

# Strategic Autonomy without Alliances: Indonesia's Defence Dilemma

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## Abstract

This article examines how intensifying alliance policies in the Indo-Pacific is reshaping the strategic choices of non-allied middle powers. As rivalry among major powers deepens and new security alignments expand, states face increasing pressure to strengthen deterrence, secure technology access, and clarify strategic positions. Indonesia presents a distinctive case because it has historically avoided formal alliances and continues to favour strategic autonomy grounded in sovereign decision-making, diplomatic flexibility, and regional multilateralism. The study asks whether strategic autonomy can remain viable without alliances amid growing regional competition. Drawing on qualitative analysis of secondary data, including policy documents, strategic reports, defence assessments, and scholarly sources, the article evaluates Indonesia's current posture and its emerging constraints. The findings indicate that strategic autonomy remains possible but is becoming more demanding. Capability gaps, fragmented procurement, maritime pressure in surrounding waters, grey-zone competition, and rising deterrence requirements all increase the costs of maintaining independence without external guarantees. Indonesia has responded through hedging, selective defence partnerships, and gradual modernisation rather than formal alignment. The article contributes by introducing the concept of a middle-power non-aligned defence dilemma, in which sovereignty and policy discretion are preserved, but strategic burdens rise as competition intensifies. The Indonesian case suggests that future autonomy will depend less on distance from partnerships than on the capacity to combine independence with credible capability and adaptive cooperation.

## Keywords:

Defence Modernisation; Defence Policy; Indo-Pacific Security;  
Indonesia; Non-Alignment; Strategic Autonomy.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

The Indo-Pacific has become the main arena of contemporary strategic competition, shaped largely by the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China. What began as economic competition has increasingly expanded into military modernisation, technological contestation, maritime disputes, and competing visions of regional order. The South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, critical sea lines of communication, and digital infrastructure have emerged as interconnected theatres in which power transition dynamics are increasingly visible (Cooper and Carr 2023). As rivalry deepens, regional states face a more uncertain security environment characterised by heightened deterrence signalling, defence spending growth, and institutional fragmentation.

One major response to this changing environment has been the revival of alliance systems and the rise of minilateral security arrangements. The United States has strengthened bilateral alliances with Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and South Korea while simultaneously encouraging more networked forms of defence cooperation. In parallel, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) has evolved into a more structured mechanism for strategic coordination, while AUKUS has introduced a new layer of advanced defence-technological collaboration centred on undersea warfare, cyber capabilities, and emerging technologies (Koga 2025). These developments indicate that security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is increasingly moving toward flexible coalition-building rather than relying solely on traditional multilateral institutions. At the same time, new forms of regional multilateralism reflect unresolved questions about order, legitimacy, and strategic leadership (Wirth and Jenne 2022).

For small and middle powers, this environment creates growing pressure to clarify strategic preferences. While many states seek to avoid explicit alignment, intensifying great-power competition narrows room for manoeuvre. Choices concerning military procurement, infrastructure financing, diplomatic language, technology standards, and maritime cooperation increasingly carry geopolitical implications. Southeast Asian states have attempted to preserve agency amid strategic competition rather than passively accept external pressures (Khoo 2022). Yet, maintaining such agency requires increasingly sophisticated diplomacy and credible national capabilities.

Indonesia occupies a distinctive position within this landscape. Historically, Indonesian foreign policy has been guided by the principle of *bebas aktif* – remaining independent from great-power blocs while actively contributing to peace and regional stability. This tradition has informed Jakarta's support for ASEAN centrality, inclusive regionalism, and resistance to exclusive security architectures. Indonesia has also preferred strategic flexibility, allowing cooperation with multiple partners without entering formal alliance commitments. Such behaviour resembles hedging,

whereby states pursue selective engagement while mitigating risks associated with uncertainty (Kuik 2023). Indonesia's advocacy of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific further reflects an effort to preserve regional inclusivity and middle-power agency through norm entrepreneurship (Putra, Cangara, and Darwis 2024). However, as strategic competition sharpens, the sustainability of autonomy based primarily on diplomatic flexibility increasingly depends on whether it is matched by credible defence capacity. Indonesia's pursuit of strategic autonomy reflects a rational response to intensifying great-power rivalry, yet capability limitations continue to constrain policy independence.

### **1.2. Problem Statement**

Indonesia seeks strategic autonomy while refusing formal alliances. This posture has long offered political benefits: it protects sovereignty, preserves diplomatic flexibility, reduces entrapment risks, and supports Indonesia's image as an independent regional actor. However, the same posture is becoming more difficult to sustain under contemporary strategic conditions.

First, defence modernisation requires substantial and sustained investment. As a vast archipelagic state located astride major maritime routes, Indonesia must develop naval reach, air surveillance, missile defence, cyber resilience, and joint-force readiness. These capabilities are capital-intensive and technologically demanding. Without alliance-based burden sharing or external security guarantees, most costs must be carried domestically.

