



PROJECT MUSE®

Assessing Indonesia's Foreign Policy under Jokowi

Chris Lundry

Asia Policy, Volume 13, Number 4, October 2018, pp. 30-35 (Article)

Published by National Bureau of Asian Research

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2018.0058>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/708148>

Assessing Indonesia's Foreign Policy under Jokowi

Chris Lundry

As Indonesia prepares for its 2019 presidential election, the race appears to be between the frontrunners of the 2014 election, Joko Widodo (also known as “Jokowi”) and Prabowo Subianto. Jokowi’s electoral victory in 2014 was notable given his humble background, quick rise, and populist undertones, although he moved quickly to establish his own priorities with regard to Indonesia’s international relations and role in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

After taking office, Jokowi declared the end of the “thousand friends, zero enemies” foreign policy approach of his predecessor Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, which emphasized greater participation in international forums. Instead, he argued for a transactional approach that would more clearly benefit Indonesia. Jokowi made maritime security a top priority, including bolstering naval capabilities and implementing tough policies aimed at curtailing illegal fishing, piracy, smuggling, and drug trafficking. He increased executions in his first year as president, reflecting a tough approach to drugs in the archipelago—which was soon to be eclipsed by that of Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte.¹ Indonesia also experienced a resurgence of terrorist attacks in 2018, and new tactics and international connections have raised questions for relations with its neighbors, specifically the Philippines and Australia.

Yet despite initial signs that Jokowi may be steering away from the foreign policy path forged by his predecessor, this essay argues that he has for the most part stayed the course. Concerns that he may take a more isolationist approach are mostly unfounded, and his actions show a willingness to back away from early rhetoric—and actions—that may have signaled a more independent course for Indonesia.

CHRIS LUNDRY is a Profesor-Investigador at El Colegio de México. He can be reached at <clundry@colmex.mx>.

¹ Jokowi has expressed admiration for Duterte’s policies, going so far as to say that drug dealers who resist should be shot without mercy. The first six months of 2017 saw a dramatic rise in police shootings of suspected drug dealers in Indonesia. Human Rights Watch, “Indonesia: Events of 2017,” in *World Report 2018* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2018) ≈ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/indonesia>.

Emphasis on Maritime Security

Under Jokowi, Indonesia has taken an aggressive stance toward illegal fishing in its territorial waters. He couched his new policies of capturing and sometimes destroying foreign fishing vessels illegally operating in Indonesian waters in terms of sovereignty, a right that all Indonesian presidents have fiercely promoted in some form or another. After claiming that up to five thousand vessels operate illegally in Indonesian waters, Jokowi set his policy in place in the hopes of deterring future poachers. The results so far have been mixed. Although production in fisheries is up, it has prompted bellicose actions by China, which views most of the South China Sea as its own waters.

The policy provoked consternation among other ASEAN states, as most of the fishing ships sunk by Indonesia are from fellow members such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia. Members also worry about an increasingly assertive Indonesia.² However, one could also argue that greater attention to naval capabilities is long overdue for the archipelagic nation of over seventeen thousand islands. Indonesia's armed forces were predominantly land-based during the Suharto era and in the years directly following it, reflecting unease with both perceived and real internal challenges to Indonesian sovereignty. U.S. secretary of defense James Mattis has expressed U.S. support for Indonesia's emphasis on maritime security.³ The two countries have conducted joint exercises in the Strait of Malacca as well as around the Natuna Islands, an area that extends Indonesia's exclusive economic zone into China's nine-dash line claim to the South China Sea. Jokowi wants to nearly double defense expenditures from 0.8% to 1.5% of GDP over five years, and the defense department received the highest share of the 2018 budget (107.7 trillion rupiah).⁴ In June 2016, Jokowi announced a plan to build an airstrip in the Natuna Islands and to move ships to the area to bolster Indonesia's claim to the islands and counter any presence from China.⁵

² Prashanth Parameswaran, "The Trouble with Indonesia's Foreign Policy Priorities under Jokowi," *Diplomat*, January 9, 2015 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2015/01/the-trouble-with-indonesias-foreign-policy-priorities-under-jokowi>.

³ Francis Chan, "U.S. to Work with Indonesia on Maritime Security, Counter-terrorism," *Straits Times*, January 23, 2018 ~ <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/us-to-work-with-indonesia-on-maritime-security-counter-terrorism>.

