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Indonesia's Bebas Aktif as the Balancing Rod on the Tightrope of Global Rivalry

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that Indonesia's bebas aktif doctrine functions as a regional public good — a finding that reorients analysis of Indonesian non-alignment from Jakarta's domestic imperatives to the structural conditions the doctrine sustains for Southeast Asia as a whole. Situating this argument against structural realist and power transition frameworks, which predict that intensifying great power bipolarity will compel middle states to align, the article explains why Indonesian non-alignment has persisted across eight decades of systemic change and why its removal would generate costs across the ideological spectrum simultaneously. Drawing on hedging theory, omnienmeshment frameworks, and the public goods tradition in international security studies, the article identifies three mechanisms through which Indonesian non-alignment stabilises the region: trusted brokerage that preserves ASEAN's institutional coherence, deliberate strategic ambiguity that prevents both Washington and Beijing from assuming the region has been secured, and an anchoring effect that normalises non-alignment as a viable posture for smaller hedging states. Taken together, these mechanisms satisfy the defining criteria of a regional public good: their stabilising benefits are non-excludable and non-rival across ASEAN member states. Two counterfactual experiments — positing Indonesian alignment with the United States and with China respectively — stress-test this claim, with both scenarios producing the same regional outcome: polarisation, institutional fragmentation, and escalation dynamics from which no actor emerges better positioned than before, regardless of alignment direction. The article concludes that bebas aktif's continuity is not Jakarta's burden alone but a shared regional inheritance requiring active collective stewardship.

KEYWORDS

Bebas Aktif, Non-alignment, U.S.–China rivalry, ASEAN centrality, Southeast Asian security, regional public good.

DISCLAIMER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context and Argument

The U.S.–China rivalry has entered a structurally more demanding phase, placing Southeast Asian governments under sharply intensified alignment pressure. Competing Indo-Pacific economic frameworks, sustained South China Sea tensions, and the February 2026 Middle East conflict — which drew significant American strategic attention away from the region — have sharpened the dilemma facing states whose economic prosperity depends on China and whose security depends on the United States. This essay examines whether Indonesia's constitutionally anchored foreign policy of free and active engagement, *bebas aktif*, offers the region more than a national diplomatic preference — whether it constitutes a structural condition on which the stability of Southeast Asia as a whole depends.

Theoretical Framework and Contribution

Situating its argument against structural realist predictions that intensifying bipolarity will compel middle states to align, the essay applies the Kaul–Sandler public goods framework to Indonesian foreign policy for the first time. It identifies three mechanisms through which Jakarta's non-alignment stabilises the region: authoritative brokerage within ASEAN, whose legitimacy depends entirely on Indonesia's perceived independence from either great power; deliberate strategic ambiguity, which compels Washington and Beijing to compete continuously for Jakarta's favour rather than assuming regional lock-in; and an anchoring effect that normalises hedging as a viable posture for smaller states across the membership. Each mechanism satisfies the defining criteria of a public good — its benefits cannot be withheld from any ASEAN member, and one state's reliance on it does not diminish what is available to the next.

The Two Counterfactual Experiments

The essay employs the counterfactual method, specifying the minimal operationally plausible departure from existing conditions, to isolate the causal contribution of Indonesian non-alignment to regional stability. In the first scenario, a decisive Indonesian tilt toward Washington triggers a Chinese strategic and economic response, BRI repositioning toward remaining hedgers, and ASEAN institutional fracture as member states face incompatible demands. In the second, a tilt toward Beijing triggers a U.S. security-architecture response — deepened partnerships with

the Philippines, Australia, Japan, and India — compounded by a domestic legitimacy crisis in Jakarta over the Natuna exclusive economic zone, a vulnerability with no parallel in the first scenario. Despite these asymmetric mechanisms, both scenarios converge on identical structural destinations: regional polarisation, organisational fragmentation, and escalation dynamics from which no actor, including Indonesia, emerges better positioned than before.

The Brokerage Mechanism

The 2012 Phnom Penh Summit — and a parallel episode in 2016 — established that asymmetric economic dependence among member states can generate effective consensus constraints that Indonesian convening authority cannot overcome. ASEAN's 2021 Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar produced no meaningful progress across three sequential chairmanships; Indonesian President Joko Widodo acknowledged publicly in May 2023 that there had been 'no significant progress' during Indonesia's own term. These cases clarify the mechanism's limits without negating its value. The relevant counterfactual is not whether a perfectly effective brokerage exists, but whether the region would be better positioned without Jakarta occupying the role at all. The convergence finding answers that question.

Shared Regional Responsibility

If Indonesian non-alignment functions as a regional public good, its preservation depends on the deliberate choices of every actor in the system. For ASEAN member states, this means treating the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific as a living operational framework rather than a declaratory document, and resisting the migration of security questions into bilateral channels that bypass regional consensus. For Jakarta, the analysis suggests that non-alignment is most effective when purposeful rather than passive — the Prabowo era invites evolution toward proactive agenda-setting that converts positional authority into constructive regional leadership. For the great powers themselves, the analysis offers a counterintuitive conclusion: Indonesia's value as an interlocutor derives from the very quality that makes it an imperfect ally. A Jakarta that maintains principled independence is strategically available to both Washington and Beijing; bilateral frameworks calibrated to preserve that independence serve long-term interests more reliably than the short-term gains of deeper bilateral enmeshment.

Structural Urgency for Sustained Non-Alignment

The February 2026 closure of the Strait of Hormuz exposed Indonesia's approximately 20-day petroleum reserve buffer and the acute energy dependencies that constrain the strategic optionality of regional governments. The crisis simultaneously revealed differential insulation across regional economies: states with overland pipeline supply and strategic reserve capacity weathered the disruption more readily than those dependent on maritime transit through the Hormuz corridor, sharpening the alignment pressure on precisely the governments whose constrained strategic optionality this essay documents. Regional energy security coordination — reserve-sharing arrangements, accelerated renewable transitions, the long-discussed Trans-ASEAN Gas Pipeline — would reduce the leverage that external shocks and great power economic pressure can exercise over governments in precisely the conditions this essay identifies as most dangerous. Structural economic resilience and political non-alignment are not separate agendas; the former is the material foundation the latter requires.

Conclusion and Implications

Indonesia does not need to choose between Washington and Beijing — and the regional order depends on it not choosing. The analysis demonstrates that the regional balance is not a structural condition that exists independently of human agency: it is a condition that deliberate collective action can choose to sustain. The essay's contribution is to establish, through the public goods framework and counterfactual methodology, that the stakes of Indonesian non-alignment are regional rather than merely bilateral, and systemic rather than merely diplomatic. For defence planners and military professionals across the region, this has an operational as much as a strategic dimension: the stability of the institutional middle ground is the condition under which cooperative security arrangements function, crisis communication channels remain open, and escalation management remains possible. Every actor in the Southeast Asian system — claimant and non-claimant, U.S. partner and Chinese economic partner alike — has a direct and demonstrable interest in the continued inhabitation of the strategic middle ground that bebas aktif provides.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Geopolitical Context

Few bilateral relationships in the contemporary international order have deteriorated as rapidly, or across as many domains simultaneously, as that between the United States and China since 2018. On trade, tariffs worth \$360 billion were imposed on Chinese goods under Section 301 of the U.S. Trade Act, to which Beijing responded in kind; on technology, Huawei was placed on the Entity List on national security grounds, severing its access to American chips and software; ZTE faced analogous component-supply restrictions that constrained its operations even after a subsequent compliance settlement (Congressional Research Service, 2022; Liu, 2025). The U.S. 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy formally designated China as a strategic competitor threatening the international order — a shift in language that marked a doctrinal watershed from the engagement-era assumptions of the preceding three decades (Swaine, 2019).

Since then, the rivalry has deepened in ways that are now mutually reinforcing. Semiconductor export controls introduced in October 2022 marked a critical inflection point in the technology competition; the United States subsequently secured parallel export controls from Japan and the Netherlands in early 2023, deepening the coordinated technology denial architecture against Chinese semiconductor ambitions (Sutter, 2025). Freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea increased in frequency as a direct challenge to China's ten-dash line. Taiwan tensions peaked following Pelosi's 2022 visit, which China answered with large-scale military exercises around the island. AUKUS was established in September 2021, encompassing the transfer of nuclear-powered submarine technology, and the Quad was revitalised at the heads-of-government level as a new security architecture for the Indo-Pacific (Markowski et al., 2024). Hornung (2023) situates the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy within a decades-long pattern of U.S. engagement whose strategic logic has remained consistent even as its instruments evolved. Kim (2025) extends this assessment to the present, identifying the compounding variables — North Korea's posture, shifting U.S. domestic politics, and hardening great power competition — that make the current security environment considerably more demanding than at any prior point in the post-Cold War era.

The strategic complexity of this environment has been further compounded by the February 2026 U.S. and Iran military conflict in the Middle East, which drew significant U.S. strategic attention and assets toward the region: Tehran's effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz confirmed Denmark and Mulvenon's (2010) warning that U.S. capacity to sustain command of the maritime commons would face its greatest stress precisely when multiple competing commitments arose simultaneously — and that states most dependent on American commons protection would bear the greatest exposure when that capacity was strained.

