

Bebas-Aktif and Pragmatic Assertiveness: Continuity and Change in Indonesia's Foreign Policy under Prabowo Subianto

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ABSTRACT

This article examines whether Indonesian foreign policy under President Prabowo Subianto (October 2024–August 2026) represents a doctrinal departure from bebas-aktif or a programmatic reconfiguration of strategic autonomy. It develops the Doctrinal Continuity–Instrumental Reconfiguration (DCIR) model, integrating foreign-policy-change theory, role theory, leader-centered Foreign Policy Analysis, and hedging. Using a qualitative longitudinal case-study design, the analysis combines structured comparison of the Jokowi–China maritime joint statement and the ORRUDA Indonesia–Russia naval exercise, while testing policy consistency across Myanmar, Palestine, the South China Sea, and AUKUS. The findings indicate strong doctrinal continuity in non-alignment, strategic autonomy, anti-colonial solidarity, bridge-building, and commitment to an inclusive regional order, alongside substantial programmatic change through intensified presidential diplomacy, defence and defence-industrial cooperation, institutional diversification, and more explicit interest-based bargaining. The article conceptualizes this pattern as pragmatic assertiveness: a more security-conscious and materially oriented enactment of bebas-aktif rather than a new foreign-policy doctrine. However, ambiguous maritime signaling and tensions between bilateral activism and ASEAN-centered commitments generate role strain. The study demonstrates how non-aligned middle powers can substantially adapt foreign-policy instruments while preserving their underlying international orientation.

Keywords: Indonesia; Prabowo Subianto; foreign policy analysis; strategic autonomy; middle power; hedging; presidential diplomacy; ASEAN; BRICS

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is an unusually demanding case for the study of foreign-policy change. Since independence, governments with markedly different ideological profiles, regime forms, and leadership styles have repeatedly invoked *bebas-aktif* (independent and active) as the country's foundational diplomatic doctrine. The formula is deliberately elastic: independence rejects binding subordination to competing power blocs, while activism authorizes diplomatic initiative in support of national interests, decolonization, peace, and a rule-governed international order. That elasticity has helped the doctrine survive the Cold War, democratization, the rise of China, the Indo-Pacific turn, and renewed major-power rivalry (Sukma, 1997; Tan, 2007; Laksmiana, 2011; Umar, 2023; Wardhani & Dugis, 2023). Yet durability creates an analytical problem. If virtually every administration claims doctrinal continuity, how can scholars distinguish genuine continuity from meaningful change in goals, instruments, alignments, and role performance?

The question became especially salient after Prabowo Subianto assumed the presidency on 20 October 2024. The attached research outline correctly identifies a contest over interpretation: whether Prabowo is preserving *bebas-aktif* or constructing a new paradigm, and it proposes foreign-policy-change theory, role theory, comparative discourse analysis, and issue cases involving Myanmar, Palestine, the South China Sea, and AUKUS as the principal analytical route. It also anticipates a shift from a normative to a more interest-based and defence-centred diplomacy. The present article retains that puzzle and empirical architecture while reformulating the claim in a way that is more defensible against the available evidence. Prabowo's inaugural address explicitly described Indonesia as *bebas-aktif*, non-aligned, outside military pacts, friendly with all states, and simultaneously committed to anti-colonial principles (Secretariat of State of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024). He reiterated the non-bloc orientation repeatedly in 2026 (Secretariat of State of the Republic of Indonesia, 2026a, 2026b). Those statements make a wholesale doctrinal replacement difficult to sustain empirically.

At the same time, continuity in declaratory doctrine does not imply policy stasis. The early Prabowo period has featured rapid presidential travel, a conspicuous expansion of defence and defence-industrial diplomacy, a willingness to use a broad portfolio of institutions and partners, and a discourse that links international engagement directly to sovereignty, national resilience, development, and strategic freedom. Indonesia formalized full BRICS membership in January 2025 and presented that decision as a means to strengthen multilateralism, South-South cooperation, and a more representative global order (BRICS Brazil, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025). At the 2025 BRICS summit, Prabowo supported multilateral reform and stronger Global South representation (Secretariat of State of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025a). Defence relations, meanwhile, have been pursued across Western and non-Western partners, including cooperation with France and Türkiye focused on technology, industrial capacity, training, and co-production (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025a, 2025b). These practices suggest not a retreat from autonomy but an attempt to operate it through wider option-building.

The research puzzle therefore concerns the level and mechanism of change. Existing studies richly explain Indonesia's national role conceptions, middle-power aspirations, hedging practices, maritime diplomacy, and Jokowi-era developmentalism (Karim, 2017, 2018, 2021; Thies & Sari, 2018; Anwar, 2020, 2023; Yoshimatsu, 2022). A growing literature also identifies strategic autonomy as a central purpose of Indonesia's Indo-Pacific posture (Abbondanza, 2022; Shekhar, 2022). However, three gaps remain. First,

much commentary on the Prabowo presidency tends to infer change from style, biography, or individual episodes without classifying the depth of change across multiple issue areas. Second, studies often treat *bebas-aktif* either as a fixed doctrine or as a rhetorical label, rather than as a national-role framework that can constrain some forms of change while legitimating others. Third, the literature insufficiently connects presidential agency and instrumental reweighting to Hermann's distinction among adjustment, program, goal/problem, and international-orientation change (Hermann, 1990).

