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### Maintaining Neutrality amid Rivalry: An Analysis of Indonesia's Foreign Policy in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)

*Menjaga Netralitas di Tengah Rivalitas: Analisis Kebijakan Luar Negeri Indonesia dalam ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)*

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#### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the application of the Rational Actor Model (RAM) in Indonesia's foreign policy through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) as a strategic response to the growing geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China. Employing a qualitative approach, the research utilizes primary data from the official AOIP (2019) document, statements from Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and interviews cited in the FPCI (2023) report, complemented by secondary sources from academic journals and policy studies by RSIS and ISEAS. The findings indicate that AOIP represents Indonesia's rational decision to advance its strategic interests while maintaining the "Independent and Active" foreign policy principle. The AOIP has effectively preserved ASEAN unity, reinforced regional centrality, and positioned Indonesia as a middle power that emphasizes inclusive diplomacy, institutional cooperation, and strategic balance amid great-power competition.

**Keywords:** ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP); Independent and Active; Indonesian Foreign Policy; Rational Actor Model

#### Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis penerapan Rational Actor Model (RAM) dalam kebijakan luar negeri Indonesia melalui ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) sebagai respons terhadap rivalitas geopolitik antara Amerika Serikat dan Tiongkok di kawasan Indo-Pasifik. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, penelitian ini memanfaatkan data primer dari dokumen resmi AOIP (2019), pernyataan kebijakan Kementerian Luar Negeri RI, serta wawancara dalam laporan FPCI (2023), dan data sekunder dari jurnal akademik serta laporan lembaga seperti RSIS dan ISEAS. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa AOIP merupakan langkah rasional Indonesia untuk memaksimalkan kepentingan strategisnya sekaligus mempertahankan prinsip "Bebas Aktif" dalam konteks geopolitik global. AOIP berperan penting dalam menjaga kesatuan ASEAN, memperkuat sentralitas regional, dan menegaskan posisi Indonesia sebagai middle power yang mengutamakan diplomasi inklusif, kerja sama institusional, dan keseimbangan kepentingan di tengah rivalitas kekuatan besar.

**Kata Kunci:** ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP); Bebas Aktif; Kebijakan Luar Negeri Indonesia; Rational Actor Model



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## INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China has reshaped the security and economic order of the Indo-Pacific region over the past decade. Confronting this challenge, Indonesia assumed a central role by initiating the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019 as a strategic response to the growing threat of ASEAN fragmentation.<sup>1</sup> The official AOIP document emphasizes four core principles: ASEAN centrality, inclusivity, transparency, and respect for international law as the foundation for regional cooperation. This initiative is not merely a normative diplomatic product but a rational outcome of Indonesia's calculated foreign policy in navigating great-power competition without losing strategic autonomy. Through AOIP, Indonesia demonstrates its adaptive capacity to balance national interests with regional stability.

In the post-Cold War context, Indonesia occupies a position that is both vulnerable and strategic. As the most populous country in Southeast Asia and the region's largest economy, Indonesia recognizes its potential as a middle power capable of influencing regional order.<sup>2</sup> According to Reza Satriakhan, Indonesia plays three strategic roles in the formation of AOIP: regional protector, regional subsystem collaborator, and mediator-integrator among major powers. These roles reflect Indonesia's rational approach to safeguarding its national interests while ensuring regional stability.<sup>3</sup> Through this framework, Indonesia strives to preserve its diplomatic autonomy without being drawn into alliance politics that could jeopardize ASEAN unity.

The Rational Actor Model (RAM) provides an appropriate analytical framework to understand Indonesia's strategic decision-making. This model assumes that states act as coherent and rational actors that identify strategic objectives, evaluate various options, and choose solutions that maximize benefits while minimizing risks.<sup>4</sup> In the context of AOIP, Indonesia rationally assessed three main alternatives: joining the anti-China alliance, remaining passive, or proposing a new framework centered on ASEAN.<sup>5</sup> The third option proved the most rational, as it preserved national interests while maintaining Indonesia's reputation as a promoter of regional stability and inclusiveness.

