

PERSPECTIVE

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What to Expect from Indonesia's ASEAN Chairmanship 2023

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Indonesia's Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi speaks during a press conference after the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Foreign Ministers' Retreat in Jakarta on 4 February 2023. Picture: BAY ISMOYO/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- There are high expectations that Indonesia's ASEAN chairmanship this year will bolster the regional grouping's relevance, given Indonesia's success in convening the G20 Summit last year, and its excellent track record in providing transformational leadership in the region.
- Indonesia's chairmanship will face multiple challenges, including the Myanmar crisis. How the ASEAN Chair responds to the global threats of the Ukraine War and the intensifying US-China rivalry will also matter.
- The proliferation of military and economic alliances in the Indo-Pacific such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI), continues to affect regional stability and challenge ASEAN centrality.
- Indonesia can be expected to push forward the negotiation for the South China Sea Code of Conduct (COC) and also advance the accession of Timor-Leste to the regional grouping.
- Indonesia has high confidence in ASEAN's role; thus, beyond managing geopolitics and great power rivalry, it needs to direct its resources towards boosting economic recovery and strengthening the institutional capacity of the ASEAN Secretariat.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's adept leadership of the Group of 20 (G20) in 2022 has elevated its reputation as a rising middle power that can moderate great power competition. Now as it assumes the chairmanship of ASEAN for 2023, there are high expectations that Jakarta will lead the regional grouping in maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific and re-energising the region in the post-pandemic period.

Often considered the *de-facto* leader of ASEAN due to its demographic and economic size, Jakarta's previous ASEAN leadership stint has been transformational. Indonesia was proactive in conducting "shuttle diplomacy" to settle the territorial conflict between Cambodia and Thailand over the Preah Vihear Temple during its chairmanship in 2011. The country also played an essential role in the conception of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's largest free trade agreement (FTA) to date, and initiated the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, a guide for the region to shape the strategic architecture in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions.

The poly-crisis of inflationary pressures stemming from COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, intensifying military tensions in the Indo-Pacific, and escalating US-China competition are impinging on the region. These challenges will test Indonesia's leadership and diplomatic capabilities in the months to come.

How Indonesia will lead ASEAN remains to be seen. The latest *State of Southeast Asia Survey 2023* conducted by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute might be an appropriate weathervane that can provide insights into Indonesia's priorities in dealing with regional and global crises.¹ Although the survey results do not present a definitive view of issues in the region or represent Indonesia's foreign policy directions, it is a benchmark for parsing and comparing the concerns and priorities of different ASEAN member states. The survey drew the views of 1,308 Southeast Asians from all ten ASEAN member states to understand their perceptions on regional affairs, and ASEAN engagement with the major powers. 121 respondents from Indonesia (9.3% of the total respondents) participated in the survey, representing academia, businesses, civil society, governments, and international organisations.

RESPONDING TO INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CRISES

The year 2022 was a challenging one for ASEAN. Amid increasing great power competition and evolving threats to regional security, Cambodia, as the ASEAN chair, had to walk the tightrope to manage at least three internal and external security threats affecting the region: the Myanmar crisis, the war in Ukraine, and the threat of conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Under Indonesia's chairmanship, Myanmar will become a defining crisis for the region due to the individual ASEAN countries' divergent stances and the lack of progress in implementing the Five Point Consensus (5PC), a guiding document agreed upon by ASEAN leaders to solve the

crisis in Myanmar. Meanwhile, the global community will be closely watching how ASEAN continues to respond to the Ukraine war and to the intensifying US-China rivalry.

Pressure is now mounting for Indonesia to lead the regional grouping to restore peace in Myanmar. Indonesia arguably inherits a much more complex situation in Myanmar than the previous two chairs. The coup has aggravated Myanmar's ethnic conflicts, worsened the humanitarian crisis, and potentially opened up an arena for proxy war for major powers. Amid this rapidly changing conflict landscape, the effectiveness of the ASEAN 5PC is in question – despite its success in galvanising international support. Indonesian elites in the survey tend to be more pessimistic about the ASEAN 5PC compared to other regional respondents. 28.1% of Indonesians hold the view that the ASEAN 5PC will not work, given the intransigence of the junta, and 24% argue that the ASEAN 5PC is fundamentally flawed in addressing complex issues. Conversely, only 18.2% agree that 5PC is the most suitable option under the current circumstances in Myanmar.