1.2. The Strategic and Economic Stakes for Southeast Asia

U.S.–China rivalry constitutes an immediate structural constraint for Southeast Asia because the region sits at the intersection of both superpowers' strategic interests. The Strait of Malacca carries an estimated 30% of global maritime commerce, and the broader region is the physical corridor through which great power competition in the Indo-Pacific is conducted. China has expanded its presence through the Belt and Road Initiative and by constructing military installations in the South China Sea; Washington has reinforced alliances with the Philippines and Thailand to maintain a favourable balance of power (Patton & Sato, 2023; Singh, 2020). Natalegawa and Poling (2024) document how American and Chinese instruments of influence now operate across overlapping institutional, economic, military and cultural domains in Southeast Asia; while the United States retains greater soft power and popular standing than China across most of the region, that advantage is assessed as potentially narrowing as both powers deepen their people-to-people and institutional engagement.

The resulting condition is one of asymmetric dual engagement: deep economic integration with China coexisting alongside security cooperation with the United States, each relationship inherently resistant to subordination to the other (Keohane & Nye, 2001). Managing these concurrent partnerships presents Southeast Asian governments with a condition of constrained strategic optionality — neither relationship can be relinquished without structural cost, yet both are increasingly difficult to sustain simultaneously without appearing to privilege one great power over the other. China is the largest trading partner and a principal source of investment for most regional economies; those same governments nonetheless rely on U.S. security guarantees and defence cooperation, particularly in resisting Chinese territorial claims

in the South China Sea. Sulaiman, Delanova, and Jati (2021) demonstrate that Indonesia's balancing act between Washington and Beijing became considerably more demanding from 2020, as pandemic-era disruptions sharpened both economic dependencies and security anxieties simultaneously. The East-West Center (2021) corroborates this interdependence, documenting that U.S.–ASEAN trade and investment ties are as substantial in absolute terms as China's. Differentiated exposure to BRI financing adds further complexity: Ujvari (2019) distinguishes states that have embraced BRI most eagerly — often accepting significant debt exposure — from a middle tier that contests specific financial terms while engaging China's connectivity ambitions, and a third group retaining deeper scepticism about BRI's strategic intent. This taxonomy is directly relevant because a Jakarta aligned with Beijing would dissolve the institutional middle ground that allows all three categories to engage China's economic initiatives without foreclosing their security relationships with Washington.

Economic interdependence has been progressively instrumentalised since 2018. U.S. semiconductor export controls, investment screening mechanisms, and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework have placed ASEAN governments in the position of navigating overlapping and often incompatible architectures, each embodying a distinct vision of regional economic integration and connectivity (Moosa, 2024; Natalegawa & Poling, 2022). For Indonesia specifically, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies Indonesia (2025) identifies food, energy, and technology supply chains as the sectors of sharpest strategic vulnerability — dependencies whose activation by either great power under conditions of strategic pressure would place acute pressure on Jakarta's capacity to sustain bebas aktif without domestic political cost. Damuri, Intan, and Rafitrandi (2023) observe that Indonesia has consistently used ASEAN frameworks to pursue regional integration whilst maintaining a deliberately balanced approach to both superpowers, a strategy that only remains viable so long as Jakarta's non-aligned posture is credible.

The analytical force of that warning was confirmed in early 2026. Iran's effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz — through which approximately 20 percent of global crude oil flows, with roughly 80 percent of that volume destined for Asian markets — exposed Indonesia's approximately 20-day petroleum reserve buffer and triggered fuel subsidies already threatening to breach the statutory deficit ceiling of three percent of

GDP under the 2003 Budget Law, reviving the political memory of the 1998 fuel price shock that precipitated the collapse of the Suharto government (Jakarta Globe, 2026; Kurlantzick & Richter, 2026; Centre for Strategic and International Studies Indonesia, 2025). The crisis simultaneously revealed an asymmetry that sharpens the constrained strategic optionality condition identified above: China, having stockpiled crude reserves and secured overland pipeline supply from Russia, was substantially insulated from the same shock — converting regional energy dependency into a new vector of alignment pressure at precisely the moment Jakarta's non-aligned posture faces its most acute external test (Downs, 2026).

1.3. The Security Dimension

The United States has assembled a layered security architecture across the Indo-Pacific, anchored by five mutual defence treaties with Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand, and extended through multilateral frameworks including AUKUS and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (White House, 2022). Rather than demanding formal alignment, this architecture operates as a 'latticework' of reinforcing partnerships — explicitly courting non-allied states, including Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore — through bilateral security dialogues, defence cooperation arrangements, and capacity-building programmes in maritime domain awareness (White House, 2022; U.S. Department of Defense, 2023a). The operational expression of this architecture includes freedom of navigation operations conducted in accordance with international law, affirming the rights of all states to unimpeded passage through international waters (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023b). The cumulative effect has been to raise the political salience of alignment questions that regional states had previously managed through deliberate ambiguity — not as a design objective of U.S. strategy, which explicitly affirms ASEAN centrality, but as a structural consequence of the competitive environment within which the architecture now operates (White House, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Of all U.S.–China rivalry dimensions, the South China Sea presents the most immediate challenge for Southeast Asian states. The contested waterway carries an estimated one-third of global maritime trade and encompasses overlapping territorial claims between China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. China's previous nine-dash line claim, invalidated by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in its 2016 award, has brought Beijing into direct confrontation with each of

the claimant states (Mushkat, 2020; Wirth & Schatz, 2020). Second Thomas Shoal has become the most volatile point of contact, with China repeatedly attempting to block Philippine resupply missions to the BRP Sierra Madre through water cannons, lasers, and ramming manoeuvres. The construction and militarisation of artificial islands across the Spratly chain from 2013 transformed the strategic geography of the South China Sea; those features now host airstrips, deep-water ports, and missile systems that extend China's effective military reach into the heart of Southeast Asia.

The legal and territorial stakes deepened further in August 2023, when China's Ministry of Natural Resources released an updated standard map replacing the nine-dash line with a ten-dash line — adding a tenth segment east of Taiwan and extending Beijing's claimed maritime boundary beyond even its already-invalidated prior position (Singh, 2023). The move prompted formal protests from Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and India, and regional analysts characterised it as a deliberate consolidation of China's maritime posture in direct defiance of the 2016 arbitration ruling rather than an accommodation of it (Singh, 2023). Active Chinese Coast Guard enforcement within the ten-dash line — documented through sustained operations in the Luconia Shoals against Malaysian energy exploration and at Second Thomas Shoal against Philippine resupply missions — establishes that the updated map carries operational rather than merely cartographic significance (Putra, 2023).

The Natuna Islands, Indonesia's northernmost archipelago, are located within its own exclusive economic zone yet fall within China's ten-dash line, which formally intrudes into Indonesian sovereign waters and transforms the South China Sea from a regional abstraction into a direct domestic political concern for Jakarta (Sulaiman, 2024; Connelly, 2016; Supriyanto, 2016). Supriyanto (2016) observes that Indonesia's dual signalling to Beijing — rejecting Chinese maritime claims whilst simultaneously cultivating maritime economic partnership — constitutes a form of hedging whose internal contradictions are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

1.4. The Institutional Dimension

Great power rivalry places particular strain on ASEAN's consensus-based institutional model because member states approach the competition from fundamentally incompatible positions. Levels of economic dependence on China, security relationships with the United States, and domestic political calculations differ

significantly across the grouping; the political cost of achieving a common position increases precisely when regional coordination is most urgently needed. ASEAN's inability to issue a joint communiqué in 2012 — when Cambodia, as chair and a significant recipient of Chinese financial patronage — including approximately USD 2.7 billion in cumulative loans and grants by 2012 and a further USD 9.6 billion in approved investments by 2013 — declined to permit South China Sea language Beijing found objectionable, and was subsequently the recipient of a pledge of over USD 500 million in new soft loans and grants, with Cambodian officials noting that China had voiced “high appreciation for the part played by Cambodia as the chair of ASEAN to maintain good cooperation between China and ASEAN” — demonstrated that the consensus mechanism can become, under competitive pressure, a veto amplifier through which great power patronage is translated into institutional paralysis (Ciorciari, 2015; Emmers, 2018). Emerson (2017) identifies the institutional logic underlying this vulnerability: Beijing requires only one dissenting member state — acting under the weight of asymmetric economic dependence — to shield its maritime behaviour from direct textual challenge in ASEAN communiqués, a dynamic that financial dependency among smaller member states renders consistently available, and which Cambodia repeated in 2016 and Laos has reinforced on multiple subsequent occasions. Ba (2016) captures the deeper institutional stakes: maintaining a space between China and the United States within which Southeast Asian states retain meaningful manoeuvre and choice may prove to be the greatest challenge confronting the ASEAN region.

