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Strategic culture and Indonesian approach to maritime "rules-based order"

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Indonesia's maritime policies have been made within the context of strategic culture, in which two strains, shaped by different interpretations of its geography and strategic history, coexist in tension. One strain is inward-looking, driven by a sense of vulnerability and focused narrowly on Indonesia's territorial integrity as an archipelagic state and domestic development agenda. The other is outward-looking, driven by Indonesia's sense of regional entitlement. Indonesia's cautious approach to fully endorsing the "rules-based order" narrative in the South China Sea and broader Indo-Pacific should be seen within the interplay of these two strains. Indonesia views the "rules-based order" narrative cautiously, as it implies an increased presence of external powers in the region that could potentially undermine Indonesia's strategic autonomy and regional leadership.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- While Indonesia's specific maritime policies are susceptible to changes in domestic politics, its long-term strategic behaviour tends to oscillate between the inward- and outward-looking poles of strategic culture. Any excessive tilt toward one pole tends to trigger self-correction mechanisms.
- For external powers with stakes in Southeast Asia, like Australia, Indonesia's strategic culture presents a dilemma. On the one hand, Australia recognises Indonesia's importance as a gateway to deeper engagement with Asia and a key partner in regional security. On the other hand, the primacy of the U.S. alliance in Australia's strategic policies means that, at times, Indonesia will be sidelined in Canberra's broader strategic calculations.
- Given Indonesia's geography and growing strategic role, it remains important for Australia to engage with Southeast Asia in a manner that does not undermine Indonesia's leadership or be

perceived as compromising its territorial integrity.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the concept of a "rules-based order" has been prominently advocated by the U.S. and so-called "like-minded states", often in reference to the established order they seek to maintain in the South China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific region. This order is underpinned by U.S. military predominance in the region and adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as the basis for determining maritime entitlements, sovereign rights, jurisdiction, legitimate interests over maritime zones, and legal frameworks that governs activities at sea.[1] Commonly seen as challenging this order is China's alternative and self-centred interpretations of international law.[2] China's disregard for the 2016 South China Sea arbitration ruling—which invalidated its sovereignty claims and "historic rights" assertions in the South China Sea—and its increasingly assertive employment of "grey zone" tactics exemplify this challenge.[3]

Despite escalating challenges from China as it extends its territorial assertions further south into the South China Sea (where the infamous nine-dash line overlaps with Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) off the Natuna Islands), Indonesia has shown restraint in extensively using the term "rules-based order" to address its maritime interests in the region. While Indonesia consistently stresses the importance of governing maritime claims in line with UNCLOS, its declaratory policies largely ignore the "rules-based order" terminology. Indonesia also shows uneasiness towards regular freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) conducted by the U.S. Navy designed to reinforce the "rules-based order" narrative by challenging China's excessive claims. The term "rules-based order" is notably missing in Indonesia's strategic documents. Although Indonesia has used the term slightly more frequently since the release of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), the formulation of which Indonesia played a key role in, references to "rules-based regional architecture" and "rules-based framework" in AOIP remain sparse and not central to its overarching theme.

This paper argues that Indonesia's strategic behaviour in the maritime domain is deeply influenced by its strategic culture. Dominant interpretations of Indonesia's geography and strategic history have given rise to two strains of strategic culture that coexist in tension. The inward-looking strain reflects Indonesia's sense of vulnerability. It narrowly focuses on safeguarding Indonesia's territorial integrity as an archipelagic state and advancing the domestic development agenda. In contrast, the outward-looking strain reflects Indonesia's self-perception of being a "great maritime nation", characterised by a sense of entitlement to regional leadership. Indonesia's reluctance to fully endorse the "rules-based order" narrative—viewed as a pretext for greater external power involvement in the region and tantamount to sidelining Indonesia's leadership role in the region—should be understood through the interplay of these two strains.

Beyond an academic exercise, this inquiry is significant for two key reasons. First, Indonesia's growing political, economic, and military posture underscores its importance as a key player in regional order. For Australia, Indonesia is a bridge to deeper engagement with Asia and a vital partner in maintaining regional security and stability. Understanding Indonesia's response to the "rules-based order"—a "visible microcosm" of its broader approach to regional security, threats against it, and its preferred methods to defend it—is therefore important.[4]

Second, the rapid and unpredictable shifts in international politics recently highlight the need for such an analysis. From uncertainty surrounding the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy following President Donald Trump's return to power, to Indonesia's recent reversal of its longstanding South China Sea policy under President Prabowo Subianto, the strategic environment appears increasingly fluid and unpredictable.[5] The analysis of strategic culture offers a valuable framework for understanding state policies by situating them within the broader, long-term, cultural context in which decisions are made.

The analytical component of this paper is divided into three main parts. First, the conceptual section defines the "rules-based order" concept and clarifies the distinction between it as an objective, empirical reality and a constructed strategic narrative. It also clarifies the role of strategic culture as the underlying context of decision-making and examines the sources of Indonesia's dual strains of maritime strategic culture. Second, the paper examines key moments in Indonesia's maritime policy to illustrate how Indonesian policymakers formulate maritime policies within a long-standing strategic cultural context. Third, it applies these insights to explain Indonesia's ambivalence toward the "rules-based order" narrative. A brief note on the recent joint statement between Indonesia and China concerning the joint development plan in the "overlapping claims" area will be provided before the conclusion section, which reiterates the short- and long-term policy implications of the findings.