Amid intensifying great-power rivalry, Indonesia has chosen not to remain passive. Through the AOIP initiative, Indonesian diplomacy redefines neutrality not as inaction, but as a consciously calculated strategy to minimize risks and maximize influence. This approach illustrates that Indonesia's foreign policy is not merely reactive but proactive in creating an inclusive and stable cooperative framework for the Indo-Pacific. Consequently, AOIP embodies a form of calculated diplomacy, positioning Indonesia as a regional agenda-setter rather than a follower of dominant global powers. This proactive posture enhances Indonesia's credibility and reinforces its role as a responsible stakeholder in regional architecture.

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- 1 Reza Tri Satriakhan Muhammad, "Peran Indonesia Dalam Pembentukan ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) Untuk Merespon Geopolitik AS-Tiongkok Periode 2016-2020" (2022).
  - 2 Dewi Fortuna Anwar, "Indonesia and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 111–29, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz223>.
  - 3 Ely Nurmawati, Chandra Purnama, and Wawan Budi Darmawan, "Fenomena Rivalitas AS-Tiongkok Dan Dampaknya Terhadap Hubungan Antar Negara Di Kawasan Indo-Pasifik," *Jurnal Asia Pasifik* 8, no. 3 (2022): 212.
  - 4 Graham T Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).
  - 5 Rizky Hikmawan, Langgeng Gilang Pangestu, and Laode Muhammad Fathun, "Strategi Indonesia Mewujudkan ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) Untuk Menciptakan Stabilitas Di Kawasan Indo-Pasifik," *Jurnal Strategi Keamanan Nasional* 26, no. 1 (2021): 14.

Through the lens of the Rational Actor Model, Indonesia can be understood as a rational actor that carefully evaluates strategic options to strengthen its position amid the rivalry between two major powers.<sup>6</sup> AOIP serves as tangible evidence of how a middle power can play a significant role within an increasingly polarized international system. This approach demonstrates that rationality in foreign policy is not solely based on material power but also on diplomatic capability and strategic vision to sustain stability without sacrificing foreign policy independence.

Although numerous studies have discussed AOIP, most have focused on its normative aspects or ASEAN's collective role rather than Indonesia's rational calculation as the principal initiator of the framework.<sup>7</sup> Few studies have applied the Rational Actor Model to analyze Indonesia's decision-making in formulating AOIP as a strategic response to U.S.–China rivalry. As a result, the mechanisms of state rationality in regional diplomacy remain insufficiently explored and theoretically underdeveloped.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze Indonesia's foreign policy through the AOIP using the Rational Actor Model to reveal how this decision reflects a rational strategy for maintaining neutrality, reinforcing ASEAN centrality, and optimizing Indonesia's position as a *middle power* in the Indo-Pacific. This research seeks to contribute theoretically to the study of rationality-based foreign policy analysis and to offer practical insights into Indonesia's diplomatic strategy amid major power competition.

### Method

This research employs a qualitative approach to analyze the application of the *Rational Actor Model* (RAM) in Indonesia's foreign policy through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).<sup>8</sup> The qualitative design was chosen because it enables an in-depth understanding of strategic decision-making processes that cannot be captured through quantitative means. Within the complex geopolitical context of the Indo-Pacific, this approach seeks to uncover the rational considerations behind Indonesia's calculated and context-sensitive diplomatic actions. Thus, the study not only examines the outcomes of foreign policy but also explores the strategic logic and rational motives that underlie the formulation of AOIP as a regional diplomatic instrument aligned with Indonesia's "Independent and Active" foreign policy doctrine.

