**Special Issue**

**Assessing Indonesia’s Normative Influence: Wishful Thinking or Hidden Strength**

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**Abstract**

This article takes a critical stance on Indonesia’s normative influence. Whilst normative influence does help explain why Indonesia matters beyond the widespread consensus that it is weak, we also feel that its influence is often overstated. We examine three components of Indonesia’s normative influence, modelling, diplomacy and civil society activism. In each component we assess the strengths and weaknesses of Indonesia and identify where wishful thinking predominates over dispassionate analysis. We conclude by arguing that the Jokowi approach to foreign policy destabilises the traditional make-up of normative influence and, if it is pursued into the future, will lead to a re-composition of that influence.

**Key words:** Indonesia, norms, ASEAN, civil society, pro-people’s diplomacy

Asking whether Indonesia is powerful is, as other contributions in this special edition suggest, a question that quickly leads to a list of weaknesses and shortcomings. Whether it is in governance capacity, military power or force projection, Indonesia seems to punch well below its weight. Yet changing the question to whether Indonesia matters prompts a very different answer—of course Indonesia matters.

In this short article, we confront this juxtaposition of weakness and significance head on by arguing that one reason why Indonesia matters today, and may well continue to do so in the future, is its normative influence. Normative influence emerges from, and works in a different way to, the more traditional components of power, notably military might and economic wealth. To understand normative influence requires embedding an analysis of what Indonesia does within an appreciation of what Indonesia is and how it is perceived. A list of activities or capabilities does little to capture Indonesia’s influence because it is not definitive of that most crucial component of influence—how Indonesia and the ideas that characterise its politics and interests are sold to the world and, just as importantly, how that message is received beyond Indonesia. We do not believe that normative influence is the most important way Indonesia engages in foreign relations. Instead, our claim is more modest—that to appreciate how and why Indonesia matters requires a broader conceptual palate than that often used. Nor do we argue that Indonesia is uniquely gifted when it comes to its normative influence relative to other states,
although we will discuss in the subsequent discussion our argument that Indonesia’s normative influence is peculiarly Indonesian.

We identify three sources of normative influence, modelling, peoples’ diplomacy and civil society activism, and adopt a critical perspective on all three. Whilst modelling is widely assumed to be the most important dimension of Indonesia’s normative influence, we find it hard to specify how Indonesian modelling exerts significance and suggest that much of the approach to modelling is characterised by wishful thinking by both many Indonesia watchers and Western governments. At the very most, modelling helps create a generally positive inclination towards Indonesia by other states. This is nothing to be scoffed at, but it is a source of influence that is indirect, maddeningly hard to pin down and, we believe, something largely beyond the power of Jakarta to actively use to secure its political priorities. It is in the area of peoples’ diplomacy and civil society activism that we can identify more concrete examples of Indonesia’s influence, but even here we are careful to identify the weaknesses of these dimensions as much as their strengths. The final part of our discussion situates Indonesia’s normative power as we have described it in the context of recent shifts in foreign policy posture under Jokowi. We view the Jokowi approach as disrupting the make-up of Indonesia’s current normative influence and the existing relationship between modelling, diplomacy and civil society. This is not to say that it will inevitably decline, indeed, we identify areas of potential growth. Instead, we argue that Indonesia’s normative influence is set to change as Jokowi seeks a more forceful promotion of self-interest that threatens to undercut what has been the basis of Indonesia’s normative influence to date, the presumption of a benign foreign policy. In doing so, we believe Jokowi may in fact end up ‘normalising’ Indonesia’s normative influence, eroding its more unique characteristics.

1. Understanding or Wishing? Power, Influence and the Mystery of Indonesia

Amitav Acharya has characterised Indonesia as an ‘emergent power’ (Acharya 2014:1), attributing its growing importance on the world stage to a combination of ‘democracy, development and stability – whilst pursuing a foreign policy of restraint towards neighbours and active engagement with the world at large’ (Acharya 2014: 1–2). Acharya enthuses that, despite economic and military weakness, Indonesia has achieved its prominence in a very different manner to other powers—a recognised regional role in Southeast Asia and a central position in a range of interlocking international organisations. Yet the image of an already important Indonesia exercising global influence is at odds with that proffered by other observers of Jakarta. Ralf Emmers suggests that even within ASEAN, Indonesia’s leadership has been ‘incomplete and sectoral… driven by a responsive approach to regional events’ (Emmers 2014: 545; see also Emmers 2005). Tacking between these two extremes, Roberts and Sebastian (2015) emphasise Indonesia as an emerging power, characterised by both strengths and weaknesses.

