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## Indonesia's *Bebas-Aktif* Foreign Policy and the 'Security Agreement' with Australia

RIZAL SUKMA\*

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Ever since the revolution, Indonesian governments have declared their intention to pursue an 'independent and active' foreign policy. That formulation has become a basic referent in discussing the problem of relations with the big powers. In fact, it has come to be regarded as the unchallengeable doctrinal basis of Indonesian foreign policy.

This status has, however, been achieved largely at the expense of a clear understanding of its meaning. The independent-and-active policy has, in fact, survived because it has proved amenable to frequent redefinition.<sup>1</sup>

It has been twenty years since Franklin B. Weinstein wrote the above passage. His book has since become one of the few authoritative sources for any discussion of the country's foreign policy. Despite disagreements with some of his arguments, few Indonesian analysts and policy makers interested in the subject or involved in the making of foreign policy have not been influenced by this book.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Weinstein's analysis is his elaboration of the evolutionary meaning of the self-proclaimed principle of *bebas-aktif* (free and active) as a doctrinal underpinning of Indonesia's foreign policy. He observes that from its formulation in 1948 until 1976, ten years after the New Order government came to power, Indonesia's governments have defined the principle differently. Twenty years after Weinstein, and with significant changes to Indonesia's foreign policy since the mid-1970s, it is timely to once again raise the question: what does *bebas-aktif* mean for the New Order, and has it changed in the last twenty years?

This question is especially important in light of the most recent initiative by Indonesia to conclude a 'security agreement' with Australia in December 1995; a move which puzzled foreign analysts, but which received relatively little discussion in Indonesia. For some, Indonesia's decision is clearly a violation of the principle of *bebas-aktif*. For others, especially for government spokesmen, the decision is seen as 'normal', and does not contravene the principle of *bebas-aktif* foreign policy. What is striking is that the decision attracted little domestic attention, and did not trigger any major debates among foreign policy élites.

This raises several questions. Why did the decision pass unnoticed in Indonesia? Does the lack of opposition to the Agreement mean that such a decision still falls within the framework of the *bebas-aktif* principle? Or, if Weinstein's assertion that the *bebas-aktif* policy has survived because it is amenable to redefinition remains valid, has the policy once again been redefined so that it now permits such a decision to be taken? Or, is it because of

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<sup>1</sup> Franklin B. Weinstein, *Indonesian Foreign Policy and the Dilemma of Dependence: From Sukarno to Suharto* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976) p. 161.

other factors that Weinstein had not foreseen twenty years ago? These are the fundamental questions this article will address.

This article examines the place of *bebas-aktif* in Indonesia's current foreign policy. The discussion is divided into four sections. First, it traces the evolution of the meaning of *bebas-aktif* in Indonesia's foreign policy since it was first formulated in 1948. Second, it discusses Indonesia's decision to conclude a 'security agreement' with Australia and explains how this decision was justified. Third, it examines why, unlike in the past, such a decision did not attract strong opposition from Indonesia's domestic forces by looking at changes to Indonesia's foreign policy making over the last decade, both in policy substance and in institutions that make the policy. Finally, it examines whether a new interpretation of *bebas-aktif* is emerging in Indonesia.

At first glance, Weinstein's assertion that the principle of *bebas-aktif* serves as an 'unchallengeable doctrinal basis of Indonesia's foreign policy' seems as valid as ever. However, by examining Indonesia's decision to enter a formal 'security arrangement' with Australia within the context of substantial and institutional changes over the last ten years in the New Order's foreign policy, this article demonstrates that the Indonesian government *does not need* to redefine *bebas-aktif* to guarantee its survival. Indeed, after thirty years of the New Order, foreign policy has ceased to function as a political instrument that could be used by opposition forces to embarrass the government.