The research draws upon both primary and secondary data, analyzed through *content analysis* to identify rational patterns in decision-making. Primary data include official documents such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (2019), the AOIP Joint Leaders' Statement (2020), and the Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (FPCI) Policy Brief (2023) featuring interviews with officials from Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Secondary data were collected from academic journals and reports by leading regional think tanks, including RSIS and ISEAS, which provide insights into Indo-Pacific dynamics and ASEAN's strategic role. The integration of both data types enables a comprehensive assessment of how Indonesia, as a rational actor, formulates its diplomatic strategy to maintain neutrality, reinforce ASEAN centrality, and optimize its role as a *middle power* in the Indo-Pacific region.

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6 Pia Dannhauer, "Elite Role Conceptions and Indonesia's Agency in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific: Reclaiming Leadership," *The Pacific Review* 37, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 30–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2125999>.

7 Lisa Mery et al., "Indonesia's Strategic Role in the Development of International Law in the ASEAN Community," *Tirtayasa Journal of International Law* 3, no. 1 (2024): 33–69; Rafyoga Jehan Pratama Irsadanar, "Japan and Indonesia as Middle Powers in Indo-Pacific: Towards AOIP – FOIP Synergy," *JURNAL HUBUNGAN LUAR NEGERI* 8, no. 2 (December 28, 2023): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.70836/jh.v8i2.12>.

8 J Moleong Lexy, *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif*, Bandung: Rosda Karya, 2002.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Geopolitical Context of the Indo-Pacific

Since the end of the Cold War, the geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific has undergone a profound transformation marked by the intensifying strategic rivalry between the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Both powers are competing to expand their political, economic, and military influence across a region increasingly vital to global trade and security. The US and its allies within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)—comprising Japan, Australia, and India—promote the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, implicitly designed to counterbalance China's growing assertiveness.<sup>9</sup> During the Quad Senior Dialogue (QSD) held in Tokyo in 2020, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo explicitly stated that the QSD aimed to “protect the Indo-Pacific from Chinese Communist exploitation,” signaling the deepening ideological and strategic dimensions of the rivalry.<sup>10</sup>

The FOIP strategy emphasizes three key pillars: maritime security, freedom of navigation, and a rules-based order as a response to China's expanding influence in the region. These principles are operationalized through enhanced defense cooperation, joint patrols, and capacity-building initiatives among coastal states to safeguard strategic waterways. The notion of freedom of navigation reaffirms the right of free passage for both civilian and military vessels, particularly through critical maritime routes such as the South China Sea, in opposition to unilateral claims that threaten open access. Meanwhile, the rules-based order underscores adherence to international law, especially UNCLOS 1982, as the foundation for peaceful dispute resolution and for maintaining regional power equilibrium amid China's expanding presence.<sup>11</sup>

China, in turn, has responded with a more assertive foreign and security policy through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its Maritime Silk Road component, serving as key instruments to expand economic and political influence across Eurasia.<sup>12</sup> Militarily, China has significantly increased its defense spending and regional presence. In 2018 alone, its military budget rose to USD 22.09 billion, accompanied by frequent naval expeditions and assertive maneuvers in both the South China Sea and the East China Sea.<sup>13</sup> This growing assertiveness has fueled tensions with neighboring states such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, as well as with five ASEAN countries—Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, and Indonesia—each of which maintains overlapping territorial claims with Beijing's expansive “nine-dash line.”

Amid this escalating polarization, Indonesia has chosen a distinct diplomatic path through the initiation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019.<sup>14</sup> The AOIP was deliberately designed as an inclusive and neutral framework, avoiding explicit references to either the US or China, thus reflecting Indonesia's commitment to maintain ASEAN's centrality and autonomy in regional affairs. As noted by Dr. Siswo Pramono, “the AOIP is an outlook, not a master plan,” emphasizing its nature as a guiding vision rather than a rigid operational blueprint. The document, concise yet strategic, rests on four pillars of cooperation—maritime

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9 Ashley Tellis, “Rebranding the Indo-Pacific: The Quad's Strategic Imperatives” (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021).

10 U S Department of State, “Remarks by Secretary Pompeo at the East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting” (Tokyo: U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Japan, 2020).

