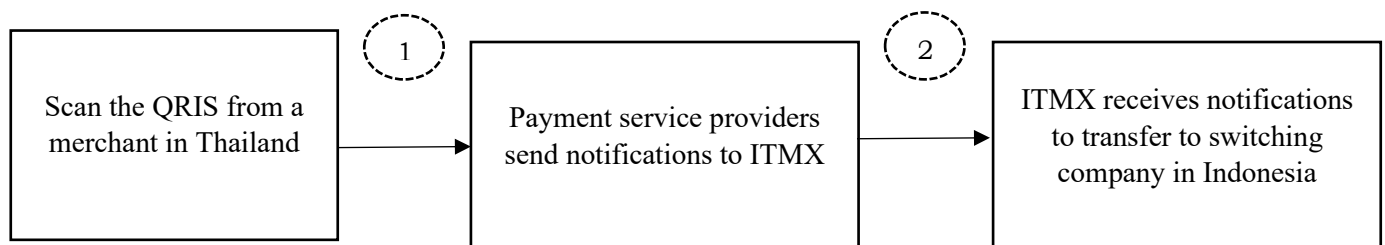
In the early implementation of this local currency settlement, the focus was still on the trade and investment sectors so that involved actors were focused on market players. However, the QR Code usage in cross-border payments conducted in trials in 2021 also targets consumers and merchants in each country so that they can transact directly. The transactions were conducted by implementing direct quotation currency conversion of each country with the appointment of ACCD from each central bank, in this case, Bank Indonesia and Bank of Thailand, with the aim of reducing transaction costs, which originally had to be converted to US dollars before exchanging from rupiah to baht and vice versa (Bank Indonesia, 2021). QR Code also shows an innovation between Indonesia

and Thailand as two large countries in ASEAN in the e-commerce market; hence, this effort is also an integration for both countries in opening and increasing opportunities in the retail industry, which still relies on MSMEs (Nunthiphatprueksa, 2019), as a form of implementation of the digital economy.

This is in line with one of the categories of the digital economy, namely the inclusivity of all actors in participating in the implementation of cross-border payments (Yu, 2023). As previously mentioned, the implementation of local currency settlement is exclusive to economic actors, such as exporters, importers, and investors, because they have large transactions. However, with the integration of QR Code between Indonesia and Thailand, these boundaries are slowly disappearing because people or consumers can participate in cross-border payment transactions. The implementation of QR Code between the two countries can also accommodate unbanked groups in both countries because they can transact using non-bank ACCD (e.g., e-wallet) without having a bank account (Medina, 2022) (Bank Indonesia, 2021).

In implementing QR Code transactions between the two countries, the application of the exchange rate is conducted using a floating exchange rate as a form of flexibility for rupiah and/or baht transactions, and is intended as a form of not being completely dependent on the US dollar. Previously, the exchange rate set for conversion to the US dollar was using a fixed exchange rate (Sari, Akbar, Yeni, Putra, & Artha, 2023). The full rollout of QRIS and Promptpay implementation was executed in 2022 (Bank of Thailand, 2022). The following is an illustration of the conversion from rupiah to baht, or vice versa, based on the local currency settlement framework.

**Table 1. Illustration of conversion of each currency between rupiah and baht based on local currency settlement (LCS) framework.**



Source: (Bank Negara Malaysia, n.d.) processed by the author (2024)

*Description:*

<sup>1</sup>Direct conversion from IDR to THB

<sup>2</sup>IDR transfer from ITMX to *switching company* in Indonesia

<sup>3</sup>*Switching company* of Indonesia will receive IDR and will forward to payment service provider in Indonesia (ACCD)

\*Conversion steps between THB to IDR also conducted at the same way

\*\*Transaction steps of QR Code between Indonesia and Thailand will be discussed in the next section.

Transactions occurring between Indonesia and Thailand are conducted through several steps as shown in the chart above. From the Thailand side, consumers can scan QRIS at Indonesian merchants, then the payment service provider sends a notification to ITMX (Interbank Transaction Management and Exchange) to accept the notification and reduce the consumers' balance. The next step is that ITMX will transmit to the switching company, which has been appointed by Bank Indonesia as the provider of the merchant, and the switching company will forward the payment to the payment service provider (ACCD) in Indonesia. The same steps are also conducted if Indonesian consumers scan Promptpay in a reverse transaction flow (Bank of Thailand, n.d.).

ACCD consists of either banks or non-banks, which are appointed by Bank Indonesia and Bank of Thailand to provide QRIS and Promptpay payment facilities. From the Indonesia side, ACCD consists of BNI, BCA, BRI, Bank Mandiri, Bank Pembangunan Daerah Bali, Bank CIMB Niaga, Bank Permata, Bank Mega, Bank Maybank, Bank Sinarmas, Dana (PT. Espay Debit Indonesia), LinkAja (PT. Fintek Karya Nusantara), Ottocash (PT. Transaksi Artha Gemilang), Shopeepay (PT. Airpay Internasional Indonesia), and PT. Telkom Indonesia. From the Thailand side, ACCD consists of Bank of Ayudhya (Krungsri), Bangkok Bank (BBL), and CIMB Thailand. Both Indonesia and Thailand will continuously add ACCD parties to facilitate payment through QR Code for both countries (Bank Indonesia, 2021). In the implementation of QR Code between Indonesia and Thailand, both countries also invite the private sector as ACCD, such as e-wallets and private banks, so that those who can provide QR Code scanning transaction services are banks and/or non-banks that have been appointed by each central bank.