Second, maritime pressure around the Natuna Islands and wider South China Sea has increased the practical need for deterrence. While Indonesia is not a formal claimant in the central South China Sea disputes, repeated incidents involving fishing fleets, coast guard presence, and jurisdictional assertions have demonstrated that sovereignty protection requires persistent maritime domain awareness and enforcement capacity (Scott 2019). Strategic ambiguity may preserve diplomatic space, but it does not automatically generate deterrent credibility.

Third, Indonesia remains dependent on foreign suppliers for major weapons systems, maintenance ecosystems, advanced sensors, and defence-industrial inputs. Procurement diversification can reduce overdependence on any single source, yet reliance on external technology also creates vulnerabilities related to sanctions, delays, interoperability gaps, and supply-chain disruption. Indonesia's strategic culture values autonomy, but material capability generation still depends significantly on external partnerships (Subagyo et al. 2024).

Fourth, Indonesia's deterrence capacity remains limited relative to the complexity of threats in the surrounding region. Non-traditional threats, grey-zone coercion, maritime incursions, and major-power military presence require integrated responses beyond symbolic force posture. The central dilemma is not whether

Indonesia should abandon non-alignment, but whether non-allied autonomy can remain credible without sufficient defence capacity, maritime awareness, and strategic signalling. Accordingly, Indonesia's challenge is not a binary choice between alliance and neutrality, but the question of how to preserve autonomy when capability-building needs are steadily rising.

### **1.3. Research Gap**

Existing international relations literature has extensively examined alliance formation, balancing, bandwagoning, and the strategic behaviour of secondary states under power rivalry. More recent studies also analyse ASEAN hedging strategies, regional neutrality narratives, ASEAN centrality, and the rise of minilateral institutions such as the Quad and AUKUS (Koga 2025; Sullivan de Estrada 2023). These works provide important insights into how states respond to uncertainty and changing order structures.

However, less attention has been given to autonomy strategies without alliance commitments. Specifically, insufficient analysis exists regarding the way in which middle powers such as Indonesia seek to maintain strategic autonomy without formal security guarantees while operating in a highly contested region. There is also limited conceptual discussion of the burdens generated by non-allied autonomy, including capability gaps, procurement dependence, and signalling dilemmas. Indonesian middlepowermanship and strategic culture are increasingly discussed, yet the defence costs of preserving autonomy remain underexplored (Maulana Prasetya, Ladiqi, and Salleh 2025). This article addresses that gap by focusing on autonomy as a strategy that requires material foundations, not merely diplomatic posture.

### **1.4. Research Questions**

This article investigates Indonesia's defence dilemma through three interrelated questions. First, why does Indonesia continue to maintain strategic autonomy without entering formal alliances despite a more polarised Indo-Pacific environment? Second, what strategic, operational, and procurement dilemmas emerge from this posture as regional competition intensifies? Third, can non-allied autonomy remain a viable long-term strategy amid expanding great-power rivalry, coalition-building, and rising deterrence demands? These questions aim to evaluate both the logic and limits of Indonesia's current strategic orientation.

### **1.5. Contribution**

This article contributes to the literature in the field by extending debates on strategic autonomy toward the concept of autonomy without alliances. Using Indonesia as a case of a non-aligned middle-power state, the article contributes to debates on how states preserve strategic autonomy without formal alliances while confronting increasing deterrence, capability, and security demands. It bridges defence policy analysis, hedging theory, middle-power behaviour, and alliance studies. Empirically, it clarifies how autonomy can generate hidden costs in capability development

and strategic signalling. Practically, it offers policy relevance for states seeking to preserve sovereign decision-making while avoiding formal alliance commitments in an increasingly competitive regional order.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative explanatory design based on secondary-source analysis to examine how Indonesia pursues strategic autonomy while avoiding formal alliance commitments under conditions of intensifying Indo-Pacific competition. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the subject of inquiry concerns state strategy, defence posture, foreign policy behaviour, institutional preferences, and strategic dilemmas that cannot be adequately captured through a single quantitative indicator. Indonesia's defence choices are shaped not only by measurable variables such as expenditure levels or force structure, but also by perceptions of threat, historical doctrine, signalling preferences, and political calculations regarding sovereignty and external dependence.

Explanatory qualitative methods are particularly useful for tracing policy logic and interpreting how decision-makers reconcile competing objectives, including autonomy, deterrence, flexibility, and regional legitimacy. For middle powers, strategic behaviour often reflects layered responses rather than binary alignment choices, requiring contextual analysis of speeches, official documents, and policy outcomes (Gerstl 2022; Le Dinh 2021). This design, therefore, allows the study to assess not merely what Indonesia does, but why particular choices persist despite changing strategic conditions.

### 2.2. Data Sources

The analysis relies exclusively on publicly available and verifiable documentary sources. Domestic sources include Indonesian Defence White Papers, Ministry of Defence strategic planning documents, presidential speeches, Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements, and relevant parliamentary records concerning defence procurement, budget priorities, or national security debates. These materials are important for identifying official threat perceptions, force development priorities, and the normative foundations of Indonesia's strategic autonomy.

