

Ordering the Rise: Indonesia's Normative Engagement with China and the Constitution of Asia-Pacific International Society, 2018–2025

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia's decision to upgrade defense engagement with China in early 2025, culminating in the first ministerial "2+2" joint foreign and defense dialogue that China has established with any country, raises a puzzle for mainstream explanations of Southeast Asian security behavior. Why would a self-described middle power deepen military cooperation with the region's predominant rising power while simultaneously sustaining expansive security ties with the United States and other partners? This study addresses that puzzle through the English School of international relations specifically the tradition of Hedley Bull (1977) and Barry Buzan (2004) which conceptualizes international society as a normative order sustained by primary institutions: sovereignty, diplomacy, balance of power, great power management, and international law. We argue that Indonesia's defense cooperation with China between 2018 and 2025 was not reducible to hedging as an instrumental posture, nor to constrained accommodation. Instead, Indonesia pursued normative engagement as an order-constituting practice: institutionalizing diplomacy through regularized mechanisms, reaffirming sovereignty and non-interference, preserving balance through non-exclusive partnerships, and keeping international law claims alive through persistent UNCLOS-centered diplomacy. We demonstrate that Indonesia performed a form of middle-power facilitative management, constructing institutional pathways through which a rising great power is drawn into consultative habits, and specify the scope conditions governing this mechanism. The case extends Bull's concept of great power management by identifying a previously undertheorized actor type: the middle power as order-constituting agent.

KEYWORDS

English School; international society; primary institutions; great power management; middle-power agency; bebas-aktif; South China Sea

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's defense diplomacy with China underwent a structural transformation in January 2025, when Jakarta's post-2024 leadership authorized a sequence of high-level engagements that moved beyond episodic contacts toward institutionalized security consultation. In January 2025, Indonesia's defense minister met his Chinese counterpart in Beijing and publicly advanced cooperation through personnel exchanges, technology-related discussions, and "soldier-to-soldier contact," while framing dialogue as the

preferred modality for managing regional problems. (Kemhan RI 2025a) Three months later, the two states participated in the first ministerial meeting of a joint foreign and defense ministerial dialogue (“2+2”) in Beijing, a mechanism China’s own foreign ministry characterized as its first foreign-and-defense ministerial dialogue globally. (China MFA 2025a) For a region living with intensifying U.S.-China strategic rivalry, this sequence carries stakes that extend beyond bilateral relations. Indonesia is the largest state in Association of Southeast Asian Nations by population and economy, a pivotal maritime actor astride key sea lanes, and a persistent advocate of ASEAN-centered regional architecture. The way it engages the predominant rising power therefore matters for the evolving terms of order across the Asia-Pacific. (DOALOS 2019)

The analytical puzzle is not that Indonesia has relations with multiple great powers. Southeast Asian foreign policies have long been characterized by diversification and autonomy-seeking. The difficulty lies in the form Indonesia chose for deepening engagement with China: not an alliance, not basing, and not a narrow procurement bargain, but a layered architecture of consultative practice embedded in language about “strategic mutual trust,” sovereignty, non-interference, and regional stability. (China MFA 2025b) In April 2025, China and Indonesia announced a set of outcomes that explicitly linked defense engagement to broader political-security cooperation, maritime security cooperation (including a coast guard agreement), and stated commitments to peace and stability in the South China Sea alongside renewed emphasis on implementing the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties and accelerating the Code of Conduct process. (China MFA 2025c) The package does not read like the lowest common denominator of crisis management. It reads like an attempt to script patterns of coexistence.

A large body of scholarship would interpret such behavior through the lens of strategic hedging or soft balancing. In this view, Southeast Asian states avoid exclusive alignment, pursue “omni-enmeshment” or “omni-directional” engagement, and keep options open under uncertainty produced by shifting power distributions. Goh (2007) and Kuik (2008) are central to this literature, demonstrating that small and middle powers mix limited security cooperation, economic engagement, and diplomatic signaling toward multiple great powers to preserve autonomy under uncertainty. Yet Indonesia’s key documentary interventions over the past decade, including its public insistence that any maritime claims must conform to UNCLOS and its direct submission of note verbales to the UN rejecting China’s nine-dash line, suggest that legal and normative commitments are not merely rhetorical adornment in this case. (UN DOALOS 2020a)

Liberal-institutionalist accounts, by contrast, stress the way ASEAN-led institutions, regime density, and economic interdependence can socialize behavior and reduce incentives for coercion. This line of argument is not misplaced for Southeast Asia, where the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation formalizes norms of sovereignty, non-interference, and peaceful settlement while prescribing regular consultation as a regional practice. (Treaty of Amity and Cooperation 1976) At the same time, in much institutionalist work, institutions are primarily instruments that lower transaction costs and mitigate information problems. That orientation often leaves underexplained the deeper question of how institutionalized practice becomes a form of regional order-making in its own right, especially when directed toward a rising great power that contests parts of the prevailing legal order.

What remains undertheorized across realist, liberal-institutionalist, and constructivist accounts is the normative-strategic logic animating Indonesia’s statecraft: the logic by which a middle power attempts to integrate a rising great power into habits of consultative restraint through institutionalized bilateral engagement, not as a hedge against material

threat, nor as a response to institutional incentives alone, but as a constitutive ordering practice. The English School, with its conceptual vocabulary of primary institutions, order and justice, and pluralism and solidarism, provides precisely the framework needed to analyze this logic. Its systematic application to Southeast Asian security cooperation remains underdeveloped (Buzan 2004; Little 2007). This study addresses that gap.

