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INDONESIA MUST BE CRITICAL OF CHINA'S GLOBAL ORDER VISION

Published: 17 December 2024 Reading Time: 5 mins

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In Brief

During his visit to China from 8 to 10 November 2024, Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto secured Chinese investment support totalling US\$10 billion and issued the Joint Statement on Advancing the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the China–Indonesia Community with a Shared Future. The Joint Statement has raised concerns as it used language suggesting alignment with China's vision of a global order — which may compromise Indonesia's stance of impartiality among major powers — and also noted an understanding on joint development in areas of overlapping territorial claims, despite Indonesia's position as a non-claimant in the South China Sea.

Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto visited the People's Republic of China from 8 to 10 November 2024. Prabowo views China as a great and significant nation and has emphasised the centuries of collaboration between both countries. As a result, Indonesia and China continue to maintain bilateral cooperation in various fields.

During the visit, Indonesia secured pledges for Chinese investment support totalling US\$10 billion. China demonstrated its support for Prabowo's current administration by committing to assist his free meal program — part of the Food Supplementation and School Feeding Programme.

The Joint Statement on Advancing the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the China–Indonesia Community with a Shared Future was also issued on 9 November 2024, during Prabowo's visit. This document references the phrase 'community with a shared future' seven times. It is unclear whether the Prabowo administration fully understands the implications of this phrase.

The phrase 'community with a shared future' evokes China's vision of a fair and just world order in which Western hegemony has been overcome. In 2020, the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and India opposed the inclusion of this phrase in a commemorative declaration for the 75th anniversary of the United Nations Charter, arguing that it was associated with Xi Jinping's global vision. Given that Indonesia aims to remain impartial in the rivalry between major powers, it should have considered using neutral language in the Indonesia–China Joint Statement.

The Joint Statement further asserted that Indonesia 'highly commended' Xi Jinping's outlook for 'a community with a shared future' and that Indonesia supported the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative.

Both countries have emphasised the importance of maintaining communication and exploring the potential for cooperation within the Global Security Initiative framework. But even though Indonesia is open to developmental cooperation with China, it is adopting a ‘wait-and-see’ approach in the security realm, particularly regarding China’s vision of global security. Since Indonesia is ASEAN’s de facto leader, it cannot decide solely based on its own interests, it must take regional concerns into account.

The assertion that Indonesia highly commended Xi’s vision for a community with a shared future and supports all three of China’s Global Initiatives also constitutes an abrupt shift. It raises doubts about whether this decision underwent thorough consultation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Indonesian academic community.

While Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam have made similar joint statements on building a ‘community of shared future’ with China, their primary motive has been benefitting from mutual cooperation with China, rather than supporting Beijing’s global order vision.

But the concept of a ‘community of shared future’ risks consolidating China’s dominant position in the region by prioritising Beijing’s core interests and weakening ASEAN members’ engagement with the United States and its allies. As ASEAN’s leader, Indonesia must voice these concerns, ensure openness, inclusivity and promote dialogue and cooperation.

The Joint Statement also addressed maritime cooperation and the South China Sea, stating that ‘the two sides reached an important common understanding on joint development in areas of overlapping claims and agreed to establish an Inter-Governmental Joint Steering Committee to explore and advance relevant cooperation’. The reference to ‘overlapping claims’ is particularly concerning as Indonesia has consistently maintained its position as a non-claimant in the South China Sea.

Indonesia has asserted its position on the Natuna Islands, and its sovereignty over the islands remaining uncontested internationally. Both China and Indonesia have also ratified the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which means that China must respect Indonesia’s maritime rights in the North Natuna Sea. China’s South China Sea claim could also destabilise the convention’s framework. Contrary to Beijing’s assertions, there are no ‘overlapping claims’ in the North Natuna Sea.

In response to China’s circular note from May 2009 regarding South China Sea (SCS) claims, Indonesia issued diplomatic note No. 480/POL-703/VII/10, stating that China’s claims lack a basis in international law and violate the principles established by UNCLOS. The frequent incidents involving Chinese authorities in the North Natuna Sea do not indicate overlapping claims — they represent violations of Indonesia’s maritime rights by China.

The Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has clarified that its position remains unchanged and the Joint Statement will not impact Indonesia’s sovereignty, sovereign rights or jurisdiction in the North Natuna Sea. This clarification underscores that the Joint Statement is a political document bearing no legal consequence.

While cooperation between China and Indonesia can benefit both nations and the broader region, it must not compromise Indonesia’s national interests. Concepts like ‘mutual trust’, ‘win-win cooperation’ and ‘fairness and justice’ should not just be slogans but require concrete actions for meaningful implementation. The Joint Statement must be renegotiated to better reflect the interests of both Indonesia and the ASEAN region.

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<https://doi.org/10.59425/eabc.1734472800>