11 Yuichi Hosoya, “FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *Asia-Pacific Review* 26, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 18–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13439006.2019.1622868>.

12 David Arase, “China's Two Silk Roads Initiative: What It Could Mean for Southeast Asia,” *International Journal of China Studies* 9, no. 1 (2018): 46–47.

13 International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2019* (London: Routledge, 2019).

14 ASEAN Secretariat, “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” (Jakarta: ASEAN, 2019).

collaboration, connectivity, sustainable development (SDGs), and economic cooperation, illustrating Indonesia's non-securitized and cooperation-based approach.<sup>15</sup>

The AOIP's core principles—inclusivity, dialogue, and ASEAN centrality—reflect Indonesia's rational strategy to prevent ASEAN fragmentation while reinforcing its position as a *middle power* capable of bridging major powers. The document explicitly asserts that “the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific will help build strategic trust and foster win–win cooperation across the region.” The AOIP was selected as a pragmatic and rational option, offering maximum strategic benefits with minimal risks. Rather than rejecting major-power involvement, Indonesia offers a cooperative framework grounded in ASEAN norms and institutions—proposing a middle path between confrontation and dependence.

As elaborated by Muhammad, Indonesia's role in the AOIP embodies three strategic dimensions: regional protector (safeguarding the region from conflict), regional subsystem collaborator (promoting cross-regional cooperation), and mediator-integrator (bridging divergent perspectives among major powers).<sup>16</sup> Thus, the AOIP is not merely a declarative foreign policy but tangible evidence of how a middle power can transform its limited capabilities into strategic influence. Through this initiative, Indonesia has demonstrated its ability to employ rational diplomacy to navigate an increasingly polarized international system, reaffirming the enduring relevance of its “Independent and Active” foreign policy doctrine in the modern Indo-Pacific era.

### AOIP as a Rational Choice within the Rational Actor Model (RAM)

From the perspective of the Rational Actor Model (RAM), the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) can be interpreted as the outcome of Indonesia's deliberate and strategic calculation in responding to complex regional geopolitics.<sup>17</sup> As a rational actor, Indonesia systematically identified its strategic objectives—protecting maritime sovereignty and strengthening ASEAN's central role within the regional security architecture. The decision-making process followed a rational logic wherein the state evaluates available policy alternatives through a cost–benefit analysis to maximize national interests while minimizing risks.<sup>18</sup> Thus, AOIP emerged not from normative ideals alone but from a pragmatic assessment of Indonesia's long-term strategic positioning within an increasingly competitive Indo-Pacific order.

Faced with the intensifying US–China rivalry, Indonesia evaluated three major strategic options. The first was to align with the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy led by the United States and its allies, which offered potential economic and security advantages but carried a high risk of direct confrontation with China—Indonesia's largest trading partner. The second option was to support China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which promised extensive investment opportunities but risked eroding Indonesia's strategic autonomy and undermining the long-standing “Independent and Active” (Bebas Aktif) principle guiding its foreign policy since independence.<sup>19</sup> The third option, which Indonesia ultimately chose, was to propose a cooperative framework through ASEAN—anchored in inclusivity, dialogue, and regional centrality—culminating in the formulation of AOIP.

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15 Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (FPCI), “AOIP and Indonesia's Strategic Vision” (Jakarta, 2023); Pradeep Chauhan et al., “Indo-Pacific Cooperation: AOIP and IPOI,” *ASEAN-India Centre Working Paper 3* (2020).

16 Muhammad, “Peran Indonesia Dalam Pembentukan ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) Untuk Merespon Geopolitik AS-Tiongkok Periode 2016-2020.”