### Theory and practice of *bebas-aktif* policy: from Sukarno to Suharto

The principle of *bebas-aktif* in Indonesia's foreign policy originated in a statement made by the Republic's first Prime Minister, Mohammad Hatta, in September 1948. The statement was a response to demands by contending political forces over the status of Indonesia in world politics amidst the growing rivalry between two opposing blocs led by the US and the Soviet Union. Faced with the pressing need to define Indonesia's international identity amidst intense domestic political rivalry, on 2 September before the Central Indonesian National Committee (KNIP), Hatta laid down the basic principles of Indonesia's foreign policy:

Have the Indonesian people fighting for their freedom no other course of action open to them than to chose between being pro Russian or pro American? Is there no other position that can be taken in the pursuit of our national ideas? The government is of the opinion that the position to be taken is that Indonesia should not be a passive party in the arena of international politics but that it should be an active agent entitled to determine its own standpoint with the right to fight for its own goal—the goal of a fully independent Indonesia.<sup>2</sup>

This position was taken with two important objectives in mind. First, to the outside world, it identified Indonesia's position in the international system, rejecting a commitment to either bloc in the rivalry between the two superpowers. Second, it was intended to mitigate domestic rivalry among competing élites. Through an independent position in world politics, Hatta sought to prevent ideological rivalry between Washington and Moscow from aggravating acute political differences within the country's political élite. In other words, the principle of *bebas-aktif* grew out of the Indonesian government's need to cultivate national unity.

The term '*bebas*' soon proved to be a difficult concept to define and operationalise accurately. Even though Indonesian governments, since recognition of independence by the Dutch in December 1949, reiterated their commitment to *bebas-aktif*, they differed with

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<sup>2</sup> The speech is published under the title of *Mendayung Di Antara Dua Karang* (Jakarta: Ministry of Information, 1951). The English translation is from Michael Leifer, *Indonesia's Foreign Policy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983) p. 20.

regard to its meaning and implementation. Weinstein observes that from 1950 to 1976, the principle of *bebas-aktif* had at least five meanings. The following discussion draws much from his work on the evolution of the *bebas-aktif* principle.<sup>3</sup>

During the Liberal Democracy period in the 1950s, the policy of *bebas-aktif* assumed two meanings. First, in the early 1950s it was defined as a policy that precluded the government from signing any international agreement that would link Indonesia to either side of the two opposing blocs. However, this position did not preclude Indonesia from being *aktif* in establishing world peace. Second, in the mid-1950s the definition of the *bebas-aktif* policy was broadened to include the obligation to establish a balance in Indonesia's relations with the two blocs. When Indonesia entered the period of Guided Democracy in 1959, the principle of *bebas-aktif* acquired its third and fourth meanings. In the early 1960s, President Sukarno extended its meaning to include balancing foreign economic relations so that Indonesia would not lean to the West or the East. By the mid-1960s, as Sukarno sought to radicalise domestic and foreign policy, *bebas-aktif* was defined in terms of Indonesia's leadership of an international movement in the developing world to oppose neo-imperialism.

The fifth meaning of *bebas-aktif* developed in the foreign policy of the New Order which came to power in 1966. Weinstein argues that the New Order attempted to combine all the meanings of *bebas-aktif* to justify its foreign policy. Thus, he finds that the pronouncements of New Order foreign policy contained the determination to avoid dependence on foreign powers, the return of the 'no pacts' interpretation of the 1950s, the reiteration of a commitment to non-alignment, the continued adherence to the principle of anti-colonialism, the need to blend policy with flexibility and pragmatism, and the aspiration to play a leading role in the Southeast Asian region.

In practice, the *bebas-aktif* principle was replete with nuances and subject to criticisms. During the early 1950s, foreign policy was characterised by the preference of the government to maintain close relations with the US. The failure to satisfy the requirement for being 'independent' from one superpower proved to be a dangerous foreign policy when the Sukiman Cabinet fell from power in 1952 after it concluded the Mutual Security Act (MSA) with the US in order to secure foreign aid. The episode conveyed a clear lesson to other cabinets not to take a foreign policy initiative that could damage their domestic political standing. Only during the tenure of the two cabinets of Ali Sastroamidjojo (July 1953–August 1955; March 1956–April 1957), which sought to implement a broader interpretation of *bebas-aktif* that included a balanced relationship with the two superpowers and strong opposition to colonisation, did foreign policy produce relatively impressive results to promote activism and maintain Indonesia's independence by reducing the country's dependence on the West. Among the most important foreign policy initiatives during Ali's terms were the establishment of diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union in 1954, the staging of the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung in April 1955 and the introduction of the West Irian issue for the first time in the UN.