Beyond institutional strain, the rivalry exposes a deeper tension between competing visions of regional order. The United States advocates a rules-based framework prioritising multilateral institutions, international law, and freedom of navigation; China generally prefers bilateral dispute management and regional arrangements that minimise the legitimacy of external balancing coalitions. For ASEAN, this is not a choice between competing normative vocabularies alone. It is an increasingly coercive competition to shape the institution's agenda and alignments, transforming ASEAN from a manager of great power competition into a venue in which that competition is conducted. Tagotra (2016) argues bluntly that ASEAN's enmeshment strategies have suffered an institutional setback as Chinese assertiveness exposed the gap between the institution's normative aspirations and its

enforcement capacity. Green and Szechenyi (2014) demonstrate through elite surveys that the contest between democratic universalism and Asian exceptionalism is producing genuine uncertainty over ideological alignment across the region, reinforcing why maintaining an authoritative non-aligned anchor remains consequential for institutional coherence.

Under these conditions, ASEAN's claim to centrality risks becoming procedural rather than substantive. Difficult security questions migrate to bilateral, minilateral, or extra-ASEAN channels, resolved by the logic of great power bargaining rather than regional consensus (Hoang, 2022). It is within this broader context that Indonesia's bebas aktif doctrine acquires its transnational significance. The bebas dimension preserves ASEAN's autonomy by ensuring an influential member cannot be classified as a proxy of either power; the aktif dimension transforms that autonomy from a passive condition into an active mechanism for collective risk management, establishing common principles and crisis management frameworks that make ASEAN an architect of regional rules, not merely a stage for great power manoeuvre.

1.5. The Argument and Contribution

Existing scholarship has largely treated bebas aktif as an artefact of Indonesian domestic political culture, a product of post-colonial identity and Hatta's original Cold War formulation (Anwar, 2018). What it has not adequately examined is the structural function that Indonesian non-alignment performs for the region as a whole. This article advances a different claim: bebas aktif operates as a regional public good, and its removal would destabilise Southeast Asia regardless of which great power Indonesia chose to align with. The argument rests on a distinction between intent and effect. Jakarta's policymakers pursue non-alignment to protect national sovereignty, as Connelly (2015) rightly notes the deep domestic roots of this impulse; the consequences, however, radiate outward. By refusing to join either camp, Indonesia preserves the political space within which smaller states hedge, ASEAN's consensus mechanism functions, and neither Washington nor Beijing can assume the region has been secured.

Shifting the analytical lens from Indonesian exceptionalism to regional interdependence is this article's original contribution. The question is not whether bebas aktif serves Jakarta, but whether its abandonment would harm everyone else.

This reframing draws on hedging theory (Kuik, 2008), omni-enmeshment frameworks (Goh, 2008), ASEAN centrality scholarship (Acharya, 2017), and strategic ambiguity literature (Ciorciari, 2010) to demonstrate that the systemic stakes of Indonesian alignment extend well beyond Indonesia's borders.

This argument is situated against a dominant IR theoretical tradition that generates a contrary prediction. Structural realist frameworks — from Waltz's (1979) balance-of-power logic to Mearsheimer's (2001) offensive realism — forecast that middle states will be compelled to align under conditions of great power bipolarity: the security dilemma and the structural pressures of an emerging two-pole system leave limited room for sustained non-alignment as rivalry intensifies. Power transition theory sharpens this further, predicting that as Chinese capabilities approach parity with American power, states occupying the transition zone will face escalating pressure to bandwagon with the rising challenger rather than maintain positional ambiguity (Organski, 1958; Tammen et al., 2000). Both frameworks offer powerful accounts of great power behaviour under systemic competition, and neither is rejected here. What they cannot adequately explain is why Indonesian non-alignment has persisted for nearly eight decades through Cold War bipolarity, unipolar U.S. dominance, and the current period of renewed great power rivalry — nor why its removal would generate costs across the ideological spectrum simultaneously rather than benefiting whichever alignment direction was chosen. The public goods framework applied in this article operates at a different level of analysis: not systemic pressure on great powers but the institutional conditions under which middle states generate regional value through sustained positional choice. It is precisely because structural realist frameworks are not designed to account for this meso-level dynamic that the reframing this article proposes is analytically necessary.

The 'regional public good' framing draws on an established theoretical tradition. Kaul, Grunberg, and Stern (1999) established the foundational framework for analysing goods that benefit multiple actors regardless of their individual contribution — the defining characteristic of a public good in political economy. Sandler (2004) refines this for security applications, distinguishing between pure public goods, club goods, and joint products that simultaneously produce private benefits for their provider and non-excludable benefits for a wider population. This distinction matters because bebas aktif is not a pure public good in every dimension. Indonesia derives

private benefits from non-alignment — sovereign protection over its Natuna claims, access to both great powers' markets, and the diplomatic standing of a recognised middle power — that accrue exclusively to Jakarta. The public goods claim applies not to bebas aktif as a whole but to the bundle of regional outputs its non-aligned posture generates: outputs whose distribution is genuinely non-excludable and non-rival across ASEAN member states.

Applying the criteria directly: ASEAN's institutional coherence is non-excludable because Indonesia cannot selectively deploy its consensus-enabling function from particular member states, and non-rival because one state's benefit from Indonesian-facilitated consensus does not reduce what is available to the next. The deterrence effect on great power escalation operates through the systemic uncertainty that Jakarta's positional ambiguity creates — that deterrent value cannot be targeted at specific beneficiaries and is not exhausted by any state's consumption of it. The hedging cover available to smaller states operates through the legitimacy that Indonesian non-alignment confers on the non-alignment posture more broadly; that cover cannot be denied to states Jakarta disfavors, and one state's reliance on it does not reduce its availability to others. To the authors' knowledge, this framework has not been systematically applied to Indonesian foreign policy, and its application here distinguishes the article's contribution from descriptive accounts of Jakarta's diplomatic preferences and from structural accounts that treat Indonesian non-alignment as an epiphenomenon of great power competition rather than a constitutive feature of the regional order.

1.6. Article Roadmap

The article proceeds in four parts. Section 2 establishes the analytical framework through the evolution of bebas aktif, identifies three stabilising mechanisms, and demonstrates that each satisfies the criteria of a regional public good. Section 3 stress-tests this framework through two counterfactual experiments and synthesises the results into a collective-interest analysis. Section 4 draws conclusions and advances a normative argument for sustaining Indonesia's non-aligned posture as a shared regional asset rather than a Jakarta idiosyncrasy.

2. METHODS: BEBAS AKTIF AS AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. The Doctrine: Origins and Evolution

Indonesia's foreign policy rests on constitutional principles of anti-bloc independence and peace, sustained through what successive governments have termed resilience diplomacy: active commitment to ASEAN centrality, adherence to international law, and substantive engagement on issues spanning the South China Sea, Myanmar, and regional economic integration. Understanding bebas aktif requires tracing both its intellectual origins and its adaptive evolution across eight decades of Indonesia's independent existence.

Emerging from the imperatives facing a newly independent state, the doctrine was conceived to preserve sovereignty amid great power competition. Mohammad Hatta's 1948 address, known as 'Rowing Between Two Reefs,' articulated the founding logic: Indonesia was to act as a sovereign agent guided by national interest rather than bloc subordination. Bebas (free) denoted independence from alignment, not withdrawal from global affairs; aktif (active) signified purposeful engagement in shaping a secure strategic environment. These principles entered official governmental doctrine on 2 September 1948 and have anchored foreign policy continuity across all subsequent administrations, surviving regime changes, economic crises, and the complete restructuring of the post-Cold War international order.

During the Cold War, the doctrine moved beyond rhetoric into institution-building. Indonesia was a driving force behind the 1955 Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung, the first major international forum convening Asian and African states to promote peace, cooperation, and anti-colonialism. The doctrine subsequently underpinned Indonesia's role in founding the Non-Aligned Movement, constituting a proactive Third World posture designed to reduce the tensions of global bipolarity. These were not merely symbolic gestures: they represented an early demonstration that a resource-rich archipelagic state could translate institutional leadership and ideological coherence into influence disproportionate to its military capacity. In this sense, the Bandung moment institutionalised the first of the three mechanisms this article identifies — credible brokerage, the capacity to convene parties across ideological divides precisely because Jakarta was not subordinated to any of them.

After the Cold War dissolved the ideological architecture of the bipolar era, the concept required reconceptualisation. Marty Natalegawa, Indonesia's Foreign Minister from 2009 to 2014, provided it through the framework of dynamic equilibrium: where the earlier doctrine had resisted change in the power constellation, dynamic

equilibrium sought to manage it, maintaining stability, predictability, and shared norms so the region would not slide into strategic anarchy as new powers emerged and old hierarchies dissolved. This was a meaningful conceptual shift — from avoiding blocs towards actively governing competition whilst retaining sovereign autonomy. Largely shaped by Indonesian diplomatic initiative, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) of 2019 represents the most recent multilateral expression of this logic, directly embodying the third mechanism: anchoring the regional centre of gravity by converting Indonesian non-alignment from a national posture into a collectively endorsed regional framework. Dynamic equilibrium simultaneously operationalised the second mechanism, strategic ambiguity, by institutionalising Jakarta's withholding of endorsement from any single great power's preferred regional order as the condition for its continued multilateral engagement.

