

# Indonesia's Role in International Relations: A Perspective from the Global South

Written by Moch Faisal Karim

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## Indonesia's Role in International Relations: A Perspective from the Global South

<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/10/03/indonesias-role-in-international-relations-a-perspective-from-the-global-south/>

MOCH FAISAL KARIM, OCT 3 2023

With the growing multipolar world that defines our current International order, the role of emerging powers is increasingly important. This multipolarity is not just about the rise of giants like China. A new breed of influential players is emerging on the global stage: the non-Western middle powers. Historically seen as regional influencers, countries like Brazil, India, Indonesia, South Africa, and Turkey are now flexing their muscles in global governance. Their influence spans diverse arenas, from trade and finance to environmental policies and human rights. The G20's evolution as a pivotal forum for global economic discussions underscores this shift, spotlighting the increasing clout of these non-Western middle powers.

But what sets these emerging middle powers apart from their traditional counterparts like Canada, Australia, and Japan? For one, their relationship with the U.S. and the existing world order is more intricate. While countries like Brazil, India, and South Africa might align with U.S. leadership in certain spheres, they've also been vocal critics in others. Their reservations range from security concerns, where they've chastised the U.S. for its unilateral approach in global conflicts, to trade governance, where they perceive the U.S. as an impediment to liberalized trade, especially given its protectionist agricultural policies.

My book examines the dynamics of Indonesia's growing regional and global roles during the transformative tenures of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014) and Joko Widodo (2014-present). Indonesia's ascent as an emerging middle power offers valuable insights into the interplay between domestic transformations and global conduct in International Relations. Since its democratic transition post-1999, Indonesia has experienced both a normative shift towards democracy and an internal restructuring, leading to a fragmented governance system. While remnants of protectionist policies from earlier eras remain, the nation's growth ambitions and external capitalist pressures have steered it towards a neoliberal economic stance.

Indonesia's democratic transition since the late 1990s and its economic growth, averaging 5% annually since 2004, have positioned it as a significant player. As the world's fourth most populous nation and Southeast Asia's largest economy, Indonesia has emerged as a democratic beacon in the Islamic world. Under Yudhoyono, Indonesia hosted pivotal international summits like COP-13 in 2007 and the WTO Ministerial Conference in 2013. Widodo continued this trend, hosting the G20 meeting in 2022. These events enhanced Indonesia's global stature, leading to heightened international expectations for its role in global issues.

However, Indonesia's amplified global role is intriguing. Unlike emerging powers like India and Brazil, domestic pressures in Indonesia lean more towards addressing internal challenges than expanding its global footprint. Historically, Indonesia's foreign policy, institutionalized during Suharto's era, prioritized regional engagements. This raises questions about Indonesia's motivations and the roles it assumes on global platforms.

While Indonesia's material capabilities align with middle power status, its foreign policy circles initially resisted this label, viewing it as diminishing. It was only during Yudhoyono's second term that this perspective shifted, and under Widodo, the middle power designation became mainstream in policy discourse. Given Indonesia's strategic importance, scholars are keen to decipher its foreign policy, with opinions divided on its global leadership potential.

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This book advocates for a nuanced understanding of middle power dynamics, emphasizing the need for a mid-ranged theoretical approach, specifically the role theory. This approach holistically captures the complexities of state actions, considering both internal evolutions and global expectations, presenting a unified analytical framework. Introduced to International Relations in the 1970s, role theory emphasizes national role conceptions—normative frameworks guiding a government's foreign policy. These conceptions, molded by a blend of internal and external factors, grant a holistic view of a state's international stance.

This book delves into the intricacies of role theory, enhancing its scope by integrating concepts of biographical narrative and state transformation. I posit that biographical narratives offer role theorists a lens to comprehend the evolving nature of role conceptions, especially in the context of shifting state identities. Roles, while integral to identity formation, also serve as tools to uphold a state's consistent biographical narrative, resonating with both domestic and international audiences.

This book also underscores the nation's state transformation and its burgeoning global aspirations, offering fresh insights to refine role theory. Unlike the conventional Weberian and Westphalian state models, Indonesia's experience as an emerging middle power from the Global South, undergoing internal transformation, provides a unique theoretical perspective. State transformation, characterized by fragmentation, decentralization, and the internationalization of state agencies, challenges the traditional, cohesive notion of the state.

By weaving in the concept of state transformation, this book amplifies role theory's analytical depth. The democratization evident in post-authoritarian states like Indonesia has birthed a landscape of domestic contestation, with diverse entities vying for influence. This often results in a fragmented state apparatus, where multiple bureaucratic entities, each with distinct agendas, influence foreign policy. Concurrently, the dynamic international landscape exerts constant pressure, compelling emerging middle powers to adapt and balance varying regional and global expectations.

As power transition is at play, understanding the roles of emerging powers becomes imperative. My book on Indonesia's growing role in regional and global order aims to contribute to this understanding, offering fresh insights by incorporating role theory literature and state transformation. It underscores the importance of listening to voices from the Global South, ensuring that the study of IR is truly global in its approach.

The book's primary objective transcends merely understanding Indonesia's foreign policy. It seeks to challenge mainstream IR frameworks. One of the significant contributions of the book is its challenge to the traditional role theory literature that often treats the state as a monolithic entity. By incorporating the notion of biographical narrative from the ontological security literature and state transformation, the book argues that roles are not just instrumental, but constitutive of identity formation. They are crafted to reflect a state's biographical narrative, resonating with both international and domestic audiences.

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## About the author:

**Moch Faisal Karim** is a Lecturer in International Relations at Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia and also teaches at Bina Nusantara University. His research focuses on the nexus of political economy and International Relations, particularly the influence of state institutions and state-society dynamics on transnational challenges in Southeast Asia. His work has been featured in *Foreign Policy Analysis*, *International Relations*, *Pacific Review*, *Contemporary Politics*, and *Territory, Politics, and Governance*, among others.