

# RI's defense industry: Between aspiration and dependency

**M**ore than seven decades since Indonesia's independence, the pursuit of a self-reliant national defense industry remains an elusive goal.

Every time a regional conflict escalates, be it the Russia-Ukraine war or the recent air battles between Iran and Israel, we are starkly reminded that true national defense is not about showcasing fleets of modern jet fighters or tanks, but about mastering the full cycle of weapons systems: Design, production, operation and maintenance. In today's strategic reality, sovereignty belongs to those who control the technology.

This is the paradox Indonesia is facing. On one hand, we proclaim the aspiration of a robust domestic defense industry. On the other hand, we continue to depend heavily on imported weaponry.

Over the past two decades, Indonesia has purchased Sukhoi fighter jets from Russia, submarines from South Korea, radars from France, missiles from Norway and drones from Turkey. Alarming, even basic aircraft maintenance often requires sending parts overseas. Instead of manufacturing our own systems, we remain dependent on others just to keep them functional.

The root of this issue goes beyond funding or political will. It lies in the structural immaturity of our defense industrial ecosystem.

State-owned defense enterprises such as PT Pindad, PT PAL and PT Dirgantara Indonesia (PTDI) have made notable progress, producing, among other military equipment, the Harimau medium tank, SIGMA-class warships and CN-235 and N-219 transport aircraft. However, their output capacity, global certifications and international competitiveness lag far behind peers in countries like South Korea, Turkey, or even Iran, which has operated under international sanctions for decades.

Why have we not reached self-reliance or autarky? The answer is complex.

First, our defense policy lacks continuity. When the administration changes, strategic priorities often shift.

Second, technology transfer from foreign suppliers remains superficial. Many procurement contracts lack meaningful offset agreements or merely offer token knowledge-sharing, not genuine manufacturing capability.

Third, research and development remain underfunded and fragmented. Government R&D agencies under the Defense Ministry and the military face persistent constraints, financial, insti-



AFP/Aditya Aji

**Homegrown souvenir:** Defense Minister Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin (left) presents on Jan. 31 a SS2 V4 A2 assault rifle made by state-owned weapons manufacturer PT Pindad as a gift to French Armed Forces Minister Sébastien Lecornu at the Defense Ministry in Gambir, Central Jakarta.



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tutional and human capital.

In Asia, military research and development (R&D) spending is on the rise, particularly in East Asia. The annual Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment released by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) late last month found Southeast Asia's key nations of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam increased spending on defense procurement and research and development by US\$2.7 billion to \$10.5 billion from 2022 to 2024. However, they still heavily rely on imports when it comes to advanced military equipment.

To be fair, importing defense systems is not inherently wrong, especially when faced with imminent threats. Buying off-the-shelf hardware can be the fastest solution to immediate operational needs, such as patrolling the Natuna Sea or safeguarding the airspace over the Malacca Strait.

But when imports become a long-term strategy, we are indulging in an illusion of strength. Real military power is not measured by the quantity of imported hardware, but by the ability to sustain and reproduce that capability independently.

History offers painful lessons. Indonesia once suffered under arms embargoes during the New Order era. Iran, despite prolonged sanctions, responded by developing its own missiles and drones. Turkey, after being disappointed by NATO allies,

emerged as a rising exporter of unmanned combat systems. The takeaway is clear: Embargoes can be either a curse or a catalyst—depending on how a nation responds.

This is why Indonesia must urgently rethink its approach to defense development. The cornerstone should be the establishment of a long-term, strategic, and institutionalized framework. True synergy must emerge between the government, the armed forces, state-owned enterprises, private defense firms, universities, and international partners.

Technology transfer must be structural, not superficial. Research must be properly funded and integrated. Human capital must be nurtured with a national vision, not just technical competence.

Self-reliance does not mean isolation. It means standing tall when foreign help is no longer available. Importing sophisticated weaponry may boost morale, but building domestic arms factories restores national dignity.

As President Sukarno once said, "A great nation stands on its own feet." In defense terms, this means producing, maintaining and mastering our own military power. Without this, sovereignty remains a hollow phrase.

Unfortunately, none of this will be achievable without a comprehensive national doctrine. Indonesia has yet to produce a White Paper on National Defense and Security, a vital strategic document outlining the country's

threat landscape, long-term defense vision, and force development scenarios over a 20–30-year horizon. Without this compass, all efforts to build a sustainable domestic defense industry will drift aimlessly, like a ship caught in fog without navigation.

Absent such a strategic plan, weapons procurement becomes reactive, political and short-sighted. Administrations come and go, each launching their own pet projects. Domestic industry, meanwhile, is fed sporadically with orders too few to sustain production or innovation. Instead of becoming centers of military excellence, defense factories risk turning into mere repair shops.

Even worse, despite the patriotic calls to "buy local", procurement contracts are often awarded to foreign vendors, disregarding the improving quality of our local products.

Without a long-term roadmap and an official state doctrine to anchor it, all the programs amount to little more than hollow rhetoric, noisy in seminars, silent on the ground. Building a national defense industry is not just about budgets or technology; it is about national vision and strategic resolve. The government must treat defense industry development as an integral component of national resilience, not as a symbolic side project or rent-seeking venture.

Indonesia must move swiftly to draft and publish a White Paper on Defense and Security, one that not only addresses current needs but articulates a long-term, coherent, and credible strategic blueprint. Only then can our domestic defense industry evolve into a true pillar of sovereignty, rather than a showroom of superficial nationalism.