

OPINION **ACADEMIA**

A Faustian bargain? Indonesia's choice between morality and military might

Indonesia's growing military ties with the US — a key ally of Israel — has raised questions about the implications for its foreign policy stance, especially its support for Palestine.

Karl Gading Sayudha (The Jakarta Post)

PREMIUM Jakarta Wed, September 11, 2024

Aa



This handout photo released by Boeing on Aug. 22, 2023, shows Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto sitting in the cockpit of an F-15EX jet on Aug. 21, 2023, following the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the Indonesian Air Force and Boeing officials at the company's St Louis facility. Indonesia and US aircraft manufacturer Boeing have agreed a deal for the sale of two dozen F-15EX fighter jets as Southeast Asia's biggest economy moves to modernize its fleet, Jakarta's defense minister said on Aug. 22. (AFP/Boeing/Eric Shindelbower)

Last month the United States approved a [US\\$20 billion](#) arms sale to Israel, including over 50 F-15 fighter jets, advanced air-to-air missiles and other military equipment. The move, aimed at bolstering Israel's long-term defense capabilities, will take years to complete, with initial deliveries expected around 2026 and the first jets arriving by 2029.

Washington justifies this action as necessary to safeguard US security and support Israel's defense against significant threats in the Middle East, particularly from Iran. However, President Joe Biden faces growing domestic pressure to limit military support to Israel, especially given the high civilian casualties in Gaza, leading to the delay of some arms shipments.

It is important to recognize that the US has facilitated over [100 undisclosed arms sales](#) to Israel since the Oct. 7, 2023, attack by Hamas, which triggered Israel's reprisal. In December 2023 alone, the Israel Defense Ministry announced the receipt of over [10,000 tonnes](#) of US military equipment, with the first cargo plane arriving on Oct. 11.

Major US weapons manufacturers like Lockheed Martin, Boeing, General Dynamics and Northrop Grumman have all benefited from significant deals brokered by the US government to supply Israel with a continuous stream of war equipment.

Conversely, Indonesia is gradually moving toward modernizing its weapons systems through "westernization", proven by significant arms deals with Western countries, especially the US.

This trend is reflected in the proposed 2025 defense budget, which stands at approximately [Rp 165 trillion](#) (\$11 billion) — the highest allocation among all ministries and state institutions. Notably, this figure represents a 5.71 percent decrease from the previous year, indicating a slight reduction in the budget while still prioritizing substantial investment in military modernization.

While initial attention focused on the Rafale fighter jets and Scorpene submarine deal with France, Washington is increasingly showing signs of approving major arms sales to Indonesia, including [F-15 Eagle](#) fighter jets and [UH-60 Black Hawk](#) helicopters to augment the Indonesian military's primary weapons system.

This condition however put Indonesia in a complex situation as it tries to modernize its military through major arms deals with the US while maintaining its longstanding support for Palestine's independence. Despite Indonesia's firm opposition to Israel's actions in Palestine, the country's growing military ties with the US — a key ally of Israel — has raised questions about the implications for its foreign policy stance.

While the Defense Ministry under [Prabowo Subianto](#) has also engaged with other Western arms manufacturers, some observers have been aware that procurement from US companies could indirectly support industries linked to Israel. This has sparked discussions about whether Indonesia's defense strategy aligns with its advocacy for Palestinian rights.

Indonesia's humanitarian efforts in Palestine, such as the hospital ship mission and airdrops in Gaza, have been commendable. However, critics suggest Indonesia's efforts to support Palestine may stand in contrast to its military investments in US-made systems.

This raises the question of whether Indonesia can effectively balance its military modernization goals with its moral obligations to the Palestinian people, who had suffered even before the Israeli troops began their military operations last October.

One might argue the risk of mass protests over a major arms deal with the US is significant. Although the protest might not be big as the demonstration to protect the Constitutional Court ruling a few weeks ago, this paradox will potentially trigger political pressure from the House of Representatives, which typically remains silent on military procurement.

For instance, in [2006](#), when the Defense Ministry planned to buy drones, allegedly from Israel, there were concerns among lawmakers about the transparency of the tender and the involvement of a non-defense company from the Philippines.

Islamic group [activists](#) protested the deal, questioning its legitimacy. While that protest was small, more US arms deal in the future could provoke larger demonstrations here because of the US's close and continuous support for Israel.

As an alternative, Indonesia could consider increasing its arms procurement and technological collaborations with European manufacturers with limited ties to Israel, such as those in the Netherlands, Spain, Belgium and Italy, which have already taken steps to halt arms deliveries to Israel. Even the [United Kingdom](#) has recently announced the suspension of some arms export licenses to Israel because of concerns that the equipment could be used to violate international law.

Furthermore, Russia and China present viable options for Indonesia's defense procurement, particularly if the government seeks to navigate the moral complexities of advancing military capabilities while supporting Palestine.

However, pursuing this path could invite potential repercussions from Washington, including sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) framework, and could jeopardize Indonesia's future involvement in security partnerships and incentives that have benefited its armed forces because of its neutral stance. CAATSA is believed to have foiled Indonesia's bid to procure Russian Su-35 fighter jets in 2019.

Given the increasing geopolitical tensions in the region and Indonesia's deep military ties with the US, Jakarta faces limited choices. The decision between supporting Palestine and maintaining the status quo for national security is indeed challenging.

Indonesia must strive to position itself as a reliable partner in promoting global peace, but balancing moral obligations with national security in weapons procurement will be a significant challenge for president-elect Prabowo, who will assume power in October.

Whether Prabowo can successfully navigate this complicated landscape, only time will tell.

The writer is an analyst at the public affairs and strategic communication firm, Kiroyan Partners. The views expressed are personal.