

# ASEAN, and Indonesia's Rising Influence in the Region

**Mohammad Abdullah Khan**

PhD Scholar, UDCP, University of Mumbai

## Abstract

When one looks at the world map, Indonesia is not really visible in a very obvious manner, due to it being an archipelago, scattered over thousands of islands in South East Asia. However, when one reads into it, they realize that it is actually the fourth most populous country on earth, and holds quite a bit of diplomatic power as well. Indonesia is one of the founding members of ASEAN, the Association of South-East Asian Nations. ASEAN houses major natural resources, a huge chunk of Earth's population, and together, the 10 ASEAN member states form one of the busiest trade routes in the world. To keep it simple, ASEAN is a really important organisation, and Indonesia, being one of the founding members, as well as the largest country in it, acts as the de-facto leader. Unfortunately, Indonesia is prone to many natural disasters due to its unfortunate geographic location, smack in the Pacific Ring of Fire. Recent major disasters have weakened Indonesia's position, and many countries now do not consider Indonesia as the de-facto leader of ASEAN. This research focuses on Indonesia's rise and fall as the undisputed leader of ASEAN, and what the future holds in store for Indonesia. To conduct this research, numerous research papers have been referred to and cited, as well as fresh information has been collected on a primary data basis. The primary data is collected by interviewing 15 Indonesian citizens, as well as senior officials at the Consulate General of Indonesia, Mumbai. Thus, the research presents the observations derived from interviewing two sides, the perspective of the Indonesian citizens, as well as the perspective of the Indonesian government. The research aims to answer some questions such as if Indonesia is prepared to tackle the current and future issues arising in ASEAN, being the leader. The research goes a step further to figure out if the Pacific Ring of Fire affects the geopolitics of Indonesia, and finally, the research looks at if the Indonesian government, and their people, the citizens look eye to eye? All of the interviews of the Indonesian citizens have been conducted virtually via Google Forms, and a meeting at the Consulate was set up in Mumbai to get the government's perspective.



## Chapter 1: The Indo-Pacific, and the Role of ASEAN

The Association of SouthEast Asian Nations, ASEAN, is one of the most widely recognised international bodies of nations in terms of mutual cooperation. It is, in many ways, the South East Asian equivalent of the EU. ASEAN has since long been a major regional player in Asian geopolitics, be it the many disputes, or the military issues, ASEAN has held itself together in a strong manner.

ASEAN consists of the following countries:

- Brunei Dar-Us-Salaam
- Cambodia
- Indonesia
- Laos
- Malaysia
- Myanmar
- Philippines
- Singapore
- Thailand
- Vietnam

The above list includes some of the major global hubs, ports, and business centers. The Indonesian archipelago is also rich in natural resources, and thus accounts for a major role in global politics. Its close proximity to China and India have led to some of the most peculiar instances of foreign relations in the world.

The ASEAN economies are not considered as highly developed ones, but they're sure catching up fast, with their ranks rising in every global index each year. Singapore has consistently been an exception to this categorisation, for it boasts of a highly developed, rich, and stable industrial economy with extremely high standards of living.

Yet, the majority of ASEAN nations are catching up fast, and they are to be watched. The speed at which they are rising may soon become a challenge to powers such as China, the US and India. The ASEAN nations also have a relatively stable foreign policy, with friendly relations with a majority of countries. Although some countries in the region have been called out for human rights violations, such as Brunei, the overall performance of the entire region has certainly been above satisfactory.

### Indonesia:

Indonesia is the largest country in Southeast Asia, with a maximum dimension from east to west of about 3,200 miles (5,100 km) and an extent from north to south of 1,100 miles (1,800 km). It happens to share a border with Malaysia in the northern part of Borneo and with Papua New Guinea as well. Indonesia is composed of some 17,500 islands, of which more than 7,000 are uninhabited, and have an abundance of natural resources. Almost three-fourths of Indonesia's area is embraced by Sumatra, Kalimantan, and western New Guinea; Celebes, Java, and the Moluccas account for most of the country's remaining area. (David John. 2020, March 25. Encyclopedia Britannica)

The Indonesian Archipelago covers a huge area, and falls within the Pacific Ring of Fire, in its entirety. This unfortunate geographic hurdle has caused Indonesia to be prone to many natural disasters, such as tsunamis, earthquakes and cyclones. Moreover, Indonesia also hosts the largest number of active volcanoes in the world, which does not make things much easier for the locals there.



**Figure (i) The Indonesian Archipelago (ontheworldmap.com)**

Indonesia was one of the founding member states of ASEAN, which was formed in order to maintain mutual cooperation within the region. Owing to its size, population and relatively higher development, with the added advantage of being one of the founder states, Indonesia has since long been considered as the de-facto leader of ASEAN.

This is an important title, because it comes with a lot of unsaid responsibilities. Whatever happens within Indonesia, affects the entire ASEAN as a whole, which is why the country seems to have vested a lot of power which has, many times turned the tables for Indonesia, and not in a good way.

### **The Indo-Pacific:**

When it comes to a maritime perspective, the geographic boundaries of the seas and oceans becomes important to understand the geopolitics of that particular region. The Indo-Pacific region is one such zone, and is rather controversial. For starters, it has no defined beginning and an end, except for the vague assumptions on the world map. The Indo-Pacific, as the name suggests, is an amalgamation of a portion of the Indian Ocean, and another of the Pacific ocean.

The simplest explanation of the boundaries of the Indo-Pacific would be from the east coast of Africa to the West coast of the Americas. It engulfs a massive portion of the earth's area, and more than that, also hosts about roughly half of the global population. This makes the area not only politically important, but also strategically relevant.



**Figure (ii): The Indo-Pacific Region**  
([perthasia.edu.au](http://perthasia.edu.au))

For many long years, India tended to view the Indian Ocean as a cohesive entity, which drove diplomatic relations between countries on its periphery, the Indian sub-continent as we know it, whilst a fairly dominant Asia-Pacific was seen more through the eyes of regionalism. It is only of late that the integrated arena of the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific, commonly referred to as the Indo-Pacific, has become a key strategic area in the 21st century with the world seeing it as a singular maritime theatre. It is safe to say that the term Indo-Pacific has conveniently replaced Asia-Pacific, and that too in a short span of time. The shift in the strategic balance of power to the East makes it necessary to explore the emerging security imperatives in the broader Indo-Pacific region, amidst a rising constellation of economic and political stars such as China, Indonesia, Japan, Australia and India, on the geo-strategic horizon. As world wide economic power shifts from the West to the East, with many nations following the “look east” policy, the vast geo-strategic and geo-economic realm spanning the western Pacific Ocean right up to the western Indian Ocean along the eastern coast of Africa is rapidly eclipsing the once dominant Asia-Pacific as the centre of trade, investment, rivalry, competition and cooperation.

