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EXPERTS TAKE

Continuity and Change in Indonesia's Past, Present, and Future Foreign Policy Agenda

An Interview with
DR. TUFAN KUTAY BORAN

Ahead of the upcoming Indonesian presidential elections on February 14, 2024, ISDP's Asia Program intern Nolwenn Gueguen sat down with Dr. Tufan Kutay Boran, Lecturer at the Department of Social Sciences at the University of Ankara, to understand Indonesia's current foreign policy agenda and what is at stake when its citizens prepare to go to the polls.

Dr. Tufan Kutay Boran is a lecturer in Social Sciences at the University of Ankara. He holds his Ph.D. from Universitas Gadjah Mada /Department of Government and Politics. Dr. Boran generally works on Indonesian foreign policy and the impact of local actors on the foreign policy-making process. Dr. Boran has articles and book chapters on Indonesian foreign policy in English and Turkish.

Nolwenn Gueguen: In 1948, Indonesia's Vice-President Muhammad Hatta introduced the concept of a free and active foreign policy (politik bebas dan aktif), which has been a cornerstone of Indonesia's non-alignment foreign policy ever since. More than half a century later, President



Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2009-2014), also known as SBY, offered his version during a speech in 2010 about his foreign policy of non-alignment and pragmatism¹ with the encapsulating quote: "A thousand friends, zero enemies" later rephrased as "A million friends and zero enemies." However, a countering perspective to such a notion might also be that "a friend to all is a friend to none." Looking towards the election in February, have any of the

three presidential candidates expressed their views on this matter?

Dr. Kutay Boran: This has been the primary doctrine of Indonesia since the beginning of the Republic. The politik bebas dan aktif, or “Bebas Active”, has been interpreted differently during each president’s term since the establishment of the active Republic. All presidents of Indonesia have clearly stated that the Bebas Active policy would be protected during their presidential periods. Yet we must understand what Bebas Active means for each current candidate or former presidents. Although framing foreign policy has been unstable due to presidential changes, Bebas has also brought some continuity. In the literature on Indonesian foreign policy, there is a problem of change and continuity. This has been because of diverse agents executing foreign policy, mainly the president. Therefore, Bebas Active is closely linked to who is president. This situation directs us to conduct an actor-specific study to understand what Bebas Active means for specific agents. So, on this note, the President of Indonesia is crucial. We can see that the president brings their own cultural background to the policy frame. From this lens, we see that Sukarno was close to communist countries because of his thoughts on anti-imperialism. However, in the Suharto period, we see the opposite of that. He instead pursued more inward-looking policies and focused on the country’s needs. Therefore, he went on to turn a new leaf with

the Western bloc. This is to say that the definition of Bebas Active has been subject to change by the agents. A similar trend could be observed after the democratization of Indonesia. For instance, SBY’s Bebas Active is very different from Joko Widodo’s (Jokowi) Bebas Active in terms of constructing relations by way of diplomacy. SBY was a person who was interested in multilateral diplomacy, while Jokowi was keener on bilateralism. This dynamic has directly affected the direction of Bebas Active in Indonesian foreign policy.

Gueguen: In today’s tense security environment, with increasing competition between the U.S. and China,² is Bebas Active still feasible? In particular, given the current geopolitical challenges between China and the U.S., notably the contested waters of the South China Sea? What if one of the leaders from the West or the East forces Indonesia to pick a side in a diplomatic great power competition for influence?³

Boran: Indonesia is generally not forced to choose sides by any bloc. However, we do occasionally see Indonesia being forced into international politics by the great powers. We saw this between Megawati Sukarnoputri and George W. Bush as America was dealing with the aftermath of the 9/11 attack. Here, the aim was to benefit from Indonesia’s identity as a democratic Islamic country. Similarly, during the Arab Spring, we saw that the West sought a democratic Islamic role model for the Arab countries

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in the Middle East through Indonesia. Such instances are significant opportunities for Indonesia to participate on the international arena. As such, they amount to a win-win situation.

Yet, even though there may be a demand in the West, foreign policy decisions are ultimately connected with domestic politics as well. After the democratization period, we saw that the legitimacy of the leaders became closely connected with public opinion. Public opinion in Indonesia, especially after the consolidation in 2004, became a significant factor. This brings forth a two-level game; the leader can get stuck between international and domestic politics. However, we are always able to discern that the leader is keen to choose the domestic side in the event that issues could endanger their political legitimacy. In this context, this new order is a lesson that teaches the presidents who came after democratization how effective public opinion is. Indonesia's leader will listen to what the people say about the issue. They can then, in turn, make use of public opinion to remake their international politics.

Gueguen: Do you think this kind of hedging strategy⁴ that Indonesia is doing can be perceived as disingenuous to leaders of the two sides?

