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Aligning with Indonesia on Gaza: A Strategic Policy for Australia

Policy Briefing Paper by Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh

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Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh

Shahram Akbarzadeh, Ph.D. is Professor of Middle East and Central Asian politics at Deakin University. He researches regional peace and security and the role of religion in foreign policy making. He has published extensively in his field of study and has developed a network of research collaboration with partners in Indonesia to examine the significance of moderate Islam in Indonesian foreign policy making.

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Comissioning Editor
Mark Duckworth

Contact
adi-admin@deakin.edu.au
+61 3 5227 2793

Deakin University
221 Burwood Highway
Burwood, Victoria 3125

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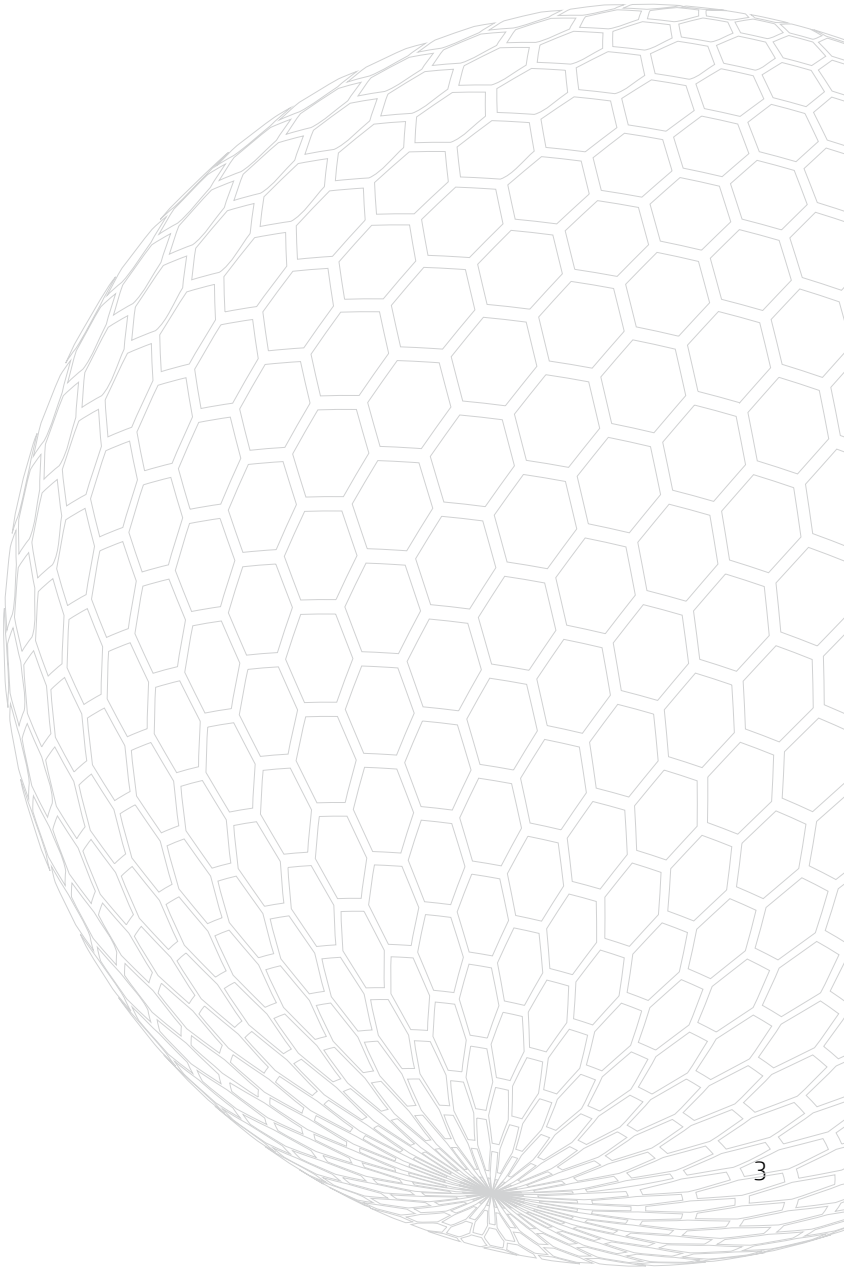
Executive Summary

Australia's foreign policy needs to adapt to shifting geopolitical dynamics, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, as emerging regional norms, security tensions, and great-power competition intensify. In this context, Indonesia's position on Israel's war on Gaza presents a challenge and an opportunity. Indonesia's unequivocal support for the Palestinian cause is deeply embedded in its foreign policy tradition, rooted in anti-colonial values, religious solidarity, and international law. For Australia, navigating this landscape involves aligning with Indonesia on shared humanitarian concerns while also maintaining its longstanding security alliance with the United States.

