

OPINION **ACADEMIA**

Prabowo's defense modernization: Ambition or balance of power?

President Prabowo's arms procurement strategy will be shaped by balancing relations between key global powers as Indonesia seeks to modernize its military without compromising its non-alignment policy.

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Local product: A domestically produced armored vehicle drives past the Hotel Indonesia traffic circle in downtown Jakarta on Oct. 5, 2023, during a parade as part of the 78th anniversary celebrations of the Indonesian Military (TNI). (AFP/Bay Ismoyo)

Prabowo Subianto's inauguration as Indonesia's eighth president has sparked a range of reactions, some hopeful, others skeptical and many uncertain about what lies ahead.

During his previous tenure as defense minister, Prabowo consistently aimed to modernize the Indonesian Military (TNI) by securing advanced technologies through various arms deals with partner countries. Although not every procurement provided the benefit he was hoping for, some were successfully implemented.

Now, with his new role and greater authority, Prabowo's challenges may stem from the scale of his own ambitions and the geopolitical implications they bring. As a globally minded nationalist intellectual, he understands that Indonesia's military needs more than the conventional arms deals seen in the past.

While he seeks equitable terms in defense acquisitions, as he did during his time as defense minister, he is also aware of the geopolitical trade-offs involved if he continues to pursue these sensitive objectives.

The traditional "free and active" foreign policy and non-alignment approach is likely to persist, though some experts speculate that Prabowo may lean more toward the West. However, the announcement of Indonesia's intent to join BRICS surprised many, demonstrating that Prabowo aims to engage with all sides impartially.

This approach offers optimism to global arms manufacturers, as it suggests the new president will not rely solely on one country or axis of power. It is important to note that as a committed nationalist and firm believer in Sukarno's principles, Prabowo recognizes the importance of Indonesia's self-reliance, leveraging external powers strategically to serve its national interests.

Along with Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin, his long-time friend and now defense minister, Prabowo plans to balance and diversify Indonesia's arms acquisitions. This strategy encompasses critical aspects like technology transfer (ToT) agreements and meeting a high level of domestic content (TKDN) for each new military asset.

Prabowo has underscored the need to build Indonesia's defense manufacturing capabilities by securing licensing arrangements for local firms, with key players like state arms producer PT PINDAD, state shipbuilder PT PAL and defense electronics company PT LEN expected to play pivotal roles in this initiative.

At the moment, there are numerous deals already underway, including France's Rafale jets and Scorpene submarines, as well as other procurements involving F-15 EX fighters, Blackhawk helicopters, Italian frigates and advanced drones from Turkey.

Rumors also suggest that the Indonesian government may pursue "interim" weapons through second-hand purchases from various countries, such as China, to bridge the gap until these newly ordered arms are fully delivered and operational.

Amid rising tensions in the South China Sea and Taiwan, together with escalating conflicts in the Middle East and Europe, Prabowo faces a challenging environment as he works to enhance Indonesia's defense capabilities. Given these pressures, he is unlikely to be selective in his approach, though he remains mindful of the limitations he faces.

Prabowo currently has several strategic options for upcoming arms deals. One route is strengthening ties with the United States in exchange for advanced weaponry, such as the F-35 jets that he highly values. However, this path could lead to pressure from Washington for Jakarta to distance

itself from Beijing, possibly even aligning with the US and its allies against China in the South China Sea.

Additionally, human rights concerns could complicate Indonesia-US defense relations and Prabowo's ties with the US could be challenged internally because of American support for Israel in its ongoing conflict with Palestine.

Another option for Indonesia is to strengthen its ties with China and Russia. This would involve limited yet growing defense cooperation. This strategy serves to balance the advantages of engaging with China economically while addressing concerns about its assertiveness in the South China Sea. It also opens the door to potential collaboration in areas such as cybersecurity and unmanned systems.

Yet, there are valid concerns regarding the quality and compatibility of Chinese or Russian equipment with Indonesia's existing Western defense infrastructure. Plus, this shift could be perceived negatively by the US, potentially jeopardizing Indonesia's longstanding partnerships with the West.

Finally, European partners offer advanced technological alternatives. Europe's increasing influence in the Southeast Asian defense market present significant opportunities for Indonesia to obtain sophisticated weapons systems through transfer of technology and local manufacturing collaborations with European firms.

These partnerships also come with fewer political conditions compared to those with the US, and less geopolitical baggage than dealings with China or Russia. However, it is important to recognize that European technologies often still depend on US-made components, which can sometimes restrict their ability to sell weapons to selected countries.

All in all, one thing is certain: President Prabowo's arms procurement strategy will be shaped by balancing relations between key global powers as Indonesia seeks to modernize its military without compromising its non-alignment policy.

It is crucial for Prabowo to diversify suppliers to prevent over-dependence and maintain flexibility, all while adeptly negotiating agreements with various global powers to preserve strategic neutrality.

Successfully doing so will demonstrate his commitment to modernizing the Indonesian military and establishing it as the undisputed strongest armed forces in Southeast Asia.

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