International and comparative sources are used to situate Indonesia within the broader regional security environment. These include SIPRI military expenditure and arms transfer datasets, which provide consistent indicators of defence spending trends and procurement patterns; IISS *The Military Balance*, which offers comparative force structure and readiness assessments; ASEAN communiqués and official statements relevant to regional security norms; and peer-reviewed journal articles analysing Indo-Pacific strategic competition, hedging, and Southeast Asian agency (Putra 2026; Wilson 2018). The study also draws on policy papers from

recognised think tanks such as CSIS, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, the Lowy Institute, RAND, and similar institutions, particularly where these provide current assessments of maritime security, defence diplomacy, and regional military balance (de Medeiros and Mazat 2019; Paribatra 2025).

Triangulating these sources improves analytical reliability by reducing dependence on any single institutional narrative or dataset. Official Indonesian documents illuminate internal strategic intentions, while international databases and external assessments help evaluate actual capabilities, procurement dependencies, and the surrounding threat environment. Combining domestic and international materials is therefore necessary to compare stated policy autonomy with material constraints and external pressures. This approach is informed by the literature on strategic autonomy, which emphasises the relationship between sovereign decision-making, external dependencies, and structural pressures in the international system (Chung 2026; Kuik 2023).

### 2.3. Analytical Method

The article applies thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns across documents, datasets, and expert assessments. Themes include autonomy logic, alliance avoidance, capability constraints, procurement dependence, maritime vulnerability, external strategic pressure, and hedging behaviour. These themes were selected because they recur consistently in debates on Indonesian defence policy and broader Southeast Asian strategic responses.

Sources are compared to identify areas of consistency, contradiction, and policy evolution. For example, official claims of independent posture are assessed alongside procurement trends, defence modernisation needs, and regional security developments. This comparative reading enables the study to distinguish rhetorical continuity from practical adaptation and to derive policy implications regarding the sustainability of non-allied autonomy (Anwar 2020; Gindarsah and Priamarizki 2021).

### 2.4. Ethics & Transparency

All data used in this study were drawn from public, legal, and citable sources. No classified materials were accessed, and no interviews or human participants were involved. Accordingly, the research presents no direct ethical risk to individuals. All interpretations, judgements, and analytical conclusions remain solely the responsibility of the author.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Why Indonesia Rejects Alliances

The findings indicate that Indonesia's continued rejection of formal military alliances is rooted less in temporary policy preference than in durable strategic culture. Across official discourse, defence planning narratives, and foreign policy behaviour, alliance avoidance appears embedded in the long-standing doctrine of *bebas aktif*

– an independent and active foreign policy orientation that emerged in the early post-independence period. In contemporary practice, this doctrine functions as a strategic identity that emphasises autonomous decision-making, diplomatic initiative, and resistance to bloc politics. Rather than signalling passivity, it frames Indonesia's role as an actor able to engage all major powers while remaining formally uncommitted ([Karim 2026](#)).

Patterns across sources also show that sovereignty sensitivity remains a central factor. Indonesia's historical experience with colonial domination, territorial fragmentation risks, and external intervention has generated a strong political norm against binding security dependence. Formal alliances may be interpreted domestically as constraints on sovereign discretion, particularly if treaty obligations could draw Indonesia into conflicts unrelated to its direct national interests. This helps explain Jakarta's preference for flexible partnerships over codified commitments. Strategic culture studies similarly note that Indonesian defence diplomacy often prioritises autonomy, status, and non-subordination in external relations ([Arif 2025](#)).

A related theme is the anti-dependence tradition. The evidence suggests that Indonesian policymakers remain cautious about relying excessively on any major power for security guarantees. While defence cooperation with external partners is accepted, guaranteed protection by another state could create vulnerabilities of political leverage, conditionality, or abandonment. Alliance commitments are therefore viewed not only as potential shields but also as possible sources of strategic constraint. This concern has become more salient in an era where great-power competition is fluid, and long-term reliability cannot be assumed.

Domestic political legitimacy further reinforces alliance reluctance. Findings from broader Indonesian foreign policy studies indicate that national elites and public opinion often reward visible independence while scrutinising signs of external dependency ([Mietzner 2025](#)). Formal alliances could invite criticism from nationalist constituencies, opposition actors, or bureaucratic factions concerned about sovereignty dilution. Even where practical cooperation is desirable, treaty-based arrangements may impose domestic political costs disproportionate to their benefits.

Finally, Indonesia's support for ASEAN centrality offers an institutional rationale for rejecting alliances. Jakarta has consistently favoured inclusive regional multilateralism over exclusive bloc structures. Formal alliance membership could complicate Indonesia's claim to impartial leadership within ASEAN or weaken its ability to mediate among members with divergent external alignments. Under intensified rivalry, ASEAN centrality has faced constraints, yet adaptation rather than abandonment remains the dominant response ([Rüland 2024](#)).

Taken together, the findings show that Indonesia rejects alliances because such arrangements are perceived to conflict with national strategic identity, sovereignty

norms, domestic legitimacy, and regional leadership preferences. Alliance avoidance is therefore best understood as a structural feature of Indonesian statecraft rather than a short-term tactical posture.

