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Strategic Equidistance: Indonesia's Foreign Policy Legacy and Post-Hegemonic Agency in the Russia–Ukraine War

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the concept of "Strategic Equidistance" to provide a novel and systematic analysis of Indonesia's foreign policy response to the Russia–Ukraine war. Moving beyond simplistic notions of neutrality or indecision, the study argues that Indonesia's stance is a deliberate and active diplomatic strategy, deeply rooted in its anti-imperialist legacy and non-aligned principles. This research fills a significant gap in the literature by offering a robust conceptual framework to explain how a middle power in the Global South navigates geopolitical polarization while preserving its autonomy and promoting its national interests. Drawing on historical context, including Indonesia's long-standing ties with both Russia and Ukraine, and its actions during the 2022 G20 presidency, the study identifies five key features of Strategic Equidistance: balanced detachment, diplomatic dexterity, non-entanglement, proactive multiplicative engagement, and normative hedging. The findings demonstrate that Indonesia's approach is a conscious positioning within an evolving multipolar world, where countries are no longer passive observers but active agents of change. The article's contribution lies in its deconstruction of the "Global South" as a homogeneous entity and its rich case study of Indonesia, offering a model for how nations can assert agency in a post-hegemonic international order. This research is important for policymakers, academics, and observers of international relations who seek to understand middle-power dynamics and the development of a global multipolar system.

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Introduction

The open outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in February 2022 marked a crucial turning point for the global order and a significant test for countries in the Global South. While the Western world—including the United States, Europe, and NATO—responded quickly and unanimously in condemning Russia's aggression, imposing sanctions, and militarizing support for Ukraine, the Global South adopted a more hesitant and inconsistent stance. This divergence was evident in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions of March 2 and October 12, 2022, where many Global South countries abstained from voting on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. States such as India, South Africa, and the majority of ASEAN members pursued a cautious approach, reflecting a broader tendency toward neutrality and non-interventionism (Stoner, 2024; Riabchuk, 2024; Lossovskiy & Krupenia, 2023). Furthermore, most Global South states refused to comply with Western sanctions against Russia, maintaining normal trade and diplomatic relations instead, as in the cases of India, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia (Basundoro et al., 2023; Heibach, 2024).

These positions are not accidental. Scholars suggest that the ambivalence of Global South countries reflects long-standing dissatisfaction with a Western-imposed international order historically associated with colonialism and military intervention. Many states in the Global South remain distrustful of Western normative projects (Riabchuk, 2024). Consequently, the Russia-Ukraine conflict is not perceived as a moral struggle between good and evil, as depicted in Western narratives, but as a clash between Global North powers with competing hegemonic interests. This perspective resonates with critiques of transnational standards that alienate Global South states by disregarding their domestic conditions (Larasati, 2023). Economic and geopolitical interests further reinforce such positions: India and Brazil continue strategic and military trade with Russia despite their professed commitment to sovereignty (Basundoro et al., 2023; Krause, 2024), while Saudi Arabia strengthens energy cooperation through OPEC+ (Heibach, 2024).

Within this broader context, Indonesia presents a unique case. On June 29, 2022, President Joko Widodo visited Ukraine to meet President Zelensky, followed by a visit to Moscow on June 30 to meet President Putin. Widodo was the first Asian leader and the only ASEAN head of state to visit both sides directly, framing the mission as a peace initiative. Indonesian scholars argue that the visits served multiple purposes, including advancing economic interests and projecting Indonesia as an effective host for the November 2023 G20 Summit (Tiara & Mas'udi, 2023). Anchored in the principles of a "free and active" foreign policy and non-aligned diplomacy, Indonesia has consistently called for dialogue and ceasefire in international forums (Saputri, 2024; Udayana, 2025). By emphasizing non-intervention, neutrality, and constructive diplomacy, Indonesia portrays itself as a peaceful actor committed to South-South solidarity and economic pragmatism, as reflected in its transactional diplomatic strategies (Khoirunnisa & Jubaidi, 2024; Ismail et al., 2023; Sebastian & Priamarizki, 2024).

