Indonesia’s New President Can Deepen Cooperation with Europe and the United States
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SYRACUSE, NY—Amid continuing violence in Syria, chaos in Iraq, and a precarious ceasefire in Gaza, it is easy to overlook the good news emerging from the Muslim world. Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim-majority country and third-largest democracy, has a new leader. On July 22, Joko Widodo — popularly known as Jokowi — was declared the winner of the presidential election with almost 70 million votes, some 8 million more than his rival Prabowo Subianto. His victory in a free, fair, and peaceful election represents the continuing resilience of Indonesia’s democratic system following the end of authoritarian rule in 1998. A furniture businessman turned small-town mayor before he became governor of Jakarta, Jokowi is also the first directly elected president without any significant ties to the previous authoritarian establishment. Other than in the unlikely event of the Constitutional Court overturning the election — Prabowo has legally challenged the results <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-28437341> — we can expect the president-elect to be sworn in by October 20.

Jokowi’s election victory presents several opportunities for Indonesia to deepen its cooperation with Europe and the United States, particularly on maritime security, democracy promotion, and global governance. Despite his lack of foreign policy experience, Jokowi has surrounded himself with some of Indonesia’s best foreign policy thinkers. With their help, during the campaign he offered a new foreign policy doctrine: the global maritime axis. This doctrine does not represent a departure from Indonesia’s basic philosophy of an independent and active foreign policy, one that disavows formal alignments while actively engaging and shaping world affairs. Instead, it revives Indonesia’s archipelagic state identity. Domestically, Jokowi will seek to boost Indonesia’s maritime resource development and infrastructure, through, among other things, the development of an inter-island marine highway. Internationally, he envisions the further development of the country’s naval and maritime security capabilities, placing maritime and border issues — such as securing Indonesia’s maritime resources and sea lines of communication — at the heart of the country’s diplomacy. To accomplish these goals, Jokowi’s campaign documents proposed raising the defense budget to 1.5 percent of gross domestic product in five years, boosting the country’s domestic defense industrial base, and reorganizing its maritime security governance. Diplomatically, it means continuing Indonesia’s active leadership in managing regional flashpoints, such as those in the South China Sea, and prioritizing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Jakarta’s regional strategy.

Jokowi also proposes eventually enlarging the country’s regional center of gravity to the Indo-Pacific theatre <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/07/21/indonesia-defence-foreign-policy-implications-jokowi.aspx>. Maritime security thus offers an important area for potential cooperation between Indonesia, Europe, and the United States. Jakarta’s ability to manage regional tensions over maritime disputes in the South China Sea while dampening Beijing’s growing assertiveness is in the interest of both Brussels and Washington. Jokowi’s foreign policy plans offer other areas of common strategic ground with Europe and the United States. Normatively, Indonesia already shares a common commitment with the United States and Europe to promoting democratic values — as shown in Jakarta’s leadership of the Bali Democracy Forum <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/article/do-new-democracies-support-democracy-indonesia-finds-new-voice> and its promotion of ASEAN’s engagement...
with Myanmar and that country’s subsequent democratization process. Strategically, Europe’s relations with Southeast Asia — and Indonesia in particular — have not been on equal footing with that of the United States. While Washington has been Jakarta’s strategic partner since the 1950s, Brussels is only just starting to become a consideration among Indonesia’s foreign policy elite. Jokowi’s emphasis on ASEAN’s centrality in regional integration, maritime security, and marine resource development could further strengthen a nascent partnership with the European Union and deepen an old one with the United States. Washington can continue supporting the notion of ASEAN’s centrality, as it has done since former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described the grouping as a fulcrum for the region’s emerging architecture. Meanwhile, the EU can offer important lessons in regional economic and political integration policies to ASEAN.

Globally, Indonesia, Europe, and the United States can strengthen existing partnerships in multilateral institutions — such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization, and the G20 — to tackle key issues such as climate change, trade, and peacekeeping. Under Jokowi, Indonesia will continue to be an active player in regional and global affairs. While Jakarta sets its sights upon new sets of priorities, the sound premise of Jokowi’s global maritime axis doctrine will continue to offer plenty of common strategic ground with Europe and the United States.

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