During the period of Guided Democracy, the *bebas-aktif* foreign policy took a radical turn. During this period, Indonesia managed to prevent itself from falling under Russian or American domination or from entering a pact with either side. Sukarno went even further, however, and founded a new 'pact'. He envisaged an international united front, the so-called New-Emerging Forces, to oppose neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism, meaning America and the West. This bold act clearly deviated from Hatta's *bebas-aktif* policy in which he maintained that Indonesia 'is not prepared to participate in any third bloc designed to act as a counterpoise to the two giant blocs'.<sup>4</sup> Foreign policy became even more radical when

<sup>3</sup> Weinstein, *Indonesian Foreign Policy and the Dilemma of Dependence* chapter 5.

<sup>4</sup> Mohammad Hatta, 'Indonesia's Foreign Policy', *Foreign Affairs* 31, 3 (April 1953) p. 443.

Sukarno proclaimed the *Ganyang Malaysia* (Crush Malaysia) Campaign in 1963, withdrew from the UN in 1965, and proposed the establishment of a 'Jakarta-Peking' axis in August 1965. As Weinstein has argued, Indonesia pursued these initiatives primarily to regain independence at the expense of foreign aid for economic development. The results were disastrous. Economic conditions deteriorated, and Indonesia became more and more isolated from other countries. What is striking, however, was that all of these governments claimed that their foreign policies were guided by the principle of *bebas-aktif*.

With the collapse of Guided Democracy following the aborted Communist coup in September 1965, Sukarno's radical interpretation of *bebas-aktif* was denounced by the subsequent New Order government as a *penyelewengan* (deviation). The New Order then proclaimed its intention to bring foreign policy back to *politik bebas-aktif yang sebenarnya* (the 'true' independent-and-active policy). However, the conduct of foreign policy during the New Order did not escape criticism. For example, close economic relations with the West and Japan were criticised as a violation of the true *bebas-aktif* principle. Moreover, the prolonged suspension of diplomatic ties with China was taken as evidence that Indonesia had abandoned its commitment to non-alignment. The New Order leadership was also criticised for being 'too low profile' and no longer active in foreign affairs. Foreign policy in the New Order, however, has followed the *bebas-aktif* principle of 'no pact' as originally defined.

Criticism began to recede at the end of 1980s after the Indonesian government indicated its willingness to once again play a more active role in international affairs. After devoting more than two decades of its resources to economic development, the New Order government felt that the time had come for Indonesia to have an international role commensurate with domestic economic success. The New Order began to pursue the principle of *bebas-aktif* more vigorously by restoring diplomatic ties with China in August 1990, becoming the Chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement for 1992–95, and hosting the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in November 1994. Moreover, the New Order's commitment to maintaining independence was clearly displayed by the decision to dissolve the Inter-Governmental Group on Indonesia (IGGI) after the government decided that donors, especially the Netherlands, had used aid to interfere in Indonesia's domestic affairs.<sup>5</sup>

The first half of the 1990s saw the resurgence of Indonesia's foreign policy through an attempt to fully manifest the principle of *bebas-aktif*. Whereas the New Order's preoccupation with economic development during the 1970s and the 1980s resulted in a foreign policy which did not emphasise excessive attention to either *bebas* or *aktif*, in the 1990s the government began to pursue a balanced emphasis on both aspects of the *bebas-aktif* foreign policy.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it was surprising when Indonesia concluded a 'security treaty' with Australia in December 1995, and the question arises as to whether this constitutes a sign that Indonesia has abandoned the *bebas-aktif* principle altogether, or represents the adoption of a new meaning of the principle. When this was not followed by any major foreign policy statements from the New Order government, the decision became even more puzzling.

<sup>5</sup> For a more comprehensive discussion on the resurgence of Indonesia's foreign policy, see Rizal Sukma, 'The Evolution of Indonesia's Foreign Policy: An Indonesian View', *Asian Survey* 35, 3 (March 1995) pp. 304–15; Heath McMicheal, 'Indonesian Foreign Policy: Towards a More Assertive Style', Research Paper no.40 (Nathan, QLD: Griffith University, Centre for the Study of Australian-Asian Relations, 1987); and Michael R.J. Vatikiotis, 'A Giant Treads Carefully: Indonesia's Foreign Policy in the 1990s' in Robert S. Ross (ed.), *East Asia in Transition: Towards A New Regional Order* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1995; Singapore: ISEAS, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> For a more comprehensive discussion on this point, see Sukma, 'The Evolution of Indonesia's Foreign Policy'.

