

Indonesia's overflight tact is vital for its airspace sovereignty



"Indonesia's foreign policy under Prabowo can be termed "active equidistance": actively cultivating inclusiveness while remaining neutral."
(Illustration by Erhan Yalvaç)

BY MUHAMMAD SYAMEER LUTHFY BIN HAMZAH APR 28, 2026 12:05 AM

Indonesia balances sovereignty and strategic alliance amid U.S. overflight negotiations

Recently, the United States made arrangements with Indonesia, perhaps a "blanket overflight access" in Indonesian skies, but the negotiations shifted to controversial ideas, halting the talks. It began with technical discussions on airspace facilitation, but the episode concerns multiple perceptions of its sovereignty and the limits of its strategic alignment in Southeast Asia.

Reports indicate that discussions on the defense framework are linked to overflight privileges. Still, Indonesian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Yvonne Mewengkang mentioned that Indonesia had no policy granting unrestricted access, which had been paused following widespread scrutiny in Indonesian media and abroad. The reaction had promised a critical reality: Indonesian airspace is not a logistical domain for air travel but also a political one. Indeed, the public must be sensitive to its sovereignty, especially in military matters, which are shaped by historical memory, such as

colonialism in the 1800s with the Dutch, and contemporary anxieties about geopolitics, such as the U.S. military engagements against Iran.

The timing of the negotiation is, without a doubt, planned. On April 13, U.S. Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth met the Defence Minister of Indonesia, Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin, at the Pentagon, where they discussed and proposed a "Major Defence Cooperation Partnership" (MDCP). This was after the engagement between Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto and U.S. President Donald Trump, which signalled the U.S. intent to strengthen defence ties with Indonesia as part of efforts to reinforce regional deterrence, especially against China.

In this context, access is not an isolated request but part of a broader architecture of operational flexibility that enables the U.S. to move easily across the Indo-Pacific and into the Indian Ocean. This is very clear in their logic: if maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz become contested or disrupted, an air corridor stretching from the Pacific, starting at Pearl Harbour and passing through Southeast Asia, would become indispensable.

What makes it critical in this equation is Indonesia's geography, which is the largest country in Southeast Asia, covering 1.9 million square kilometers and comprising more than 17,000 islands. This, as figured, forms a natural bridge between east and west, with an approximate distance of 3,800-4,000 kilometers from Aceh to the Gulf region, situating Indonesia within operational reach of West Asian theaters, particularly at the moment, **with contingency planning against Iran.**

Diverse international relations

But the response is non-compliant with Indonesia's current position, as the pause in negotiations reflects a broader strategic posture that resists one-sided alignment. Indonesia's foreign policy under Prabowo can be termed "active equidistance": actively cultivating inclusiveness while remaining neutral. For instance, while engaging with the U.S. in defense and trade, Indonesia also maintains ties with China and Russia, which reinforce its commitment to non-alignment principles rooted in the longstanding Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) doctrine.

This act can be further evidenced by Indonesia's participation in wide-ranging initiatives, such as the Board of Peace (BoP), where it serves as a constructive actor in addressing longstanding issues, including the reconstruction of Gaza. Indonesia, in fact, presented itself not as a pivoting state but as an anchor seeking relevance through neutrality rather than realignment.

In their economy, both the U.S. and Indonesia had always remained significant. They had recently signed a reciprocal trade agreement titled "Toward a New Golden Age for the U.S.-Indonesia Alliance," which reflects such deepening of bilateral ties beyond the domain of security. But in this moment, the asymmetries are evident, as the U.S. remains one of Indonesia's arms suppliers. Until the recent friction, when the collapse of the planned acquisition of 24 F-15EX fighter jets from Boeing, a flagship deal, signalled the limits of defence-industrial convergence. Same as well for the ongoing reliance on platforms such as F-16, which underscores both continuity and constraint in the relationship.

Nevertheless, the U.S. and Indonesia have historically had ties that oscillated between cooperation and caution. During the Cold War, Indonesia's stance in the non-aligned movement kept it at arm's length from the U.S.; even so, practical engagement persisted. In the post-1998 reformasi era, relations deepened for counterterrorism and maritime security. But the core principle of strategic autonomy has endured, shaping

Indonesia's contemporary overtures such as the Major Defense Cooperation Partnership (MDCP) and overflight arrangements.

Modulating sovereignty

In analysing this, the concept of "blanket overflight access" introduces a subtle but important shift in sovereignty. While Indonesia can retain ultimate authority over its airspace, the routine exercise of that authority becomes simplified, arguably weaker, under a standing permit regime. But then, this is not sovereignty surrendered, but sovereignty modulated. However, the question is, will such a modulation serve Indonesia's long-term interests?

There are potential gains, no denying that. With enhanced cooperation, the U.S. could yield benefits in intelligence sharing, capacity building and deterrence. And can provide Indonesia with leverage to navigate regional uncertainties, particularly in the Middle East, where much has threatened to disrupt global energy flows. Indonesia itself is a net oil importer with 26.3% of a share in energy supply in 2023 and has vested interests in maintaining stability along routes through the Strait of Hormuz.

Yet the risks are equally pronounced. Perceptions of overreach by a foreign power will erode public confidence. Regionally, closer alignment with the U.S. may complicate Indonesia's relations with other major countries, particularly China. Hence, in strategic understanding, granting overflight access may incrementally draw Indonesia into contingencies not of its own making.

Adding to these complications, neighbouring states such as Singapore continue to engage with Western partners, while Malaysia, as the convening state, appears to preserve channels with multiple actors. The Philippines, which is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) chair for 2026, remains aligned with the U.S., which could set similar arrangements. But what this shows is that it is not a unified ASEAN stance, but a spectrum of strategic choices, each made.

In this post-normal landscape, the halt in U.S.-Indonesia negotiations should not be read as a rejection but as a recalibration. Indonesia is signalling that access, particularly its military nature, cannot be divorced from legitimacy, both domestic and regional. It is asserting that strategic cooperation must be balanced by strategic caution.

All in all, the importance of this episode lies not in whether an overflight agreement is concluded, but how Indonesia navigates the pressures surrounding it. Airspace, once considered a passive extension of territory, is now an active domain of geopolitical contestation. To manage it effectively, needs political finesse, not only technical capability.

Indonesia has long prided itself on being "Bebas dan Aktif" (Free and Active) as it is the largest state in the region. The situation today is to remain both, even as the skies above it become increasingly crowded with others' ambitions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Research fellow at the Institute of International and ASEAN Studies (IINTAS) at the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM)

