

Civilisational Diplomacy between India and Indonesia: An Idea whose Time has Come

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I. Introduction: The Resurgence of Civilisational Diplomacy

When Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono elevated bilateral ties to a Strategic Partnership in 2005, they were doing more than signing a framework document. They were in fact, reaching back across centuries of contact to announce that India and Indonesia are not merely neighbours by geography. They are also civilisationally related by history. The phrase "civilisation diplomacy" has since resonated both in New Delhi and Jakarta. It signals a style of bilateral engagement that draws explicitly on political trust built on civilisational affinity, popular recognition and strategic relevance.

The foundations are well known. For over two millennia, the Indian subcontinent and the Indonesian archipelago were bound together by the **monsoon trade system**; a time honoured seasonal engine of maritime trade that carried not only spices and cloth, but scripts, religions, political philosophies, and court cultures across the Bay of Bengal. The Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of Srivijaya, Majapahit, and Mataram drew deeply from Brahminic and later Buddhist traditions originating on the subcontinent. Place-names across Java and Sumatra bear Sanskrit roots. Bali today remains a living museum of pre-Islamic India centred civilisation. The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are not foreign imports in Indonesia. They are woven into an indigenous, shared cultural fabric.¹

It is well known however, that civilisational affinity alone does not generate effective foreign policy. The post-independence decades were marked by intermittent diplomatic engagement punctuated by long stretches of mutual apathy. India's foreign policy was long dominated by its immediate subcontinental neighbourhood and its Cold War choices. Indonesia under Suharto's New Order (1966–98) was absorbed by its own political consolidation, economic growth and

ASEAN integration.. The Bandung spirit of 1955, celebrated at the Non-Aligned Conference, provided much rhetoric and a sense of fellowship but not much else.

The twenty-first century has brought about significant changes in this prolonged lethargy. Three main reasons stand out. First, India's economic rise following the 1991 reforms, and subsequent acceleration after 2004, created a commercial search for a more comprehensive engagement with ASEAN's largest economy, Indonesia.. Second, the emergence of China as a revisionist maritime power in the Indo-Pacific generated shared strategic anxieties in both capitals. Third, the election of Narendra Modi in 2014 and the articulation of the "Act East Policy" as a replacement for the more passive "Look East" posture gave civilisational diplomacy new institutional energy and political authority.

II. Geopolitical Causes: Strategic Convergence in the Indo-Pacific

The geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific have created a structural logic for India–Indonesia convergence that operates largely independently of which governments are in power. The South China Sea, through which approximately USD 5.3 trillion in annual trade transits, has become the central theatre of contestation in Asian international relations. Indonesia's Natuna Islands lie at the southern extremity of China's contested "nine-dash line," placing Jakarta in an uncomfortable but clarifying position: it is not a claimant state in the South China Sea dispute, but it is an affected party. China's fishing incursions into the Natuna Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) — most dramatically in 2019–20 — forced Indonesia to acknowledge a maritime security challenge it had long preferred to avoid explicitly naming.

India faces its own version of this structural pressure. The 2017 Doklam standoff, the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, and the steady expansion of Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean have confirmed what strategic analysts in New Delhi had long argued: China's challenge is not merely territorial but **systemic**. Neither India nor Indonesia seeks an explicit anti-China alignment — Jakarta's trade dependence on Beijing and India's own complex economic interdependence make that impractical. But both nations share a deep interest in a rules-based regional order, freedom of navigation, and the preservation of ASEAN centrality as the primary institutional architecture for regional governance.³

India's Act East Policy, formalised in 2014, though at times lacking determined execution, is the most significant structural shift in Indian foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. The message is simple yet direct. India is not merely a South Asian power. It is also an active contributor to the mapping of the security and economic framework of Southeast and East Asia. Indonesia, of course, by all accounts the natural fulcrum of this reorientation. Besides civilisational trust, both countries share a vision of the Indo-Pacific as a "free, open, and inclusive" space; a common language that appears in both the Indian and Indonesian official formulations.