(Mehta, Sureesh., Kaushiva, Pradeep. 2014. The Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific)

### **The ASEAN Outlook:**

With ASEAN having a population of around 622 million, it is but natural that the ASEAN countries would play an important role in the Indo-Pacific, more so because they lie in the center of that oceanic region. The ASEAN Website lists the following outlooks of ASEAN, in regards to the Indo-Pacific:

- A perspective of viewing the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, not as contiguous territorial spaces but as a closely integrated and interconnected region, with ASEAN playing a central and strategic role
- An Indo-Pacific region of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry;
- An Indo-Pacific region of development and prosperity for all



- The importance of the maritime domain and perspective in the evolving regional Architecture.

In addition to this, ASEAN also has the following objectives in the Indo-Pacific context:

1. Offer an outlook to guide cooperation in the region
2. Promote an environment of peace
3. Promote the existing ASEAN- lead mechanisms in the region
4. Work towards achieving the SDG'30 in the region
5. Maintain peace, freedom and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific

The ASEAN 2025 are in line with the SDG 2030, which makes ASEAN a major contributor in helping to achieve those goals. ASEAN has also pledged for economic cooperation and disaster risk management, and helping combat climate change in the region.

(ASEAN outlook of the Indo-Pacific, asean.org)



Figure (iii): Leaders of the ASEAN Member States

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## Chapter 2: The Rise & Fall of Indonesia in the Affairs of ASEAN

As discussed earlier, Indonesia is the largest country in SouthEast Asia, and also the most populous. Being one of the founding members of ASEAN, it is safe to say that it maintained its position as the de-facto ASEAN leader for a long time. The general perception is that while Indonesia did act as a leader for quite some time, recent times have seen Indonesia lose its de-facto positions due to economic and political instability, as well as natural calamities.

Before the emergence of ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) was formed up by Thailand, the Philippines, and the federation of Malaya with Prime Minister Rahman of Malaya as the initiator, but it failed because of the political disputes between member nations. Then on August 5 1967, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines gathered in Bangkok and signed on the Bangkok Declaration to declare the establishment of ASEAN. This was considered as a landmark moment in SouthEast Asian politics. These five countries were accounted as original members of ASEAN, and the new members of ASEAN are Brunei (January 8, 1984), Vietnam (July 28, 1995), Laos (July 23, 1997), Myanmar (July 23, 1997), and Cambodia (April 30, 1999) (ASEAN-JAPAN CENTRE).

(UK Essays, How Indonesia plays an important role in ASEAN Politics)

A group of 15 Indonesian citizens were interviewed as a part of this research, and were asked questions about their thoughts as Indonesians, and their views about Indonesia's Leadership position in the ASEAN. In a parallel interview, two senior officials at the Consulate General of Indonesia, Mumbai were interviewed as well, the questions remaining the same. The observations derived henceforth will be of two perspectives viz. of the Indonesian people, and of the Indonesian government.

When the Indonesian officials at the consulate were asked about Indonesia's Role in ASEAN, what are the current aims and objectives, the officials responded with the following brief response:

### 1) Counter Terrorism

The ASEAN Region is prone to many terror attacks, and terrorist groups operate in many nations. This has become a huge menace for the people there, and while terror attacks are not exactly a very frequent occurrence, they do have many direct and indirect effects. Indonesia is thus, on the frontlines in respect to countering terrorist activities in the ASEAN Region.

### 2) Narcotics

The Narcotics team of the Indonesian government is doing what it can to tackle drug abuse and drug smuggling that is very prevalent in the country, as well as in the other ASEAN member states. Indonesia has been cooperating with the other states to reduce the level of drug abuse in the ASEAN Zone.

### 3) Make proper use of its population

Indonesia is the biggest country in SouthEast Asia, as well as the most populous. In fact, half of ASEAN

Region's entire population resides in Indonesia. It aims at utilising its human resources well and improving the overall global HDI rankings of all ASEAN member states.

#### 4) Mediation

There are a number of conflicts in the ASEAN region, and Indonesia is in the frontlines in almost all the peacekeeping and mediation processes. The Indonesian influence in the region is strong enough for Indonesia to assert certain powers in times of conflicts in the region.

#### 5) South-China Sea Dispute

One of the most prominent geo-political issues prevalent in the Indo-Pacific region is that of the South-China Sea. Along with China, a lot of ASEAN Member states are also tangled up in the messy issue, and have thus brought upon a lot of problems on themselves. Indonesia has consistently played the role of a mediator when it comes to this specific issue, and has since long, been acting as a bridge of peace in the South-China Sea Issue.

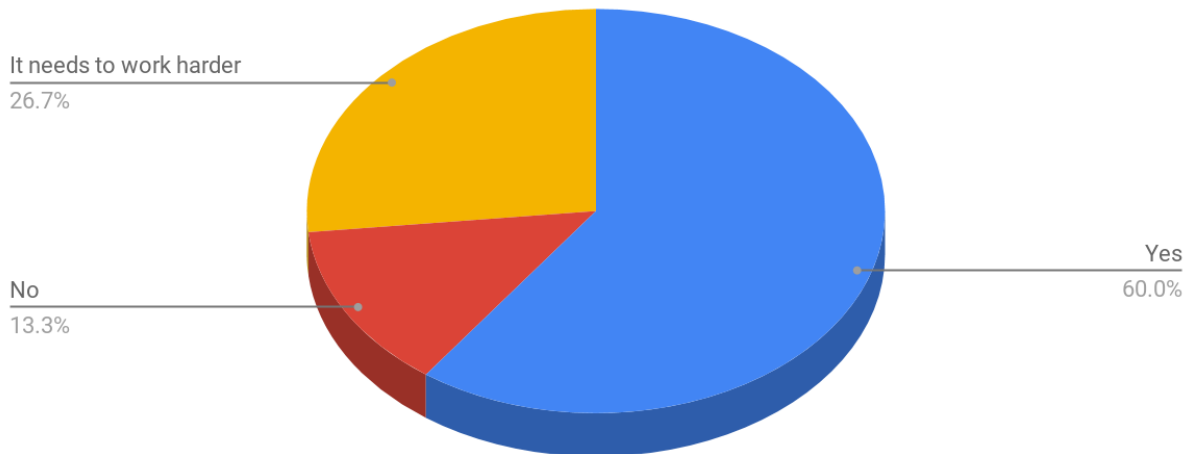


**Figure (iv): Senior Official at The Consulate General of Indonesia, Mumbai.**

When the Indonesian officials were asked if the leadership position of ASEAN is currently unstable, the officials affirmed that no such phenomenon exists. Indonesia may have faced a lot of ups and downs, but that has not shaken the foundations of Indonesia's Leadership. That being said, they confirmed that there is no need for a change in leadership, when it comes to handling the affairs of ASEAN.