### The 'security agreement' with Australia

On the eve of the Fifth ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in December 1995, Indonesia surprised its ASEAN partners when the Republic's State Minister for State Secretariat Moerdiono announced that Indonesia had concluded a 'security agreement' with Australia. Until this announcement, the agreement had been a well-kept secret in Indonesia and Australia. Even Indonesia's ASEAN partners were apparently not informed, let alone consulted, about the decision beforehand. More interestingly, Indonesia's Foreign Minister Ali Alatas was reportedly reduced to reading from an Australian press briefing when asked about the agreement in Bangkok;<sup>7</sup> thus conveying the impression that he was not familiar with the undertaking. In responding to the news, ASEAN partners, such as Singapore and Malaysia, only extended the 'diplomatic courtesy' of describing the agreement as 'positive' and 'good'. The agreement was the result of eighteen months of personal diplomacy between President Suharto and Australia's former Prime Minister Paul Keating.<sup>8</sup>

The agreement, officially called the Agreement on Maintaining Security (AMS), consists of three main points. First, both sides agreed to 'consult regularly at a ministerial level on matters affecting their common security'. Second, both countries 'agree to consult in the case of adverse challenges to either party or to their common security interests and, if appropriate, consider measures which might be taken either individually or jointly and in accordance with the process of each party'. The third point states that the two countries will 'promote beneficial cooperative security activities'.<sup>9</sup> In short, the language used in the AMS reminds us of the ANZUS Treaty (Australia, New Zealand, and the US).<sup>10</sup>

Despite the AMS having the spirit of a military pact, Indonesia's State Secretary for the State Secretariat maintains that the agreement 'cannot be categorised as a military pact or defence pact'.<sup>11</sup> Shortly after the Agreement was signed in Jakarta, President Suharto stated: 'the Agreement is expected to eradicate whatever doubts some people in Australia might still have about Indonesia's position'.<sup>12</sup> Following Moerdiono and Suharto, Foreign Minister Ali Alatas also argued that the Agreement only formalised the existing bilateral defence relationship. He also attempted to draw a clear line between what he called 'defence cooperation' and 'security cooperation' in which the AMS, in Alatas' view, represented the latter. Moreover, Alatas also expressed his hope that the Agreement will 'put to rest whatever vague and unfounded fears that may linger in some parts of Australia' about Indonesia being a potential military threat.<sup>13</sup>

The AMS provoked different reactions in each country. In Australia, criticisms centred around the way the Agreement was negotiated. By keeping the process confidential, Keating was charged with being undemocratic and ignoring the parliamentary process. Australia's Defence Minister, Ian McLachlan, of the newly-elected Liberal government, for example, maintained that although his government would respect the Agreement, it still regretted the Keating administration's decision to sign the Agreement in secret.<sup>14</sup>

In Indonesia, one would have expected that a decision to enter a formal security arrangement with a foreign country would provoke a heated debate about the impact on

<sup>7</sup> John McBeth, Michael Vatikiotis and Jacqueline Rees, 'Personal Pact', *Far Eastern Economic Review* (28 December 1995–4 January 1996) p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> McBeth, Vatikiotis and Rees, 'Personal Pact'.

<sup>9</sup> *KOMPAS* (Jakarta) (23 May 1996).

<sup>10</sup> I would like to thank Professor Michael Leifer for drawing this point to my attention.

<sup>11</sup> *Republika* (Jakarta) (15 December 1995).

<sup>12</sup> *Republika* (19 December 1995).

<sup>13</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review* (28 December 1995–4 January 1996) p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> *KOMPAS* (22 April 1996).

Indonesia's long-held *bebas-aktif* foreign policy. It was this assumption that apparently underlined Alatas' remarks quoted earlier. Quite possibly, he anticipated that without making a clear distinction between 'defence' and 'security' cooperation, the government's decision would have easily been attacked for violating the principle of a *bebas-aktif* foreign policy. No foreign policy officials in Indonesia, including Alatas, could have overlooked the strong attachment of Indonesia's political élite to this principle.