DEFINING RULES-BASED ORDER AND STRATEGIC CULTURE

RULES-BASED ORDER: BETWEEN OBJECTIVE REALITY AND STRATEGIC NARRATIVE

It is important to distinguish between the rules-based order as an objective or empirical reality and the "rules-based order" as a constructed strategic narrative. Empirically, at its most basic level, order connotes patterned or structured relationships among units.[6] He and Feng define order through its "emergent properties" arising from interactions among political units built on three pillars: *power, institutions, and norms*.[7] The maritime rules-based order can thus be understood as structured inter-state relations grounded in three pillars: the primacy of U.S. naval power, adherence to international laws and institutions (especially UNCLOS), and a set of norms, such as freedom of navigation, sovereignty, and non-intervention. This status quo order has deep historical roots: freedom of navigation doctrine dates back to at least the 17th century, power configurations with the U.S. primacy were largely established after World War II, and UNCLOS was codified in 1982. This order, with its pillars of power, institutions, and norms, forms the foundation of the status quo that the U.S. and its allies have sought to uphold in the Indo-Pacific.

In addition to "rules-based order" being an objective, empirical reality, the term has also taken on new meaning as a strategic narrative. This narrative emerged mainly in response by the U.S. and the so-called "like-minded states" to China's rising influence and, to a lesser extent, Russia's renewed assertiveness in Europe.[8] In this sense, the "rules-based order" is not merely a neutral framework of structured inter-state relations. Instead, the very use of the concept increasingly reflects an attempt by status quo powers to preserve their influence and leadership. As Byrne suggests, the "rules-based order" concept represents not just a set of shared norms but also a contest over leadership and agenda-setting within the Indo-Pacific's regional order.[9] This paper deals with "rules-based order" in this latter sense.

The prominence of the term "rules-based order" in public discourse started in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Although the U.S. is now the major proponent of this concept, it was initially a latecomer.[10] In Australia, for instance, the term first appeared in Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 2008 National Security Statement, and was further emphasised in the 2009 Defence White Paper (DWP). It quickly became central to Australia's defence policy, especially in the 2016 DWP, where it was mentioned 56 times.[11] Despite government changes, the term has remained a key feature of Australia's defence strategy (as seen in the 2023 Defence Strategic Review and the 2024 National Defence Strategy), which highlights the ADF's mission to collaborate with partners in securing the Indo-Pacific and upholding the rules-based order.

Similarly, under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan promoted the rules-based order as a strategic goal focused on maritime security and freedom of navigation.[12] Japan's 2014 Diplomatic Bluebook defined maintaining a "maritime order governed by law and rules, not by coercion" as a national interest.[13] In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration has embraced the language of the rules-based order since 2015 as a tool to counterbalance China, though with a unique emphasis on sovereignty equality and inclusivity.[14] This more nuanced approach, which distinguishes India's conception of the order from that of its Quad partners, was aimed at winning the support of Southeast Asian countries.

The concept of "rules-based order" in U.S. foreign policy became central during President Obama's administration, particularly with the Pivot to Asia strategy. This strategy marked a realignment from the Middle East and Europe to the Indo-Pacific, where key U.S. interests—economic, military, and diplomatic—were perceived to now reside. The 2022 U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, which emphasised support for rules-based governance in the maritime domain, formalised this approach.[15] The strategy highlighted the importance of working with "any country", regardless of size, that supports a "rules-based order". The 2022 National Security Strategy further reinforced

this and asserted that the U.S. would seek to strengthen partnerships with states that align with its vision for an open, inclusive, and rule-governed Indo-Pacific region.[16]

As a strategic narrative, "rules-based order" is an actively promoted vision of global governance where all states are expected to adhere to certain standards of behaviour, with the hope of creating more stable and predictable behaviour in the maritime domain.[17] Certain norms, such as freedom of navigation and overflights, or the belief that certain types of activities are permissible in certain maritime zones, are among the behaviours this order regulates. In the South China Sea, this version of the order, backed by U.S. naval primacy in the region, conflicts with an alternative set of norms primarily advanced by China. Beijing promotes concepts such as "historic rights" to maritime zones, more restrictive use of those, and a stretched interpretation of the archipelagic baseline regime.[18] These expansive territorial claims by China and increasingly assertive measures to impose them have prompted the U.S. to actively promote the "rules-based order" narrative as a counterbalance.

STRATEGIC CULTURE: CONTEXT OR DETERMINANT?

This paper follows Colin Gray's definition of strategic culture as "the persisting socially transmitted ideas, attitudes, traditions, habits of mind, and preferred methods of operation that are more or less specific to a particular geographically based security community that has had a necessarily unique historical experience".[19] Following Gray and the first generation of strategic culture scholarship, this paper does not argue that strategic culture is the determinant factor that single-handedly shapes Indonesia's maritime policies.[20] Indeed, as suggested by recent works, attempts to construct monocausal, testable explanations of state behaviour based solely on strategic culture have been largely abandoned, and the strategic culture scholarship's preoccupation with the culture-behaviour nexus has been criticised.[21] As Gray himself acknowledged, there is vastly more to strategy and strategic behaviour than culture alone.[22]

Rather than explanatory causality, strategic culture provides a framework for understanding state behaviour.[23] It constitutes the cognitive and normative context in which policymakers interpret strategic challenges and opportunities, both domestic and international, and limits the range of appropriate responses.[24] While political, economic, and strategic circumstances obviously influence policy, they do so within the constraints of long-standing cultural predispositions that influence which policy options appear legitimate, desirable, or feasible to decision-makers at any given moment. No policy or strategy can be divorced from the cultural framework that conditions how threats and opportunities are perceived. As Gray argued:

> *Everything a security community does, if not a manifestation of strategic culture, is at least an example of behaviour affected by culturally shaped, or encultured, people, organisations, procedures, and weapons.*[25]

Following the definition of strategic culture above, while culture is not entirely static, it does not change easily. Once established, it evolves slowly or in response to seismic events, such as defeat in war or transformative historical moments that reshape national identity.[26] Instead, strategic culture is reproduced by individuals and institutions acting as cultural agents.[27] This persistence explains consistencies in state behaviour even when policies are implemented decades apart by different leaders under different circumstances.