At the operational level, the pattern is consistent across contemporary administrations. The Jokowi era (2014–2024) accelerated economic synergy with China, aligning the Maritime Fulcrum vision with BRI-linked projects whilst establishing Indonesia as a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Gindarsah and Priamarizki (2015) demonstrate that the Global Maritime Fulcrum doctrine is inseparable from Indonesia's commitment to regional stability and its refusal to allow national sovereignty to be subordinated to any external security framework — a domestic framing that reinforces rather than contradicts the non-aligned posture. Simultaneously, defence ties with the United States deepened, culminating in the Super Garuda Shield exercises and defence ministerial meetings. These developments continued under the Prabowo administration. Priamarizki (2024) provides granular analysis of the domestic political determinants that make this balancing act both necessary and fragile: elite preferences, coalition structures, and public nationalism each impose constraints on how far any administration can depart from the non-aligned centre ground without political cost. Bland, Laksmana, and Kassam (2022) show that Indonesian public opinion broadly supports strategic independence over alignment with either great power, providing a durable societal foundation for bebas aktif that transcends individual administrations. Thies and Sari (2018) offer a theoretical anchor through role theory, arguing that Indonesia's self-conceived identity as a middle power makes its active non-alignment a constitutive feature of its international role rather than a contingent preference — a distinction with

significant implications for how durable the posture is likely to be under sustained great power pressure.

Since taking office in October 2024, the Prabowo administration has pursued what analysts describe as a "more active but still free" foreign policy: doctrinal continuity in non-alignment accompanied by a more assertive posture towards global engagement (Lowy Institute, 2025). Prabowo's inaugural address reaffirmed Indonesia's commitment to bebas aktif and its abstention from military alliances, even as his administration simultaneously deepened engagement with both great powers — Indonesia acceded to BRICS in January 2025 whilst expanding security cooperation with the United States. April 2025 brought the inaugural ministerial-level China–Indonesia Joint Foreign and Defence Ministerial Dialogue in Beijing, described by Beijing as the first such 2+2 mechanism China has established with any foreign state (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025). The November 2024 Prabowo–Xi joint statement introduced language on "joint development in areas of overlapping maritime claims," prompting an immediate clarification from Jakarta's Ministry of Foreign Affairs that Indonesia's non-claimant position in the South China Sea remained unchanged. That episode exposed the governing tension bebas aktif must navigate under Prabowo: concurrent deepened engagement with both powers generates signals each side may read as tilt, whilst the Natuna nationalist constraint imposes a firm domestic ceiling on any drift towards China. The doctrine's adaptive logic remains intact, though under sharper pressure than at any prior point in the post-Cold War period (Wicaksana, 2023).

2.2. Mechanism I: Credible Broker Within ASEAN

Within the current Indo-Pacific geopolitical landscape, Indonesia's doctrinal autonomy through bebas aktif functions as a centre of gravity for ASEAN stability. Whilst some member states maintain formal defence alliances with the United States and others deepen economic dependence on China, Indonesia has been relatively consistent in practising strategic hedging — refusing to bind itself to either dominant pole. This distinctive position flows from a diplomacy fundamentally oriented towards sustaining ASEAN centrality. Nabbs-Keller (2020) argues that Indonesia's leadership

credentials within ASEAN derive in part from its sustained independence from great power patronage networks — a posture that renders Jakarta more readily accepted as a convening authority across the full spectrum of ASEAN members than any state perceived as an extra-regional proxy could be. Parameswaran (2014) provides relevant context: Washington pursues looser strategic partnership frameworks specifically to institutionalise relationships and share security burdens, a logic that depends on partners retaining sufficient autonomy to be seen as independent actors, not mere proxies. Indonesia's non-aligned posture is precisely what preserves this quality — making its brokerage role credible to both great powers and smaller regional states simultaneously. In public goods terms, this brokerage function is non-excludable: no ASEAN member can be denied access to the stabilising effects of Indonesian-led convening, and one state's reliance on that function does not diminish its availability to others.

This brokerage role was demonstrated most clearly in the development of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific in 2019. Before the Outlook was agreed, the region risked fracturing along a sharp dichotomy between the Free and Open Indo-Pacific framework associated with Western alliances and China's competing geoeconomic initiatives. Indonesia's non-aligned position enabled it to lead the effort to reframe that competitive narrative towards a more inclusive cooperative framework, emphasising maritime cooperation and economic integration over security confrontation. Studied neutrality proved tactically effective: it encouraged the major powers to accommodate ASEAN's vision instead of co-opting it, restoring the institution to its intended role as the primary architect of regional security arrangements.

This brokerage function depends entirely on perceived independence. Vietnam accepts Indonesia as an authoritative convener precisely because Jakarta is not seen as a proxy for either Washington or Beijing. The Philippines, whose more explicitly confrontational posture towards China reflects a different strategic calculus, nonetheless regards Indonesia as an indispensable stabilising force. These differing assessments converge on a shared recognition: without a recognised non-aligned convener, ASEAN's consensus diplomacy is vulnerable to strategic paralysis when great power pressures are most acute. Without Indonesia occupying the middle ground, internal cohesion weakens, collective deterrence diminishes, and the space

for external intervention across Southeast Asian sovereign territory widens — ultimately threatening to fracture the very consensus mechanism that gives ASEAN its organisational identity (Emmers, 2018).

2.3. Mechanism II: Strategic Ambiguity That Deters Escalation

As Southeast Asia's geopolitical environment grows more volatile under U.S.–China rivalry, Indonesia has consistently refused to take sides. This posture is bebas aktif in operational form: a strategic calculation that actively cultivates uncertainty, drawing its power precisely from that uncertainty. It is not fence-sitting; it is the deliberate manufacture of positional opacity as a diplomatic instrument (Ciorciari, 2010).

Indonesia's refusal to align prevents both great powers from assuming strategic lock-in. Washington cannot assume that Jakarta will automatically support a Quad-based Indo-Pacific order, just as Beijing cannot calculate Indonesia as a dependable partner for its Global South narrative. When a state commanding a population of 280 million, the region's largest economy, and sovereign control over the Lombok Strait and strategic adjacency to the Strait of Malacca remains strategically unpredictable, both powers are compelled to compete continuously for Jakarta's favour rather than presuming to exploit it.

This uncertainty constrains both powers through opportunity cost mechanisms. Any coercive manoeuvre against Indonesia — whether economic pressure or military signalling — risks driving Jakarta towards the rival's orbit. The mechanism is structurally equivalent to deterrence by denial in classical deterrence theory: not because Indonesia threatens retaliation, but because aggression would be counterproductive to the aggressor's own strategic interests. Crucially, this calculus holds symmetrically for both Washington and Beijing, which is precisely what gives it stability. Where great powers deter through capability, middle powers deter through positional uncertainty. As long as both rivals remain uncertain which side Indonesia would choose in a crisis, they will restrain themselves from actions that might force Jakarta into a definitive choice, because that choice itself would fundamentally alter the regional balance (Kuik, 2008). Karim and Chairil (2016) provide empirical grounding here: Southeast Asian states have not engaged in hard balancing against China despite its military build-up, preferring indirect forms of balancing — a pattern

supporting the proposition that the regional system sustains a managed equilibrium rather than moving towards open confrontation. Tan (2009) demonstrates that Beijing's engagement strategy in the region has depended on the continued functioning of ASEAN's inclusive institutional architecture; the erosion of that architecture would remove the very framework within which managed competition has been possible. The deterrent benefit of strategic ambiguity is also non-rival: Washington's uncertainty about Jakarta's intentions does not reduce Beijing's uncertainty, nor does any third state's reliance on Indonesia's ambiguity exhaust the supply of that benefit for others.

2.4. Mechanism III: Anchoring the Regional Centre of Gravity

The third mechanism explains how Indonesia's bebas aktif posture serves as a gravitational anchor for the broader regional order. Indonesia's weight — demographic, economic, and geographic — means that its foreign policy orientation does not merely reflect regional norms; it helps constitute them. When the largest state in Southeast Asia refuses to choose sides, non-alignment becomes the regional norm rather than the exception. Smaller states gain the political cover to pursue hedging strategies that would otherwise appear anomalous or inconsistent with an alliance-based security architecture. Goh (2008) provides the most rigorous theoretical account of this dynamic: the regional system has been sustained not through formal alliance commitments but through a pattern of accommodation in which smaller states accept managed great power authority in return for guaranteed strategic autonomy. In this framework, Indonesian non-alignment is not passive but positional — it establishes Jakarta as the pivot around which accommodation bargains are organised. Goh (2013) extends this argument, demonstrating that the struggle for regional order turns fundamentally on who defines the terms of engagement between great powers and smaller states; Indonesia's non-aligned posture is the single most consequential act of definitional authority available to a Southeast Asian state, because it refuses the terms both great powers seek to impose.