Constructivist and historical-institutionalist scholarship on ASEAN offers more precise analytical tools for norm entrepreneurship and regional agency. Acharya (2014) argues that Southeast Asian actors have not been passive recipients of global norms; they have localized, adapted, and in some cases produced regional standards that shape great power behavior and regional expectations (Acharya 2014). Work on the Indo-Pacific debate also highlights Indonesia's agency in generating the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, a document that framed the Indo-Pacific as a space of dialogue and cooperation rather than rivalry, explicitly warning against "mistrust" and "zero-sum" behavior and grounding regional engagement in sovereignty and international law, including UNCLOS. Anwar (2020) traces the sustained diplomatic effort by Indonesia that led ASEAN to adopt this outlook, emphasizing ASEAN centrality and rules-based regional architecture (Anwar 2020). (DOALOS 2019) This scholarship strongly suggests that Indonesia's statecraft contains an ordering dimension. Still, the field lacks sufficient theorization of how that ordering dimension operates when Indonesia engages China not only through ASEAN but also through bilateral military and security mechanisms.

This is where the English School provides distinctive analytical traction. International society, in Bull's (1977)'s canonical formulation, exists when states are conscious of common interests and values, "conceive themselves" bound by common rules, and share in the working of common institutions. (Bull 1977, 13) The English School thus treats rules and institutions not as external constraints on state behavior but as constitutive practices through which order is created and maintained. Buzan (2004) extends this approach by distinguishing "primary institutions" (deep, evolved, legitimate practices such as sovereignty, diplomacy, balance of power, international law, and great power management) from "secondary institutions" (formal organizations and regimes). (Buzan 2004) Indonesia's *bebas-aktif* (free and active) foreign policy doctrine, the principle that Indonesia maintains strategic autonomy through active, multidirectional engagement rather than alignment with any great power, is treated here not as diplomatic rhetoric but as a normative commitment with observable behavioral implications: refusal to join formal alliances, insistence on non-exclusivity clauses in security arrangements, and persistent advocacy of ASEAN-centered multilateral frameworks as the legitimate architecture of regional order. The framework's explanatory purchase lies in its capacity to treat rules and institutions as constitutive of inter-state order rather than merely constraining state behavior, a distinction that matters when analyzing Indonesia's statecraft, which cannot be reduced to material constraint or procedural compliance. Despite this leverage, the English School has been systematically under-applied to Southeast Asian security cooperation (Buzan 2004), a gap this study directly addresses.

This paper therefore asks why Indonesia's deepening military cooperation with China between 2018 and 2025 took the form it did, and what that form reveals about the nature of an emerging Asia-Pacific regional international society. Three subsidiary inquiries elaborate the core question. We reconstruct the key process through which Indonesia moved from an ASEAN-centered Indo-Pacific vision and legal contestation over maritime entitlements to the creation of institutionalized defense dialogues with China. We then evaluate how Indonesia's practices mapped onto the English School's primary institutions, paying sustained attention to sovereignty, diplomacy, balance of power, great power

management, and international law. We also examine how the record exposes the order–justice tension that Bull’s (1977) treats as endemic to international society, particularly in the South China Sea context where legal clarity and enforcement are decoupled. Finally, we assess the character of the emerging regional international society, whether it exhibits the coexistence-oriented features of pluralism or the thicker normative convergence associated with solidarism, and locate Indonesia’s practice along that spectrum.(UN DOALOS 2020a; 2020b)

Our central claim is contestable but grounded in the documentary record: Indonesia’s deepening defense cooperation with China between 2018 and 2025 constituted a deliberate attempt to reinforce a regional international society by integrating a rising great power into habits of consultation and partial restraint while preserving Indonesia’s strategic autonomy through diversified partnerships. The argument matters in three ways. Theoretically, it demonstrates that the English School can illuminate Southeast Asian order dynamics without reducing them to either material power balancing or procedural institutionalism. Empirically, it provides a systematic account of a critical juncture in Indonesia–China security relations centered on the adoption and activation of a ministerial 2+2 mechanism, a shift formalized through bilateral joint statements and ministerial dialogues. Practically, it clarifies the logic of “normative engagement” as a strategy available to middle powers seeking to manage great-power rivalry without surrendering legal positions or regional institutional preferences (Belt and Road Forum, 2026).

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative, historical-interpretive design combining process tracing with structured content analysis. This design is appropriate given the research question: explaining how Indonesia’s defense cooperation with China reflected and contributed to regional international society requires reconstructing meaning and sequence, not correlational measurement (Watson, 1987). The theoretical framework operationalized is the English School of International Relations, developed most prominently by Bull’s (1977) and extended by Buzan (2004) and others. Its foundational assumptions are fourfold. First, anarchy does not preclude the existence of society; states can form an international society when they are conscious of common interests and values, see themselves bound by common rules, and share in common institutions . (Bull 1977, 13) Second, order is not merely the absence of war; it refers to patterned activity that advances the elementary goals of the society of states, including security, promise-keeping, and stability of possession. Third, legitimate behavior matters: shared understandings of appropriate conduct shape the terms on which power is exercised and contested. Fourth, international society persists through “primary institutions,” understood as deep, durable, evolved practices recognized as legitimate among members. Several English School concepts organize the analysis. “Primary institutions” are treated as the core analytic categories. Following Buzan (2004; 2014), they include sovereignty, diplomacy, balance of power, international law, and great power management, the five institutions this study operationalizes as observable analytical Categories. “Secondary institutions” are treated as purpose-built organizations or regimes that operationalize, but do not replace, these primary institutions; in Southeast Asia, ASEAN-led mechanisms often operate in this role. The order–justice tension is treated as an interpretive axis rather than a dependent variable. In Bull’s framework, order and justice can align, but they can also pull against each other when legal principles are asserted without effective enforcement or when stability is prioritized over adjudication. The pluralism–solidarism debate provides a way to characterize the emerging regional international society. Pluralism prioritizes coexistence

