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Indonesia's Chairmanship of ASEAN 2023: Navigating Complex Security Challenges in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

This paper delves into Indonesia's pivotal leadership role as the Chair of ASEAN in 2023, with a specific focus on its engagement with two paramount and pressing regional challenges: the Myanmar crisis and the South China Sea conflict. It illuminates Indonesia's approach, outcomes and explores the broader implications of its leadership within the context of ASEAN. The primary objective of this manuscript is to meticulously examine Indonesia's strategies and initiatives in effectively addressing these pivotal regional challenges during its tenure as the ASEAN Chair. It systematically explores Indonesia's capacity to navigate divisions among ASEAN member-states, effectively engage with non-cooperative actors, and uphold ASEAN's principles of neutrality and centrality. The results of this paper illuminate Indonesia's multifaceted role in tackling the Myanmar crisis, underscoring its diplomatic acumen, principled stance, and the formidable challenges it confronts. Likewise, in the context of the South China Sea conflict, this research critically evaluates Indonesia's leadership in facilitating dialogue, championing a code of conduct, and emphasizing the imperative of adherence to international law. The paper concludes by underscoring the pivotal importance of Indonesia's leadership in building the future stability of Southeast Asia. It accentuates Indonesia's balance between diplomatic engagement, principled leadership, and fidelity to ASEAN's guiding principles. This paper contributes significantly to the ongoing discourse surrounding ASEAN's intricate political and security dynamics and spotlights Indonesia's central position within this influential organization.

Keywords: Indonesia, ASEAN, leadership, Myanmar crisis, South China Sea

1. Introduction

Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN has received attention from various perspectives. One aspect that experts consider is Indonesia's role in providing international public goods, engaging in conflict management, and

promoting institution-building within ASEAN. Emmers (2014b) argues that Indonesia has actively attempted to develop a peaceful and independent security environment and mediate conflicts such as the Myanmar and South China Sea disputes. This viewpoint emphasizes Indonesia's attempts to be proactive and constructive in ASEAN's political and security processes. Furthermore, due to its vast dimensions, large population, strategic position, and natural riches, analysts recognize Indonesia's natural leadership role within ASEAN. Other ASEAN nations have recognized Indonesia as the first among equals, and it has felt entitled to a leadership position (Drajat, 2018). This acknowledgment of Indonesia's leadership role offers a foundation for specialists to examine and assess its performance in meeting its ASEAN leadership responsibilities (Sebastian, 2013). Experts also evaluate Indonesia's foreign policy and its impact on ASEAN chairmanship. Indonesia's foreign policy direction has shifted since President Joko Widodo ruled the country in October 2014. Widodo's government has shifted its focus away from ASEAN and towards other avenues that benefit Indonesia's national interests (Desker, 2015; Sukma, 2009). This shift calls into question Indonesia's leadership trajectory in ASEAN and compels experts to assess its dedication to ASEAN's aims and mission.

However, Indonesia's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2023 would be difficult, as the region faces several regional and international issues. First, when supporting consensus-building, Indonesia must balance its national interests with the interests of other ASEAN countries (Pattiradjawane, 2016). Indonesia needs to strike a balance between its national interests and the interests of other ASEAN countries by considering the long-term benefits of regional cooperation and integration (Haftel, 2010). The second problem is managing the Myanmar crisis. The Myanmar crisis is one of the significant regional challenges that Indonesia will face during its chairmanship (Karim, 2017). The diversity of military and economic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), AUKUS defense pact, and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), influences regional stability and ASEAN centrality (Wicaksana, 2023). The last issue Indonesia should address is maintaining ASEAN unity on global issues. As the chair, Indonesia is responsible for leading and setting the agenda for various ASEAN efforts to overcome regional and global problems (Umar & Santoso, 2023). One of the significant obstacles is bringing ASEAN member-states together on global concerns while maintaining their unity (Zhang, 2023), for example, in response to the aftermath of the Ukraine war (Aiza Azam and Adil Sultan, 2023). These inconsistencies emphasize the problems Indonesia would face as chairman and the importance of good leadership in tackling them.