Despite these observations, existing research has yet to provide a systematic conceptualization of Indonesia's seemingly ambiguous yet consistent foreign policy. This study addresses that gap by introducing the concept of 'Strategic Equidistance' to analyze Indonesia's diplomatic behavior as a deliberate positioning within a multipolar world and an increasingly assertive Global South. Although much of the literature on Global South responses to the Russia-Ukraine war focuses on large states like India, Brazil, or South Africa, it often treats the Global South as a homogeneous entity. In reality, the Global South encompasses diverse foreign policy orientations shaped by distinct historical experiences and geopolitical imperatives. Indonesia, as a strategic middle power in Southeast Asia, offers a valuable but understudied case for understanding this diversity. While several studies have noted Indonesia's neutrality, they stop short of explaining how its strategic posture is conceptualized and

sustained. Indonesia's strategy neither aligns explicitly with the West nor with Russia, but rather seeks to preserve autonomy and enhance geopolitical relevance.

This study therefore poses the research question: "How does Indonesia maintain strategic equidistance in its foreign policy amid the Russia–Ukraine war?" Addressing this question allows us to view Indonesia's policy not as an isolated crisis response but as part of a broader adaptation to a multipolar world in which middle powers are simultaneously freer to maneuver and more vulnerable to external pressures. The study also situates Indonesia within collective trends characteristic of the Global South while acknowledging its distinctive trajectory. By analyzing Indonesia, this research contributes to debates on Global South diplomacy and middle-power strategies in a post-hegemonic world order.

The central research gap lies in the absence of an adequate conceptual framework to explain Indonesia's foreign policy amid the Russia–Ukraine war. While neutrality has been observed, it has not been systematically theorized. To fill this gap, the study advances the concept of **Strategic Equidistance**, defined not merely as passive neutrality but as an active and deliberate strategy of diplomatic balancing. This approach enables Indonesia to maintain autonomy, navigate multipolarity, and assert its role as a principled middle power within the reassertive Global South. By framing Indonesia's foreign policy through Strategic Equidistance, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts to reveal the consistent rationale underpinning Jakarta's choices. The study also challenges the notion of the Global South as a monolithic actor. Instead, it highlights Indonesia as a distinct case that demonstrates how middle powers interpret and operationalize neutrality. This enriches the literature on both middle-power diplomacy and Global South strategies.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative, descriptive analytical approach. Data sources include official government declarations, multilateral statements, academic scholarship, and media reports, which together provide a comprehensive perspective on both elite policy-making and societal discourse. This triangulation allows the study to capture the interplay of internal and external factors shaping Indonesia's diplomatic posture. Such an approach is particularly well suited to analyzing Indonesia's foreign policy, which cannot be adequately explained by traditional rational choice or realist frameworks.

To operationalize Strategic Equidistance, the paper examines five key dimensions of Indonesia's diplomatic behavior: balanced detachment, diplomatic dexterity, non-entanglement, proactive multiplicative engagement, and normative hedging. These dimensions provide a structured lens to analyze how Indonesia positions itself between competing powers while reinforcing its autonomy and normative commitments. Ultimately, this paper argues that Indonesia's foreign policy during the Russia–Ukraine war exemplifies Strategic Equidistance: a deliberate, active, and multidimensional strategy that balances geopolitical pressures, economic interests, and normative commitments. Far from being an ambiguous stance, Indonesia's approach reflects a consistent and principled logic rooted in its history, identity, and aspirations as a middle power within the Global South.