This paper also builds on the growing literature on Indonesian strategic culture. It is not a novel argument that cultural factors play a role in shaping Indonesia's foreign and security policies. Seminal works by Weinstein and Leifer have long argued that generations of Indonesian leaders hold a distinct worldview regarding interstate politics and Indonesia's place within it.[28] Anwar's 1996 study introduced the concept of strategic culture into Indonesian studies, arguing that Indonesia has historically adopted a comprehensive approach to security beyond the military dimension.[29] More recent scholarship examines how strategic culture influences Indonesia's response to the contemporary strategic environment. Sulaiman argues that Indonesia's underbalancing behaviour toward China can be explained by its strategic culture, which consists of three major elements: a constructed narrative that reinforces a perception of fragile national unity, the legacy of armed resistance for independence in which the military was depicted as playing a prominent role, and a tradition of nonalignment in foreign policy.[30] Arif and Kurniawan highlight that Indonesia's strategic history, dominated by land-based military operations with limited experience in naval warfare, has paradoxically allowed the primacy of the Indonesian Navy in the country's maritime security governance.[31]

What unites these works is their shared emphasis on Indonesia's unique geographical characteristics and historical experiences, particularly during its formative years, as the primary sources of its strategic culture. However, these factors have been interpreted differently by various strategic culture agents, giving rise to two coexisting strains of strategic culture.

INDONESIA'S DUAL MARITIME STRATEGIC CULTURE AND KEY HISTORICAL ENGAGEMENTS

This paper argues that Indonesia's strategic culture consists of two distinct strains: inward-looking and outward-looking. Both are rooted in Indonesia's geography and formative historical experiences. However, these shared sources have led to dual interpretations, which successive generations of Indonesia's strategic community members—civilian and military decision-makers responsible for national security policy—have been socialised into and continue to reproduce. The inward-looking strain fosters a sense of vulnerability, a narrow focus on the territorial integrity of Indonesia as an archipelagic state, and suspicion of foreign powers' presence in the region. The outward-looking strain reflects Indonesia's self-perception as a regional leader, expressed through its role in shaping and maintaining regional order, primarily through its leadership in ASEAN.

SECURING THE ARCHIPELAGO: THE ROOTS OF INWARD-LOOKING STRATEGIC CULTURE

The inward-looking strategic culture is rooted in the interpretation of Indonesia's geography as a source of weakness and vulnerability. While Indonesia is now recognised as an archipelagic state, where its islands and surrounding waters form a unified territory enclosed by archipelagic baselines, this was not always the case. Upon formal transfer of sovereignty from the Dutch in 1949, Indonesia's maritime boundaries were still governed by a 1939 colonial ordinance, which granted the new republic only a three-mile territorial sea around each of its scattered islands.

As Djalal notes, this ordinance resulted in two issues: fragmented territorial compartments and the presence of pockets of open sea between the nation's islands, which were regarded as international waters in all legal senses and purpose.[32] This fragmentation raised concerns over territorial integrity and the ability to control and secure maritime spaces.

This sense of vulnerability became more pronounced in the 1950s and 1960s, as the central government faced separatist movements and lingering Dutch control over West New Guinea. Some rebel groups received external support, which exploited Indonesia's fragmented maritime space to smuggle arms. The suspicions of foreign subversion were confirmed when U.S. weapons were discovered in Sumatra, and a U.S. pilot was shot down over Ambon.[33] Meanwhile, despite the formal transfer of sovereignty in 1949, the Dutch navy continued operating in Indonesian waters. This led to several skirmishes with the nascent Indonesian navy.[34] Lacking sufficient naval power, Indonesian leaders perceived Dutch naval activities in its waters as both a security threat and a national embarrassment. This inability to challenge Dutch naval supremacy persisted until the West New Guinea dispute was resolved diplomatically in 1962–1963.

These events left a lasting sense of insecurity among subsequent generations of Indonesian leaders, both civilian and military. For the army, which dominated Indonesian politics under the New Order regime, these experiences led to a doctrine focused on internal security threats, land-based counterinsurgency, and a massive territorial structure.[35] In maritime strategy, Indonesia's strategic history reinforced the priority of controlling navigation and resources in its territorial waters, archipelagic waters, and the EEZ. This inward-looking focus is evident in the navy's dominance in maritime security governance, where operations and resources prioritise law enforcement in domestic waters over projecting power abroad, traditional missions, or high-intensity operations against foreign navies.[36] Most importantly, it manifests as suspicion toward foreign initiatives that might increase the presence of external actors in or near Indonesia's waters.

The Indonesian government responded to this insecurity by declaring in 1957 that

> *all waters, surrounding, between and connecting the islands constituting the Indonesian state, regardless of their extension or breath, are integral parts of the territory of the Indonesian state and therefore, parts of the internal or national waters which are under the exclusive sovereignty of the Indonesian state.*[37]

Securing international recognition of this archipelagic concept, as contained in the Djuanda Declaration, shaped Indonesia's maritime diplomacy for the subsequent decades, primarily through the United Nations Conferences on the Law of the Sea. In addition, Indonesia actively pursued boundary delimitations with neighbouring countries, basing its stance on archipelagic principles.[38] These efforts culminated in the adoption of UNCLOS in 1982, which solidified Indonesia's legal status as an archipelagic state.