However, the citizens hold a slightly different perspective. When the sample population was asked if they feel that Indonesia is an important player in ASEAN, this is the response observed:

## Do Indonesians feel that their country is an important player in ASEAN?



### Figure (v) : A significant number of Indonesians are skeptical about Indonesia’s role in ASEAN

As the observation indicates, 60% of Indonesian citizens feel that Indonesia is an important player in ASEAN affairs, but the remaining 40% of the citizens cannot be overlooked, because it accounts for many million people. They either feel that their country is not an important player at all, or are not really confident about its leadership capabilities.

### Instances of Indonesia’s Leadership in the affairs of ASEAN

As a part of this research, Mr Mujtaba Achmad, an Indonesian student at the University of Mumbai, who also happens to be well versed with Indonesia’s history and politics, offered an elaborate insight as to how Indonesia previously played an important role in ASEAN.

His expertise has been mentioned below:

As we know, Indonesia is one of the five original countries which formulated ASEAN in 1967. If we look back at the historical background in the case of Indonesia and Malaysia war, during 1962-1966 we can see that both countries had a conflict over the creation of the Federal of Malaysia that took place on the island of Borneo which is called Kalimantan Island. In this war, British meddled in the conflict between these two sides. The war was much complicated which makes us hardly believe that Indonesia would agree to form a regional group with Malaysia. But later on, under Indonesia’s President, Suharto, Indonesia eventually agreed to accept Malaysia. In addition, Indonesia agreed to shape ASEAN, as in that Indonesia agreed to accept the establishment of Federation of Malaysia and moreover; the tension between Indonesia and Malaysia war did not happen anymore in 1966. More importantly, during the period of the cold war, ASEAN could break up easily owing to ideology crash. At that time, Indonesia had a crucial role to prevent this crash. Indonesia had participated with other ASEAN member countries in order to prevent the so-called epidemic of communism and strengthen ASEAN’s role in global politics.



### **A.1. Case of Indonesia and Malaysia War**

The Indonesian-Malaysian confrontation happened during 1962-1966 was Indonesia's political and against the establishment of Malaysia. It is also known by Indonesian and Malaysian name Konfrontasi. The creation of Malaysia was the integration of the Federation of Malaya (now west Malaysia), Singapore and British Borneo in September 1963. The confrontation was an undeclared war which took place at the frontier area between Indonesia and East Malaysia on the island of Borneo which is known as Kalimantan in Indonesia. But Sabah and Sarawak were religious, ethnic, and political variety and there were some areas which opposed Malaysia that Indonesia attempted to exploit. Owing to the fact that terrain in Borneo was challenging and there were a few roads, both sides depended on foot soldiers and air transport. The British and Malaysian armed forces provided a main element of the effort with the Australian army, navy air forces from the combined Far East Strategic Reserve. Firstly, Indonesians overran into East Malaysia and relied on local volunteers trained by Indonesian army. The crucial military forces turned to Malaysia were British yet, their first activities were unsuccessful. Then, the British reacted to increasing Indonesian activities. In 1965 British began to convert operations into Indonesian Kalimantan under the code name Operation Claret. Meanwhile, Indonesia had little armed forces into west Malaysia. In August 1966, under Indonesia President Suharto's rise to power, eventually, a peace agreement influenced Indonesia and then Indonesia accepted the existence of Malaysia.

### **Role in maintain ASEAN**

Indonesia is a big brother of ASEAN, it holds a big responsibility and maintains the relationships among the members of ASEAN. Indonesia involved in the Cambodia and Thailand dispute.

In case of the Cambodia-Thailand territory dispute, Indonesia, chairman of ASEAN, asked both parties to sit and talk in order to seek the solution. After negotiating many times, the clash still occurred and the situation worsened. Responding to these issues Indonesia had sought an agreement which Indonesia sent observers to the conflict area in order to prevent fire.

The problem was never solved until Cambodia asked the UN for help. It showed that Indonesia failed to solve the problem. Yes, it is right Indonesia failed to solve the problem, but it was not Indonesia's mistake; It is because of the international law "must respect to the state sovereignty" and ASEAN as well. ASEAN is a regional group and it did not have enough power yet to intervene in its members' conflict. In addition to the failure of solving the problem, the present situation of Indonesia in this dispute is really important because until the dispute ends it saves many lives that live along the border. This failure experience will affect positively on our future ASEAN.

### **Participation of Indonesia in the bright future of ASEAN**

Indonesia can be called ASEAN's major power because of its population, size of territory and also located in one of the busiest trade routes in the world called Malacca. Indonesia is not only a member of ASEAN, but also a member of G20 which makes it the voice of ASEAN in the group of major world powers and brings ASEAN to the high ranking group. With the membership of Indonesia, ASEAN would gain more bargaining power and reputation in the international affair as well as the world politics (The Jakarta post, 2011)

### **Conclusion**

To summarize, Indonesia is seen as a big brother of ASEAN because Indonesia has the largest economy

in Southeast Asia as well as it has more 240 million people, so it has a potentially huge market. If you look at the past, you might see that Indonesia had a crucial role to help countries in Southeast Asia walk away from Communism. Indonesia is not only a significant player in establishing ASEAN, but also be a mediator in negotiation of Cambodia and Thailand conflict so that prevents clashes between members and maintain the relationships among the members of ASEAN. Not only now but also in the future, Indonesia will be the one who participates the most in ASEAN prosperity.

### **Fall of Indonesia's Leadership**

Experts claim that while Indonesia did act as a de-facto leader of ASEAN for a while, it might be time for it to step back, because it is slowly losing its leadership capabilities.