It should be noted that while Quad (Australia, India, Japan, United States), and the AUKUS understanding, might have complicated Indonesia's strategic perceptions, the bilateral momentum with India has remained intact. Jakarta's characteristic preference for "strategic autonomy", (its version of what New Delhi calls "multi-alignment") means that both capitals

share a structural interest in preserving space for independent manoeuvre in a world of hardening great-power blocs. Civilisation diplomacy provides precisely this: a vocabulary of engagement that is neither aligned nor confrontational, but rooted in the two countries' own civilisational self-understanding as ancient polities with independent strategic traditions.



Figure 1: India–Indonesia Defence and Strategic Cooperation Timeline, 2001–2024

III. Commercial Imperatives: The Economic Architecture of Partnership

The civilisational argument ipso-facto would not meet the strategic requirements of a fast evolving, new multi-polar world. Fortunately, the economic complementarities and growing commerce provide a material foundation to trust rooted in centuries of commerce, culture, technology, something that has survived both Islamic empire and European colonialism. Bilateral trade, which stood at a modest USD 3.5 billion in 2004, increased to approximately USD 38 billion by 2022; before moderating to roughly USD 29 billion in Post-Covid recovery. For many observers this was more a reflection of global commodity price cycles rather than any structural deterioration. The very fact that both governments have set an aspirational target of USD 50 billion in bilateral trade, supported by the ongoing review of the ASEAN–India Free Trade Agreement (AITIGA) and dedicated investment promotion frameworks signals the intent to build both on historical maritime commercial and cultural links on the one hand and the drivers of present day structural imperatives on the other.

Furthermore, bilateral trade structure reflects genuine complementarity. Indonesia is among the world's largest exporters of **coal, palm oil, nickel, copper, and crude palm oil derivatives**, all commodities for which India has rising demand. India, in turn, exports **pharmaceuticals, machinery, refined petroleum products, IT services, and textiles**,

categories in which Indonesian demand is strong and Indian supply competitive. The rise of Indonesia's middle class, projected to exceed 130 million by 2030, creates expanding markets for Indian consumer goods, healthcare services, and digital products.⁵