Cross-border payments cover several aspects, such as technical, business, and legal, as well as the involvement of several parties appointed by the central bank in implementing QR Code between Indonesia and Thailand, such as ASPI (Indonesian Payment Association) from Indonesia, ITMX from Thailand acting as a switching company, ATM Bersama (Artajasa Pembayaran Elektronik), ATM Prima (Rintis Sejahtera), ATM Link (Sigma Cipta Caraka), and ATM Alto (Daya Network Lestari) switching companies in

Indonesia (Kominfo, n.d.), and ACCD, included as a payment service provider (Bank of Thailand, n.d.) (The Jakarta Post, 2018).

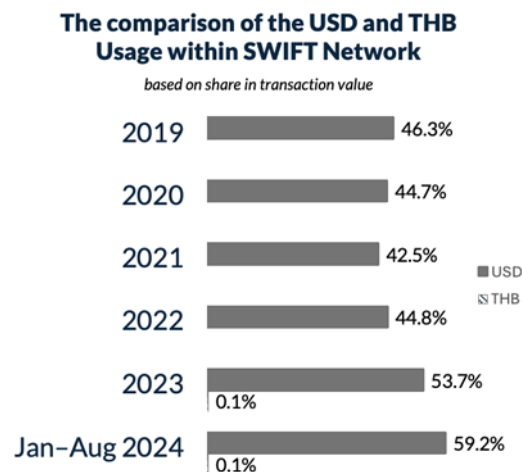
In the G20 Roadmap on improving the speed, cost, transparency, and accessibility of cross-border transfers, it was agreed that countries need to adopt and implement ISO 20022 through High-Value Payment Systems to implement fast payments, including across the SWIFT network for cross-border payments and reporting. The adoption of ISO 20022 has been implemented from March 2023 to November 2025, which allows for it to be structured (Swift, 2024). SWIFT, as one of the global payment systems, not only acts as a payment service provider for market players, but also for consumers (people-to-people) and SMEs (Swift, 2024). SWIFT not only moves funds, but also facilitates cross-border financial information flow that supports SWIFT users, such as banking institutions, companies, investment firms, and market infrastructures, and does not preclude individuals who use the SWIFT network. The SWIFT network provides communication between one bank and another bank efficiently with low cost (Jin, 2022) so that SWIFT acts as a connector between one bank and another bank for those banks that transact. Transaction fees applied depend on the type of transfer, destination country, foreign exchange fees, and tracking fees. There are at least three types of transfers in SWIFT, namely: 1) BEN, where the recipient bears all costs of the transaction received within a short time, 2) OUR, where the sender bears all costs that are usually charged separately and the transaction is received in full, and 3) SHA, where each party is charged by its respective bank with the sender being charged separately from the sending bank and the recipient paying to the receiving bank for the transactions made (Schonken, 2023).

On the other hand, cross-border implementation in local currency settlement is used to utilize the local currency of each country that has collaborated and reduce dependence on the US dollar. However, currently, there is no strong foreign exchange market for currencies in Southeast Asia, and this means that the spread between the buy and sell rates for local currency pairs in Southeast Asia can be more than double the spread between the buy and sell rates for local currencies against the US dollar (Greene, 2022). Therefore, in the context of cross-border payment cooperation between Indonesia and Thailand in the QR Code usage, a floating exchange rate system is applied, and the exchange rate between the rupiah and baht is adjusted based on the exchange rate from the organizer used by consumers in storing their funds. In contrast to SWIFT, cross-border payments are a mechanism established between countries, usually through banks or non-banks appointed according to an agreement (Schonken, 2023). The position of cross-border payments can be said to be complementary to SWIFT as an alternative transfer service

that is conducted because its form is not a replacement since the use of US dollars is still applied.

In the SWIFT network, the use of dollars still dominates from January 2019 to August 2024. Compared to rupiah and ringgit, the baht ranks 15th out of 24 countries using SWIFT in terms of total value share (Statista, 2024). Below is a comparative table of the use of US dollars and baht on the SWIFT network.

**Picture 1. The comparison of the USD and THB Usage within SWIFT Network**



Source (Statista, 2024) processed by the author (2024)

On the other hand, if it is compared to the use of digital payment between Indonesia and Thailand, the following is a comparison from 2021 to the projections to be achieved in 2024. Indonesia's total transaction value in the digital payment market, which includes mobile payments via smartphones and cross-border money transfers via the internet (digital remittance), is projected to reach US\$102.30 billion in 2024. It continuously increases from 2021 until 2024 consecutively, namely with a value of US\$71.71 billion, US\$77.54 billion, US\$88.43 billion, and US\$102.30 billion (Statista, n.d.). On the other hand, Thailand's total transaction value in 2024 is projected to reach US\$39.28 billion with Promptpay usage of THB32.742 billion in 2021, THB 43.206 billion in 2022, and THB 47.419 billion in 2023 (Statista, n.d.).

When using QR Code on QRIS and Promptpay, there are no transaction fees charged to consumers when sending money. However, in local currency settlement, there are several fees that are customized by each ACCD bank, such as: 1) Telegraphic transfer fees, which are a service that enables you to send money to an account abroad in the range of Rp35,000 to Rp75,000 (Bank Mandiri, n.d.) (BCA, n.d.), and 2) Provision fee, which is



a fee charged if the source currency of the funds is the same as the foreign currency sent (Bank Mandiri, n.d.). As previously explained, both Bank Indonesia and Bank of Thailand apply floating exchange rates, thus providing flexibility for ACCD in determining the exchange rate in transactions conducted on their systems.

