

## Reflecting on the 75th Anniversary of Indonesian-Turkish Relations

Written by Hadza Min Fadhli Robby and Tufan Kutay Boran

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HADZA MIN FADHLI ROBBY AND TUFAN KUTAY BORAN, MAR 27 2025

This year, Indonesia and Türkiye commemorate 75 years of bilateral relations. Last month, the inaugural High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSC) between Indonesia and Türkiye was also being held, which resulted in the signing of 13 agreements between ministries and institutions of both countries. This moment serves as a reaffirmation of the Indonesia-Türkiye Strategic Partnership, which was established in 2011 during the Presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

Reflecting on Türkiye's geographical position, Yücel Bozdağlıoğlu argues that Türkiye faces an identity dilemma due to its equally strong interactions with both Asia and Europe. Under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's leadership, Türkiye associated itself more with the West to assert its status as a modern civilization (*muasır medeniyet*). This alignment led to Türkiye's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and its candidacy to become a member of the European Union (EU). However, Türkiye's EU accession has been hindered by persistent negative perceptions from EU Member States. This challenge prompted Türkiye to rekindle its historical connections with Asian nations. This shift began in the 1980s under Turgut Özal, who envisioned a trade corridor "from the Adriatic Sea to the Great Wall of China." This vision was later refined by İsmail Cem, Türkiye's Foreign Minister in the 1990s from the center-left Democratic Left Party, who argued that Türkiye naturally owned two essential identities: as a central country (*merkez ülke*) and as a terminal country (*terminal ülke*) connecting Asia and Europe. This vision became a cornerstone of Turkish foreign policy in the subsequent decades, including under the AK Party government.

In the early 2000s, Ahmet Davutoğlu, then a foreign policy advisor to the Turkish Prime Minister, by highlighting Türkiye's historical ties with Asia, coined the term Asian Depth (*Asya Derinliği*) to describe Türkiye's potential deeper engagement with Asia. However, this concept was not fully developed by Davutoğlu and subsequent administrations. It was not until 2019 that Türkiye introduced a specific foreign policy vision focused on Asia, known as Asia Anew (*Yeniden Asya*). This policy aligns with three main priorities in Türkiye's foreign policy, which consisted of three main agendas. First, strengthening Türkiye's partnerships with Asian countries to advance bilateral relations. Second, enhancing Türkiye's credentials as a model country in the practice of diplomacy and mediation. Third, prioritizing digital diplomacy is a main tool in the conduct of Türkiye's foreign policy.

Within the Asia Anew framework, Türkiye has placed greater emphasis on Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia. This focus is based on the status of both countries as democratic, Muslim-majority nations that play key roles in the region. Although the Asia Anew Concept allows Türkiye to open its relations deeper towards Asian nations, it largely remains a general concept and needs time to find its focus. In terms of operational definition, the Asia Anew Initiative covers broad concepts such as increasing culture, economy, and military exchanges with Asian countries. This raised some questions about whether the Asia Anew Initiative has some ambiguities or will be a significant doctrine in Turkish foreign policy. The main reason is that Türkiye has to calibrate its focus towards each nation to catch the momentum. This has to be done not only in the setting of government-to-government engagement but also in people-to-people relationships.

The high-level meetings between Türkiye and Indonesia resulted in the signing of 13 agreements covering cooperation in defense, education, investment, agriculture, natural resource exploration, and communications. Two

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of these agreements specifically focus on strengthening defense cooperation, particularly in the joint development of unmanned aerial vehicles and defense equipment in Indonesia.

Since assuming the role of Defense Minister under President Joko Widodo, Prabowo Subianto has been committed to establishing defense partnerships with key countries, including Türkiye. The intensive defense diplomacy initiated during Jokowi's administration has fostered trust between Turkish and Indonesian bureaucrats. In this context, President Prabowo's new approach to Indonesian foreign policy will definitely contribute a lot to Türkiye's newborn initiative towards Asia. Prabowo's initiatives in the defense sector have resulted in a military drone-selling agreement between Türkiye and Indonesia. In this context, Indonesia will buy 60 Bayraktar TB3 drones. This clearly shows that Türkiye's Asia Anew Initiative is successful in responding to other actors' demands. However, if Türkiye fails in military technological advancement, would the Asia Anew Initiative be successful or not is an important question to be asked.

On the other hand, an excessive focus on defense diplomacy should be balanced with the understanding that strong bilateral relations are better built through close civil society engagement. Defense diplomacy, while important, is frequently influenced by ever-changing geopolitical dynamics and mostly remains an elite-driven initiative. In this case, Indonesian society knows a lot about Türkiye, especially in terms of historical perspective, namely 'Ottoman Concept'. Indonesian people, especially in Muslim circles, highly refer to and glorify the Ottoman Empire. However, Turkish society's knowledge about Indonesia as well as Southeast Asia, is still limited. To strengthen the ties between societies, policymakers should take more concrete steps in people-to-people relations. For the Türkiye side, this has to start from scratch, with concepts such as Pancasila (Five Guiding Principles of the Indonesian Republic), Islam Nusantara, Adat-adat Indonesia (Indonesian traditions), etc. Otherwise, Asia Anew won't go further than serving the materialist interest of the Turkish republic.

There are three policy proposals that could be considered by Indonesian and Turkish governments to further strengthen bilateral relations. First, the Indonesian and Turkish governments should create greater space for civil society to strengthen people-to-people relations. This can be achieved through initiatives such as scholarship programs, student exchanges, and collaboration between NGOs on social and humanitarian issues. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has stated that the 5,000 Indonesian students studying in Türkiye will serve as *gönül elçiliği* (cultural ambassadors) for Türkiye in Indonesia. Similarly, Indonesia should consider providing more scholarships and exchange opportunities for Turkish students through short-term programs like Darmasiswa and long-term initiatives like the *KNB* scholarship.

Second, Türkiye has taken significant steps to promote its culture in Indonesia, such as establishing the Yunus Emre Institute in Jakarta, introducing Turkish dramas and literature in Indonesian, and popularizing Turkish cuisine. Indonesia should reciprocate by actively promoting Indonesian culture in Türkiye. This includes engaging Indonesian alumni who studied in Türkiye to translate Indonesian novels into Turkish and broadly introduce Indonesian cultural and culinary heritage, such as promoting Indonesian coffee culture in Türkiye. These efforts are necessary to prevent a lack of awareness among Turks regarding Indonesian and broader Asian cultures. The further cultural and societal exchange between Indonesians and Turks would avoid misunderstanding, which might cause possible backtracking in bilateral relations between the two countries, as in the debate of the naming of a street in Menteng as 'Atatürk Street'.

Third, and finally, as two rising middle powers in global politics, Indonesia and Türkiye should support each other in reinforcing their roles in regional and international affairs. Indonesia, as a regional leader in Southeast Asia, can assist Türkiye in finding a relevant role within ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific region. Conversely, Türkiye, one of the leading countries in the Muslim world, should facilitate Indonesia's involvement in addressing strategic issues in the Middle East and the Muslim world, particularly concerning the issue in Palestine.

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## About the author:

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