



# Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



## POLICY BRIEF

### The Overflight Question: Indonesia and Strategic Independence

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**Delhi Policy Group**

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### Cover Images:

1. Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto meet U.S. President Donald Trump in Washington, D.C., during a working visit to the United States from February 17–21, 2026. Source: [Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia, Washington](#)
2. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth welcomed his Indonesian counterpart, Defence Minister Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin, to the Pentagon, where they announced the establishment of the Major Defence Cooperation Partnership (MDCP) on April 13, 2026. Source: [Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin](#)
3. On February 19, 2026, Secretary of State Marco Rubio met Indonesian Foreign Minister Sugiono in Washington, D.C., to reaffirm their commitment to the Indonesia-U.S. Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Source: [Minister for Foreign Affairs-Indonesia](#)

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**The Overflight Question: Indonesia and Strategic Independence**

by

Divya Rai

**Contents**

**Introduction ..... 1**

**The Overflight Controversy..... 1**

**Sovereignty by Degree ..... 3**

**Indonesia and Strategic Independence ..... 4**

**Conclusion..... 5**

## The Overflight Question: Indonesia and Strategic Independence

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### Introduction

On April 13, 2026, Indonesia and the United States formally signed a Major Defense Cooperation Partnership (MDCP) agreement, during a meeting at the Pentagon between U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth and Indonesian Defense Minister Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin. In a joint statement released during the visit, the U.S. Department of War and Indonesia's Defense Ministry said that the MDCP was the fruit of "decades of cooperation", positioning it as a guiding framework to advance bilateral defence relations across modernisation, training, and interoperability.<sup>1</sup>

Structurally, the agreement rests on three foundational pillars: military modernisation and capacity building; training and professional military education; and exercises and operational cooperation. The framework commits both countries to pursuing "cutting-edge initiatives", including "next generation" maritime, subsurface, and autonomous systems technologies and maintenance, repair, and overhaul support. The framework also includes cooperation in military modernisation, training, joint exercises, and the development of next-generation capabilities in maritime, subsurface, and autonomous systems.<sup>2</sup> For Jakarta, the deal offers access to capabilities that directly address growing concerns over foreign surveillance in Indonesian waters. For Washington, it deepens Indonesia's integration into the broader Indo-Pacific security architecture – without requiring permanent basing rights.

Yet, the signing was almost immediately overshadowed by a controversy that had already erupted in the days preceding it.

### The Overflight Controversy

A day before the Pentagon meeting, on April 12, 2026, the paper Sunday Guardian published details from what it described as a classified U.S. document titled

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<sup>1</sup> Department of War. 2026. "Readout of Secretary of War Pete Hegseth's Meeting with Indonesian Minister of Defense Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin." April 13, 2026. <https://www.war.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/4458468/secretary-of-war-hegseth-hosted-bilateral-meeting-with-indonesian-defense-minis/>.

<sup>2</sup> Department of War. 2026. "Joint Statement on the Establishment of the U.S.-Indonesia Major Defense Cooperation Partnership." April 13, 2026. <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Apr/13/2003911810/-1/-1/1/READOUT-OF-SECRETARY-OF-WAR-PETE-HEGSETH-MEETING-WITH-INDONESIA-MINISTER-OF-DEFENSE-SJAFRIE-SJAMSOEDDIN.PDF>

*“Operationalising U.S. Overflight”*.<sup>3</sup> The document reportedly proposed blanket overflight access for American military aircraft across the Indonesian archipelago, including provisions for contingency operations, crisis response, and mutually agreed exercise-related activities. Crucially, the mechanism would allow U.S. aircraft to transit Indonesian airspace upon notification alone, remaining active until a U.S. deactivation notice – meaning access would be continuous rather than subject to case-by-case approval. The arrangement would also establish a direct hotline between the U.S. Pacific Air Forces and the Indonesian air operations centres. The report further claimed that the proposal had reached the level of in-principle agreement between the two presidents during Prabowo’s February visit to Washington.

This kind of authorisation would stand in direct tension with Indonesia's existing legal framework. Currently, Indonesian Airspace Management Law (2025) requires foreign aircraft on unscheduled flights to obtain authorisation before entering Indonesian airspace. The law classifies airspace into restricted, limited, and dangerous zones and mandates individualised clearances to safeguard national security.<sup>4</sup> The difference between this system and the proposed notification-based regime is thus not merely procedural – it is substantive. Per-flight clearance means Indonesia evaluates each request on its own terms: the aircraft, the mission, and the destination. A notification-only system, by contrast, front-loads that judgement to a single point of agreement and thereafter extends indefinitely. In granting blanket overflight access on a notification basis, Indonesia would effectively be ceding the right to decide, flight by flight, who enters its airspace and under what conditions.