This norm-constituting function is more consequential than it might initially appear. In a regional system where both great powers are actively seeking to convert neutrality into alignment, the existence of a large, credible, and consistent non-aligned anchor reduces the systemic pressure on smaller states. Vietnam's omni-directional engagement strategy, Thailand's managed equidistance, Malaysia's economic

pragmatism: all of these are easier to sustain when Indonesia's posture normalises the middle ground as a legitimate and durable diplomatic position (Womack, 2004). Taken together, the three mechanisms demonstrate that bebas aktif satisfies both criteria of a regional public good as defined by Kaul, Grunberg, and Stern (1999): its stabilising benefits are non-excludable across ASEAN member states, and their consumption by any one state neither depletes nor diminishes what remains available to others. The counterfactual experiments that follow provide the stress-test.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The counterfactual method is employed in this section not to predict future events but to isolate the causal contribution of Indonesian non-alignment to regional stability by examining what its removal would causally produce. Each scenario is constructed around an identifiable and policy-grounded trajectory, consistent with the epistemological conventions of counterfactual analysis in international relations scholarship (Fearon, 1991; Tetlock & Belkin, 1996). The analytical commitment, following Zelikow (1994), is to specify a minimal rewrite — the smallest change to existing conditions sufficient to produce the hypothetical outcome — and trace the causal pathway through which that change would propagate. The scenarios are not constructed as maximalist catastrophes; they represent the smallest operationally plausible departures from bebas aktif and trace downstream consequences through identifiable transmission mechanisms. The results are then synthesised into a collective-interest analysis.

3.1. Counterfactual I: The Scenario¹

Over a compressed two-to-three-year period, Indonesia makes a sovereign and affirmative strategic choice to systematically deepen the existing U.S.–Indonesia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) and Defence Cooperation Arrangement (DCA) across security, economic, and institutional dimensions simultaneously at a

¹ Contributor note — MAJ Zurn (United States Army). The counterfactual scenario in Section 3.1 posits a hypothetical condition — decisive Indonesian alignment with the United States — that has not occurred. The analytical consequences assessed in Sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3 are derived exclusively from publicly documented U.S. strategic frameworks, observable trade and security data, and the logical implications of official policy documents cited throughout. No claim in this section represents personal opinion beyond what the cited public record supports, and accordingly references to a U.S. 'containment posture' and regional 'militarisation' do not appear in this section.

pace and density that regional actors perceive as qualitatively distinct from routine partnership management (White House, 2023a; White House, 2023b).

On the security dimension, this deepening is operationalised through the regularisation of the Indonesia–U.S. Bilateral Defence Dialogue at ministerial level, the full activation of the Maritime Security Joint Work Plan with documented capability transfers generating technical dependencies in Indonesian maritime domain awareness systems, and the sustained expansion of Super Garuda Shield into a de facto anchor exercise for U.S. Indo-Pacific force posture in Southeast Asia (U.S. Embassy Jakarta, 2023; U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, 2024). On the economic dimension, Indonesia accelerates engagement with the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, signalling a positional preference for U.S.-aligned supply chain architecture in its critical minerals and downstream processing sectors, without formally restricting Chinese investment (White House, 2023a).

This scenario does not require Indonesia to formally renounce bebas aktif or declare exclusive alignment. It requires only that the cumulative signal of these concurrent commitments crosses a regional legibility threshold: the point at which China, ASEAN partners, and hedging states perceive Indonesian behaviour as having acquired the functional character of alignment, regardless of its doctrinal self-presentation (Strangio, 2023; Citrinowicz & Rachmanto, 2023).

3.2. Counterfactual I: Likely Geopolitical Reactions

The causal pathway for this counterfactual begins not with Indonesian formal renunciation of bebas aktif but with the crossing of a regional legibility threshold at which China, ASEAN partners, and hedging states read Indonesian behaviour as functionally aligned. The mechanism runs through Beijing's assessment of ASEAN's strategic orientation. Indonesia is not merely one of eleven ASEAN members; it is the institution's gravitational centre, the state whose size, democratic legitimacy, and historical convening role make its alignment the de facto orientation of the institution as a whole. An Indonesian tilt towards Washington would be interpreted by Beijing not as a bilateral shift but as a signal that ASEAN's institutional architecture had migrated into the U.S. strategic orbit.

China's response to a perceived Indonesian alignment shift would most plausibly take the form of strategic recalibration rather than immediate retaliation — a combination of economic incentives directed towards remaining hedgers and selective pressure calibrated to raise the cost of further regional alignment shifts (Chung, 2010). Indonesia's bilateral trade exposure provides the primary lever available to Beijing: China accounted for approximately 22% of total Indonesian exports and was the largest source of foreign direct investment inflows in recent years; bilateral trade exceeded US\$147.8 billion in 2024, making China Indonesia's largest trading partner for twelve consecutive years, a dependency that generates leverage Beijing would not need to deploy immediately to exert influence (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025; Seuaple, 2026). Beijing would simultaneously deepen preferential ties with states that continue to hedge — specifically Thailand, Malaysia, and Vietnam — through trade incentives, BRI infrastructure financing repositioned towards greater sustainability and transparency, and supply chain integration designed to preserve its regional centrality (Chung, 2010; Seuaple, 2026).

For intra-ASEAN coordination, Indonesia's alignment would expose and deepen existing fault lines. States with deep economic dependence on China — notably those most integrated into BRI financing frameworks — would face intensified pressure to resist what Beijing would characterise as an alignment configuration contrary to its regional interests. ASEAN's consensus mechanism, already strained, would face incompatible demands: members seeking strong language on international law and UNCLOS confronting others unwilling to antagonise Beijing (Nguyen, 2026). Hedging states such as Vietnam would attempt to preserve policy autonomy whilst carefully avoiding postures that could be interpreted as definitive alignment. The net effect would likely be fragmentation in place of collective strengthening: smaller states seeking bilateral and minilateral channels as ASEAN's collective shield weakens, and the organisation's capacity to manage great power competition diminishing precisely when that capacity is most needed (Nguyen, 2026; Citrinowicz & Rachmanto, 2023).

3.3. Counterfactual I: Why This Outcome Is Worse Than the Status Quo

The regional costs of this scenario are measured not against an idealised baseline but against the three stabilising mechanisms Section 2 established as the functional contribution of Indonesian non-alignment: authoritative brokerage within ASEAN, diplomatic ambiguity that forecloses great power assumptions, and an

anchoring effect that preserves hedging space for smaller states. It is the erosion of these specific mechanisms, rather than any bilateral deterioration in U.S.–Indonesia relations, that constitutes the scenario's primary regional cost.

That erosion operates gradually and by accumulation, not through discrete crisis events. Indonesia does not lose its convening credibility on the day a ministerial dialogue is regularised or a capability transfer is documented; it loses it incrementally as regional actors update their assessments of Indonesian equidistance and adjust their own behaviour accordingly. A convener that China, Cambodia, or Laos no longer regards as genuinely non-aligned cannot perform the brokerage function that ASEAN's consensus framework depends upon, regardless of how carefully bilateral U.S.–Indonesia messaging preserves the language of ASEAN centrality (White House, 2023b; Strangio, 2023).

What alignment forfeits is not recoverable through trade diversification or security guarantees: it is the doctrinal coherence and accumulated convening authority that bebas aktif was specifically designed to build across decades. These are the assets that cannot be restored by scaling back cooperation once the regional legibility threshold has been crossed (Citrinowicz & Rachmanto, 2023). Managed deterioration short of systemic collapse best characterises the outcome: a gradual, self-reinforcing narrowing of the regional architecture this posture currently sustains, producing costs that accumulate in the medium term even when short-term bilateral management remains competent. It is worse than the status quo not because it triggers immediate catastrophe, but because it forecloses the possibility of return.

3.4. Counterfactual II: The Scenario

A plausible scenario for Indonesia's alignment with China would not require a formal alliance declaration. It would instead involve the gradual institutionalisation of preferential strategic relationships, with signals accumulating incrementally until a decisive tilt became unmistakable. Economically, Indonesia would deepen its participation in China-led initiatives — granting preferential political support to BRI-related projects, integrating domestic supply chains with Chinese firms, and treating Chinese capital as the primary driver of industrial upgrading. Diplomatically, Jakarta would increasingly calibrate its regional language towards Beijing's priorities, emphasising bilateral dispute management, moderating its opposition to Chinese

activities around the Natuna exclusive economic zone, and resisting ASEAN institutional mechanisms that Beijing perceives as legitimising external balancing.

