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# Overcoming invisible barriers in the Australia– Indonesia relationship

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## Key messages

- The Australia–Indonesia relationship has come a long way, underpinned by hard-gained strategic trust built over the decades.
- Despite institutionalised frameworks and agreements, trade, investment, and people-to-people ties remain limited, indicating the relationship is yet to reach its full potential.
- While the Defence Cooperation Agreement is a milestone, both need to enhance their cooperation on fast evolving and emerging risks in the region.
- Divergent strategic outlooks means that zero sum thinking and rhetoric on ‘the China factor’ will not be effective as an entry point for bilateral or broader regional cooperation; rather, pragmatic partnerships are needed.
- Shared interests exist in economic diversification and critical industries, including critical minerals, offering opportunities for convergence despite differing strategic choices.
- Persistent outdated perceptions and low Indonesia literacy in Australia underscore the need to invest more intentionally to strengthening community links, exchanges, and mobility initiatives.



Prime Minister Anthony Albanese meets Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto in Jakarta, Indonesia, for bilateral meeting at Istana Merdeka, Jakarta on 15 May 2025

The Australia–Indonesia relationship has come a long way – trust has been built, cooperation established, and political commitments made explicit. Today, both countries stand as neighbours whose relations remain steady despite divergences in foreign policy. In this sense, Australia–Indonesia ties offer a fitting test of how far a Western country and a non-aligned country can forge meaningful cooperation amid geopolitical divides. However, their cooperation also falls short of its full potential and has often been more arduous than natural. This paper looks at some of the reasons for this – including differing (geo)political orientations and threat perceptions, gaps in mutual understanding as well as economic barriers – and suggests new strategies to achieve deeper cooperation.

## Trajectory of Indonesia–Australia relations

Australian policymakers have clearly recognised Indonesia’s strategic importance. In Australia’s 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, Indonesia is among those four countries mentioned as critical partners “to support a balance in the Indo–Pacific favourable to our [Australia] interests and promote an open, inclusive and rules-based region.”<sup>1</sup> The oft-repeated line that Indonesia is projected to be the world’s fourth-largest economy by 2050 has further become a standard feature in speeches, debates, and policy documents. Furthermore, President Albanese’s decision to make Indonesia his first visit and efforts to build close ties with President Prabowo has sent a strong signal of intent from the current administration to court Indonesia even closer at a time when Jakarta’s growing global weight is giving it abundant options.

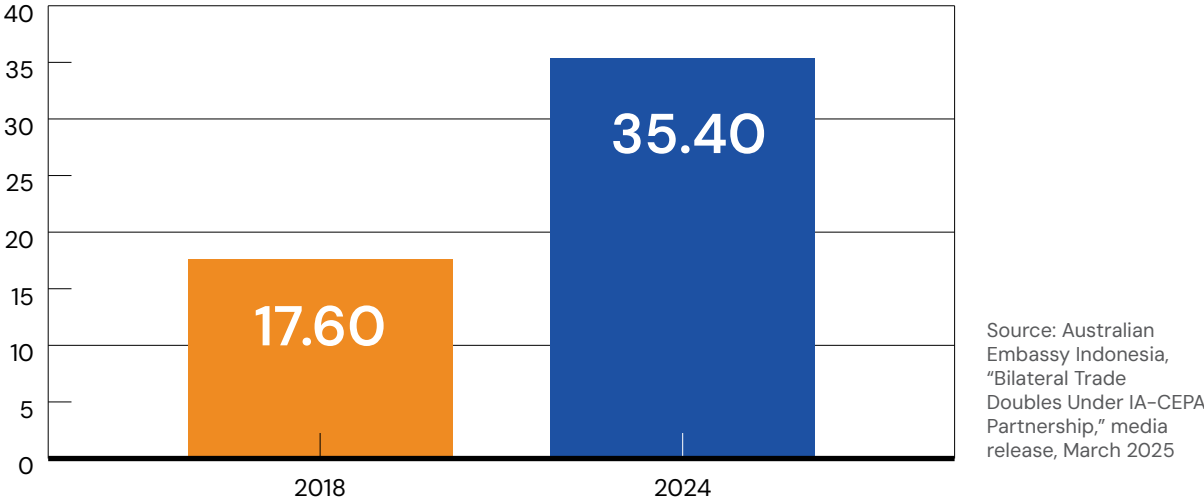
“ Indeed, the relationship has come a long way.”

Political ties between Australia and Indonesia today are arguably the best they have ever been, following a long period of ups and downs shaped by crisis over crisis including the East Timor case (1999), Australian spying allegations (2013), the execution of Australian drug traffickers (2015), and other incidents that strained diplomatic ties.