norms such as sovereignty and non-intervention, while solidarism implies a thicker normative community with shared substantive commitments and potentially collective enforcement. Pluralism is operationalized through language emphasizing sovereignty, non-interference, and non-exclusivity in bilateral documents; preference for soft institutional forms (dialogue mechanisms, MoUs) over binding alliances; and explicit rejection of collective enforcement commitments. Solidarism is operationalized through language of 'community with a shared future,' joint commitments to 'international fairness and justice,' and cooperative programs extending beyond security to development and connectivity. Mixed evidence will indicate a transitional or nascent-solardist regional society.

These concepts are operationalized through observable indicators derived from the primary documents examined. Sovereignty is coded through explicit affirmations of territorial integrity, non-interference, and strategic autonomy, as well as through the absence of exclusivity clauses that would compromise policy independence. Bebas-aktif is treated as an observable scope condition: its behavioral markers, absence of exclusivity clauses, sustained multilateral exercise participation, ASEAN-centered framing of bilateral cooperation, indicate normative commitment rather than tactical convenience. Where these markers appear alongside formal defense institutionalization, bebas-aktif is confirmed as operative. Diplomacy is operationalized through the creation, institutionalization, and routinization of consultative mechanisms, including bilateral dialogue formats and regularized ministerial or senior-official meetings. Balance of power, as a practice rather than a distribution, is operationalized through Indonesia's continued participation in exercises and defense agreements with multiple partners, and through evidence that engagement with one great power did not terminate or downgrade engagement with others. International law is operationalized through explicit references to UNCLOS and the legal invalidity of the nine-dash line, through Indonesia's diplomatic notes to the UN, and through consistent public positions that maritime claims must conform to international law. Great power management is operationalized through Indonesia's efforts to embed China in institutionalized security consultation and to shape Chinese participation in regional maritime stability practices, including commitments to implement and accelerate ASEAN-China confidence-building instruments.

The causal mechanism hypothesized connects systemic pressure to ordering outcome through Indonesia's normative practice. The antecedent condition (X) is China's rise and maritime assertiveness in the South China Sea, generating uncertainty about whether Asia-Pacific order will be organized through great-power hierarchy, bipolar rivalry, or a society of states governed by shared norms. The mediating process (M) is Indonesia's normative engagement: institutionalizing bilateral defense dialogue and military cooperation with China while sustaining diversified defense partnerships and embedding engagement within ASEAN's normative repertoire and UNCLOS-centered legal language. The outcome (Y) is not full socialization, too strong a claim for available evidence, but reinforcement of consultative habits and institutional scripts that raise the cost of coercive unilateralism and create observable precedent for other ASEAN-China bilateral relationships. Scope conditions delimiting this mechanism include: the rising power's perception that institutional engagement is less costly than unilateral assertion in the specific dyad; the middle power's possession of sufficient diplomatic capital and ASEAN legitimacy to serve as credible institutional interlocutor; and the existence of multilateral institutional infrastructure providing normative vocabulary and political cover for bilateral engagement.

The primary sources analyzed include Indonesian Ministry of Defence press releases and statements surrounding the January 2025 Beijing meeting and the April 2025 2+2

dialogue; Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of National Defense statements on the 2+2 mechanism and its outcomes; the October 2023 bilateral joint statement that agreed to establish a 2+2 dialogue mechanism; the November 2024 joint statement that upgraded cooperation from “four pillars” to “five pillars” with the addition of security; ASEAN documents including the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation; and UN note verbales submitted by Indonesia rejecting the nine-dash line and emphasizing the supremacy of UNCLOS maritime zones over historic rights claims. Secondary sources include analyses from International Institute for Strategic Studies on the structure of exercise networks and Indonesia–China defense ties; S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies assessments of Indonesia’s defense policy under Prabowo; and quality journalism documenting the controversy around 2024 and 2025 maritime cooperation language and the continuing salience of South China Sea disputes.

This research relies on existing, accessible documentary and statistical evidence rather than interviews or fieldwork, which is sufficient because the central mechanism examined is publicly institutionalized and discursively performed through official documents and diplomatic practice. The analytical procedure proceeds in three stages. First, we code key documents for references and commitments that map onto the English School categories specified above, paying attention to both explicit language and institutional design choices (dialogue mechanisms versus binding pacts). Second, we reconstruct the temporal sequence from Indonesia’s normative regional framing in 2019, through legal contestation in 2020, to bilateral institutionalization steps in 2023–2025, identifying decision points where norm-relevant commitments become observable. Third, we triangulate between Indonesian, Chinese, ASEAN, and independent sources to ensure that claims about commitments are not artifacts of single-source framing and that opposing interpretations are visible in the evidentiary record.

Validity is addressed through triangulation across Indonesian, Chinese, ASEAN, and independent sources; consistency checking between normative rhetoric and behavioral patterns; and counter-evidence consideration. Reliability is addressed by acknowledging the interpretive character of English School analysis and mitigating subjectivity through explicit operationalization criteria.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results are structured by English School institutions and related analytical categories, presenting evidence of Indonesia’s practices between 2018 and 2025.

