

# Indonesia's 2023 ASEAN Chairmanship: Challenges and Policies Taken

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**Abstract.** As Indonesia has recently completed its term in the chair position for 2023, a study is needed to determine the link between ASEAN's policy goals, agendas, and their outcomes as reflected by common communiqués during Indonesia's chairmanship and Indonesian national policies and interests. Using a qualitative descriptive method, this study will examine two questions: firstly, how is Indonesia's ASEAN chairmanship in 2023 influenced by its pre-existing national foreign policy doctrine, and secondly, how is it reflected in its policy outcomes as chairman of ASEAN? This study examines these questions in the light of the three main issues that ASEAN faced during Indonesia's chairmanship in 2023: the conflict in Myanmar, the ASEAN bloc's relations with China, Russia, and the US, particularly in the context of the South China Sea dispute and the war in Ukraine, and regional integration and inter-country connectivity within ASEAN. Finally, this study will examine how Indonesia has successfully utilized its ASEAN chairmanship to achieve its internal policies and amplify them to the regional and global stage.

**Keywords:** ASEAN, Foreign Policy, Regional Integration, South China Sea, Indonesia, National Interests.

**Abstrak.** Mengingat Indonesia baru saja menyelesaikan masa jabatannya sebagai negara ketua ASEAN pada tahun 2023, diperlukan sebuah kajian untuk mengetahui kaitan antara tujuan kebijakan, agenda, dan hasil kebijakan ASEAN, sebagaimana tercermin dalam berbagai keputusan bersama yang dilakukan pada masa kepemimpinan Indonesia, dengan kebijakan dan kepentingan nasional Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini akan mengkaji dua pertanyaan: pertama, bagaimana kepemimpinan Indonesia di ASEAN pada tahun 2023 dipengaruhi oleh doktrin kebijakan luar negeri nasional Indonesia yang sudah ada sebelumnya, dan kedua, bagaimana pengaruh tersebut tercermin dalam hasil kebijakan Indonesia sebagai ketua ASEAN? Kajian ini menguji pertanyaan-pertanyaan tersebut dalam lensa tiga permasalahan utama yang dihadapi ASEAN pada masa kepemimpinan Indonesia pada tahun 2023: konflik di Myanmar, hubungan blok ASEAN dengan Tiongkok, Rusia, dan Amerika Serikat, khususnya dalam konteks sengketa Laut Cina Selatan dan perang di Ukraina, dan integrasi dan konektivitas regional antarnegara ASEAN. Terakhir, studi ini akan mengkaji bagaimana Indonesia berhasil memanfaatkan masa kepemimpinannya di ASEAN untuk mensukseskan kebijakan internalnya dan menyuarakan kebijakan tersebut di tingkat regional dan global.

**Kata Kunci:** ASEAN, Politik Luar Negeri, Integrasi Regional, Laut Cina Selatan, Indonesia, Kepentingan Nasional.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Central in Southeast Asia's political realm, particularly during the recent developments surrounding the states of the region, is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which has ten members (Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar). Central to the ASEAN governance mechanism itself is the system of rotating chairmanship, where each member state is given an equal chance to set agendas and hold meetings for ASEAN's working bodies for one year. ASEAN's rotating chairmanship has historically been utilised to guide intra-ASEAN consensus towards policy outcomes in line with the chairman state's national interests (Suzuki, 2020: 697). As Indonesia has recently completed its term in the chair position for 2023, a study is needed to determine the link between ASEAN's policy goals and outcomes during Indonesia's chairmanship and Indonesian national policies and interests.

This study will examine two questions: firstly, how is Indonesia's ASEAN chairmanship in 2023 influenced by Indonesia's national foreign policy, and how is it reflected in policy outcomes? Secondly, how is Indonesia utilising its ASEAN chairmanship to resolve regional and global issues? This study will place particular emphasis on three issues facing ASEAN in 2023: the conflict in Myanmar, relations between ASEAN and China, Russia, and the US, particularly in light of the South China Sea dispute and the war in Ukraine, and regional integration and connectivity between ASEAN member states.