Conceptual Framework

This study develops a conceptual framework to explain Indonesia's foreign policy response to the Russia-Ukraine war, centering on the concept of "Strategic Equidistance." This framework integrates multidisciplinary theories from international relations, including strategic diplomacy, and domestic framing, to position strategic equidistance not merely as a passive neutrality but as an active, rational foreign policy used by middle powers in a re-emerging multipolar world. At an operational level, strategic equidistance involves projecting a neutral or balanced position through parallelization, mitigating conflict, and delivering measured messages—a pattern of

behavior that shares similarities with hedging strategies but can also function as a balancing or bandwagoning mechanism depending on diplomatic or material pressures (Teo & Koga, 2022).

In this evolving multipolar context, the adoption of strategic equidistance has gained traction among middle powers seeking to preserve autonomy and maneuverability amid intensifying geopolitical rivalries. Rather than adhering to fixed alliances or passive neutrality, states such as Indonesia employ calibrated strategies that allow for selective engagement, issue-based alignment, and principled detachment from major power blocs (Garzón, 2017; Braveboy-Wagner, 2024). This reflects a broader trend among Global South actors who, in response to structural fragmentation in global governance, have turned to multialignment and regionalism as tools for maximizing agency (Teo & Koga, 2022). Strategic equidistance thus represents an active form of diplomacy that incorporates elements of hedging, soft balancing, and normative positioning, depending on the context and policy domain. For example, Malaysia's hedging in the South China Sea exemplifies how states may assert resource rights and avoid militarization while navigating U.S.–China tensions (Alatas, 2016). Similarly, the rise of alternative institutions such as the New Development Bank, initiated by the BRICS bloc, illustrates how equidistant strategies manifest through institutional diversification and contestation of the Western-dominated financial order (Mahrouh, 2023). As such, strategic equidistance functions as a dynamic and multidimensional approach to international engagement—shaped by geopolitical, geoeconomic, and ideational factors. This study identifies five key features of this strategy that are particularly salient in understanding Indonesia's foreign policy posture:

1. **Balanced Engagement:** Nations employing this strategy deliberately maintain balanced relationships with multiple great powers to avoid over-reliance on a single state. This approach, as seen in India's long-standing foreign policy tradition, enables a nation to maintain strategic partnerships without becoming dependent on one power (Shur, 2021).
2. **Responsiveness and Agility:** The strategy requires a highly flexible and agile foreign policy capable of adapting to rapidly changing geopolitical dynamics. The example of smaller states like Finland demonstrates how strategic flexibility can be used to respond effectively to different geopolitical situations (Aaltola, 2011).
3. **Avoiding Entanglement:** States intentionally avoid involvement in conflicts or formal alliances that would restrict their foreign policy choices. The refusal of countries like Russia and China to form a formal military-political alliance, despite close ties, is a prime example of states seeking to retain their strategic independence and avoid being dragged into another's conflicts (Kireeva, 2019).
4. **Multilateral Engagement:** Strategic equidistance involves a proactive role in multilateral institutions, both regionally and globally, to enhance a state's leverage and security. India's multi-alignment strategy, which includes active participation in various regional and international forums, is an example of this feature (Hall, 2016).
5. **Normative Hedging:** This feature refers to a state's conscious effort to project its values and norms in a way that resonates with a broad range of international actors, allowing it to exert influence without affiliating with any single power bloc (Hall, 2016).

This multidisciplinary framework provides a robust theoretical foundation for analyzing strategic equidistance as a diplomatic approach and an indicator of fundamental shifts in the international political and economic landscape.

Dynamics of Indonesia-Russia and Indonesia-Ukraine Relations

To fully understand Indonesia's stance on the Russia-Ukraine war, it is crucial to first examine the historical context of its relations with both Russia and Ukraine, as these long-standing dynamics significantly inform its current policy of Strategic Equidistance. Indonesia's relationship with Russia, particularly through its predecessor the Soviet Union, has a long and

often profound history. Formal diplomatic relations were established in 1950, five years after Indonesia declared independence in 1945. This period was marked by the Soviet Union's crucial political support for Indonesia's sovereignty against attempts by the Netherlands to re-establish colonial control, a gesture that laid the groundwork for a deeply rooted partnership (Zakariya et al., 2018; Maletin & Khokhlova, 2022).