The adoption of UNCLOS was a major diplomatic victory for Indonesia, as it codified the archipelagic state principles that allowed Indonesia to establish full sovereignty over the waters and airspace between its islands. Indonesian leaders took great pride in this achievement. As Arif Havas Oegroseno, a maritime legal scholar and the current deputy foreign minister, aptly put it, UNCLOS for Indonesia represented "the largest acquisition of territory in the world without even shooting a single bullet".[39] This highlights how deeply inward-looking strategic culture influences Indonesia's maritime policy. One of Indonesia's most consequential diplomatic and norms-setting achievements was, in fact, primarily driven by unilateral, and arguably narrow, concerns over sovereignty consolidation and territorial integrity. Informed by the historical memory of maritime vulnerability, policymakers saw archipelagic state recognition as essential to preventing territorial fragmentation.

OUTWARD-LOOKING MARITIME CULTURE: ASEAN LEADERSHIP AND REGIONAL ORDER

However, the same geographical features that produce a sense of vulnerability also give rise to the second strain of Indonesia's strategic culture, which is more outward-looking. Situated at the heart of the Indo-Pacific, Indonesia's archipelago encompasses critical sea lanes for global shipping. Key straits, including Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Ombai-Wetar, connect the Indian and Pacific Oceans, giving Indonesia a crucial geopolitical role to ensure uninterrupted flow of global maritime traffic through these waters. This sense of duty, as an Indonesian legal scholar noted, reflects Indonesia's self-perception as a guardian of regional, if not global, maritime order.[40] Beyond the strategic location, Indonesia's abundant natural resources and vast population further reinforce a national self-image of a great nation, entitled to respect and a leadership role in regional, if not global, affairs.

As with the inward-looking strain, Indonesia's formative historical experiences also reinforced its outward-looking orientation. Alongside the acute sense of vulnerability, the struggle for independence fostered a strategic culture that emphasises a sense of entitlement among the founding elites who believed that, unlike other Southeast Asian nations, Indonesia's independence was more authentic, as it was achieved through both diplomatic and armed struggle, without maintaining ties to its former colonial ruler.[41] For early Indonesian foreign policy elites, regional leadership was not just about exerting regional influence but also an assertion of national identity and independence, which positioned the country as a pioneer in the fight against foreign domination.[42]

While one could argue that this belief among Indonesia's founding elites has faded over time, evidence suggests otherwise. The outward-looking strain of strategic culture has persisted, as contemporary policymakers continue to emphasise Indonesia's unique struggle for independence as a source of national identity and legitimacy. This enduring belief is reflected in official documents, such as the 2007 Defence Doctrine, which states:

> *The success of gaining independence by driving out colonial rulers with far more modern weaponry elevated Indonesia's status as a heroic nation, respected and recognized by other nations around the world. This achievement also positioned Indonesia as one of the few nations whose independence was not granted by another country or given as a gift but was truly the result of the struggle of all Indonesian people, blessed by God Almighty.* [43]

One manifestation of Indonesia's outward-looking strategic culture is its expectation to be consulted on and involved in major regional developments.[44] This expectation is not only an objective necessity, given Indonesia's size and role in the region, but also a reflection of its self-perception as a regional leader. Indonesia's perceived regional hegemonic role in maritime Southeast Asia and its long-standing position as a mediator and informal leader within ASEAN reinforce this view. Indonesia has long felt entitled to a "natural leadership" role within ASEAN, seeing itself as "first among equals", and perceiving its actions as contributing to regional stability and security.[45] This sense of entitlement also fuels Indonesia's discomfort with external powers introducing agendas that could undermine regional autonomy and its leadership. Central to this vision is Jakarta's aspiration to play a managerial role in organising Southeast Asian relations, independent of external (non-ASEAN) interference.[46]

In the South China Sea, despite being a non-claimant state—with no sovereignty claim over any maritime feature in the region except the Natuna Islands, over which its sovereignty is undisputed—Indonesia has long felt the necessity of leading the establishment of a regional institutional framework to manage potential conflicts. By the late 1980s, tensions began to rise between China and several Southeast Asian countries over territorial disputes in the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagos. Despite not being a direct participant in these disputes, Indonesia took the initiative to address what was seen as a growing risk of conflict between China and the Southeast Asian claimants. An informal workshop process was organised, bringing together representatives from South China Sea coastal states to participate in their personal capacities. The workshop process was successful in fostering a conducive atmosphere for subsequent negotiation and laid the basic principles regarding the behaviour of China and the ASEAN states in the South China Sea.[47]

After over a decade of relative calm, tensions in the South China Sea began rising again in the late 2000s. An ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting in 2012, held against the backdrop of standoffs between China and the Philippines in the Scarborough Shoal, failed to produce a statement—the first such failure in ASEAN history. Once again, despite having no formal obligation, Indonesia went to great lengths to salvage ASEAN unity and credibility.[48] After the meeting, Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa engaged in "shuttle diplomacy", visiting the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Singapore to meet with the leaders within a span of seventy-two hours. This resulted in the ASEAN Six-Point Principles on the South China Sea, which all ASEAN members approved.[49]

These two events (the initiation of the South China Sea workshop process and Natalegawa's "shuttle diplomacy"), occurring decades apart, highlight the persistence of strategic culture in shaping Indonesia's policies. While external and internal dynamics influenced Indonesia's engagement in the South China Sea, they operated within the framework of long-standing strategic-cultural predispositions. By the late 1980s, against the backdrop of the end of the Cold War, the New Order regime was arguably at the peak of its power, with opposition to President Suharto's dominance largely neutralised. The East Timor issue, which had tarnished Indonesia's external image, had also been largely brought under control, at least from Jakarta's perspective. Combined with Indonesia's perceived success in mediating the Cambodian conflict, these factors increased its confidence to pursue a more proactive foreign policy.[50]

In contrast, by the early 2010s, the international and domestic contexts of Indonesia's foreign policymaking were markedly different. Indonesia had undergone a major political transformation in the late 1990s and had emerged as a democracy with a more pluralistic and decentralised political system. More actors were now involved in a more contested and layered foreign policymaking environment.[51] Regionally, the strategic environment had become more complex, with China's rise and the Indo-Pacific increasingly becoming a theatre of great power competition where the US-led order faced growing challenges. Despite these contrasts, Indonesia's engagements in the South China Sea in both cases were driven by a consistent sense of regional leadership entitlement and an enduring preference for multilateralism through ASEAN, which it continues to see as the most legitimate platform for managing tensions and shaping regional order.