This article asks: To what extent does Prabowo Subianto's foreign policy represent a doctrinal departure from *bebas-aktif*, and through what mechanisms has its operational meaning changed since October 2024? It advances three arguments. First, the evidence to 31 August 2026 supports doctrinal continuity: non-alignment, strategic autonomy, anti-colonial solidarity, bridge-building, and a preference for an inclusive regional order remain recurrent legitimating principles. Second, change is concentrated at the programmatic level. Prabowo has reweighted the foreign-policy toolkit toward presidential summitry, defence diplomacy, defence-industrial cooperation, institutionally diversified partnerships, and direct interest bargaining. Third, these two dynamics combine in what this article calls pragmatic assertiveness: a more explicit and sometimes risk-tolerant pursuit of national interests within the normative and role boundaries of *bebas-aktif*. Pragmatic assertiveness is thus a mode of role enactment, not a replacement doctrine.

The theoretical contribution is the Doctrinal Continuity–Instrumental Reconfiguration (DCIR) model. DCIR integrates foreign-policy-change theory, role theory, leader-centred FPA, and hedging. It proposes that external pressures and domestic priorities create incentives for adaptation; leader agency selects the tempo, repertoire, and organizational locus of response; and durable national role conceptions filter which adaptations are politically legitimate. The predicted result is substantial program change without international-orientation change. The model also predicts role strain when short-term bargains or ambiguous formulations appear inconsistent with Indonesia's established legal or regional roles. This moves the analysis beyond a binary choice between 'continuity' and 'change' and offers a portable framework for other non-aligned middle powers whose doctrines persist while their practices evolve (Harnisch, 2001; Cantir & Kaarbo, 2012; Boller & Wenzelburger, 2024).

Empirically, the article compares Prabowo's first twenty-two months with stylized baselines from the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Joko Widodo presidencies and then examines Myanmar, Palestine, the South China Sea, and AUKUS as structured issue tests. It treats BRICS and defence diplomacy as cross-cutting evidence of institutional and instrumental change. The analysis does not assume that Prabowo's military biography mechanically causes a more security-centred foreign policy. Biography is instead treated as a leader-level plausibility factor whose explanatory value must be assessed alongside structural pressures, domestic development priorities, bureaucratic interests, and inherited policy trajectories (Hudson, 2005; Brummer, 2024). This caution is essential for avoiding personality determinism and for producing an explanation that can travel beyond the Indonesian case.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature relevant to the puzzle falls into five intersecting clusters: the historical and ideational foundations of *bebas-aktif*; foreign-policy change and leadership; national roles and middle-power status; hedging and strategic autonomy under major-power rivalry; and defence diplomacy as an instrument of

regional order. Reading these clusters together reveals why the Prabowo period should not be evaluated only by counting new partnerships or comparing presidential rhetoric. The central analytical task is to determine whether observed changes alter the country's basic international orientation, its substantive goals, its programs, or merely the settings and intensity of existing instruments.

The first cluster treats *bebas-aktif* as a historically resilient framework rather than simple neutrality. Early post-independence diplomacy linked autonomy to anti-colonialism and to the refusal to become an appendage of external blocs; later governments adapted the doctrine to very different strategic environments. Sukma's analysis of Indonesia–Australia relations shows that even security cooperation has long been debated through the lens of autonomy and domestic legitimacy (Sukma, 1997). Studies of Indonesia's worldview emphasize that non-alignment has coexisted with selective cooperation and pragmatic accommodation (Tan, 2007; Sukma, 2009). Laksmana (2011) further demonstrates that Indonesia's international influence historically rested not only on material size but also on normative voice, while Shekhar (2018) links the country's rising ambitions to status signalling, broader regional reach, and power projection. More recent work emphasizes that the meaning of *bebas-aktif* changes through practice: Jokowi's developmental priorities modified diplomatic emphasis without formally abandoning the doctrine (Warburton, 2016; Wicaksana & Wardhana, 2021; Wardhani & Dugis, 2023).

A second strand highlights the ideational and historical resources that make certain roles durable. Bandung and postcolonial solidarity remain available repertoires for legitimating Global South leadership even when economic diplomacy becomes more prominent (Umar, 2019). Islam is also relevant but should not be treated as a monocausal driver. Sukma's historical study of Islam in Indonesian foreign policy shows a persistent duality between Islamic societal pressures and a state identity centred on nationalism, sovereignty, and autonomous diplomacy (Sukma, 2003). This helps explain why support for Palestine can simultaneously express Muslim solidarity, constitutional anti-colonialism, humanitarian concern, and a broader non-aligned role. The analytical implication is that 'normative' and 'interest-based' foreign policy should not be treated as mutually exclusive categories: norms structure what counts as a legitimate national interest, while interests shape how norms are operationalised.

The second literature cluster concerns how foreign policy changes. Hermann's (1990) classic framework distinguishes adjustment changes in effort or scope, program changes in the methods used to pursue established goals, problem/goal changes in the ends themselves, and international-orientation changes that redirect a state's overall approach to world affairs. Gustavsson (1999) stresses the interaction of international and domestic conditions and political agency, while Harnisch (2001) demonstrates how role theory can explain continuity in goals alongside changes in instruments. More recent research finds that major foreign and security policy transformations are relatively rare and that incremental change is more common (Boller & Wenzelburger, 2024). These insights caution against labelling a new tone, visit, institution, or procurement as a doctrinal revolution.

Foreign Policy Analysis adds an actor-specific dimension. Hudson (2005) argues that international outcomes ultimately pass through human decision makers and domestic processes, and leader-centred approaches specify how leaders can trigger, guide, and implement policy change (Brummer, 2024). Yet leadership is mediated by institutions and contested expectations. Cantir and Kaarbo (2012) show that domestic actors can contest national roles, and Wehner and Thies (2014) demonstrate how narratives help constitute and reinterpret roles. In Indonesia, presidential influence is especially important because foreign policy is highly executive-centred, but bureaucratic organizations, the military, economic ministries,

coalition politics, public opinion, and ASEAN commitments constrain what presidents can sustain. Thus, Prabowo's military background is analytically relevant as a source of preferences and repertoire, but it is not a sufficient causal explanation.

