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No. 060/2025 dated 26 May 2025

ASEAN Is Indonesia's Map – It Is Time to Navigate It

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SYNOPSIS

Amid the uncertainty arising from a fractured global order, Indonesia's foreign policy must strategically prioritise its core geographic and regional centrality, allowing no distractions from geographically distant concerns.

COMMENTARY

The world is entering a new era where the foundations of globalisation are buckling under the pressure of US tariffs. There is a sense now, as there was in the late 1980s, that the international system and America's position therein are nearing a historical watershed.

Amid such volatility, countries may be tempted to reposition themselves in preparation for unipolarity's predicted denouement. Perhaps that is the current thinking in Jakarta as we reach the dawn of a new era. Having just recently expanded its global reach by joining BRICS, the intergovernmental grouping initially involving Brazil, Russia, India and China, Indonesia is widely seen as a rising force in the Global South, a new pole in an evolving multipolar world.

Such distractions may account for Indonesian Foreign Minister Sugiono's lack of a substantive statement for an Indonesian vision for ASEAN in his annual statement on 10 January. This omission raised [alarm bells in Indonesia](#) over its commitment to ASEAN as a cornerstone of its foreign policy. For the uncertain global order should prompt a different course, one that turns inward towards Indonesia's immediate region. Indonesia must re-examine its geography and the strategic weight it holds at the heart of Southeast Asia.

A Look Around the Neighbourhood

[Geography](#) has always shaped the way nations engage with the world, but this fact is not always obvious, given how international relations are discussed.

The physical realities of a country's location, including its borders and proximity to trade routes or conflict zones, quietly influence everything, from economic strategy to security choices. A state with long shorelines and access to key maritime passages is bound to play a different role in global trade than one that is landlocked and isolated.

Yet, too often, geography gets sidelined. Attention usually shifts to flashier variables such as ideology. However, ignoring geography does not make it go away. It continues to be the setting on which all foreign policy plays out, whether it is acknowledged or not.

Indonesia's location, straddling vital sea routes and serving as a gateway between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, inherently positions it as a natural facilitator of trade and regional connectivity. This is not just about access to globalisation; it is about controlling and sustaining the network of exchanges that sustain regional prosperity.

As one of ASEAN's founding members – alongside Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore – Indonesia has long internalised a “mental map” that centres Southeast Asia as its strategic and moral sphere. This spatial consciousness, shaped by geography and history alike, has informed Jakarta's enduring preference for multilateralism.

Rooted in the values of the 1955 Bandung Conference (Asian African Conference), which are non-alignment, peaceful coexistence and the rejection of domination, Indonesia has historically sought to project leadership not through hegemony but through facilitation.

This long-held regional ambition is not merely a legacy; it should be a compass that navigates Indonesia's foreign objectives. Indonesia must resist the pull to abandon it in favour of more diffuse global ambition.



President Prabowo Subianto arrived in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to attend the 46th ASEAN Summit on 26–27 May 2025. *Image source: [BPMI Setpres/Laily Rachev](#).*

A Legacy of Trading States

The reciprocal [tariffs](#) announced by President Trump earlier this year have severely impacted Southeast Asia. The tariffs range from 32% to 49% on nations like Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia, targeting what the Trump administration deems unfair trade practices. This move threatens to unravel ASEAN's fragile trade dynamics.

More significantly, the steep tariffs imposed on Chinese exports risk disrupting global supply chains and could severely impact Southeast Asia's manufacturing sectors as the region plays a crucial intermediary role in global trade, particularly between the United States and China.

In response, ASEAN may be compelled to accelerate internal trade agreements and deepen regional economic integration to safeguard against external trade shocks and enhance its economic resilience.

Centuries before the formation of ASEAN, Southeast Asia was a thriving region of trade and cultural exchange. Maritime trade routes, guided by the seasonal monsoon winds, connected port cities across the Indian and Pacific Oceans, enabling the region to build a dynamic network of cooperation. The flow of spices, textiles and ideas was not only intended for economic gain but was also a means of forging alliances and establishing a sense of shared regional identity.

This historical role as a collection of trading states meant that Southeast Asia could seamlessly evolve into a variegated region of diverse social forms and political economies able to adapt to a succession of world order types, from the colonial era, the Pacific War, the Cold War and the post-Vietnam War epoch.

The latest manifestation of world order in the 1980s was the result of a globalisation of ideas, finance and production. This process, rooted in American security guarantees, was driven first by Japan and now a China-centred production structure revolving around decentralised production networks in a variety of exporting Southeast Asian states.

However, the global map is redrawing itself again today. Rules-based globalisation, once anchored in US hegemony, is fragmenting. Trade is no longer universally liberal; blocs are returning, supply chains are realigning, and strategic autonomy is the new currency of economic diplomacy.

In this era of uncertainty, ASEAN must stay the course and remain an example of open regionalism by promoting trade and investment liberalisation, with Indonesia working with its ASEAN neighbours to drive this process. It is crucial to emphasise the preservation of the rules-based international trading order for the sake of maintaining regional stability within the region.

The challenge now is not whether ASEAN has potential; it does. The question is whether Indonesia is willing to reinvest in that vision. APEC, the Asia-Pacific economic forum, is fading. A US-led globalisation is no longer a given. While China's influence grows, ASEAN need not become an appendage to either pole.

The region should now aim to chart its own economic pathway anchored in the value of open markets, resilient supply chains and intra-regional trade that is not just reactive to great powers but proactive in defining its future. ASEAN must decide whether to become a passive node in someone else's supply chain or to actively shape its own.

Natural Keeper of The Region

Indonesia views its place in international relations through the concept of concentric circles. At the centre lies Indonesia itself, followed by ASEAN as the immediate outer ring, and the Asia-Pacific region as the outer ring further beyond. This structure reflects Indonesia's approach to security: prioritising its own stability, then extending to ASEAN, and finally to the broader regional architecture.

Rooted in the Javanese concept of *mandala*, this idea posits that the security of the immediate outer ring – ASEAN, in this case – directly impacts the security of the innermost circle, i.e., Indonesia. ASEAN, therefore, is Indonesia's natural region.

Amid the shifting global order, this mental geography should guide Indonesia back to its immediate surroundings. Indonesia's archipelagic position offers both the leverage and the responsibility to ensure that Southeast Asia is not a periphery to distant power blocs but a core region shaping its own destiny.

The rise of BRICS is significant, but it should not divert Indonesia's attention from the region it helped to build. Geography, after all, matters, as reflected in Indonesia's mandala concept of security.

Indonesia does not need to wait for a new global order to be handed down from Washington or Beijing. It has the tools, the geography and the institutional memory to help build one. And it should start by reviving the importance of ASEAN. Reasserting ASEAN's relevance is not something new but is born from the very map Indonesia has long drawn for itself.

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