In summary, across these historical moments, a clear pattern emerges: Indonesia's maritime policies consistently reflect the interplay between inward- and outward-looking strategic cultural strains, which together form the context of decision-making. Whether asserting archipelagic sovereignty or leading ASEAN diplomacy, Indonesia has engaged with regional order in ways that safeguard its territorial interests while reinforcing its normative leadership role. These two strains are not mutually exclusive but often overlap and interact. While it is possible for certain periods, administrations, or policies to be leaning more toward one, both can coexist and influence decision-making simultaneously.

It is important to note that any excessive tilt toward one strain of strategic culture, either outward- or inward-looking, also tends to trigger self-correction mechanisms. Indonesia's geostrategic position, situated in the midst of competing global interests, has historically prevented it from adopting extreme positions.[52] Under President Yudhoyono, as noted above, Indonesia spent considerable effort asserting its leadership within ASEAN and beyond. In contrast, when Joko Widodo (Jokowi) assumed office in 2014, he criticised Yudhoyono's foreign policy as overly normative. Instead, Jokowi's foreign policy, at least in its early years, was almost entirely driven by domestic economic development and tangible outcomes, including in the maritime domain. As a result, Jokowi's early years saw a retreat from ASEAN leadership and a downplaying of the South China Sea disputes, where Indonesia opted for a more unilateral approach—a move that was heavily criticised by both domestic and international audiences.[53] In response to this criticism, Jokowi gradually shifted course in the latter part of his presidency by revitalising Indonesia's diplomatic leadership role through a number of initiatives. Similar patterns are likely to be seen under the current administration of President Prabowo Subianto.

Furthermore, this cultural framework has been continuously reproduced through discourses, practices, and institutions, both civilian and military. Within the foreign ministry, ASEAN remains to be seen as the "cornerstone" and first concentric circle of Indonesia's foreign policy, reflecting the outward-looking strain. Meanwhile, within the military, long-standing concerns about foreign subversion and territorial vulnerability continue to influence strategic thinking and reinforce the inward-looking outlook. This process of reproduction ensures that strategic culture remains a compelling lens through which Indonesia's contemporary approach to the rules-based order narrative can be understood.

STRATEGIC CULTURE AND INDONESIA'S RESPONSE TO "RULES-BASED ORDER"

The interplay between Indonesia's inward- and outward-looking maritime strategic culture provides a useful lens for understanding its reluctance to fully embrace the collective promotion of the "rules-based order" narrative by the U.S. and its allies. This interplay forms the context in which Indonesia's response to the "rules-based order" narrative is situated. While it is in Indonesia's interest to ensure respect for international law, particularly UNCLOS, it remains cautious of external security frameworks that could undermine its autonomy or ASEAN centrality.

To be fair, the concept of a "rules-based order" is not entirely absent from the lexicon of Indonesian foreign policy. During Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Indonesia in 2018, President Joko Widodo signed the "Statement on Shared Vision on Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific between India and Indonesia". This statement reaffirmed the importance of achieving a free, open, transparent, rules-based, peaceful, prosperous, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. In the context of ASEAN, both President Jokowi and Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi also occasionally emphasised ASEAN's role in upholding a "rules-based regional architecture". However, they lack the emphasis necessary to position them as an overarching theme in Indonesia's approach to regional maritime order.

The term "rules-based order" can hardly be found in the annual press statements by the Indonesian foreign minister in recent years. These statements are among the most authoritative sources for identifying Indonesia's foreign policy priorities, especially in the absence of foreign policy white papers. More importantly, the language of "rules-based order" is also largely absent from the Indonesian Ocean Policy. Released in 2017, the document was regarded as the blueprint of Jokowi's vision to transform Indonesia into a global maritime fulcrum.[54] The absence of the "rules-based order" concept was thus noteworthy.