Based on data from the Bank of Thailand as of April 4, 2024, the following is the cross-border payment mechanism implemented between Indonesia and Thailand in using QR Codes.

**Table 2. Cross-border payment Indonesia and Thailand**

Users from Indonesia who make transaction in Thailand		Transaction limits	Users from Thailand who make transaction in Indonesia		Transaction limits
Participating bank from Indonesia	Eligible QR payment at Thailand merchant		Participating Bank from Thailand	Eligible QR Payment at Indonesia merchant	
ACCD	Bangkok Bank, Kasikorn Bank, Krungthai Bank, SCB, Bank of Ayudhya, CIMB Thai	IDR5.000.000 per transaction	Bangkok Bank, Krungthai Bank, Bank of Ayudhya, CIMB Thai	QRIS	THB100.000 per transaction THB500.000 per day

Source (Bank of Thailand, n.d.) processed by the author (2024)

Referring to Bank Indonesia data on its social media, the development of QRIS transactions as of February 2024 inbound amounted to 368.65 million rupiah, while outbound data amounted to 10.19 billion rupiah (Bank Indonesia, 2024). Additional data also show that QRIS transactions in Indonesia as of July 2024, the increase in QRIS transactions in Indonesia was 13% month-to-month from the Thai community, while the increase in QRIS in Thailand was 9% month-to-month (Bank Indonesia, 2024). The implementation of QR Code between Indonesia and Thailand is intended to advance MSMEs as an effort to maximize the economy and digital financial ecosystem connected to Promptpay. This is one of the reasons why Indonesia chose to work with Thailand in the first cross-border implementation of QR Code. In addition, from 2018 to 2023, Indonesia's gross domestic product (GDP) was respectively US\$1,043 billion, US\$1,119 billion, US\$1,063 billion, US\$1,188 billion, US\$1,319 billion, and US\$1,417 billion, while Thailand's GDP was respectively US\$507 billion, US\$544 billion, US\$500 billion, US\$506 billion, US\$495 billion, and US\$512 billion. Indonesia ranks first in GDP income, followed by Thailand in second place (Statista, n.d.), whose main source of GDP income comes from tourism (Statista, n.d.).

**Bank Indonesia as an Administrative and bureaucratic body determines exchange rate as policy preference in International Economic Policy.**

Bank Indonesia, as the central bank, issued QRIS as one of the efforts to achieve the ASEAN Payment Connectivity Initiatives as an effort to contribute to improving the tourism sector, MSMEs, and the national digital financial economy. In line with this, Bank Indonesia has been working with several other ASEAN member countries since 2022. However, Indonesia has been conducting trials with Thailand in implementing QR Code since 2021 (Kementerian Sekretariat Negara RI, 2022). At the G20 forum, the implementation of cross-border payments was planned to use the SWIFT network to achieve fast payments between countries by implementing ISO 20022 on High-Value Payment Systems. The adoption of ISO 20022 has been in effect from March 2023 to November 2025 (Swift, 2024).

In addition to achieving the ASEAN Payment Connectivity Initiatives, the implementation of cross-border payments is also planned on a global scale, which was discussed through the G20, namely Advancing Regional Digital Payment Connectivity in Bali, November 14, 2022. In the regional scope, Indonesia has collaborated with Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines through their respective central banks. The cross-border payment mechanism in ASEAN is considered one of the commitments towards digital transformation (Kementerian Koordinator Bidang Kemaritiman dan Investasi, 2022). In addition, the signing of the MoU between the five countries will implement several things, including QR Code through QRIS, fast payments, and Real Time Gross Settlement (RTGS), which were discussed at the 43rd ASEAN Summit in Jakarta. Other ASEAN countries are planned to sign the same MoU after the development and strengthening of their domestic payment systems are considered capable of implementing this (Kominfo, 2023).

The implementation of QR Code specifically between Indonesia and Thailand can be seen from the gross digital payment value in the six largest countries in ASEAN reaching US\$806 billion in 2022, increasing 14% YoY and is expected to increase to nearly US\$1.2 trillion in 2024. The availability of smartphones and increasing internet usage play an important role in the widespread adoption of online banking, mobile money, and e-wallet services. In 2022, bank account ownership or registration with a mobile money provider increased from 12% to 62% since 2011. On the other hand, e-wallet usage in ASEAN is one of the largest in the world in terms of e-wallet penetration, namely Thailand (92%), Vietnam (91%), the Philippines (88%), Malaysia (86%), and Indonesia (82%) (World Economic Forum, 2023).