Indonesia, then, presents itself as somewhat of a mystery—both important and unimportant—depending on how others perceive it and the evidence analysts use to substantiate their claim. Indonesia is a regional leader that seems unable to lead—a great power without a great foreign policy. We argue that Indonesia is indeed important but that its importance does not stem from its power. One danger in measuring Indonesia’s importance is the conflation of ‘power’ with ‘influence’. By power we mean the material and social resources that Indonesia seeks to consciously deploy in pursuit of its ends. These, whilst growing, are characterised by considerable weaknesses, many of which are discussed in other parts of this special edition. Influence, however, is not directly correlated with power, a crucial distinction that helps to explain why Indonesia is both felt to be important and yet so often appears to fall short of expectations. Influence has far more to do with the indirect significance of an actor—a significance generated not only by its conscious decisions and policies but also by its broader political and social values as perceived and understood by others. Influence is a broader, more diffuse, category than power—it
is composed not of things but of impressions of things—it is built from norms, not weapons systems or GNP figures. Norms are patterns of shared ideas (Finnemore & Sikkink 1999: 890) that shape how both Indonesia and others understand it. This process of sharing ideas enhances Indonesia’s influence both by generating a sense of greater understanding of Indonesia and directly exporting Indonesia’s values to others and so expanding the community of ‘like-minded’. As such normative influence comprises all activities and characteristics that promote the image of a country overseas, whether they are consciously wielded, emerging from the actions of non-government actors, or even ‘enjoyed’ simply because of the assumptions of others.

2. Understanding Indonesia’s Influence: Modelling, Diplomatic Posture and Civil Society Activism

We identify three discrete elements of Indonesia’s normative influence: modelling, peoples’s diplomacy and civil-society activism. In what follows, we identify the diverging nature of these elements, as well as Indonesia’s strengths and weaknesses in each of these areas. We conclude with a discussion of the future of these elements of normative influence and how they are related to the changing balance of power between Indonesia and its ASEAN neighbours.

Modelling refers to the positional and ideological characteristics of a particular state and the reception of that model by others. It is the most passive of the components we suggest and rests far more on the assumptions of others than on proactive engagement by Jakarta, placing it well beyond Indonesia’s ability to actively control. Indonesia possesses modelling influence through its status as the world’s largest Muslim majority state, its democratic credentials, its shift from authoritarian to democratic government, its social media aptitudes and its particular take on multiculturalism. In each of these dimensions, Indonesia and its history provide a template for others to admire, emulate and adapt as they may see fit. Consider the speech given by US President Barack Obama during his visit to Jakarta in the November of 2010. Obama spoke of both Indonesia’s ‘extraordinary democratic transformation’ and its ‘spirit of tolerance… mosques and churches and temples standing alongside each other’ (Obama 2010). Similarly, Hillary Clinton, then Secretary of State, emphasised in 2009 that Indonesia served as a role model for women’s rights (Lander 2009). In each of these areas, it is not what Indonesia’s government actively does through its foreign policy choices that brings it weight in the eyes of the United States but rather what it is and how that perceived nature meshes with the United States’s own foreign policy goals. Indonesia’s increasingly entrenched democratic system wins plaudits from overseas. In 2009, The Economist noted that Indonesia had shown the world that ‘democracy can work in huge, diverse and poor countries’ (Economist 2009). No less a voice than the New York Times proclaimed Indonesia an ‘unlikely role model’—not because democracy worked smoothly in the country, but because ultimately, it was democracy that won out against competing forces (New York Times 2014). Indonesia itself has in the past emphasised these very points. In 2004, then Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda claimed in front of the UN General Assembly that ‘as the country with the largest Muslim population, Indonesia has proven that Islam can be a bastion of democracy and social justice’ (Wirajuda 2004).