This paper examines Indonesia's position on Gaza, analyzes why it matters for Australia's regional and global standing, and outlines how Australia can adopt a balanced, principled, and strategic policy response. This paper argues that it is both feasible and desirable for Australia to strengthen alignment with Indonesia on Gaza through a diplomatic, humanitarian, and value-based approach, without undermining our alliance with the United States.



Indonesia's Position on Gaza

Indonesia's position on Gaza is an expression of its identity, religious solidarity, and long-standing commitment to a rules-based international order. It is shaped by Islamic values that carry significant weight in its domestic politics and anti-colonial sentiments. Since the earliest days of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Indonesia has been among the most vocal supporters of the Palestinian cause. Indonesia does not have diplomatic ties with Israel and advocates for Palestinian statehood.[1] This position is motivated by its post-colonial history and a desire not to reward colonial occupiers (which is how Israel is seen). It serves to reinforce Indonesia's domestic legitimacy and regional leadership aspirations. As the largest Muslim-majority democracy in the world, Indonesia's stance resonates widely within the broader Islamic world.

Indonesia's foreign policy operates under the doctrine of bebas dan aktif (independent and active) in its engagement with international affairs. This doctrine was first articulated under president Sukarno (1945–1965) but has been reinterpreted in recent decades as promoting solidarity with oppressed peoples, especially within the post-colonial Global South.[2] Within this framework, Palestine represents a cause that combines anti-colonial symbolism with Islamic solidarity. Indonesia recognized the State of Palestine in 1988 and has regularly emphasized its commitment to Palestinian independence as part of its broader commitment to a humanitarian agenda. In January 2024, for example, then deputy foreign minister Pahala Nugraha Mansury reiterated Indonesia's commitment to Palestinian sovereignty at a summit of the Non-Aligned Movement.[3] This message was delivered again by incumbent President Prabowo Subianto in January 2025, while hosting the Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in Jakarta.[4]

Indonesia has also consistently voted in favor of United Nations (UN) resolutions condemning Israeli military operations in Gaza and supporting ceasefire and accountability measures. In December 2023 and again in July 2025, Indonesia co-sponsored General Assembly resolutions calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, unrestricted humanitarian access, and adherence to international humanitarian law.[5] Indonesia has been involved in delivering humanitarian aid to Gaza,[6] and continues to lobby for Israel's accountability at international fora. Indonesia has supported the International Court of Justice advisory opinion on the illegality of Israeli occupation.[7]

One of the defining aspects of Indonesia's Gaza policy is its vocal rejection of any proposal that would result in the permanent displacement of Palestinians to third countries. In April 2025, president Joko Widodo argued that the international community must prioritize a ceasefire and post-war reconstruction for Gaza.[8] This position was welcomed by civil society organizations, most notably the two powerful Islamic organizations Muhammadiya and Nahdlatul Ulama, which view permanent relocation proposals as violating the Palestinians' right of return and potentially undermining their claim to homeland and sovereignty.[9]

Indonesia's Gaza policy plays an important role in domestic politics. Political elites from across the ideological spectrum, including Islamist parties and secular nationalists, routinely express support for Palestine. Public demonstrations in Jakarta and other cities regularly draw thousands of citizens demanding stronger actions in defense of Palestinian rights. Indonesia's Gaza policy is one of the rare issues where political unity transcends party lines. As Melinda Martinus observes in ISEAS Perspective, Indonesia's foreign policy under President Subianto "will continue to support Palestinian self-determination, driven by widespread public opinion and concerns over the West's partisan stance on the Israel–Gaza conflict".[10] This broad consensus lends Indonesia's foreign policy a high degree of legitimacy when engaging on the issue globally.

"Aligning Australia's policy on Gaza with that of Indonesia will affirm our shared set of humanitarian principles."

Why does this matter for Australia?

Indonesia's position on Gaza matters significantly for Australia as Canberra seeks to recalibrate Australia's foreign policy toward the Indo-Pacific region. Indonesia is Australia's largest and most consequential neighbor. It is a member of G20 and a key player in Southeast Asia. Indonesia is the world's third-largest democracy, and an ASEAN heavyweight. Australia and Indonesia formed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2018,[11] and have since steadily deepened ties in trade, education, intelligence sharing, and defense cooperation.