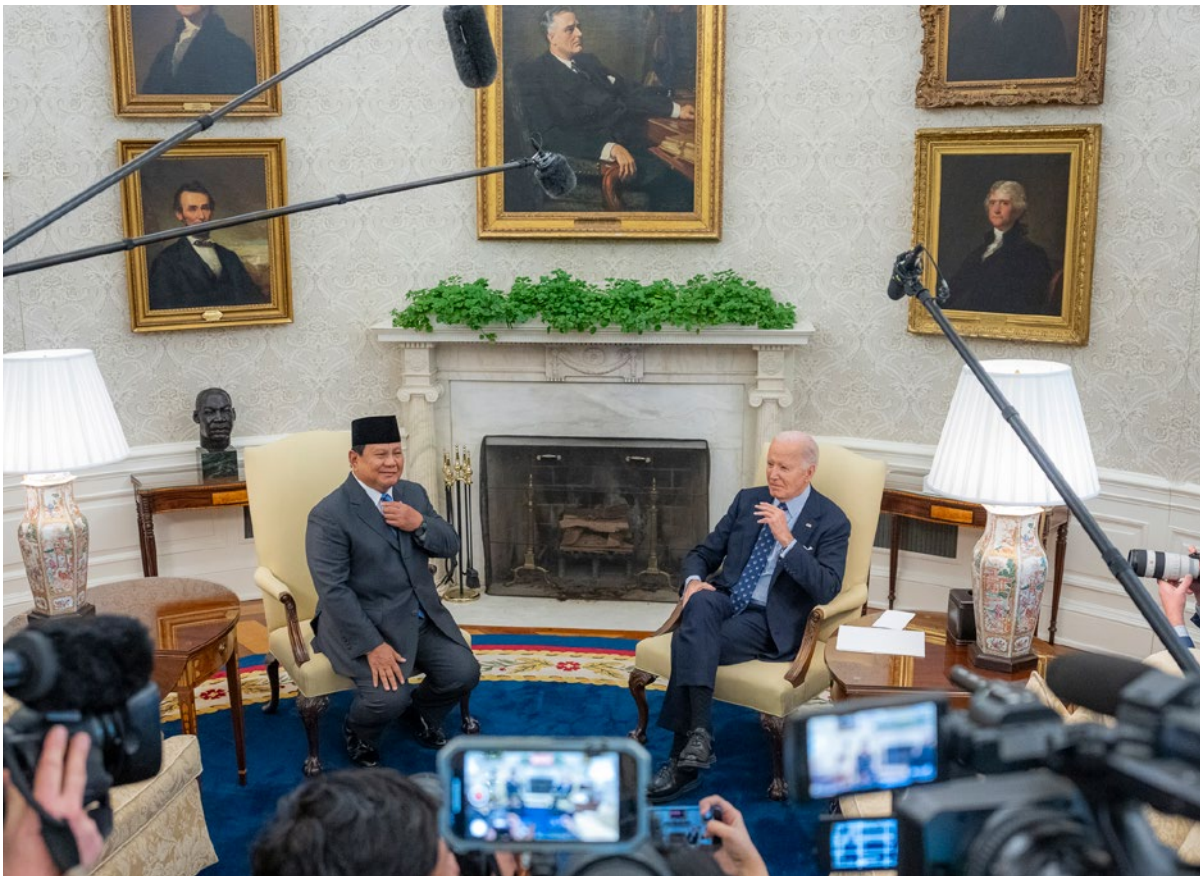
Instead, contemporary official documents continue to reflect the influence of Indonesia's strategic culture in shaping its engagement with regional order. The 2017 Ocean Policy characterises Indonesia's strategic environment in East and Southeast Asia primarily in terms of "tensions" that could potentially become "sources of conflict". However, rather than responding with caution or disengagement, it is notable that Indonesia sees leadership as the natural response to such tensions.

> *For that matter, Indonesia should be able to show its leadership in regional and global maritime areas, enhance bilateral cooperation with strategic countries, and also plays its leadership role in creating security architecture in Asia.*[55]

This outward-looking, leadership-seeking aspiration helps explain why the "rules-based order" narrative struggles to gain traction in Indonesia. From the perspective of Indonesian leaders, aligning too closely with a framework introduced by external powers, one that Indonesia does not control, is perceived as potentially undermining Indonesia's strategic autonomy and its leadership in shaping regional norms. Furthermore, within the context of Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN, the promotion of the "rules-based order" narrative, supported by minilateral alliance architectures such as the Quad and AUKUS, is also seen as a potential threat to ASEAN centrality.[56] Indonesia perceives itself as a leader within ASEAN and views such developments as challenging the organisation's aspiration to be the centre of regional security architecture.

Indonesia's ambivalence toward the "rules-based order" mirrors its initial hesitation in embracing the related concept of the "Indo-Pacific". Early reluctance to adopt the term stemmed from concerns that it could be seen as aligning Indonesia with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, which might alienate China, a key economic partner for Indonesia. However, while this pressure from China likely played a role, from a strategic cultural perspective it is more plausible that Indonesia's reluctance was driven by a desire to prevent the "Indo-Pacific" concept from being co-opted by extra-regional powers in a way that would undermine Indonesia and ASEAN's central role. This sentiment was particularly evident when members of Indonesia's academic and policy circles repeated that Indonesia had long engaged with the "Indo-Pacific" concept before it gained prominence among the U.S. and its allies. Notably, Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa's 2013 proposal for an "Indo-Pacific Treaty of Amity and Cooperation"—an expansion of the ASEAN TAC—was frequently cited as evidence of Indonesia's early efforts to shape the concept on its own terms.[57]

Indonesia began using the term "Indo-Pacific" more frequently after the release of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019. The AOIP, which was drafted primarily by the Indonesian Foreign Ministry, was conceived as ASEAN's response to the competing Indo-Pacific strategies of major powers at the time. It represented ASEAN's effort to establish a common position on the Indo-Pacific discourse and potential areas of cooperation. However, the very fact that Indonesia saw the need to draft such a document highlights its desire to preserve ASEAN centrality amid major power rivalry. Most notably, the AOIP makes only sparse and inconsistent references to maintaining a "rules-based order". This distances the AOIP from the U.S.-led narrative while maintaining room for engagement with China through its emphasis on inclusivity.



At the same time, the inward-looking strategic culture, influenced by the narrow conception of Indonesian maritime interests to safeguard its archipelagic territory, has made Jakarta view the use of the term by the U.S. and its allies with caution. Indonesia, interpreting the "rules-based order" narrative as a euphemism for U.S. dominance in the region, views it as a potential justification for increased military presence that could jeopardise its territorial integrity.[58] This scepticism is consistent with Indonesia's past reactions to initiatives perceived as potentially increasing extra-regional influence on its shores.