This study will examine the various events happening during Indonesia's ASEAN chairmanship in 2023, and how Indonesia in its capacity of chairman responded to those issues. In answering these questions, this study argues that Indonesia's chairmanship in ASEAN in 2023 and the resulting policy outcomes are influenced by Indonesia's national foreign policy. This study also argues that Indonesia has successfully utilised its ASEAN chairmanship to solve some regional issues (albeit with less success in some cases) and has deepened regional integration through intensifying cooperation between ASEAN member states. To accomplish this, this study will begin by looking into the theoretical

underpinnings of ASEAN, particularly the "ASEAN Way" method of governance and the role held by the chair state in the internal mechanisms of ASEAN. Secondly, this study will examine the various theoretical frameworks surrounding ASEAN, particularly the bureaucratic theory and realism as practiced in Indonesia's national foreign policy. This study will next investigate three main challenges that Indonesia faced during its chairmanship of ASEAN: the Myanmar issue, the balancing of relationships between China, Russia, and the United States, and regional integration within ASEAN. This study will then conclude that Indonesia's policy outcomes as chairman of ASEAN for 2023 goes hand-in-hand with its pre-existing national foreign policy doctrine, and that Indonesia has utilised its chairmanship to successfully solve some issues facing ASEAN, while failing to do so in some other issues.

From its inception, ASEAN have depended on decision-making procedures dominated by consultation and consensus between member states (Nischalke, 2002), which aims to unite all member states without antagonizing any member state in the decision-making process. This principle forms the basis of "The ASEAN Way", a decision-making process characterized by its informality (Acharya, 1997: 328-333, Masilamani and Peterson, 2014). This particular working method enables ASEAN to have significantly less institutionalisation than similar regional organisations (e.g., the European Union). However, at the same time the ASEAN Way have been criticised as only producing 'lowest common denominator policies', particularly when faced with disagreements between member states (Kurus, 1995: 406).

The annually rotating position of ASEAN's chairman was formally instituted in the ASEAN Charter, which came into force in 2008. The Charter provided that the position of chair would rotate annually in alphabetical order between member states (ASEAN Secretariat, 2007). This dynamic therefore puts all member states in equal footing, and established principles of sovereign equality between large and small member states (Suzuki, 2020: 703). Aside from bringing considerable prestige to the chairman state for the year, chairmanship also presents an opportunity for the chairman state to set agendas and deliver policy outcomes on behalf of

the whole ASEAN bloc for their chairmanship year. Chairmanship also gives member states the opportunity to host high-level meetings and conferences, an opportunity that member states are eager to take as part of their “good host diplomacy” and “conference diplomacy” (Sato, 2013, Dongxiao, 2014).

In analysing such a method of regional cooperation, the employment of Weber's bureaucratic theory could be utilized. Weber identified a few distinct characteristics present within bureaucratic institutions, among them: “formal lines of authority, a fixed area of activity, and officials with expert training in their fields” (Swedberg and Agevall, 2005: 18-21). Elements of Weber's bureaucratic theory can be seen in ASEAN's method of governance: there is a clear line of authority (i.e., the chairman state which holds the authority during their chairmanship year), a fixed area of activity (which is set by the chairman state through a common theme, which in the case of Indonesia's chairmanship in 2023 is “ASEAN Matters: Epicentrum of Growth”), and expert officials negotiating on behalf of ASEAN member states. This particular characteristic can be seen in the form of ASEAN Ministerial Meetings and the Annual Meeting of Foreign Ministers, which brings together ASEAN foreign ministers and ministers outside ASEAN to participate in negotiations and discussions (ASEAN Secretariat, 2006: 4).

Another theoretical element that can further explain Indonesia's ASEAN chairmanship in 2023 is the international relations theory of realism, which places the state as the paramount actor in international politics and recognising the lack of any supranational authority to enforce rules upon states (Reus-Smit and Snidal, 2010). Elements of realism can be noticed within ASEAN's system of governance, where power lies not in an institutionalised secretariat or formalised supranational institutions (as in the case of the European Union), but in member states themselves, where participation is entirely voluntary. Indeed, as expounded by Suzuki (2020: 702), “the ASEAN Secretariat has not played any substantial role in decision-making”, which gives substantially more leeway for individual states to carry their respective national foreign policy goals into ASEAN forums, in this case through the chairmanship. Elements

of realism can be seen in ASEAN's collective hedging strategy *vis-à-vis* China (Kuik, 2016). In the case of Indonesia, realism (and hedging as a practical application of realism) has been used as the primary national foreign policy doctrine, as Indonesia has consistently used a style of foreign policy known as “free and active foreign policy” (Haryanto, 2015, Anwar, 2022).

