

Modi's Trip to Jakarta Is a Geopolitical Event

By [M. K. Bhadrakumar](#)

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi's daylong visit to Jakarta for the [ASEAN-India Summit](#) on Thursday despite the countdown having begun for the G20 summit he's hosting in New Delhi, stands out as a sign of Indian diplomacy responding to a transformative geopolitical environment in Asia.

Modi's decision signifies the highest importance Delhi attributes to its relations with the ASEAN region, which is in the throes of a creeping new cold war like it never experienced since the Vietnam War ended fifty years ago.

Modi [stated](#) at the ASEAN Summit that India regards the group as a central pillar of its Act East policy. In his words, "India supports ASEAN's outlook on Indo-Pacific. While our partnership enters fourth decade, ASEAN occupies prominent place in India's Indo-Pacific initiative." He lavishly praised ASEAN as the epicentre of growth, playing a crucial role in global development.

The full import of Modi's remarks can be understood only if they are read in the immediate context of the opening remarks earlier on Tuesday by Indonesian **President Joko Widodo**, calling on the ASEAN to devise "a long-term tactical strategy that is **relevant and meets people's expectations**". [Emphasis added.]

Jakowi, as this charismatic statesman is fondly called, warned against ASEAN getting dragged into big-power rivalry, saying "ASEAN has agreed not to be a proxy to any powers. Don't turn our ship into an arena for rivalry that is destructive."

Jokowi added,

"We, as leaders, have ensured this ship keeps moving and sailing and we must become its captain to achieve peace, stability, and prosperity together."

Jakowi's exhortation has a complex backdrop. For a start, it comes in the downstream of an impassioned [plea by China's top diplomat Wang Yi](#) addressed to an audience in Jakarta last Saturday that southeast Asian countries must avoid following in the footsteps of Ukraine and beware of being used as geopolitical pawns by foreign forces that are sowing discord in the region for their own gain.

The geopolitical pantomime is crucially about the mounting US pressure on Indonesia to get the latter to bandwagon with the Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific strategy. Washington is anxious to "lock in" Indonesia, the biggest Muslim nation in the world and an Asian powerhouse, as part of a US-led bloc arrayed against China.

Indonesia felt compelled to pull back its BRICS membership application seeking more time to reflect. Jokowi was originally expected to participate in the BRICS Summit at Johannesburg on August 22-24.

President Joe Biden is skipping the ASEAN Summit in Jakarta and is heading from the G20 event in Delhi to Vietnam on September 10. In a nuanced commentary, Voice of America, the flag carrier of America's public diplomacy, posed a tantalising riddle on Sunday titled [Why Is Biden Going to Vietnam, Not Indonesia](#), differentiating between Vietnam and Indonesia through the prism of US interests:

"Vietnam is a valuable partner for the United States as it develops ties in Southeast Asia... Vietnam is now ready to increase its relations with the US after 10 years of comprehensive partnership. One reason Vietnam might now be ready to increase relations with the US is because of China's activities in the South China Sea... Vietnam wants to protect its rights in the South China Sea by making partnerships that strengthen its position. Earlier this month [September], Biden said Vietnam "want[s] relationships because they want China to know that they're not alone."

"The US has supported Vietnam's maritime, or sea, security in the past... Increased partnership would help Vietnam develop its technology industry. This would include production of semiconductors and development of artificial intelligence. Both these fields are areas of competition for the US and China."

When it comes to Indonesia, though, VOA quotes expert opinion to make the point that "among Southeast Asians, the United States was more popular than China and that popularity increased from the year before. However, Indonesians appeared to be **outliers**. The percentage of Indonesians choosing the US fell 18 percentage points from 2021 to 2023. Those choosing China rose by about the same number of percentage points during the same period... finding balance between the US and China is the "biggest homework" for Indonesia. One way for Indonesia to find balance is to look to the US to provide arms." [Emphasis as in original text.]

Poking reluctant or sceptical partners by simulating contrived attitudes is an old trick in the US diplomatic toolbox. Thus it happened that Washington took advantage as the host country to exploit the recent visit of the Indonesian **Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto** to stake outlandish claims in a [fake joint press statement on the Pentagon website](#).

It claimed amongst other things that Prabowo and Secretary Austin "shared the view" regarding China's "expansive maritime claims" in the South China Sea; "jointly condemned violations of national sovereignty" and "deplore in the strongest terms the aggression by

the Russian Federation against Ukraine and demands its complete and unconditional withdrawal from the territory of Ukraine.”

But Jakarta wasn't amused. Defence Minister Prabowo publicly insisted later [through the national news agency Antara](#) that “there was no joint statement [with Austin], nor was there a press conference.” Prabowo was actually on a working visit to Washington!

Prabowo said,

“The important thing is, I can underline here that we (Indonesia) have very good relations with China. We build mutual respect and understanding. I conveyed that in the US. We are close friends with China, we respect America, and we seek friendship with Russia. Indonesia's position is clear that we are non-aligned. We befriend all countries.”

The minister then announced his plans to visit Moscow and Beijing this year.

“I will visit Moscow, I also have an invitation to visit Beijing in October. Insha Allah (God willing), I was invited. We want to befriend all countries. If possible, we can become a bridge for all.”

This bottom line has now been confirmed at the ASEAN Summit in Jakarta on Tuesday by President Widodo himself. The entire ASEAN alliance “agreed not to become a proxy for any power,” declared Jokowi. He asserted that ASEAN cooperates with any countries for peace and prosperity, but no one is allowed to make the alliance “an arena of destructive rivalry.” And Jakarta insists on its neutrality.

Suffice to say, Modi's Jakarta visit can be seen as a geopolitical event. In all likelihood, it was an intentional move by Delhi. After all, Modi was also one of the first Asian leaders to warmly felicitate the [new prime minister of Thailand Srettha Thavisin](#) on September 5 after he took oath of office in front of King Maha Vajiralongkorn, marking another spectacular defeat of another Western-sponsored colour revolution in Asia, after the turmoil in Hong Kong three years ago.

If China moved with “coercive smart power” to weather the storm, the Thai establishment leaned on “coercive soft power” — possibly with [Beijing's backing behind the scene](#) — to marginalise the protestors who enjoyed Anglo-American support and were rooting for the overthrow of the ancient Thai monarchy in that deeply religious nation and impose republicanism as the state ideology under the leadership of a tycoon trained in Harvard and inserted latterly into Thai politics as a cult figure by the social media — reminiscent of Mikhail Saakashvili during the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia in 2008.

The stabilisation of Thai politics works well for India. India, Thailand and China are more for less [on the same page as stakeholders](#) in the Myanmar situation. Modi's visit to Jakarta (as indeed the invitation to Bangladesh as special invitee to the G20 summit) testify to an independent foreign policy. The Act East policy is adjusting in tune with the Asian regional environment.

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Featured image: Prime Minister Narendra Modi (5th from left) and leaders of Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Jakarta, sept 7, 2023

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