Surprisingly, however, little negative public reaction or criticism was directed towards the decision. Most foreign policy élite in Jakarta discussed the decision in terms of the potential economic benefits of the agreement. Some even rejected any suggestion that the Agreement signalled the end of *bebas-aktif* foreign policy and, instead, praised it as 'a manifestation of the improvement in bilateral defence relations between Indonesia and Australia'.<sup>15</sup> This is quite astonishing, because, as mentioned earlier, when Prime Minister Sukiman signed the MSA with the US in 1952, despite trying to secure American aid with the agreement, it led to a very different result.

The strongest public criticism came from a well respected retired general, Hasnan Habib, five months after the official conclusion of the Agreement.<sup>16</sup> The attack was made during a seminar, Enhancing Indonesian–Australian Relations, in Jakarta on 22 May 1996. Referring to the second point of the agreement, General Hasnan Habib maintained: 'I see [the Agreement] as a military pact because the two countries commit themselves to provide mutual assistance in defence'. In his view, the provision meant that 'if Indonesia was attacked by a third party, Australia could interfere to help it, and vice versa'. General Habib also attributed the Agreement as Australia's 'successful diplomatic coup'. Habib went to the extent of saying that 'this agreement creates the impression that Indonesia has become part of the FPDA'.<sup>17</sup> So, why don't we join the FPDA altogether? Moreover, he also stated that because the Agreement must have been intended to anticipate a 'threat' from a foreign country or a third party, then 'Indonesia has to find out which foreign country that might be'.<sup>18</sup>

What is striking from General Habib's strong reaction was that he did not directly raise the more fundamental question of whether or not the Agreement contradicted the principle of *bebas-aktif*. Instead, he tended to question the nature of the Agreement. However, such remarks can also be interpreted as an indirect criticism of the conduct of Indonesia's foreign policy. Because, by referring to the Agreement as a military pact, Habib implied that by entering into such a pact, Indonesia has in fact departed from the *bebas-aktif* principle. One participant, however, did raise the question of whether Indonesia has not violated the principle of *bebas-aktif*. But, it is interesting that *KOMPAS*, a major Indonesian daily which reported the seminar, did not even mention how this question was answered. Instead, in its editorial, *KOMPAS* argued: 'the defence agreement between Indonesia and Australia is a logical choice, which is complementary to the ARF [ASEAN Regional Forum] multilateral process'.<sup>19</sup>

Before analysing the impact of the AMS on the principle of *bebas-aktif*, it is important

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Otje Soediono, 'Soeharto–Keating: Kejutan di Ujung Tahun' (Soeharto–Keating: A Surprise at the End of Year), *SINAR* (Jakarta) (6 January 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Lt-General (rt.) Hasnan Habib is a leading military thinker and strategist. He was actively involved in the formulation of the doctrine of *Ketahanan Nasional* (National Resilience) which serves as the foundation of Indonesia's defence and security thinking.

<sup>17</sup> The FPDA, or the Five Power Defence Arrangements, is a defence pact involving Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore.

<sup>18</sup> *KOMPAS* (23 May 1996).

<sup>19</sup> *KOMPAS* (24 May 1996).

to ask why the government's decision to enter such a formal security arrangement has not attracted strong criticism from within Indonesia. This response is particularly puzzling considering that this kind of agreement was the first that Indonesia had signed with a foreign country. As discussed earlier, the 'no pact' interpretation of the *bebas-aktif* principle has survived for fifty years. Indeed, Indonesia has never entered into a formal security arrangement before. When it did try once in 1952, strong criticism erupted and the government resigned. Now that Indonesia has entered one with a very different result, a new chapter in the Republic's foreign policy is bound to open. Does the decision represent a departure from *bebas-aktif*, or just a manifestation of a new interpretation which is yet to be articulated?

The main answer seems to lie not so much in one of these possibilities, but more in the changes in the spirit of foreign policy and in the nature of how foreign policy is made and not made under the New Order. The decision, and the mute reactions by Indonesia's élite, is better understood as the result of changes to policy substance and the structure of foreign policy making. Through such an understanding, it is clear that Weinstein's assertion quoted at the beginning of this article, that the *bebas-aktif* principle is 'the unchallengeable doctrinal basis of Indonesian foreign policy', has stood the test of time.