Yet what does this modelling bring Indonesia? Whilst we can easily find speeches and prognostications of Indonesia’s importance, this modelling has also translated into tangible policy outcomes. For example, in 2008, then UN Special Envoy to Burma Ibrahim Gambari noted that the Burmese junta was paying close attention to the Indonesian experience of democratic transition as Burma went through its own process of partial democratisation (Strait Times 2008). Indonesia has also sought to capitalise on its modelling significance as a way of ensuring access to international institutions. One notable example is MIKTA, a grouping created by the Foreign Ministers of Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea,
Turkey and Australia in 2013. MIKTA describes itself as ‘sharing core values’ including being ‘democracies that benefit from open economies’ and ‘the capability to contribute to protecting public goods and global governance’ (MIKTA Vision Statement). Indonesia is included in this fledgling international governance mechanism because of what it is, what it represents and what it is perceived to be. Yet whether or not Indonesia’s involvement in such groupings ends up amplifying Indonesia’s position, or addressing global governance concerns, remains to be seen.

There are both positive and negative aspects of Indonesia’s form of normative influence via modelling. Tackling the positives first, it is clear that Indonesia is thought to have a special weight by virtue of its particular characteristics. This assumed weight powers the desire on the part of many to have Indonesia play a fuller role in global governance. Yet it also serves as an awkward ‘multiplier’ for expectations about Indonesia that it often is unwilling or unable to fulfil. Much of the significance of modelling lies in the hope, perhaps even exploitation, of Indonesia’s image for the national interests of other states. Indonesia is felt to be important because it is important for the realisation of particular goals—moderate Islamic democracy being central to that on the part of many. It is interesting to note that Indonesia itself has not met the expectations heaped upon it by admirers and has not articulated clear visions for its role in international organisations such as the G20 (or, more radically, the role of the G20) or in the United Nations. Jakarta may be able to turn its wish for inclusion into a reality, but it has yet to use that inclusion to advance new perspectives on perennial problems.

The second component of Indonesia’s normative influence is its diplomatic posture. We use diplomatic posture to capture two forms of diplomacy. The first is the use of ‘high’ diplomacy led by diplomats in innovative ways. The second is ‘people-focused’—an attempt to step beyond the political elites and ‘sell’ the message, usually the intention to build positive impressions and inclinations, to the people of other states (see discussion in Melissen 2012). This type of normative influence is very different to that just discussed—most significantly because it is consciously directed by the state.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) best defined Indonesia’s ‘usual’ diplomatic posture in the post-reformasi period as aiming for ‘a thousand friends and zero enemies’ via an ‘all directions foreign policy’ (2009). SBY, together with his Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa, remained very much focused on the traditional dimension of diplomacy—especially global institutions and the Western great powers. Beyond that, Indonesia played a cautious role in ASEAN—a primus inter pares rather than a hegemon. This role was cemented, and accepted by other ASEAN members, because of the particular design of ASEAN, with its overwhelmingly strong defence of national sovereignty, domestic freedoms and peaceful consensus-based diplomatic relations. This approach emphasised self-restraint on the part of members and helped build up the expectation of self-restraint by others. In this vein notably, Indonesia compromised over the 2007 ASEAN Charter, accepting very weak defences of human rights and democracy as the ‘price’ of ensuring the agreement of newer members, such as Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. These traditional diplomatic patterns reinforced the previous component of influence just discussed, modeling, by emphasising its willingness to both ‘play multilaterally’ and at the same time to remain wedded to compromise within ASEAN.

