



CSIS Commentaries is a platform where policy researchers and analysts can present their timely analysis on various strategic issues of interest, from economics, domestic political to regional affairs. This commentaries serves as a medium for experts to disseminate knowledge and share perspectives in two languages – Bahasa Indonesia and English, enabling a diverse readership to engage with the content. Analyses presented in CSIS Commentaries represent the views of the author(s) and not the institutions they are affiliated with or CSIS Indonesia. Please contact the editorial team for any enquiries at publication@csis.or.id

CSIS Commentaries CSISCOM01426

July 8th, 2026

A "Golden Chapter" for India and Indonesia – If the Follow-Through Comes

Premesha Saha

Senior Policy Fellow, Asia Society Australia

pksaha@asiasociety.org

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to Jakarta produced a full ledger.¹ India and Indonesia signed 20 memorandums of understanding and several substantive agreements – on BrahMos and Astra missiles, a renewed maritime security arrangement, critical minerals and the long-

¹ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, "Visit of Prime Minister to Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand, July 06–11, 2026," press release, July 3, 2026, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases?dtl/41399/Visit_of_Prime_Minister_to_Indonesia_Australia_and_New_Zealand_July_0611_2026.

stalled Sabang port.² By any measure it was a consequential moment for a relationship that rests on civilisational affinity, maritime geography and a shared preference for a multipolar Asia, and is now framed through the language of a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific underpinned by ASEAN centrality. Yet the relationship has long fallen short of its promise, and the problem has never been a shortage of goodwill. It has been the difficulty of turning political intent into sustained delivery. The test of a day like this is not how many agreements were signed, but how many are still working a year from now.

For India, Indonesia is not one ASEAN partner among many. It is the strategic hinge between India's Act East policy and its wider Indo-Pacific ambitions, sitting astride the Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, Makassar and Ombai–Wetar straits — through which much of the trade, energy and naval traffic between the Indian and Pacific Oceans moves. No serious Indian Indo-Pacific strategy can overlook that geography.

The maritime agenda is where that geography matters most, and it is also where the visit's boldest promise sits. India–Indonesia maritime cooperation has long centred on Malacca, Sabang and the Andaman Sea, and the most ambitious of those initiatives — the joint development of Sabang port in Aceh, near the mouth of the Malacca Strait — had long shown the limits of the relationship.³ Invited to develop Sabang in 2018, India took over five years merely to finish a feasibility study, and Indonesia's strategic community firmly rejected any framing of the port as an Indian military foothold.⁴ The obstacle was never the geography but the model — capital-heavy infrastructure freighted with questions of cost, viability and sovereignty. This visit put Sabang firmly back on the table: the two governments agreed to develop the port jointly and set up a task force for Sabang and for Andaman–Aceh connectivity.⁵ It is the clearest signal of intent in eight years. But intent has never been the problem; follow-through has. The measure of the agreement will be whether Sabang finally moves from feasibility studies to construction and traffic — or joins the long list of Sabang plans that were announced but never built.

On the day-to-day machinery of maritime security, the visit delivered genuine, if incremental, progress. The two navies already run the biennial Samudra Shakti exercise and coordinated patrols through IND-INDO CORPAT, but these rehearse domain awareness and disaster

² <https://aninews.in/news/world/asia/pm-modis-indonesia-visit-culminates-into-20-mous-includes-cooperation-on-brahmos-missile-systems20260707121725/>

³ The Economic Times, "India, Indonesia Hold Dialogue on Boosting Sabang Port Infrastructure," December 20, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-indonesia-hold-dialogue-on-boosting-sabang-port-infrastructure/articleshow/96378843.cms>.

⁴ Balis, N., "Analysis: India's Maritime Economics and Security Framework," *Equilibrium*, January 8, 2026, <https://sites.gatech.edu/econjournal/2026/01/08/analysis-indias-maritime-economics-and-security-framework/>.