Expansion of the China–Indonesia 2+2 diplomatic and defence dialogue into a more operational security framework would be the clearest indicator of a decisive tilt. In April 2025, the two sides convened the inaugural ministerial-level China–Indonesia Joint Foreign and Defence Ministerial Dialogue in Beijing, described by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi as the first such mechanism China has established with any foreign state (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2025); deeper institutionalisation could include regular defence consultations, expanded port access and logistics cooperation, a recalibration of existing bilateral defence and access arrangements in ways that constrain the U.S. security architecture’s operational reach in the region, and a significant reduction in U.S.–Indonesia bilateral defence programmes. The influx of Chinese businesses relocating to Indonesia to circumvent U.S. tariffs would simultaneously accelerate economic interdependence, creating structural dependencies progressively constraining Jakarta’s ability to reverse course. None of these steps alone constitutes a formal alliance; combined, however, they would represent a decisive departure from bebas aktif, signalling that Indonesia is no longer the region’s primary non-aligned anchor.

3.5. Counterfactual II: Likely Geopolitical Reactions²

The causal mechanism for this counterfactual runs through the U.S. security architecture’s response logic. Indonesia is not merely a bilateral partner; it is the state whose non-aligned posture has historically prevented ASEAN from being read in Washington as a Chinese-adjacent institution. An Indonesian tilt towards Beijing would compel the United States to reposition its security architecture around the remaining partners who had not defected from the middle ground — not because the United States would respond punitively to Jakarta specifically, but because the regional legibility of the shift would make the maritime corridors of Southeast Asia strategically exposed in ways they had not previously been. Egberink and van der Putten (2011) document the general form of this dynamic: when any major Southeast Asian state

² Contributor note — MAJ Zurn (United States Army). A parallel analytical constraint applies to the U.S. response scenario in Section 3.5. All characterisations of U.S. strategic behaviour are grounded in publicly available policy documents, including the Indo-Pacific Strategy (White House, 2022), the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (White House, 2023a), and associated bilateral frameworks. No claim in this section attributes intent, capability, or posture to the United States beyond what the cited public record supports.

withdraws from a neutral posture, the opposing great power's perceived threat automatically increases, and its compensatory security investments accelerate accordingly. The Indonesian case, given Jakarta's demographic and geographic weight, would produce this dynamic at larger scale and higher speed than any prior regional defection.

A decisive Indonesian alignment with China would most plausibly prompt the United States to intensify existing engagement frameworks with regional partners — not through the activation of a new strategic posture but through the deepening of mechanisms already documented in the Indo-Pacific Strategy and associated bilateral frameworks (White House, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2024). The publicly documented U.S. approach is invitation-based and partner-driven, structured around responding to partner requests for enhanced capacity-building, interoperability, and maritime domain awareness; it would manifest through the deepening of security arrangements with the Philippines, Australia, Japan, and India, the intensification of freedom of navigation operations in contested waters, and the recalibration of investment frameworks to incentivise states maintaining existing cooperative relationships. Tow (2016) provides essential context here, observing that American engagement with ASEAN has always been contingent on larger forces of global change, making the loss of even one reliable non-aligned partner a disproportionately significant strategic setback. From Manila's perspective, an Indonesian pivot towards China would represent a major strategic reversal, undermining the Philippines' security environment, intensifying pressure in the West Philippine Sea, and potentially signalling tacit acceptance of China's ten-dash line narrative at the highest level of ASEAN leadership. Prospects for a legally binding Code of Conduct in the South China Sea would be materially compromised by the loss of ASEAN's most credible non-aligned voice (Bayrante, 2026).

Hedging states would not automatically polarise, but their strategic manoeuvring would intensify considerably. Vietnam would quietly strengthen security ties with the United States, Japan, and Australia whilst maintaining formal diplomatic engagement with Beijing. Ho (2021) provides important nuance here: his field research on Vietnamese and Indonesian elite perceptions shows that both countries regard China as seeking to modify rather than overturn international rules, making full decoupling psychologically as well as economically implausible, and pointing towards

managed diversification as the dominant response. Ye (2020) demonstrates through analysis of Beijing's own hedging response to the Indo-Pacific strategy that China's posture is itself calibrated and non-maximalist — a finding reinforcing the case for maintaining the structured ambiguity Jakarta's posture provides, without forcing binary choices on either side.

Polarisation along a maritime fault line running through Southeast Asia would be the likely outcome. States with acute Chinese maritime disputes would be drawn towards closer U.S. engagement; states with deep BRI dependencies would intensify their accommodation of Beijing. ASEAN's procedural architecture would survive in formal terms, but its substantive capacity for collective action — specifically on contested security issues and in crisis moments — would contract sharply. Indonesia itself would face domestic pressures difficult to contain: nationalist sentiment runs deep on sovereignty questions, particularly concerning the Natuna exclusive economic zone, and any arrangement with China appearing to compromise Indonesian maritime claims would generate significant political opposition, calling into question the very sustainability of the alignment.

3.6. Counterfactual II: Why This Outcome Is Worse Than the Status Quo

Chinese alignment produces an outcome symmetrical with Counterfactual I, though the polarity is reversed. Where U.S. alignment provokes Chinese economic retaliation and maritime escalation, Chinese alignment triggers the intensification and reconfiguration of U.S. security architecture across the region's maritime corridors and a systematic deepening of its Indo-Pacific partnerships. In both scenarios, ASEAN loses a credible non-aligned convener, the consensus mechanism fractures under the weight of incompatible member-state positions, and the political space for hedging — the strategy that has allowed Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia to navigate great power competition without choosing sides — contracts sharply. Indonesia itself would sacrifice sovereignty over its own maritime claims, the very thing bebas aktif was originally designed to safeguard.

Emmers (2018) has argued that ASEAN neutrality has been central to the organisation's longevity and functional coherence. Remove Indonesia from that equation and neutrality ceases to be a collective posture; it becomes an aspiration that individual states pursue in isolation, without the institutional architecture or the

demographic anchor to sustain it against sustained great power pressure. Whether the alignment runs towards Washington or Beijing matters less than the fact of alignment itself. Either path leads to polarisation, organisational strain, and escalation dynamics that leave every actor in the regional system — including Indonesia — worse off than the status quo.

The two counterfactuals produce the same systemic outcomes, yet they operate through meaningfully different mechanisms. U.S. alignment generates a primarily economic response from China, weighted towards trade leverage and BRI repositioning, stopping short of immediate military signalling. Chinese alignment, by contrast, triggers a security-architecture response from the United States, expressed through intensified existing frameworks and expanded maritime domain cooperation with partners across the region. The asymmetry matters analytically: the costs of U.S. alignment accumulate gradually through economic recalibration and ASEAN fracture, whilst the costs of Chinese alignment include a more acute domestic political vulnerability. Indonesian nationalist sentiment over the Natuna exclusive economic zone means that a China-aligned Jakarta would face an internal legitimacy challenge with no direct parallel in the U.S.-alignment scenario. The convergence on equivalent endpoints is therefore best understood as a result despite these asymmetries, not as simple parity of mechanisms.

3.7. Why ASEAN States Need Indonesia's Non-Alignment

What follows disaggregates the regional benefit of Jakarta's non-alignment by state type. The argument is not that all ASEAN members benefit equally — their strategic positions differ too markedly for that claim to hold — but that each category of state derives a distinct and identifiable benefit from Indonesia's continued refusal to align.

Singapore illustrates the pro-U.S. case with particular precision. As one of Southeast Asia's foremost commercial and financial hubs, and a longstanding U.S. security partner, Singapore plays a regional role disproportionate to its size. Medeiros et al. (2008) identify Indonesian political stability among Singapore's foremost national security concerns alongside China's long-term intentions and the trajectory of the U.S.–China relationship itself. Any decisive shift in Jakarta's strategic posture would register immediately in Singapore's threat calculus, compelling a recalibration of the

carefully balanced regional policy Singapore has maintained for decades. Sullivan (2014) documents the strategic logic underpinning this posture: Singapore combines deep economic engagement with China and closer security ties with the United States precisely because its geographic exposure at the eastern mouth of the Strait of Malacca creates vulnerabilities that no single great power relationship can insure against. This strategy of cultivated autonomous capability depends on the regional middle ground remaining inhabited — a condition that Jakarta's non-aligned posture sustains. Hamilton-Hart (2009) further demonstrates that ASEAN's non-interference norm functions as both a stabilising mechanism and an occasional irritant in the Indonesia–Singapore bilateral relationship, preventing formal escalation of disputes but heightening mutual sensitivity to perceived affronts; the normative scaffolding within which that bilateral friction is managed depends on ASEAN's institutional coherence remaining intact. Pro-U.S. states, including Singapore and the Philippines, therefore benefit from Indonesian non-alignment even when they privately wish Jakarta would take a stronger position on South China Sea disputes.

For Cambodia and Laos, Indonesia's non-alignment serves a function that neither Phnom Penh nor Vientiane can perform on its own: it prevents Washington from approaching Southeast Asia through an exclusively competitive security lens that forecloses multilateral engagement. So long as the region's largest state refuses to join any bloc, the United States retains an incentive to engage the region multilaterally rather than through selective bilateral partnerships that reward alignment and punish proximity to Beijing (Parameswaran, 2014). Without Indonesia occupying the middle ground, the binary logic of great power competition would compress their strategic options to a degree that forecloses meaningful economic diversification — a entrenched dependency whose consequences would be felt most acutely by their most economically vulnerable populations.

