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Zero Enemies, Except the Neighbors?

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On October 20, 2026, President Prabowo marked two years of his administration. Many foreign policy decisions made during this period are worth revisiting, including how far his good neighborhood policy has been realized. It is still vivid in our memory when Prabowo Subianto, then a presidential candidate, delivered a foreign policy speech at CSIS Indonesia in 2023 and promised to maintain good relations with the neighbors and continue the spirit of a thousand friends and zero enemies across the globe. Such preposition has been frequently repeated on many occasions since, from his inauguration day to the 2025 State of the Nation Address, and most recently the cabinet meeting on Oct 21st. This piece argues that we are indeed in dire need of turning that promise into reality, given that over the past two years Indonesia has often treated distant partners better than its own neighbors in both its public narrative and policies.

The New Imperatives

Maintaining good relations with the neighbors has always been imperative for Indonesia's national interests. Beyond geographical proximity and socio-cultural affinity, the main argument has remained the same since Indonesia founded the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) together with Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. A stable regional environment enables Indonesia and its neighbors to pursue their respective domestic economic priorities in a mutually beneficial way. The zero-sum mindset and beggar-thy-neighbor mentality were rejected given the greater challenges posed to the region by external interference and insurgencies of all kinds.

The imperative for such good neighborliness has grown even stronger these days. Three more rationales account for that.

First, the great powers have changed the way they compete against each other. In the past, they competed for influence by extending concessions to smaller and middle power alike, including Indonesia and its neighbors, in the form of market access and security guarantees. They undoubtedly still compete today. But knowing that regional countries need to keep a balanced equation, they now extract concessions instead, whether in the form of material benefits or symbolic gestures. Indonesia would be mistaken if it failed to recognize this shift fast enough and belittled the importance of cooperating with its neighbors, as sharing best practices on what works and what does not in dealing with the great powers can spare us from learning the hard way alone or being played off against one another.

Second, the prevalence of open conflicts between producing countries and along the strategic sea lanes for maritime commerce have driven up the prices of many critical goods, if not caused their scarcity. In the Russia-Ukraine war, wheat and fertilizer became the main concern. The Middle East crisis has worsened the situation as the whole world is vying over access to energy products, oil tanker, shipping insurers, and alternative suppliers. As a result, the efforts of a single country like Indonesia to secure these staple goods will never be on par with the collective efforts of ASEAN neighbors that have already cultivated a vast and prudent supply chain ecosystem. Yet, such an ideal endeavor requires Indonesia to move beyond a me-first mentality and invest in collective strategic preparedness.

Third, transnational crime has grown more complex. Over the past few years, the region has been facing the challenge of online scam intertwined with financial fraud, data privacy breach, and human trafficking. Since thousands of its citizens being affected, Indonesia cannot handle this alone no matter how much it wishes to act it by itself. The main reason is that the center of gravity for these illegal operations sit across multiple law enforcement agencies and foreign jurisdictions. These operations also tend to take place in politically sensitive areas, either because of border tensions or because the host state may not always be able to enforce the law effectively. The complexity is compounded by rapid development of artificial intelligence

along with ill-defined responsibilities of the tech business operate the digital infrastructure behind these crimes.

The Gap Between Aspiration and Reality

Against these new imperatives, it is worth revisiting how far Indonesia has been the good neighbor President Prabowo envisions. To begin with, the recent public narrative has not helped project such an image. Forest fires in Indonesia have caused transboundary haze across Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Timor Leste. Instead of humbly apologizing and welcoming the assistance offered, some current and former Indonesian officials worsened the situation by retorting that the neighbors never thank Indonesia for the oxygen it sends them at other times, or by accusing Singapore of issuing haze notices merely to please its own voters. Others feed the imagined story of Singapore actively working against Indonesia's economy, whether through leniency towards palm oil businesses, pressure on rating agencies to downgrade Indonesia's status, or the exploitation of Indonesian gas and of global commerce passing through the Malacca Straits at the expense of Indonesians. All of these are dangerous narratives that run contrary to the spirit of Prabowo's own good neighborhood policy.