Under President Sukarno, Indonesia's first president, this relationship blossomed, evolving into a key alliance for military and infrastructure development. The two countries signed multiple intergovernmental agreements in the 1950s and 1960s, with the Soviet Union extending significant loans of hundreds of millions of dollars at a low interest rate of 2.5 percent. These funds were instrumental in constructing major infrastructure projects, including metallurgical and hydroelectric plants, highways, and the iconic 100,000-seat stadium in Jakarta (Maletin & Khokhlova, 2022). Furthermore, the Soviet Union provided invaluable military support and training, which culminated in its backing of Indonesia's struggle to reclaim West Irian from the Dutch. The Soviet Union supplied arms and even dispatched submarines to the region, providing a level of support that Western nations had refused to offer (Maletin & Khokhlova, 2022). This historical precedent of seeking support from an alternative great power when the West was not forthcoming is a critical element of Indonesia's anti-imperialist legacy and provides a powerful historical rationale for its current non-aligned posture. However, with the collapse of the Sukarno regime starting in 1965 and the rise of the anti-communist Suharto (officially made president in 1968 and removed from power in 1998) in the New Order era, Indonesia's foreign policy shifted dramatically toward the West. Bilateral ties with the Soviet Union were downgraded, and while relations continued, they were significantly less prominent. This shift highlights a recurring theme in Indonesian foreign policy: the ability to pivot between major power blocs to suit its domestic and geopolitical needs without ever committing to a formal alliance. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, diplomatic and economic relations with the Russian Federation began to be re-established, focusing on education, culture, trade, and defense cooperation, but without the ideological fervor of the Sukarno era.

In contrast, Indonesia's diplomatic relationship with Ukraine is more recent. Formal ties were established in 1992, and the relationship was built on a foundation of mutual respect and adherence to non-aligned principles. Both countries engaged in cooperation in economic, trade, and educational sectors, with Ukraine serving as a supplier of key commodities and defense technologies to Indonesia (Junaedi, 2022). Prior to the 2022 invasion, relations were friendly but moderate, characterized by mutual support in international forums such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, therefore, placed Indonesia in a uniquely complex position, one that directly tested its historical commitment to an independent foreign policy and necessitated the implementation of Strategic Equidistance. On one hand, Indonesia's democratic principles and its long-standing support for sovereignty and territorial integrity compelled it to vote in favor of UN Resolution A/ES-11/L.1 condemning Russia's aggression (Wirengjurit, 2022).

On the other hand, its historical ties to Russia, its non-aligned identity, and its desire to avoid great power entanglements prevented it from joining Western-led sanctions. This dual approach was further necessitated by the profound economic impacts of the war on Indonesia and the broader Southeast Asian region. As A. Junaedi (2022) highlights, the war had direct negative effects on Indonesia's economy, including a decrease in the rupiah exchange rate, a decline in the capital market, and a significant increase in imported wheat commodity prices. Similarly, Yuniarto et al. (2023) detail the regional economic repercussions, such as global supply chain disruptions and rising energy and food prices. While bilateral trade between ASEAN and Russia is only 0.66% of the region's total trade turnover, the broader global economic instability

created by the war directly threatened Indonesia's national interests, particularly its food and energy security. This economic reality provided a strong pragmatic motivation for Indonesia to act as a stabilizing force and seek a swift, diplomatic resolution to the conflict. The application of Strategic Equidistance in this context was therefore a deliberate and active strategy, as theorized in this article. It was not a passive neutrality but a form of "security diplomacy" aimed at protecting Indonesia's economic interests and asserting its agency in global affairs (Riyanto et al. 2024).