⁴ Sheldon Simon, "Diplomatic Gambits," *Comparative Connections* 16, no. 3 (2015) ~ <http://cc.csis.org/2015/01/diplomatic-gambits>; and "Defense Ministry Gets Top Allocation in 2018 State Budget," *Jakarta Post*, October 26, 2017 ~ <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/10/26/defense-ministry-gets-top-allocation-in-2018-state-budget.html>.

⁵ Sheldon Simon, "Augmented Presence," *Comparative Connections* 18, no. 2 (2016) ~ <http://cc.csis.org/2016/09/augmented-presence>.

Yet Indonesia is still far from being able to assert control over its maritime boundaries. The new policy is for now mainly symbolic, and questions remain as to Indonesia's commitment to a policy that rankles its neighbors. Furthermore, perhaps reflecting a desire to avoid inflaming China's ire, especially given its past aggressive reactions to Indonesia's seizure of its fishing vessels, Indonesia has ceased pursuing Chinese ships.⁶

Executions Spur International Condemnation

After taking office, one of Jokowi's policy shifts was to increase the use of capital punishment for those accused of smuggling drugs, even though this had implications for Indonesia's relations with its neighbors and had been put on hold by Yudhoyono.⁷ In his first year as president, Jokowi executed fourteen people, the most in any year in Indonesian history, and all for drug trafficking. The executions were a way for Jokowi to bolster his credibility as being tough on crime since he does not have a military background like his predecessor.⁸

Yet although the executions may have bolstered his credentials in Indonesia, where around 85% of the population favors the death penalty, they harmed Indonesia's international relations because most of those executed were foreigners. In 2015, Brazil, the Netherlands, and Australia—all countries that have abolished the death penalty—protested the executions of their citizens by firing squad.⁹ The following year, the number of executions for drug smuggling dropped to four: three Nigerians (one a dual Senegalese citizen) and an Indonesian. In 2017, no executions were carried out.

Did international—or domestic—pressure force a reckoning? Jokowi has stated that he would consider a moratorium on the death penalty, but that one seemed unlikely given popular support for capital punishment.¹⁰ Australian protests over the conviction of Schapelle Corby in 2005 are

⁶ In March 2016, a Chinese coast guard ship rammed a Chinese fishing boat that had been captured by Indonesian authorities to force its release. See Joe Cochrane, "Chinese Coast Guard Rams Fishing Boat to Free It from Indonesian Authorities," *New York Times*, March 21, 2016 ~ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/22/world/asia/indonesia-south-china-sea-fishing-boat.html>.

⁷ Yudhoyono declared a moratorium on executions for four years but executed six people in the last year of his presidency.

⁸ John McBeth, "Indonesia, Politics and the Death Penalty," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Strategist, April 30, 2015 ~ <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/indonesia-politics-and-the-death-penalty>.

⁹ Brazil technically has the death penalty on its books but only in the time of war. It has not executed a criminal since 1876.

¹⁰ "Jokowi Would 'Suspend Death Penalty If Indonesia Wants It,'" *Today* (Jakarta), March 28, 2017 ~ <https://www.todayonline.com/world/asia/jokowi-would-suspend-death-penalty-if-indonesia-wants-it>.

thought to have influenced Indonesian judges to give her a harsher sentence in retaliation for what they perceived as meddling in their judicial affairs. But the international reaction in 2015 likely caused some handwringing. Those executed in 2016 were all from countries that have the death penalty.

Regardless of whether a moratorium will be implemented, Indonesia is still sentencing people to death, including terrorist Aman Abdurrahman, who was convicted in June 2018. Meanwhile, Indonesia continues to advocate for its own citizens who face the death penalty elsewhere, many of whom are domestic servants in the Middle East. This may play a role in efforts to abolish or reduce the use of capital punishment in Indonesia.¹¹

The Changing Face of Terrorism

In June 2018, terrorism reared its ugly head again in Indonesia with multiple attacks in Surabaya. Three groups of people from the same family, including the father, mother, and children, targeted three different churches with suicide bombs. As Sidney Jones, director of the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict in Jakarta wrote in the *New York Times*, the Surabaya attacks show an evolution in tactics for domestic terrorists, including the use of women and children as attackers, which is something not seen before in Indonesia. Jones also noted that of those who support the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and are willing to commit acts of terrorism, not all are members of the largest terrorist network in Indonesia, Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD). Some ISIS support groups in Indonesia are more loosely organized, making them harder to track and eliminate.¹² One regional terrorist organization, Jemaah Islamiyah, had stopped promoting attacks in the aftermath of the Bali bombing in 2002, although a splinter group led by Noordin Top remained active until his death in 2009. JAD, which is affiliated with ISIS, has no such qualms about using violence. The group was outlawed by a Jakarta court, and its leader Aman Abdurrahman, as noted above, was sentenced to death for his role in coordinating prior terrorist attacks.

