

PERSPECTIVE

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Indonesia, ASEAN, and the Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- With the emergence of the Indo-Pacific region as an expanded theatre of U.S.-China rivalry epitomized in the call by Washington for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific and China's Belt and Road Initiative, Indonesia has taken the ASEAN lead in developing a framework to lessen regional tensions and to promote cooperation.
- Since 2017, Foreign Minister Retno LP Marsudi has been pressing ASEAN to endorse Indonesia's Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept, the next opportunity being the 22 June ASEAN Summit.
- Even if adopted, there is nothing in the "concept" to suggest it will influence great-power behaviour either among themselves or towards ASEAN.
- Domestically in Indonesia, it gives a measure of symbolic credibility to President Joko Widodo's Global Maritime Axis vision and enhances Foreign Minister Retno's standing.

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U.S. President Donald Trump advanced his vision for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) at the November 2017 Vietnam-hosted APEC meeting, revitalizing the concept of Indo-Pacific security regionalism.¹ In the address, he developed a theme already used by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson a month earlier in remarks to the American Council on Foreign Relations prior to a scheduled trip to South Asia. Tillerson said the U.S. and India should partner to further “a free and open Indo-Pacific,” upholding the rule of law and freedom of navigation, while China does not.² Since then, the FOIP concept has been embraced by the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India in a revival of a four-power security dialogue dating back to 2007 known as the Quad. The FOIP initiative framed a multilateral challenge to what was viewed as China’s aggressively unfair and illegal attack on the global order in its ascent to great-power status. Beijing denounces the political attack on its policies and activities as “containment.” The Quad was particularly alarmed by China’s rising economic and political profile in the Indian Ocean and Southwest Pacific regions created by Beijing’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beijing’s intention to build the infrastructure for a maritime “silk road” was announced in a speech by Xi Jinping to Indonesia’s parliament – the first by a foreign head of state – in October 2013.³

Lurking behind the threat to the established regional order are security concerns based on China’s growing military power, particularly blue-water naval capabilities as represented by its second aircraft carrier. American recognition of China as a possible military adversary seems captured in the March 2018 renaming of the Honolulu-headquartered U.S. Asia-Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command. The great-power dynamics seemingly joined the South China Sea and Indian Ocean as the front line of an Asian Cold War pitting a revisionist China against the defenders of the established order. Caught behind the lines, as it were, ASEAN and – in ASEAN – especially Indonesia, seek to avoid, or at least mitigate, collateral damage to their economic growth and international standing. At risk is a politically stable and peaceful regional environment that since the end of the Indochina wars has engendered strong economic growth and spreading welfare. Politically for ASEAN, the expansion of the great-power geostrategic battlefield threatens ASEAN’s claim of centrality in the regional security architecture. For archipelagic Indonesia, the southern shores of which are lapped by the Indian Ocean, a perceived diminished leadership role in ASEAN is notionally offset by a new leadership claim in the Indian Ocean. As ASEAN’s only geographic Indo-Pacific state, Jakarta seeks a way to translate the geographic fact into geopolitical influence. The question was what Indonesia and ASEAN could do to avert the great-power pressures on them to choose sides.

In Jakarta, the need for a middle way had been anticipated during the second term of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Four years before FOIP, Yudhoyono’s foreign minister Marty Natalegawa placed the future political and economic developments in the Indo-Pacific region on the regional international agenda. In a 20 May 2013 keynote address to an Indonesia conference at Washington’s Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), he laid out “An Indonesian Perspective on the Indo-Pacific.”⁴ Noting that in the past the regional political and economic identities of the Pacific and Indian oceans could be considered separately, he argued that the future could hold a new international architecture connecting the two into an Indo-Pacific framework. For Indonesia, given its geography spanning the two oceans, the future course of the Indo-Pacific region was of profound interest. Marty attributed the looming challenges to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region to “first and foremost” a “trust-deficit.” In his view, a new paradigm was needed to address the trust-deficit in the Indo-Pacific region’s international relations on the basis of