Beyond the ASEAN 5PC, Indonesia elites tend to hold a strong view that dialogue with all key stakeholders, including the National Unity Government (NUG), to build trust is vital (50.4%) – significantly higher than most elites from other ASEAN countries, especially the previous ASEAN chair, Cambodia (17.2%). Two months into its chairmanship, Indonesia has shown an appetite for corraling efforts from multiple avenues. President Joko Widodo has considered sending a top general to meet the military junta to show them how Indonesia successfully transitioned to democracy.² Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi stated that Indonesia will establish an office of the ASEAN special envoy on Myanmar and she underlined the importance of ASEAN efforts to be synergised with concerned neighbouring countries, and the United Nations.³ However, the upcoming elections planned by the junta administration may put ASEAN in a dilemma of either recognising it or suspending the country for failing to meet the 5PC commitments.

On responding to the war in Ukraine, ASEAN under Cambodia's chairmanship last year was able to facilitate Ukraine's accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), despite ASEAN countries' divergent stances on the Russian invasion.⁴ Though symbolic, the signing was a win for Cambodian diplomacy.

Will Indonesia continue these efforts? It might not be a priority under its ASEAN chairmanship, but playing an active role on Ukraine is an excellent diplomatic exercise for President Joko Widodo's administration. In its capacity as the president of the Group of 20 (G20), Indonesia attempted to broker peace between Ukraine and Russia. Jokowi became the first ASEAN leader to meet both Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Russian President Vladimir Putin. The success of issuing a joint leader's statement condemning Russia's aggression at the G20 summit was also seen as a major diplomatic achievement by Indonesia. Jokowi and his administration seemed to enjoy approval from its citizens; more than half of Indonesian elites in the survey strongly approved or approved of their government's diplomatic attempts. In addition, most Indonesians are extremely concerned with Russia's invasion of Ukraine (61.2%), especially with the increase in energy and food prices and economic hardship stemming from the war.

The escalating US-China tensions will undoubtedly be felt in the region and will put ASEAN in a difficult situation. Most of the ASEAN elites in the survey agree that the conflict between the US and China in the Taiwan Strait will destabilise the region (43.3 %). ASEAN's approach towards the Taiwan Strait has been to avoid open conflict. In the wake of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan last year, ASEAN Foreign Ministers quickly issued a statement on the Cross Strait Development, calling for maximum restraint and reiterating support for the One-China Policy.⁵ This *modus operandi* should endure as ASEAN citizens (45.6 %) in the survey believe that their country should oppose the use of force and instead utilise diplomatic measures to mediate the conflict. Of note, Indonesian respondents (66.1 %) express the strongest support for this approach.