### **Foreign policy under the New Order**

Any understanding of contemporary Indonesia's foreign policy should begin with the recognition that the place of foreign policy in domestic politics under the New Order is both similar to and different from the period of Guided Democracy. It is similar in that foreign policy continues to reflect various impulses in domestic politics. It is different in that under the New Order foreign policy ceased to function as a 'battleground' where contending forces fought battles to alienate and dismiss political opponents by using particular foreign policy issues. More importantly, opposition forces are able to use these issues as a political weapon to criticise the government's program of economic development.

The fact that foreign policy no longer serves as a battleground for domestic political forces against the government owes much to the extent of government control. Since the New Order government came to power, it has sought to 'pasteurise' domestic politics from ideological and political rivalry and conflicts that had characterised the previous period. Initially, through the creation of the government electoral body, GOLKAR, public servants were required to dissociate themselves from political parties and give their 'monoloyalty' to GOLKAR instead. Then, the government developed the doctrine of a 'floating mass' to 'safeguard' the people from political manipulation by competing political parties, thus effectively denying for political parties the ability to conduct political activities in rural areas. In 1973, all political parties were compelled to regroup into two new parties, the PPP (United Development Party) and the PDI (Indonesian Democratic Party). Finally, in 1985, these two parties, along with other mass organisations, were obliged to accept the *Pancasila* as their sole ideological foundation. As a result, opposition political forces are weak and unable to establish their own power base independent of the government.

In accordance with the 'restructuring' of political order, the Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI) emerged as the most dominant political force in Indonesia's New Order. Under the leadership of General, now President Suharto, various power centres within ABRI were quickly centralised, thus eradicating intra-military rivalry so prevalent during the Guided Democracy era. Soon after the elimination of the Indonesian Communist Party (the PKI), ABRI implemented the *dwifungsi* (dual functions) doctrine in its fullest form, which even now still justifies ABRI's involvement in national, political and economic life, along with its defence role.

As the core of the New Order, ABRI began to pursue the twin objectives of *stabilitas*



(stability) and *pembangunan ekonomi* (economic development) in order to create a modern Indonesia. The legitimacy of the goals of *stabilitas* and *pembangunan* rested in part on the New Order's role as the guardian of the state against potential threats which might come from communism and China. It was these twin objectives and the New Order's threat perception that have guided the New Order's interpretation, and implementation, of Indonesia's *bebas-aktif* foreign policy since 1966. For the New Order government, foreign policy should bring concrete benefits for Indonesia's economic development. As Weinstein argued, a foreign policy of maintaining independence gave way to a foreign policy of development. Although foreign ministry officials, intellectuals, and other segments of the society continued to push for a more active international role for Indonesia, the military leadership under President Suharto firmly believed that such a role could not be attained until after Indonesia possessed 'national vitality'. The result was a conscious choice to pursue a 'low profile' international role to support domestic economic reconstruction.

As mentioned earlier, as Indonesia's development program progressed, the 'low profile' foreign policy also began to change after the early 1980s. This change was also a result of President Suharto's growing confidence in domestic achievements and his gradual involvement in foreign policy issues.<sup>20</sup> In 1969, he stated: 'we shall only be able to play an effective role if we ourselves are possessed of a great national vitality'.<sup>21</sup> In 1989, he reiterated: 'Indonesia will have a say in the world only if it has successfully addressed its domestic challenges'.<sup>22</sup> In his August 1990 national address, President Suharto declared that these challenges had been met and therefore it was time for Indonesia to play a greater international role. President Suharto was obviously the architect behind a more assertive Indonesian foreign policy.<sup>23</sup>

With Indonesia's government having officially declared its intention to play a greater international role, a wide range of foreign policy initiatives and options present themselves. President Suharto's command over foreign policy making, and his strong position in domestic politics, ensures that the ability to choose different foreign policy options is greater than it has been since independence.<sup>24</sup> Compared to Sukarno, President Suharto is far less constrained by competing political forces in deciding which course of foreign policy he should take. After thirty years of his rule, President Suharto has become 'comfortable' in handling foreign policy issues. Indeed, foreign policy has become his area of expertise in which, for example, he could make a decision despite opposition from some ABRI leaders, such as the decision to normalise diplomatic ties with China. He was able to make this decision because, as a leading Indonesian scholar asserted: 'no one wanted to be seen as opposing the president'.<sup>25</sup> The relative absence of public opposition to Indonesia's decision to enter into a formal security arrangement with Australia can also be understood in this context.