### **3.2. Strategic Benefits of Non-Alignment**

The evidence suggests that non-alignment continues to generate tangible strategic benefits for Indonesia when managed pragmatically. The first benefit is diplomatic flexibility. Without treaty obligations, Indonesia retains discretion to calibrate responses to crises, participate selectively in security initiatives, and avoid automatic involvement in disputes among major powers. This flexibility is particularly valuable in a volatile Indo-Pacific environment where alignments are increasingly issue-specific rather than permanent. Strategic ambiguity can therefore function as a source of manoeuvrability for middle powers ([Goh 2022](#)).

A second benefit is the ability to engage the United States and China simultaneously in different domains. Indonesia can deepen defence exchanges, training, and maritime cooperation with Washington and its partners while sustaining robust trade, investment, and infrastructure ties with Beijing. This dual-track approach reduces the costs of choosing sides and allows Jakarta to extract benefits from multiple relationships. Findings across recent studies on Indonesian hedging indicate that such calibrated engagement remains central to Jakarta's external strategy ([Iksan and Soong 2023](#)).

Third, non-alignment supports procurement diversification. Indonesia has historically sourced military equipment from a range of suppliers, including Western, Asian, and other partners. This can reduce excessive dependence on a single provider and create bargaining leverage in price, technology transfer, and delivery negotiations. Diversification also helps mitigate risks associated with sanctions or policy shifts by any one supplier.

Fourth, autonomous positioning enhances Indonesia's diplomatic standing within ASEAN. Because it is not formally tied to any bloc, Indonesia can more credibly advocate dialogue, restraint, and inclusive regional mechanisms. This strengthens its image as a convening actor and supports leadership ambitions within Southeast Asia.

Overall, the findings indicate that non-alignment remains strategically useful because it maximises flexibility, preserves diversified partnerships, and sustains diplomatic legitimacy. Its value, however, depends on careful management and sufficient national capability to support independent choices.

### **3.3. Emerging Defence Dilemmas**

While non-alignment provides benefits, the findings also reveal growing defence burdens associated with autonomy without alliances. The most fundamental constraint is the absence of an external security guarantee. Indonesia cannot rely

on treaty partners to provide automatic military assistance in a crisis. As a result, deterrence must rest primarily on national capabilities, credible signalling, and the expectation that external partners might assist voluntarily rather than by obligation.

This creates a substantial burden of self-strengthening. Indonesia must independently finance readiness, maritime patrol capacity, intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance systems, air and naval modernisation, cyber resilience, and logistics depth across a geographically vast archipelago. For an island state with extensive sea lines and dispersed territories, these requirements are resource-intensive. Maritime security assessments show that persistent domain awareness and presence operations demand sustained investment rather than episodic deployments ([Bateman 2015](#)).

The evidence also points to slow modernisation pressures. Defence ambitions have often exceeded budget realities, producing delays in recapitalisation and uneven capability growth. Where acquisition plans depend on long procurement cycles, shifting exchange rates, or fiscal reprioritisation, force modernisation can lag behind regional developments. Studies of Indonesia's defence modernisation identify persistent gaps between planning targets and realised capability outcomes ([Febrica 2023](#)).

A further dilemma concerns fragmented procurement. Although diversification offers autonomy benefits, sourcing from multiple suppliers can generate interoperability problems, maintenance complexity, training burdens, and supply-chain inefficiencies. Different platforms may require separate sustainment ecosystems, munitions compatibility solutions, and technical standards. Regional procurement research indicates that diversification without integration can reduce operational coherence.

Maritime enforcement gaps are another recurring concern. Indonesia's Natuna waters and outer maritime zones require continuous patrol presence, legal enforcement capacity, and rapid response mechanisms. Intermittent deployments may signal resolve politically, but are less effective operationally when facing persistent grey-zone pressure or repeated incursions. The evidence suggests that geography magnifies the costs of autonomy because sovereignty assertion requires constant rather than symbolic presence.

Finally, crisis vulnerability remains significant. In coercive scenarios involving stronger external actors, Indonesia may face harder choices without formal alliance backing. Even if partners offer political support, uncertainty regarding the timing, scale, and scope of assistance can weaken deterrence in advance of a crisis. This does not mean Indonesia is strategically isolated, but it does imply higher risk exposure. The findings, therefore, show a central paradox: autonomy preserves sovereign freedom of action while simultaneously increasing the material and strategic burden required to make that freedom credible.

### **3.4. Current Coping Strategy**

The evidence suggests that Indonesia manages this dilemma through pragmatic adaptation rather than pure independence. Hedging remains the core mechanism. Jakarta avoids exclusive alignment while engaging multiple powers in overlapping economic, diplomatic, and security relationships. This allows Indonesia to preserve room for manoeuvre while reducing exposure to any single partner ([Iksan and Soong 2023](#)).

A second coping tool is a limited strategic partnership. Indonesia has expanded defence cooperation, exercises, training, and technology dialogues with a range of states without entering treaty alliances. Such arrangements improve capacity while preserving legal autonomy. Military exercises are particularly significant because they enhance interoperability, operational familiarity, and readiness without requiring permanent commitments.