The implementation of QRIS and Promptpay between Indonesia and Thailand is addressed to shape an effective payment ecosystem among market players, mainly in the tourism sector and MSMEs, so that it is not limited to only big market players, such as business-to-business entities. However, this also does not prevent the implementation of cross-border trade settlements, investments, and remittances, as well as other economic transaction activities that create inclusiveness of transactions in the region. Indonesia and Thailand are collaborating on cross-border payments to facilitate transactions between market players, especially in the tourism and SMEs sectors (Chandran, 2023). The existence of QRIS and Promptpay is also intended to foster a competitive attitude in the global market, which can be seen from Indonesia's efforts at the G20 regarding cross-border payments (World Economic Forum, 2023). In implementing QRIS and Promptpay, fees and exchange rates are determined based on a mutual agreement between Indonesia and Thailand through their central banks. Then, the central bank will provide flexibility for ACCD in charging these fees in the exchange rate conversion process between rupiah and baht (Chandran, 2023)

The purpose of Indonesia and Thailand, through their respective central banks, in implementing QR Code is to facilitate the tourism sector as the main focus, including helping MSMEs in the tourism area, increasing payment inclusion, digital economic inclusion, and e-commerce transactions (Bank Indonesia, 2021). In 2022, there were 61,128 Thai tourists visiting Indonesia (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023), while Indonesian tourists visiting Thailand in 2022 were 355,000 (Pusparisa, 2024). Data from Bank Indonesia shows that transactions using the Thailand QR Code by Indonesian tourists reached 14,555 transactions equivalent to 8.54 billion rupiah, and transactions by Thai tourists using QRIS amounted to 492 transactions with a value of 114 million rupiah in 2023 (ASEAN Indonesia, 2023). In addition, the integration of QRIS and Promptpay is also intended to improve the retail industry compared to wholesale between Indonesia and Thailand because the retail industry of both countries still relies on MSMEs, so that it is expected that MSMEs can also digitize the economy (Nunthiphatprueksa, 2019) (Yu, 2023) using QR Codes in cross-border transactions that have been facilitated by Bank Indonesia and Bank of Thailand.

Although the current efforts being made are still bilateral, Bank Indonesia, as Indonesia's central bank, plans to collaborate with the Bank for International Settlements and Project Nexus to expand the scope of cross-border payment implementation, either regionally or globally. This payment system will be standardized to connect other payment systems that will be connected to Nexus. This network will protect SWIFT with

two-factor authentication (2FA) to prevent fraud or hack attacks when one party makes a transaction to the destination bank (Nexus, n.d.). On the other hand, the use of Nexus allows reaching the entire system globally and avoiding the creation or use of special bilateral links (World Economic Forum, 2023) (BIS, 2024).

Although the MoU implementation looks promising, there are still several challenges that must be recognized by Bank Indonesia and Bank of Thailand, one of which is the awareness and knowledge of market players, especially in the MSME sector, to use QR Codes in transactions. The mechanism for using QR Codes is still largely unknown to market players, and from the Indonesian side, there are several fees charged to merchants of 0.3% for micro-businesses and 0.7% for other transactions, known as the merchant discount rate (MDR) (CNBC Indonesia, 2023). In addition, other challenges to achieving regional payments are also found due to differences in domestic payment systems that apply different technical standards, message formats, and process flows. Although ISO 20022 has been implemented, these systems are often adjusted in an incompatible way, and this technical factor adds to the complexity of the relationships that will be formed by countries in implementing cross-border payments (World Economic Forum, 2023). Therefore, this requires collective action from stakeholders and market players to implement a payment ecosystem using QR Codes.

### **Conclusion**

Indonesia's foreign economic policy towards Thailand in cross-border payments using QR Code is implemented by considering the exchange rate in the conversion of exchange rates between rupiah and baht with the appointment of ACCD in each country by the central bank and the application of a floating exchange rate that is delegated to each bank or non-bank in applying the necessary costs. This effort is made to reduce dependence on the US dollar and strive to achieve the ASEAN Payment Connectivity Initiatives and Advancing Regional Digital Payment. Although its implementation is still being developed to produce a more positive trend in the use of QR Codes, there are several challenges faced, such as differences in domestic payment systems, as well as awareness and knowledge of market players in using the QR Code payment mode.

Indonesia also attempts to cooperate with Thailand first, compared to Malaysia, in implementing QR Code because it sees many Indonesian tourists who go to Thailand for tourism and to open and increase opportunities for the retail industry in bilateral economic cooperation with Thailand, so that the implementation of Indonesia's foreign

economic policy implements QRIS and Promptpay integration as the first step before collaborating with others on the use of QR Code in the cross-border payment framework.

This journal article only discusses the exchange rate as one of the preferences of economic foreign policy, which explains how Indonesia regulates and negotiates with Thailand in the conversion of exchange rates between rupiah and baht as a form of reducing dependence on the dollar, so that further research is needed that discusses other preferences that can explain in more detail the application of QR Code in cross-border payments, such as trade, immigration, and foreign investment, by presenting supporting data. Future papers may focus more on how the implementation of QR Codes can impact trade in each country as well as foreign investment entering Indonesia and/or Thailand as a form of local currency settlement.

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## Security Threats in the Humanitarian Crisis in Ethiopia

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*The humanitarian crisis caused by the prolonged conflict in Ethiopia from 2020 to 2023 has created multidimensional insecurity. Previous studies have examined the conflict's impact on economic and food security, but few have analyzed all seven dimensions of Human Security as defined by the UNDP (1994). This study aims to explore the impact of the conflict on economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security. Using a descriptive exploratory method with a qualitative approach based on library research, data were collected from academic literature, international reports, and credible media sources. Data were analyzed using the Human Security framework. The findings show that economic blockades and damaged infrastructure have caused economic crises and mass starvation. The healthcare system collapsed due to a lack of medical access and supplies, while environmental degradation worsened living conditions. Additionally, sexual violence as a military strategy caused psychological trauma and threatened the security of individuals and communities. Political instability further deepened social divisions, creating widespread insecurity across all levels of society. This study offers a comprehensive analysis of how the prolonged conflict affects multiple dimensions of human life in Ethiopia.*

**Keywords:** Ethiopia, Conflict, Humanitarian Crisis, International Organizations, Human Security.

### Introduction

A humanitarian crisis is a condition of extreme suffering experienced by individuals or groups on a large scale, in which human welfare and safety are severely threatened. In international classifications, crises may arise from natural disasters or complex emergencies, such as armed conflicts. One of the most severe ongoing humanitarian crises is occurring in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, where a prolonged conflict between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has persisted. Since political tensions escalated on November 4, 2020, the conflict has caused widespread suffering among civilians due to violence, infrastructure destruction, and obstructed access to humanitarian aid.