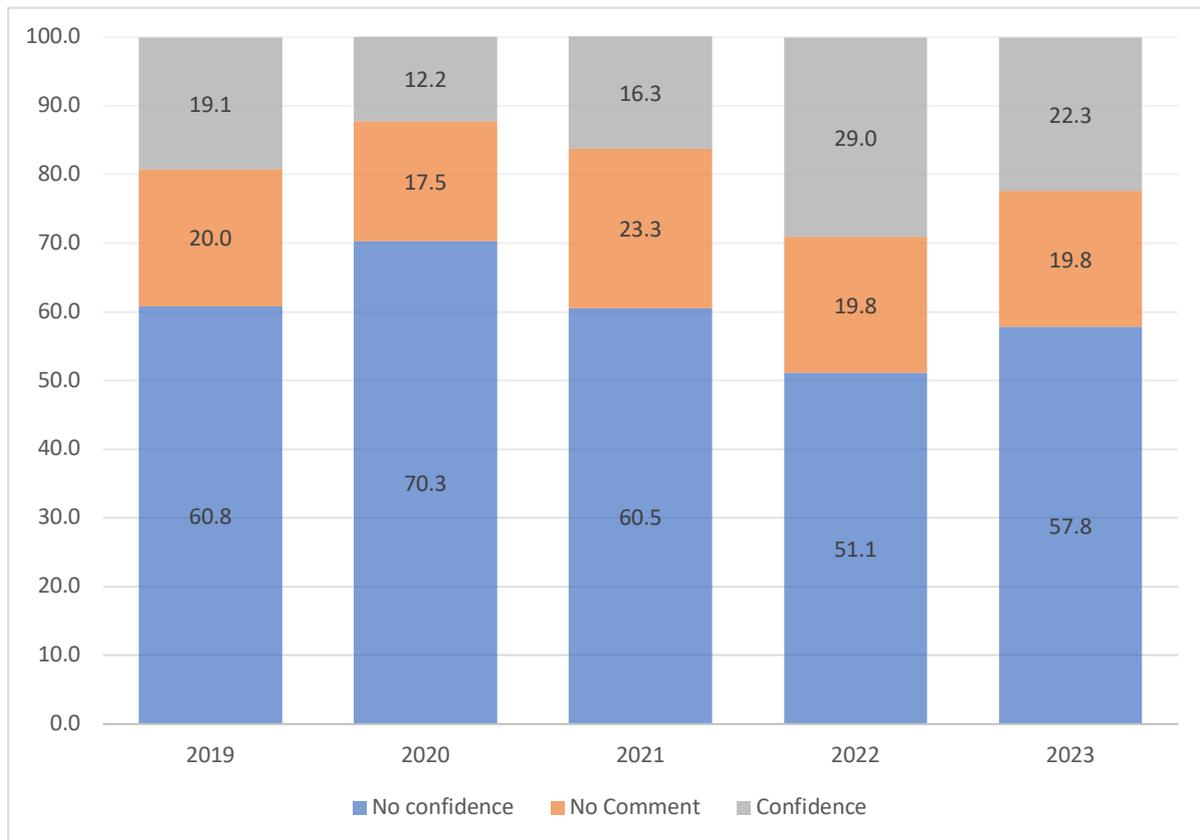
There is no sign that the rivalry between the US and China will recede. Washington's crackdown on Chinese companies' technology access and the recent spy balloon incident have defined a new cold war between the two major powers. ASEAN is at risk of splintering between the two. When posed the hypothetical question of ASEAN having to align itself with one of the two superpowers, most of the Southeast Asian respondents chose the US (61.1%) over China (38.9 %). However, at the country level, China continues to enjoy popular support from the three ASEAN Muslim countries: Brunei (55%), Malaysia (54.8%) and Indonesia (53.7%). Interestingly, Indonesian respondents are the most evenly split in this view compared to their ASEAN cohort (53.7% choosing China and 46.7% choosing the US), indicating that Indonesian elites are quite polarised in their view of the US and China divide.

Indonesian elites' perceptions of China have been changing gradually. The survey traced the trust and distrust ranking of major powers in the region over the past five years. While it is true that the majority of Indonesian elites are not confident about Beijing's leadership, the level of trust in Beijing to do the right thing in the region has improved, probably due to the tangible economic impacts such as trade and investment that Beijing brings into the region. From 2019 to 2021, less than 20% of Indonesian elites participating in the annual survey had confidence in Beijing's leadership. In the past two years (2022-2023), this number has surpassed 20% (Chart 1).

A separate survey conducted by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute of ordinary Indonesian citizens, *the Indonesia National Survey Project 2022: Engaging with Developments in the Political, Economic, and Social Spheres*, however, found that Indonesians generally hold negative perceptions of the China and Indonesia bilateral relationship, which is a reversal of the trend seen in the same survey conducted in 2017.⁶ At the same time, negative opinions towards China's Belt and Road Initiative are also more strongly evident.