17 Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

18 James D Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organizations* 49, no. 3 (1995): 387.

19 Muhammad Alhamid, *Politik Luar Negeri Indonesia: Dari Soekarno Hingga Jokowi* (Jakarta: Gramedia, 2021).

Through the lens of RAM, AOIP represents the most rational and balanced strategic choice, offering maximum benefits with minimal risks. The official AOIP document was intentionally designed to be concise and flexible—unlike other detailed master plans—to accommodate the political diversity of ASEAN member states with varying preferences toward the US–China rivalry. This flexible design reflects Indonesia’s calculated effort to maintain ASEAN cohesion and strategic unity. Moreover, AOIP embodies a uniquely Southeast Asian interpretation of the balance of power, one that avoids military alliances or overt confrontation, instead emphasizing institutional cooperation, dialogue, and the reinforcement of multilateral norms as mechanisms for stability and mutual trust.

This approach aligns closely with Indonesia’s identity as a middle power that derives influence through diplomacy, normative leadership, and consensus-building rather than military capability.<sup>20</sup> As highlighted by Mamentu et al., Indonesia’s strategy through AOIP represents an example of balanced diplomacy—avoiding direct confrontation while simultaneously strengthening regional influence through constructive engagement.<sup>21</sup> In this regard, AOIP is far more than a symbolic diplomatic document; it serves as tangible evidence of how Indonesia, acting as a rational and adaptive actor, successfully transformed geopolitical challenges into strategic opportunities. Through this initiative, Indonesia not only reinforced ASEAN’s centrality amid great-power competition but also reaffirmed the enduring relevance of rational and independent diplomacy in maintaining regional equilibrium.

### Comparing the AOIP and the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy

A comparison between the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy initiated by the United States reveals a fundamental philosophical divergence in how regional order in the Indo-Pacific is perceived.<sup>22</sup> Introduced by President Donald Trump in November 2017, FOIP is primarily driven by security and military considerations, with the strategic aim of “containing China’s dominance in the Indo-Pacific” and safeguarding American interests and those of its allies. This approach reflects Washington’s realist worldview, which conceives of the Indo-Pacific as an arena of power competition, where regional stability is measured by the balance of military capabilities and the ability to control strategic sea lanes and chokepoints.

As outlined in various U.S. policy documents, FOIP prioritizes defense cooperation and security partnerships as its central pillars, while economic and infrastructural collaborations serve as complementary tools to reinforce its security objectives. By contrast, the AOIP, initiated by Indonesia and adopted by ASEAN in 2019, embodies a fundamentally different orientation.<sup>23</sup> The AOIP deliberately avoids naming or targeting any specific country or bloc. Instead, it emphasizes four non-securitized pillars—economic cooperation, sustainable development, connectivity, and maritime collaboration. The official ASEAN document clarifies that the AOIP “is not a new mechanism or intended to replace existing ones, but rather to complement and strengthen existing regional cooperation,” guided by the principles of inclusivity, dialogue, and ASEAN centrality.<sup>24</sup>

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20 Andrew F Cooper, *The Group of Twenty (G20)* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

21 Michael Mamentu, Joyce Jacinta Rares, and Very Y. Lond, “Indonesian Foreign Policy in Encouraging the Acceleration of Implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” *Journal of Law and Sustainable Development* 12, no. 1 (January 4, 2024): e2776, <https://doi.org/10.55908/sdgs.v12i1.2776>.

22 Bonnie S Glaser, “The Evolution of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (2021): 7.

23 Benedictus B. Koessetianto, “Great Power Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific: Charting ASEAN’s Role in Ensuring Southeast Asia’s Stability,” *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences (PJLSS)* 22, no. 2 (2024): 112, <https://doi.org/10.57239/PJLSS-2024-22.2.001357>.