Public opinion has also played a consequential role in shaping Indonesia's official stance on the Russia–Ukraine conflict. Widespread skepticism toward Western intentions, rooted in Indonesia's historical experience of unequal relations with the United States and other Western powers, has contributed to a relatively sympathetic view of Russia among segments of the Indonesian public (Pamungkas, 2024; Subagyo et al., 2024). This sentiment aligns with broader anti-imperialist and anti-hegemonic narratives prevalent in Indonesian political discourse, which portray Western interventions as selective and driven by double standards. As a result, the Indonesian government's reluctance to impose sanctions on Russia and its emphasis on neutrality can also be read as a response to domestic political sensitivities and the need to maintain internal legitimacy. The resonance of these public attitudes was made especially visible in March 2022, when the Ukrainian Ambassador to Indonesia, Vasyl Hamianin, published a highly publicized open letter to President Joko Widodo (McBeth, 2022; Choirul, 2022). In it, he referred to Vladimir Putin as a "dictator" and "murderer," calling on Indonesia to show moral leadership by condemning Russia's actions. He appealed to religious solidarity, invoking the suffering of Ukrainian Muslims under Russian attacks and the participation of Muslim Ukrainian fighters in the defense of Ukraine. Despite the emotional appeal, the Indonesian government maintained its strategic restraint—an outcome that underscores how public discourse, while influential, does not override the deeper institutional logic of Indonesia's foreign policy. Instead, it reinforces the cautious and calibrated nature of Indonesia's Strategic Equidistance, which seeks to navigate global crises through a lens of pragmatism, historical experience, and multilateral engagement rather than alignment with dominant geopolitical narratives.

One of the most prominent responses came from Dina Sulaeman, a well-known public intellectual, and social media commentator. Writing on her Facebook page, Sulaeman (2022) strongly criticized the Ukrainian Ambassador's tone and content, accusing him of overstepping diplomatic norms: "Sir, your statement is DICTATING our president. This is not polite behavior for an ambassador. Our Ministry of Foreign Affairs already has many competent experts to analyze the situation." She further condemned Ukraine's own foreign policy record, recalling its involvement in the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003: "Sir, in 2003, your country JOINED the US to ATTACK Muslims in Iraq! During the five-year war, Ukraine sent 5,000 combat troops (the third-largest contingent in the US coalition). When the accusations against Iraq (of possessing weapons of mass destruction) were proven false, did your country apologize for the blood of Muslims shed in Iraq?" (Sulaeman, 2022). Sulaeman's post quickly went viral, receiving over 3,800 likes, more than 1,000 shares, and close to 900 comments within days. The controversy was picked up by many Indonesian media outlets, with headlines such as *Surat Terbuka Dubes Ukraina Dianggap Mendikte Presiden Jokowi, Analis Ini Murka [Ukrainian ambassador's open letter deemed to dictate President Jokowi, this analyst is furious]* (RCTI Plus, 2022) and *"Surat Terbuka Dubes Ukraina ke Presiden Jokowi Kutip Alquran hingga Singgung Rasa Malu, Pengamat: Ini Tidak Sopan [Open letter from the Ukrainian Ambassador to President Jokowi quotes the Qur'an and mentions shame, analyst: This is impolite]"* (Mirsan, 2022). Short video clips quoting both Hamianin's letter and Sulaeman's response circulated widely on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, further amplifying the public debate. Notably,

the majority of social media comments sided with Sulaeman, defending President Jokowi and criticizing what they perceived as the Ambassador's disrespectful tone and political hypocrisy.

This episode reveals the ways in which public opinion, shaped by media narratives and social media influencers, can play a significant role in reinforcing Indonesia's policy of Strategic Equidistance. Rather than pushing the government toward alignment, such controversies often serve to validate Jakarta's non-aligned posture, particularly when foreign actors are seen as undermining Indonesia's sovereignty or lecturing its leadership. The mobilization of historical memory—such as referencing Ukraine's role in Iraq—also highlights how Indonesian public discourse can weaponize global events to resist external pressure and maintain a principled stance rooted in national dignity, anti-imperialism, and pragmatic diplomacy (Pamungkas, 2024; Subagyo et al., 2024).