In the 1980s and 1990s, for instance, Indonesia actively pursued the formal establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in Southeast Asia. For ASEAN, the idea of a nuclear-weapon-free zone was seen as an interim measure advanced as a component of the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), based on ASEAN's long-standing aspiration to reduce great power intervention in Southeast Asia.[59] From Indonesia's perspective, however, support for the SEANWFZ proposal serves an additional purpose, which is to reinforce the archipelagic principle and further ensure its implementation.[60] The SEANWFZ Treaty and its Protocol, signed in 1995 during Indonesia's ASEAN chairmanship, bound the State Parties not to develop, manufacture, acquire or have control over nuclear weapons; station or transport nuclear weapons by any means; test or use nuclear weapons; and allow in their respective territories any other state to do these acts.[61] Importantly, the treaty affirmed Indonesia's right to regulate navigation through its territorial sea and archipelagic waters, except where governed by established rights such as innocent passage, archipelagic sea lanes passage, or transit passage.[62]

Almost two decades later, similar concerns about the navigation of nuclear-powered vessels through Indonesia's archipelagic waters emerged in response to the announcement of AUKUS, the trilateral security arrangement between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the U.S., which is intended to support the defence of the "rules-based order".[63] Among its key initiatives is the provision of nuclear-powered submarines to be operated by Australia in the coming decades. While AUKUS submarines clearly do not target Indonesia, their navigation depends on passage through Indonesia's strategic choke points.[64] In Jakarta, this raised concerns about undetected foreign submarine activities in Indonesia's archipelagic waters and reinforced Indonesia's vigilance.[65]

Given these strategic implications, Indonesia was aggrieved by the lack of consultation or prior notice about AUKUS, with different parts of the government (including the foreign ministry and parliament) reacting strongly. This frustration was further reinforced by existing commitments and mechanisms, such as the 2006 Lombok Treaty and regular "Two Plus Two" meetings, which are specifically designed to facilitate bilateral security coordination between Indonesia and Australia.[66] However, beyond these immediate explanations, Indonesia's "very negative" initial response to AUKUS also reflects its sense of regional entitlement.[67] Indonesia views consultation on defence and security matters not merely as a diplomatic courtesy but as an affirmation of its regional status and leadership role, although it is also important to note that even within the administration in Australia itself, only a small group was aware of AUKUS before its announcement.[68] Nevertheless, from Jakarta's point of view, the lack of consultation was still seen as something highly regrettable.

Indonesia recognises the convergence of great powers' interests in the region and its responsibility to ensure safe passage through its waters. However, its inward-looking strategic culture drives discomfort with external powers "taking matters into their own hands" in regional security. Therefore, over the years, Jakarta has continued to reject the direct role of external military powers in securing the waters of Southeast Asia.[69] For Indonesia, safeguarding navigation should be the sole responsibility of the littoral states, while external countries are welcome to assist only through the provision of capacity-building and technical support.[70] It is in this context of constant concerns about the increased activities of external powers in and through its waters and adjacent areas—concerns driven by a historically rooted sense of vulnerability—that Indonesia's response to the rules-based order narrative should be understood.

A NOTE ON INDONESIA-CHINA JOINT DEVELOPMENT STATEMENT

Most recently, the role of strategic culture in influencing Indonesia's foreign policy and maritime strategy was reflected in the controversial agreement between Indonesia and China. Merely three weeks into his presidency, President Prabowo Subianto visited Beijing, where he and President Xi Jinping issued a joint statement announcing, among others, that Indonesia and China had reached an "important common understanding on joint development in areas of overlapping claims" and agreed to establish an Inter-Governmental Joint Steering Committee to explore and advance relevant cooperation.[71] By doing so, Prabowo effectively abandoned Indonesia's long-held position on the South China Sea dispute: that Indonesia is not a party to the disputes, as it makes no sovereignty claims over any features in the South China Sea beyond the Natuna Islands, and that Indonesia does not share boundaries with China because the nine-dash line claim has no basis in international law.

Prabowo's decision dealt a significant blow to longstanding efforts to delegitimise China's nine-dash line claim. It reflects an underappreciation of Indonesia's broader strategic interests, which extend beyond its territorial boundaries to include regional leadership in managing potential conflicts in the South China Sea and upholding the entirety of UNCLOS principles, including those that govern maritime delimitations and the archipelagic state concept. Instead, Prabowo's decision appears to have been driven by narrow domestic priorities, primarily the pursuit of cordial relations with Beijing to secure economic concessions to fund domestic programs. While its full implications remain to be seen, if placed in a long-term context using the strategic culture perspective, Prabowo's decision reflects a continuity from the inward-looking foreign policy of his predecessor, Jokowi.

However, it is notable that Prabowo's decision has drawn criticism not only from international actors, including ASEAN members, but also, more importantly, from domestic audiences, particularly foreign policy and international law experts. These critics have described the decision as "contradictory", "reckless", and "dangerous for Indonesia and the region", likening it to a "silent retreat" from Indonesia's traditional position in the South China Sea.[72] This forced Foreign Minister Sugiono to play down the significance of the joint statement, reiterating in his first annual foreign policy speech that Indonesia's diplomacy would continue to advocate for the completion of the code of conduct in the South China Sea.[73] In the context of the oscillation between the two strains of strategic culture discussed in this paper, this backlash highlights a broader pattern: when the government leans too heavily towards one strain, corrective pressures emerge to restore balance.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, the analysis reveals key insights about Indonesia's maritime strategic culture and its influence on Indonesia's ambivalent response toward the "rules-based order" narrative. The main takeaways and policy implications are as follows:

First, strategic culture matters in understanding Indonesia's maritime strategy and foreign policy. While strategic culture is not a rigid determinant of policy, it serves as a persistent context that shapes how strategic decisions are framed and justified over time. Social realities are so complex that "clear behavioural consequences cannot be derived from strategic culture alone".[74] However, strategic culture provides valuable insight into the broad contours of Indonesia's external behaviour and, when analysed carefully, can serve as a guide to understanding Indonesia's policy directions and long-term strategic tendencies.