security as a common good. To that end, Marty proposed that the Indo-Pacific states work towards developing an Indo-Pacific Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. His model was the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) to which all of the dialogue partners had acceded. Such an Indo-Pacific treaty, he claimed, would strengthen and flesh out the commitments made in the November 2011 Declaration of the East Asia Summit (EAS) on the Principles for Mutually Beneficial Relations. Known as the Bali Principles from the venue, the declaration is a 12-point guide to peaceful and cooperative interstate behaviour drawing on the UN Charter, the Bandung Principles, the TAC, and other ASEAN-endorsed normative admonitions.⁵ Left open was the question of how and why the proposed Indo-Pacific treaty would be, in the absence of sanctions, any more effective in disciplining state behaviour to its normative commitments than its antecedents have been.

Marty's proposal for an Indo-Pacific version of ASEAN's TAC was put on ASEAN's regional security agenda. At the June 2013 46th ASEAN [Foreign] Ministers' Meeting (AMM), the ministers merely took note of the idea of an Indo-Pacific framework based on the principles contained in the TAC and the 2011 Bali Principles, but did not suggest any action. The May 2014 ASEAN Summit's Chairman's Statement "welcomed Indonesia's effort to promote a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in the wider Pacific area." This was followed by the August 2014 47th AMM at which the ministers welcomed Indonesia's effort to propose such a treaty and looked forward to further details from Indonesia. They also tasked their senior officials with exploring the possibilities for such a regional framework. In doing this, the ministers reiterated the importance of preserving ASEAN centrality in the evolving regional architecture. For three years, however, 2015-2017, the Indonesian initiative disappeared into the black hole of ASEAN bureaucracy. There is no mention of the Indo-Pacific in the chairman's reports on the meetings in those years of the AMM, ASEAN Summit, or the EAS. In part, this may have been because of no sense of urgency, but more likely because Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natalegawa, one of ASEAN's drivers, was no longer in office. Even so, in the 15 months left in his tenure as foreign minister, as he wrote in his memoirs, he remained committed to the idea of a treaty.⁶

The 2014 Indonesian elections produced a new government. New president Joko Widodo (familarly known as Jokowi) shifted Indonesian maritime policy from an ASEAN-based regionalist focus towards a more nationalist vision in which Indonesia's future was to be a Global Maritime Axis (GMA). "We have far too long turned our back on the seas, the oceans, the straits, and the bays," he declaimed in his inaugural address, going on to assert "it is time to restore everything so that in the sea we will triumph."⁷ A foreign policy priority in his campaign's *Vision and Mission* statement called for an expansion of Indonesia's regional strategic view.⁸ The implication of this was interpreted to mean a downplaying of the long-standing assertion that ASEAN was the foundation of Indonesian foreign policy. Rizal Sukma, Jokowi's close foreign policy advisor, described the GMA's role as "the Power between Two Seas" [capitalization in the original], emphasizing the geographic, geostrategic, and geo-economic realities confronting Indonesia in the Indian and Pacific oceans.⁹ Jokowi tried to explain the GMA at his first meeting as president of Indonesia with his fellow leaders at the November 2014 9th East Asian Summit. He claimed that Indonesia as a strong maritime power would help keep the Indo-Pacific region peaceful and safe; contrasting Indonesia's role with those who use the ocean for seizure of natural resources, territorial disputes, and maritime supremacy.¹⁰ In a visit to China in March 2015, Jokowi, anxious for Chinese funding for GMA infrastructure projects, agreed that the BRI and GMA were complementary.¹¹

Marty Natalegawa was succeeded as foreign minister by Retno LP Marsudi. Unlike Marty's, her career pattern had not included ASEAN affairs or a senior multilateral posting such as the UN or EU. Sponsored by former president Megawati Sukarnoputri, President Sukarno's daughter and head of the largest political party in Jokowi's coalition, Retno was plucked from her posting as Indonesian ambassador to the Netherlands to become Indonesia's first female foreign minister. Her efforts to forward Jokowi's policies, particularly in ASEAN, have tested her diplomatic skills and mettle.