Diplomacy, as a primary institution, is visible in the steady construction of consultative mechanisms that progressively embedded Indonesia–China defense engagement in regularized formats. As early as October 2023, the two governments agreed to establish a 2+2 dialogue mechanism for foreign and defense ministers, explicitly framing it as a platform for high-level strategic communication across political, defense, and security cooperation (Belt and Road Forum 2023). In August 2024, a senior officials’ meeting China’s foreign ministry formally described as the official launch of the 2+2 mechanism, demonstrating that the architecture was constructed sequentially from preparatory bureaucratic work to ministerial activation. By April 2025, China’s defense ministry and foreign ministry both described the first ministerial meeting of the joint foreign and defense ministerial dialogue as a milestone, emphasizing that it institutionalized strategic mutual trust through a structured platform rather than through an alliance or a one-off summit.

The documentary record of January 2025 operationalizes what the outline terms ‘soldier-to-soldier contact’: General Liu Zhenli’s visit to Jakarta on January 9–10 produced concrete commitments to personnel exchanges at high, middle, and low officer ranks, with the Indonesian defense ministry explicitly framing multi-rank exchanges as ‘an important indicator to strengthen defense in both countries’ (Kemhan RI 2025a). Defense Minister Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin’s subsequent Beijing meeting on January 22 formalized cooperation in three vectors: military technology exchange, communication mechanism establishment, and direct personnel contact. These operational commitments transformed the consultative architecture from declaratory to programmatic: the dialogue mechanism was paired with functional military-to-military interaction at the working level, not only at the ministerial summit.

The January 2025 sequence provided a second layer of diplomatic institutionalization, centered first on military-to-military elite engagement and then on ministerial-level defense talks. During January 9–10, China’s Chief of Staff of the Joint Staff Department, Liu Zhenli, visited Jakarta and met Indonesia’s defense minister and armed forces commander; the Chinese embassy’s reporting of these meetings stressed hopes for deeper “personnel exchanges and joint exercises and training,” indicating a push to normalize practical military cooperation under political guidance. On January 22, Indonesia’s defense ministry publicly described the Beijing meeting between Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin and China’s defense minister Dong Jun as a forum to strengthen strategic defense cooperation through dialogue and consultation, while expanding cooperation beyond technology transfer toward direct relationships among personnel.

Sovereignty and non-intervention appear as foundational coexistence norms consistently present across the documentary record. ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, often treated as a baseline expression of “the ASEAN way,” codifies mutual respect for sovereignty, the right of states to be free from external interference, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and renunciation of the threat or use of force. Indonesia’s official framing of the January 2025 Beijing talks drew directly on these norms, emphasizing dialogue rather than armed force as the appropriate method for resolving regional problems. At the April 2025 2+2, official Chinese readouts emphasized that both sides agreed to “adhere to strategic autonomy” and oppose external interference while supporting each other’s core interests. Indonesian readouts similarly framed the forum as a platform to strengthen communication, mutual understanding, and trust while underscoring sovereignty and territorial integrity as a condition for cooperation.

Indonesia’s insistence on sovereignty is also appears in prior legal and diplomatic contestation over maritime entitlements, which highlights that Indonesia did not treat engagement with China as conditional on accepting Chinese maritime claims. In its May 26, 2020 note verbale to the UN Secretary-General, Indonesia stated that the nine-dash line “clearly lacks international legal basis” and emphasized that any alleged historic rights were superseded by the maritime zones provided by UNCLOS. In June 2020, Indonesia reiterated that no feature in the Spratly Islands generates overlapping maritime entitlement with Indonesia’s EEZ, and explicitly rejected any legal basis for negotiating maritime boundary delimitation with China. The record therefore shows sovereignty practiced not only as a declaratory norm but as a legal-technical stance performed through multilateral legal channels.

Balance of power, treated here as a primary institution expressed through practice, is evident in Indonesia’s sustained defense diversification even during the deepening of China ties. Indonesia’s continued participation in large-scale exercises with the United States and multiple partners provides direct evidence. In August 2024, Indonesia and the

United States began their annual joint drills, with Reuters reporting more than 4,500 personnel and participation by partners such as Australia, Japan, Britain, France, and New Zealand. By 2025, public reporting described “Super Garuda Shield” as involving roughly 6,500 troops and a wide set of participating states, despite parallel Indonesian engagement with China earlier that year. Beyond exercises, Indonesia signed a treaty-level defense cooperation agreement with Australia in 2024, described as enabling forces to operate from each other’s territory for mutually determined cooperative activities and expanding cooperation in areas including maritime security and education and training. Indonesia’s defense cooperation with Japan also intensified: the Japanese defense ministry’s January 2025 reporting highlighted agreements on high-level exchanges, multilateral exercise collaboration, and maritime-security consultations referencing regional seas and ASEAN frameworks.

Indonesia’s participation in the U.S.-led Rim of the Pacific exercise provides further evidence of sustained interoperability-building with a U.S.-centered maritime network. The U.S. Pacific Fleet lists Indonesia among participating countries, and reporting on RIMPAC 2022 and related documentation identifies Indonesian naval assets and personnel involvement, while RIMPAC 2018 coverage noted Indonesian frigate participation. These practices are particularly salient because Laksmana’s (2024) IISS analysis establishes the structural baseline from 2003 to 2022, Indonesia held only four combined military exercises with China but more than 100 with the United States. (Laksmana, 2024) While the period studied here extends beyond 2022, the baseline disparity underscores that deepening cooperation with China in 2024–2025 took place against a long-standing pattern of Western-oriented defense engagement, rather than replacing it.