The conflict began with an attack by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) on a federal Ethiopian military base in Gondar, as well as assaults on Eritrean territory,

a key ally of the Ethiopian government. In response, the Ethiopian government, through the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF), conducted airstrikes in several cities, including Mekelle, Adigrat, and the Tekeze Dam (Pellet, 2021). These retaliatory attacks by the ENDF in Mekelle and at the Tekeze Dam caused extensive damage to the Tigray region, affecting critical infrastructure, public buildings, and residential areas. This devastation forced many civilians to flee to areas such as Shimba, Histats, Mai Aini, and Adi Harush seeking safety and protection (Plaut, 2021). Approximately 5.2 million of Tigray's 5.7 million inhabitants require emergency food assistance, with over 400,000 individuals facing famine-level hunger (Quintanilla et al., 2014).

The literature on Ethiopia's humanitarian crisis often addresses Human Security partially, lacking a comprehensive perspective. Falhan Hakiki (2020) emphasizes the impact of the food crisis on the economy, health, and education sectors but does not connect these issues to the underlying armed conflict. Meanwhile, Pragi Laksono (2022) examines mediation efforts in Ethiopia's protracted conflict but fails to explore the conflict's implications for all dimensions of Human Security. Similarly, Puspita et al. (2022) highlight the significance of sexual violence as a military strategy in the conflict but do not integrate this issue into a holistic Human Security framework. Thus, a significant gap persists in the literature regarding how the conflict in Ethiopia generates a humanitarian crisis that simultaneously threatens all seven dimensions of Human Security.

This study addresses the research question: What are the forms of threats to Human Security within the context of the conflict in Ethiopia? It focuses on analyzing the various threats that have emerged from the ongoing conflict in the country. The central argument of this research is that the protracted conflict in Ethiopia poses serious threats to multiple dimensions of Human Security. These threats encompass economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political aspects, which are interconnected and exacerbate overall insecurity in Ethiopia. These seven dimensions not only endanger the daily lives of the population but also undermine social and economic stability, necessitating a holistic approach that prioritizes the protection of affected individuals and communities. Consequently, the humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia demands greater attention from the international community to formulate comprehensive and sustainable solutions.

### **Human Security Analytical Framework**

The concept of Human Security was arguably foreshadowed by U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt in his 1941 address to Congress, in which he asserted that individuals should enjoy freedom of speech, freedom of worship, and freedom from fear (Obete, 2021). The 1994 Human Development Report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is widely recognized as the foundational document for the formal articulation of this concept. According to the report, two core battles must be won to ensure peace: the fight for security against fear and the fight for economic stability against want. The term “security” has often been criticized for its traditional focus on protecting the state from external threats. To ensure true security, human life must be placed at the center, and protection should not be dictated solely by national interests. According to the UNDP, there are seven core dimensions of Human Security: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security (Juntunen, 2010).

The concept of Human Security has sparked debates among scholars and practitioners, with critics arguing that it is overly broad, vague, and potentially overlapping, which may undermine human rights. At the 2005 World Summit, the United Nations General Assembly defined Human Security as a “right.” In the 2012 UN Secretary-General’s report to the General Assembly, a shared understanding emerged, defining Human Security as freedom from fear, want, and indignity. Freedom from fear entails protecting individuals from violence by foreign states, their own governments, or other actors. Freedom from want encompasses protection from economic, social, and environmental hardships. Freedom from indignity refers to protection from violence perpetrated by other individuals (Justika, 2022).

Human Security, as defined by the UNDP, involves two critical aspects: first, protection from chronic threats such as hunger, disease, and repression; and second, protection from sudden and disruptive events that disturb daily life in the home, workplace, or community. The Human Security Commission defines it as “the protection of individuals from both violent and non-violent threats. It is a condition characterized by freedom from pervasive threats to people’s rights, safety, or lives” (UNDP, 1994).

In this study, threats to Human Security are categorized into two main types: (1) sudden and unexpected threats, such as turmoil, armed conflict, and social instability, that disrupt everyday life; and (2) chronic threats, such as hunger, malnutrition, disease, and oppression. These categories illustrate that Human Security entails not only the

absence of conflict but also comprehensive protection of human life under various circumstances.

According to Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Anuradha M. Chenoy, Human Security emphasizes the protection of individuals from a wide range of risks that can endanger physical health, psychological well-being, dignity, and overall quality of life. It encompasses not only survival but also the right to a dignified life and respect for human rights. Thus, a secure environment is one that is stable, ensures predictability, and allows individuals to exercise control over their decisions and future without interference from external threats (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007).