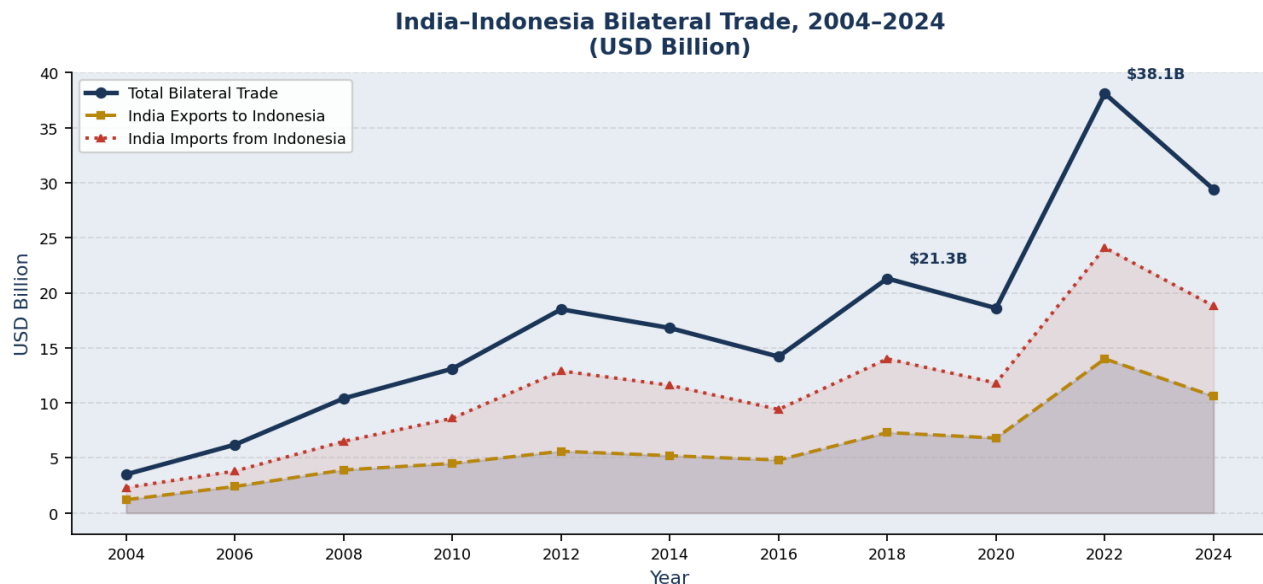


Figure 2: India-Indonesia Bilateral Trade, 2004-2024 (USD Billion)

Perhaps the most strategically significant emerging commercial frontier is the electric vehicle (EV) and battery supply chain nexus. Indonesia holds the world's largest proven reserves of nickel, a critical input for lithium-ion batteries, and has, since 2020, pursued an aggressive downstream processing strategy to capture value from this endowment. India's National EV Mission and its ambitions to become a major battery manufacturing hub create a near-perfect demand-side counterpart. Bilateral frameworks for EV supply chain cooperation, discussed at the 2022 G20 Bali summit margins and subsequently developed through Joint Commission meetings, represent the most significant new commercial architecture since the 2018 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

Indian investment in Indonesia has grown steadily, with Tata Consultancy Services, Wipro, Mahindra, and a number of pharmaceutical companies maintaining significant Indonesian operations. Indonesian investment into India, while more modest, is growing in the consumer goods and media sectors. The Indonesian government's ambition to join the OECD, actively pursued since 2023, and its parallel engagement with the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) create further convergences with Indian economic priorities.

IV. Defence and Strategic Causes

The defence dimension of India-Indonesia relations has undergone the most dramatic transformation of any bilateral component over the past two decades. From a relationship that

had almost no meaningful defence contacts prior to 2001, the two countries have built a structure of naval exercises, intelligence exchanges, defence industrial cooperation, and just as significantly, access arrangements that have strategic implications well beyond the bilateral relationship.

The landmark of this transformation is the 2018 Memorandum of Understanding on access to the Sabang port facility, located on the northern tip of Aceh province at the mouth of the Malacca Strait. The strategic significance of this arrangement is difficult to overstate. Sabang offers India access to a deep-water port facility that could support Indian naval presence at the most economically and strategically vital chokepoint in Asia. The announcement came at the Modi–Widodo summit in May 2018, framed deliberately within the language of civilisational partnership and maritime heritage; a compelling recognition that strategic arrangements of this sensitivity require convincing political legitimation. Civilisational diplomacy provides just that.

The Indian Navy and the Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI-AL) have conducted coordinated maritime patrols (IND-INDO CORPAT) along their respective maritime boundaries since 2012. These exercises have progressively expanded in scope, encompassing anti-piracy operations, search and rescue, and more recently, anti-submarine exercises. Defence industrial cooperation has advanced through multiple Memoranda of Understanding on co-production, technology transfer, and the sharing of defence research outputs. India's BrahMos supersonic cruise missile has been a particular focus of Indonesian interest, with acquisition discussions initiated in 2021 and firming up through 2023.

Both countries are also deepening cooperation on maritime domain awareness, put simply, the capacity to monitor, track, and respond to activities across vast ocean spaces. Indonesia's archipelagic geography, with over 17,000 islands and the world's largest coastline relative to land mass, creates monitoring challenges that India's space and surveillance assets can help address. The National Maritime Domain Awareness Centre established by India in 2019 has provisions for information sharing with ASEAN partner nations, with Indonesia as a priority interlocutor.