Great power management is visible in the construction of institutional bridges that presented defense engagement as precedent-setting and connected it to regional stability practices. China’s own characterization of the 2+2 mechanism as its first ministerial-level foreign-and-defense dialogue globally assigns status significance to Indonesia. The April 2025 2+2 outcomes explicitly included expanding the scope of security cooperation, establishing additional consultation mechanisms (including on arms control), and intensifying maritime cooperation through a coast guard maritime security cooperation agreement, while both sides reiterated commitments to implement the 2002 Declaration on Conduct and accelerate Code of Conduct consultations. The diplomatic framing of the 75th anniversary of China–Indonesia relations and the 70th anniversary of the Bandung Conference also anchored the mechanism in shared narratives of sovereign equality and anti-hegemonic solidarity, at least in the language presented by China’s foreign ministry spokesperson.

Precedent diffusion is a further observable indicator of great power management. Following Indonesia’s establishment of the 2+2 mechanism, China initiated similar dialogue formats with Malaysia and Vietnam (China MFA 2025). Indonesian officials described the bilateral cooperation as a ‘model for China-ASEAN countries, effectively safeguarding regional security’, framing the mechanism as precedent-setting rather than exclusive (Kemhan RI 2025b). This replication effect distinguishes Indonesia’s initiative from routine bilateralism: it generated normative diffusion across the ASEAN–China relational field, consistent with the English School’s characterization of primary institutions as shared practices reproduced through imitation and recognition.

International law, as an institution, appears in Indonesia’s persistent coupling of engagement with explicit legal boundary-setting. The clearest evidence comes from Indonesia’s UN note verbales, which moved beyond generic commitments to international law and directly rejected the nine-dash line’s legal basis, while referencing the 2016

arbitral award's reasoning on the absence of certain maritime entitlements and the supersession of historic rights claims by UNCLOS. This legal position remained publicly salient even as defense cooperation deepened. After China released the 2023 edition of its "standard map" incorporating a ten-dash line, Indonesian officials publicly reiterated that any drawing of lines and claims must conform to UNCLOS, and domestic reporting documented renewed debate about Indonesia's regional stance in the run-up to ASEAN summits. The 2024 Indonesia–China joint statement controversy also produced a similar dynamic: Reuters reported that Indonesia's foreign ministry reiterated that it does not recognize China's South China Sea claims and that any joint development understanding would not affect Indonesia's sovereign rights in the North Natuna Sea.

The order–justice tension is visible in Indonesia's dual practice of legal contestation and cooperative institutionalization. Indonesia's justice-oriented claims were articulated through formal legal documents and public statements rejecting the nine-dash line, while its order-oriented practices emphasized dialogue, consultation, and the creation of mechanisms intended to prevent escalation. The tension intensified in November–December 2024, when a joint statement with China referenced "joint development in areas of overlapping claims," prompting public concern and subsequent Indonesian clarification that it has no overlapping claims with China and had not agreed to specific joint development areas. The episode underscores that order maintenance through cooperative language can generate justice risks when rhetorical formulations are perceived as conceding legal ground.

Evidence of modest solidarist tendencies appears in the normative language used in bilateral joint statements and ministerial readouts. The October 2023 China–Indonesia joint statement referenced civilizational values and explicitly linked cooperation to the "Bandung Spirit" and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, while committing to establish a 2+2 dialogue mechanism. The November 2024 joint statement explicitly described the upgrading of cooperation from "four pillars" to "five pillars" by adding security, and framed security cooperation as an "important manifestation" of strategic mutual trust, alongside commitments to joint exercises and dialogue mechanisms. The April 2025 readouts repeatedly used the phrase "community with a shared future" and linked the 2+2 to Global South coordination, with commitments to coordinate at multilateral platforms. Such language goes beyond minimal coexistence rhetoric even if it does not entail supranational authority or collective enforcement.

Two anomalies complicate the picture. First, episodic maritime frictions have continued despite institutionalization, as reflected in reporting on Indonesian maritime agencies repeatedly driving away Chinese vessels, indicating incomplete socialization and persistent contestation of jurisdictional claims. Second, the asymmetry of material power between Indonesia and China raises the possibility that some cooperative practices are better understood as risk-minimizing accommodation rather than as successful great power management. The evidence does not resolve this tension, both anomalies remain live, and the discussion must assess whether they disconfirm the English School interpretation or merely establish its scope conditions.

The empirical record is now assessed against the English School framework's core propositions. Bull (1977, 13) defines international society as existing when states are conscious of common interests and values, conceive themselves bound by common rules, and share in the working of common institutions. Buzan (2004) specifies that primary institutions, sovereignty, diplomacy, balance of power, international law, and great power management, constitute the normative structure through which that society is reproduced. The central interpretive question this discussion addresses is whether Indonesia's

deepening military cooperation with China between 2018 and 2025 reflected and reinforced those primary institutions, or whether the observed patterns are better explained by material self-interest, institutional density, or power asymmetry. We argue that the English School provides superior explanatory purchase, while acknowledging the limits of that purchase.

The empirical record above fits uneasily with accounts that treat Indonesia's China policy as either merely opportunistic hedging or reluctant acquiescence. The evidence shows a consistent preference for institutionalizing diplomatic practice and embedding security engagement within a normative repertoire that draws simultaneously on ASEAN principles, the Bandung legacy, and legal boundary-setting grounded in UNCLOS. The English School provides a way to interpret this pattern as an ordering strategy, not simply as a survival strategy.