Human Security represents an ideal condition envisioned by the UNDP, in which all seven dimensions are fulfilled across diverse aspects of life. However, the reality in many parts of Africa, including Ethiopia, presents a stark contrast. Rather than achieving Human Security, human insecurity prevails, characterized by widespread and acute threats to daily life. The seven dimensions of Human Security remain largely unmet due to intersecting crises involving hunger, poverty, armed conflict, and social instability, all of which hinder the realization of a secure and prosperous life in the region.

Each of the seven dimensions of Human Security—economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political—faces distinct threats. This study identifies that human insecurity in Ethiopia is closely linked to these seven dimensions, particularly due to the ongoing civil war, which has led to severe consequences, including sexual, physical, and psychological abuse; looting of property; destruction of health infrastructure; disruption of economic activity; and pressure from political instability. Political security, in this context, generally refers to the protection of human rights and freedom from political intimidation or repression (Brilanti, 2020).

The Human Security approach employed in this research is not merely a theoretical framework but a practical tool for understanding and addressing the multidimensional threats currently facing Ethiopia. This framework provides a valuable lens for identifying risks across the seven dimensions of Human Security, enabling the study to assess the crisis's broader impact, particularly aspects often overlooked in traditional conflict analyses.

## **Discussion**

### **The Civil War Between the Ethiopian Government and the Ethnic Party TPLF**

In the history of Ethiopian governance, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was established as a small guerrilla group in northern Ethiopia in February 1975. Its initial movement was ethno-nationalist, aiming to ensure the inclusion of the Tigrayan people in Ethiopia's governance. Following the establishment of a socialist military regime by the Derg government in 1974, numerous groups became disillusioned with its centralized and authoritarian rule (Berhe, 2004). The Tigray region held significant importance for the Ethiopian state. When the TPLF overthrew the Derg regime militarily, dissatisfaction with the regime's economic stagnation sparked resistance from various groups. Consequently, these groups collaborated to form the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition comprising several ethnically based parties, including the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front), ODP (Oromo Democratic Party), ADP (Amhara Democratic Party), ANDP (Afar National Democratic Party), and SEDP (Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Party) (Nugraheni, 2017).

The conflict between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian government, which escalated in 2018, was rooted in political instability and ethnic tensions under the administration of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn. Public unrest, particularly among the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups, ultimately led to Hailemariam Desalegn's resignation. On April 2, 2018, the Ethiopian parliament elected Abiy Ahmed, leader of the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP), to succeed Hailemariam as Prime Minister (Pellet, 2021). During his tenure, Abiy Ahmed initiated the formation of a new political entity, the Prosperity Party (Pellet, 2021). He transformed the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) into this new party. However, the TPLF opposed this transformation, prompting Abiy to restructure the coalition under the new name, incorporating four of the former EPRDF parties. His administration aimed to unify the nation and shift from conservative economic policies by implementing liberal economic reforms and expanding opportunities for the private sector. The TPLF rejected the proposed coalition, arguing that the ethnic federalism model adopted since 1991 was more effective in managing Ethiopia's deep-rooted ethnic divisions. The TPLF contended that this model had significantly contributed to the country's economic growth, whereas the Prosperity Party's liberal outlook conflicted with the TPLF's preference for state-led economic

development. Consequently, the people of Tigray began opposing the federal government, fearing that their regional autonomy was threatened.

The conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region began with growing disagreements between the federal and regional governments, particularly after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed refused to hold national elections and formed a new political party. After one year of Abiy Ahmed's leadership, parliamentary elections were held to determine his continuation as Prime Minister. However, in September 2020, the Tigray regional government independently conducted local elections, which Debretsion Gebremichael of the TPLF won. These elections proceeded despite the federal government's postponement, citing concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic. This defiance escalated tensions between the Tigray regional government and Abiy Ahmed's administration (Justika, 2022). In response, Abiy cut federal funding to the Tigray leadership, deeming the elections illegal and unconstitutional. The TPLF interpreted this action as a "declaration of war."

The underlying tension stemmed from ideological and political differences between the TPLF and the federal government regarding the country's future political direction. When the federal government halted budgetary disbursements to Tigray, tensions escalated further, prompting the Tigray regional government to withhold tax revenues owed to the federal government. In early November, the federal government invoked its constitutional authority to launch a national intervention through a military offensive in the Tigray region. According to the federal government, this intervention was triggered by an alleged TPLF attack on the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) stationed in the Tigrayan capital. The regional authorities were reportedly unable to withstand this offensive, while the TPLF viewed it as an effort to preemptively weaken their military capabilities across the region (Fessha, 2020).

This conflict has inflicted immense suffering on civilians, including sexual violence, mass killings, looting, abductions, and the displacement of millions. Moreover, the Ethiopian government cut off telephone and internet networks in Tigray, preventing the media from reporting the situation on the ground. This has adversely affected approximately six million people in the region and hindered the delivery of humanitarian aid from external actors (Fessha, 2020). The United Nations reported over 500 cases of rape in Tigray, including incidents in clinics, attributed to social stigma and inadequate health services, which made it difficult for victims to report these incidents. Survivors stated they were raped by members of the armed forces, who were supposed to protect

them rather than cause harm. Some men were even forced to rape their own family members under threat of violence if they refused. The UN has urged immediate action to address the widespread sexual violence and rape cases in Tigray (Bedaso, 2021).