Stalemated in ASEAN, the GMA was quickly linked to Indonesian interests in the Indian Ocean. One vehicle was the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which by rotation was scheduled to pass leadership to Jakarta for 2015-2017. The IORA is an organization of 21 countries bordering the Indian Ocean with common interests in promoting and supporting maritime security, economic development, investment, safety, tourism and other activities. In addition to Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand are dual members of ASEAN and the IORA. Jokowi saw in Indonesia's term as IORA chair an opportunity to position the GMA as the crucial link in the Indo-Pacific. Foreign Minister Retno, assuming the IORA Council's chair, said she would "shape the IORA to Indonesia's interest."¹² This was underlined by the theme adopted for the Indonesian tenure, "Strengthen Cooperation in a Peaceful and Stable Indian Ocean." During 2016, the bureaucratic focus was on preparing for the first-ever IORA heads-of-government meeting held in Jakarta 7-8 March 2017, commemorating the grouping's 20th anniversary. The major achievement of the IORA Summit was the adoption of the "Jakarta Concord." Drafted in Jakarta and approved by the IORA Council of Ministers on 27 October 2016, the Concord detailed the activities to be promoted to advance regional cooperation for a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indian Ocean.¹³

At the ASEAN level, the foreign ministers were closely following the rising tensions between China and its competitors. President Trump's 2017 FOIP speech and the Quad's efforts to counter Beijing's push for the BRI threatened to sideline ASEAN and damage relations with one or the other of the great-power protagonists. In response to President Trump's speech widening the geopolitical field of contest from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific, Marty Natalegawa, now from an unofficial position, said that ASEAN should not fear the revival of the Indo-Pacific concept, but should build on it with an expanded EAS in which the Indo-Pacific-rim countries would be bound together by the proposed Indo-Pacific Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.¹⁴

With ASEAN's blessing, Foreign Minister Retno picked up where Marty left off, trying to sell to the East Asia Summit (which includes China and the U.S.) a framework agreement that could ameliorate tensions and preserve ASEAN centrality in the regional security architecture. For Marty, the vehicle had been a proposed treaty – a binding legal document. For Retno, it is a "concept." Marty's Indo-Pacific Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation was replaced by the Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept. Among other considerations, it had been the legalities of the treaty format and ratification process that had impeded the progress of Marty's proposal. Nevertheless, Retno found it no easier to convince her fellow ASEAN ministers to approve her "concept" than Marty had his treaty.

The outline of the Indonesian "concept" for Indo-Pacific cooperation was previewed in a major policy speech by Foreign Minister Retno at Jakarta's Center for Strategic and

International Studies Global Dialogue, 16 May 2018.¹⁵ It was rooted in the well-known principles of openness, transparency, inclusiveness, dialogue, cooperation, friendship, and upholding international law. She amplified President Jokowi's remarks three weeks earlier at the 32nd ASEAN Summit that ASEAN needed to create an environment conducive to cooperation. Areas of cooperation could include maritime security, connectivity, and sustainable development as starting points. Like Jokowi, Retno emphasized the importance of strengthening ASEAN solidarity and cooperation so as to maintain ASEAN centrality. Through ASEAN centrality, the Indo-Pacific partnership would be independent of Washington and Beijing and through its strategy of mutual security and economic gain, would not be tempted by American or Chinese alternative frameworks. Missing from the outline of the Indonesian strategy for the Indo-Pacific was how the good intentions could be turned into real policy. In terms of the significance of the "concept" for Indonesia, Foreign Minister Retno said – to a basically Indonesian audience – that the adoption of the "concept" by ASEAN and the EAS would "cement" Indonesia's status as ASEAN's leader and as a global middle power.