However, Australia's reputation in the region has often been tested by its inconsistent position on the Israel–Palestine conflict. Until recently, Australia regularly abstained from or voted against UN resolutions perceived as critical of Israel, even when these were broadly supported by ASEAN members.[12] Such divergence risks undermining Australia's credibility in its neighborhood as a responsible international partner that respects international law.[13]

Indonesia's position on Gaza is not merely symbolic, it represents a moral compass for the region. When Indonesia speaks out on Gaza, it resonates not only within its own borders but across Malaysia, Brunei, and large swathes of civil society in Asia-Pacific and the Muslim-majority world. In the wake of the 2023–2025 escalation in Gaza, Indonesia has emerged as a consistent voice advocating for international accountability. Australia's delayed support for ceasefire resolutions at the UN due to its strategic alliance with the United States has not escaped regional observers.[14]

Australia's muted response to humanitarian crises involving Muslim populations is interpreted as double standards in the region, undermining trust.[15] The impression of hypocrisy presents a risk for Australia's engagement with the region, particularly when Australia is seeking to position itself as a reliable Indo-Pacific partner. By demonstrating value-based diplomacy on Gaza that is aligned with Indonesia's humanitarian focus, Australia can reinforce its image as an ethical, consistent and reliable middle power.

This is not merely about optics. Australia and Indonesia have invested in bilateral frameworks that depend on mutual trust and normative alignment. The 2024 Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) and shared regional security initiatives under ASEAN-led platforms such as the East Asia Summit require coherent messaging. When Australia appears out of step with Indonesia on matters of global justice, it jeopardizes these frameworks and creates diplomatic tension.

More broadly, aligning with Indonesia strengthens Australia's hand in multilateral diplomacy. Indonesia is an influential member of the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the G20. Indonesia's diplomatic support has been pivotal in promoting Global South engagement on climate change, trade justice, and regional security. Closer policy coherence on Gaza can facilitate greater Indonesian support for Australia's broader international initiatives, including on maritime security, cyber norms, and regional connectivity.

Such a policy shift would also resonate domestically within Australia. According to polling by Essential Research in 2024, a majority of Australians support an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and increased humanitarian aid.[16] Younger Australians, diaspora communities, and faith-based organizations have expressed concern about Australia's past ambiguity on Palestinian rights. A principled foreign policy stance in line with Indonesia's calls for ceasefire, accountability, and aid would reflect both international and domestic values.

As Ramesh Thakur argued almost a decade ago, middle powers operating within a shifting global order carry the opportunity and responsibility to uphold normative, multilateral frameworks.[17] When they fail to do so consistently and show selective silence on crises, they risk being perceived as hypocritical. In the current crisis, such a perception undermines regional trust in Australia. Indonesia and Australia are expected to be normative leaders for the region. This convergence does not mean abandoning neutrality or compromising on other strategic interests. Rather, it offers Australia a chance to demonstrate principled leadership, to act as a bridge between the Global North and the Global South, and to consolidate its position as an advocate of rules-based international order.

The balancing act with the United States

Australia's enduring alliance with the United States remains the cornerstone of its strategic and defense policy. The ANZUS treaty, close intelligence cooperation through the Five Eyes alliance, and deepening military interoperability under AUKUS reflect this long-term commitment. However, this does not preclude Australia from exercising foreign policy independence in humanitarian crises or in its diplomatic approach to the Israel–Palestine conflict.

Historically, Australia has demonstrated that it can maintain close alliance ties while pursuing distinct policy positions. For instance, Australia supported international legal processes against apartheid South Africa,[18] and actively championed nuclear disarmament treaties,[19] even when these positions diverged from the United States' preferences. A similar logic applies to Gaza. Australia can adopt a value-based diplomatic stance aligned with regional partners such as Indonesia, while preserving core security commitments with Washington.

The key lies in distinguishing between alliance obligations and diplomatic alignment. The United States–Australia alliance is built on shared strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific, not on unconditional political alignment in all global conflicts. Indeed, even within the United States' political system, there is increasing debate over Washington's support for Israel. In 2024 and 2025, multiple members of the United States Congress publicly called for greater accountability in Israeli operations.[20]

The growing international concern over human rights violations by Israel in Gaza, creates a diplomatic space for allies like Australia to take principled positions. Australia's support for the December 2024[21] and June 2025[22] UN General Assembly resolutions calling for a ceasefire and humanitarian access in Gaza were both instances where Canberra aligned with European and Global South states, even as Washington abstained. Such actions illustrate the feasibility of adopting an independent humanitarian policy within the framework of alliance loyalty.