24 Secretariat, “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.”

In an interview, Dr. Siswo Pramono, Head of the Policy Analysis and Development Agency at Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, succinctly captured this distinction: "If you look at other Indo-Pacific concepts proposed by different countries, most are focused on defense, security, and containment. In our case, AOIP is about cooperation, win-win solutions, and adherence to the UN Charter and the ASEAN Charter".<sup>25</sup> For Indonesia, the Indo-Pacific is conceptualized not as a theater of rivalry but as a "space for developmental collaboration," emphasizing economic interdependence as the foundation of long-term peace. While the AOIP and FOIP differ in their philosophical orientations, the AOIP does not seek confrontation. Instead, it aims to "build momentum for strategic trust and win-win cooperation across the region".<sup>26</sup>

In this light, the AOIP can be understood as Indonesia's effort to create a "safe space" amid major power competition—where ASEAN member states can retain their strategic autonomy without being forced to align with either bloc. Its emphasis on economic cooperation and development resonates with Immanuel Kant's idea of *Perpetual Peace*, which posits that economic interdependence and institutional cooperation form the basis of sustainable peace. As noted by Nagy, Indonesia, as a *middle power*, has advanced a form of "neo-middle-power diplomacy," privileging normative and institutional approaches to secure autonomy amid great-power rivalry.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, AOIP is more than a public document—it is a rational diplomatic strategy designed to transform potential conflict into opportunities for inclusive cooperation. Despite clear philosophical differences between AOIP and FOIP, complementarity remains possible as long as ASEAN centrality is respected and collaboration is not conditioned on exclusive military alliances. In essence, AOIP represents an alternative Indo-Pacific vision—one that prioritizes collective prosperity over hegemonic dominance, reflecting Indonesia's enduring Independent and Active foreign policy and its rational adaptation to the complexities of contemporary geopolitics.<sup>28</sup>

### Neutral but Active: Indonesia's Strategy in Managing U.S.–China Rivalry through the AOIP

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) is far more than an ordinary policy document; it embodies the contemporary realization of Indonesia's long-standing foreign policy doctrine of Independent and Active. Within the increasingly polarized Indo-Pacific geopolitics, the AOIP represents a modern interpretation of this principle—where "independent" signifies non-alignment with any major power bloc, while "active" is expressed through Indonesia's proactive initiatives in shaping an inclusive regional architecture.<sup>29</sup> This approach does not indicate passivity or blind neutrality but rather a rationally calculated strategy that prioritizes Indonesia's long-term national interests as the world's largest archipelagic state. By doing so, Indonesia redefines neutrality not as disengagement but as constructive leadership amid strategic rivalry.

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25 Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (FPCI), "AOIP and Indonesia's Strategic Vision."

26 ASEAN Secretariat, "AOIP Joint Leaders Statement" (Jakarta: ASEAN, 2020).

27 Lai-Ha Chan, "Strategic Hedging: A 'Third Way' for Australian Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific," *Asia Policy* 15, no. 3 (July 2020): 87–112, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2020.0045>.

28 Weiqing Song and Ziqing Yang, "Unpacking the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Testing Case of Strategic Autonomy," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 123–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2024.2305650>.

29 Hidetaka Yoshimatsu, "ASEAN and Great Power Rivalry in Regionalism: From East Asia to the Indo-Pacific," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 42, no. 1 (April 24, 2023): 25–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/18681034221139297>.

The implementation of AOIP illustrates how Indonesia successfully adapted the Independent and Active principle to a rapidly changing global order. During the Cold War, this doctrine materialized through the Non-Aligned Movement and the Asia–Africa Conference. Today, under renewed U.S.–China rivalry, Indonesia channels the same spirit through ASEAN’s multilateral framework, deliberately rejecting ideological polarization.<sup>30</sup> However, AOIP has not been immune to criticism. From the perspective of the United States and its Quad partners, AOIP appears too accommodating toward China’s maritime expansion in the South China Sea and insufficiently concrete in proposing mechanisms for collective defense.<sup>31</sup> reflect differing expectations between security-centric powers and Indonesia’s preference for institutional diplomacy and cooperative engagement.

Conversely, China views AOIP with cautious skepticism, suspecting it to be a subtle attempt to limit Beijing’s regional influence, even as it publicly endorses ASEAN centrality. These contrasting perceptions raise a fundamental question: *Is the AOIP an effective policy instrument or merely diplomatic rhetoric without tangible implementation?* This question is particularly relevant given AOIP’s nature as an “outlook” rather than a master plan. As its architects have emphasized, AOIP was intentionally designed as a “guiding star”—a flexible strategic compass rather than a binding operational framework.<sup>32</sup> This design choice has allowed AOIP to remain resilient amid disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic and evolving regional dynamics, sustaining its function as a conceptual anchor for ASEAN cooperation.