Indonesia has also shown selective openness to minilateral engagement where interests align, especially in maritime awareness, humanitarian assistance, disaster response, and practical security cooperation. Southeast Asian responses to emerging minilateral formats indicate a preference for functional participation over bloc membership ([Allès and Fournol 2025](#)).

At the domestic level, official rhetoric increasingly emphasises defence self-reliance, local production, and industrial upgrading. Although implementation remains uneven, these efforts seek to reduce long-term procurement dependence and strengthen sovereign capability generation.

Overall, the findings indicate that Indonesia sustains strategic autonomy through networked partnerships, diversified cooperation, and gradual capability enhancement. Its posture is therefore not isolationist neutrality, but adaptive non-alignment designed to preserve freedom of choice under competitive regional conditions.

## **4. Discussion**

### **4.1. Strategic Autonomy vs Strategic Isolation**

The findings suggest that Indonesia's commitment to strategic autonomy remains politically rational and strategically understandable in an era of intensified great-power rivalry. Strategic autonomy offers three enduring advantages. First, it preserves sovereign decision-making by reducing external influence over national security choices. Second, it provides diplomatic flexibility, enabling Indonesia to engage multiple partners simultaneously while avoiding binding commitments. Third, it lowers the risk of entrapment in conflicts generated by the strategic priorities of larger powers. For many middle and secondary states, these advantages are especially valuable when rivalry among major powers is fluid and uncertain ([Lee, Yang, and Son 2025](#)).

However, strategic autonomy should not be conflated with strategic detachment. Autonomy refers to the capacity to decide independently; isolation refers to insufficient strategic connectivity with relevant security networks, technological ecosystems, and deterrence frameworks. A state may formally preserve autonomy while becoming materially vulnerable if it lacks partnerships that enhance resilience and strategic awareness. This distinction is increasingly relevant in the Indo-Pacific, where defence relationships are no longer limited to treaty alliances but increasingly include intelligence sharing, logistics access, joint exercises, supply-chain cooperation, and issue-based multilateral mechanisms (Ye 2025).

From a strategic perspective, deterrence credibility is produced not only by sovereign intent but also by visible capability, coherent signalling, and external relationships that shape an adversary’s calculations. States that remain overly distant from meaningful security cooperation may retain legal independence while losing practical influence over regional security outcomes. In such circumstances, autonomy risks becoming symbolic rather than operational. New partnership geometries across Asia indicate that states increasingly seek deterrence through layered networks rather than solely through traditional alliances (Wilkins 2026).

For Indonesia, the practical implication is that non-alignment remains viable only if paired with sufficient connectivity to external sources of training, technology, maritime awareness, and crisis coordination. Complete distance from evolving

**TABLE 1. Indonesia’s Strategic Autonomy: Benefits vs Costs**

Dimension	Strategic Benefits	Strategic Costs
<b>Sovereignty</b>	Preserves independent decision-making and avoids external control over defence policy.	Requires Indonesia to bear primary responsibility for its own security without guaranteed support.
<b>Diplomacy</b>	Enables flexible engagement with multiple powers simultaneously.	Ambiguity may reduce clarity of deterrence signalling during crises.
<b>Alliance Risk</b>	Avoids entrapment in conflicts driven by major-power interests.	Lack of formal backing may increase vulnerability to coercive pressure.
<b>Regional Role</b>	Strengthens Indonesia’s credibility as an ASEAN-oriented and autonomous actor.	Limited alignment may reduce leverage in emerging security coalitions.
<b>Procurement</b>	Allows diversification of arms suppliers and bargaining flexibility.	Multiple suppliers can create interoperability, maintenance, and logistics problems.
<b>Defence Posture</b>	Supports an independent force-planning model tailored to national priorities.	Modernisation is slower and more expensive without alliance burden-sharing.
<b>Maritime Security</b>	Maintains freedom to calibrate responses in Natuna and surrounding waters.	Persistent maritime presence requires costly ISR, patrol, and rapid-response capacity.
<b>Strategic Identity</b>	Reinforces bebas aktif doctrine and domestic legitimacy.	Strategic identity may constrain adaptation to changing regional realities.

Source: Author’s synthesis based on article findings and secondary sources.

security networks could unintentionally increase vulnerability, especially in maritime grey-zone contingencies or supply-chain disruptions. The findings, therefore, indicate that autonomy should be interpreted as selective engagement on Indonesia's own terms, not as deliberate separation from defence cooperation. In this sense, the central challenge is not preserving distance but preserving discretion while remaining strategically connected.

The preceding analysis indicates that Indonesia's strategic autonomy generates both enduring advantages and increasing operational burdens. While autonomy preserves sovereign discretion and diplomatic flexibility, it also requires Indonesia to independently sustain the capabilities necessary to deter coercion and manage regional uncertainty. To clarify these competing effects, Table 1 summarises the main benefits and costs associated with Indonesia's current strategic posture.