The third cluster concerns role theory and middle-power identity. Holsti (1970) conceptualized national role conceptions as policymakers' understandings of the functions their state should perform internationally. Contemporary role scholarship emphasizes interaction between ego expectations, external expectations, and domestic contestation (Thies & Breuning, 2012). Applied to Indonesia, role theory illuminates recurring self-images as regional leader, bridge-builder, mediator, voice of developing countries, democracy promoter, maritime power, and autonomous middle power. Karim (2017) shows that role conflict can limit democracy promotion, while Karim (2018) demonstrates that status-seeking and role conceptions shape Indonesia's and South Korea's middle-power behaviour. Thies and Sari (2018) argue that role theory can reconcile material, behavioural, and identity-based accounts of Indonesia's middle-power status, and Karim (2021) emphasizes the need for role legitimation. Karim and Nabila (2022) further show that Asia-Pacific middle powers construct security roles in relation to regional order, not merely material capability.

This literature matters because role continuity can coexist with tactical change. Indonesia's ASEAN role, for example, has repeatedly been renegotiated rather than simply maintained or discarded. Rosyidin and Pattipeilohy (2020) show how Jokowi-era ideas produced a less ASEAN-centric emphasis during part of his presidency, while Anwar (2020) interprets the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) as an attempt to preserve inclusivity and ASEAN agency. Agastia (2020) explicitly uses role theory to explain Indonesia's role in the AOIP. Mueller (2019) cautions that ASEAN centrality is vulnerable to institutional competition, and Jones and Smith (2007) famously question whether ASEAN's process orientation generates substantive progress. These debates provide the background against Prabowo's regional activism, and any bilateral bargains must be evaluated: the issue is not whether Jakarta engages outside ASEAN, but whether those engagements strengthen or erode its claimed role as an autonomous regional convenor.

The fourth cluster analyses hedging and strategic autonomy. Kuik (2016) conceptualizes hedging as a set of mutually counteracting alignment behaviours adopted under uncertainty; Ciorciari and Haacke (2019) and Haacke (2019) refine the concept and warn against using it as a catch-all for any mixed policy. He (2008) shows how institutional balancing can supplement material balancing in Asian regionalism. In the Indonesian case, Yoshimatsu (2022) identifies accommodation, diversification, and institutional responses to China's BRI and Indo-Pacific initiatives, while Anwar (2023) describes Indonesia's 'hedging plus' as combining national and ASEAN-level agency. Abbondanza (2022) characterizes Indonesia as a strategically autonomous and comparatively sceptical Indo-Pacific middle power, and Shekhar (2022) portrays its great-power management as the balancing behaviour of a 'dove state.' Together, these works suggest that diversified engagement with China, the United States, Russia, Europe, Türkiye, India, and BRICS need not signal alignment; it can instead be a strategy for expanding options and reducing dependence.

The fifth cluster concerns defence diplomacy. The regional literature shows that military cooperation in Southeast Asia is not reducible to alliance formation. Tan and Singh (2012), Tan (2012), Laksmana (2012), and Emmers (2012) demonstrate how bilateral and multilateral defence engagement can build confidence, socialise armed forces, manage uncertainty, and contribute to regional order. More recent work highlights joint exercises as signals and ordering practices rather than merely technical military events

(Chang & Laksmana, 2025; Teo, 2025). This is crucial to interpret Prabowo's apparent preference for defence diplomacy. Expanded training, procurement, technology transfer, and military-to-military engagement may simultaneously serve capability development, industrial policy, status signalling, and hedging. They therefore need to be classified by function and partner diversification rather than presumed to indicate bloc alignment.

A final empirical sub-literature concerns maritime security and China. Indonesia has long combined resistance to expansive maritime claims with economic engagement and diplomatic caution. Chapsos and Malcolm (2017) note the need for a comprehensive maritime-security agenda, while Caroline (2021) characterizes parts of Jokowi's maritime posture as underbalancing. Laksmana (2025) warns that ambiguous accommodation can create the appearance of strategic alignment with China. Conversely, Putra and Cangara (2026) show that Indonesian responses to sea-based incursions can shift from visibly assertive to legal and cooperative instruments even when threat perceptions remain. These findings reinforce the need to distinguish changing instruments from changing objectives. The South China Sea is therefore a particularly useful 'hard case' for evaluating pragmatic assertiveness: it can reveal whether tactical flexibility remains bounded by UNCLOS, sovereign rights, and non-alignment or whether those commitments are being substantively revised.

The literature gap is thus not a lack of scholarship on Indonesia, but the absence of an integrated classification of early Prabowo-era change across doctrine, roles, programs, and issue-specific behaviour. Existing concepts often work at different levels: hedging describes a strategic pattern, role theory explains identity and legitimacy, FPA explains leadership and decision processes, and foreign-policy-change theory classifies depth. This article combines them. The resulting framework allows a more demanding test of the outline's proposition that Indonesia is moving from *bebas-aktif* toward a new 'active and pragmatic' paradigm. The key question becomes whether pragmatism displaces the doctrine or instead constitutes its contemporary operational form.

Theoretical Framework for Analysis

The framework begins with Hermann's hierarchy of foreign-policy change. Adjustment change alters the level of effort, visibility, or scope while leaving goals and means largely intact. Program change replaces or substantially reweights the instruments used to pursue existing goals. Problem/goal change revises the ends that policy seeks to achieve. International-orientation change is deepest: it transforms the state's general approach to external relations and typically reorganizes multiple issue areas (Hermann, 1990). This hierarchy is useful because it prevents analytical inflation. A more intensive presidency, new forum membership, or a different procurement partner may be politically important without amounting to international reorientation.

