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Unpacking Self-Sufficiency in Prabowo's Free and Active Foreign Policy

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SYNOPSIS

Leonard C. Sebastian and Dilla Andieni Nurshadrina argue that Prabowo Subianto's first 100 days of diplomatic visits clearly indicate the trajectory that Indonesia's foreign policy will take. Prabowo's foreign policy is an extension of his national priorities.

COMMENTARY

President Prabowo Subianto is moulding an image as a foreign policy president. While his management of Indonesia's "free and active" foreign policy is still a work in progress, expect Prabowo to adopt a more personal and hands-on approach to diplomacy, marking a departure from his predecessor's style.

While Indonesia's long-standing national doctrine of free and active foreign policy will remain his guiding principle, Prabowo will implement it in his own way. His foreign policy will act as a vehicle to further his ambitious domestic agenda.

Shifting Style, not Alliance

Analysts and commentators were perplexed when Indonesia and China signed two strategic [memorandums of understanding \(MoUs\)](#) in the mineral sector on 9 November 2024 during the president's state visit to Beijing. At the centre of the debate was a statement regarding "overlapping claims" in the South China Sea, which some think compromises Indonesia's commitment to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The statement triggered wrong signals, giving the impression that Indonesia recognised China's claims in the South China Sea, a notion that Minister of Foreign Affairs Sugiono emphatically refuted two days later.

While in Beijing, Prabowo also landed funding for his ambitious Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) or Free Nutritious Meal Programme. For Prabowo, choosing China as the destination for his first overseas trip as president was not about shifting allegiances to Beijing, but rather pragmatism.

Prabowo has never shied away from bold moves, including during his first 100 days as president. At the core of his presidency is the need to be self-sufficient. His vision is simple: a robust, independent Indonesia that cooperates internationally but is dependent on nobody. This vision is merely a rewording of the free and active foreign policy doctrine. Under Prabowo, this is more than foreign policy dogma; it is a commitment to practical independence, grounded in domestic ambition.

In delivering his Annual Minister of Foreign Affairs Press Statement on 10 January, Foreign Minister Sugiono assumed more of the role of envoy, a clear departure from the status of his predecessor, Retno Marsudi, under whose leadership Indonesia's foreign policy [agenda](#) was largely crafted in-house at the Foreign Ministry (Kemlu). Sugiono's inaugural press statement primarily reflected the campaign promises made by President Prabowo, giving the impression of a speech written at the Istana.

Aside from outlining Kemlu's usual business, which is safeguarding Indonesia's diaspora and fostering regional goodwill, his speech notably centred on Prabowo's *Asta Cita* policy, which prioritises domestic welfare and development. The MBG programme and push for self-sufficiency were notable key points that were repeated several times. Such repetition is the clearest indication that Prabowo's free and active foreign policy aims to fulfil a domestic agenda, notably his ambition for self-sufficiency.



President Prabowo Subianto's foreign policy is driven by pragmatism and aimed at advancing his ambitious domestic agenda. *Image source: Wikimedia Commons.*

All for Asta Cita

For Indonesia, striving for self-sufficiency and independence, particularly in food production, is not a new endeavour. During the Soeharto era, the country achieved global recognition for becoming [self-sufficient](#) in rice production. However, this success proved hard to sustain, with growing dependence on imports over the past

decades. Now, Prabowo seeks to rekindle that spirit of independence, not just in agriculture but across sectors, including energy.

Since his first presidential bid in 2014, Prabowo has consistently championed the idea of achieving energy self-sufficiency through energy diversification. This plan extends to embracing renewable sources such as hydropower, solar, wind, geothermal, biofuels, and nuclear energy. For this, Indonesia would need to tap partners, not just China, to help exploit advances in renewable technologies. Indonesia would require partners to sustain that ambition of achieving energy self-sufficiency.

When it comes to tapping the vast natural gas reserves in the Natuna Sea, Indonesia needed a partner. In 2017, [ExxonMobil](#) was engaged in talks to explore the Natuna D-alpha or East Natuna gas field but it walked away subsequently. It was believed to be uneconomical for the company to develop the block. That decision has allowed China to step into the vacuum left by the United States.