## 2. METHOD

The primary methodological approach used in this study is a qualitative-descriptive one. The description narrative of the subject matter is drawn from academic works about Indonesia's role in ASEAN and power dynamics within the bloc. The description of the events happening in ASEAN throughout the Indonesian chairmanship period in ASEAN is also analysed through a textual analysis of ASEAN communiques and press releases, particularly comparing keywords and sentiments (positive, negative, or neutral) reflected in those communiques. The goal of qualitative-descriptive research is to give an in-depth account of contemporary issues in a language which is easy for readers to comprehend (Sullivan-Bolyai, Bova, and Harper, 2005). In addition, identifying and understanding phenomenon and the perspectives of those involved are the objectives of qualitative-descriptive researchers (Caelli et al., 2003). This renders the qualitative-descriptive method especially pertinent for practitioners and policy makers who wish to make an informed decision on the issues at hand (Sandelowski, 2000).

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Indonesia's Chairmanship and the Myanmar Issue

The “ASEAN Leaders' Meeting” was held in Jakarta on 24 April 2021 to determine a common ASEAN policy regarding Myanmar. The meeting successfully established the Office of the Special Envoy of ASEAN to Myanmar (Isjchwansyah, 2023: 95). In its capacity as the chairman state for the year, Brunei appointed Foreign Minister Erywan Yusof as the Special Envoy. When in 2022 Cambodia became the chairman state of ASEAN, Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn was appointed to be the new Special Envoy (Strangio, 2021). Therefore, a precedent was made: ASEAN's Office of the



Special Envoy to Myanmar would follow the rotating chairmanship, and the Special Envoy would be by custom the chairman state's foreign minister and therefore would largely function as a mere extension of the chairman state's pre-existing policies regarding Myanmar.

Indonesia's chairmanship in 2023 followed the same precedent: Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi was appointed as the Special Envoy to Myanmar. It seems that in accordance with the precedent made by Brunei and Cambodia, Minister Marsudi will only serve as special envoy during Indonesia's chairmanship year, after which the envoy will be passed on to Laos as the next chairman state. There is therefore no continuity in the Office of the Special Envoy, and whatever progress made by one envoy could easily be undone by the next. It also seems that Indonesia is treating the Office of the Special Envoy, which comes with its ASEAN chairmanship, only as a way to increase its diplomatic position within ASEAN, even when what the Myanmar issue needs is a stable ASEAN mission to act as a dependable, long-term dialogue partner, instead of the current system of annually changing envoys which follows the rotating chairmanship. Indeed, as Indonesian academic and vice-presidential advisor Dewi Anwar stated, the Office of the Special Envoy needs permanence to properly function (Mada and Anwar, 2023).

Indonesia is therefore placed in a difficult spot: while it wants to utilise the chairmanship (and the Special Envoy position that comes with it) to advocate for a democratic resolution to the Myanmar issue (keeping in line with its internal liberal democratic ideals), particularly considering that Cambodia (the previous chairman state for 2022) and Laos (the future chairman state for 2024) are more conciliatory towards Myanmar's military junta, Indonesia is reluctant to detach the Office of the Special Envoy from the chairmanship, as it risks the ire of other ASEAN member states (i.e., future chairman states) which would lose a part of the prestige and tangible power that comes with chairmanship (Isjchwansyah 2023: 96). Indonesia, by the end of its chairmanship term, elected to not detach the Office of the Special Envoy from the chairmanship (thereby turning the Office of the Special Envoy into an Indonesia-dominated institution), but instead

continued the status quo and bequeath the institution, weak as it is, to Laos as the next chairman state (with Laotian veteran diplomat Alounkeo Kittikhoun as the next Special Envoy).

Internal disagreements between ASEAN member states regarding the Myanmar issue can also be seen in the joint communique of the 2023 56<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM), held in Jakarta in July 2023 under Indonesia's chairmanship: from a total of 149 points, only five were declared about Myanmar. While the communique called for the cessation of violence (points 142 and 144), it remained silent on the issue of a reinstatement of democracy in Myanmar, which is supported by Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, but is evaded by Thailand, Cambodia, and Philippines (Septiari, 2021, Ranada, 2021). It can therefore be seen that ASEAN failed to reach a consensus on the matter of regime change and democracy in Myanmar.

### **3.2 Balancing between China, Russia, and the US**

A common theme in ASEAN meetings and proceedings over the past decade is the formulation of a common ASEAN policy *vis-à-vis* China, particularly surrounding the South China Sea dispute. However, individual ASEAN member states have taken differing policies on the issue. While Indonesia (ASEAN's chairman state for 2023) is a party to the dispute against China, Cambodia (the previous chairman state for 2022) and Laos (the future chairman state for 2024) are more conciliatory towards Chinese claims (Pang, 2017, Dipua et al., 2020, Var, 2021). Considering the extensive influence chairman states hold over ASEAN's agenda-making processes and policy outcomes for their respective chairmanship year, this signifies that Indonesia's ASEAN chairmanship functions as a more independent interim between two pro-China ASEAN chairmanships of 2022 and 2024.