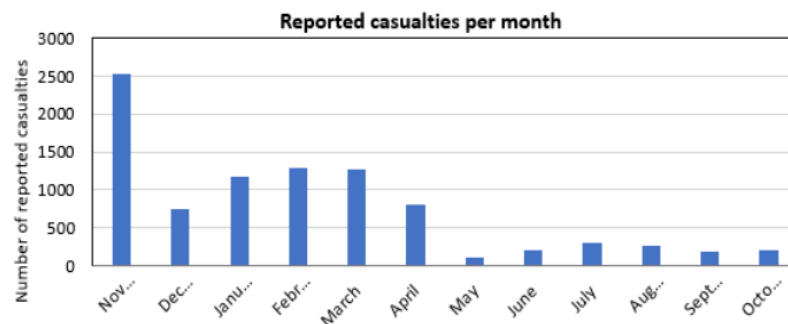
The conflict between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray region, rooted in a power struggle and calls for political reform that escalated in November 2020, has forced thousands into displacement. A major contributing factor is the severe food shortage and the Ethiopian government's decision to restrict access to Tigray, including telecommunications such as landline and internet services, which has made it difficult to obtain accurate information about the situation. Many areas remain inaccessible, hospitals rely solely on generators for electricity, and food prices have skyrocketed due to scarcity. The conflict has intensified further with the involvement of Eritrean forces, who have a history of animosity toward the Tigrayan ethnic group from the period of previous Tigrayan leadership in Ethiopia. Allegations suggest that the Ethiopian government has collaborated with Eritrean troops to suppress the Tigray movement, particularly given Ethiopia's history of prolonged conflict with Eritrea under Tigrayan rule (IDN TIMES, 2021).

After Ethiopian federal troops gained control of Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region, the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) blocked access to Tigray, significantly hindering media coverage and humanitarian aid efforts. By December 2020, tensions began to ease, allowing humanitarian aid to enter the region and enabling civilians trapped in Mekelle to begin leaving the city. As a result of the conflict, many Tigrayan civilians—particularly women and children—fled to neighboring countries, experiencing trauma, exhaustion, and an urgent need for assistance. The resulting humanitarian crisis threatens human well-being, stemming from both natural causes and human actions, manifesting in issues such as limited access to clean water, food insecurity, and inadequate shelter. Humanitarian intervention becomes essential when crises are prolonged and endanger fundamental human rights. A humanitarian crisis is defined as a situation in which the health, safety, and well-being of a community or group are severely threatened (Emmanuelar, 2015). In military contexts, sexual violence has been used as a weapon to terrorize specific groups, often leading to genocidal consequences (Sari et al., 2022).

In early 2020, the Ethiopian government officially designated the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) as a terrorist organization. The conflict has resulted in hundreds of thousands of casualties and triggered the worst famine-related crisis globally in the past

decade. Moreover, the conflict between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray region has spilled over into neighboring areas, such as Amhara and Afar.

**Graph 1 - victim reports**



Source: Tigray: Atlas of the humanitarian situation.

**Graph 2 - number of victims of the killing of Tigrayan people by the Ethiopian Nations Defense Force**



Source: Tigray: Atlas of the humanitarian situation.

Graphs 1 and 2 present monthly data from February 2020 to October 2021, showing approximately 283 deaths and between 6,542 and 12,346 victims resulting from the conflict. The war between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) resulted in 4,490 recorded acts of violence and 478 incidents, leading to between 8,946 and 16,291 victims by the conflict's end. On November 2, 2022, a peace agreement was signed between Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael. The agreement included nine key provisions and comprised a preamble and 15 articles, beginning with the objectives of the agreement, followed by



general principles guiding the ceasefire. Article 13 mandates that both parties implement the agreement in good faith and refrain from actions that may undermine it (African Union, 2022).

An estimated 5 million people have been affected by conditions such as drought in the Amhara and Tigray regions. In Amhara, crop failure has left approximately 3.4 million people in need of agricultural assistance due to attacks on farms and disrupted agricultural activities caused by the ongoing conflict. In the Afar region, malnutrition rates remain high, with over 130,000 pregnant and breastfeeding women requiring urgent support. The unstable security situation continues to hinder the expansion of humanitarian operations in hard-to-reach areas, restricting the movement and access of aid workers and convoys, particularly in rural regions (OCHA, 2023).

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This crisis poses a serious threat to human survival, particularly due to transnational crimes, such as human trafficking, the illegal drug trade, and irregular migration, as well as environmental and public health challenges, including infectious diseases, natural disasters, and climate change (Sagena, 2019).

### **Threats to Ethiopia**

The civil war has generated numerous threats within the framework of Human Security. Consequently, threats to Ethiopian society have become increasingly apparent. These threats can be analyzed based on the seven dimensions of Human Security:

**Economy:** Freedom from poverty and the challenge of securing basic needs remain critical threats facing the Ethiopian population. According to Cepheus, an Ethiopian research firm, defense spending has quadrupled, reaching 14.9% of the national budget, making it the second-largest expenditure in Ethiopia after debt servicing.

This dramatic increase in military expenditure has significantly reduced the government's capacity to fund poverty alleviation efforts. The war, which ended with a ceasefire in November 2022, resulted in incalculable financial losses, the full extent of which may never be known. The government acknowledged that the conflict could potentially lead to the deaths of up to three million people in northern Ethiopia (Budget et al., 2022).

**Food Security:** Food insecurity remains a major challenge in Ethiopia, a country already grappling with a widespread food crisis. The outbreak of war introduced new threats, particularly affecting the agricultural sector, which was the most severely impacted by the conflict. Agriculture accounted for 59% of total losses due to looting, disruption of planting activities, and acts of vandalism. These included the "killing and looting of livestock, destruction of crops in the fields, and theft of harvested produce" (The New Humanitarian, 2023).