Role theory supplies the missing ideational mechanism. National roles are not decorative rhetoric; they are socially embedded expectations about appropriate international functions (Holsti, 1970; Thies & Breuning, 2012). They can stabilise foreign policy by defining which goals and instruments are legitimate, but they can also generate change through role contestation, learning, and adaptation (Cantir & Kaarbo, 2012; Wehner & Thies, 2014). For Indonesia, five role elements recur strongly enough to be treated as a durable role bundle: (1) autonomous/non-aligned actor; (2) bridge-builder and friend to multiple sides; (3) regional leader committed to ASEAN relevance; (4) supporter of anti-colonialism and the Global South; and (5) middle power seeking status and agenda influence without alliance dependence (Karim, 2018, 2021;

Thies & Sari, 2018; Umar, 2023). The empirical question is whether Prabowo is abandoning, reprioritising, or differently enacting that bundle.

Leader-centred FPA explains how program change can occur without doctrinal rupture. Leaders differ in threat perception, time horizons, diplomatic style, preferred advisers, tolerance for ambiguity, and favoured instruments (Hudson, 2005; Brummer, 2024). Prabowo's long experience in the military and as defence minister plausibly makes defence institutions, strategic industries, and hard-security relationships more cognitively and politically available than they were to presidents whose primary repertoires were civilian technocratic or democratic-diplomatic. Yet DCIR treats this as a conditional mechanism, not a biographical destiny. Structural rivalry, technological dependence, domestic development goals, inherited procurement decisions, and bureaucratic entrepreneurship can independently produce the same observable outcome. Leader agency is therefore assessed by evidence of presidential initiative, centralisation, framing, and cross-issue consistency rather than inferred from biography alone.

Hedging and strategic-autonomy scholarships add an external behavioral dimension. A non-aligned middle power facing uncertain great-power competition can increase autonomy by cultivating partly redundant relationships, participating in overlapping institutions, and avoiding exclusive commitments (Kuik, 2016; Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019; Anwar, 2023). From this perspective, simultaneous cooperation with the United States, China, Russia, France, Türkiye, India, Australia, ASEAN, OECD processes, and BRICS is not inherently contradictory. It may represent portfolio diversification. The decisive indicators are whether partnerships are exclusive, whether they impose alignment costs, whether Indonesia preserves freedom of choice across issues, and whether institutional diversification increases rather than narrows strategic options.

The article integrates these elements in the Doctrinal Continuity–Instrumental Reconfiguration (DCIR) model (Figure 1). Systemic pressures and domestic priorities generate incentives for adaptation. Leader agency affects the speed, style, and instrument mix of adaptation. Durable national roles operate as a filter: policies congruent with autonomy, bridge-building, anti-colonial solidarity, and regional leadership are easier to legitimate than policies that imply military alignment or dependence. The expected outcome is role-preserving program change—substantial reweighting of instruments without a change in the country's basic international orientation. The model also includes a feedback mechanism: if pragmatic bargains create ambiguity about legal principles, ASEAN commitments, or impartiality, role strain can emerge and trigger clarification, bureaucratic correction, or reputational costs.

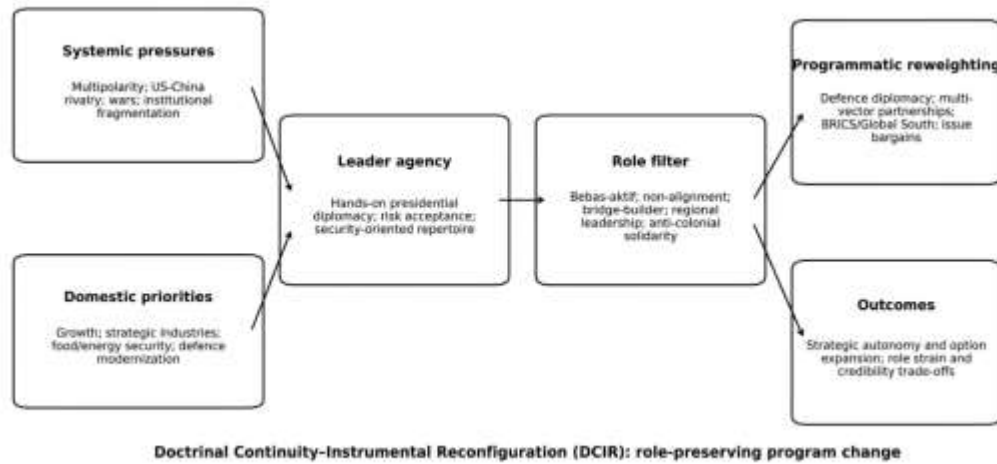


Figure 1. Doctrinal Continuity-Instrumental Reconfiguration (DCIR) model

Source: Author's synthesis based on Hermann (1990), Holsti (1970), Thies and Breuning (2012), Brummer (2024), and the empirical coding strategy in this article.

Three observable propositions follow. P1 (doctrinal continuity): if *bebas-aktif* remains the master doctrine, presidential and governmental statements across different contexts should repeatedly reject bloc alignment and affirm strategic autonomy even as partnerships expand. P2 (programmatic reconfiguration): if pragmatic assertiveness is occurring, the relative salience of presidential diplomacy, defence diplomacy, defence-industrial cooperation, diversified institutions, and explicit interest bargaining should increase without a corresponding shift toward exclusive alignment. P3 (role strain): where tactical pragmatism conflicts with established roles or legal positions, contestation should become visible through clarification, criticism, or mixed signalling. The November 2024 Indonesia–China maritime language is a strong test of P3 because the phrase 'overlapping claims' could be read against Indonesia's established legal posture, while the Palestine case tests whether normative solidarity can coexist with pragmatic conflict-resolution language.