In January 2023, the Chinese Coast Guard ship CCG5901 was spotted patrolling Indonesia's EEZ. Reactions within the Indonesian government varied: while the Indonesian Navy deployed a warship and patrol planes to monitor the Chinese movement in their EEZ, the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was instead more dismissive of the Chinese manoeuvre, viewing it as a legitimate exercise of

the right of innocent passage (Teresia, 2023). Considering that the incident happened not long before the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in June and keeping in mind China's influence on ASEAN conference diplomacy, Indonesia's strategic ambiguity in this matter is unsurprising (Dongxiao, 2014). It can therefore be seen that Indonesia's internal policy on strategic ambiguity informed its policy as ASEAN's chairman state for 2023 which in turn manifested in its mixed response to the Chinese incursion: firm military reaction combined with a restrained diplomatic response.

The escalation in South China Sea prompted bigger coverage regarding the issue in ASEAN documents over the year 2023. Both the Chairman's Statement and the AMM Joint Communique devoted whole headings to the South China Sea issue (points 156-157 of the Chairman's Statement and points 138-139 of the AMM Joint Communique), with the name being mentioned eight times in the Chairman's Statement and nine times in the AMM Joint Communique, far more than any other maritime toponym (with the Indian Ocean being mentioned far less times).

**Figure 3.1. Mentions of major powers in the Chairman's Statement of the 43<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN Summit**

Country	Number of Mentions
China	4
United States	1
Russia	0

*Source: Chairman's Statement of the 43<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN Summit*

**Figure 3.2. Mentions of other regional powers in the Chairman's Statement of the 43<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN Summit**

Country	Number of Mentions
Japan	10
India	5
Australia	8

*Source: Chairman's Statement of the 43<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN Summit*

The Chairman Statement of the 43<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN Summit held in Jakarta on 5 September 2023 also proved the focus of ASEAN on China *vis-à-vis* other major powers of the United States and Russia. China is mentioned 4 times throughout the 34-page communique, with one time referring to ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific

(Point 28), two times referring to trade (Point 66), and one referring to ongoing dialogues and summits (Point 141). The United States was only mentioned once in the whole document, referring to it as a dialogue partner (Point 28). Interestingly, while a strongly worded statement supportive of Ukrainian territorial integrity was issued in Point 163, the point (and, indeed, the whole document) did not mention Russia even once. This may reflect the general method in ASEAN, particularly Indonesia as the chairman state, to support Ukraine's territorial integrity in the UN and other multilateral avenues without explicitly condemning Russia or militarily backing Ukraine, in line with its traditional "free and active foreign policy" (*politik luar negeri bebas aktif*).

The 56<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM), aside from involving ASEAN member states' delegates, also featured Wang Yi (Chinese Foreign Minister), Anthony Blinken (US Secretary of State), and Sergey Lavrov (Russian Foreign Minister) on the sidelines—which marked an almost unprecedented level of diplomatic presence in Indonesia. However, despite the presence of these representatives of the great powers, it can be seen that there is still some degree of independence maintained by ASEAN (and Indonesia as this year's chairman) in forming agreements regarding global issues.

**Figure 3.3. Mentions of major powers in the 56<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting Joint Communique**

Country	Number of Mentions
China	5
United States	1
Russia	3

*Source: 56<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting Joint Communique*

**Figure 3.4. Mentions of other regional powers in the 56<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting Joint Communique**

Country	Number of Mentions
Japan	9
India	7
Australia	6

*Source: 56<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting Joint Communique*

The 56<sup>th</sup> AMM Joint Communique's point 147 reaffirmed Ukraine's territorial integrity,

for which Lavrov responded with a degree of anger (The Moscow Times, 2023). Two points pertaining to the South China Sea dispute (points 138 and 139) deplored continued Chinese land reclamations in the South China sea and reaffirmed the 1982 UNCLOS, a law which China has consistently disregarded through its nine-dash line claims. Considering that Indonesia's internal policies are supportive towards Ukraine's sovereignty and is generally against China's maritime ambitions, it can be concluded that the Joint Communique as a policy outcome is influenced by Indonesia's national foreign policy to a considerable extent.