Strategic Equidistance, therefore, became the most viable and domestically coherent policy option, allowing the government to uphold international law while also respecting the sentiments of its populace. The historical and contemporary dynamics of Indonesia's relations with Russia and Ukraine are indeed foundational to understanding the article's central thesis. The historical legacy of non-alignment and anti-imperialism provides the ideological justification for Strategic Equidistance. The contemporary economic pressures and domestic political discourses provide the pragmatic justifications for its implementation. Indonesia's foreign policy is not a simple reaction to a crisis but a complex, multi-layered strategy that draws on its unique history and identity to navigate the challenges of an increasingly polarized, multipolar world, thereby filling a crucial gap in the literature on middle-power foreign policy.

Indonesia's Stance on Russia's Special Military Operations in February 2022

The February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine drastically altered the global geopolitical landscape, forcing nations worldwide to take a position. Indonesia's response was a careful and cautious diplomatic act, reflecting its "free and active" foreign policy principle of not taking sides politically but siding with international law and humanitarianism. While Indonesia voted in favor of UN Resolution A/ES-11/L.1 condemning Russia's aggression, it simultaneously maintained diplomatic and economic relations with Moscow. This dual approach was a direct manifestation of the Strategic Equidistance concept. Indonesia's cautious stance was also driven by domestic and economic considerations. Economically, the war had significant negative impacts on Indonesia, as highlighted by Junaedi (2022). These included a decrease in the rupiah's exchange rate, a decline in the capital market, and an increase in imported wheat prices due to disruptions in global supply chains. The broader economic repercussions for Southeast Asia, such as rising energy and food prices (Yuniarto et al., 2023), further motivated Indonesia to seek stability and a swift resolution to the conflict.

Indonesia actively resisted Western pressure to sever ties with Russia, refusing to turn the G20 into a platform for geopolitical conflict. This resistance was most evident in President Joko Widodo's visit to Kiev and Moscow in June 2022. There, he undertook a historic peace mission and became the first Asian leader to visit both Kiev and Moscow. This visit was a strategic move to soften President Putin's stance, moderate tensions between the United States and Russia, and, crucially, ensure a conducive environment for the G20 Summit in Bali. This activism was a practical application of Indonesia's "free and active" principle, aimed at bridging the conflict and preventing the G20 from becoming a political failure. Additionally, Indonesia's stance remained consistent through 2023 and 2024 (Riyanto et al., 2024).

The government also rejected the imposition of unilateral sanctions outside the UN mandate, arguing they were inconsistent with international law. In various international venues, Indonesia consistently affirmed its support for territorial integrity, sovereignty, and a non-military, diplomatic resolution (Yahya, 2023). This strategic position indicates that Indonesia's

foreign policy is designed not only to avoid taking sides but also to advance a middle-ground approach that protects national interests, ensures economic stability, and maintains food and energy security in an increasingly polarized world. By providing humanitarian aid and expressing solidarity with Ukraine while simultaneously engaging with Russia, Indonesia demonstrated its commitment to both its non-aligned principles and its role as a responsible global actor.

Indonesia's Strategic Equidistance in The Russia–Ukraine War and Its Anti-Imperialist Foreign Policy Legacy

Indonesia's foreign policy response to the Russia–Ukraine war is a contemporary manifestation of its long-standing anti-imperialist and non-aligned legacy. This response is best understood through the lens of "Strategic Equidistance," an approach that deliberately avoids exclusive alignment with any major power bloc, while actively engaging with all parties to protect national interests and promote international stability. This strategy is not a reflection of indecision but is deeply rooted in Indonesia's foundational principles articulated at the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung, where President Sukarno declared, "Colonialism is not yet dead. It has merely adopted modern forms... it can be economic control, intellectual domination, or political subjugation" (Abdulgani, 2011). This ideological resistance to hegemonic influence and its emphasis on sovereign foreign policy are the historical antecedents of Indonesia's current position. A prime example of this strategic equidistance in action was Indonesia's conduct during its G20 presidency in 2022. The visit by President Joko Widodo to Kiev and Moscow in June 2022 becomes an important breakthrough in Indonesian diplomacy. His visit will not be simply representative but an operational action to address the world food crisis and anticipate the G20 Summit success in Bali. President Widodo extended invitations to both President Volodymyr Zelensky and President Vladimir Putin to attend the summit, steadfastly refusing to retract Russia's invitation despite calls for a boycott from some Western leaders. The government argued that the G20 was an economic forum, and its purpose was to address pressing global issues, not to be a venue for deepening political divides.