Table 1. Operationalisation of the integrated analytical framework

Analytical layer	Indicators	Observable implication	Primary evidence
Foreign-policy change	Adjustment; program; goal/problem; international orientation	Classify depth of change rather than infer it from novelty alone	Cross-issue comparison; policy instruments; commitments
National roles	Non-alignment; bridgebuilder; ASEAN leader; Global South/anti-colonial; middle power	Continuity if new policies are justified through durable role expectations	Presidential speeches; ASEAN/UN/BRICS statements
Leader agency	Presidential initiative; centralization; preferred instruments; risk framing	Change in tempo/repertoire without assuming biography is determinative	Presidential actions; defence and diplomatic initiatives

Analytical layer	Indicators	Observable implication	Primary evidence
Strategic autonomy/hedging	Partner diversification; non-exclusivity; overlapping institutions	More options and lower dependence without bloc alignment	BRICS; defence partnerships; major-power relations
Role strain	Legal ambiguity; external/domestic contestation; need for clarification	Pragmatic bargain generates reputational or legitimacy costs	South China Sea wording; critiques; official clarification/context

Source: Author's synthesis (2026)

The conceptual contribution is therefore narrower and more testable than the claim that a new doctrine has replaced *bebas-aktif*. 'Pragmatic assertiveness' is defined here as the more explicit, leader-driven and instrumentally diversified pursuit of national interests through multi-vector engagement, combined with a willingness to use defence, economic, and minilateral or plurilateral instruments, while retaining non-alignment as the outer boundary of legitimate foreign policy. Figure 2 locates the early Prabowo period in the quadrant of high instrumental assertiveness but low doctrinal change. A future move toward formal military alignment, abandonment of ASEAN-centred inclusivity, or systematic acceptance of a great power's legal-security preferences would shift the case toward strategic reorientation; the evidence examined here does not reach that threshold.



Figure 2. Distinguishing doctrinal change from instrumental assertiveness

Source: Original analytical figure developed for this study (2026).

METHODS OF RESEARCH

This study employs a qualitative longitudinal case-study design with structured, focused comparison. The principal period of analysis is 20 October 2024 to 31 August 2026, capturing the first twenty-two months of the Prabowo presidency while allowing a clear data cut-off. To distinguish inherited patterns from new ones, the study uses the Yudhoyono and Jokowi presidencies as historical baselines rather than as fully symmetrical comparison cases. The objective is explanatory classification: to identify the depth and mechanism of change, not to estimate a causal effect statistically. Case-study logic is appropriate because the phenomenon is path-dependent, roles and doctrines are interpretive constructs, and the central question concerns process and congruence among discourse, instruments, and issue-specific decisions (George & Bennett, 2005).

The empirical corpus combines primary and secondary sources. Primary material includes presidential speeches, Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements, Ministry of Defence releases, bilateral joint statements, and official ASEAN, United Nations, and BRICS-related communications. Secondary material consists primarily of peer-reviewed scholarships indexed in major academic databases and a limited number of reputable policy analyses used for contextual triangulation. Documents were selected purposively when they contained explicit statements on doctrine, alignment, national interest, regional order, legal position, defence cooperation, or the four issue domains. The analysis does not claim an exhaustive archive of every speech or diplomatic contact; instead, it prioritises documents with high evidentiary value for the stated propositions.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, qualitative content analysis codes documents along six dimensions: (1) doctrinal language, namely *bebas-aktif*, non-alignment, and military blocs; (2) national-role language, such as bridge-builder, ASEAN leadership, Global South, and anti-colonial solidarity; (3) interest and pragmatism, including development, sovereignty, resilience, and transactional benefit; (4) instrument choice, namely summitry, defence diplomacy, economic diplomacy, and multilateral or plurilateral institutions; (5) alignment behaviour, specifically partner diversification versus exclusivity; and (6) legal-normative consistency, especially UNCLOS and regional commitments.

Second, structured questions are applied to Myanmar, Palestine, the South China Sea, and AUKUS: What inherited objective is observable? What changed in rhetoric, instrument, or commitment? Which Hermann category best fits the change? Which national role is activated or strained? What plausible alternative explanation exists? This procedure helps prevent selection on the dependent variable. The four cases vary in issue type: regional political crisis (Myanmar), identity-laden humanitarian and sovereignty question (Palestine), direct maritime sovereignty and legal interest (South China Sea), and external security architecture (AUKUS). BRICS and defence diplomacy are treated as cross-cutting domains because they affect multiple roles and policy instruments rather than a single dispute.

Third, process-tracing logic is used to assess mechanisms. The study looks for sequences in which structural or domestic pressures are followed by presidential framing, instrument selection, and role-consistent justification; it also looks for disconfirming evidence, such as exclusive security commitments or explicit repudiation of established doctrine. Triangulation compares official claims with peer-reviewed interpretations and independent analyses. Validity is strengthened by distinguishing evidence from interpretation in the results section and by using negative evidence cautiously. For example, the lack of a

major new Prabowo-specific doctrinal statement on AUKUS is not coded as support for either acceptance or opposition; it is treated as an evidentiary limitation.

The design has four limitations. First, the Prabowo presidency is ongoing, so findings concern an early phase rather than a settled doctrine. Second, public speeches are strategic communications and may conceal internal disagreement. Third, without elite interviews, cabinet records, or decision memoranda, the study cannot isolate the independent causal effect of Prabowo's personal or military background. Fourth, issue coverage is uneven: the documentary record is much richer for Palestine, BRICS, and defence cooperation than for AUKUS. These limitations are consequential. The article therefore uses the language of 'supports,' 'is consistent with,' and 'suggests' rather than claiming definitive causal proof where internal decision evidence is unavailable. Additional author-supplied interviews or archival material would materially strengthen a journal submission.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results support the central proposition of role-preserving program change. Across doctrine, institutions, and issue cases, the early Prabowo period exhibits stronger personalisation, defence orientation, and pragmatic bargaining, but the evidence does not show abandonment of non-alignment or a systematic shift into a great-power camp. The more precise interpretation is a reconfiguration of how strategic autonomy is pursued. The sections below separate continuity in master doctrine from change in operational practice, then test the pattern across four issues and assess the implications for ASEAN leadership and Indonesia's honest-broker role.