The report immediately drew criticism within Indonesia; many saw the proposal of granting the blanket overflight access as weakening Indonesia’s practical control over its own airspace and undermining the country’s sovereignty. Jakarta confirmed that discussions were ongoing, but emphasised that the proposal remained under careful inter-agency review and that no binding commitment had been made.<sup>5</sup> The Indonesian Foreign Ministry’s response was notably measured: officials stopped well short of dismissing the proposal outright, instead stating that national interests and sovereignty would be the guiding criteria in any such arrangement.

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<sup>3</sup> The Sunday Guardian. 2026. “US Seeks Blanket Overflight Access via Indonesia”. April 10, 2026. <https://sundayguardianlive.com/world/us-seeks-blanket-overflight-access-via-indonesia-183288/>.

<sup>4</sup> Kompas. “Airspace Management Bill Approved as Law, Regulating Sanctions and Use of Drones”, November 25, 2025. <https://www.kompas.id/artikel/en-ruu-pengelolaan-ruang-udara-disetujui-jadi-uu-atur-sanksi-dan-penggunaan-drone>

<sup>5</sup> Antara News. 2026. “Indonesia reviews US military overflight proposal”. April 23, 2026. <https://en.antaranews.com/news/413505/indonesia-reviews-us-military-overflight-proposal>

## Sovereignty by Degree

Part of what makes this controversy instructive is how military access is increasingly negotiated not through explicit alliances but through the accumulation of logistics arrangements, training agreements, interoperability clauses, and expedited clearance procedures. The reported draft covered three mission categories: contingency operations, crisis response, and mutually agreed exercises. The first two are conspicuously elastic. “Crisis response” could encompass humanitarian assistance or a military strike package. “Contingency operations” might describe disaster relief coordination or naval manoeuvres in the South China Sea.

Usually, the less dramatic provisions that rarely attract headlines – namely, logistics support arrangements, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief cooperation<sup>6</sup> – look harmless. Ostensibly, none resemble granting special rights to the foreign military in sovereign airspace, and none violate Indonesia’s sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> However, in fact, it is here that issues start to become more complex. Under a blanket access regime, Indonesia would have no meaningful basis to distinguish between these categories on a flight-by-flight basis. If a U.S. aircraft transiting Indonesian airspace were heading toward a military operation against a third party, Indonesia would become – whether it intended to or not – a facilitating state. It was informed in advance; it did not object. This is the logic by which passive acquiescence can be read as active complicity, and it is precisely what Indonesia’s carefully hedged diplomatic language appears designed to forestall. Phrases such as “urging caution”, “still under review”, and “no binding agreement” are not denials but are typical diplomatic signals used when an issue is real, sensitive, and still being navigated internally.

In addition, there is a legal dimension that has been overlooked. Indonesia is an archipelagic state, which gives it special rights and obligations under UNCLOS. One key provision is designating Archipelagic Sea Lane Passages (ALKI): specific corridors through which foreign ships and aircraft have an automatic right of transit that Indonesia cannot block or suspend. Indonesia has only designated three ALKI corridors, and they all run north-south (connecting the Pacific to the Indian Ocean)<sup>8</sup>. Major U.S. military routes, however, frequently run east-west – connecting bases in

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<sup>6</sup> Centre for Strategic and International Studies, “Open Skies, Open Questions: Indonesia's Airspace and the Price of Partnership”, April 15, 2026. <https://www.csis.or.id/publication/open-skies-open-questions-indonesias-airspace-and-the-price-of-partnership/>.

<sup>7</sup> Asia Times. “Indonesia-US overflight debate misses the strategic point”. April 27, 2026. <https://asiatimes.com/2026/04/indonesia-us-overflight-debate-misses-the-strategic-point/>

<sup>8</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). “Contingent Capabilities: Southeast Asia’s Emerging Anti-access Environment”, February 2026. [https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2026/contingent-capabilities-southeast-asias-emerging-anti-access-environment/contingent-capabilities-southeast\\_asias-emerging-anti-access-environment.pdf](https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2026/contingent-capabilities-southeast-asias-emerging-anti-access-environment/contingent-capabilities-southeast_asias-emerging-anti-access-environment.pdf)

Guam, the Philippines, and Australia across the Java Sea, and further west to the Indian Ocean base in Diego Garcia – and do not fall within any formally designated ALKI corridor. Indonesia's regulations require foreign aircraft to use designated archipelagic sea lanes, with any passage outside these routes needing prior authorisation – an interpretation disputed by the United States. A 2014 U.S. State Department report declared some Indonesian practices inconsistent with UNCLOS, reflecting Washington's view that such flights constitute normal international navigation.<sup>9</sup> This disagreement creates a legal grey zone: if Indonesia signs a broad overflight agreement covering the Java Sea without first clarifying its legal position, it risks implicitly conceding the U.S. interpretation of its own airspace. That would be a consequential legal move dressed as a security arrangement.