Both countries have agreed on frameworks across diverse sectors to open avenues for expanded engagement for the past decade. They reached a level of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2018.<sup>2</sup> The signing of the Indonesia–Australia Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IA–CEPA) in 2019 was another milestone in the bilateral relationship, while defence ties have been consolidated with updates in 2021 and 2024 to the landmark Defence Cooperation Agreement (2012).<sup>3</sup>

These agreements have generated tangible benefits for both sides. Two-way trade between Indonesia and Australia doubled from AU\$17.6 billion (US\$12.3 billion) in 2018 to AU\$35.4 billion (around US\$23.7 billion) in 2024.<sup>4</sup> Mechanisms to tackle business and investment barriers have opened new doors for partnership. These include the establishment of the Jakarta Investment Deal Team (run jointly by Austrade and DFAT and Export Finance Australia) to better facilitate Australian investors, the appointment of Professor Jennifer Westacott as ASEAN Business Champion for Indonesia, and two-way business exchanges.

FIGURE 1: **Australia–Indonesia trade (in AU\$ billion)**



Similarly, in August 2025, Foreign Ministers and Defence Ministers from both countries affirmed that they would build on the Defence Cooperation Agreement to increase defence and security cooperation at practical levels such as military exercises and indicated in-principle commitment to explore cooperation on sensitive issues such as cyber security and critical technology.<sup>5</sup>

**“Australian and Indonesian leaders today share a high level of strategic trust – a hard-won achievement after years of deficit.”**

Incidents like the 2013–14 phone-tapping scandal provide a sharp reminder of the fragility of this trust. The revelations that Australian intelligence agencies had tapped the phone of then President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his inner circle provoked one of the most severe crises in bilateral relations. Indonesia recalled its ambassador, suspended several cooperation, and domestic outrage surged. Yet both governments recognised the strategic costs of prolonged estrangement and worked to rebuild trust, culminating in the 2014 Joint Understanding on a Code of Conduct to restore cooperation and establish a mechanism for consultation.<sup>6</sup> This agreement did not erase mistrust overnight, but it institutionalised the trust-building process and embedded coordination channels that helped prevent future crises from spiralling.

In an era of mounting geopolitical fragmentation, this trust is a critical asset. A recent case in April 2025 on Australia's response to Russia's alleged request to access Indonesian airbase to host its long-range aircraft in Papua showed how far the relationship has come. The report sparked alarm in Canberra, noting Papua is just 1400km north of Darwin. However, the Australian Government made immediate calls to Jakarta, offering an opportunity for Indonesian Defence Minister Sjafrie Samsoeddin to reassure his counterpart that no such arrangement would occur. This candid, rapid communication among the leaders was essential to avoid misperception and protect trust.<sup>7</sup>

## Bilateral relations have come a long way, but remain underweight

Despite visible progress, however, several aspects of the relationship indicate that bilateral ties remain well below their full potential. While there is a formal commitment to the partnership at the leadership level, significant obstacles to deepening the relationship persist in practice.

Firstly, though the total trade and investment amount is showing progress, the proportion of Indonesia in Australia's overall trade and investment has remained relatively stagnant over the past decade.

**“Despite being immediate neighbours, Australia and Indonesia hold a minor share in each other's overall trade.”**


Indonesia accounts for less than 3 per cent of Australia's total trade, and Australia accounts for less than 5 per cent of Indonesia's. Australian FDI in Indonesia is not even 0.5 per cent of its total stock of outward direct investment.<sup>8</sup> Indonesia ranks barely in Australia's top twenty investment destinations.<sup>9</sup> On the Indonesian side, there is encouraging but limited development. In 2023, Indonesian investment into Australia has reached almost double the level of outbound Australian investment into Indonesia, accounting for US\$1.4 billion.<sup>10</sup> Having each other so far down the list despite geographical proximity and growing economic prospects shows that natural barriers remain unaddressed.

Secondly, the political and security partnership currently matters more for Canberra than it does for Indonesia. At a time when the Defence Cooperation Agreement with Australia has been hailed as a historic milestone in Canberra, Indonesia has also been taking steps forward in its relationships with other countries, including China and Russia, at an unprecedented level.