We advance the following thesis: Indonesia's deepening military cooperation with China between 2018 and 2025 constituted a deliberate effort to reinforce a regional international society by integrating a rising great power into consultative habits through diplomacy and great power management, while preserving balance and legal justice claims through diversified partnerships and persistent international-law positions. This interpretation treats *bebas-aktif* not as mere procedural non-alignment but as a constitutive ordering practice: a middle power using strategic autonomy to build the institutional fabric through which a rising great power is socialized into habits of restraint.

A first supporting argument concerns diplomacy as institution-building and its relationship to great power management. The evidence establishes a clear sequence: ASEAN-centered normative framing in the 2019 Outlook on the Indo-Pacific; legal contestation and UN note-verbale diplomacy in 2020; bilateral agreement to create a 2+2 mechanism in 2023; preparatory senior officials' activation in 2024; and ministerial institutionalization in April 2025, accompanied by cooperation documents in maritime security and other areas. This sequence indicates purposive institutionalization rather than episodic tactical improvisation. Within the English School, diplomacy is not only a tool but a constitutive institution of international society: it is the practice through which states recognize one another as legitimate participants and manage friction without collapsing into coercion. Indonesia's push toward a 2+2 is therefore not merely a channel to "talk more." It creates an institutional script that treats consultative practice as the default mode for managing a sensitive security relationship.

The great power management element emerges because the mechanism is specifically designed to manage relations with a major power whose rise is widely perceived as the key systemic pressure in the region. Bull's classic conception of great power management emphasizes that major powers accept special responsibilities and mutual restraint in sustaining order (Bull 1977). The Indonesia–China case indicates a contemporary variant: a middle power initiates institutional forms that encourage a rising power to enact consultative restraint, while simultaneously situating this enactment within a broader normative community. The fact that Chinese official statements repeatedly described the 2+2 as China's first ministerial-level foreign-and-defense dialogue globally confirms it as a managed relationship rather than an ordinary bilateral channel.

The January 2025 record sharpens this point. When General Liu Zhenli visited Jakarta on January 9–10, the Indonesian defense ministry framed officer exchange commitments in explicit institutionalization language: multi-rank personnel exchanges would build 'China-literate' Indonesian officers and, symmetrically, Indonesia-literate PLA officers (Kemhan RI 2025a). This human interoperability dimension is distinct from material capability transfer; it produces the working-level relationships through which consultative habits

become embedded across bureaucratic levels, not only at ministerial summits. This is precisely what Bull (1977) means by 'primary institution' as reproduced practice: the 2+2 mechanism functions not because a document was signed but because personnel flows create recurring interaction that normalizes consultative behavior as default.

A second supporting argument concerns the balance of power as a primary institution maintained through non-exclusive partnerships. Balance of power in the English School is not simply about capabilities; it is a recognized practice that prevents hegemonic domination, enabling sovereignty to remain meaningful. The record shows that Indonesia did not translate deeper China cooperation into exclusive alignment. On the contrary, Indonesia intensified defense arrangements with Australia through a treaty-level agreement and sustained a large-scale multinational exercise portfolio anchored by Super Garuda Shield and participation in RIMPAC. Cooperation with Japan likewise deepened in 2025, including plans for high-level exchanges and maritime-security consultations. These practices demonstrate that engagement with China was layered onto a diversified security network rather than substituting for it.

The IISS evidence on exercise networks helps interpret the significance of this. If Indonesia historically held far more combined exercises with the United States than with China, then the emergence of deeper China engagement in 2024–2025 is best understood as additive normalization rather than replacement or bandwagoning. (Laksmana, 2024) Under an international-society lens, this additive engagement constitutes balance-as-institution in Bull's (1977) sense: a consciously maintained practice that prevents hegemonic domination and preserves the conditions under which sovereign coexistence remains meaningful. Indonesia did not merely hedge; it performed a structural function in the society of states.

A third supporting argument focuses on the order–justice tension and Indonesia's calibrated approach to legal claims. Indonesia's behavior combines legal boundary-setting with institutional engagement. The legal boundary-setting is not subtle. In its 2020 note verbale, Indonesia stated that the nine-dash line lacks legal basis and that UNCLOS supersedes any historic rights claim, explicitly tying its position to the logic of the 2016 arbitral award. Indonesia's subsequent public insistence that the drawing of lines and claims must be consistent with UNCLOS, especially after the ten-dash line map controversy, confirms that legal claims remained a visible part of Indonesia's public diplomacy even in a period of institutional deepening with China.

The curated evidence from January 8, 2025, when Bakamla head Rear Admiral Irvansyah met Chinese Coast Guard counterparts in Guangzhou to discuss safe shipping lanes and anti-illegal-fishing cooperation, provides the clearest single-event illustration of calibrated prioritization. Indonesia engaged the CCG directly as a dialogue partner in maritime governance rather than exclusively as an adversary challenging its sovereign jurisdiction, the very institutional actor that has contested Indonesian EEZ rights in the North Natuna Sea. This move operationalized procedural order through dialogue while formal legal positions (UNCLOS, EEZ assertions, North Natuna Sea designation) remained unchanged. The Natuna patrol record confirms that CCG engagement did not translate into legal concession, consistent with Finding 6's characterization of Indonesia's approach as calibrated prioritization of order and justice simultaneously.

At the same time, Indonesia's defense diplomacy in January 2025 explicitly reaffirmed dialogue and consultation rather than force for resolving regional problems, a stance repeated in the April 2025 2+2 framework. In Bull's terms, order and justice are distinct values; preserving order sometimes requires restraining justice claims that might provoke escalatory confrontations, while a stable order ultimately requires legitimacy, which

depends in part on justice. Indonesia's strategy can be read as attempting to keep justice claims alive through legal documents and UNCLOS-centered rhetoric while channeling dispute management into procedural order-building through dialogue mechanisms and the ASEAN–China Code of Conduct process.

