

ASIA TIMES

OPINION

Indonesia blindly drifting into a US vs China storm

Jakarta's non-alignment has long buffered SE Asia but recent US engagements risk turning it from stabilizer to battleground

By ADI ABIDIN
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Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto and US President Donald Trump are increasingly aligned. Image: X Screenshot

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Earlier this month, Indonesia and Japan signed a defense cooperation [agreement](#) that could eventually allow Jakarta to acquire lethal weaponry from Tokyo. The move was the latest in a series of strategic engagements signaling that Indonesia is beginning to lean toward one side amid intensifying geopolitical rivalry in Indo-Pacific.

When I [argued](#) last July that the US–Indonesia trade compromise would test President Prabowo Subianto’s non-aligned strategic discipline, the assumption was that Jakarta would have time to calibrate. It has not, and does not.

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This has been evident in new political and defense agreements with the US and its regional partners, including discussions that have raised China's voice over expanded US military overflight access, and in simultaneous energy dealings with Russia under sanctions pressure.

All of this has unfolded against the backdrop of the Iran war and its associated oil shock, caused by the blockades of the Strait of Hormuz.

From Jakarta's perspective, this may look like strategic diversification. From Beijing's perspective, it is likely viewed as strategic drift toward the US. The danger is not Jakarta's formal alignment, but that Indonesia is edging into the eye of the storm of US–China rivalry at precisely the moment when maritime order and the global economy are under severe strain.

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Indonesia's geography is increasingly consequential. [The archipelago flanks the Strait of Malacca](#) – the primary artery for China's energy imports and westward trade – and governs a lattice of sea lanes connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The Hormuz disruption has demonstrated how quickly chokepoints can be weaponized and how tenuous legal guarantees become during armed conflict. That, in turn, has focused new attention on the Malacca Strait's strategic corridor and its potential role in any US-China conflict in the Indo-Pacific, including over Taiwan.

Jakarta can rightly point out that it has engaged Beijing at the highest level. [Prabowo met Chinese President Xi Jinping in September 2025 and attended China's military parade](#) — an unmistakable signal of diplomatic goodwill.

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Economically, the relationship is deep and growing. China is Indonesia's largest trading partner and is deeply integrated into Indonesia's minerals, manufacturing and infrastructure sectors. [Indonesia officially joined BRICS+](#) in January 2025, a bloc in which China is the primary force building systems and channels outside US-led institutions.

Yet these engagements do not resolve Beijing's core concern: the prospect that Indonesian airspace and maritime routes could be used by US forces in a kinetic conflict. This concern has crystallized around recent reports of a US request for broad military overflight access.

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[Indonesia's own Foreign Ministry has cautioned](#) that such access could enable US surveillance, create the perception of an alliance and possibly make Indonesia a target in a regional conflict pitting the US against China.

Beijing's diplomatic response, delivered through its Foreign Ministry, was characteristically measured but pointed, saying [defense cooperation should not "target any third party" or harm regional stability](#). The "third party" did not need to be named.

Herein lies the crux of the matter. In contemporary conflict, overflight rights, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) integration and shared logistical corridors shape military outcomes more than formal treaties or partnerships.

Indonesia may not choose geopolitical sides — but its airspace could be used by the US before it does. That is the threshold Beijing's statement suggests it is wary of Indonesia's crossing.

China's reaction to the Indonesia-Japan agreement was likewise telling. When Tokyo's leadership signaled that a Taiwan contingency could constitute a direct security threat to Japan, Beijing [responded](#) sharply, warning of consequences while saying a red line had been crossed.

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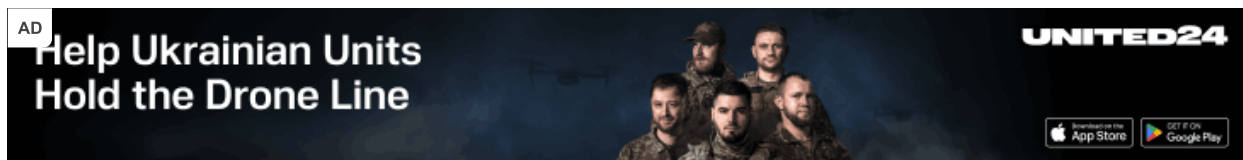
Tokyo's announcement marked a decisive shift from strategic ambiguity to an explicit commitment to contingency planning. Once a state is seen as part of a Taiwan scenario, it is no longer neutral – it is pre-positioned in China's strategic calculus.

Indonesia has made no such declaration on Taiwan. But its deepening defense engagement with Japan creates what analysts call a second-order alignment risk. Beijing's concern is not what Jakarta says; it is with whom Indonesia is becoming functionally aligned.

The events of February deepened this perception. Indonesia's participation in a US-led "peace" initiative **framed** around Palestine was quickly overtaken by the subsequent US–Israel strikes on Iran, leading to the disruption in Hormuz, a surge in energy prices and an overt US shift from diplomacy to coercion.

A diplomatic initiative turned, without warning, into an instrument of force, leaving Indonesia exposed – appearing to have taken sides in the process.

Individually, none of Indonesia's recent moves – defense cooperation with the US, Australia and Japan, a trade agreement including critical minerals cooperation with Washington and industrial discussions with Europe – amounts to overt alignment. But collectively, they form a clear pattern.



This is not policy incoherence. It is a strategy of drift through steady accumulation. Each step is defensible, but together they reduce ambiguity and create a directional signal.

At the same time, geopolitical competition is **intensifying** with European sanctions regimes expanding to include third-country nodes, turning energy and other transactions into geopolitical positioning.

The global economy, already strained by the Hormuz shock, is becoming more fragmented, pressuring non-aligned states like Indonesia to take sides. Moreover, despite Xi Jinping and Donald Trump's just-concluded summit, the US–China rivalry is not dissipating. As maritime chokepoints become central to strategic competition, Southeast Asia is no longer a buffer — it is a theater.

That, in turn, is making policies of neutrality harder and harder to sustain. If Indonesia drifts too quickly or too far toward Washington without calibrating Beijing's concerns, it risks shifting from stabilizer to battleground.

Such a shift, or even the perception of one, would be costly for the region. Indonesia has long anchored Southeast Asia as a zone of relative stability, acting as a convenor within ASEAN and a bridge among competing powers. That diplomatic role depends on its credibility as a non-aligned nation.

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A country perceived as positioned, on the other hand, can see its influence quickly erode as its neutrality comes into question. That may not yet be the case for Indonesia, but [China's concerns have been clearly aired](#).

In a fractured geopolitical order, sovereignty is determined not just by what a state controls, but also by its ability to avoid being drawn into systems it does not command. For Indonesia, the task is no longer to expand partnerships indiscriminately, but to restore balance — deliberately and visibly — before drift hardens into alignment.

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 **Godzilla Mothra**
May 16, 2026 at 9:25 PM

It is simple, if Indonesia allow its airspace to be used by the Americans, China will be forced to violate the Indonesian airspace too, to protect China security. In a way, Indonesian airspace will be open sky.

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