With China, Indonesia just had an inaugural meeting for the 2+2 defence and foreign ministers' dialogue, established regular naval exercises, resumed joint special forces exercises after a decade-long pause, and ongoing talks are underway on the possibility of purchasing Chinese fighter jets. This is not to mention the highly contested "joint development" plan with China in the South China Sea put forward by President Prabowo late last year. Indonesia has also held its first-ever bilateral naval exercise with Russia, and pursued high-level talks with Russian security officials, including talks on the purchase of Russian defence equipment. It is worth noting most of these developments happened within less than a year of President Prabowo's presidency.

### BOX 2: The 2024 Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA)

Australia and Indonesia signed the DCA in 2024 to pursue enhanced practical cooperation and interoperability between both countries armed forces in addressing non-traditional security threats, logistics and training. It builds on previous security arrangements including the 2006 Lombok Treaty, and 2012 Defence Cooperation Arrangement and signals both sides' continued commitment to the defence relationship.



While Australia remains a top security partner for Indonesia after the United States for now, whether it will maintain that position in the future depends on whether the partnership is brought to a deeper level and can effectively address emerging risks—particularly given the geographical proximity between the two countries.

**“ Finally, fondness at the leadership level has not translated into the wider community.”**

Many Australians have yet to digest that the Australia–Indonesia relationship today is not the same as two decades ago, and that Indonesia itself has transformed rapidly. At the leadership level, trust has grown: frameworks are formalised, dialogues institutionalised, agreements steadily upgraded. Yet these developments remain confined to a narrow elite circle. According to the Lowy Institute, only 12 per cent of Australians identified Indonesia as the country’s “best friend in Asia” in 2023, with no increase over three consecutive years. In 2024, just 14 per cent of Australians would choose Indonesia as the country with which they want closer relations.<sup>11</sup>

## Translating strategic trust into depth of cooperation

These gaps in two-way trade and investment, the weight of the security partnership and perceptions of Indonesia in Australia underscore that more must be done to translate existing frameworks and the strategic trust into depth of cooperation. The necessary frameworks and blueprints are in place and political will is explicit. However, as one expert argued, “the ballast is keeping the ships floating, but not enough to make them sail.”<sup>12</sup>

To harness the full potential of their partnership, Australia and Indonesia need to develop new strategies to overcome invisible barriers like divergent strategic outlooks and broader challenges in deepening economic, business, and people-to-people ties that currently constrain the bilateral relationship.

### 1 Deepening defence and security cooperation

Jakarta and Canberra perceive China’s growing influence in the region very differently. Australia tends to view China’s rise primarily through a lens of strategic risk, while Indonesia approaches it more as a source of economic opportunity.

This divergence shapes their respective foreign policy choices. For Australia, its alliance with the United States remains the cornerstone of its security and foreign policy, complemented by efforts to deepen partnerships with like-minded countries to collectively address shared concerns over China’s influence. Indonesia, by contrast, upholds its long-standing non-aligned tradition and seeks to expand its foreign policy options. It remains open to partners of diverse political orientations, pragmatically pursuing partnerships with tangible benefits.

Indonesia is, therefore, unlikely to become a “like-minded” partner for Australia. Some would even consider Indonesia “an unhelpful friend” or “the stranger next door.” A more diplomatic way of describing it is offered by Dr. Pia Dannhauer in a report: “Australia and Indonesia are charting different paths—and choosing different friends—to navigate great-power competition.”<sup>13</sup>

This divergent outlook means that – unlike with Japan or South Korea – zero sum thinking and rhetoric on ‘the China factor’ will not be effective as an entry point for bilateral or broader regional cooperation. Rather, tangible, pragmatic partnerships that align with Indonesia’s “a thousand friends, zero enemies” approach are needed.

In the defence domain, achieving true depth requires moving beyond more frequent joint exercises toward addressing fast evolving and emerging risks in the region.

The stakes are too high for both countries not to address the emerging risks, given the two sharing an immediate region hence sharing economic and security vulnerabilities. For example, about two-thirds of Australia's exports by value and a little over 40 per cent of its imports by value travel through Indonesian sea lanes, notably the Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok Straits.<sup>14</sup>

#### BOX 2: Indonesia's maritime chokepoints



Adapted from US EIA via Asia Times<sup>15</sup>

These narrow maritime arteries are critical trade routes relatively close to the Australian mainland, but also highly vulnerable to disruption. Any blockage of these passages – whether from geopolitical crisis, piracy, US–China confrontation, or hybrid sabotage – would necessitate rerouting shipping, incurring long delays, higher costs, and significant economic fallout. The Strait of Malacca has already demonstrated the vulnerability of these sea lanes: piracy surges in the early 2000s and periodic shipping accidents temporarily blocked key passages, proving how easily congestion or disorder can disrupt critical supply chains.<sup>16</sup>