Considering the complex regional and international backdrop, this paper is essential to understand Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN to navigate these challenges and promote regional cooperation from a constructivist viewpoint. This approach underlines the power of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping state behavior. This approach can be used to analyze the significance of Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN to navigate security challenges in the region. As one of the founding countries of ASEAN, Indonesia plays a major role in driving regional cooperation and conflict resolution in Southeast Asia. Indonesia's constructivist foreign policy aligns with the regional organization's basic principles: non-interference, consensus-building, and peaceful dispute resolution. This paper contributes to a broader understanding of Indonesia's ASEAN leadership, growing position, and ability to respond effectively to complex regional and global concerns.

1.1 Literature Review

Indonesia's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2023 becomes a strategic opportunity for the country to propose various peace and cooperation initiatives on complex Southeast Asian security issues. This literature analysis looks at how Indonesia handled regional security issues during its presidency of ASEAN in 2023. This review provides insights into Indonesia's strategy for tackling security concerns and promoting regional stability by analyzing diverse scholarly works and perspectives. Because of its physical dimensions, strategic location, and massive population, Indonesia is primarily recognized as having natural leadership in ASEAN (Ardhani et al., 2023).

However, little attention has been paid to how Indonesia has exerted leadership and how other Southeast Asian countries see it. While Indonesia has long been deemed the de facto leader, scholars say its leadership in ASEAN has been insufficient and inadequate (Emmers, 2014a). Resistance from some member states and differences in preferences for regional order have posed challenges to Indonesia's leadership (Emmers, 2014b). Some member

nations' opposition and differences in aspirations for regional order have provided obstacles to Indonesia's leadership (Pradana & Darmawan, 2023). It aims to create a stable and independent security environment, resolve conflict, and promote institutional development (Acharya, 1997; Väyrynen, 2022). Indonesia has participated in conflict settlement, including the Cambodian and South China Sea disputes. It has also established organizational structures to promote security, democracy, and human rights in the region (Emmers, 2014b; Karim, 2023; Sukma, 2011).

The constructivist perspective is better suited to analyzing Indonesia's leadership in navigating complex security concerns in Southeast Asia than the realist and liberalist approaches. This is because the constructivist approach emphasizes the significance of ideas, norms, and identities in determining state action (Wendt, 1992). The situation of Indonesia is particularly pertinent because its foreign policy is based on constructivist concepts such as non-interference, consensus-building, and peaceful conflict resolution (Acharya, 2014). Realist and liberal perspectives fail to define Indonesia's foreign policy actions (Roberts & Widyaningsih, 2015). The realist viewpoint is preoccupied with power and competition, while the liberal viewpoint is concerned with cooperation and interconnection (Dar, 2019; Zhou, 2020). Because both approaches do not explore the importance of ideas and norms in driving state conduct, they are not well-suited for analyzing Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN. The constructivist viewpoint can assist us in comprehending Indonesia's reluctance to take a firm stance on particular situations, such as the crisis in Myanmar. Indonesia's foreign policy is influenced by its identity as a diverse and pluralistic nation and its commitment to the principles of non-interference and sovereignty. It can also help us to understand how Indonesia is trying to balance its relations with the United States and China (Freundlieb, 2019).

A constructivist inquiry underlines Indonesia's ASEAN leadership regarding ideas, norms, and identities. According to academics, Indonesia's constructivist leadership prioritizes debate, inclusivity, and consensus-building (Anwar, 2023; Caballero-Anthony & Emmers, 2022). It seeks to develop a regional culture that values peaceful dispute resolution and compliance with international law. Indonesia helps ASEAN stability and cooperation by creating shared norms and identities (Drajat, 2018). Indonesia's ASEAN leadership involves both problems and possibilities. Security difficulties, such as territorial conflicts in the South China Sea and geopolitical rivalries, are among the challenges. Indonesia must manage these complex issues through dialogue and diplomacy and support peaceful resolutions (Irene et al., 2023). Economic integration and addressing economic disparities among member states are also key challenges. However, Indonesia's leadership presents opportunities to enhance regional cooperation, address non-traditional security challenges, and strengthen democratic governance and human rights within ASEAN (Ramadhony & Firmansyah, 2022).