On 9 August 2018, Foreign Minister Retno formally presented the Indonesian Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept to the 8th Ministerial Meeting of the East Asia Summit.¹⁶ The "concept" was well known by the ministers and senior officials. Retno and Indonesian diplomats had campaigned for adoption, briefing and lobbying the attendees. In her remarks, Retno placed heavy emphasis on the importance of Indonesian initiative in the current geopolitical setting in which the countries of the Indo-Pacific region are potentially new objects of attraction of the constellation of world powers (euphemistic framing of China – U.S. rivalry). The Indonesian foreign minister assured the other EAS ministers that the proposal was "not to create a new mechanism or replace an existing one, but to enhance cooperation using existing mechanisms." Does this structurally reduce the Indo-Pacific strategy to "more of the same but better"? This prompts another question. Retno identified the EAS with its "unique strengths" as the ideal platform from which to drive economic cooperation within the Indo-Pacific region. This raises the question of what role, if any, have the economic and other related functional ministries had in developing the Indonesian proposal? The EAS response to the Indonesian "concept" was underwhelming. The Chairman's Statement simply noted that they had exchanged views on the various Indo-Pacific concepts. The Ministers looked forward to further discussion on the various Indo-Pacific concepts, which should embrace key principles such as ASEAN Centrality, openness, transparency, inclusivity, and rules-based approach, while contributing to mutual trust, mutual respect and mutual benefit.¹⁷

New urgency was added to Indonesia's quest for a comprehensive ASEAN Indo-Pacific policy with the passage by the U.S. Congress and signing into law on 31 December by President Trump of the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA). The law provided a legislative green light for the U.S. "to develop and commit to a long-term strategic vision and comprehensive, multifaceted, and principled United States policy for the Indo-Pacific region."¹⁸ The ARIA was widely viewed as intensifying the already sharp differences between the U.S. and China and the pressures on ASEAN. It called for expansion of security and defense cooperation with allies and partners and authorized \$1.5 billion to enhance the defense capabilities of the U.S. and its allies in the Indo-Pacific. It expressed grave concern over Chinese actions to undermine a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. The ARIA underlined the American commitment to FOIP as being in the American national interest. The many strategic, economic and diplomatic measures enumerated in the ARIA bolstered

an American-led counter to China's growing presence and influence in the oceans beyond the East and South China seas. Even so, the ARIA states that it is the diplomatic strategy of the U.S. "to support functional problem-solving regional architecture, including through ASEAN, APEC, and the EAS."

On 9 January 2019, a few days after the signing of the ARIA, Foreign Minister Retno addressed the world press and Jakarta's diplomatic corps in the minister's annual statement.¹⁹ In it, she promised that Indonesia would continue to work to advance the regional architecture for the Indo-Pacific. She stressed the point that for Indonesia, the Pacific and Indian oceans were a "Single Geo-Strategic Theater." In a paragraph that echoed Jokowi's debut remarks at the 2014 EAS, she said the region must ensure that the Indo-Pacific does not become an arena for competition for natural resources, territorial conflict, and maritime sovereignty. This is the context, she said, in which Indonesia developed its Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept. She invited all partners to continue developing the "concept," and in a gentle nudge to her fellow ASEAN foreign ministers, she added, "For Indonesia, ASEAN must be proactive in a strategic reaction to changes in the region."

Ten days following the press conference, the Indonesian foreign minister traveled to Chiang Mai, Thailand, for the 20-21 January ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat hosted by Thailand, ASEAN's 2019 chair. There, she again unsuccessfully pressed her ASEAN colleagues to accept the Indonesian Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept. "ASEAN ministers fail to reach conclusion on Indo-Pacific Strategy" read the headline in one Thai paper, with the Thai foreign minister quoted as saying that, although it was on the agenda, "they did not touch on the issue."²⁰ If the ministers themselves had not touched upon it, their senior officials had, in preparing the final press statement which said:

We note the progress of deliberations on the ASEAN collective approach on the Indo-Pacific outlook that reinforces ASEAN's centrality and that is based on key principles of openness, transparency, inclusiveness, rules-based approaches, mutual trust, mutual respect, and mutual benefit. We believe that such an approach would generate concrete benefits for the peoples of the region and complement existing regional and sub-regional frameworks of cooperation. In this regard, we look forward to further developments of this outlook, with a view to adoption by ASEAN.