There are also new and emerging risks posing unprecedented challenges, among others: political factors that might lead to denial of access or restrictions; cyber–physical sabotage that can disable navigation or port operations; and deliberate disruption of undersea cables or energy infrastructure. Recent high–profile incidents in Taiwan have shown how critical undersea infrastructure—pipelines and data cables—can be deliberately sabotaged, causing severe economic and political disruption, heightened insecurity, and greater political fragmentation.<sup>17</sup>

Addressing these issues demands a high level of trust and may reveal divergence in threat perceptions, particularly where the 'China factor' weighs in. Still, both countries should leverage their high level of trust to engage in difficult dialogues and to build crisis preparedness, shared risk assessment and management, and capability to coordinate at times of crisis.

**“ Australia and Indonesia can also collaborate to build resilience in the neighbourhood and establish effective coordination channels to operate in times of crisis.”**

Addressing these risks demands adaptability and depth of cooperation. Beyond trust–building, it is increasingly important to collectively build actual capability to execute coordinated responses, joint mechanisms for information–sharing, and critical infrastructure protection. For Australia and Indonesia, pursuing such depth would not only strengthen their resilience at home but also set a model for crisis management and collective security in the Indo–Pacific region.



## 2 Opportunities close to home: different strategic objectives, complementary economic means

Another area where both countries' interests converge is in their shared agenda to diversify economic relations and supply chains amid emerging global economic and security risks. Looking ahead, diversification is no longer optional in the face of geopolitical and geo-economic uncertainty. There is now a stronger drive to forge new trade relations, pursue joint projects in critical industries, and expand security dialogues with alternative partners among both developing developed countries. Uncertainty over Washington's trade policy under President Donald Trump has only accelerated this trend.

For Australia, diversification is largely security-driven – reducing concentrated reliance on China to safeguard national security. For Indonesia, it is growth-driven – unlocking new funding opportunities, boosting GDP potential, and fuelling socio-economic development.

To date, Australia has prioritised “like-minded partners”, countries who share similar strategic outlook and political orientation, over Indonesia. While Australia is trying to secure its lifelines away from China's dominant share, opportunities that lie in its immediate neighbourhood are still often overlooked: “Indonesia does not really look South, it looks North. But Australia is looking even farther North”.<sup>18</sup>

This is evident, among others, in its approach on critical minerals. Canberra has rapidly established critical mineral agreements with the United States, Japan, and the European Union – all partners that share the same concern and sense of insecurity of China's growing dominance over the critical minerals supply chain. There is no such comprehensive agreement yet being extended with Indonesia, despite both being in a strategic position to chart ahead their critical mineral industries (though the recent 2+2 meeting between Foreign Ministers Penny Wong and Sugiono addressed the sector in the discussion on the growth of bilateral economic relationship).<sup>19</sup>

**“ This is a missed opportunity, as convergence on the means to diversify economic relations provides potential bridges for cooperation.”**

Political calculations may explain why Canberra gravitates toward allies first – whether on critical minerals or defence – but geography and shared risks make Indonesia too significant to be overlooked. Indonesia is not yet a natural destination for Australia to ‘friend-shore’, but there is a strong economic case for why it should be one: it offers a critical buffer zone for Australia to diversify its economy and build resilience amid China's growing influence.

Complementarities are clear: Indonesia seeks partnerships with countries in all directions where it unlocks growth, expands industrial capacity, and creates jobs, while Australia looks for reliable partners to reduce vulnerabilities – both security and economy-wise. When aligned, these agendas could create fertile ground for deeper cooperation. By positioning Indonesia not as a “like-minded” partner in the Western sense, but as a trusted partner in its own right Australia could unlock the complementarities both sides need.

### 3 Beyond the narrow circle: people mobility as key to addressing outdated perceptions of Indonesia

Outdated perceptions of Indonesia persist in the wider Australian community, including among the business community and bureaucrats, and ‘Indonesia literacy’ remains lacking.

For example, research by the Australia–Indonesia Centre (AIC) and EY Sweeney (2016) found little awareness of Australian companies performing well in Indonesia and minimal awareness of Indonesian organisations or brands operating in Australia. Only 22 per cent of Australians agreed that “Australian businesspeople can be confident when conducting business with Indonesians” (38 per cent neutral, 26 per cent disagreed, 14 per cent unsure). According to the author, “there are some significant misconceptions in Australia about Indonesia and a stark lack of basic knowledge about the country.”<sup>20</sup> The 2020 Asialink Business Winning in Asia report also found that over 90 per cent of boards and senior executive teams in ASX200 companies lack the experience, knowledge, and capabilities to do business in the region.<sup>21</sup> These findings show that Australians often lack the practical understanding to turn frameworks into tangible engagement.