Boran: I do not think so. First, we need to consider that there is some distance between Indonesia and international problems. What is happening in Indonesia's vicinity is more important for major powers. For example, Indonesia sometimes bears witness to provocative maneuvers by China in the Natuna Sea. Any assertive movement by China can be perceived as threatening by the United States. Such a situation may naturally serve to bring Indonesia closer to the United States. In turn, Indonesia can take a step by conveying that even though it respects its economic and diplomatic relations with China, it also possesses maritime sovereignty. China needs to respect that as well. This, then, is the balance.

For the presidential candidates, we see different discourses at play in their speeches, especially regarding which side Indonesia will lean towards after the elections. For example, Prabowo Subianto said he respects both China and the United States. Hence, it is ultimately not about choosing one side. This is about Indonesia trying to find a balance between national security and peaceful relations in the area. I think such a stance will continue for the three candidates after the elections. After the democratization period, we see this push and pull dynamic between the two blocs, yet Indonesia tries to balance its policy framework between those two blocs. Indonesia depends on China mainly because of many joint projects and tries to maintain its One China Policy. On the other hand, because of China's expansionist policies, we also see Indonesia conducting joint military operations with the Western block in the South China Sea. For me, this is indicative of Bebas Active.

Gueguen: What are the 2024 presidential election candidates' (Ganjar Pranowo, Prabowo Subianto, Anies Baswedan) prospective foreign policy plans as you see them? What are the implications of the candidates' foreign policy stances?

Boran: It is still too early to grasp the implications. First, we don't know who is going to become the president and what kind of foreign policy agenda will ultimately be put forward. Such plans are normally unveiled with a four or five-item foreign policy agenda after being elected president. From what I have gleaned, the three candidates have not put forward anything amounting to a change of course in Indonesia's foreign policy, but some have tried to show their change in terms of foreign policy strategy. For example, Ganjar has said that he would increase the Ministry of Foreign Affairs budget to bolster the role of Indonesian diplomats in order for them to be able to play more influential international roles. We have seen this before with the process

of “benah diri” (or process of self-improvement) formerly implemented by Foreign Affairs Minister Hassan Wirajuda (2001-2009). In that context, Wirajuda wanted to reform foreign affairs and increase the quality and competence of foreign affairs personnel. So, I think this can be perceived as a bureaucratic reform. Yet, I haven’t seen any critical discourse regarding overall foreign policy agenda. Therefore, we might in that case see more of an inward-looking foreign policy during a potential Ganjar presidency.

Prabowo was the Minister of Defense. He has a military background and was included in policy talks in terms of involvement with other nations during his work at the Ministry of Defense. Since he has already had this experience with other countries, seeing how that will translate to his foreign policy plans could be interesting. In this context, we may see Prabowo’s influence on Indonesia’s foreign policy with regard to maritime sovereignty. Then we have Anies, who tried to promote smart power by combining hard and soft power. As we know, hard power could increase defense systems, maritime sovereignty, and economic development. On the other hand, with soft power, you can also promote Indonesian culture. However, it is not very clear what kind of culture will actually be promoted. If we talk about culture, the coalition partner of Anies, Cak Imin, and his party, the National Awakening Party’s (PKB) connection with Nahdlatul

Ulama (NU) can be promoted much more. After the democratization process, the Indonesian governments saw NU as an asset and tried to promote the role of NU in solving some of the Islamic world’s problems by promoting Indonesia’s “moderate Islamic identity”. This, in effect, also makes NU a transnational actor. I think, when we talk about culture in Indonesia, “Islam Pribumi” or ‘local Islam’ is the culture of Indonesia itself. So, the role of non-governmental actors in foreign policy could be promoted further if Anies is elected. On the other hand, I still see a level of continuity since the beginning of Indonesian foreign policy. Those three candidates all share an advantage as far as I am concerned: the economic diplomacy implemented during the Jokowi era. That policy strengthened Indonesia’s bilateral relations with other nations in economic terms. So, the candidates will all benefit from economic diplomacy. But concerns have also been raised that economic diplomacy has harmed Indonesia’s diplomacy because it was mainly based on economic bilateral relations, not multilateral ones. The argument has been that Indonesia should return to strengthening multilateral ties because Indonesia’s foreign policy was not promoted enough during the Jokowi era. However, in Indonesia, foreign policy is strongly connected with domestic policies, and Jokowi was aware of that. You cannot be proactive in Indonesian foreign policy without having a solid economy. He experienced that himself

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during the SBY period when SBY promoted bridge-building and multilateral diplomacy. Still, the public strongly criticized him because this free policy agenda did not benefit them. So, Jokowi created this understanding of economic diplomacy. Those three candidates may continue economic diplomacy and add more multilateral aspects to promote Indonesia's diplomacy with other countries in order to also be more proactive.