The government's control over foreign policy, which is no longer constrained by

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Gordon Hein, *Suharto's Foreign Policy: Second Generation Nationalism in Indonesia*, PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, CA, 1986 (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Information Service, 1988) p. 50; and Vatikiotis, 'Giant Treads Carefully' p. 218.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Leifer, *Indonesia's Foreign Policy* p. 112.

<sup>22</sup> *Jakarta Post* (13 September 1989).

<sup>23</sup> For the most recent discussion on the role of President Suharto in foreign policy, see Leo Suryadinata, *Indonesia's Foreign Policy: Aspiring to International Leadership* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1996) especially chapter 4.

<sup>24</sup> On a series of recent foreign policy initiatives taken by Indonesia, see Sukma, 'The Evolution of Indonesia's Foreign Policy'.

<sup>25</sup> Dewi Fortuna Anwar, *Indonesia and the Security of Southeast Asia* (Jakarta: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 1992) p. 43.

domestic rivalries, is also reinforced by how Indonesia's élite has come to view the place of the *bebas-aktif* principle in foreign policy discourse. Gordon Hein's study illuminates the significance of this factor in shaping the direction of Indonesia's foreign policy under the New Order. He notes that the majority, if not all, of Indonesia's élite share the view that *bebas-aktif* is one of the fundamental guiding principles.<sup>26</sup> There is also a strong consensus about the enduring relevance of this principle. Both the New Order political élite, and the critics, do not consider it necessary to change this guiding principle, even though they are aware that the international environment has changed considerably since the end of the 1980s. Indeed, the consensus is so strong that a deliberate deviation from this principle seems unthinkable.

The nature of domestic politics and the supreme authority of the government over foreign policy leave the foreign policy élite able to comment freely on foreign policy issues, but able to play only a limited role in influencing the making of actual policy. The authority to pursue a particular foreign policy primarily rests with the President and his close aides. In a way, this is the nature of foreign policy making in almost any country. This explains why any government, including Indonesia's, occupies an advantageous position to justify a particular decision. As Hein aptly states: 'Provided the government takes care to justify a particular foreign-policy decision in terms of an established principle, the opposition can only accept the decision as a *fait accompli* or scramble to show how a "true" interpretation of that principle would yield a different policy choice'.<sup>27</sup>

Indonesia's decision to conclude the AMS with Australia reflects this reality in domestic politics. The government was already in a position to invoke the principle of *bebas-aktif* to justify the decision. The government does not need to provide a new 'definition' of *bebas-aktif* to support its justification. In this case, Weinstein's claim that the principle of *bebas-aktif* serves as an 'unchallengeable doctrinal basis of Indonesia's foreign policy' remains as valid as ever. However, his assertion that the principle has survived because, 'it has proved amenable to frequent redefinition' needs to be reappraised. As the Indonesia–Australia security agreement reveals, the principle survives precisely because the government *does not* need to change it. Due to the government's control over domestic politics, foreign policy issues have ceased to be a rallying point for opposition against the government. In other words, under the New Order, foreign policy has returned to its conventional function of advancing external interests of the state and the regime, rather than promoting narrow domestic interests of competing political forces.

Indeed, government officials made no direct reference to the *bebas-aktif* principle in their attempt to justify the decision. Both Minister Moerdiono and Foreign Minister Alatas, for example, only stated that the AMS was not a military pact. Moerdiono also stated that the Agreement was, 'only to formalise the existing bilateral cooperation between the two countries in their attempts to contribute to the stability and security in the region'.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, according to Moerdiono, the Agreement, 'registers the spirit of mutual respect of sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity. Therefore, both countries will respect each other's sovereignty and will not interfere in each other's internal affairs'.<sup>29</sup> In short, official statements tended to emphasise the benefits of the Agreement not only for Indonesia and Australia but also for the stability of the region. In this view, whether or not Indonesia has deviated from the principle of *bebas-aktif* is not a relevant question.

<sup>26</sup> See Hein, *Suharto's Foreign Policy* especially chapter 2.

<sup>27</sup> Hein, *Suharto's Foreign Policy* p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> *Republika* (15 December 1995).