For oil and gas cooperation, Indonesia has already begun talks with major Chinese energy [firms](#) like Sinopec and Petrochina, currently involved in joint studies to explore energy resources in Buton and Timor in eastern Indonesia. Sinopec has also partnered with Pertamina to boost oil production through techniques such as enhanced oil recovery (EOR). The potential partnership with China in the Natuna Sea could be a game changer for Indonesia in tapping its natural gas reserves.

In the area of housing, Hashim Djojohadikusumo, head of Indonesia's housing task force, revealed that a Chinese [firm](#) had pledged to build 1 million urban dwelling units. This is another area where foreign engagements involve partnerships to address domestic priorities.

However, Chinese involvement in Indonesia's energy sector does not mean that Indonesia is entirely distancing itself from the United States in its energy plans. In fact, Indonesia has already initiated extensive discussions with the United States regarding nuclear power development. US-based ThorCon Power plans to build Indonesia's first nuclear power plant in Bangka Belitung, specifically selected for its thorium deposits. During his inaugural visit to Washington, Prabowo also obtained a promise from the United States for [cooperation](#) in developing small modular reactor (SMR) nuclear technology.

Another notable highlight is President Prabowo's emphasis during his presidential campaign on Indonesia's potential in biodiesel production. Drawing parallels with similar nations with vast rainforests, like Brazil, Indonesia aims to implement a 50 per cent palm-oil-based biodiesel blend by early 2025. Prabowo has also expressed interest in collaborating with [Brazil](#) to advance this initiative.

Brazil, already a long-standing partner in [biofuel development](#), will become a key player in this strategy. Both countries, home to the world's largest palm oil plantations, have been at the forefront of the biofuels race. On the sidelines of the recent G20 summit, President Prabowo signalled his interest in deepening cooperation with Brazil, building on their successful collaboration in biodiesel production.

Prabowo is also looking to the Middle East to bolster support for his vision of Indonesia as a rising powerhouse in the Islamic world. He plans to leverage Indonesia's growing influence and trust among Islamic [nations](#), with Deputy Foreign Minister Anis Matta highlighting commitments from Qatar and the UAE to fund 7 million units out of a 15-million-unit housing programme under Prabowo's administration.

Nudging BRICS towards a New Direction?

In 2025, Indonesia made headlines by becoming the first Southeast Asian state to join the BRICS inter-regional bloc as a full member. BRICS membership may not come as a surprise: for Prabowo, it is also about pragmatism. Indonesia's [decision](#) to join BRICS should be viewed through the lens of national economic development.

Economic considerations are the driving force behind the decision to join BRICS. By becoming a part of BRICS, Indonesia aims to tap into alternative resources and explore new opportunities within emerging markets, not just China.

Given that Indonesia is a founding member of the 1961 Non-Aligned Movement, some may question whether Indonesia's membership of BRICS signals a shift away from its non-aligned, free and active foreign policy. We believe that Indonesia intends to influence BRICS so that it does not evolve into an anti-West bloc.

A further safeguard to retain ties with the West will be Indonesia's future accession to the OECD. The OECD [accession](#) roadmap for Indonesia was formally approved by the OECD Council on 29 March 2024. Unlike the process for joining BRICS, the OECD accession process is highly institutionalised and lengthy. BRICS may dominate Indonesia's agenda in the short term while pursuing OECD membership remains a long-term commitment.

If Indonesia successfully clears the review process and accession to the OECD is accelerated, Prabowo will be positioning Indonesia to navigate and benefit from both worlds in this emerging global landscape. This approach embodies Prabowo's vision of a free and active foreign policy, one that also serves his domestic political goals.

Some argue that Indonesia is losing its balance and drifting away from its free and active foreign policy. However, what Prabowo is doing simply constitutes an evolution of the free and active policy. Indonesia is not abandoning its principles; it remains faithful to a tradition of leaving one's options open and making pragmatic deals that serve the nation's interests.

Whither Free and Active Policy?

Whether dealing with China, the United States or any other country, Indonesia's foreign policy under Prabowo is rooted in practicality. The goal is to secure partnerships that contribute to Indonesia's growth and having the autonomy to choose those partners. Joining BRICS and the OECD is not about aligning with one global power but rather engaging with all poles, creating opportunities for market access and cooperation.

For Prabowo, the free and active principle is not about neutrality but about taking an active stance and making strategic moves with anyone to advance his domestic agenda and self-sufficiency goals in an evolving world order where there is no longer any centre of gravity.

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