⁵ <https://theprint.in/defence/brahmos-astra-missiles-critical-minerals-sabang-port-india-indonesia-seal-key-strategic-pacts/>

response as periodic drills rather than permanent capabilities.^{6,7} This time the two sides renewed their coast-guard maritime-security arrangement and, more significantly, agreed to deploy an Indonesian liaison officer to India's Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region, which enables real-time maritime information-sharing.⁸ That is a genuine step toward the shared, day-to-day picture the relationship has lacked. Yet a liaison officer and a renewed memorandum are only a start: there is still no permanent white-shipping information exchange of the kind India already holds with more than a dozen partners, and no joint operating picture that activates automatically when the next tsunami strikes.⁹ The institutionalisation has begun; it is not finished.

The urgency is real. Since President Prabowo Subianto took office, Chinese coast guard vessels have repeatedly intruded into the North Natuna Sea, obstructing Indonesian energy surveys within its own exclusive economic zone, while Indonesia's archipelagic sea lanes remain thinly covered by shared surveillance.¹⁰ The most useful cooperation is the kind that strengthens Indonesia's own control of its waters rather than tests it — information-sharing, coordinated domain awareness, joint action against illegal fishing and a disaster-relief protocol. Each of these builds Indonesia's own capacity to secure its waters, which makes it both more achievable and more welcome in Jakarta.

The timing helps. India now chairs the Indian Ocean Rim Association, and Indonesia — which hosted the first IORA Leaders' Summit in 2017 — is a key member.^{11,12} A working bilateral template on information exchange, disaster response and illegal fishing could be scaled across the wider Indian Ocean during India's chair year.

Defence is where the relationship shifted most visibly. The BrahMos agreement — signed in Jakarta alongside additional missile batteries and a decision to import India's Astra beyond-visual-range air-to-air missiles — made Indonesia India's second BrahMos customer after the Philippines, whose 2022 order and 2024 deliveries had given India its first proof that it could

⁶ Government of India, Press Information Bureau, "India and Indonesia Strengthen Maritime Cooperation," press release, October 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2179326®=48&lang=2>.

⁷ Jayasree, "Enhancing Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean Region: India-Indonesia Surveillance and Cooperation," April 2026, <https://www.impriindia.com/insights/policy-update/enhancing-maritime-security-in-the-indian-ocean-region-india-indonesia-surveillance-and-cooperation/>.

⁸ <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/india/indonesia-posts-first-liaison-officer-at-indias-ifc-ior-ahead-of-modis-visit/>

⁹ The Press Trust of India, "India Signed White Shipping Info-Sharing Pacts with Five Countries in Last 5 Years: Govt," ThePrint, July 28, 2025, <https://theprint.in/india/india-signed-white-shipping-info-sharing-pacts-with-five-countries-in-last-5-yrs-govt/2890569/>.

¹⁰ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "Seismic Strife: China and Indonesia Clash over Natuna Survey," May 15, 2026, <https://amti.csis.org/seismic-strife-china-and-indonesia-clash-over-natuna-survey/>.

¹¹ Vachaparambil, J. J., & Rai, M., "IORA at 28: India's Chairmanship and the Path Forward," 2025, <https://maritimeindia.org/iora-at-28-indias-chairmanship-and-the-path-forward/>.

¹² Ankit Panda, "Indian Ocean Rim Association Concludes First-Ever Leaders' Summit," The Diplomat, March 9, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/indian-ocean-rim-association-concludes-first-ever-leaders-summit/>.

deliver a complex weapon system, on schedule, to a Southeast Asian military.¹³ With Vietnam reportedly close behind, the pattern signals India's steady emergence as a defence supplier in Southeast Asia rather than a one-off exporter. For Indonesia, it strengthens maritime deterrence across a vast and exposed archipelagic geography.

But a missile procurement alone does not equal to a well established defence partnership. Its value depends on what follows: training, sustainment, spare parts, doctrine, exercises and long-term operational familiarity. India has proposed a Joint Defence Industry Cooperation Committee covering technology transfer, co-production and shared industrial capacity — the difference between a one-off sale and a durable relationship.¹⁴ Treating Indonesia as a long-term maritime security partner, not a market, is what would make BrahMos a genuine turning point.