<sup>29</sup> *Republika* (19 December 1995).

### Concluding remarks: towards a new *bebas-aktif*?

The previous analysis is not meant to suggest that the principle of *bebas-aktif* is no longer significant for the conduct of Indonesia's foreign policy. Even though the government did not attempt to justify the security agreement with Australia in terms of the *bebas-aktif* principle, this does not mean that the *bebas-aktif* principle has been abandoned. On the contrary, the government continues to hold the view that the meaning of *bebas-aktif* to which it has subscribed for the past three decades remains as relevant as ever. The decision can be seen as a display of how, in the government's view, a truly *bebas-aktif* foreign policy should be implemented in the current international environment.

The decision clearly registers the rejection by Indonesia's New Order of a narrow interpretation of the *bebas-aktif* policy. The 1950s interpretation that *bebas-aktif* was a commitment to establish a balance with the two opposing blocs is obviously no longer relevant. Yet, as indicated by Moerdiono's remarks, the New Order government continues to subscribe to the early 1950s view that Indonesia should stay out of military pacts. However, by distinguishing between a 'military pact' and 'security cooperation', this interpretation has become more loosely defined. This suggests that the New Order tends to invoke a broader meaning of *bebas-aktif*, one that is pragmatic and flexible enough to accommodate whatever actions it sees are in the interests of the state. Indeed, as a technocrat in Suharto's cabinet remarked: '[the independent-and-active concept] means we are free to make our own decision as to how we can best meet our national needs at a given time'.<sup>30</sup> Conceived in this way, as Hein has argued, the implementation of *bebas-aktif* for the New Order still centres around the question of 'what would we gain from it?'<sup>31</sup>

What, then, are Indonesia's national needs at this time? What would it gain from a security arrangement with Australia? I contend that 'keeping all options open' is currently the main priority of Indonesia's foreign policy. A rigid definition of *bebas-aktif* would limit the ability of Indonesia's foreign policy to make adjustments to regional developments in the post-Cold War Asia-Pacific. It would also limit Indonesia's attempts to shape regional order through a greater international role. Security uncertainty in the region, especially with regard to China, requires a significant degree of 'flexibility' in Indonesia's foreign policy. Such flexibility can be attained by making the principle of *bebas-aktif* itself more flexible. In this regard, the security arrangement with Australia can be interpreted as an expression of Indonesia's attempt to loosen the meaning of the *bebas-aktif* concept, which opens up the possibility of formalising defence cooperation with other countries.

Close bilateral cooperation with Australia confirms the importance of this country for Indonesia's domestic and foreign policy. However, Indonesia's decision to conclude its first formal security treaty with Australia may have been based on the New Order's concern to avoid the impression that it has seriously compromised the *bebas-aktif* principle. Moreover, by choosing Australia instead of, say, the US, Indonesia wanted to demonstrate that it has not abandoned its long-term commitment to oppose any attempt by major powers, of which Australia is not included, to dominate the Southeast Asia region and interfere in regional affairs. In other words, Indonesia's decision to enter into a security agreement with Australia once again demonstrates the need to blend policy with flexibility and pragmatism in order to express its aspiration to play a leading role in the Southeast Asia region. The conceptual significance of the *bebas-aktif* principle in Indonesia's foreign policy has not changed. What has changed is the structure of domestic power that shapes the implementation of that principle.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Hein, *Suharto's Foreign Policy* p. 42.

<sup>31</sup> Hein, *Suharto's Foreign Policy* p. 42.

However, the Indonesia–Australia security agreement suggests that Indonesia may need to reformulate a formal interpretation of a broader, more flexible and more pragmatic *bebas-aktif* foreign policy. The Suharto government presently faces no obstacles to implementing a broader meaning of the concept without having to formulate a new interpretation. As discussed earlier, President Suharto dominates both domestic and foreign policy. More importantly, thirty years of his rule has guaranteed that foreign policy issues no longer interfere with domestic politics. The era when foreign policy was an effective vehicle by which the opposition could embarrass, and even topple, the government has long gone. However, there is no guarantee that in the post-Suharto era, foreign policy would not return to its unconventional function as a means of advancing narrow domestic interests, with unpredictable consequences beyond Indonesia. The need to maintain a strong consensus on this issue clearly constitutes a critical task for the New Order.