However, unlike the Chairman Statement, which is devoid of any mentions of Russia, the 56<sup>th</sup> AMM Joint Communique mentioned Russia three times (all in Point 125) as a strategic partner. Particularly when compared to the only one mention of the United States, Russia is more represented in the 56<sup>th</sup> AMM Joint Communique than in the Chairman Statement.

Interestingly, both the Chairman's Statement and the AMM Joint Communique mentioned smaller regional powers more than major world powers. In the Chairman's Statement, Japan was mentioned 10 times over five points, India was mentioned five times over four points, and Australia mentioned eight times over four points. Likewise, in the AMM Joint Communique, Japan was mentioned nine times over four points (including successive points 123-125, all naming Japan as an important dialogue partner), India was named seven times over five points (also in the crucial "dialogue partner" section of points 123-125). Comparatively, Australia was only named six times over three points in the whole Joint Communique, crucially missing from points 124 and 125, where Japan and India were both mentioned.

### **3.3 Efforts Towards Regional Integration within ASEAN**

The bulk of the 56<sup>th</sup> AMM Joint Communique (points 2-118) discussed ASEAN's regional integration in various sectors. As regional integration goes hand in hand with ASEAN's further institutionalisation (which has been the trend since the adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2008), Indonesia is seeking to utilise its chairmanship to advocate for ASEAN's

increased institutional capacity (Wibowo, 2023).

As part of its increased commitment on climate issues, the Joint Communique calls for the establishment of the ASEAN Co-ordinating Centre for Transboundary Haze Pollution Control, which has been negotiated since 2002 (Heilmann, 2015, Riccardi and Riccardi, 2020). Indeed, Indonesia's internal policies seem to have guided the inclusion of this point into the Joint Communique, as ASEAN's haze issue is primarily centred in Indonesia, and the haze's effect on Malaysia and Singapore have historically caused relations between the countries to strain (Forsyth, 2014). Aside from the haze issue, the Joint Communique also highlighted several issues which affect Indonesia more than other ASEAN member states, e.g., marine pollution (point 29), palm oil production sustainability (point 64), and disaster management (point 113). It can therefore be seen how Indonesia successfully utilised its chairmanship to push for policy outcomes that would benefit Indonesia's national interests.

In the economic sector, ASEAN is committed to accelerate its common economic growth through the development of the digital economy sector (Joint Communique point 16). Indeed, it seems that Indonesia gears its chairmanship more towards regional economic growth as embodied in its slogan "ASEAN Matters: Epicentrum of Growth" (The Jakarta Post Editorial Board 2023). This commitment is a continuation of the trend that has developed over the past two years. ASEAN's commitment to increase regional payment connectivity (point 71), for example, echoes the agreement between the Indonesian central bank and its Thai and Malaysian counterparts to facilitate cross-border transactions with QR code technology (Bank Indonesia 2022).

The Joint Communique also called for increased regional integration through the establishment of various working bodies: the Working Group on Strengthening the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (point 45), ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (point 86), ASEAN Villages Network (point 97), and ASEAN Centre for Climate Change (point 108). These efforts in regional integration will also be combined with

increased external partnerships, such as through the establishment of ASEAN-Canada Strategic Partnership (point 125). The Joint Communique marks an increasing push towards ASEAN's regional integration, a policy goal that has been consistently advocated by Indonesia (Kim, 2011, Rattanaseeve, 2014). We can therefore conclude that Indonesia's longstanding policy on ASEAN integration and its role as the chairman state for 2023 has influenced ASEAN's policy outcomes to a further extent than Cambodia's chairmanship in 2022 and perhaps more than Laos' chairmanship in 2024 will be.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Through these examples, we can therefore discern that Indonesia has successfully utilised its ASEAN chairmanship in 2023 to achieve its internal policy goals and amplify them to the regional and global stage. Through ASEAN's chairmanship, Indonesia has reaffirmed ASEAN's commitment to solve the Myanmar issue, recognised international laws and norms in the cases of the South China Sea and the war in Ukraine, and pushed for increased regional integration and connectivity, all of them being long-standing themes within the Indonesian national foreign policy establishment. However, this also proved that specific policies advocated and the speed in which they are implemented within ASEAN are heavily contingent on the willpower of the chairman state for the year, as to date the chairmanship only functions as a means to amplify and further the chairman state's national foreign policy goals. It remains to be seen whether the gains and policies made by Indonesia as ASEAN's chairman state in 2023 will be retained or instead rolled back by the next chairman state for 2024.

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