The two mixed opinions over China among Indonesians from two different surveys indicate that there are conflicting perceptions between the significant portion of Indonesian elites who think of China favourably, and the public who express anxiety over China's influence in the country.

Chart 1 How confident are you that China will “do the right thing” to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance? (Indonesian respondents)



Source: *the State of Southeast Asia 2019-2023 Report, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute*

REALIGNING ASEAN CENTRALITY

ASEAN centrality continues to be challenged by the proliferation of security alliances in the Indo-Pacific led by the US and China. As a non-aligned organisation, ASEAN is generally wary that these developments would further strain regional stability and side-line the region in shaping the Indo-Pacific regional architecture. The *State of Southeast Asia* survey finds that Southeast Asia has diverging responses and receptiveness to these alliances.

ASEAN’s response to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), an informal grouping comprising Australia, Japan, India and the United States, is generally positive. 50.4% of regional respondents agree or strongly agree that the strengthening of this mini-lateral group will be constructive for the region. Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam support this view. The QUAD’s positive engagement, such as vaccine assistance, and its attempt to forge tangible cooperation on climate change, cyberspace, maritime security, and humanitarian aid over the past years might have significantly shaped this welcoming attitude.

While the majority of Indonesians in the survey are receptive of the QUAD (51.3% agree or strongly agree that QUAD will be constructive for the region), the proportion of those Indonesians wary of the QUAD is among the highest in ASEAN (14.5%). Aside from tangible cooperation and assistance, Jakarta's receptiveness can be seen from China's growing assertiveness. Although Jakarta remains suspicious of US military motives in the region, it needs the US and its allies' support in balancing China's aggression in the South China Sea.⁷ Meanwhile, the primary concern with the QUAD is the side-lining of ASEAN, which has been the linchpin in Indonesia's foreign policy.⁸

President Xi Jinping's introduction of the Global Security Initiative (GSI) to promote common and sustainable security marks a clear shift from China's economic engagement – which is primarily defined by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – to one of military endeavour.⁹ Critics argue that the GSI is full of ambitious rhetoric but still light on concrete initiatives. Rather than purely projecting China's ambitious global outreach and ensuring international order, the GSI is mainly seen as an attempt to counter the growing US-coalition.¹⁰ Thus, 44.5% of regional respondents express little or no confidence that it will benefit the region, Meanwhile, 27.4% feel confident or very confident, while 28% of respondents have no comment. This lack of confidence is most pronounced in Myanmar, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand.

Indonesia's response to the GSI has been carefully calculated so far, given China's growing economic influence in the country and territorial disputes around the Natuna Islands. ASEAN as a regional grouping might likely adopt the same restrained attitude. In the joint press statement following the bilateral meeting between Jokowi and Xi Jinping in July 2022, Indonesia stated that it “takes note of the Global Security Initiative and stands ready to work with the Chinese side.” The language used in the statement “takes note” is somewhat cautious and compromised rather than entirely buying into the initiative.¹¹

ADVANCING THE SOUTH CHINA SEA CODE OF CONDUCT (COC) AND TIMOR-LESTE'S ACCESSION

Indonesia is expected to leverage the momentum of its chairmanship to continue advancing the South China Sea COC which remains unresolved after years of painful negotiation. Critics argue that the slow progress of the negotiations is due to member states prioritising bilateral ties with China over reaching regional consensus.¹²

In November 2002, China and the 10 ASEAN member nations approved the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) as the first region-wide step to improve trust between disputed parties before adopting a much stronger and legally binding COC.¹³ All members of ASEAN were committed to peacefully resolving the conflicts, even though only Brunei, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines are direct claimant states in the disputed waters.

Indonesia is not a claimant state in the South China Sea disputes, but recently it faced Chinese vessel incursions and pushback from China over its exploration of oil and gas reserves in the Natuna Sea.^{14 15} Thus, aside from a bilateral negotiation, Indonesia's space to negotiate the disputes is somewhat limited to it being part of ASEAN.¹⁶ At the recent ASEAN Foreign Minister's Retreat, Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi stated that Indonesia was ready to host negotiations of the South China Sea COC.¹⁷ Additionally, exploring pragmatic approaches such as facilitating maritime dialogues through the ASEAN Maritime Forum and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum are also important to build trust among the disputing parties.