The late-2024 “joint development” episode clarifies the fragility of this balancing act. If cooperative language is interpreted as endorsing “overlapping claims,” it risks undermining justice positions even if policymakers intend to compartmentalize cooperation. Reuters reporting that Indonesia reiterated its non-recognition of China's maritime claims and that no specific joint development areas had been agreed shows the Indonesian government's sensitivity to this justice risk. That episode therefore supports, rather than undermines, the claim that legal justice norms remained central constraints shaping the terms and limits of normative engagement.

These interpretations face serious counter-arguments. The strongest realist counter-argument is that Indonesia is simply hedging under uncertainty. The evidence is compatible with hedging: Indonesia maintains relations with both poles, expands options, and avoids exclusive commitments. Yet hedging accounts typically stop at describing the mixture of behaviors. They do not explain why Indonesia invested in particular institutional forms that are so explicitly identity- and norm-laden: a 2+2 format framed by Bandung and the Five Principles, embedded in language of strategic autonomy and non-interference, and paired with repeated references to maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea through existing normative instruments. The English School interpretation does not deny hedging behavior; it proposes a different causal logic for the form hedging took. Indonesia did not hedge by quietly maintaining parallel relationships while keeping each partner unaware of the other. It hedged by attempting to embed both sides, especially China, into an institutional script of coexistence, thereby transforming autonomy-seeking into an order-making practice.

A second counter-argument is constrained accommodation: Indonesia cooperated because China's material weight and geographic proximity left little choice, and normative language is a polite cover for risk management. Power asymmetry is real. Still, several features in the record are difficult to reconcile with a pure accommodation story. Indonesia institutionalized security engagement with China while at the same time signing a defense cooperation agreement with Australia and sustaining high-tempo exercises with the United States and other partners. Indonesia also maintained public legal positions that directly contradict China's maritime narrative, including UN note verbales rejecting the nine-dash line and publicly insisting that claims must conform to UNCLOS. These behaviors imply boundary-setting rather than concession. Accommodation might still be part of the story, but the evidence suggests accommodation within a bounded normative framework rather than accommodation through substantive legal retreat.

A third counter-argument comes from liberal institutionalism, which would attribute the observed patterns to ASEAN-led institutional density and mutual economic interests, treating the 2+2 as another channel in an already thick regional architecture. This account identifies part of the mechanism: ASEAN provides institutional infrastructure and vocabulary. Yet the Indonesia–China 2+2 is explicitly bilateral and security-focused, and China described it as a unique first-of-its-kind ministerial mechanism. The key question is not whether institutions exist but what kind of institutions are being constructed and what they are designed to do. The English School's distinction between primary and secondary institutions is useful here: ASEAN may function as a secondary-institutional environment, but Indonesia's ordering move is to activate primary institutions through concrete practice,

making diplomacy, strategic autonomy, and great power consultation the routine basis of interaction.

The causal mechanism can now be refined in light of the evidence and counter-arguments. China's rise and its maritime behavior create systemic uncertainty about order, especially where legal entitlements and coercive patrol practices collide. Indonesia's response is not alignment. It is normative engagement through institutionalization. The mechanism turns on three mediating moves that are jointly necessary for the observed pattern. First, Indonesia establishes and activates consultative forums, the 2+2 architecture, the January military exchanges, the CCG maritime security talks, that define legitimate interaction as dialogue and consultation, constituting an institutional script for the relationship. Second, Indonesia preserves balance by deepening, not shrinking, external partnerships, maintaining a regional environment in which sovereign autonomy remains plausible. Third, Indonesia maintains justice claims through international law, particularly UNCLOS, thereby setting normative boundaries on what engagement can legitimate.

This mechanism has scope conditions that the evidence makes visible. It operates when the middle power has sufficient diplomatic capital to create institutional formats that a rising power finds valuable, and when secondary-institutional infrastructure exists to provide normative vocabulary and political cover for bilateral engagement. ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific supply precisely that vocabulary: sovereignty, non-interference, peaceful settlement, and ASEAN centrality. The mechanism also presumes that the rising power perceives consultation as less costly than open coercion in the specific dyad, even if it continues coercive practices elsewhere. That condition helps explain why socialization remains partial and why anomalies persist in the form of recurring maritime incidents.

Engagement with existing scholarship clarifies what this case adds. It complements the hedging literature (Goh 2007; Kuik 2008) by specifying the normative-institutional content of hedging strategies and identifying how hedging can function as international-society reinforcement rather than as pure opportunism. The evidence also extends Acharya's account of regional agency by identifying a concrete ordering pathway: bilateral institutionalization with a rising power that is explicitly framed as compatible with ASEAN's normative commitments and international law. It supports Anwar's argument that Indonesia's Indo-Pacific activism is tied to ASEAN centrality and legal principles, but it moves further by showing how those principles are deployed in the security domain through a 2+2 architecture with China.

The theoretical implication concerns the English School concept of great power management. In classical English School accounts, great power management is often written as a practice performed by great powers themselves. The Indonesia–China case suggests a complementary dynamic: middle powers can perform a form of facilitative management, constructing institutional pathways through which a great power is drawn into consultative habits. This is not a claim that middle powers control great powers. It is a claim that middle powers can shape the institutional scripts through which great powers enact legitimacy. The April 2025 record, where the 2+2 is described as opening a new chapter of strategic mutual trust and is paired with institutional outputs in arms control consultation and maritime cooperation, provides empirical grounding for this refinement.