The country has sought to establish a stable and autonomous security environment, to conduct conflict mediation efforts in the Cambodian conflict and the South China Sea disputes, and to develop institutional mechanisms to promote security, democracy and human rights among other issues. Still, Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN has been incomplete due to resistance from some members to its preference for an autonomous regional order and in recent years a democratic form of domestic governance. Its leadership has so far also been limited to the political and security spheres, leaving other sectors, like the economy, to others.

(Emmers, Ralf. Indonesia's role in ASEAN: A case of incomplete and sectoral leadership. *The Pacific Review*)

Economic and political crisis in Indonesia has had a marked impact on Indonesia's ability to participate fully in international affairs, including its relations with Southeast Asia and its participation within ASEAN. This has led many countries in the region to question Indonesia's role as a leader.

In the past, Indonesia has been described as the leader of ASEAN, and it can be shown that Indonesia has had a marked impact on the formation of, and developments within, ASEAN. The economic crisis, questions over Indonesia's political stability, forest fires, bilateral disputes between ASEAN's member states and so on have all taken their toll on ASEAN's cohesion. While ASEAN remains an important regional body, clearly Indonesia's leadership of the grouping has been tested and found wanting.

(Smith, A. Indonesia's Role in ASEAN: The End of Leadership?. *Contemporary SouthEast Asia*)

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### Chapter 3: South China Sea & Other Disputes

#### The Quad

Post the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004, the Indo-Pacific has been through a period of geopolitical turmoil. In the midst of this crisis, the Quad, a collaboration between India, Japan, United States and Australia was formed, in order to make the Indo-Pacific zone more inclusive.

The meeting of 'The Quad' was held in Singapore, between the officials of the foreign ministries of India, Australia, Japan and the United States. The main agenda for the creation of the Quad is as mentioned below:

The four countries reaffirmed their support for a free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific Region. They also confirmed their common commitment, based on shared values and principles, to promote a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

The statement indicates the discomfort of the various stakeholders with China's bid to alter the status quo in the South China Sea, that is interpreted as a hurdle to freedom of maritime and air movements.

The participants expressed support for the ASEAN-related mechanism to help stabilise the Asia-Pacific region. The South China Sea dispute is one of the many issues faced by the ASEAN region in the present times.

They agreed to partner with all countries and institutions in the region to promote the shared vision of a peaceful, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific, including through such plurilateral formats.

The participants considered ways to pursue shared objectives in the areas of connectivity and development, regional security, including counter-terrorism and non-proliferation, high availability disaster recovery (HADR) and maritime cooperation.

The first meeting of officials from the four countries took place against the backdrop of an increasingly assertive China that has not only made Southeast Asian nations wary but also raised quite a few concerns regarding freedom of trade and navigation through the waters of the South and East China seas.

Add to this China's aggressive posturing along land borders with countries like India and Bhutan. It's welcome then that the 'quad' has endorsed a free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region that isn't monopolised by a single country.

(Project UPSC, Indo-Pacific area should be inclusive)

#### The South-China Sea

The South-China Sea dispute is one of the most prominent issues of the Indo-Pacific Region in the present times.

Many foreign policy observers and political elites in the Asia-Pacific region see the SCS maritime region to be in a precarious situation, compared to the last few decades. Whereas the territorial dispute during the last three decades or so largely focused only on marginal backlashes in interstate public diplomacy, China today has aggressively implemented 'dredging operations for land reclamation works at seven disputed reefs and shoals' fearlessly, and the 'naval and air force facilities are being established: new piers and wharves, extended airstrips, and military garrisons with radar installations and coastal artillery' (Yoon, 2015, p. 1). In the Spratly Islands, several hundreds of miles from Chinese mainland's coastline, 'Chinese

dredgers are spewing up torrents of sand from the sea bed, turning reefs into new islands’ (Marcus, 2015). As the US Pacific Fleet Commander Harry Harris confessed that ‘China was using dredges and bulldozers to create a “great wall of sand” in the South China Sea’ (Brunnstrom & Takenaka, 2015). In mid-June 2015, the Chinese foreign ministry reported that the land reclamation activities in the seven reefs in the SCS region would end soon and announced that it would begin establishing infrastructures in those reclaimed lands ‘for defence, but also maritime search and rescue, disaster relief and research’ (BBC, 2015a).



**Figure (vi): South-China Sea Dispute**

As per a research conducted by Pew Research Center, the majority of the respondents from the Philippines (91%), Japan (83%), Vietnam (83%), South Korea (78%), Australia (63%), Malaysia (45%) and Indonesia (41%) confirmed that they are ‘very/somewhat concerned’ about the territorial maritime disputes with China (Pew Research Center, 2015). (Regilme, S. S. F. (2018). Beyond Paradigms: Understanding the South China Sea Dispute Using Analytic Eclecticism. International Studies)

### **Indonesia’s Stance on the South China Sea Dispute**

Indonesia has been described by many as a humble-hard power in the South-China Sea dispute. While Indonesia does not have much to claim in that matter, its position as an ASEAN Leader has put the Indonesian authorities in a fix.

Jakarta has deliberately ignored the core issue namely China’s aggressive ambitions in the South China Sea. The South China Sea is a critical commercial and strategic marine highway between East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe with rich ocean sheries and potentially rich sub-seabed energy resources (Cohen 2014). The fish stocks in Indonesia’s Natuna have become increasingly valuable as natural other fish resources in the region are depleting day by day.

Indonesian foreign policy in the South China Sea dispute also clearly rejected the democracy, economic interdependence and international institution. Indonesia has openly discussed the possible solution of South China Sea with the claimants as well as media and other related public institutions.



Access toward Indonesian diplomacy in the South China Sea is relatively open for any critics and discussion from opposition parties in Parliaments and public discussion in media. Economic interdependence is also evident as China and other claimants states are important trade partners for Indonesia. The priority of economic cooperation in Indonesian diplomatic agenda with China and other claimants states are part of constraint of increasing tensions in South China Sea. Lastly, Indonesia is very vocal in enhancing the capacity and capability of ASEAN institutions in dealing and managing regional problems including the South China Sea.

(Robertua, Verdinand & Sinaga, Obsatar. 2018. Indonesia in the South China Sea Dispute: Humble-Hard Power.)