Terrorism is, however, one aspect of Indonesia's foreign relations that continues to spur cooperation with other members of ASEAN as well as other states in the broader region. Following the 2017 siege of Marawi in

¹¹ David McCrae, "Indonesian Capital Punishment in Comparative Perspective," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 173, no. 1 (2017): 1–22.

¹² Sidney Jones, "How ISIS Has Changed Terrorism in Indonesia," *New York Times*, May 22, 2018 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/22/opinion/isis-terrorism-indonesia-women.html>>.

the Philippines—led by Philippines-based Abu Sayyaf and Maute jihadist groups but supported by ISIS militants, illustrating the transboundary nature of the problem—Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines increased patrols in their border areas, and Indonesia bolstered its land troops in the islands near the border. In January 2018, the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting produced a joint statement pledging enhanced cooperation on antiterrorism efforts. In March 2018, ASEAN signed a memorandum of understanding with Australia to enhance their mutual efforts based on the Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism from 2016. Indonesian defense minister Ryamizard Ryacudu emphasized the importance of joint counterterrorism efforts at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018. Indonesia also continues to pursue bilateral cooperation on counterterrorism with Australia, reflecting Jokowi’s preference for bilateralism in an attempt to increase benefits for Indonesia.¹³

ASEAN

Other ASEAN states were initially wary of Jokowi’s pronouncements and actions asserting Indonesian sovereignty and his criticism of Yudhoyono’s policies, which he deemed elitist and internationalist. These partners were afraid that Indonesia would turn inward to fulfill Jokowi’s promises to put the Indonesian people first, in combination with the potential for Jakarta to take a more muscular approach to maritime security. Have these fears been borne out?

The simple answer is no. Despite Jokowi’s emphasis on bilateralism and his administration’s early statements on ASEAN, Indonesia appears to continue to put its faith in the organization, albeit with greater acknowledgment of some of its perceived shortcomings.

For example, in acknowledging internal disputes between ASEAN claimants in the South China Sea, Jokowi has argued for these to be settled internally so that the organization can present a united front to China. He has also expressed a desire for ASEAN to play a role in the ongoing Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, although given its inability to intercede in the internal affairs of member states, this would have to be at the invitation of Myanmar, which is not likely. Jokowi has also pledged to neighboring

¹³ Avery Poole, “Is Jokowi Turning His Back on ASEAN?” *Diplomat*, September 7, 2015 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2015/09/is-jokowi-turning-his-back-on-asean>. Jokowi has also promoted the idea of Australia joining ASEAN.

countries that Indonesia will maintain its efforts to reduce transboundary haze from forest fires.

Rather than turning away from ASEAN, Jokowi has pointed out its limitations. This is not the same as expressing a desire to weaken or withdraw from the organization, as some early critics feared. Jokowi's initial statements seem to have been intended to garner support among his domestic constituents. In assessing the administration's relationship with ASEAN, it appears as though Indonesia will continue to support the organization and play a role in its leadership. Moreover, Jokowi's criticisms of ASEAN could lead the organization to look more realistically at its limitations and change its strategies for facing an assertive China.

Conclusion

The 2019 presidential election may serve as a barometer for Indonesian sentiment toward the Jokowi administration, with the electorate choosing continuity or expressing the desire to replace him with Prabowo and his more populist and nationalist style. It will not be, however, a referendum on a radical new path forged by Jokowi because, as this essay shows, he has not departed greatly from his predecessor's policies, despite initial indications that he may. Although Indonesian presidential candidates try to separate themselves from their competition and may make statements about policy shifts, the ship of state stays the course in practice.

External events such as China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea and the continued threat of transboundary cooperation between terrorist networks will necessitate both a proactive and reactive foreign policy for Indonesia, but continued cooperation with its neighbors should be expected. Jokowi's ratcheting down of the number of foreigners executed also shows that his administration cares about relations with neighboring countries (after demonstrating his initial "toughness"). Additionally, his continued support for Indonesia's role in ASEAN shows that he recognizes the value of multilateralism in the region. Prabowo's campaign rhetoric may once again pull candidate Jokowi toward populism and an "Indonesia first" position. But if he remains on top when the dust settles, Indonesian policy will not likely stray significantly from its current path. 