Moreover, policy divergence on Gaza could be framed positively in Washington as an example of Australia's regional leadership. By reinforcing alignment with ASEAN states like Indonesia and Malaysia, Australia supports the United States' broader strategic goals in the Indo-Pacific – namely, reinforcing a stable, rules-based regional order and pushing back against Chinese influence. Rather than viewing value-based diplomacy as a threat to alliance coherence, Washington may come to see it as a useful complement.

Domestically, the Australian public also supports greater foreign policy independence. In 2022, an opinion poll by the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney revealed that, "76 per cent of voters believe that Australia should develop a foreign policy 'independent of the global powers'".[23] Anecdotal evidence suggests this perspective remains valid now. This provides political space for Canberra to align its policies with Indonesia on humanitarian issues without facing domestic backlash or alliance uncertainty.

Policy Recommendations

Australia's foreign policy toward Gaza should be recalibrated to reflect both its regional priorities and its commitment to value-based diplomacy. The following policy recommendations aim to align Australia more closely with Indonesia while preserving its strategic relationship with the United States:

1. **Support a Permanent Ceasefire and UN Accountability Measures.**

Australia should consistently vote in favor of UN resolutions calling for a permanent ceasefire, independent investigations into potential war crimes, and humanitarian access in Gaza. This would signal alignment with Indonesia and the majority of the international community, while remaining consistent with Australia's support for a rules-based international order.

2. **Initiate Joint Humanitarian Efforts with Indonesia.**

Australia can partner with Indonesia on coordinated humanitarian aid to Gaza. This might include funding for United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNREWA), co-branded medical missions, or joint logistics channels through Egypt and Jordan. Such actions would be symbolically powerful and have material impact, reinforcing mutual commitment to civilian protection and reconstruction.

3. **Adopt a Value-Based Communication Strategy**

Australia's diplomatic messaging should frame its position on Gaza as rooted in international humanitarian law, civilian protection, and regional cooperation, rather than as reactive to United States or domestic political pressures. Value-based diplomacy will resonate with Indonesian and broader Southeast Asian audiences, elevate Australia's international standing and preserve Australia's credibility in global forums.

4. **Expand Parliamentary Dialogue and Muslim Diplomacy**

Australia should support inter-parliamentary delegations, scholar exchanges, and cross-religious peacebuilding initiatives with Indonesian Muslim leaders and civil society groups. This will create a people-to-people narrative that reinforces diplomatic alignment beyond high-level diplomacy.

5. **Clarify Alliance Flexibility with the United States**

Through back-channel and formal diplomatic avenues, Australia should clarify to United States counterparts that principled humanitarian stances on Gaza enhance, rather than undermine, regional trust and leadership. Existing alliance frameworks allow for such flexibility without disrupting core strategic ties.

This package of recommendations provides a roadmap for Australia to demonstrate principled leadership, reinforce regional trust, and advance a cohesive and independent Indo-Pacific policy.

"Australia should adopt a value-based diplomatic approach that aligns more clearly with Indonesia's position on Gaza. Such alignment advances Australia's strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific. It builds regional trust, reinforces democratic norms, and strengthens Australia's credibility as a principled middle power."

Conclusion

Australia stands at a pivotal crossroads in its foreign policy. As global conflicts sharpen and regional dynamics shift, the choices made in relation to Gaza will echo far beyond the immediate context. Indonesia's principled and sustained support for Palestine is more than a bilateral concern – it is a litmus test of Australia's regional alignment, values-based leadership, and foreign policy coherence.

Australia should adopt a value-based diplomatic approach that aligns more clearly with Indonesia's position on Gaza. Such alignment is not only morally justified in response to the grave humanitarian crisis in Gaza, but also advances Australia's strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific. It builds regional trust, reinforces democratic norms, and strengthens Australia's credibility as a principled middle power.

Australia's alliance with the United States remains a bedrock of its defense and security posture, but that alliance allows for diplomatic flexibility, particularly in the context of humanitarian law. By supporting ceasefire resolutions, initiating joint aid missions, and reinforcing international legal norms, Australia can demonstrate regional leadership without sacrificing its core security relationship with the United States. In fact, such leadership can complement the United States' broader strategic goals in the region by bolstering the legitimacy of like-minded democracies.

Aligning Australia's policy on Gaza with that of Indonesia will affirm our shared set of humanitarian principles. This will reinforce long-term bilateral relations and gives credibility to Australia as a bridge between the Global North and the Global South.

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