The danger lies in the habit of blaming others rather than contemplating on the homework Indonesia should have done long ago. Rather than invoking blind nationalist sentiment, the first question to ask is whether Indonesia has provided a fair, predictable, and transparent legal system for its businesses community to keep their money at home. And rather than always treating external factors as the driver of any potential downgrade or capital outflow, the question should be whether the administration has given the market enough reassurance to operate normally, without fear of arbitrary state takeover whatever the justification. Too often, the state intervenes where it should not yet remain indifferent where it should act to address the people's socio-economic grievances. Furthermore, the bigger question for our fellow Indonesians is where the money goes when Singapore pays for Indonesian gas. Our neighbor purchased that gas through legitimate contracts and built its own import infrastructure, rather than exploiting it for free and free riding on Indonesian facilities.

Beyond public discourse, Indonesia's image as a good neighbor over the past two years has also failed to show up in policy exemption. The disastrous forest fire haze provides a clear starting point. While Indonesians appreciate Japan's swift approval of Jakarta's request for assistance, what raises our eyebrows is why the same call did not reach Singapore or Kuala Lumpur, the immediate neighbors with greatest stakes in containing the fires and the relevant capacity to help. More so, when Indonesia rapidly cleared the bureaucracy to welcome the personnel and assets of Japan Self-Defense Forces, the question is why the same treatment was not extended to the law enforcement agencies of Indonesia's neighbors, despite decades of trust-building efforts through dialogues and joint exercises.

On the economic side, the gap has been even more blatant. Government Regulation No. 21/2026, which requires the retention of export earnings from natural resource commodities, exempts only several economies including the United States, China, Hong Kong, Canada, and Australia. None of the neighbors are on the list, even though Singapore is among the largest sources of foreign investment in Indonesia, and despite the thick web of ASEAN economic agreements and repeated political commitment to regional integration and resilience. The government justified the list by citing strong bilateral trade ties with these partners, as if the same could not be said of our closest neighbors. Such contradiction is not only ridiculous but can also easily be read as proof that President Prabowo's good neighborhood policy is an empty promise. Worse, it could weaken the fabric of solidarity among neighbors at a time when the imperative for a stronger one is higher than ever.

From Necessary to Sufficient

Many international counterparts have inquired what has happened between Indonesia and ASEAN as well as its member states over the past two years. Indonesia seems to be moving away from the strategic conversation about where the regional architecture is heading, focusing more on platforms outside the region like BRICS, where we do not have the ultimate privilege of setting the chairmanship agenda, and on the socio-cultural pillars within ASEAN. While there is nothing wrong with exploring new international cooperation frameworks or doubling down on a pillar that has not traditionally been Indonesia's strong suit, these should not divert the Prabowo's administration from what Indonesia has invested so much in throughout the years. It is shaping the trajectory of ASEAN as an inclusive and outward looking regional organization and nurturing rapport among its member states. Some might easily argue that President Prabowo traveled to almost all ASEAN members between his election and his inauguration, upgraded bilateral diplomatic frameworks, and even personally greeted or saw off some ASEAN leaders at the airport as a manifestation of being a good neighbor.

However, such gestures are necessary but not sufficient for friends and partners in the region. What makes good neighborliness sufficient is ensuring that Indonesian politicians do not resort to provocative, impromptu, or condescending comments that further damage relations with the neighbors. For a long time, our neighbors have carefully chosen their words in expressing their views about Indonesia and managed their domestic public opinion so as not to hurt bilateral relations. It is time for us to do the same and restrain politicians from doing otherwise. But that wisdom can only take hold if the highest leadership is on board and calls out politicians who abuse the megaphone diplomacy.

Beyond public discourse, being a sufficiently good neighbor also depends on whether Indonesia has an institutionalized mechanism to consult with and solicit feedback from the neighbors when the effects of our policies will put them at a disadvantage. More so, it means

allowing the neighbors enough time to deliberate together on arrangements that put forward mutually beneficial solutions, or to adjust when necessary, rather than sacrificing either our domestic needs or theirs. That entails Indonesian politicians to stop thinking that the neighbors have ripped us off, or that Indonesia cannot develop if neighboring countries continue to thrive.