Gueguen: You mentioned in one of your articles⁵ that the view of ASEAN as Indonesia's golden cage remains unchanged. Can you explain the reasoning behind this "Golden Cage" phrasing? What weightage does ASEAN have in Indonesia's foreign policy and what is that organization's significance when it comes to Indonesia's regional influence?

Boran: The term comes in large part from Indonesia's influence on foreign policy. As you know, Indonesia is a founding member of ASEAN, and the aim of ASEAN is mainly to maintain regional stability. Indonesia needs that stability to operate its domestic politics more efficiently. A Javanese proverb reads: "sepi ing pamrih, rame ing gawe" (actively doing good things for the benefit of others). This is how Indonesia tries to promote collectivism in the region. If your neighbors are unstable and there is no stability around you, you will also be affected. ASEAN offers a sense of stability that is vital for regional order and Indonesia's domestic politics. However, there are also problems in ASEAN, and Indonesia has always tried to solve them by mediating between its members. This has had the effect of blocking Indonesia's foreign policy from being open to other international issues. Therefore, if ASEAN is the cornerstone of Indonesia's foreign policies, how can it promote its diplomacy and mediation in other parts of the world? How can it open itself up to other diplomatic platforms, not solely regional but also international actors? This outlines the issue of

potentially being stuck in ASEAN. There have been plans for post-ASEAN policies to open Indonesia up to collaboration with other diplomatic platforms. But because the Jokowi period was more focused on bilateral relations, we see the likeness of a post-ASEAN after the elections. The three candidates may try to open Indonesia's diplomacy up to other countries and open Indonesia's religious diplomacy up through a post-ASEAN approach. But the question remains: Will it be like that, or will they instead primarily focus on ASEAN instead?

Gueguen: Continuity in Indonesia's foreign policy has seemingly been prosperous for both domestic economic development and regional influence. In one of your papers,⁶ you mentioned that Ganjar and Prabowo represented a certain continuity in Indonesia's foreign policy, while Anies could potentially bring a different agenda. Do you think Indonesia's foreign policy needs this change? What could a change in the continuity of Indonesia's foreign policy bring to the country from your perspective?

Boran: I have examined the different candidates' discourses on various platforms, and Prabowo has brought back a version of SBY's "one thousand friends, zero enemies" doctrine by saying "One thousand friends too little, one enemy too many," so there we see this continuity I mentioned. Even though some concepts have changed, the candidates have yet to bring new ideas for Indonesia's foreign policy in their discourses. Indonesia's foreign policy needs to change to be more proactive in international politics, but such a change hasn't been reflected in the three candidates' presentations so far. I do not see any changes in terms of new doctrines from the three candidates. During Jokowi's period, there were some new free policy agendas. During his first term, there was maritime sovereignty; in the second term, the agenda was more so economic diplomacy. So, presidents are used to bringing new

doctrines into Indonesia's principles. From this point, we can see what has changed and what has continued. After someone gets elected, we will be able to see new doctrines. In Indonesian foreign policy, there has not been a time when a president or prime minister has not brought a new doctrine after getting elected. Therefore, someone studying the change and continuity in Indonesian foreign policy must be very familiar with the background of the actors. On the other hand, I think that international actors' expectations or demands from Indonesia

shape Indonesia's foreign policy. But decision-makers in Indonesia generally take public opinion into account. Therefore, if decision-makers are stuck between international politics and domestic politics during the decision-making process, they generally act in the direction of domestic politics. We are yet to see it in the discourse, but I am sure that after the elections, new doctrines will be added to the literature on Indonesian foreign policy. We must be patient in deciding whether what follows the election will ultimately benefit Indonesia's foreign policy.

Endnotes

- 1 Ted Piccone and Bimo Yusman, "Indonesian Foreign Policy: 'A Million Friends and Zero Enemies'," *The Diplomat*, February 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/02/indonesian-foreign-policy-a-million-friends-and-zero-enemies/>.
- 2 Barbara Lippert and Volker Perthes, "Strategic Rivalry Between the United States and China," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, April 2020, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2020RP04/>.
- 3 Hunter Marston and Thomas Bruce, "Hedging, Over Commitment, and the Escalating Risk of Conflict in Southeast Asia," *The Diplomat*, October 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/hedging-over-commitment-and-the-escalating-risk-of-conflict-in-southeast-asia/>.
- 4 Dewi Fortuna Anwar, "Indonesia's Hedging Plus Policy in the Face of China's Rise and U.S.-China Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific Region," *The Pacific Review*, December 2022, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09512748.2022.2160794>.
- 5 Tufay Kutay Boran, "Indonesian Foreign Policy in the Future: Predictions Based on Discourses," *Modern Diplomacy*, November 2023, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/11/16/indonesian-foreign-policy-in-the-future-predictions-based-on-discourses/>.
- 6 Ibid.