V. Future Prospects: Multipolar Asia and the Retreat of Globalism

The strategic environment of 2025 is profoundly different from that of 2004. The post-Cold War liberal international order, with its assumptions of an unstoppable new democratic fourth wave, deepening economic globalisation, and US-led security guarantees lies in disarray and disorder. In Trump's second term, it has given way to a more contested, multipolar, and transactional world. This shift, far from complicating the India–Indonesia bilateral relationship, may in fact have created a new opportunity, and expanded room for closer bilateral cooperation. .

The retreat of globalisation, manifested in supply chain restructuring, strategic industrial policy, export controls on critical technologies, and the weaponisation of trade and finance, creates powerful incentives for middle powers to diversify their partnerships and reduce dependence on any single great power. Both India and Indonesia have pursued variants of this strategy with considerable success. India's "China Plus One" positioning as a manufacturing alternative and its digital public infrastructure exports to Southeast Asia and Africa have enhanced its strategic appeal. Indonesia's downstream processing strategy in minerals, its IPEF participation, and its

growing role as a swing state in great-power competition are beginning to provide enhanced leverage.

The ASEAN–India relationship provides the institutional scaffolding for this deepening. The proposed upgrade of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement, now under negotiation, would, if concluded successfully, constitute the most significant liberalisation of bilateral trade since the original agreement entered force in 2010. Indonesia, as ASEAN's largest economy and the 2023 ASEAN Chair, played a decisive role in shaping the *Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, a document that closely mirrors Indian positions on the importance of inclusive, ASEAN-centred regional architecture.⁷

In a world where democracies face unprecedented pressure, from the lure of authoritarianism, from internal polarisation, and from the institutional fatigue of postwar multilateralism, the India–Indonesia partnership acquires an additional dimension. Together, they represent approximately 1.9 billion people, the majority living in democratic systems. India is the world's largest democracy by electorate; Indonesia is the largest Muslim-majority democracy and arguably the most successful example of democratic consolidation in the developing world. Their bilateral relationship, framed as a partnership of civilisational equals, carries a normative message about the compatibility of diversity, democracy, and strategic autonomy in twenty-first century Asia.

The future trajectory of civilisation diplomacy will depend on three enabling conditions. First, institutional architecture must deepen, more frequent leadership and management level contacts, a permanent secretariat mechanism for the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, and dedicated maritime cooperation frameworks at a higher level than existing CORPAT arrangements. Second, commercial complementarities will mean little unless they are translated into investment flows through simplified regulatory frameworks and the operationalisation of the bilateral Investment Promotion Agreement. Third, people-to-people connections, through education exchanges, diaspora networks, tourism, and cultural diplomacy, must be expanded to give civilisational sentiment tangible, everyday familiar meaning and personal content. As Fig 3. shows, we have come a long way forward between 2018-2024, despite the distractions of COVID 19. But given the scale of the challenges that lie ahead this is yet just a beginning.

VI. Conclusion: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

Civilisation diplomacy between India and Indonesia is not a diplomatic novelty; a creative idea thought up on the spur of the moment. It is the celebration of a relationship of extraordinary depth, though temporarily obscured by the accidents of postcolonial nation-building and Cold War alignments. The argument of this paper has been that this rediscovery has been driven by the convergence of a number of structural forces: a geopolitical environment that rewards partnership between non-aligned democracies; commercial complementarities of growing scale and strategic significance; a deepening defence relationship anchored in maritime geography and shared threat perceptions. They are bound together by a civilisational inheritance that

provides a reservoir of trust, legitimacy, and cultural memory and familiarity absent from purely transactional partnerships.

The significance of the Modi–Widodo Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of 2018, and the subsequent acceleration of bilateral engagement under President Prabowo Subianto and Prime Minister Modi's third term, is that it has given institutional form to what was previously an aspiration. Civilisation diplomacy is no longer merely a rhetorical flourish. It is the operative framework for one of Asia's most consequential bilateral relationships.