Since the election of President Joko Widodo, there has been a significant rupture in the style and substance of Indonesian diplomacy (although note (Santikajaya 2014 for the contrary view). Jokowi and his new Foreign Minister Retno LP Marsudi have emphasised that diplomacy should work more clearly in Indonesia’s national interest via a variety of means. In particular, Foreign Minister Retno has announced a shift away from international forums, especially the ones Indonesia has traditionally held to be central, and a move towards ‘pro-people’s diplomacy’, with a particular focus on building economic opportunities (Saragih & Parlina 2015).
In the realm of high diplomacy, Jokowi has indicated that he expects diplomats stationed overseas to perform *blusukan* or impromptu visits to the constituents by state officials. This style of *blusukan* diplomacy also extends to relations with Australia. When asked how he would deal with the difficult relationship with Australia, Jokowi stated that he favoured people-to-people links (Connelly 2014, p. 14). In our view, ASEAN itself could greatly benefit from a dose of *blusukan* in an effort to breathe life into the still elitist ‘people-centric’ community-building process. As a form of normative influence, the new style of diplomacy could underline the idea of a rising power eschewing the normal practices of high diplomacy used by traditional great powers. The practice would also place a high value on the business sector and other non-state economic actors.

Beyond formal diplomacy, Indonesia is also moving to augment its cultural appeal via building people-to-people links through cultural activities. Indonesia has announced that it will establish 10 cultural centres in the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Turkey, Japan, Timor Leste, Singapore, Myanmar and Australia. Figure 1 provides a map of Indonesia’s current and proposed new diplomatic infrastructure. The new cultural centres are self-evidently globally located, not only within Southeast Asia or even the Asia-Pacific but rather extending also to Europe, the Middle East and North America. The geographic footprint of these new cultural centres suggests that, when it comes to normative or cultural influence, Indonesia believes that it has a global role to play.

Despite the novelty and potential benefit of this new diplomatic posture, questions remain as to whether Indonesia can deliver on these commitments or has thought about them as systematically as perhaps it should. Take the new cultural centres and consider whether or not they are situated in the most important markets for Indonesia’s normative influence projection? Notably absent from the list are India and China. Given the undoubted importance, and perhaps overwhelming centrality, of New Delhi and Beijing in the coming decades, this oversight suggests a set of priorities that may not best serve Indonesia in the future. These cultural centres will require resources to run and a constant commitment to be of value. Moreover, for pro-people’s diplomacy or *blusukan* to succeed would depend on diplomats being willing to undertake unorthodox activities, something that is difficult for those who have grown up and have been socialised in ‘the old way of doing things’. Minister Retno herself is a career diplomat who has been schooled in the old pro-ASEAN and pro-multilateral foreign policy rather than...
pro-people’s diplomacy aimed at the global level. Finally, achieving normative influence at the global level will require a great investment of Jokowi’s political capital in the foreign policy arena. Notwithstanding the exciting rhetoric deployed in the President’s remarks to the 60th Asia–Africa Conference Commemoration urging his fellow leaders to ‘reignite the Bandung spirit’ through ‘cooperation on equal footing’ (Widodo 2015), to date, there is little evidence that Jokowi is willing to invest in foreign policy to the degree needed.

Another cause for concern is that the aforementioned examples of innovation in both high and people-centric diplomacy are in tension with the other aims that Jokowi has tasked Indonesia’s diplomatic apparatus with achieving. Jokowi has been very clear in emphasising that Indonesia’s foreign relations need to work to the direct benefit of the Indonesian people. The stronger emphasis on ‘peoples’ sovereignty’ that lies at the heart of the Jokowi critique of the internationalism of his predecessor suggests a new unwillingness to compromise on key issues, whether that be watered-down commitments to democracy within ASEAN or indeed the ASEAN economic community which jeopardises Indonesian workers livelihoods in favour of a grand regional vision of economic integration.

Jokowi has therefore both launched a new phase of diplomacy that seeks to cultivate good relations with those overseas and whilst at the same time pushing his diplomatic service to imperil those good relations by more stridently perusing what Jokowi sees as the national interest. This cuts to the heart of a crucial question, one that Jokowi himself does not seem to know the answer to—does Indonesia want to be liked and respected as a ‘good friend’ or does it wish to use its newfound ‘great power’ status to achieve Indonesian interests? Is Indonesia talking to people or talking to governments?