Doctrinal continuity, changing diplomatic repertoire

The strongest evidence against a doctrinal rupture lies in Prabowo's own repeated articulation of Indonesia's foreign-policy principles. In his inaugural address, he reaffirmed *bebas-aktif*, non-alignment, avoidance of military blocs, friendship with all countries, and continued adherence to anti-colonial principles (Secretariat of State of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024). This position was reiterated well into his presidency. In March 2026, Prabowo again emphasised that Indonesia did not intend to join any bloc (Secretariat of State of the Republic of Indonesia, 2026a), while in June 2026 he described non-alignment as an inherited principle enabling Indonesia to maintain constructive relations with competing powers while safeguarding national interests (Secretariat of State of the Republic of Indonesia, 2026b). The recurrence of these statements across different contexts indicates that non-alignment is more than ceremonial rhetoric; it remains an active framework for legitimating foreign-policy choices.

This continuity reflects a broader Indonesian pattern in which presidential style changes more rapidly than the underlying doctrine. Under Yudhoyono, foreign policy emphasised middle-power activism, multilateralism, democratic identity, and the "million friends, zero enemies" narrative (Karim, 2021). Jokowi redirected attention toward infrastructure, economic diplomacy, maritime sovereignty, and material national interests, yet these shifts are generally interpreted as adaptations within *bebas-aktif* rather than its rejection (Warburton, 2016; Rosyidin & Pattipeilohy, 2020; Wicaksana & Wardhana, 2021; Wardhani & Dugis, 2023). Prabowo combines these inherited strands with more visible defence diplomacy and highly personalised presidential summitry.

Theoretically, the key distinction is between continuity of strategic orientation and change in policy instruments. Indonesia's pursuit of strategic autonomy remains stable, while the repertoire used to sustain

it has expanded. This pattern corresponds closely to Hermann's category of program change and supports Harnisch's (2001) argument that role continuity may coexist with instrumental innovation. Prabowo's foreign policy therefore demonstrates that deeper defence cooperation, participation in new plurilateral institutions, and engagement with rival powers can remain compatible with non-alignment when they preserve, rather than constrain, Indonesia's freedom of strategic choice.

Table 2. Continuity and change across three Indonesian presidencies

Dimension	Yudhoyono baseline	Jokowi baseline	Prabowo, 2024–2026
Declaratory frame	Bebas-aktif; “million friends, zero enemies”; multilateral activism	Bebas-aktif; national-interest and developmental emphasis	Bebas-aktif; non-aligned; good-neighbour diplomacy; explicit sovereignty and national-interest framing
Prominent role	Democratic middle power; bridge-builder; entrepreneur	Maritime/developmental state; pragmatic middle power	Autonomous middle power; Global South advocate; security-capability builder
Instrumental emphasis	Multilateral normative ASEAN/G20 profile	summitry; diplomacy; Economic maritime infrastructure investment	Presidential summitry; defence diplomacy; strategic-industry partnerships; diversified forums including BRICS
Great-power posture	Broad engagement and equidistance	Economic accommodation plus maritime resistance/diversification	Multi-vector option-building; explicit non-bloc language; diversified defence/economic ties
ASEAN relationship	High declaratory centrality and regional leadership	More variable; ASEAN sometimes subordinated to broader priorities	ASEAN remains important, but global/plurilateral activism increases need to demonstrate complementarity
Hermann classification versus predecessor	—	Primarily program/priority reweighting	Primarily program change with issue-specific adjustment and role strain; no demonstrated orientation change

Source/Note: Author's synthesis based on Karim (2021), Warburton (2016), Wardhani and Dugis (2023), Anwar (2023), official Prabowo statements, and the literature reviewed above.

Pragmatic assertiveness as multi-vector strategic autonomy

The clearest manifestation of programmatic change is Indonesia's increasingly multi-vector strategy of institutional and bilateral option-building. Indonesia's full BRICS membership in January 2025 was framed not as entry into an anti-Western bloc, but as a platform for multilateral cooperation, Global South representation, sustainable development, and global institutional reform (BRICS Brazil, 2025;

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025). At the July 2025 BRICS summit, Indonesia again emphasised peace, governance reform, and a stronger voice for the Global South (Secretariat of State of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025a), reflecting Bandung-era postcolonial roles while advancing contemporary economic and status interests (Umar, 2019, 2023).

A structural realist interpretation might view BRICS membership as movement toward a China- and Russia-centred counterorder, but this overlooks Indonesia's continued rejection of bloc politics and its diversified external partnerships. Hedging scholarship suggests that under uncertainty, states cultivate overlapping institutions and partners to reduce dependence and preserve strategic manoeuvrability (Kuik, 2016; Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019; Haacke, 2019; Anwar, 2023). Prabowo's approach therefore resembles strategic portfolio expansion rather than balancing against the West.

This pattern also blurs the distinction between normative and interest-based diplomacy. BRICS, Palestine, and defence partnerships combine material objectives with principles of fairness, anti-colonial solidarity, and regional stability. Norms are therefore not displaced by interests; rather, they legitimate a more materially oriented foreign-policy repertoire (Laksmana, 2011; Thies & Sari, 2018).