History, culture, and basic trust are the bedrock. Economic and business complementarities are the motors. Defence and strategic convergence provide a road map. And democracy, in all its complexity and imperfection, is the shared constitutional commitment that makes this partnership, in the most fundamental sense, a natural one. As the Indo-Pacific becomes the crucible of twenty-first century geopolitics, the partnership between the world's largest democracy and the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy may prove to be one of the defining strategic relationships of the coming decades. It is, as the title of this paper suggests, an idea whose time has finally, and irreversibly, come.

Note on Methodology

This paper draws on official government statements, Joint Commission communiqués, bilateral summit documents, and peer-reviewed scholarship on India–Indonesia relations. Trade data are sourced from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (India) and Badan Pusat Statistik (Indonesia). Defence cooperation data are drawn from Ministry of Defence press releases and academic secondary sources. All figures cited are rounded to one decimal place.

Endnotes

- ¹The longevity and depth of Indic cultural transmission to the Indonesian archipelago is documented in Coedès, G., *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (1968), which remains the foundational scholarly treatment of this process. The survival of Hindu Balinese culture through the Islamic transition of Java and Sumatra offers a uniquely visible instance of civilisational persistence.
- ²India's Act East Policy was formally announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the ASEAN Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, in November 2014, replacing the "Look East Policy" articulated by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in 1991. The rebranding signalled an intention to move from passive engagement to active participation in Indo-Pacific economic and security architecture.
- ³Indonesia's assertion of sovereignty over the Natuna EEZ against Chinese fishing vessels and coastguard escorts became a visible flashpoint in 2019–20. President Widodo's visit to the Natuna Islands aboard a warship in January 2020 was a deliberately symbolic act of sovereign assertion, reflecting the limits of Jakarta's strategic patience toward Beijing's maritime encroachments.

- ⁴For the conceptual underpinnings of Indonesia's "strategic autonomy" doctrine and its resonances with India's multi-alignment, see Weatherbee, D. E., *International Relations in Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy*, 3rd edition (2014).
- ⁵Bilateral trade data are drawn from the Export-Import Data Bank, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, and corroborated by UN Comtrade bilateral trade statistics. The USD 50 billion bilateral trade target was first articulated at the 2018 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership summit and reaffirmed at subsequent meetings.
- ⁶The Sabang port MoU was signed on 30 May 2018 during Prime Minister Modi's state visit to Indonesia. The arrangement provides for Indian access to Sabang's deep-water port and the development of port infrastructure, and carries significant implications for Indian naval presence at the northern entrance to the Malacca Strait.
- ⁷The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), adopted at the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in June 2019, articulates ASEAN's vision for an "open, transparent, inclusive, rules-based, and mutually-beneficial" regional architecture. Its emphasis on ASEAN centrality and the primacy of international law closely parallels India's stated Indo-Pacific positions.
- ⁸Indonesia's nickel reserves, estimated at 21 million metric tonnes (approximately 52 per cent of global known reserves as of 2023), and its 2020 prohibition on raw nickel ore exports represent a deliberate downstream processing strategy. India's National Electric Vehicle Policy (2023) creates direct demand linkages that bilateral economic diplomacy is now beginning to institutionalise.