As shown in Table 1, strategic autonomy remains valuable politically and diplomatically, but its sustainability increasingly depends on Indonesia's ability to absorb rising defence costs. The central issue is therefore not whether autonomy should be preserved, but whether sufficient capabilities can be developed to support it under conditions of intensifying Indo-Pacific competition. In such an environment, misperceptions regarding Indonesia's deterrent capacity and the reliability of its strategic partnerships may weaken signalling effectiveness and increase the risks associated with non-aligned autonomy.

#### **4.2. Middle Power Theory Perspective**

The findings also help reposition Indonesia within contemporary middle power theory. Indonesia behaves neither as a classic balancer seeking explicit countercoalitions, nor as a bandwagoner aligning with the dominant power, nor as a treaty ally subordinating strategy to external guarantees. Instead, Indonesia is more accurately understood as a selective autonomous middle power.

Middle powers typically seek influence through diplomacy, institution-building, coalition management, and norm entrepreneurship rather than raw military dominance. In the Indo-Pacific context, they also attempt to preserve strategic space between competing major powers (Shin, Alden, and Higgott 2026). Indonesia's behaviour fits this pattern. It seeks agenda-shaping influence through ASEAN-led frameworks, diplomatic brokerage through inclusive regional dialogues, and strategic flexibility through diversified external relations. This reflects a broader model of middle power diplomacy that operates beyond simplistic balancing logic (Xiao 2025).

Indonesia's strategic assets reinforce this role. Geography gives it control over critical sea lanes and maritime chokepoints linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Diplomatic status as Southeast Asia's largest state provides convening authority. Its historical leadership within ASEAN offers institutional leverage, even if ASEAN

cohesion remains uneven. These attributes allow Indonesia to exercise influence disproportionate to formal alliance commitments.

At the same time, selective autonomy does not imply passivity. The findings indicate that Indonesia accepts limited security alignment in specific issue areas, such as maritime cooperation, exercises, defence industry engagement, and humanitarian coordination, while rejecting formal dependence. This behaviour is consistent with strategic choice models in which states calibrate commitment levels according to risk, domestic legitimacy, and uncertainty (Jones and Jenne 2022).

Thus, Indonesia should be understood not as indecisive, but as pursuing a middle-power strategy centred on controlled flexibility. Its challenge is sustaining this model as rivalry intensifies and the costs of ambiguity rise.

### **4.3. The Defence Dilemma**

The core implication of the findings is that refusing alliances preserves sovereignty but increases capability burden. This constitutes Indonesia's principal defence dilemma and can be conceptualised through two linked dynamics: the autonomy-capability paradox and the sovereignty-security trade-off. Unlike the classical security dilemma, which emerges from reciprocal threat perceptions among states and the unintended escalation of insecurity, the defence dilemma identified in this study is primarily a capability-generation dilemma. It concerns the tension between preserving strategic autonomy and acquiring the military, technological, and institutional capabilities necessary to sustain that autonomy. The dilemma, therefore, originates not from how other states interpret Indonesia's actions, but from the growing burden of maintaining credible defence capacity without alliance-based security guarantees.

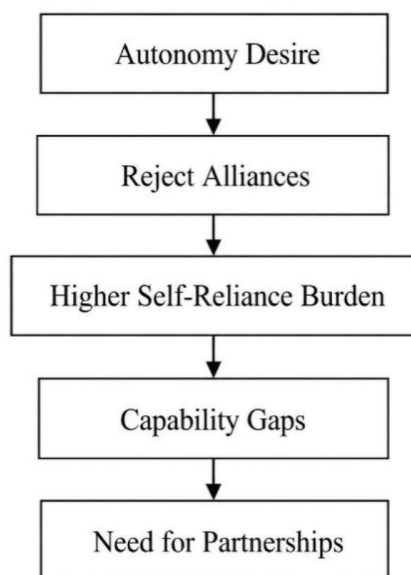
The autonomy-capability paradox arises because the more a state avoids formal alliances, the more it must independently generate the capabilities that alliances often help provide. These include deterrent force structure, readiness, intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance systems, maritime presence, logistics resilience, cyber protection, and defence-industrial depth. Alliances can distribute some of these burdens through burden-sharing, interoperability, or guaranteed support. Without such mechanisms, the state must finance and sustain them domestically. Strategic autonomy, therefore, requires substantial material investment if it remains credible (Chung 2026).

For Indonesia, geography intensifies this burden. An archipelagic state with dispersed maritime approaches requires a persistent naval and air presence across wide operational spaces. Sovereignty defence is not merely a legal matter but a logistical one. Maintaining surveillance and response capacity in distant waters is inherently costly. If resources lag behind operational requirements, autonomy may endure politically while weakening operationally.

The second dynamic is the sovereignty-security trade-off. Maximising freedom from external commitments may reduce access to certain benefits commonly associated with deeper partnerships: advanced technology transfer, integrated training systems, interoperability gains, intelligence depth, and predictable crisis support. Even non-treaty partners may be less willing to commit resources where institutional expectations remain vague. This does not imply that alliances are cost-free, but it highlights that sovereignty can carry opportunity costs in security terms (Liow 2024).