**“ To realise the potential of Australia–Indonesia cooperation, this perception gap must be overcome.”**


The red carpet must be laid for the community to learn about the land of opportunity rising in Australia’s north and to multiply the already existing successful models of people–to–people partnerships– from businesses to civil society, from elites to the public. Australia should provide incentives, pathways, and institutional support to make studying, working, and partnering with Indonesia not only attractive but a common practice. Addressing these practical barriers is a critical step to build the necessary literacy to deepen bilateral ties and unlock the full potential of the Australia–Indonesia partnership.

#### BOX 4: Strategies to strengthen community links between Australia and Indonesia



One option to support community links is to ease and incentivize mobility for Indonesians. Visa requirements for Indonesians traveling to Australia have remained cumbersome, even after political will to ease mobility have for several times been expressed at the top leadership levels. Travel is limited, and only a few frameworks allow people to move freely and forge meaningful partnerships. A visa to Bali costs about IDR 500,000 (≈ AU\$ 50) and is available on arrival.<sup>22</sup> A visa to Australia costs more than AUD 100, involves lengthy processing, and carries far less certainty of approval.<sup>23</sup> For example, the Persebaya–East Java football match in August 2025 could have showcased people–to–people ties. Out of 120–130 Indonesian supporters applying for Australian visas, however, less than 50 were approved. These experiences make Australia appear unwelcoming and risk undermining the relationship. While leaders have shown explicit political will, people–to–people ties need to be supported through effective bureaucracy and mutually accessible mobility options. Lowering these barriers would unlock talent, capital, and ideas, making exchanges common practice rather than isolated cases.

**“ The Government should also aim to expand Australian exchanges to Indonesia and revive Indonesian language training in Australia.”**



Encouraging signs are easily visible from the other side: there was a 41 per cent increase in Indonesian students studying in Australia from 2018 to 2024.<sup>24</sup> But building sustained mutual understanding and growing deep expertise requires beyond just student numbers and it also takes both sides. Currently, Australia's investment in Indonesia literacy is declining. According to ACICIS, enrolments in Southeast Asian languages at Australian universities dropped nearly 75 per cent since 2001. Year 12 enrolments for Indonesian language fell 12 per cent from 2022 to 2023.<sup>25</sup> Once compulsory, Indonesian language teaching has declined sharply, worsened by teacher shortages. While ANU and Monash maintain strong programs, many others have reduced offerings, removed Indonesian as a major, or closed language centres. Programs such as ACICIS and the New Colombo Plan have been transformative for Australians but remain limited in scale.<sup>26</sup>

Reversing this trend should become a political priority, as building the community's literacy will be a long-term process. Canberra knows this. A handful of Australians with deep experience in Indonesia often return with transformed perceptions, as they discover vibrant growth, opportunities, and a massive skilled population in Indonesia. It is not rare to find such testimony among Australian tourists who experience the country beyond Bali. Many started with exchanges or private initiatives, now become fond of Indonesia, even run successful ventures or contribute voluntarily to bridging ties—yet these efforts remain individual rather than systemic. This perception shift needs to be broadened.

The third approach is to expand institutional partnerships and optimize existing arrangements. Partnership models exist: the University of Sydney–Surabaya linkage or the sister-state partnership between Western Australia and East Java, the activities of Australia–Indonesia Institute, and the appointment of an Australian business champion to Indonesia. These collaborations endure beyond political cycles. Crucially, returning students, business leaders, or exchange alumni also need to also be systematically tied back into networks of professionals and alumni as 'ambassadors' for the relationship. Doing so ensures their expertise and experiences are sustained, leveraged, and positioned at the forefront of bilateral efforts, transforming the isolated and sporadic success cases into a replicable engine for deeper bilateral engagement.

## Recommendations

### to deepen Australia–Indonesia ties

- Collaborate to manage emerging risks such as critical infrastructure protection, cybersecurity, and crisis preparedness.
- Leverage shared interest in economic diversification and pursue strategic opportunities including on critical industries such as critical minerals.
- Strengthen community links and mutual understanding by easing mobility for Indonesians, investing more in building Indonesia literacy in Australia, enhancing institutional partnerships that extend beyond leadership and elite circles.

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Cover photo: The prime minister Anthony Albanese meeting President Prabowo Subianto's inauguration as President of Indonesia, November 2024 (IG: @albomp).