**Other Disputes in the Indo-Pacific**

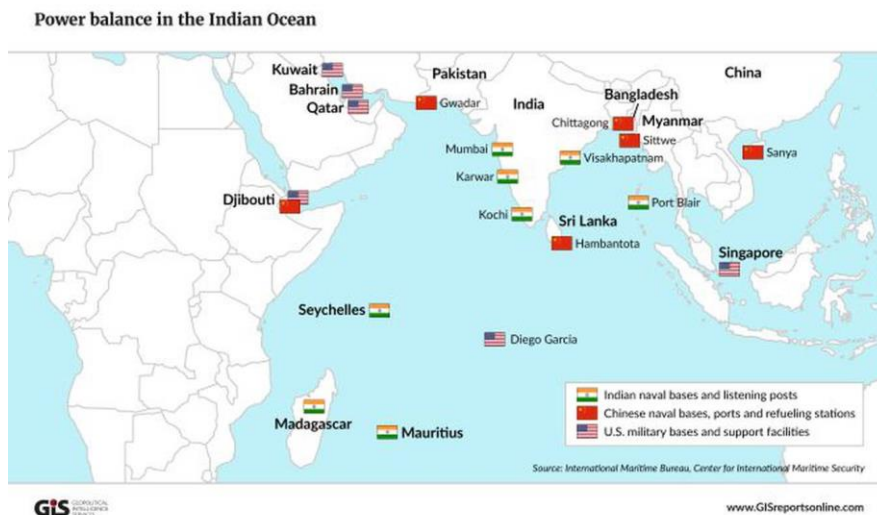
(Amjed, Jaaved., Indo-Pacific Region: A hotspot of rivalry)

**1) China’s aggressiveness**

As discussed before, China’s claim on the South-China Sea is pretty problematic in many ways. However, its ambitious ‘String of Pearls’ project aims at surpassing the US, and making China the global naval power, and it is doing so by acquiring chunks of the Ino-Pacific.

The Indo-Pacific region is of great importance because of its impact on energy maritime and trade security. ASEAN and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation are important politico-economic players in the region. The APEC members account for 40 percent of the world's population, 54 percent of the World’s Gross Domestic Product and 44 percent of the World’s trade. The ASEAN accounts for about 8.8 percent of the World's population and three percent of the total and area of Earth.

To block China’s ascendancy, all littoral states including Japan, Australia, Taiwan, South Korea and other middle ranking regional powers are modernizing their navies.



**Figure (vii): Power Struggles in the Indian Ocean**

**2) India as an emerging proxy of the US**

When it comes to maritime issues, the US leads as the diplomatic superpower, and it did so again, by acquiring India’s trust as a protegee in its mission to take control over major portions of the Indo-Pacific region. To woo India firmly into its fold, the USA offered to sell India US\$ 3 billion (per one unit)

Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and Patriot Advanced Capability (PAC-3) missile defence systems as an alternative to Russian S-400 system. India ditched Russia from whom it had decided to purchase five S-400s Russian S-400s air defence systems at a cost of US\$5.4 billion.

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#### Chapter 4: Indonesia v/s Indonesians, Natural Disasters and Indonesia's Future with respect to ASEAN

It is a general trend to associate a country with its government, which in all means, is a fair deal. However, when it comes to its people, it is in no way fair to simply assume that the government and the people feel the same. Trump's election to the White House in 2016 made us all look at Americans in a different way, which is not only wrong, but also bigoted. Just the way not all Americans feel the same, the trend is similar across the globe.

Even in the case of Indonesia, it is important that we draw a clear cut distinction between Indonesia, as a country, and Indonesians, as people who happen to be incredibly diverse.

When one looks at if at all the Indonesian government and the citizens are on the same page, we get two widely different perspectives.

When the officials at the Consulate General of Indonesia, Mumbai were asked this question, they first filled in with the trivia one needs to know about Indonesia, and while seemingly uncomfortable and reluc-

tant, they eventually caved in and gave out some details.

Their perspective is that Indonesia is doing the best that they can, considering the many issues that country has gone through. It is still a developing country, and invests a lot of money, as per its capabilities, into infrastructural development and human resource development. It has a large population, with close to 272,800,000, it is the fourth most populous country in the world.

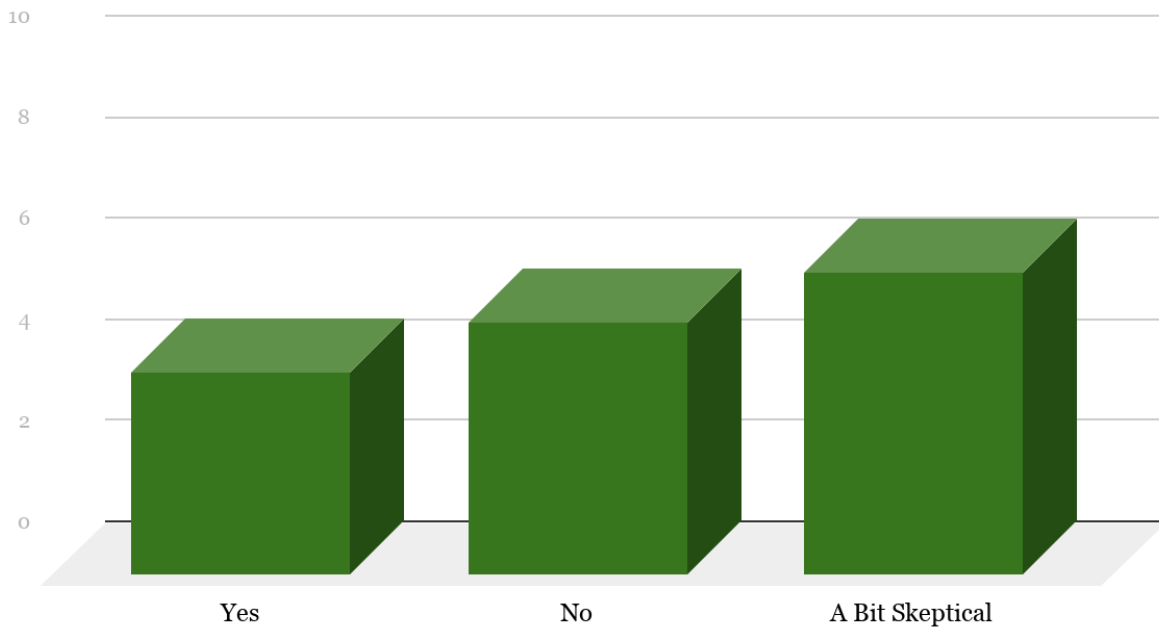
They were also honest about the fact that they are a middle income country, with a major chunk of the population belonging to the middle class. However, they asserted the fact that the middle class income is constantly on the rise, to an extent that by 2021, it is predicted that around 85 million Indonesians will experience a significant increase in their incomes. Its life expectancy is 75 years, which seems pretty good by South-East Asian standards, and has increased by around 5 years over the past few years, owing to the many infrastructural developments.

