

# It is time for Indonesia to focus on drone warfare

*Drones represent the forefront of modern warfare, overshadowing conventional weaponry.*

Karl Gading Sayudha (The Jakarta Post)

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Future weapon: Director of technology and development at state aircraft manufacturer PT Dirgantara Indonesia Gita Amperiawan talks to the media on March 13, 2020, in front of the prototype of the Indonesian Medium Altitude Long Endurance unmanned aerial vehicle at the company's hangar. (Antara/Virna P Setyorini)



Indonesian Navy chief of staff Adm. Muhammad Ali has outlined the country's future development and procurement plans, which include the potential acquisition of Bayraktar Akinci and Anka drones from Turkey. The Defense Ministry has confirmed the proposal, emphasizing technology transfer to enable the local production of drones.

Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI) drones are planned to be manufactured in Indonesia through collaboration with PT Dirgantara Indonesia (PTDI), which will significantly benefit the national defense industry.

These developments align with President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo's emphasis on the importance of unmanned weapons systems in adapting and responding to technological advancements and disruptions. This message was underscored during his visit to the Military Academy in

Magelang, Central Java, in January 2024, alongside Defense Minister [Prabowo Subianto](#).

Although drone technology has been developed since the Cold War, it gained prominence and fame during the latest Azerbaijan-Armenian conflict in 2020, where both surveillance and suicide drones produced by Turkey and Israel were utilized. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 further propelled the popularity of smaller drones, including commercial ones, which have been extensively used not only to target personnel but also to destroy armored vehicles, rendering the deployment of main battle tanks potentially obsolete.

These drones afforded Ukraine, the smaller force by size, a considerable advantage over the larger Russian forces, enabling them to sink multiple Russian Navy vessels, conduct deep strikes into Russian territory and inflict billions of dollars in damage to the Russian economy. Additionally, the presence of these drones had a psychological impact on ground troops, facing relentless attacks from smaller suicide drones.

Given the unfolding events, it is imperative to swiftly grasp unmanned technologies, especially for countries like Indonesia, which hold significant potential for their development, particularly for military application. A prime example is the Medium Altitude Long Endurance (MALE) Black Eagle Drone, unveiled for the first time on Dec. 30, 2019.

Despite being a priority under President Jokowi, the prospects of drone development have been uncertain. National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) chairman Laksana Tri Handoko in February 2023 expressed concern over the project's military objectives, citing potential boycotts Indonesia experienced in the past when developing a home-grown radar.

Nevertheless, the Defense Ministry is formulating a new road map to finish the development of the MALE drones, according to Deputy Defense Minister Muhammad Herindra in October 2023. The road map for MALE drones is a follow-up to President Jokowi's directive and the recommendation of the Defense Industry Policy Committee (KKIP), which is headed by the President.

It is important to note that on a micro-scale, various combat units in the Indonesian Army, even at the battalion level in Strategic Reserve Command (Kostrad), including the Presidential Security Detail, also have small drone procurement programs. Meanwhile, the Army Aviation Command (Penerbad) is reportedly planning to establish special drone units in large numbers.

Herindra emphasized the importance of leveraging all available technological, human and domestic financial resources to attain self-sufficiency in the drone sector. However, no definitive information has been provided thus far regarding the government's concrete plan to fulfill this strategic initiative.

The primary obstacle preventing the government from advancing drone development remains ambiguous. If the interest of superpowers in developing the MALE drones is indeed a concern, Indonesia could shift its focus to developing smaller drones, similar to Ukraine's strategy, which

prioritizes battlefield surveillance and loitering munitions. Perhaps Indonesia could initiate joint research with a trusted partner like Turkey, leveraging Ankara's decades of experience in manufacturing cutting-edge drones.

Such a joint project presents a viable option, given the previous successful collaboration between the two countries in developing the Harimau/Kaplan MT medium tank. Exploring an additional partnership for drone development could enhance Indonesia's exposure to unmanned technologies, facilitating further domestic progress and potentially leading to significant advancements in the national defense sector.

With geopolitical tensions escalating, the time for Indonesia to make a steadfast commitment to national defense is now. The advancement of unmanned technology will persist, and Indonesia's survival hinges on its proactive approach to this crucial aspect.

Drones represent the forefront of modern warfare, overshadowing conventional weaponry. Should Indonesia falter in its commitment to advancing drone technology, it may choose to prioritize its anti-drone capabilities. However, this scenario only unfolds when the nation is ready to invest in its future, lest it belatedly recognize the urgency when confronted with conflict.

The time is perfect to consider all existing options with the president-elect, Prabowo, who will soon take office in October. This new leader should have a solid commitment to pursue drones as one of the tools to defend the national interest and his people at a relatively low cost, which would accommodate the budget constraints he would face at the beginning of his administration.

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