Indonesia's non-aligned stance provides strategic cover for states that prefer not to choose between Washington and Beijing, because it maintains a legitimate middle ground within ASEAN. For Vietnam, Jakarta's refusal to join any bloc makes it easier for Hanoi to selectively strengthen security cooperation with the United States and other partners whilst maintaining diplomatic and economic ties with China — such a posture appears not as bloc alignment but as a defensible regional model, and Indonesia's credibility is precisely what makes the model legible to outside observers.

De Gurung (2018) illustrates this through Vietnam's "Three Nos" policy, which mirrors the logic of bebas aktif: no military alliances, no hosting of foreign bases, no siding with one power against another. This demonstrates that Indonesia's non-aligned posture is not idiosyncratic but rather the anchor for a broader regional pattern of structured equidistance that multiple states have independently adopted as their most viable strategic model. Natalegawa and Poling (2024) document that while the United States retains greater overall soft power standing than China across most of Southeast Asia, neither power has translated that position into decisive institutional or ideological capture of the region's alignment — an equilibrium that reflects, among other factors, the legitimising weight of Jakarta's sustained non-declaration of preference. Patton and Sato (2023) document that this asymmetric picture would be further destabilised by any decisive Indonesian alignment, forcing smaller hedging states to recalibrate their own positions without the cover that Jakarta currently provides.

3.8. Why Great Powers Also Benefit

Washington's interest in Jakarta's non-aligned posture derives not from concern about provoking any specific actor but from the underlying logic of U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy itself. That strategy seeks a free, open, and resilient regional order sustained by ASEAN cohesion and Indonesian multilateral leadership — both of which rest on Indonesian non-alignment, because ASEAN's consensus architecture requires a credible non-aligned convener and Indonesian multilateral leadership derives its regional legitimacy from the perceived equidistance that bebas aktif provides (White House, 2022; White House, 2023b). Full alignment would erode both simultaneously — not as a consequence of external reaction but as a functional necessity, because the convening credibility that makes Indonesia strategically valuable cannot survive the perception of exclusivity, regardless of how carefully bilateral messaging is managed (Strangio, 2023). The costs of alignment accrue not through bilateral deterioration but through the gradual erosion of the enabling conditions that Indonesian non-alignment currently sustains across the region as a whole (White House, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2024).

China's calculus mirrors the American one, though through a different lens. Beijing benefits from a non-aligned Indonesia because the alternative would almost certainly trigger a compensatory security response that undermines the conditions of managed competition China prefers. Egberink and van der Putten (2011) documented

how the withdrawal of any major Southeast Asian state from a neutral posture automatically increases the opposing great power's perceived threat, generating a security spiral neither side can easily reverse. A non-aligned Jakarta allows Beijing to maintain economic access, sustain BRI partnerships, and avoid the strategic overreach that would follow from attempting to absorb the region's largest state into a formal sphere of influence. Restraint, paradoxically, yields more durable influence than dominance — an analytical conclusion that follows from the internal logic of the argument, not a sentimental one. Natalegawa and Poling (2024) capture this dynamic from the American perspective as well, noting that neither great power has successfully converted Southeast Asian economic or institutional engagement into durable political alignment, a finding that itself reflects the anchoring effect of Jakarta's posture on regional strategic culture.

3.9. The Imperfect Equilibrium

Bebas aktif is not without legitimate frustrations. Critics within the region have long pointed to Indonesia's tendency towards diplomatic paralysis — a reluctance to take decisive positions that occasionally renders ASEAN's largest member a bystander, not a leader. Connelly (2015) documented how the transition from Yudhoyono's activist internationalism to Jokowi's domestically oriented presidency produced periods of strategic drift in which Jakarta's regional leadership was more nominal than substantive; his subsequent analysis of Indonesia's South China Sea posture (Connelly, 2016) further demonstrates how the non-claimant status that enables brokerage simultaneously produces reluctance to lead on precisely the issues where leadership is most consequential. The free-riding critique carries weight too: smaller states bear disproportionate security costs whilst Indonesia shelters behind non-alignment as a justification for inaction on contentious issues, including the South China Sea code of conduct negotiations, where a stronger Indonesian voice would likely have accelerated progress.

Two cases establish the brokerage mechanism's operational ceiling in concrete terms. The first is the Cambodia precedent: where sustained Chinese economic engagement creates structural incentives that, within ASEAN's consensus framework, function as effective constraints on collective action, Indonesian convening authority cannot substitute for the institutional unanimity the ASEAN Way requires, regardless of how carefully Jakarta manages its own equidistance (Ciorciari, 2015; Emmerson,

2017). The pattern has proven durable — Cambodia blocked or diluted South China Sea language at ASEAN meetings in 2012 and again in 2016, establishing that the structural vulnerability Emmerson identifies is not episodic but systemic. The second case is ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar, agreed at Jakarta in April 2021 following the military coup. Within two days of endorsing the five commitments — immediate cessation of violence, constructive dialogue, a special envoy, humanitarian assistance, and the envoy's visit to all parties — the junta walked back its agreement, announcing it would consider the commitments only once “the situation returns to stability” (International Crisis Group, 2021). Three ASEAN chairmanships — Brunei, Cambodia, and Indonesia in sequence — produced no meaningful progress on any of the five points; President Joko Widodo acknowledged publicly in May 2023, during Indonesia's own chairmanship, that there had been “no significant progress” on implementation (Haacke, 2025; Moe Thuzar, 2023). These cases clarify the mechanism's limits without negating its value. Indonesian brokerage functions where shared institutional interest sustains consensus; it encounters practical limits where asymmetric economic dependencies have generated effective consensus constraints among member states, or where an internal party has sufficient external backing to disregard ASEAN commitments. The relevant counterfactual is not whether a perfectly effective brokerage mechanism exists — it does not — but whether the region would be better positioned without Jakarta occupying the broker's role at all.

The Prabowo era introduces a sharper version of this challenge. What analysts describe as “multi-alignment” — the simultaneous deepening of relationships with both Washington and Beijing, exemplified by concurrent BRICS accession and expanded U.S. defence cooperation — might appear to represent a departure from bebas aktif rather than its continuation. On closer examination, it does not. Bebas aktif has never required equidistance in every domain simultaneously; it requires that no single alignment be permitted to foreclose the other. Jakarta's deliberate cultivation of optionality across economic and security channels, while maintaining doctrinal non-alignment, is precisely what the doctrine prescribes. The stress-test is not whether Indonesia engages both powers, but whether either engagement acquires the exclusive or subordinating character that would convert Jakarta from a non-aligned anchor into a partisan one. The November 2024 Indonesia-China joint statement — which Indonesian analysts and regional observers interpreted as a contested

departure from Jakarta's long-standing non-claimant position on Natuna, prompting immediate Foreign Ministry clarification — illustrates where the brokerage ceiling is most acutely tested: when Indonesia's own sovereign posture becomes a matter of disputed interpretation among regional observers, the unambiguous equidistance that makes brokerage credible is itself under pressure (Sulaiman, 2024; Strangio, 2024). Multi-alignment, properly understood, is bebas aktif updated for a period of more intense and simultaneous great power courtship — not its abandonment.

The criticisms canvassed here are nonetheless fair. What the counterfactual analysis conducted in this article demonstrates, however, is that the alternatives are not merely imperfect; they are categorically worse. Both alignment scenarios produce the same outcome: regional polarisation, institutional fragmentation, and escalation dynamics that leave every state more exposed than before. The relevant comparison is not between bebas aktif and some idealised policy of decisive regional leadership, but between the imperfect equilibrium that non-alignment sustains and the disequilibrium that would follow its abandonment. Cook (2019) offers a useful external reference point here: his analysis of Australia's position between a U.S. security alliance and deep Chinese trade dependence demonstrates that the dual-dependency bind is not unique to ASEAN states, and that economic alignment does not always coincide with strategic alignment even under sustained pressure — a finding reinforcing the analytical case for preserving Indonesia's middle-ground posture.

Acharya (2017) is among the most rigorous critics of ASEAN centrality as a concept, arguing that it has become "ambitious, ambiguous and impractical" since the mid-2000s and that the organisation has struggled to convert procedural centrality into substantive regional leadership. His scepticism cuts directly at this article's first mechanism: if ASEAN centrality is more aspiration than operational reality, the brokerage function attributed to Indonesian non-alignment may be similarly nominal. The response this article offers is not to contest his diagnosis of ASEAN's procedural limits but to distinguish between the institution's performance under stress and its structural condition in the absence of its non-aligned anchor. Acharya documents how ASEAN centrality has been eroded; he does not address what would replace it, or how much faster that erosion would accelerate if Indonesia ceased to provide the convening credibility that holds the institution together in its weakest moments. Even his sceptical assessment affirms that ASEAN retains institutional relevance precisely

because no alternative regional architecture has emerged — and that alternative would be no more likely to emerge following Indonesian alignment. What would change is the rate of deterioration of the existing architecture. Emmers (2018) reaches a parallel conclusion: whatever the limitations of ASEAN neutrality in practice, the regional grouping's preference for insulating itself from great power rivalry remains a live institutional commitment. Remove the anchor that holds this posture in place — Jakarta's studied abstention from bloc commitment — and even an imperfect equilibrium becomes unsustainable. Stability, in a period of systemic great power competition, is a collective good. The region cannot afford to lose it.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1. Restatement of the Argument

This article has argued that Indonesia's bebas aktif doctrine is not merely a national foreign policy preference but a constitutive mechanism that stabilises the Southeast Asian regional order. Through three interconnected channels — authoritative brokerage within ASEAN, deliberate non-commitment that deters great power escalation, and its anchoring effect on the region's geopolitical centre — Indonesian non-alignment performs a function that extends well beyond Jakarta's borders. The doctrine creates political space for smaller states to hedge, preserves the institutional coherence of ASEAN's consensus-based architecture, and imposes uncertainty costs on both Washington and Beijing that moderate their behaviour in ways neither would independently choose.