By 2045, the population of Indonesia is expected to touch 320 million, and most of it will be fairly young. Indonesia aims at making use of this young population to overtake major world powers in many global indexes and positions by the year 2050.

The Indonesian government thus, seems to have its heart set on the right path. It is, however, quite important to understand the perspective of the Indonesia citizens as well.

When asked if the people in Indonesia are happy with their government’s performance in keeping the people happy, this was the observation derived:

### Do Indonesians feel that their government is doing a good job?



**Figure (viii): Indonesians, on their government**

As the derived observation indicates, only 4 in 10 Indonesians feel that their country’s government is doing a satisfactory job in keeping the citizens of Indonesia happy. For a majority of them, there are quite a few flaws in the system which needs to be improved, whereas a good one third of the people actually denied any good work done by the government for the betterment of the citizens.

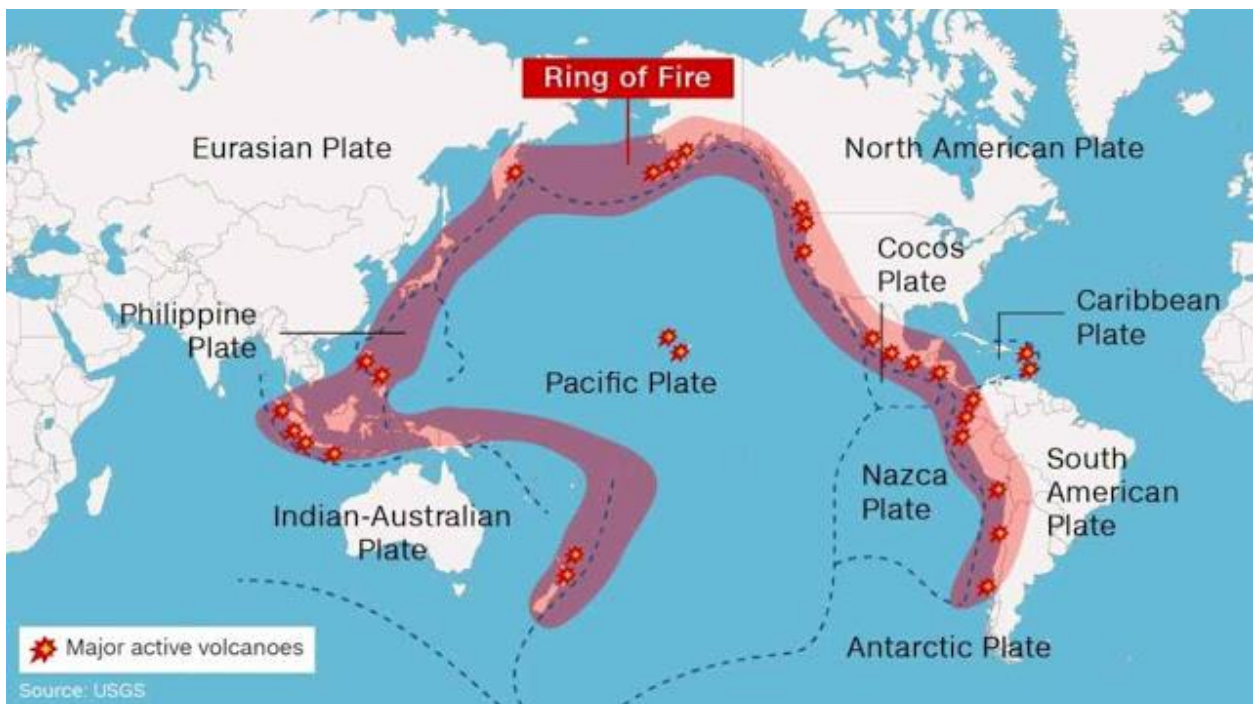


**Figure (ix): Indonesia is primarily a young country**

### The Pacific Ring of Fire

Indonesia is unfortunately prone to many natural disasters, thanks to its geographic location. Earthquakes are a very frequent occurrence, minor ones do not even bother the Indonesians that much. However, every once in a while, a major earthquake can trigger a chain reaction of aftershocks, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis, causing massive damage. The fact that Indonesia also has the world’s largest number of active volcanoes does not make things any better either.

All of this is due to the fact that Indonesia is situated bang on the Pacific Ring of Fire.



**Figure (x) : The Pacific Ring of Fire almost entirely engulfs Indonesia**

The Ring of Fire is a 25,000-mile-long region where several oceanic plates of Earth’s rocky crust are slipping beneath Asia and the Americas as the continents shift toward one another. The seismic and volcanic activity generated has the potential to disrupt the lives of hundreds of millions of people in some 40 countries. This is because tectonic plates under the Pacific move faster than any others on Earth, driven



by a force called slab pull. The larger the slab of lithosphere sinking at a subduction zone, the faster the plate moves, and the stronger the seismic activity. Plates meet. Cold, dense oceanic lithosphere sinks below an adjacent, lighter plate, plunging into the hot asthenosphere.



**Figure (xi): The Island of Java, one of the many volcanic hotspots in Indonesia**

Indonesia has 245 million people located in the world’s largest archipelago on the Ring of Fire who are at risk from earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes, and landslides. Earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanoes occur as a result of ongoing subduction of the Indo-Australian plate in the vicinity of Indonesia. It is one of the seismic sources in this area. High frictional stresses also cause medium earthquakes on the overriding plate that are often observed within and to the south of the island. The megathrust region to the west-northwest of Sumatra and Java has also caused colossal earthquakes, as the region is subject to medium, large, and massive earthquakes. Several major earthquakes recently occurred in Aceh in 2004, Niasin 2005, Yogyakarta, West Java and West Sumatra in 2006, Bengkulu and West Sumatra in 2007, and West Java and West Sumatra in 2009. Some of these were followed by large tsunamis that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people and damaged half a million structures. The social and economic consequences of these earthquakes are tremendous.