Indonesia's chairmanship in the 2023 ASEAN provides a crucial platform for managing regional security problems in Southeast Asia. By examining the constructivist approach, this literature review highlights Indonesia's efforts to address security challenges and promote regional stability. Indonesia's natural leadership, provision of international public goods, constructivist approach, and recognition of challenges and opportunities contribute to its role in navigating complex security challenges during its leadership as the 2023 ASEAN Chair. By promoting dialogue and cooperation, upholding ASEAN's principles and norms, and building trust with external partners, Indonesia can help to create a more peaceful and prosperous Southeast Asia.

2. Method

This research applies a qualitative method that involves researchers' interpretation in understanding and revealing certain phenomena. In qualitative research, "researchers build a detailed, comprehensive picture, study words, show detailed views of informants, and conduct their studies in natural settings" (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Collecting research data uses literature study methods from previous studies, focus group discussions, existing statistical data, and in-depth interviews (Bryman, 2016). This study seeks to see the patterns of interaction between Indonesia, ASEAN member-states, and other related actors in the Myanmar crisis and the South China Sea conflict to obtain a clear picture of how Indonesia's leadership is at the heart of promoting ASEAN centrality and neutrality.

3. Result

3.1. Finding a Peaceful Solution for the Myanmar Crisis

The Myanmar crisis poses a significant challenge to ASEAN in the year 2023. Following the military coup in February 2021, Myanmar has plunged into a severe political and humanitarian crisis, with ASEAN struggling to reach a consensus on its resolution. ASEAN works hard to find a peaceful solution acceptable to all parties involved. The principles of neutrality and centrality underline the necessity of ASEAN refraining from taking positions in disputes (Yoshimatsu, 2023a).

Indonesia has taken several proactive steps to deal with the Myanmar crisis, which include establishing an emergency ASEAN summit in April 2021 to address the emergency, employing the Five-Point Consensus (5PC), providing a special representative to Myanmar to speak to the ruling military regime and other stakeholders, developing a humanitarian corridor to supply essential assistance to the people of Myanmar, and working together with the UN and other international partners (Azis et al., 2023). President Joko Widodo of Indonesia has also officially criticized the military coup, requesting the release of political prisoners and the resumption of democracy in Myanmar.

Indonesia is accountable for seeking an achievable resolution to the continuing situation as the 2023 ASEAN chair (Wicaksana et al., 2023). Indonesia can employ its well-established foreign policy values, such as free and active foreign policy, as well as its dedication to ASEAN's essential principles of neutrality and centrality, to address the Myanmar problem. With its open and active foreign policy, Indonesia can play an important role in settling regional problems. In addition, Indonesia's foreign policy can also maintain ASEAN neutrality and centrality principles to solve the Myanmar crisis.

Nevertheless, Indonesia confronts enormous obstacles in resolving the Myanmar problem. These obstacles include divisions within ASEAN over how to address the crisis, varying degrees of support for the military junta among ASEAN members (ranging from support in some cases to criticism in others), the military junta's refusal to carry out the five-point consensus agreed upon by ASEAN in April 2021, and a declining security condition in Myanmar marked by a severe clampdown on opposition and allegations of widespread human rights abuses (Haacke, 2023; Haosheng & Yunkang, 2023; Ong, 2023).

Indonesia's leadership in resolving the Myanmar situation is critical, evidenced by its long history of mediating disputes and supporting peace in Southeast Asia. Indonesia's devotion to free and active foreign policy principles, ASEAN neutrality, and centrality uniquely positions it to contribute to crisis resolution significantly. Indonesia must use its diplomatic expertise and resources to traverse the complex environment of the Myanmar issue in this endeavor (Muhamad, 2023; Sari, 2023). This includes forging consensus within ASEAN, interacting constructively with the military regime, and delivering critical humanitarian aid to the affected population (Acharya, 2021). The high stakes involved underscore the critical importance of Indonesia's leadership, which has the potential to influence the future trajectory of Southeast Asia profoundly.

