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Theme B: Emerging Powers in a Changing Global Order

### Between Blocs: The Strategic Nonalignment of Emerging Powers

In an era of resurgent great-power [competition](#), emerging states are increasingly navigating between rival blocs and, in doing so, are challenging the logic of the existing world order. More and more, developing nations are rejecting the notion that prosperity and security must depend on alignment with dominant powers like the United States, Russia, and China. Instead, through deliberate policies of strategic nonalignment, emerging powers—including Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines—are redefining the nature of global engagement, undermining traditional alliance structures and asserting a more fluid, multipolar approach to international politics in a way that enables them to protect their sovereignty, pursue economic development, and even mediate between geopolitical rivals.

Indonesia's nonalignment strategy is rooted in its longstanding "[free and active](#)" (*bebas dan aktif*) foreign policy doctrine, through which it [seeks](#) to maintain a measured balance in its relations with the world's great powers. The Indonesian government's fidelity to this doctrine was demonstrated in 2022, when it [refused](#) to disinvite Russian President Vladimir Putin from that year's G20 Leaders' Summit, which Indonesia was hosting, despite pressure from [Western nations](#) to exclude

Russia because of its invasion of Ukraine. This decision reflected Indonesia's desire to avoid damaging its relationship with Russia, from which it [hoped](#) and continues to [hope](#) to attract more investment. However, despite its attempts to maintain and expand its economic ties with Russia—on which the United States has levied a series of financial [sanctions](#) and trade [restrictions](#)—Indonesia [maintains](#) close diplomatic, economic, and security ties with the United States, demonstrating its willingness to engage with both of these rival powers in order to protect its interests by not foreclosing the possibility of trade with or investment from either of these nations.

Besides safeguarding its economic interests, Indonesia's willingness to engage with both the United States and Russia at a time when relations between those two great powers were at an ebb allowed it to position itself as a voice for peace and unity on the world stage. In a speech delivered at the opening of the 2022 G20 Summit, Indonesian President Joko Widodo [declared](#): "We should not divide the world into parts. We must not let the world fall into another Cold War." This call to avoid partitioning the world into spheres of influence defined by allegiance to a great power, as has so often [happened](#) in the past, not only reflected Indonesia's pragmatic, nonaligned approach to international relations but also served as an opportunity for this emerging power to elevate its profile as a constructive and independent global player.

Vietnam's nonalignment strategy is rooted in its so-called "[bamboo diplomacy](#)" (*ngoại giao cây tre*), a flexible approach to foreign affairs that emphasizes independence and adaptability. This doctrine allows Vietnam to maintain a careful balance in its ties with competing great powers, most notably the

United States and China. Despite its historical [tensions](#) with China, including ongoing territorial [disputes](#) in the South China Sea, Vietnam has not aligned itself fully with the United States, opting instead to pursue pragmatic engagement with both countries.

A notable example of Vietnam's strategic balancing occurred during the 2014 Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig crisis, which was precipitated by China's deployment of a state-owned drilling platform into marine waters claimed by Vietnam. This move provoked widespread outrage among the Vietnamese public, leading to mass protests and anti-China riots. Yet, rather than stoke public anger against China, Vietnam's largest trading partner, the Vietnamese government [adopted](#) a calibrated propaganda strategy through which it criticized China's actions while downplaying historical grievances and attempting to temper anti-Chinese nationalism. In doing so, Vietnam was able to avoid a major rupture with China, thus allowing the two nations to [keep](#) strong economic ties. At the same time, however, Hanoi was pursuing increased security ties with Washington, [hosting](#) high-level defense talks, [increasing](#) naval cooperation, and [receiving](#) American-made patrol vessels for use in its coast guard. This balanced, flexible approach allowed Vietnam to protect its economy while simultaneously bolstering its ability to safeguard its sovereignty, all without becoming beholden to any one major power.

The Philippines' nonalignment strategy is best summed up by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s [statement](#) that his nation seeks to be "a friend to all and an enemy to none." This doctrine is visible in the Philippines' calibrated handling of the ongoing [dispute](#) between China and Taiwan. While officially [adhering](#) to Beijing's

[One China](#) policy, Manila has strengthened ties with Taipei, expanding [trade](#) and joint [patrols](#) near the Taiwan Strait. At the same time, the Philippines maintains strong [economic](#) and [diplomatic](#) ties with China. Furthermore, although the Philippines has [deepened](#) its military cooperation with the United States through the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, Marcos has [asserted](#) that the Philippines will “not choose sides” in the geopolitical contest between Washington and Beijing, and has [prohibited](#) the use of American-operated bases in the Philippines to launch attacks against China. This balancing act was further illustrated in December 2023, when the Philippines [supported](#) a United Nations resolution calling for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza, diverging from its defense partner, the United States, which [vetoed](#) the measure. Taken together, these moves reveal a strategy of nonalignment that allows the Philippines to protect its national interests while asserting its sovereignty and sustaining constructive relations with both sides of major geopolitical rivalries.

Emerging states’ increasing tendency toward nonalignment could significantly decrease the ability of great powers to influence world affairs. In 2003, for instance, Indonesia bypassed an arms embargo that the United States and the European Union had [initiated](#) in response to Indonesia’s violent occupation of East Timor by [purchasing](#) fighter jets from Russia. More recently, efforts by Western powers to utilize economic sanctions to [pressure](#) Russia to end its war in Ukraine have been [undermined](#) by the insistence of emerging powers like Indonesia and Vietnam—which recently agreed to pursue new [oil](#), [gas](#), and [renewable energy](#) projects in cooperation with Russian firms—to maintain economic ties with Russia.

Incidents such as these underscore how the strategic nonalignment of emerging states is not just a diplomatic stance but also a structural challenge to the ability of great powers to enforce global consensus or shape international outcomes on their own terms.

Ultimately, the turn toward nonalignment by emerging powers signals a rejection of great-power rivalry and, in some cases, indicates an effort to prevent such rivalries from deepening or spreading. For instance, Indonesia—an emerging power that is concerned that taking sides in international conflicts might stall its economic ascent—seeks both to avoid aligning itself with any one great power and to help mend the rifts between antagonistic blocs, an endeavor to which President Widodo alluded at the 2022 G20 Summit when he [stated](#): “Indonesia has made every effort to bridge very deep and very wide differences.” This posture reflects a strategy of leveraging nonalignment to mediate tensions between rival states. Thus, in the hands of emerging nations, nonalignment may become not just a stance meant to avoid foreign entanglements but an active attempt to bridge divides between other countries before they calcify into global rifts.