(Wardani and Muntohar, April 2013)

Indonesia’s elected officials will likely be tested again soon. The country has a population of approximately 260 million people, with over 80 percent living in the island of Java, which includes Jakarta. (Sulawesi, in contrast, accounts for about 10 percent of Indonesia’s population.) Thanks to climate change and sea-level rise, Jakarta has become the fastest-sinking city in the world. Now and increasingly in the future, Indonesia’s capital will be prone not only to earthquakes and tsunamis, but also to severe flooding that will affect a critical mass of voters.

The historical record shows that democracies that are able to sustain long-term, widespread protection of their population against natural hazards are more likely to survive. If Jakarta’s democratic system keeps failing in the face of worsening natural disasters, it might be consigned to the dustbin. Democratization did pave the way for improving protection to the country, and this has saved considerable lives and property. However, demography, climate change, the legacy of autocracy, corruption, and poverty are preventing democratic politicians from sustaining these efforts in the long run—and that could be their undoing.

(Flores, Alejandro. 2018. Indonesia’s Disaster Politics)

Territorially, it is located in a tropical climate area, with its two seasons—wet and dry—exhibiting characteristic weather changes, such as with regard to temperature and wind direction, that can be quite extreme. These climatic conditions combine with the region’s relatively diverse surface and rock topographies to provide fertile soil conditions. Conversely, the same conditions can lead to negative outcomes for this densely populated country, in particular, the occurrence of hydrometeorological disasters such as floods, landslides, forest fires, and drought. The 2017 World Risk Report’s ranking of countries’ relative vulnerability and exposure to natural hazards such as earthquakes, storms, floods, droughts, and sea-level rise calculated Indonesia to be the 33rd most at-risk country. Between 1815 and 2018, 23,250 natural hazards occurred here; 302,849 people died or were otherwise lost, 371,059 were injured, and there were 39,514,636 displaced persons, as well as billions of rupiah in losses. The most frequent type of natural hazard has been floods (8,919 instances), followed by cyclones (5,984), and then landslides (4,947).

(Kusumasari, 2019)

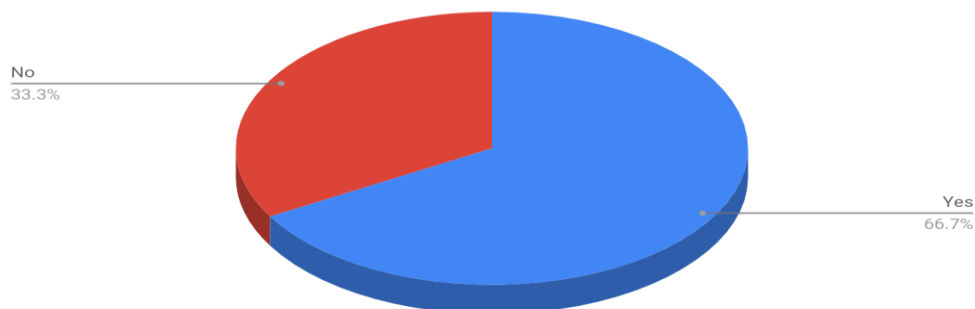
Following these latest disasters and acknowledging that Indonesia is becoming increasingly vulnerable to such natural hazards, the country’s government established a comprehensive disaster management system. Officials at the Consulate General of Indonesia, Mumbai claim that these natural disasters have little effect on Indonesia’s foreign policy, since they try their best to maintain good relations with all the countries in Indonesia’s diplomatic circle.

The Natural Disaster Bureau educates people in case of an upcoming crisis due to the natural disasters, and manages it well. They evacuate the people, if needed. The Indonesian government maintains a National Body of Disaster Management and Mitigation, which helps pull Indonesia back on its feet after a major natural disaster. The officials at the consulate acknowledged the world’s concern for Indonesia, and affirmed that they also play a huge role as the lungs of the world, thanks to the vast rainforests present in the country, where entire ecosystems are thriving.

The Indonesian government usually reserves 1-2% of its annual GDP for disaster management, which comes up to a rough sum of about \$ 1 Billion. The government is also working hard to update its disaster warning infrastructure, and is improving it as much as they can.

The citizens of Indonesia had a bit of a different perspective of things:

Do you think natural disasters shape Indonesia's Foreign Policy?



**Figure (xii): Indonesians are segmented into a ratio of 2:1 when it comes to foreign policy and natural disasters**

Has Indonesia's geographic location become a hurdle in its daily functioning?

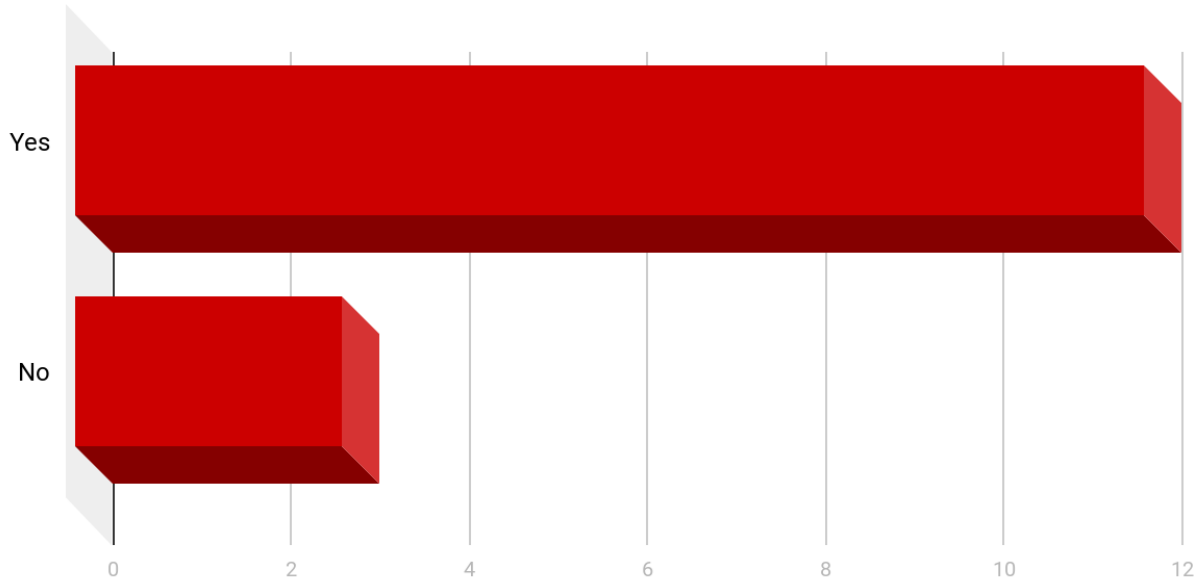


Figure (xiii): A lot of Indonesians agree to this claim

Are you happy with Indonesia's disaster management mechanism?