Such a longstanding and fatal assumption only give us false hope about the country's future. It is wishful thinking to believe that if we manage to "punish" and "penalize" the neighbors, as some advocate, Indonesia will automatically prosper from its resources. The broader question that camp must answer is this. If the neighbors wish to see Indonesia fail, why do they consistently invest here, with some even becoming among our top sources of foreign direct investment? Why do they keep choosing Indonesia instead of investing in somewhere else? Only a sufficient level of sobriety and maturity could help answer these questions.

Practicing What We Preach

Indonesia may not always see eye to eye with its neighbors on many issues. In our time of need, there may be occasions where the neighbors are not the first one to offer support. In fact, few neighbors in history have managed their dynamics well, as even current Canada-United States relations show. But none of this justifies us acting as the big bully, unfairly disrupting the neighbors' access to critical goods in a way we would never wish to be treated by them in times of concurrent global crises.

When Indonesia's suddenly cut 31 million standard cubic feet of pipeline gas a day to Singapore last Saturday following the Energy Minister's warn against countries that do not respect Indonesia, it went without saying that the decision sent an extremely detrimental signal about Indonesia's credibility as an economic partner. If Indonesia truly needed these supplies for domestic purposes, why did not first declare force majeure, call on the nearly thirty countries President Prabowo has visited over the past two years for immediate assistance, if those visits are to mean anything at all, or activate any available regional emergency mechanism for energy supplies?

Why should the burden fall first on the neighbors next door while other buyers beyond the immediate region are not affected at all? The decision is indefensible. Instead, it prolongs the list of cases where Indonesia has disappointed its partners, a list that Korea, Japan, and China already cite from their own experience. If Singapore as Indonesia's closest neighbor, its largest source of investment, and a fellow ASEAN member, can be treated this way, could Indonesia's other partners be convincingly reassured that they will never experience the same? Our actions are watched closely not only in Singapore, but also in other capitals across the region.

By no means does this article campaign to put our own interest behind those of others. What it advocates is that the good neighborhood policy and the thousand friends zero enemies mantra, which President Prabowo has consistently preached over the past two years, must now be practiced. Only in that spirit can we identify ways to serve everyone's interest without fraying the delicate fabric of our foreign affairs.

The First Step is Ours

If we truly claim Indonesia to be a contributor to international order and world peace as the 1945 Constitution enshrines, or call ourselves a bridge-builder, Jakarta has to take the first step by clarifying its intentions. It is not too late for Jakarta to review and undo the policies that put both sides in uncomfortable positions, while crafting a regional assistance scheme for supply chain in times of domestic crisis. Indonesia cannot claim to be a good neighbor, or the big country as many politicians always tout, if we continue to live under suspicion and resent the neighbors who co-benefit from our abundance.

There is no reason for us to pick unnecessary fights with our neighbors in an era of strategic diversification. Our failure to maintain good rapport with the neighbor would only encourage them to bypass Indonesia, look elsewhere, and worse, gravitate toward supply arrangement that exclude Indonesia from the conversation. To prevent such thing, members of the public should hold accountable the politicians who scapegoat and badmouth our neighbors to deflect attention from their failing capacity to deliver meaningful prosperity and stable supply chain at home.

Konfrontasi in the 1960s may feel like distant history in Jakarta, but it is not so distant in the minds of our immediate neighbors. Every careless remark and every sudden measure against the neighbors risk reminding them of a time when Indonesia was the threat rather than the anchor of the region. It took decades of deliberate assurance through endless ASEAN meetings to finally ease fears of Indonesian hostility and restore Indonesia's credential among its partners.

As such, a thousand friends and zero enemies should not come with an exception for those next doors. This is a critical test whether President Prabowo truly means what he says about a good neighborhood policy. Let our nation not fail this test and let us get back on track toward a more respectful way of conducting foreign affairs once for all.

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