Indonesia's diplomatic agility in a rapidly changing geopolitical context was a key feature of this strategy. Aaltola (2011) emphasizes that flexibility and adaptability are central to strategic equidistance. Indonesia's peace mission, where President Jokowi advocated for the resumption of grain and fertilizer exports to mitigate the food crisis, perfectly epitomizes this agility. This approach resonated with the Ten Principles of Bandung, particularly "respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity" and "non-intervention in internal affairs," while simultaneously addressing the immediate geoeconomic challenges posed by the conflict. The economic motivations behind Indonesia's stance are further highlighted by sources like Junaedi (2022) and Yuniarto et al. (2023), who detail the negative impacts of the war on Indonesia's economy, including a decrease in the rupiah's exchange rate, a decline in the capital market, and rising imported wheat prices. The broader global economic repercussions, such as disruptions to supply chains and increased food and energy costs for Southeast Asia, reinforced Indonesia's need to act as a stabilizing force to protect its national interests.

By actively engaging with both parties, Indonesia exemplifies a preference for diplomacy over alignment with any power bloc, which is a key principle of strategic equidistance (Shur, 2021). Its decision to refrain from imposing unilateral sanctions on Russia—on the grounds that such measures lack legitimacy without a UN mandate—reflects a conscious effort to avoid becoming entangled in Western-led geopolitical pressure. This stance parallels the approach of major powers like Russia and China, which, despite their close cooperation, deliberately avoid formal military alliances to maintain their strategic autonomy (Kireeva, 2019). Similarly, Indonesia avoids binding defense agreements, opting instead to sustain high-level dialogue with all parties, thereby preserving its freedom of action.

Indonesia's use of its G20 presidency to foster dialogue rather than deepen geopolitical divides highlights its commitment to active multilateralism. As Hall (2016) notes in the context of India's multi-alignment, leveraging multilateral forums is key to projecting influence and legitimacy. In his opening address at the Bali Summit, President Widodo's call for an end to confrontational rhetoric and the avoidance of geopolitical polarization was instrumental in preserving the summit's stability. Despite efforts by some Western nations to isolate Russia, the final declaration was adopted with Russia's inclusion, a diplomatic success acknowledged even by some Western leaders. This achievement showcases Indonesia's skill in crafting a balanced communique that condemned the war while also acknowledging divergent views, a hallmark of its effective multilateral diplomacy. This position is also a form of normative hedging, where Indonesia aligns its rhetoric with liberal internationalist norms like sovereignty and anti-aggression while simultaneously resisting Western geopolitical dictates. This approach is a continuation of its ideological foundations, as President Sukarno's closing call at the Bandung Conference for a "new world—a world of peace and mutual respect, of dignity and justice for all nations" remains a guiding principle (Abdulgani, 2011). This legacy persists in Indonesia's refusal to take sides in major power conflicts and its emphasis on an independent and "free and active" foreign policy, which is codified in its own laws (Law No. 37/1999 on Foreign Relations).