**Health:** Before the war, the Tigray region had a three-tier health system. The first tier consisted of 712 health posts, 233 health centers, 29 primary hospitals, and 16 general hospitals. The second tier provided secondary care through general hospitals. The third tier offered tertiary care through specialized referral hospitals. During the war, the functionality of hospitals and health centers declined significantly. Of the 228 health centers assessed in the region, only 40% were fully functional, while the rest were non-functional, partially functional, or of unknown status. Of the 40 hospitals evaluated, 14 were non-operational, nine were partially functional despite severe limitations, and only six were fully operational. Moreover, the whereabouts of 90% of the 280 ambulances operating before the war remain unknown (BMJ Global Health, 2021).

**Environment:** The conflict has emerged as one of the greatest threats to the environment, resulting in infrastructure damage estimated at \$22.7 billion and a productivity loss of \$6 billion, equivalent to 26% of national income. Examples of infrastructure damage include hospitals, schools, and other social infrastructure, which account for 21% of the total destruction (BMJ Global Health, 2021). Additionally, climate change poses a serious threat to quality of life. It also constitutes a crisis that leads to disaster-induced displacement, disrupting or halting activities across multiple sectors, particularly the economy and social life (Hasanah et al., 2023).

**Personal Security:** Physical violence, threats to safety, and sexual assault experienced by vulnerable Ethiopian communities during the conflict present serious and ongoing threats. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

released a detailed report based on an analysis of 36 incidents of sexual violence involving 106 women and girls, committed by 144 perpetrators between November 2020 and March 2021. The study found that 39% of victims reported being raped inside their homes, and 33% experienced gang rape. Additionally, 44% of victims were raped by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers, 33% by Amhara militia, 6% by a combination of Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers, and 11% were unable to identify the perpetrators (BMJ Global Health, 2021).

**Community:** A conflict that initially stemmed from tensions between the Tigrayan ethnic group and the Ethiopian government has become a direct threat to the Tigrayan people themselves. Investigations conducted by the BBC revealed that Tigrayan civilians were targeted in what appears to be a campaign of ethnic cleansing in the conflict-affected northern region of Tigray. In an interview, a 23-year-old Tigrayan trader told investigators that he was beaten and left to die in Rawyan by members of the Amhara special forces, who stated, “We will erase you from this land. This land is ours. This is the Tigrayans’ last chance to leave this area” (BBC, 2022).

**Politics:** The protection of human rights for the Tigrayan ethnic group is under serious threat due to a campaign of ethnic cleansing rooted in political tensions involving the Tigrayans, who once dominated Ethiopia’s central government. These political frictions have escalated into a fratricidal conflict, placing the human rights of the Tigrayan people in a precarious position due to political pressure. Individuals in Tigray interviewed by Reuters reported that an increasing number of people were being arrested in the capital. A healthcare worker, who stated he was detained in a compound-style building on the southern outskirts of Addis Ababa, said that approximately 300 Tigrayans, including a lawyer, as well as his friends and family, were being held there (Paravicini et al., 2021).

Based on the Human Security framework, the prolonged conflict in Ethiopia poses serious threats to all seven dimensions of Human Security as defined by the UNDP. Economically, the increase in defense spending, reaching 14.9% of the national budget, has significantly reduced allocations for poverty alleviation, thereby worsening the population’s overall welfare. The food crisis has deepened due to the war’s devastating impact on the agricultural sector, which has suffered 59% losses from looting and crop destruction. The collapse of the healthcare system, with only 17.5% of health centers operational, highlights a failure to provide basic health protection. Individual security is gravely threatened by the use of sexual violence as a military strategy, leaving survivors with long-lasting trauma. The environment has also suffered from the conflict, with

infrastructure damage amounting to \$22.7 billion and climate change further deteriorating the quality of life. Furthermore, the conflict has endangered community security through ethnic cleansing campaigns targeting Tigrayan civilians. Political tensions have compounded the crisis by undermining human rights and social stability. These widespread impacts underscore the urgent need for a Human Security approach that prioritizes the protection of individuals across all aspects of life.

### **Conclusion**

This study confirms that the protracted conflict between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF has created a multidimensional crisis with severe implications for Human Security. Based on the seven dimensions of Human Security outlined by the UNDP (1994)—economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security—the findings reveal that the conflict in Ethiopia has not only led to infrastructure destruction and political instability but has also affected the lives of more than 20 million people directly impacted by the war.

The food crisis stands out as one of the most pressing threats, with millions facing hunger and malnutrition due to economic blockades and disrupted supply chains. The collapse of the healthcare system, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has intensified the humanitarian crisis, increasing mortality rates and limiting access to essential medical services. Meanwhile, the use of sexual violence as a military strategy has severely undermined personal security and human dignity, reaffirming that Human Security encompasses not only survival but also the right to live a dignified and meaningful life.

This research also finds that political instability, rooted in the power struggle and ideological tensions between the TPLF and the central government, has contributed to social fragmentation and waves of displacement, further deteriorating both personal and community security. Although international organizations have provided humanitarian assistance, limited access and a lack of legal interventions have left many victims without adequate protection.

In conclusion, this study underscores that the pervasive human insecurity in Ethiopia is a direct outcome of the protracted conflict, necessitating comprehensive and long-term solutions grounded in a human-centered approach.

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