The third dimension of normative influence is civil society activism, which refers to the way a state’s values and identity are demonstrated and promoted through the activities of non-elite groups, such as civil society organisations (CSOs) and Track II bodies. As we shall see in the following discussion, Indonesian civil society has, through direct and indirect engagement, helped spread Indonesian ideas about democracy and human rights. Furthermore, whereas both the modelling and peoples’s diplomacy components of Indonesia’s normative influence have clear global dimensions, Indonesia’s civil society activism has concentrated predominantly on Southeast Asia. Our discussion focuses both on how Indonesian ideas have ‘permeated’ ASEAN, as well as how those ideas have been used directly by civil society in its engagement with other ASEAN member states.

When discussing civil society activism, it is important to note that the direct ‘lobbying’ of ASEAN by NGOs is widely understood to be ineffective (Kelly 2014: 266). In this, Indonesian CSOs have had no more success than those of other states. Whilst since 1997 ASEAN has moved to be more open to civil society than previously was the case, this is a very limited exposure and not a transformation. For example, after a brief consultation in 2008, ASEAN largely excluded CSOs from the process of drafting the Terms of Reference for the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR). Similarly, government representatives drafted the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration behind closed doors with no conversations with civil society at all. The eventual release of the Declaration in November 2012 prompted an outcry of disappointment from Indonesian civil society. Joining with other civil society organisations from within and beyond Southeast Asia, Indonesian civil society openly rejected the Declaration, condemning it as an ‘anti-human rights instrument’ (Human Rights Watch 2012). There is no guarantee that even the most careful of consultations with civil society will continue. Surin Pitsuwan, ASEAN Secretary General from 2008 to 2012, was particularly interested in at least consulting with civil society, even in areas as sensitive as human rights, a trait that his successor Lê Lu’o’ng Minh does not appear to share.

If the policy of direct critical engagement was the only way civil society had engaged with ASEAN, then Indonesia’s normative
power in this area would be weak or even non-existent. Yet at least one CSO has adopted a different approach. The Working Group for the Establishment of an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism (hereafter, the ‘Working Group’), a network across Southeast Asia that includes as its co-Chairman Indonesian Marzuki Darusman, stands out as particularly successful. Through a careful conversation with ASEAN in the mid-2000s, the Working Group helped the process of institutionalising rights into regional cooperation, by providing templates for commitments that would eventually in ASEAN’s 2004 Vientiane Action Programme. The unprecedented success of the Working Group here in facilitating ASEAN’s human rights institutionalisation suggests that the story is more complex than simply one of ASEAN ignoring CSOs (Davies 2013).

Another example of this ‘indirect’ influence can be seen in the example of Rafendi Djamin. Djamin was the Executive Director of the Human Rights Working Group, a collection of Indonesian domestic civil society actors who sought to pressure the Indonesian government to live up to its treaty obligations in the human rights field. Djamin became Indonesia’s first representative to the AICHR and is widely believed to be one of the most activist members of this institution (and, alongside the Thai representative, the only one to move from civil society to a government position). Individual movements such as these are conduits of influence for the ideas that civil society expresses.

Nevertheless, uniting both of these examples of indirect influence is the fact that whilst Indonesian ideas about democracy and human rights got ‘on the inside’ of ASEAN, this form of civil society activism came at a price. The Working Group was successful only after it developed a strategy of non-confrontation and consensus that diffused the radicalism of human rights institutionalisation in the eyes of ASEAN’s more authoritarian members. Similarly, Djamin’s role as Indonesia’s representative to the AICHR required that he work within the Terms of Reference for that body, which include not only the protection and promotion of human rights but also, in Article 2, a commitment to respect the domestic freedoms of ASEAN members (ASEAN 2010). For Indonesian CSOs, gaining access to ASEAN indirectly requires working within the ASEAN Way. The price of access is a limitation on overly critical activism; this not only allows for Indonesia’s normative influence to extend into places that otherwise it would be excluded from but also shapes that influence, curtailing its most radical elements.

3. The future of Indonesia’s Normative Influence

To this point, we have identified three dimensions of Indonesia’s normative influence, modelling, diplomacy and civil society, as well as providing critical commentary of their real-world effect. Modelling, peoples’s diplomacy and civil society activism each provide Indonesia with a sense of significance that outweighs its simple material capabilities. However, this review of Indonesia’s normative influence shows that even in this area, Indonesia is a perplexing and frustrating mix of strengths and weaknesses.