The findings, therefore, suggest that Indonesia's challenge is not ideological non-alignment itself. Rather, it is the harder task of converting autonomy into credible power. A state can proclaim independence, yet if its deterrent posture is insufficient, external actors may discount its strategic preferences. Conversely, modest but well-designed partnerships can strengthen autonomy by reducing vulnerabilities. In practice, the relevant question is not whether Indonesia should choose sovereignty or security, but how to secure sovereignty through capability and selective cooperation.

The strategic logic identified in this study can be illustrated as a cumulative dilemma. Indonesia's desire to preserve autonomy encourages continued resistance to formal alliances. However, the absence of alliance-based burden sharing increases the demand for national self-reliance, which in turn risks widening capability gaps if defence modernisation does not keep pace with regional pressures. As these constraints deepen, the need for selective external partnerships becomes more pronounced. This relationship is summarised in Figure 1.



**Figura 1** Indonesia's Defence Dilemma Model

Source: Author's conceptual model based on findings of this study.

As seen in Figure 1, Indonesia's strategic dilemma is cyclical rather than binary. Efforts to maximise independence can unintentionally generate new dependencies when domestic capabilities remain insufficient. This suggests that strategic autonomy

should be understood not as separation from cooperation, but as the ability to manage external partnerships without surrendering decision-making authority. In practical terms, selective cooperation may therefore strengthen, rather than weaken, Indonesian autonomy.

#### **4.4. Policy Options for Indonesia**

Three broad strategic pathways emerge from the findings. The first is pure autonomy. Under this model, Indonesia would minimise external defence dependence, avoid deeper security networking, and prioritise national self-reliance. The benefits are clear: sovereignty is maximised, entrapment risk remains low, and policy discretion is fully preserved. Yet the costs are equally high. Force development becomes more expensive, deterrence accumulates more slowly, and crisis management burdens fall almost entirely on national institutions. In a rapidly changing Indo-Pacific, pure autonomy may be politically attractive but materially demanding.

The second pathway is flexible strategic partnerships. This model preserves non-alignment while expanding practical cooperation with multiple states. Benefits include access to training, maritime domain awareness, intelligence exchanges, defence technology collaboration, logistics familiarity, and regular exercises. Indonesia would retain freedom to choose partners issue by issue rather than through treaty obligation. The principal challenge is diplomatic management. Partnerships with one side may be interpreted by others as alignment, while ambiguity during crises may limit expectations of assistance. Even so, this pathway aligns closely with emerging regional patterns of alliance alternatives and functional security networking (Chaudhry, Aqib, and Wassan 2025).

The third pathway is a quasi-alliance network involving more structured and politically visible security cooperation with a smaller number of key partners. This could accelerate capability gains, improve deterrence signalling, and generate stronger external support in crises. However, it would likely face domestic political resistance, perceptions of abandoning *bebas aktif*, and possible retaliation or counter-pressure from competing powers. It may also narrow Indonesia's room for manoeuvre in diplomacy.

A more plausible pathway would be calibrated partnerships without treaty alliances. This approach accepts that Indonesia does not need to choose between isolation and alignment. Instead, it can preserve autonomy while deepening selective cooperation where interests are clear and sovereignty costs are manageable. Priority areas should include maritime domain awareness, coastal surveillance integration, defence technology partnerships, joint exercises, professional military education, secure communications, and supply-chain resilience. Issue-based multilateral arrangements focused on humanitarian assistance, disaster response, maritime safety, or non-traditional threats could also provide functional gains without symbolic alliance baggage (Vinodan and Kurian 2024).

From a policy standpoint, Indonesia should also strengthen domestic absorptive capacity so that external cooperation translates into sustainable national capability. Procurement reform, maintenance ecosystems, reserve logistics, and indigenous industry partnerships are as important as diplomacy. Strategic autonomy in the twenty-first century is less about standing alone than about retaining sovereign choice within networks of cooperation.

Accordingly, the most realistic recommendation is neither pure independence nor formal alliance entry, but adaptive non-alignment supported by credible capabilities and carefully structured partnerships. This would allow Indonesia to remain autonomous in decision-making while reducing the risks of strategic isolation.

The findings further suggest that Indonesia's future strategic posture is best understood as a choice among several policy pathways rather than a binary decision between alignment and neutrality. Each option offers distinct gains and constraints in terms of sovereignty, deterrence, domestic legitimacy, and strategic flexibility. Table 2 compares the principal alternatives available to Indonesia.