The visit did not stop at security. Bilateral trade stood at about \$29 billion in 2023–24 — sizeable, but skewed by an Indian deficit of roughly \$20 billion and still short of the \$100 billion target the two have set for 2030.¹⁵ On the economy the visit delivered its most concrete results. The two sides signed an agreement on critical minerals and the steel supply chain, under which India will invest in processing steel, nickel and rare-earth magnets in Indonesia — a direct move into a sector China dominates — together with a steel joint venture and cooperation on rare-earth magnets.¹⁶ A separate digital-infrastructure pact linked India's ONDC network with its Indonesian counterpart, extending the same interoperability logic that a QRIS–UPI payments link would bring. These serve energy security, supply-chain resilience and digital autonomy at once. The test is not the number of agreements signed but whether a few are given owners, timelines and review rather than left to drift.

Across maritime security, defence and the economy, the same risk recurs: intentions set at the top are not always carried through to implementation. This visit did not resolve that; if anything, 20 fresh memoranda raise the stakes, because each now needs to be turned into action. The Joint Commission Meeting, the foreign-minister-level forum meant to steer the relationship, met in June 2026 for the first time in four years — a gap that tells its own story about follow-through.¹⁷ It sets direction, but too infrequently to drive delivery. What the visit did not create is the layer beneath it: a senior officials' mechanism meeting regularly to convert ministerial direction into monitored, deadline-bound progress between summits. Without it, the risk is not that these agreements were insincere, but that they join the pile of past declarations that were never fully

¹³ <https://aninews.in/news/world/asia/india-indonesia-sign-brahmos-astra-deal-agree-to-cooperation-in-space-sector20260707122111/>

¹⁴ Patel, R., "Indonesia Eyes More Than Single BrahMos Missile Battery from India with Phased Induction Approach," 2026, <https://defence.in/threads/indonesia-eyes-more-than-single-brahmos-missile-battery-from-india-with-phased-induction-approach.18196/>.

¹⁵ Marine Insight, "India–Indonesia Strengthen Maritime Ties with Renewed Agreements," June 2026, <https://www.marineinsight.com/india-indonesia-strengthen-maritime-ties-with-renewed-agreements/>.

¹⁶ <https://theprint.in/defence/brahmos-astra-missiles-critical-minerals-sabang-port-india-indonesia-seal-key-strategic-pacts/2979481/>

¹⁷ <https://theguardian.com/world/from-defence-to-trade-eam-jaishankar-outlines-blueprint-for-deeper-india-indonesia-cooperation202607145021-707737/>

implemented. That connective tissue — the machinery of delivery — is what a relationship now rich in both declarations and memoranda still lacks.

There is a wider purpose too. India and Indonesia are two consequential states of the Global South — democratic, post-colonial, strategically autonomous and unwilling to be forced into binary choices between great powers. Indonesia's *bebas-aktif* tradition of an independent and active foreign policy means it will keep working with all major powers, China included. But that independence is easier to sustain from a position of strength, and partners who help Indonesia secure its waters and diversify its economy widen its room for manoeuvre. A more operational partnership with India is one such source of leverage — showing that strategic autonomy is not a slogan but a capacity to act.

India–Indonesia relations have never lacked history, warmth or strategic logic, and after this visit they do not lack signed agreements either. What they need now is disciplined delivery: the achievable functional cooperation launched immediately, the harder connectivity projects — Sabang above all — carried from task force to construction, and a mechanism to keep both on track. With India chairing IORA, BrahMos now reshaping defence ties and ministerial dialogue freshly resumed, the visit converted a rare alignment of openings into a stack of commitments. For New Delhi, Indonesia is not peripheral to the Indo-Pacific; it is central to it. The logic was never in doubt. The task now is to build the machinery that lets it deliver.

CSIS Indonesia, Pakarti Centre Building, Indonesia 10160

Tel: (62-21) 386 5532 | Fax: (6221) 384 7517 | csis.or.id

Please contact the editorial team for any enquiries at

publication@csis.or.id