The Russia–Ukraine conflict has been symbolically framed as a geopolitical dichotomy between the West and the East. Within this symbolic geography, Indonesia deliberately avoids falling into a binary framework that could compromise its strategic autonomy. By maintaining active engagement with both parties, Indonesia acts as a balancing force, avoiding ideological and geostrategic partisanship. This position is not merely pragmatic but rooted in Indonesia's historical legacy of anti-imperialism and its non-alignment principles, demonstrating how its strategic equidistance is both a geographic and symbolic assertion of its agency in an increasingly polarized global landscape.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Indonesia's foreign policy response to the Russia–Ukraine war is not indecision or passive neutrality but a coherent and active strategic posture best conceptualized as "Strategic Equidistance." Defined here as a deliberate and active diplomatic strategy, Strategic Equidistance fills a critical gap in the literature on middle-power foreign policy and the Global South. By moving beyond descriptive accounts, this framework explains the consistent logic behind Indonesia's foreign policy behavior and offers a systematic understanding of how Jakarta formulated and maintained its stance amid a major geopolitical crisis.

The central contribution of this study lies in departing from the tendency to treat the "Global South" as monolithic. While scholarship has focused heavily on India and Brazil, Indonesia emerges here as a distinct and illuminating case. Through the lens of Strategic Equidistance, Indonesia demonstrates how a state can balance liberal internationalist commitments with deep-seated skepticism of Western hegemony. This enables Jakarta to pursue national interests without being drawn into great-power rivalries, reinforcing its role as a principled middle power in an evolving Global South. The argument that Indonesia's position is conscious positioning within a multipolar world is substantiated by five features of Strategic Equidistance: balanced detachment, diplomatic dexterity, non-entanglement, proactive multiplicative engagement, and normative hedging.

First, balanced detachment is visible in Indonesia's dual approach of condemning Russia's aggression at the UN while maintaining diplomatic and economic ties. Rooted in the anti-imperialist principles of the 1955 Bandung Conference, Indonesia has long pivoted between

power blocs to suit domestic and geopolitical needs without joining formal alliances. Historical precedents—such as turning to Soviet support when Western nations withheld assistance—reinforce its current non-aligned posture and resistance to Western pressure.

Second, Indonesia's diplomatic dexterity was showcased during its 2022 G20 presidency. By moderating tensions between the United States and Russia, Jakarta created conditions for a productive summit in Bali. The adoption of a final declaration with Russia's inclusion, despite boycott calls, highlights Indonesia's skill in balanced multilateral diplomacy.

Third, non-entanglement remains a cornerstone of this strategy. Jakarta's refusal to impose unilateral sanctions on Russia, citing the absence of a UN mandate, reflects its determination to avoid Western-led coercion. Like Russia and China—who avoid binding alliances despite cooperation—Indonesia sustains dialogue with all parties while preserving freedom of action and rejecting defense commitments that would curtail its autonomy.

Fourth, proactive multiplicative engagement strengthens Indonesia's leverage and security. Its G20 presidency emphasized dialogue over division, projecting Jakarta as a responsible stabilizing actor. This strategy also addressed domestic concerns, as the war negatively impacted Indonesia's economy through rupiah depreciation and higher wheat import costs.

Finally, normative hedging enables Indonesia to project values of sovereignty, peace, and multilateralism while avoiding alignment with any single power bloc. Its stance is not merely pragmatic but rooted in enduring principles, echoing President Sukarno's Bandung call for a "new world—a world of peace and mutual respect, of dignity and justice for all nations."

In conclusion, this study makes a unique scholarly contribution by introducing Strategic Equidistance as a framework for understanding Indonesia's foreign policy during the Russia–Ukraine war. It demonstrates how a middle power can navigate a polarized, multipolar order while safeguarding autonomy and promoting national interests. Beyond Indonesia, the framework is relevant to the study of middle-power dynamics and the Global South, offering insight into how states outside the great powers assert agency as active and principled actors of change. Future research could examine how Strategic Equidistance applies to other middle powers, particularly regarding the influence of domestic opinion on their responses to geopolitical crises. Ultimately, this study affirms that even in a world increasingly structured by geopolitical binaries, nations like Indonesia can remain principled, proactive, and peacefully independent.

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