What makes this argument analytically distinctive is its framing. Previous scholarship has asked whether bebas aktif serves Indonesia's national interest; this article asks whether its removal would harm the regional system as a whole. The answer, demonstrated through counterfactual analysis, is that it would — and it would do so regardless of alignment direction. This asymmetry is significant: it means that the structural value of Indonesian non-alignment cannot be held hostage to any particular bilateral relationship or partisan preference. It is a regional asset with a value that exists independently of Jakarta's intentions. Anwar (2018) was right to observe that Indonesia desires strategic autonomy not only for itself but for its immediate environment. What this article has demonstrated is that the environment, in turn, depends on Indonesia's autonomy for its own stability — and that the doctrine's value

lies precisely in what it holds open: access, credibility, and optionality across both great power orbits simultaneously.

4.2. Summary of Evidence

Each of the three mechanisms survived counterfactual scrutiny. As a recognised broker within ASEAN, Indonesia's non-aligned status has been the enabling condition for multilateral diplomatic frameworks such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific — a document that would have been impossible to negotiate under a Jakarta that had declared alignment with either great power (Hoang, 2022). The mechanism is not merely historical: the Prabowo administration's continued capacity to engage both Washington and Beijing as a credible interlocutor rests on the same non-aligned foundation. As a source of strategic ambiguity, Indonesia's refusal to choose prevents both great powers from assuming the region has been secured, imposing uncertainty costs that moderate escalatory behaviour and sustain conditions for managed competition (Kuik, 2008). This deterrent effect is non-rival: Washington's uncertainty about Jakarta's intentions does not reduce Beijing's, and vice versa. As an anchor for the regional centre of gravity, Indonesia's demographic and economic weight normalises non-alignment as a viable posture for smaller states, providing diplomatic cover that expands the political space for hedging across ASEAN (Goh, 2008). Both counterfactual experiments confirm that removing this anchor produces convergent structural destinations — polarisation, organisational fragmentation, and escalation dynamics — regardless of alignment direction.

4.3. Normative Implication

If the preceding analysis is correct, it carries a normative implication that Southeast Asian policymakers have been slow to make explicit: Indonesian non-alignment should not be viewed as exceptionalism or strategic timidity, and the analytical case for sustaining it should actively shape how regional actors respond to greater pressure on Jakarta's posture.

External pressure to frame Indonesia's non-alignment as fence-sitting or free-riding should be resisted. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, substantially shaped by Indonesian diplomatic initiative, represents the most durable institutional expression of *bebas aktif* in multilateral form, and sustaining it requires active endorsement from ASEAN members rather than passive acquiescence. Szalwinski

(2023) observes that Indo-Pacific visions remain plural and contested, and that the region's capacity to navigate competing frameworks rests on the diplomatic space created by states that refuse to endorse any single vision as authoritative — space that only a non-aligned Indonesia can anchor with the legitimacy both great powers will accept.

Defence cooperation arrangements with Jakarta are most durable when calibrated to preserve rather than erode the non-aligned posture that makes Indonesia a credible regional partner. Bilateral frameworks perceived as functional alignment — whether by China, by ASEAN partners, or by Indonesia's own domestic audience — erode precisely the convening credibility that makes Indonesia valuable to the regional order. Anwar (2019) demonstrates that the China–Indonesia relationship has been managed most productively when Jakarta maintained clear non-aligned principles, and that its stability is contingent upon Indonesia's refusal to convert economic interdependence into strategic alignment. The same logic applies symmetrically to U.S. engagement: the structural value of the partnership lies in the partner's autonomy, not its incorporation. Emmers (2018) offers a clear warning here: ASEAN neutrality has already been partially eroded by member states prioritising bilateral accommodation at the expense of collective impartiality, a pattern that will intensify if the institutional anchor of Indonesian non-alignment is weakened.

Underlying both dispositions is a more fundamental recognition: Indonesian non-alignment is not Jakarta's gift to the region but the region's structural inheritance, one that every category of state depends upon in ways the counterfactual analysis has made clear. Roberts (2017) warned that the South China Sea dispute carries the capacity to fracture ASEAN if managed poorly. Preserving Indonesia's capacity to mediate, rather than drawing it toward alignment with one side of the dispute, is the single most consequential investment the region can make. This is not a counsel of passivity. It is a recognition that Indonesia's strategic value to the region lies not in the power it deploys, but in the alignment it withholds.

4.4. Forward-Looking Reflection

Pressure to align will intensify. As U.S.–China rivalry deepens and the costs of deliberate ambiguity grow, both great powers will increase their inducements to

uncommitted states to declare their loyalties. The analysis presented in this article suggests that this temptation must be resisted — not out of ideological attachment to non-alignment as a Cold War inheritance, but because the alternatives produce outcomes that are measurably and categorically worse for every actor in the system. Bebas aktif will need to adapt, as it has adapted before: from Hatta's Cold War formulation through Natalegawa's dynamic equilibrium to whatever operational form the Prabowo era demands (Anwar, 2018; Wicaksana, 2023). The content will change. The structural logic should not.

4.5. Sustaining the Balance: A Shared Regional Responsibility

The analysis presented in this article carries implications that extend beyond academic observation. If bebas aktif functions as a regional public good — and the counterfactual evidence demonstrates that it does — then its continuity is not Jakarta's burden alone. It is a shared inheritance whose preservation depends on the deliberate choices of every actor in the regional system.

For ASEAN member states, the starting point is recognition. The institutional space that Indonesian non-alignment sustains — the space within which smaller states hedge, ASEAN's consensus architecture functions, and neither great power can assume the region has been secured — does not maintain itself. It is sustained through active endorsement. Treating the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific as a living framework rather than a declaratory document, resisting the migration of security questions away from regional consensus into bilateral channels, and collectively affirming the value of ASEAN centrality in moments of great power pressure: these are the expressions of that endorsement (Hoang, 2022).

For Jakarta, the analysis suggests that non-alignment is most effective when it is purposeful rather than passive. The brokerage ceiling exposed by Phnom Penh and the Five-Point Consensus experience points not toward the abandonment of the broker's role but toward its more active exercise — deploying Indonesia's positional authority to drive Code of Conduct negotiations, to institutionalise crisis management within the ASEAN Regional Forum, and to shape regional agendas rather than simply moderate them (Putra et al., 2024). The doctrine's history demonstrates that adaptation has always been its strength; dynamic equilibrium was not a retreat from bebas aktif but its evolution. The Prabowo era invites a further evolution — from

reactive equidistance toward proactive agenda-setting that converts non-alignment from a defensive posture into a source of constructive regional leadership.

For the great powers themselves, the analysis offers a counterintuitive insight: Indonesia's value as an interlocutor derives from the very quality that makes it an imperfect ally. A Jakarta that has declared alignment is strategically useful to one power and strategically lost to the other; a Jakarta that maintains principled independence is strategically available to both. Bilateral defence and economic frameworks calibrated to preserve that independence — rather than to erode it incrementally across a regional legibility threshold — serve the long-term interests of Washington and Beijing more reliably than the short-term gains of courtship (Anwar, 2019; Emmers, 2018).

The energy dependencies exposed by the 2026 Strait of Hormuz closure add material urgency to this broader argument. Regional coordination on energy security — reserve-sharing arrangements, accelerated renewable transitions, the long-discussed Trans-ASEAN Gas Pipeline — would reduce the leverage that external shocks and great power economic pressure can exercise over governments whose constrained strategic optionality the essay has documented. Structural economic resilience and political non-alignment are not separate agendas; the former is the material foundation the latter requires (Centre for Strategic and International Studies Indonesia, 2025; Denmark & Mulvenon, 2010).

None of this is guaranteed. The pressures documented in this article are real, intensifying, and unlikely to abate. But the analysis does suggest that the regional balance is not merely a structural condition that exists independently of human agency — it is a condition that human agency can choose to sustain. Indonesia has provided the architecture. The region now faces the question of whether it understands what that architecture is worth, and whether it has the collective will to preserve it.

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6. AUTHORS' NOTE

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