Retno's response to the non-action was that "various advances had been achieved and Indonesia was expecting the concept to be agreed upon at the upcoming ASEAN Summit."²¹ Due to Thai domestic affairs, including elections and crowning a new king, the summit was postponed to 22 June. Until then, the Indonesian foreign minister continued to lobby for the "concept" and to validate Indonesia's credentials as the Indo-Pacific "axis" or "fulcrum," the terms used synonymously.

On 20 March 2019, Foreign Minister Retno convened in Jakarta a High-Level Dialogue (HLD) on Indo-Pacific Cooperation. This was a follow-up on the announcement of such dialogues at her January press conference. The HLD was attended by foreign ministers or their deputies from the ASEAN states and their eight EAS dialogue partners. With the theme of "Towards a Peaceful, Prosperous, and Inclusive Region," the session was another effort by the foreign minister to sell the Indonesian "concept." Retno warned in general terms that great-power strategic rivalry threatened peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region, undermining decades of economic and social development. To meet the challenge, she said,

“countries must together develop a framework of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,” in order to ensure that the region is one of peace and cooperation, not that of rivalry and conflict.²²

Also in March 2019, Indonesia hosted the first Indonesia-South Pacific Forum (ISPF). Under the slogan “Our future, shared ocean, shared prosperity”,²³ 15 countries attended, from Papua New Guinea through the island nations of the South Pacific to Australia and New Zealand. Some of the small island nations were already labouring under BRI-debt obligations. Foreign Minister Retno made it clear that the purpose of the ISPF was “to increase (Indonesia’s) role and presence in the South Pacific.” Jakarta has been testing the air for a gathering of all Indo-Pacific nations – ASEAN, IORA, ISPF – but has seen reluctance from the Indian Ocean states concerned about being drawn into the South China Sea issue.

Throughout the discussions of the Indonesia-proposed Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept, two overriding concerns seem to have guided ASEAN decision-making. The first is that of the demand for ASEAN centrality, which in operational terms means ASEAN control of agendas, pace, and form of decision-making, which is consensus. The second is that existing ASEAN mechanisms will be employed. Foreign Minister Retno personally assured her Cambodian counterpart, Foreign Minister Prak Sokhon, that Indonesia was not introducing a new regional architecture, but wanted to optimize the existing structures.²⁴ In practical terms, this means that Chinese influence as deployed through Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand will continue to weigh heavily. It should also be noted that, among others, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia itself have signed on to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. It is to be doubted that the kind of BRI issues that spurred the FOIP initiative would be openly addressed in an ASEAN-controlled setting.

If, on the other hand, we were to consider Indonesia’s Indo-Pacific strategy as simply a symbolic framework for specific projects development, it can be noted that ASEAN is already filled with an abundance of such frameworks. Indonesia has promoted its “concept” as an ASEAN reaction to great-power rivalry aggravated by China’s advances beyond the crisis-ridden South China Sea. Foreign Minister Retno has not demonstrated that her (Jokowi’s) *démarche* bridges the national interests gap between China and those countries that view it as a geopolitical-economic threat, not a potential partner in a new ASEAN scheme.

Indonesia’s dogged pursuit of its Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept tests its real political weight within ASEAN. Jakarta’s historical self-view that Indonesia is the natural leader in Southeast Asia seems outdated given its failure to move ASEAN on issues of democracy, human rights, and other commitments made more than a decade ago in the ASEAN Charter. The details of the Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept seem remote from the real issues in the China-U.S. regional competition. Nevertheless, Indonesian “ownership” of the “concept” does have domestic political influence. It has given some degree of credibility to Jokowi’s Global Maritime Axis vision, although foreign policy was not an issue-area in April’s election which awarded him a second term. It also has allowed Retno LP Marsudi to emerge as more than just a “junior” face in the crowd on the ASEAN stage. Whether this is enough to maintain her ministerial role when Jokowi’s second term cabinet is formed remains to be seen.