The limitations of Indonesia’s normative influence can be most clearly seen in the components of various international rankings of ‘soft power’. To this point, we have consciously avoided invoking the term soft power both to aid the distinguishing of material power and normative influence and because we feel the term soft power infers too much intentionality—that these are things for Jakarta to wield whereas our suggestion is that so much of normative influence comes from what Jakarta is and how it is perceived. However, at this point, bringing soft power into conversation is useful because it helps us appraise what we have said about Indonesia to this point.

Take the July 2015 ‘Soft Power 30’ released by Portland Communications (Portland Communications 2015). The report breaks down the notion of soft power to include diplomatic engagement, cultural appeal, government commitment to rights and democracy and governance effectiveness, education quality/appeal to international students, digital infrastructure and digital diplomacy, and enterprise attractiveness. Despite the achievements outlined
earlier, Indonesia still ranks very poorly when compared with global ‘heavy hitters’ in the field. Indonesia does not make the Portland Communications’s list of the top 30 nations, and the only ASEAN member ranked in the top 30 by Portland was Singapore at 21. This speaks to the very real limits of the appeal of Indonesia both within Asia and globally—it does not have the cultural appeal of South Korea or Japan, its universities fare poorly in global metrics, and as we have noted earlier, its governance is often perceived to be weak and ineffectual.

In the introduction, we distinguished between material power and normative influence, saying that the former rested on the quantifiable and the latter on the role of norms—those shared ideas that helped to generate positive inclinations towards Jakarta whilst also helping to export Indonesia’s domestic standards to other actors. What we see here when examining the dimensions of soft power is that there is some relationship between material and normative dimensions. The wealthier Indonesia becomes, the more it can invest in its infrastructure, its education system or diplomatic resources. Such growing material wealth enhances the attractiveness of Indonesia as a model (a more successful model has greater weight than one that is struggling) and permits greater active ‘selling’ of Indonesia through diplomacy.

This poses the obvious question—what is the future of Indonesia’s normative influence? There are two key issues here—will Indonesia continue to grow economically (and then invest that wealth in the sort of attributes and activities that promote its influence) and will the Jokowi period mark a new period in Indonesia’s foreign policy approach and goals or will it be an outlier, swiftly abandoned by his predecessor? Any attempt to chart the future is fraught with danger, but we take as a baseline that Indonesia’s economic weight will continue to grow over at least the medium term, with all the positive consequences that flow from it.

We think under that circumstance, Indonesia faces a serious choice about the type of power it wishes to be and, through that, the composition of its normative influence. With Jokowi’s approach to foreign policy—not only innovative in trying to sell Indonesia abroad but also strongly focused on maximising the domestic political benefit of foreign relations—then we argue that Indonesia’s normative influence will change in character. It will, in effect, become more typical of other countries, losing the peculiarly Indonesian characteristic of being predicated on a strong sublimation of the national interest in favour of the regional one. There are strong reasons to suspect that this is the outcome we will see. Rizal Sukma suggests Indonesia should free itself from any undeserving obligation to follow the wishes of any state or a grouping of states, including ASEAN, if by doing so we sacrifice our own national interests (2009).

The early moves of the Jokowi government supports the belief that Indonesia has shifted to a more strident promotion of national interest even if it has not been greatly successful in that quest. Jokowi’s concern to make sovereignty work ‘for the people’ is popular with an electorate looking to make politics work more clearly for their advantage. This was the same populist shift that underpinned Jokowi’s ascending to the presidency. Were Jokowi’s approach prove to be an aberration and his successor return to the approach of SBY, a kind of soft internationalism, then Indonesia we believe would continue to ‘punch below its weight’ in terms of its ability to use its growing power actively, but its normative influence would strengthen in ways fundamentally continuous with its past. In either event, the future of Indonesia’s normative influence is intimately tied to questions of Indonesia’s foreign policy attitude given that so much of normative influence depends on the perceptions of the audience, both in the region and beyond.

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