## Indonesia and Strategic Independence

Indonesia's geostrategic significance is difficult to overstate. Straddling the air corridors linking the Western Pacific, the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and northern Australia, its airspace is not merely a domain of national jurisdiction. It is a critical buffer in the region's security architecture. The U.S. already has standing overflight arrangements with Australia, Japan and the Philippines. Viewed through the prism of contingency planning for Taiwan, the South China Sea, or broader Indo-Pacific mobility, Indonesian airspace fills a conspicuous gap: without it, rapid air movement across this theatre demands longer routing, additional refuelling stops, and greater operational complexity. That is precisely what makes such access so strategically valuable to Washington.

Indonesia's doctrine of '*bebas aktif*'- independent and active foreign policy – has long rested on careful management of sovereignty, political independence, strategic autonomy, and balanced relations with major powers. The doctrine is not inherently threatened by bilateral defence cooperation. It is, however, tested by arrangements that alter the practical reality of how sovereignty operates at moments of crisis.<sup>10</sup> The Chicago Convention of 1944 is unambiguous on this point, affirming in Article 1 that every state holds complete and exclusive sovereignty over its airspace<sup>11</sup>. That principle becomes more consequential, not less, when powerful states seek to operationalise access agreements under strategic pressure.

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<sup>9</sup> Connelly, Sean. 2022. "Archipelago Angst: How Indonesia, US Differ on Air Routes over Sea Lanes". Lowy Institute. September 21, 2022. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/archipelago-angst-how-indonesia-us-differ-air-routes-over-sea-lanes>.

<sup>10</sup> Centre for Strategic and International Studies, "Open Skies, Open Questions: Indonesia's Airspace and the Price of Partnership", April 15, 2026. <https://www.csis.or.id/publication/open-skies-open-questions-indonesias-airspace-and-the-price-of-partnership/>.

<sup>11</sup> Convention on International Civil Aviation. [https://www.icao.int/sites/default/files/2024-12/7300\\_cons.pdf](https://www.icao.int/sites/default/files/2024-12/7300_cons.pdf)

The U.S. request for blanket overflight access does not exist in a vacuum – it lands in a region where China's overwhelming presence is deeply felt. Beijing's stake in this question is straightforwardly operational: U.S. aircraft transiting Indonesian airspace gain access to corridors directly relevant to the South China Sea, geography that China watches closely. Indonesia has navigated this tension before – for instance by renaming disputed waters the “North Natuna Sea” and patrolling against Chinese fishing vessels without Beijing retaliating economically. But an overflight arrangement with the U.S. is a different order of alignment. Unlike a dispute over maritime names, blanket U.S. air access over the archipelago would mark a structural change – one that directly affects Chinese military planning in the region.

Historical precedent suggests that Indonesia is not categorically opposed to granting special airspace access. Its arrangements with Singapore and Malaysia demonstrate a willingness to do so when the purpose is clear, the scope is limited, and the governing rules are well defined. Nonetheless, the geopolitical context always shapes the risk calculus. Accommodating immediate neighbours carries relatively contained political and security costs. Granting blanket access to the United States – a superpower increasingly inclined toward unpredictable and unilateral action – amid intensifying great-power competition carries a substantially different set of implications.

## Conclusion

The Trump administration's pursuit of expanded operational access around the Indonesian archipelago reflects a clear strategic logic: Indonesia lies along a critical air and sea corridor, and that position matters for U.S. contingency planning across the Indo-Pacific. However, for Jakarta the calculation is far more complex. Enhanced defence cooperation with Washington offers real benefits, yet Indonesia cannot afford to jeopardise its relationship with China – its largest trading partner and a significant investor in its infrastructure and energy sector, and a strategically important neighbour across the South China Sea. An airspace arrangement with the U.S., with vague mission parameters, no per-flight oversight, and no domestic veto mechanism, presents a considerably harder case to make domestically and diplomatically. In the end, Indonesia's claim to strategic independence and equilibrium will be judged not by these avowed principles of long standing, but by the concrete reality of its decisions in this sensitive case.

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