

Biden meets Indonesia's Widodo ahead of APEC summit

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Indonesian President Joko Widodo traveled to Washington for a meeting on Monday with United States President Joe Biden. The two leaders agreed to elevate their ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), the highest level of diplomatic cooperation. Widodo is also in the US to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit being held this week in San Francisco, California.

The meeting provided Biden the opportunity to push his administration's confrontation with China. The US president no doubt placed ample pressure on Widodo in private to distance Jakarta from its traditional non-aligned foreign policy stance and move closer into Washington's orbit.

During a joint press conference, Biden declared that the new CSP would develop the US-Indonesian relationship "across the board, affecting everything. It includes enhancing security cooperation, particularly maritime security. And it includes expanding our work together to build a secure and resilient supply chain."

The two sides announced collaboration in significant sectors including semiconductors, a key product for the US military. Biden and Widodo declared that the two countries would work together "to create a more resilient, secure, and sustainable global semiconductor value chain" while carrying out a review of Indonesia's semiconductor industry in order to develop it, ultimately to meet the needs of US imperialism.

The two leaders also stated that they would elevate military ties with a new Defense Cooperation Arrangement, which includes the expansion of both bilateral and multilateral military exercises. It also includes stepped up cooperation in regards to cybersecurity and so-called counterterrorism.

While avoiding direct mentions of China, the joint statement released at the meeting declared, "Both

leaders underscore their unwavering support for freedom of navigation in and overflight above the South China Sea and respect for sovereignty and for sovereign rights and jurisdiction of coastal states over their exclusive economic zones (EEZ) and continental shelves in accordance with the international law of the sea, as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)."

The purpose of such a statement from Washington's point of view is to inflame tensions in the region with what is a thinly-veiled denunciation of China.

Indonesia has a territorial dispute with China around the Natuna Islands in the South China Sea. In recent years, Chinese fishing vessels have operated in waters Indonesia considers part of its EEZ around these islands where Beijing has its own claims, leading to Jakarta increasing its military presence. An EEZ stretches 200 nautical miles from a country's coast.

Washington is essentially encouraging Indonesia to take a more hardline stance against China through the signing of a bilateral Work Plan on Maritime Security Cooperation deal "to prevent and counter illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing." This will raise the prospect of a clash.

It is these sorts of territorial disputes in the South China Sea, once minor, that Washington has whipped up to pressure China and justify US-led war games in the region as well as operating militarily on China's doorstep, claiming "freedom of navigation." It must also be noted that while the US demands Beijing adhere to the former's interpretation of UNCLOS, Washington refuses to adopt this UN convention.

Furthermore, increased military cooperation is already underway. On October 23, senior officials from the US State and Defense Departments met senior Indonesian officials in the Foreign Affairs and Defense

Ministries for their first ever “2+2 Foreign Policy and Defense Dialogue.”

Washington’s aim is to build a system of alliances throughout the Indo-Pacific region with the intention of economically and militarily surrounding China. This includes working to encourage members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), such as Indonesia, to move into the camp of US imperialism.

Washington and Indonesia also held the 2023 Super Garuda Shield exercises from August 31 to September 13 in multiple locations across Indonesia. Additional participants included Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom, France, and Singapore. Twelve more nations attended as observers, including South Korea, New Zealand, Canada, and the Philippines, all of which the US considers key components of its war plans with China. These sorts of US-led military exercises in the region have become almost daily occurrences.

Washington is also using its other alliances to pressure nations. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin was in South Korea on Monday where he and his South Korean counterpart Defense Minister Sin Won-sik agreed to leverage their alliance to pressure Southeast Asian and Pacific Island nations.

The two sides asserted that “the Alliance seeks to play a more active role in contributing to regional security, including by bolstering defense cooperation with Southeast Asia and Pacific Island Countries to cultivate a well-networked region, which is critical to protect the values of freedom, peace, and prosperity.”

Washington has demonstrated precisely what it means by “freedom, peace, and prosperity” through its complete backing of Israel’s genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. For all of the talk of “rule of law” in the Indo-Pacific, it amounts to nothing more than a tool to demonize Beijing. And while Widodo called on Biden to support a ceasefire in Gaza, through the signing of the CSP, he made clear that the mass murder of civilians is no barrier to working with Washington.

This does not mean Jakarta is rushing to join the US war drive against China, which is Indonesia’s largest trading partner. At the same time, Indonesia is dependent on Washington for security, with the US also being Indonesia’s second-largest trading partner.

Jakarta is therefore attempting to balance between the two, conscious that conflict between Washington and

Beijing will have a negative impact on its economy. Widodo stated in Washington that “Indonesia is always open to cooperate with any country, and not to take the side of any power, except to take the side of peace and humanity.”

This is ultimately unacceptable to Washington, which considers Indonesia a major factor in maintaining its hegemony in the region. Indonesia was the site of one of the most vicious crimes of the 20th century: the mass murder of one million workers, peasants, and Indonesian Communist Party members during the 1965–1966 CIA-organized coup led by Suharto. Having spilt this blood, Washington is not prepared to allow the country to go its own way.

Biden’s meeting with Widodo also came two days before the US president met with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the APEC summit. Rather than reduce tensions, Biden’s discussions with these and other leaders have been used to ratchet up the danger of war in the Indo-Pacific.



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