

Indonesia's realist bet on Trump's Board of Peace

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Much has been written criticizing Indonesia's decision to join United States President Donald Trump's so-called Board of Peace (BoP). Rizal Sukma and many other foreign policy thinkers show that the BoP is nothing more than a vanity project: an authoritarian, unaccountable platform that reduces the complex Palestinian struggle to a commercial real estate fantasy and elevates Trump to the position of chairman for life. In their view, Indonesia's participation undermines the principles of our long-cherished *bebas aktif* (independent and active) foreign policy and offers unearned legitimacy to a deeply flawed initiative.

These criticisms are not without merit. The BoP's structure and symbolism are deeply problematic. But Indonesia's foreign policy should not be guided by moral outrage alone. We must also speak frankly about the kind of world we now inhabit: one in which the liberal, rules-based order is collapsing, global institutions are weakened or paralyzed and transactionalism reigns supreme.

In such a world, strategic ambiguity and calibrated engagement are often necessary tools of statecraft.

As Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney observed in Davos, we are entering a new era marked by the retreat of hegemony, the erosion of institutional norms and the return of brute power politics. The United Nations, long the cornerstone of multilateral diplomacy, is in disarray. The international consensus on Palestine is repeatedly ignored.

In this context, the BoP, however distasteful, offers an uncomfortable truth: decisions about Gaza's future may soon be made unilaterally, without the participation of those who have historically defended Palestinian rights.

This is the core dilemma: yes, joining BoP may seem like a betrayal of our values. But not joining may mean total irrelevance in decisions that will affect Palestine's future. The price of moral purity could be silence in the room where decisions are made.

Indonesia's participation should not be read as endorsement, but as hedging, defined as a long-established strategy of middle powers navigating great power rivalry. Indonesia has done this before. We joined China's Belt and Road Initiative, even as concerns about debt and sovereignty were raised. We adopted aspects of the US-driven Indo-Pacific strategy while asserting ASEAN centrality. We have even moved closer to BRICS, a bloc widely perceived as counter-hegemonic while at the same time trying to join OECD.

In short, bebas aktif has never been about non-alignment. It is about strategic flexibility, and the BoP, ironically, provides another platform for such flexibility, however imperfect it is.

Moreover, in today's hyper-personalized world order where leaders like Trump drive great power policy, for middle powers, participation in initiatives like the BoP serves as insurance. This is because Trump will reward those who "play his game" and punish those who do not, usually with tariffs or worse. Indonesia must prepare for that world.

There is another subtext worth addressing. President Prabowo Subianto's foreign policy instincts are often criticized for being overly personal, under-institutionalized or lacking consultation. That may be so. But they also reflect a hard-nosed realism that sees diplomacy not as performance, but as bargaining in a dangerous world. Under his leadership, Indonesia has signaled willingness to engage with all poles of power, even those deemed controversial, to safeguard its economic and geopolitical interests.

The BoP participation is likely time-bound. Trump may only be in power for another three years. He may no longer factor into the broader foreign policy. But as a strategic bet, it allows Indonesia to remain relevant in one of the most consequential conversations of our time: the future of Palestine and the global order itself.

Make no mistake, Indonesia should not abandon its support for Palestine and its belief in rules-based international order. But neither should it indulge in idealism untethered from the realities of power.

The BoP is flawed. But the world that gave birth to it is also flawed. If we want to shape outcomes rather than merely protest them, we must sometimes enter uncomfortable rooms, even when the architecture is crooked.

After all, bebas aktif has never meant rigid moralism. It has always been anchored in our national interest, defined by strategic flexibility rather than frozen ideals. --- The writer is a fellow at Indonesian Institute for Foreign Affairs (IIFA) at the Indonesian International Islamic University (UIII).

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