This refinement, middle-power facilitative management, has a specific logical structure that extends rather than revises Bull's framework. Bull (1977) identifies great power management as involving mutual restraint among major powers. The Indonesia–China case adds an actor type: a middle power that lacks the material standing of a great power but possesses diplomatic capital, multilateral legitimacy, and institutional creativity sufficient

to perform a structurally equivalent ordering function. Indonesia did not manage China through superior power. It managed China by creating institutional conditions under which Chinese participation in consultative practices became the expected and reproduced behavior, the precondition for legitimacy in the bilateral relationship. This is socialization through institutional design, not through material coercion or normative persuasion alone.

Policy implications follow cautiously from the analysis. Indonesia's approach suggests that normative engagement constitutes a viable strategy for order maintenance when it is institutionalized, norm-bounded, and paired with diversified partnerships. The key variables are structural: dialogue mechanisms that create expectations of consultation; diversified external partnerships that prevent hierarchical absorption; and persistent legal positions that establish normative boundaries. Friendliness without structure is diplomacy; structure without friendliness is coercion. Indonesia's approach combined both. For ASEAN members and other middle powers, the implication is that institutional creativity can be a source of leverage, provided it is anchored in widely recognized norms such as sovereignty and international law rather than in ad hoc bargaining.

The English School framework does have limits that the evidence also reveals. It does not on its own explain procurement incentives, defense-industrial considerations, or bureaucratic political drivers of timing. For instance, Reuters reporting on Indonesia's exploration of various procurement options illustrates that material modernization choices intersect with diplomacy in ways that an international-society lens may under-specify. Nor does the framework fully adjudicate whether "community with a shared future" language indicates genuine solidarist convergence or strategic signaling, especially given continuing contestation at sea. These limits do not invalidate the argument; they identify complementary explanations that future research should integrate.

CONCLUSION

Indonesia's deepening military cooperation with China between 2018 and 2025, culminating in the January 2025 defense ministerial engagements and the April 2025 inaugural 2+2 joint foreign and defense ministerial dialogue, followed a coherent pattern of institutionalizing consultative practice while preserving Indonesia's autonomy through diversified partnerships and sustained legal boundary-setting. Across the five primary institutions, the record shows: diplomacy enacted through the 2+2 mechanism and its January 2025 programmatic foundations; sovereignty reaffirmed through non-interference language and explicit strategic autonomy clauses; balance maintained through treaty-level cooperation with Australia, exercises with the United States, and maritime security agreements with Japan; great power management executed through the precedent-setting 2+2 and its subsequent diffusion to Malaysia and Vietnam; and international law upheld through UN note-verbale diplomacy and public UNCLOS-centered positions sustained throughout the period of cooperation.

The research question can now be answered directly. Indonesia's military cooperation with China reflected a principled commitment, consistent with *bebas-aktif* doctrine and the Bandung normative heritage, to integrating a rising great power into the normative and institutional fabric of a regional society of states: not through alignment, not through accommodation, but through the construction of consultative habits that raise the cost of unilateral coercive behavior. Indonesia's military cooperation with China reflected an effort to reinforce a regional international society by integrating a rising power into consultative habits and institutional scripts, rather than conceding to hierarchy or choosing alignment. The evidence indicates that Indonesia sought order through inclusion without

collapsing its justice claims grounded in UNCLOS, even when cooperative language created interpretive risks, as in the late-2024 joint development controversy.

The theoretical contribution is twofold. First, it demonstrates the empirical applicability of the English School to Southeast Asian security cooperation by showing how primary institutions can be operationalized through documentary evidence and traced through a concrete process. Second, it refines the concept of great power management by identifying a middle-power facilitative pathway: Indonesia performed an ordering role by building institutional platforms through which China's engagement could be channeled into consultative practice, a pattern visible in China's own characterization of the 2+2 as its first such ministerial mechanism globally.

Two limitations should be acknowledged. The interpretive methodology cannot establish motivational certainty; official rhetoric may blend normative commitment with strategic signaling, and rhetoric can coexist with continued contestation at sea. The single-case design limits generalizability; Indonesia's scale, ASEAN position, and diplomatic repertoire may not travel to settings where middle powers lack comparable institutional standing. These limits do not invalidate the argument; they specify its scope and identify the research extensions that a single-case interpretive study necessarily defers.

Future work should test the mechanism comparatively by examining whether similar consultative architectures produce comparable ordering effects in other ASEAN dyads with China, particularly those facing sharper dispute intensity. Longitudinal research should also evaluate whether the institutionalization of 2+2 dialogues produces measurable changes in maritime behavior over time, using systematic incident datasets triangulated with official communications. Finally, theoretical development of middle-power facilitative management should specify the conditions under which such actors can effectively shape great-power legitimacy scripts without being absorbed into hierarchical bargaining.

The broader stakes of this inquiry extend beyond the Indonesia–China dyad. As U.S.–China strategic competition intensifies and the Asia-Pacific order becomes a contested terrain, the question of whether regional international society can be sustained, and by whom, becomes analytically urgent. Indonesia's practice between 2018 and 2025 suggests that the answer lies not only in great-power restraint or institutional engineering from above, but in the deliberate ordering work performed by states that occupy the middle ground: diplomatically credible, normatively anchored, and institutionally creative enough to construct the consultative scripts through which rising powers enact legitimacy. Whether this ordering work proves durable is an empirical question the next decade will test.

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