In addition to the initiatives mentioned earlier, Indonesia could contemplate additional measures, such as dispatching a fact-finding mission to Myanmar for on-the-ground assessment, imposing sanctions on the military junta, and collaborating with the UN Security Council to refer the Myanmar situation to the International Criminal Court. The ultimate success of Indonesia's leadership hinges on several critical factors, including the willingness of ASEAN members to cooperate, the degree of collaboration from the military junta, and the support extended by the international community (Julianto, 2022). Nonetheless, Indonesia possesses the potential to make a substantial difference in resolving the Myanmar crisis, cementing its pivotal role in regional diplomacy and stability.

3.2. South China Sea Conflict

Indonesia's presidency in 2023 ASEAN can help promote peace in the South China Sea in various ways. Indonesia can play an essential role in encouraging conversation and diplomatic negotiations between ASEAN member states and China. As a neutral and powerful member of ASEAN, Indonesia may organize conversations and encourage peaceful resolutions to the South China Sea issues (Odgaard, 2003). Second, Indonesia can lobby for implementing a South China Sea code of conduct. A code of conduct would provide guidelines and norms for regional behavior, lowering the likelihood of conflicts and misunderstandings (Emmers, 2014a). Indonesia can help to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea by aggressively pushing and supporting the implementation of a code of conduct (Ramadhani, 2015).

The conflicts in the South China Sea are complicated, comprising several claimants with rival territorial claims (Sack, 2022). ASEAN has been crucial in handling the issue and preventing it from worsening. However, the conflict has questioned ASEAN's unity and centrality (Chambers & Bunyavejchewin, 2023; Sack, 2022). Some ASEAN member countries are more associated with China, while others are more aligned with the US. Because of this lack of cohesiveness, ASEAN has found it challenging to adopt a firm stand on the problem.

From a constructivist standpoint, Indonesia's leadership is critical to maintaining ASEAN's centrality and neutrality in response to the South China Sea conflicts because Indonesia is an ASEAN founding member and leading power with a long history of promoting regional cooperation and conflict resolution (Heiduk, 2016; Suzuki, 2019). Conducting its leadership in ASEAN, Indonesia refers its foreign policy to constructivist concepts such as non-interference, consensus-building, and peaceful dispute resolution. These values are critical for ASEAN's centrality and neutrality in the South China Sea conflicts (Caballero-Anthony & Emmers, 2022; Koga, 2018). Because Indonesia has the capacity to bridge disunity among ASEAN member states, Indonesia's leadership is critical for sustaining ASEAN's centrality and neutrality in the South China Sea conflicts. Indonesia maintains cordial relations with all ASEAN nations, China, and the United States. This places Indonesia strategically positioned to facilitate communication and collaboration among the various stakeholders.

Furthermore, Indonesia's leadership can urge ASEAN countries to uphold international law principles such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Indonesia can emphasize the significance of recognizing the rights and interests of all countries connected to the South China Sea problems and demanding adherence to the UNCLOS legal framework (Ramadhani, 2015). This method can help to prevent escalation and promote peaceful ends. Indonesia's leadership can encourage regional collaboration and confidence-building measures (CBM) among ASEAN member states and China (Anwar, 2020). Indonesia has embarked on various attempts in ASEAN to build a peaceful framework for resolving potential conflicts in the South China Sea. The ASEAN Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC), the ASEAN-China Joint Working Group on DOC Implementation (JWG), the ASEAN Workshop on Managing Potential Conflicts in the South China Sea, and the ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise are among these initiatives (Aziz & Basir, 2022; Rizani, 2021). Indonesia can promote regional trust and collaboration through increased combined marine patrols, information exchange, and capacity-building programs. These steps can aid in alleviating tensions and promoting peace in the South China Sea.