ASEAN communities are looking forward to the accession of Timor-Leste to the regional grouping. Nearly two-thirds of Southeast Asians in the survey (61.5%) support the accession of Timor-Leste to ASEAN. Support from Indonesia is strong, with 67.8% of Indonesian respondents supporting their neighbour. Meanwhile, 24.8% of them are unsure about admitting Timor-Leste, most likely due to concerns about its readiness and capacity to fulfil its duties as a member.

Will Timor-Leste be fully admitted to the regional grouping under Indonesia's chairmanship? Proponents of such a thought might sound sentimental: the inclusion of the young republic into ASEAN signifies Indonesia's *mea culpa* and fulfilment of its debts to its former colony.¹⁸

BOOSTING ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND ASEAN'S INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

Rising geopolitical tensions are expected to overshadow Indonesia's ASEAN chairmanship. However, the theme of the chairmanship, "ASEAN Matters: Epicentrum of Growth" is the country's honest gesture of bringing in tangible impacts, especially on the economic front.

Indonesia's enthusiasm for ASEAN is the highest among its ASEAN cohort. 43 % of Indonesians in the survey believe that ASEAN is a leader in championing the global free trade agenda, significantly higher than other dialogue partners such as China (18.2%), Japan (10.7%), and the European Union (10.7%). The majority (43.8%) of Indonesians in the survey also think that ASEAN is the leader in maintaining a rules-based order and upholding international law, even though civil society in the country often criticises ASEAN for its failure in protecting human rights. Thus, the claim that ASEAN is the centrepiece of the nation's foreign policy still holds true today.

During its tenure as the G20 chair, Indonesia was able to mobilise impactful programmes. The country successfully raised US\$ 1.4 billion for the Pandemic Fund, urging developed countries to assist low and middle-income countries that may struggle to finance their public health in the future.¹⁹ This achievement demonstrates Indonesia's solid track record in global health diplomacy.²⁰ Indonesia also signed an initial US\$20 billion deal with the G7 Countries to launch the Just Energy Transition Partnership to help Indonesia pivot away from fossil fuels, signalling a growing priority to address climate change.²¹ At the recent ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) meeting, Indonesia signalled an enhancement in collaboration to ensure food

security, particularly to maintain the regional supply chain and strengthening logistic systems in the region as well as developing regional electric vehicle production.^{22 23}

Equally important, many expect Indonesia to initiate reforms to enhance the capacity of the ASEAN Secretariat. It is always in Indonesia's interest, and no other ASEAN chair would probably make the same effort to ensure that the Secretariat in Jakarta is empowered. Several recommendations could include strengthening the ASEAN decision-making process for crisis response, coordinating ASEAN-led mechanisms, aligning ASEAN and sub-regional groupings' objectives, and advancing the roles of the Committee of Permanent Representative (CPR) as well as the EAS Ambassadors Meeting in Jakarta (EAMJ). Indonesia must also consider ways to make the ASEAN Secretariat impactful for its citizens by effectively managing and disbursing dialogue partners' assistance to the most urgent social-development needs such as public health, education, youth empowerment, and digitalisation.

CONCLUSION

Indonesia's chairmanship of ASEAN is the continuation of an excellent momentum for President Joko Widodo and his administration to leave a legacy before the country heads into its general elections in 2024. The chairmanship will likely be defined by the managing of the Myanmar crisis and how it will continue responding to the global threats of Ukraine War and US-China intensifying rivalry. Indonesia's leadership capabilities will also be tested by its ability to realign ASEAN centrality in response to the growing security alliances in the Indo-Pacific, negotiating the South China Sea COC, and advancing Timor-Leste's accession to the regional grouping. Not least, the chairmanship will be assessed by how the country makes a meaningful contribution to the region's economic recovery and to ASEAN's institutional capacity.

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