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- ¹ “Remarks of President Trump at the APEC CEO Summit, Danang, Vietnam” 10 November 2015, accessed at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-of-president-trump-apec-ceo-summit-da-nang-vietnam/>.
- ² “Tillerson on India: Partners in a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” accessed at <http://www.cfr.org/blog/tillerson-india-partners-free-and-open-indo-pacific>.
- ³ The text of Xi’s speech can be accessed at https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/2013xiapec/2013-10/02/content_17007915.htm.
- ⁴ The full text of the speech was published by the *Jakarta Post* and can be accessed at <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2013/05/20/an-Indonesian-perspective-the-indo-pacific.html>.
- ⁵ The text of the Bali Principles can be accessed at https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/eas/pdfs/declaration_1111_2.pdf.
- ⁶ Marty Natalegawa, *Does ASEAN Matter? A View from Within* (Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), 104-107.
- ⁷ The full text of the speech can be accessed at <https://www.rappler.com/world/regions/asia-pacific/indonesia/72529-text-jokowi-inauguration-speech>.
- ⁸ Jokowi’s foreign policy platform was laid out in pages 12-14 of *Jalan Perubahan untuk Indonesia Yang Berdaulat: Visi, Misi, dan Program Aksi* [“The Road to Change for a Sovereign Indonesia: Vision, Mission, and Action Program”], accessed at http://kpu.go.id/koleksigambar/Visi_Misi_Jokowi_JK.pdf.
- ⁹ Rizal Sukma, “Gagasan Poros Maritim,” *Kompas*, August 21, 2014, accessed at <http://bisniskeuangan.kompas.com/read/2014/08/21/080000726/Gagasan.Poros.Maritim>.
- ¹⁰ “Jokowi launches maritime doctrine to the world,” *Jakarta Post*, 15 November 2014.
- ¹¹ The Chinese foreign ministry release on the Xi-Widodo joint press conference can be accessed at https://fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topic_665678/xijoexbyzlt2015nnn/1250054.shtml.
- ¹² As quoted in “Indonesia’s Maritime Axis to Pivot Westward through IORA,” *Jakarta Post*, 25 February, 2015.
- ¹³ The “Jakarta Concord” can be accessed at <http://www.iora.int/en/documents>.
- ¹⁴ Marty Natalegawa, “Asean should step up to promote a pacific Indo-Pacific,” *Straits Times*, 30 November 2017.
- ¹⁵ Jansen am, “What’s in Indonesia’s Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept?” *The Diplomat*, 16 May 2018.
- ¹⁶ “Introducing the Indo-Pacific Concept, Indonesia Sets the Tone at the East Asia Summit,” accessed at <http://en.presidentpost.id/2018/08/09/introducing-the-indo-pacific-concept-indonesia-sets-the-tone-at-the-east-asian-summit/>.
- ¹⁷ The EAS Chair’s statements can be accessed at <https://asean.org/asean/external-relations/east-asia-summit-eas/>.
- ¹⁸ The full text of the act can be accessed at <http://www.congress.gov/115th-congress/senate-bill/2736/text>.
March-2015.pdf.
- ¹⁹ The annual press statement can be read at <http://www.en.indonesia.nl/gallery/download/send/5-speeches/14-2018-annual-press-conference-of-retno-lp-marsudi-minister-for-foreign-affairs>.
- ²⁰ As cited by the *Nation*, 21 January 2019.
- ²¹ As cited by the *Jakarta Post*, 21 January 2019.
- ²² Retno LP Marsudi, “Time to deepen Indo-Pacific cooperation,” *Jakarta Post*, 20 March 2019.
- ²³ “Indonesia puts meat into Indo-Pacific agendas; launches South Pacific Forum,” *Economics Times*, 21 March 2019.
- ²⁴ As cited in “Indonesia Presents Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept at ASEAN Ministerial Meeting,” *Jakarta Globe*, 2 August 2018.

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