Issue-specific tests: Myanmar, Palestine, the South China Sea, and AUKUS

Myanmar provides the clearest case of continuity. At the October 2025 ASEAN Summit, Prabowo characterised Myanmar as an ongoing regional concern and urged ASEAN to uphold democratic and transparent principles in relation to its political process (Secretariat of State of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025c). The available evidence does not indicate a shift toward unilateral coercion or abandonment of ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus. Indonesia therefore remains constrained by ASEAN norms, consensus-based diplomacy, and a long-standing preference for non-military pressure. The change is best classified as adjustment, involving variations in presidential emphasis within an inherited regional framework.

Palestine is more analytically significant because it combines identity, constitutional principles, domestic expectations, and international diplomacy. Prabowo's inauguration linked Palestinian independence to Indonesia's anti-colonial and anti-oppression principles (Secretariat of State of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024). At the United Nations in September 2025, he simultaneously supported Palestinian statehood and argued that durable peace requires recognition of Israel's security within a two-state solution (Secretariat of State of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025b). This represents role adaptation rather than goal change: anti-colonial solidarity is retained but operationalised through bridge-building and conflict-resolution diplomacy. Sukma (2003) similarly shows that Indonesian support for Palestine cannot be reduced to religious affinity alone, but is embedded in broader narratives of sovereignty, decolonisation, and independent diplomacy.

The South China Sea provides the strongest evidence of role strain. The November 2024 Indonesia–China joint statement referred to joint development in "areas of overlapping claims" and emphasised "mutual respect, equality, mutual benefit, flexibility, pragmatism, consensus, and domestic law" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024). Given Indonesia's established rejection of the legal validity of China's expansive dashed-line claims within its exclusive economic zone, this wording introduced significant ambiguity. However, the statement also reaffirmed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties and pursuit of a Code of Conduct, while no evidence demonstrates abandonment of Indonesia's UNCLOS-based rights. The episode is therefore better understood as a high-risk programmatic experiment rather than goal or orientation change (Laksmana, 2025; Putra & Cangara, 2026).

AUKUS constitutes an evidence-limited continuity case. Indonesia remains cautious toward exclusive minilateral security arrangements because of concerns over strategic rivalry, ASEAN centrality, and arms competition (Anwar, 2020; Abbondanza, 2022). Yet continued defence cooperation with Australia and other Western partners remains compatible with strategic autonomy. Taken together, the four cases reveal a coherent pattern: Myanmar reflects adjustment, Palestine role adaptation, the South China Sea programmatic experimentation with role strain, and AUKUS continuity under limited new evidence. None meets Hermann's threshold for international-orientation change.

Table 3. Structured classification of issue-specific and cross-cutting evidence

Issue case	Empirical evidence in 2024–2026 corpus	Change classification	Role implication	Confidence
Myanmar	ASEAN-centered concern; emphasis on democratic/transparency principles in 2025 summit	Adjustment/continuity	Regional leader and consensus-based problem manager	High
Palestine	Anti-colonial solidarity plus explicit two-state/Israel-security language at UN	Role adaptation; programmatic diplomacy	Solidarity role combined with bridge-building	High
South China Sea	2024 joint statement used “overlapping claims” and pragmatic joint-development language while retaining DOC/COC references	Programmatic experimentation; possible adjustment in signaling	Strongest role strain: legal-sovereignty clarity and honest-broker credibility	High on wording; medium on long-term effect
AUKUS	No sufficiently consequential new Prabowo-specific doctrinal statement in selected corpus; cooperation with member states continues	No demonstrated change; evidence-limited	Consistent with non-alignment if bilateral ties remain non-exclusive	Low-to-medium
BRICS (cross-cutting)	Full membership in 2025 framed as multilateral reform, Global South cooperation, and active diplomacy	Program change / institutional diversification	Status-seeking and Global South role without formal bloc alignment	High
Defence diplomacy (cross-cutting)	France/Türkiye and other partnerships stress training, technology transfer, co-production, industrial self-reliance	Programmatic reweighting	Capability-building instrument of strategic autonomy	High

Source/Note: Author's qualitative coding of the documentary corpus through 31 August 2026.

Presidentialization, military background, and the reweighting of defence diplomacy

The most visible instrumental shift under Prabowo lies in the growing salience of defence diplomacy. Indonesia already possessed extensive military exchanges, exercises, procurement ties, and

ASEAN defence mechanisms before his presidency (Tan & Singh, 2012; Tan, 2012; Laksmana, 2012; Emmers, 2012). The key issue is therefore not whether defence diplomacy is new, but whether its strategic weight has increased. Evidence from 2025 suggests that it has. The Ministry of Defence framed engagement with France, Türkiye, and other partners in terms of technology transfer, joint production, research, training, and defence-industrial self-reliance (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025a, 2025b), linking external partnerships directly to domestic capability-building.

This development is significant in three respects. First, defence diplomacy can deepen strategic relationships without requiring formal alliance commitments. Exercises, exchanges, and military networks can function as mechanisms of confidence-building, signalling, socialisation, and regional order management (Laksmana, 2012; Chang & Laksmana, 2025; Teo, 2025). Second, defence-industrial cooperation gives diplomacy a geoeconomic dimension, as technology transfer and co-production may reduce external dependence and strengthen bargaining leverage. Third, diversification of suppliers and military partners is consistent with hedging because it limits dependence on a single strategic ecosystem. Expanded defence diplomacy under Prabowo therefore need not imply militarised alignment; it can instead support non-aligned strategic autonomy.

Prabowo's military background is nevertheless relevant to understanding the presidentialisation of this instrument. Leader-centred Foreign Policy Analysis emphasises that professional experience can shape preferred institutions, perceived risks, and policy instruments (Hudson, 2005; Brummer, 2024). As a former general and defence minister, Prabowo entered office with established military networks and familiarity with strategic-industry negotiations. However, this should be treated as an amplifying factor rather than a sufficient causal explanation. Regional insecurity, technological dependence, military modernisation, and the maturation of ASEAN defence cooperation also matter.