Despite these obstacles, Indonesia is dedicated to promoting South China Sea peace and stability. According to Indonesia, the COC is the greatest strategy to prevent conflict from escalating. Indonesia continues to attempt to increase trust and confidence among the conflict's various stakeholders. Indonesia can mediate between ASEAN member countries and China through diplomatic channels and shuttle diplomacy. Through diplomatic efforts, Indonesia can foster dialogue, bridge divisions, and peacefully facilitate negotiations to resolve South China Sea problems (Thao, 2023). Consequently, Indonesia's leadership in the ASEAN 2023 summit may contribute to establishing stability in the South China Sea by fostering dialogue, advocating for a code of conduct, upholding the principles of international law, enhancing regional cooperation, and engaging in diplomatic mediation. These programs can reduce tensions, prevent wars, and maintain regional peace.

4. Discussion

Indonesia's chair of the 2023 ASEAN placed it in a strategic position to confront critical regional challenges, including the Myanmar situation and the South China Sea conflict. It emphasizes the delicate balance between Indonesia's solid and free foreign policy and ASEAN centrality values (Thao, 2023). The way Indonesia has handled the Myanmar crisis illustrates its commitment to diplomatic approaches. The "free and active" concept in Indonesia's foreign policy allows it to demonstrate leadership without identifying with any one power bloc (Wardhani & Dugis, 2023). In this context, Indonesia has called an emergency ASEAN conference, dispatched a special ambassador to Myanmar, and established a humanitarian corridor, all consistent with its commitment to diplomacy and mediation.

However, Indonesia's efforts have faced substantial challenges. ASEAN's internal divisions over addressing the Myanmar crisis have strained its diplomatic capacity (Koga, 2022). While Indonesia promotes neutrality, some ASEAN members have been more sympathetic to the military junta. Bridging these differences while upholding ASEAN's principles is a delicate task. The military junta's uncooperative stance and Myanmar's deteriorating security situation pose significant challenges to any diplomatic resolution (Medail et al., 2023). Indonesia's leadership role necessitates engaging with the junta, urging them to implement the ASEAN-agreed consensus from April 2021 and ensuring humanitarian assistance reaches the affected population.

The results of the 2023 ASEAN summit in Jakarta, Indonesia, on September 5, 2023, did not significantly increase the chances of a peaceful solution to the Myanmar crisis. The summit was held under the chairmanship of Indonesia, one of Myanmar's most vocal critics of the military junta. However, the summit could not reach any consensus on addressing the crisis. The 2023 summit agreed to prolong the mandate of Brunei's Foreign Minister, Erywan Yusof, the ASEAN special envoy, to Myanmar for another three months (Lin, 2022). However, Yusof's efforts to foster discussion between the military junta and the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party that won the 2020 elections, have failed (Editorial, 2021). The conference also resolved to form an ASEAN foreign ministers' "contact group" to address the Myanmar problem. However, it is unclear what role this group will serve or how it will vary from the current processes that have failed to resolve the situation.

Nevertheless, clarifying that the summit was not a failure is crucial. It reaffirmed ASEAN's commitment to finding a peaceful solution to the crisis and allowed the ASEAN leaders to discuss the issue and exchange views. The future of the Myanmar crisis is uncertain. The ASEAN leaders have clarified that they are committed to finding a peaceful solution. The next few months will be critical in determining whether ASEAN can succeed in bringing peace to Myanmar. ASEAN and its member-states still need Indonesia to build peace for the Myanmar Crisis. Indonesia's diplomatic skills and commitment to ASEAN's centrality, neutrality, and peaceful dispute resolution principles were tested in 2023 (Farhana, 2022). Building consensus within ASEAN, encouraging cooperation from the junta, and fostering international support are critical components of Indonesia's leadership in addressing the Myanmar crisis.

Furthermore, Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN extends to its role in promoting peace in the South China Sea. The South China Sea conflict has long been a long-standing issue involving territorial disputes and overlapping claims, primarily between China and ASEAN member states. The results of the 2023 summit in Jakarta could not significantly increase peaceful solutions for the South China Sea conflict (Agusman, 2023). ASEAN and China must create a more conducive dialogue, cooperation, and stakeholder trust-building environment (Chairman's Statement, 2023). By upholding ASEAN's principles and norms and promoting the implementation of existing agreements, the following summit in Lao could help reduce tensions and create a more stable and peaceful region. It is important to note that the South China Sea conflict is complex, and there is no easy solution.