**TABLE 2. Policy Options for Indonesia in Indo-Pacific Rivalry**

Policy Option	Main Features	Advantages	Risks / Limitations	Overall Assessment
<b>Pure Autonomy</b>	Minimal security dependence, no formal alliances, emphasis on self-reliance.	Full sovereignty, low entrapment risk, maximum policy discretion.	Expensive force development, slower deterrence accumulation, high crisis burden.	Politically attractive but materially demanding.
<b>Flexible Strategic Partnerships</b>	Non-allied posture with selective defence cooperation, exercises, technology partnerships, intelligence exchanges.	Retains autonomy while improving readiness, maritime awareness, and capability access.	Requires careful balancing; support in crisis may remain uncertain.	Most realistic and sustainable option.
<b>Quasi-Alliance Network</b>	Structured long-term cooperation with key partners short of treaty alliance.	Stronger deterrence, faster interoperability, greater crisis supports potential.	Domestic backlash, perceived abandonment of <i>bebas aktif</i> , possible retaliation from rivals.	Effective but politically sensitive.
<b>Formal Alliance</b>	Treaty-based defence commitment with major power(s).	Highest deterrence credibility and security guarantee.	Loss of flexibility, entrapment risk, domestic legitimacy concerns.	Unlikely under the current Indonesian strategic culture.

Source: Author's comparative framework derived from discussion findings.

As seen in Table 2, the most plausible pathway for Indonesia is neither pure autonomy nor formal alliance entry, but calibrated strategic partnerships that preserve sovereign discretion while reducing capability shortfalls. Such an approach is consistent with Indonesia's historical doctrine, yet more responsive to contemporary requirements for deterrence, technology access, and maritime resilience.

## Conclusions

This study has examined a central strategic puzzle: why Indonesia continues to pursue strategic autonomy while refusing formal alliances in an increasingly competitive Indo-Pacific environment. The analysis suggests that this posture is neither accidental nor merely rhetorical. Indonesia's alliance avoidance is deeply rooted in the doctrine of *bebas aktif*, a post-colonial sensitivity toward sovereignty, a long-standing preference for independent decision-making, and a diplomatic tradition that favours inclusive regional multilateralism through ASEAN. These foundations have given Indonesia a durable strategic identity that remains influential across successive administrations and changing external conditions.

The findings indicate that this approach still carries significant political and strategic value. By avoiding treaty commitments, Indonesia preserves domestic legitimacy and reduces concerns that national policy is being shaped by external powers. It also retains diplomatic flexibility, allowing engagement with multiple actors across security, economic, and technological domains without being drawn automatically into major-power rivalry. In practical terms, non-alignment lowers entrapment risk and supports Indonesia's aspiration to act as an autonomous regional actor rather than an adjunct to another state's strategy.

Yet the article has also shown that the regional environment is changing in ways that increase the costs of autonomy without alliances. Intensifying rivalry among major powers has elevated the importance of deterrence credibility, maritime domain awareness, rapid strategic decision-making, secure access to defence technologies, and resilience during coercive crises. In such an environment, autonomy cannot be sustained by diplomatic positioning alone. States that seek policy independence must also demonstrate the material capacity to protect that independence. Where capabilities lag behind strategic ambition, autonomy risks becoming increasingly difficult to defend in practice.

From a policy perspective, this means that strategic autonomy in the current era requires more than doctrinal consistency. It must be underpinned by defence readiness, credible maritime enforcement capacity, coherent procurement planning, reliable intelligence and surveillance systems, and resilient defence institutions capable of sustained adaptation. For Indonesia, the challenge is not whether to preserve *bebas aktif*, but how to modernise its practical meaning under

contemporary conditions. Sovereignty today is exercised not only through freedom from commitments, but through the ability to act effectively when pressure emerges.

The study further suggests that non-allied states still require meaningful external cooperation. Refusing alliances does not eliminate the need for networked partnerships, defence industrial collaboration, selective military exercises, minilateral coordination, and diversified strategic relationships. Carefully structured cooperation can strengthen autonomy by reducing technological dependence, improving readiness, and widening strategic options. In this sense, partnership and autonomy should not be viewed as opposites. Properly managed, they can be mutually reinforced. More broadly, the Indonesian case offers lessons for other middle powers navigating great-power rivalry. Strategic space can still be preserved, but it increasingly depends on combining diplomatic flexibility with credible capabilities and selective connectivity. The most sustainable path lies neither in rigid neutrality nor in automatic alignment but in adaptive statecraft that balances independence with practical cooperation.

Although the Indonesian case is embedded in the specific geopolitical dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, the broader implications extend beyond Southeast Asia. The findings suggest that states seeking to preserve strategic autonomy face a common challenge: balancing sovereign decision-making with the capability requirements needed to sustain credible defence and deterrence. While the institutional and geopolitical contexts of European middle and small powers differ considerably from Indonesia's, similar questions regarding dependence, strategic flexibility, capability development, and selective security cooperation have become increasingly relevant in a period of heightened geopolitical uncertainty. The concept of a defence dilemma developed in this study may therefore provide a useful analytical lens for examining how states manage the tension between policy independence and capability dependence, even under different regional and alliance arrangements. In this sense, the article contributes not only to understanding Indonesia's strategic choices but also to broader debates on strategic autonomy among middle and small powers.

In strategic terms, Indonesia's preference for autonomy remains understandable and potentially sustainable, but only if matched by continuous capability development to address maritime coercion, grey-zone challenges, and broader deterrence requirements in the Indo-Pacific, together with realistic external engagement. The future of Indonesian autonomy may depend less on rejecting alliances and more on redefining autonomy within networks of interdependence involving defence partners, technology providers, and regional security institutions.

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