Second, Indonesia's dual strategic culture has often led to inconsistent foreign policies and maritime strategies. Occasionally, Indonesia adopts policies that seem inconsistent with established patterns. The recent controversial reversal of Indonesia's South China Sea

policy under President Prabowo is one such example. However, in the long term, Indonesian foreign and security policy can still be understood as oscillating between the two poles of strategic culture analysed in this paper: inward-looking, driven by a sense of vulnerability and focusing on domestic agendas, and outward-looking, driven by a sense of entitlement and emphasising Indonesia's regional normative leadership. Whenever the government leans too much toward one pole, a self-correction mechanism pulls it back toward the other.

Third, policy engagement with Indonesia must consider the cultural dimensions of its foreign and security policymaking. For Australia, Indonesia's strategic culture presents a dilemma. On one hand, Australia rightly views Indonesia as a bridge to Southeast Asia and actively supports ASEAN centrality in regional security architecture, with the Albanese government making significant investments in fostering Australia-ASEAN engagement. On the other hand, the primacy of the U.S. alliance in Australia's strategic policy often overshadows Indonesia and ASEAN in regional engagement.
Given Indonesia's geography and growing strategic importance, Australia must engage with the region in a way that strengthens Indonesia's leadership and avoids being perceived as compromising its territorial integrity.
Rather than expecting Indonesia to align with the U.S.-led "rules-based order", Australia should focus on greater collaboration with Indonesia on security initiatives and better communicate how frameworks like AUKUS and the Quad can reinforce, rather than sideline, ASEAN-led regional security architecture.

ENDNOTES

1 "Chairman's Statement of the 36th ASEAN Summit, 'Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN,'" June 26, 2020, https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Chairman-Statement-of-the-36th-ASEAN-Summit-FINAL.pdf.

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3 Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson, *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2019); Martin A. Sebastian, "China's Gray Zone Operations in the South China Sea; Manipulating Weaknesses", in *Maritime Issues and Regional Order in the Indo-Pacific,* ed. Leszek Buszynski and Do Thanh Hai (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 39–50.

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11 See the discussion in Nick Bisley and Benjamin Schreer, "Australia and the Rules-Based Order in Asia", *Asian Survey* 58, no. 2 (April 1, 2018): 302–19, https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2018.58.2.302.

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13 "Chapter 3: Japan's Foreign Policy to Promote National and Worldwide Interests", in *Diplomatic Bluebook 2014* (Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2014), 31.

14 Ian Hall, "India and a Regional Rules-Based Order", *Security Challenges* 16, no. 3 (2020): 27–31.

15 "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States" (The White House, 2022).

16 "National Security Strategy" (The White House, 2022).

17 Rebecca Strating, "Assessing the Maritime 'Rules-Based Order' in Antarctica", *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 76, no. 3 (May 4, 2022): 286, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2022.2056874; Strating, "The Rules-Based Order as Rhetorical Entrapment", 373.

18 For instance, the U.S. and most other countries are of the view that UNCLOS gives coastal states the right to regulate economic activities within their EEZs but not the right to regulate navigation and overflight through the EEZ. China holds the minority view that UNCLOS allows them to regulate both economic activity and foreign militaries' navigation and overflight through their EEZs. Beijing has also been attempting to make a legal case that the features it claims in the South China Sea can be treated as single units—the "outlying archipelago"—enclosed within archipelagic baselines. From these baselines, a 12 nm territorial sea would be established, rather than from individual islands, while the waters between these features would be treated as internal waters. However, China's position contravenes the provisions of UNCLOS, which reserve the right to draw archipelagic baselines exclusively for archipelagic states, not continental states like China. "China Primer: South China Sea Disputes", IN FOCUS (Congressional Research Service, February 2, 2021); Oriana Skylar Mastro, "How China Is Bending the Rules in the South China Sea", *The Interpreter,* February 17, 2021, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/how-china-bending-rules-south-china-sea.

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21 Beatrice Heuser, "The Conceptual Heritage of Strategic Culture and Collective Mentality", in *Routledge Handbook of Strategic Culture,* ed. Kerry M. Kartchner, Briana D. Bowen, and Jeannie L. Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2024), 25. See also Dogachan Dagi, "Strategic Culture and Its (Re) Construction: What Role for Narratives and Othering?", *Comparative Strategy* 43, no. 5 (September 2, 2024): 576–90, https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2024.2383152.

22 Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context", 50.

23 For methodological distinction between "explaining" and "understanding" approaches, see Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

24 See Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context".

25 Gray, 52.

26 Jeffrey A. Larsen, "The United States and NATO: Is There a Western Strategic Culture?", in *Routledge Handbook of Strategic Culture,* ed. Kerry M. Kartchner, Briana D. Bowen, and Jeannie L. Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2024), 98.

27 It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to discuss how strategic culture is imposed or enacted through power. The instrumentality of strategic culture in the Indonesian case, particularly in the context of army dominance in politics, is implicit in existing works. See Dewi Fortuna Anwar, "Indonesia's Strategic Culture: Ketahanan Nasional, Wawasan Nusantara and Hankamrata", Australia-Asia Papers, no. 75 (May 1996); Yohanes Sulaiman, "Indonesia's Strategic Culture: The Legacy of Independence", in *Understanding Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific,* ed. Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski, and Michael Wills (Washington, D.C.: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2016).

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38 For instance, Indonesia concluded a continental shelf agreement with Malaysia and a seabed treaty with Thailand in 1969 and 1975, respectively. In both instances, Indonesia accepted agreements that clearly favoured its neighbours. The goal was to set a precedent and gain their support for Indonesia's archipelagic campaign at the UN. The author thanks Dr I Made Andi Arsana of Universitas Gadjah Mada for highlighting this in a conversation.

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62 Abad, 171.

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