

Jokowi's national security leadership is personalized



President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo installs Adm. Yudo Margono as the Indonesian Military (TNI) chief at the State Palace on Dec. 19, 2022. (Cabinet Secretariat Public Relations/Rahmat)

Share this article

Whatsapp

Facebook

Twitter

Linkedin

Adi Abidin and Rifat Abdillah (The Jakarta Post)

PREMIUM Jakarta • Tue, January 3 2023

The newly sworn-in Indonesian Military (TNI) commander Adm. Yudo Margono is only the third naval officer to hold the chief post, and the first one after almost 10 years. He has a

34-year career in the Navy and attained the top job in the service on May 20, 2020. His inauguration has restored a custom in the armed forces established some 20 years ago that the military chief is rotated among the three services.

Yudo took over the TNI command baton from Gen. Andika Perkasa of the Army, who retired from the military service at the end of December 2022. Andika served in the post for about a year, topping a 35-year career, of which most was served in the special forces and intelligence: a well-versed officer with extensive academic pursuits in the United States.

Andika himself was appointed to fill the post previously occupied by Air Chief Marshal Hadi Tjahjanto. The latter served for almost four years as the commander, a rarity for this strategic position, particularly in the last 24 years. His tenure overlapped with the 2019 presidential election and was able to navigate the military to stay at a distance from the contentious campaigning of that period.

It was also in Hadi's time that the military completed an expansion of its structure that for the most part was tuned toward accommodating a surplus in the number of senior officers. Numerous command and staff positions were created at the TNI headquarters as well as posts across the archipelago. While this has been a long-standing problem in the military, this policy at least ameliorates some of the personnel pressure at the senior ranks.

These military commanders follow a more recent pattern where President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo would appoint officers that he personally knew -- or a key ally knew -- and has had close working experience. Along the same vein, the President could also claim the uptake from the above-mentioned organizational reform.

A critical juncture in Yudo's path was his appointment as the commander of the Western Indonesia joint-defense command from 2019 until his promotion as the Navy chief. During this time, he was considered instrumental in the initial phase of Indonesia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic by organizing repatriation of Indonesians from China and establishing a massive isolation and care facility in Jakarta, the epicenter of the pandemic.

Yudo's stewardship during the biggest naval accident in TNI's history was considered commendable. When the submarine KRI Nanggala-402 with all hands sank in an exercise, he led the recovery not only of the boat but also the morale among sailors. In the political space, he enlists strong patronage that could provide important support.

Several months ago, he invited former president and Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) matriarch, Megawati Soekarnoputri, to inaugurate female naval heroines from the 16th to 19th century who fought against European colonial powers.

Andika has had his own experience in proximity to the President. He served as the commander of the presidential security detail for almost two years in the early part of Jokowi's first term as president. Afterward, in about two years he rose to become the Army chief of staff before finally promoted to TNI chief in November 2021.

He also has powerful voices around the President that strengthen his standing. As a junior special forces officer in the mid-1980s, he was trained in sophisticated intelligence specialties under the supervision of Luhut Panjaitan, now President Jokowi's close confidant and *de facto* chief operating officer of the Jokowi administration. Andika's other benefactor is A.M. Hendropriyono, his father-in-law and the voice that influenced President Jokowi and Megawati. A retired general with a long record in the special forces himself, Hendropriyono served as president Megawati's intelligence chief, and has since been a close advisor to her.

The post of commander of the presidential detail is strategic in advancing an officer's career. In Jokowi's time, all previous commanders have attained a rank of three-star flag officer in their respective services and served in critical positions. One recent commander, Maj. Gen. Tri Budi Utomo, is appointed to a lateral move as the military commander in Eastern Kalimantan, who oversees the security and development of the new capital and its supporting defense ecosystem.

One former presidential security detail commander to watch is Lt. Gen. Maruli Simanjuntak, who currently leads the prestigious Army Strategic Reserve Command -- a 40,000-strong Army's main-strike force. For about six years in the last eight, he has served at the President's security detail. He could as well advance further in the remaining two years of President Jokowi's tenure. It is helpful that he is married to Luhut's daughter.

For Hadi, his first encounter with Jokowi occurred in about 2010 when the latter was the mayor of Surakarta, Central Java, and Hadi commanded the airbase in the city. Later when Jokowi became President, he appointed Hadi as his military secretary. From there, Hadi rapidly rose through the ranks to become the Air Force chief, and not long after was entrusted to command the TNI. He was only the third Air Force officer to hold the post and the first after 10 years when he was installed in 2017.

As a testament to how Jokowi values the work of Hadi, not long after retirement, he was appointed as the agrarian minister with the responsibility of ensuring the President's key constituents could obtain their long-awaited land titles and clear any land dispute or spatial planning over the building of the new capital.

Following Hadi, all previous incumbents have attained the rank of three-star officer and served in key offices in the military and government.

Similar settings can be found in the National Police and the intelligence service. The current police chief, Gen. Listyo Sigit Prabowo, has been the municipal police chief in Surakarta when Jokowi was the mayor. Later in the early years of Jokowi's presidency, Listyo served as aide-de-camp to the President. In about five years he rose to become the police chief and he would have another seven years to serve.

The retired police general Budi Gunawan -- who served as an adjutant to president Megawati in the early 2000s -- has led the State Intelligence Agency (BIN) for the last six years and has been the trusted hand to reach political and sociocultural leaders to maintain coalition and stability.

Yudo will have attained the top of his military career when he retires around November of this year. If this pattern charts the path, the successor as the TNI commander-in-chief will be one that has had proximity to the president, and like the police chief, has enough remaining years of service to see his vision through.

Adi Abidin is a research fellow at Populi Center and a public-policy specialist at Kiroyan Partners, where Rif'at Abdillah, a political science alumnus of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), is a consultant. The views are their own.