Accordingly, the evidence supports reweighting rather than replacement. Defence diplomacy has become more prominent, but it coexists with Bandung diplomacy, peacekeeping, humanitarian engagement, ASEAN multilateralism, and other sources of Indonesian soft power. Pragmatic assertiveness therefore expands the foreign-policy repertoire rather than reducing it to military statecraft.

ASEAN leadership, honest-broker legitimacy, and the limits of pragmatism

The principal strategic risk of pragmatic assertiveness is not immediate alliance entrapment but role inconsistency. Indonesia's capacity to act as a regional bridge depends on external recognition of the credibility of its strategic autonomy. Because role legitimacy is relational (Karim, 2021), bilateral arrangements that appear to accommodate contested great-power claims, or partnerships that repeatedly bypass ASEAN, may weaken Indonesia's standing as an autonomous and credible intermediary. This concern is especially important in the South China Sea, where ambiguous legal language can affect both sovereignty interests and Indonesia's reputation as a supporter of an inclusive, rules-based regional order.

ASEAN centrality further complicates Prabowo's expanding global engagement. BRICS membership, stronger bilateral defence ties, and participation in overlapping institutional networks can widen Indonesia's strategic options, but they may also reduce incentives to invest political capital in ASEAN-led mechanisms. Similar tensions emerged under Jokowi (Rosyidin & Pattipeilohy, 2020), while Mueller (2019) shows that ASEAN centrality weakens when major

initiatives shift outside ASEAN-centred institutions. By contrast, Anwar (2020) and Agastia (2020) emphasise Indonesia's continuing commitment to an inclusive Indo-Pacific order through ASEAN. The policy challenge is therefore to ensure that extra-ASEAN diversification complements rather than substitutes for regional leadership.

The empirical pattern remains differentiated but broadly coherent. Myanmar reflects continued ASEAN-based engagement; BRICS is framed through multilateral reform and Global South representation; major-power relations remain diversified; and the South China Sea demonstrates how bilateral pragmatism can generate legal ambiguity and role strain.

No single theory fully explains this pattern. Structural realism captures systemic pressure, hedging explains diversification, role theory clarifies the political costs of alignment, and leader-centred FPA explains diplomatic tempo. The DCIR framework integrates these dimensions by linking systemic pressure, domestic priorities, presidential agency, and durable national roles.

The broader implication is that *bebas-aktif* endures because of its operational flexibility. Yudhoyono emphasised multilateral reputation, Jokowi development and sovereignty, and Prabowo defence, status, and multi-vector engagement. These are substantive adaptations within a persistent autonomy-seeking role structure. Pragmatic assertiveness is therefore most sustainable when diversification remains transparent, legal positions are unambiguous, and new partnerships expand rather than constrain Indonesia's strategic choice.

CONCLUSION

This article examined whether Prabowo Subianto's foreign policy constitutes a doctrinal departure from *bebas-aktif* or a reconfiguration of how the doctrine is implemented. The findings suggest that the early Prabowo period is best characterised by doctrinal continuity combined with programmatic reconfiguration. Indonesia continues to affirm non-alignment, strategic autonomy, friendship with multiple partners, anti-colonial solidarity, and support for an inclusive international order. At the same time, Prabowo has increased the prominence of presidential diplomacy, defence and defence-industrial cooperation, institutional diversification, and more explicit interest-based bargaining. These developments differentiate his foreign-policy practice from previous administrations without amounting to a fundamental change in Indonesia's international orientation.

The concept of pragmatic assertiveness captures this combination of continuity and adaptation. It does not signify a shift toward purely transactional diplomacy; rather, enduring doctrines and national roles continue to define the boundaries of legitimate action while Indonesia employs a more security-conscious and materially oriented diplomatic repertoire. BRICS membership illustrates institutional diversification and stronger Global South engagement; Palestine demonstrates the coexistence of anti-colonial solidarity and bridge-building; Myanmar reflects continued ASEAN-centred restraint; and the South China Sea reveals the risks created by legal and strategic ambiguity. AUKUS likewise shows that cooperation with individual member states should not automatically be interpreted as movement toward military alignment.

The article's principal theoretical contribution is the Doctrinal Continuity–Instrumental Reconfiguration (DCIR) model, integrating foreign-policy-change theory, role theory, leader-centred

Foreign Policy Analysis, and hedging. DCIR explains how systemic pressures and domestic priorities generate incentives for adaptation, presidential agency shapes diplomatic tempo and instrument selection, and durable national roles constrain the range of politically legitimate changes. It therefore conceptualises role-preserving program change, while identifying role strain when tactical initiatives appear inconsistent with established legal, regional, or normative expectations.

Empirically, the study avoids both continuity bias and change inflation. The Prabowo case demonstrates that significant change can occur in policy instruments, priorities, organisational pathways, and diplomatic tempo while the foundational doctrine remains intact. Pragmatic assertiveness should therefore be understood as a contemporary re-enactment of *bebas-aktif* rather than its replacement.

For policy, strategic autonomy depends on coherence among diversified partnerships, legal positions, ASEAN commitments, and diplomatic communication. Stronger cross-ministerial coordination is therefore essential. Future research should incorporate elite interviews, systematic speech analysis, defence-network data, and comparison with other non-aligned middle powers such as India, Vietnam, and South Africa.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

The author was solely responsible for all aspects of this study and manuscript preparation, including conceptualization, data collection and analysis, methodology development, interpretation of results, manuscript writing, and final revision.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declare that there is a conflict of interest in this study, namely [describe the type of conflict of interest, such as a financial relationship, institutional affiliation, or professional interest]. This conflict of interest has been transparently disclosed and taken into consideration in the conduct and reporting of the research..

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) USE STATEMENT

The author declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) technology was used in the research process or in the preparation of this article.

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