Those experiences significantly contribute to Indonesia as a neutral and influential actor in conflict resolution (Vershina et al., 2023). Firstly, Indonesia can facilitate diplomatic negotiations between ASEAN states and China. Its neutrality and diplomatic credibility make it a suitable mediator. Encouraging dialogue, compromise, and the peaceful resolution of disputes is a pivotal aspect of its leadership role. Secondly, advocating for

implementing a code of conduct in the South China Sea aligns with Indonesia's commitment to promoting peaceful norms. A code of conduct can help establish guidelines for responsible behavior and reduce tensions. Indonesia's leadership in pushing for adopting and adhering to such a code demonstrates its dedication to regional peace. Indonesia can also emphasize adherence to international law, notably UNCLOS, in resolving South China Sea disputes. Promoting respect for UNCLOS principles can provide a legal framework for addressing territorial and maritime claims, fostering stability and predictability. Indonesia's leadership can encourage confidence-building measures, such as joint maritime patrols and capacity-building initiatives (Haacke, 2009; Inkiriwang, 2021). These efforts enhance trust among regional actors and contribute to conflict prevention.

Lastly, Indonesia's diplomatic expertise can be utilized in shuttle diplomacy to facilitate negotiations and bridge differences between the parties involved (Teo, 2022). Its neutral status and diplomatic channels make it well-suited for such efforts. Indonesia's leadership in the 2023 ASEAN Chair underscores the importance of its free and active foreign policy, rooted in diplomacy and principled neutrality. Balancing these principles with ASEAN centrality, Indonesia's role in addressing the Myanmar crisis and contributing to South China Sea peace is crucial (Haacke, 2023; Sambhi, 2023; Yoshimatsu, 2023b). Success in these endeavors will shape Indonesia's leadership legacy and influence Southeast Asia's future stability. The delicate balancing act between diplomatic engagement, principled leadership, and adherence to ASEAN's guiding principles defines Indonesia's role in these critical regional issues.

5. Conclusion

This paper sheds light on Indonesia's pivotal role as the 2023 ASEAN Chair and its adept handling of two paramount regional challenges: the Myanmar crisis and the South China Sea conflict. We have gained valuable insights into Indonesia's strategic approach, resulting outcomes, and the broader ramifications of its leadership within the ASEAN context through meticulous examination. Although widely recognized, Indonesia's leadership within ASEAN has been relatively underexplored regarding its nuanced dynamics. Scholars have identified resistance from specific member states and sectorial leadership tendencies, highlighting the complexities inherent in this role. This research has meticulously examined Indonesia's strategies and initiatives in addressing these critical regional challenges during its ASEAN Chairmanship. It has revealed Indonesia's capacity to navigate internal divisions within ASEAN, engage effectively with non-cooperative actors, and uphold the organization's foundational principles of neutrality and centrality. Throughout our analysis, we have spotlighted Indonesia's multifaceted role in addressing the Myanmar crisis, emphasizing its adept diplomatic efforts, principled stance, and the formidable obstacles it faces.

Similarly, within the South China Sea conflict context, we have critically evaluated Indonesia's leadership in promoting dialogue, advocating for a code of conduct, and championing adherence to international law. As we conclude, it is essential to underscore the pivotal importance of Indonesia's leadership in shaping the future stability of Southeast Asia. Indonesia's ability to strike a delicate balance between diplomatic engagement, principled leadership, and adherence to ASEAN's guiding principles defines its crucial role in addressing and resolving complex regional challenges. This research contributes significantly to the ongoing discourse surrounding ASEAN's intricate political and security dynamics and highlights Indonesia's central and influential position within this dynamic organization. Indonesia's leadership serves as a beacon of hope for regional peace, stability, and cooperation, and its success in these endeavors will undoubtedly reverberate throughout the Southeast Asian region.

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