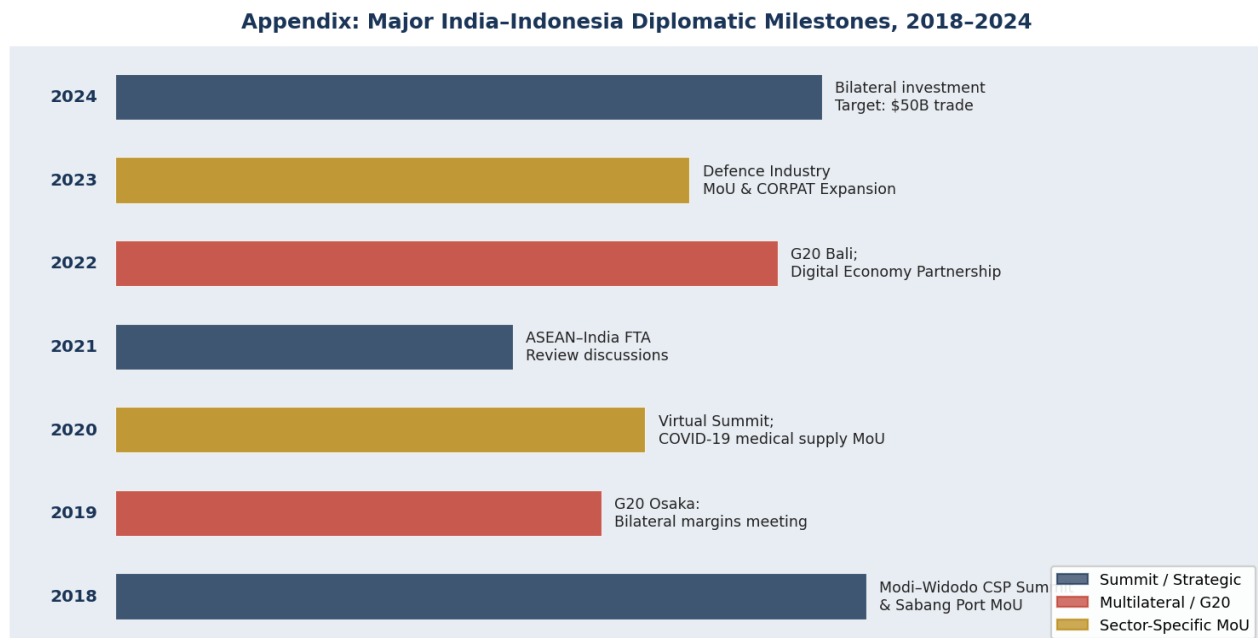
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APPENDIX

A.1 Major India–Indonesia Diplomatic Milestones, 2018–2024

The following chart summarises the principal diplomatic achievements in the India–Indonesia bilateral relationship following the landmark Comprehensive Strategic Partnership summit of May 2018. It maps summit-level interactions, multilateral margin meetings, and sector-specific Memoranda of Understanding that have collectively translated civilisation diplomacy from rhetoric into institutional substance.



Appendix Figure1: Major India–Indonesia Diplomatic Milestones, 2018–2024 (Source: MEA India; MFA Indonesia; All compilation)

A. 2 : Catalogue of Major India–Indonesia Agreements and Initiatives, 2018–2025

The table below provides a comprehensive catalogue of principal agreements, MoUs, joint declarations, and institutional initiatives concluded or advanced between the Republic of India and the Republic of Indonesia between the May 2018 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership summit and early 2025. It covers the full range of bilateral engagement from strategic and defence cooperation through economic, digital, and people-to-people pillars.

Year	Agreement / Initiative	Summary / Significance	Pillar
2018	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) Declaration	Elevated the bilateral relationship from Strategic Partnership (2005) to CSP; set framework for deepened cooperation across defence, trade, and civilisational exchange.	Strategic / Political
2018	Sabang Port Access MoU	Granted India access to Indonesia's Sabang deep-water port at the northern tip of Aceh at the mouth of the Malacca Strait; significant implications for Indian naval presence.	Defence / Maritime
2018	MoU on Hydrographic Cooperation	Framework for joint survey and data sharing of maritime hydrography in the Bay of Bengal and adjacent waters.	Defence / Maritime
2018	MoU on Cooperation in Health Sector	Collaboration on pharmaceuticals, traditional medicine, and healthcare system capacity building.	Economic / Social
2018	Bilateral Trade Target (USD 50 billion)	Both governments committed to a USD 50 billion bilateral trade target within five years, supported by trade facilitation and investment promotion.	Economic / Trade
2019	G20 Osaka Bilateral Margins Meeting	Modi–Widodo bilateral on sidelines of G20 Osaka; reaffirmed CSP agenda and discussed Natuna EEZ security.	Strategic / Political