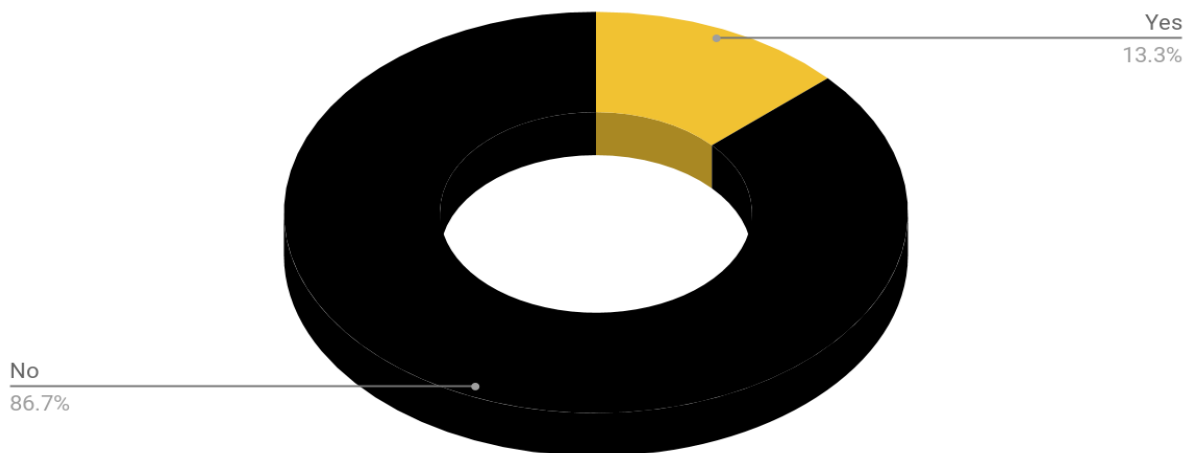


Figure (xiv): The numbers speak for themselves

### The future of Indonesia in ASEAN

Despite small claims of Indonesian territory in the South China Sea, Indonesia was among the states determined to settle or at least press down any surface tensions with relations to the disputed areas. It was and still is the core interest of Indonesia to maintain the overall peace and security of the region, and the disputes over the South China Sea simply undermines that essential aim. It is a clear depiction of

Indonesia's good intentions for the ASEAN region. Indonesia though shows great persistence and determination in making sure that ASEAN still runs in a manner agreed, despite the continuous presence of such a belligerent and assertive state known as China. Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN was clearly reflected following ASEAN's 2012 Ministerial Meeting, in which the Foreign Minister of Cambodia (the then chair of the Summit) refused to issue a joint communiqué of the summit, first ever to happen in the organization. Cambodia, which at that time acted as a close economic partner with China, was persistent that the recent clashes that time between Philippines and China in the South China Sea must be responded bilaterally, not multilaterally through ASEAN (this of course reflects one sided though in the part of Cambodia). Not willing to allow the failure of a joint communiqué, Natalegawa undertook rounds of consultative diplomacy formulating ASEAN's document that could be accepted by all states, which eventually a week later, resulted to the 'Six-Basic principles on the South China Sea' (which reemphasized the essential values of the 2002 Code of Conduct in South China Sea) (Emmers, 2014, p. 552-553).

(Putra, Bama Andika. 2015)

Under President Jokowi's leadership, Jakarta has pushed ASEAN, as an organization, to enunciate a vision for its role in a future Asia, at a time when the United States, Japan, and other major regional powers are laying out their own visions for the future of Asian security. The latest U.S. strategy, a vision for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific", jibes in large part with Japan's approach. Other countries, like Australia and even France, also have released visions for regional security. Indonesia has no major on-going conflict with any country. In the Indo-Pacific, the only diplomatic crisis it faces is its stance of not recognising Israel as a country.

So, over the past year, leading Indonesian officials prodded other ASEAN officials, at ASEAN meetings, to collaborate on an ASEAN regional security vision. This outlook was finally released at an ASEAN summit last month. It hews closely to Indonesian ideas for regional security, showing that in some ways Jakarta has gained back some of the leadership role in Southeast Asia from Singapore and other states. The vision seeks to reinforce ASEAN's centrality in regional security.

Yet even after successfully getting ASEAN to adopt this vision, it will be hard for Indonesia to ever return to the dominance it once enjoyed in the Cold War era. Other Southeast Asian states, from Vietnam to Singapore, have become more powerful regionally, and less willing to defer to Indonesia. Indonesia still sometimes struggles to figure out how to balance ties with China and the United States.

Jokowi has sometimes advocated for greater investment and participation in regional trade integration, which is reshaping the region, but more often he has defaulted to a position of economic nationalism. Other Asian states are instead taking the lead on pushing regional economic integration. Indonesia is powerful again, but it still is not punching its weight in regional security or economics.

(Kurlantzick, Joshua. 2019. Aspenia Online)





**Figure (xv): President of Indonesia, Joko Widodo a.k.a Jokowi**  
(Source: Reuters)

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### Annexures

- **What do you think will Indonesia's role be in ASEAN in the near future?** An email was sent to the Consulate General of Indonesia, Mumbai, requesting to arrange a meeting in order to discuss the following topics from the perspective of the Indonesian government:
- **Indonesia's role in ASEAN**
- **The Pacific Ring of Fire, and other geographical hurdles in the way of Indonesian Governance**
- **Indonesia's Disaster Management Methods**
- **How do natural disasters shape Indonesia's foreign policy?**
- **The revival of Indonesia's status as the de-facto ASEAN leader**
- **Indonesia, and Indonesians: - A happiness analysis**
- **Indonesia's relationship with other major players of the Indo-Pacific**

Similarly, the citizens of Indonesia were virtually interviewed via a Google Form. They were asked the following questions:

- **Do you think that Indonesia is an important player in ASEAN? Why?**
- **Do you believe that natural disasters play a role in Indonesia's foreign policy? Please explain.**
- **Do you think that Indonesia's geographic location ever becomes an obstacle to its governance?**
- **Are you happy with Indonesia's performance when it comes to managing natural disasters and coming out of them? Elaborate a little.**
- **Is the Indonesian government doing a good job in keeping its citizens happy? Please give your perspective.**



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