A survey of Indonesian international relations scholars revealed that 68% of respondents consider the AOIP to remain primarily a conceptual framework lacking clear implementation mechanisms.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, AOIP has succeeded in preserving ASEAN unity amid growing external pressures to take sides. Data from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Jakarta indicate that since its adoption in 2019, ASEAN has maintained cohesion in addressing contentious U.S.–China issues, unlike earlier periods of internal division. This stability underscores AOIP’s effectiveness in upholding regional solidarity through the rational recalibration of the Independent and Active doctrine. In this sense, AOIP demonstrates Indonesia’s ability to operationalize neutrality as a strategic asset, confirming that its diplomatic rationality remains adaptive, consistent, and regionally stabilizing.<sup>34</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This study finds that the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) represents Indonesia’s rational and calculated response to the intensifying U.S.–China geopolitical rivalry. Through the lens of the Rational Actor Model (RAM), Indonesia’s decision to initiate AOIP emerges as the most strategic alternative—offering maximum benefits with minimal risks. Rather than aligning with either the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Indonesia opted for an inclusive and cooperative framework that upholds ASEAN centrality

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30 Vibhanshu Shekhar, *Indonesia’s Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy in the 21st Century*, *Jurnal Asia Pasifik*, vol. 7 (Routledge, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315560977>.

31 Gautam K. Rajesh and Madhumati Deshpande, “Hedging with the Indo-Pacific: Why Southeast Asia Might Benefit from Embracing the Construct,” *The Round Table* 114, no. 4 (July 4, 2025): 463–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2025.2511000>.

32 Chauhan et al., “Indo-Pacific Cooperation: AOIP and IPOI.”

33 Mohamad Rosyidin, “Reconciling Revisionism with the Status Quo in IR: Indonesia’s Foreign Policy and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” *The Pacific Review* 6, no. 3 (December 2, 2025): 1–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2025.2597450>.

34 Irfan Ardhani, Randy W. Nandyatama, and Rizky Alif Alvian, “Middle Power Legitimation Strategies: The Case of Indonesia and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 77, no. 4 (July 4, 2023): 359–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2023.2228709>.

and stability. The findings affirm that AOIP is a deliberate extension of Indonesia's long-standing Independent and Active doctrine, reinterpreted for a multipolar era where rational diplomacy, institutional engagement, and strategic autonomy define sustainable regional leadership.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the literature by contextualizing the Rational Actor Model within Southeast Asian diplomatic behavior, demonstrating that rationality in foreign policy extends beyond military or economic calculation to include institutional and normative rationality. Empirically, it underscores Indonesia's role as a middle power capable of transforming structural constraints into diplomatic opportunities through multilateral initiatives. AOIP's success in maintaining ASEAN cohesion amid great-power polarization also offers a model for non-aligned regionalism in the 21st century. By prioritizing dialogue and inclusivity over confrontation, Indonesia provides an alternative paradigm of constructive neutrality—a form of strategic engagement that redefines the meaning of independence in contemporary international relations.

Future research could expand on this study by conducting a comparative analysis between AOIP and the Indo-Pacific strategies of other middle powers, such as Japan, India, and Australia. Such a study would clarify how different states operationalize rationality within their respective foreign policy doctrines while navigating U.S.–China competition. A comparative approach would also reveal the extent to which AOIP's principles—dialogue, inclusivity, and regional centrality—can serve as a foundation for broader multilateral convergence in the Indo-Pacific. Understanding these variations could enrich theoretical debates on middle-power diplomacy and offer policy insights into how cooperative regionalism can coexist with strategic rivalry in a rapidly evolving geopolitical environment.

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