Year	Agreement / Initiative	Summary / Significance	Pillar
2019	IND-INDO CORPAT Expansion	Expanded scope of coordinated maritime patrols to include joint exercises in anti-piracy, HADR, and maritime domain awareness.	Defence / Maritime
2020	Virtual Summit — COVID-19 MoU	First virtual leader-level summit; concluded MoU on supply of pharmaceuticals and medical equipment during COVID-19 pandemic; India supplied hydroxychloroquine and PPE to Indonesia.	Economic / Humanitarian
2020	MoU on Digital Cooperation	Framework for cooperation in e-governance, digital payments interoperability, and smart city technology transfer.	Digital / Technology
2021	ASEAN-India FTA (AITIGA) Review Discussions	Indonesia supported reinvigorating the AITIGA review process; bilateral consultations on tariff rationalisation and rules of origin reform.	Economic / Trade
2022	G20 Bali Summit — Bilateral Declaration	Modi–Widodo bilateral margins meeting at G20 Bali; launched Digital Economy Partnership and affirmed EV / battery supply chain cooperation agenda.	Economic / Digital
2022	EV and Battery Supply Chain Framework	Preliminary bilateral framework on cooperation in nickel processing, battery manufacturing inputs, and alignment of EV policy timelines.	Economic / Energy
2022	MoU on Space Cooperation (ISRO–LAPAN/BRIN)	ISRO and Indonesia's National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) formalised cooperation on satellite development, remote sensing, and launch services.	Science / Technology
2023	Defence Industry Cooperation MoU	Comprehensive MoU on defence industrial co-production,	Defence / Industry

Year	Agreement / Initiative	Summary / Significance	Pillar
		technology transfer, joint R&D, and offset arrangements; BrahMos missile system acquisition discussions formalised.	
2023	CORPAT and ASW Exercise Expansion	IND-INDO CORPAT expanded to include anti-submarine warfare (ASW) components for the first time; joint passage exercise in the Strait of Malacca.	Defence / Maritime
2023	MoU on Renewable Energy Cooperation	Framework for cooperation in solar, geothermal (leveraging Indonesia's significant geothermal endowment), and green hydrogen development.	Energy / Climate
2023	ASEAN-India Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) Alignment	India and Indonesia issued coordinated statements on the AOIP, affirming shared commitment to rules-based order, UNCLOS, and ASEAN centrality.	Strategic / Diplomatic
2024	Bilateral Investment Promotion Agreement Review	Renewed discussions on updating the bilateral investment treaty framework to reflect current investment priorities and provide stronger investor protections.	Economic / Investment
2024	Cultural MoU — Ramayana Circuit Tourism	Joint initiative to promote the Ramayana heritage tourism corridor linking Ayodhya, Varanasi, and key Ramayana sites in Java and Bali.	Civilisational / Cultural
2024	Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) Cooperation	India shared the DPI stack — Aadhaar, UPI, ONDC — as a model for Indonesian digital governance reform; bilateral working group established.	Digital / Governance

Year	Agreement / Initiative	Summary / Significance	Pillar
2024	Prabowo–Modi Summit, New Delhi	First bilateral summit under President Prabowo Subianto; reaffirmed CSP framework, initiated discussions on defence financing, and concluded MoU on food security cooperation.	Strategic / Political
2025	AITIGA Advanced Negotiations	Indonesia and India engaged in advanced rounds of the upgraded AITIGA negotiations; focus on services, investment, and digital trade chapters.	Economic / Trade
2025	People-to-People Exchange Programme	Launch of the India-Indonesia Young Leaders Forum and enhanced scholarship schemes at IIT and leading Indonesian universities.	Education / Cultural

*Appendix Table: Catalogue of Major India–Indonesia Agreements and Initiatives, 2018–2025
(Source: MEA India; MFA Indonesia; AII compilation)*

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