

SOUTHEAST ASIA

Indonesia's hard-charging defence minister delivers politics

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In October 2024, Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin assumed office as Indonesia's defence minister, bringing with him a dual reputation as a technocratic reformer and a controversial former commander long shadowed by a murky human rights record.

A prominent figure in the Ministry of Defence since the mid-2000s, Sjafrie played a key role in shaping its early reforms under the Minimum Essential Force initiative and in establishing the Defence Industry Policy Committee to revitalise Indonesia's stagnant defence industries. He also enhanced budget transparency, secured the ministry's first clean audit opinions and facilitated the implementation of the 2012 Defence Industry Law, which institutionalised mandatory technology transfers and local content requirements for all foreign weapon acquisitions.

As President Prabowo Subianto's long-time confidant, Sjafrie was expected to wield the political influence needed to drive meaningful change. Yet more than one year into his tenure, a different picture has emerged. Rather than acting primarily as a strategic reformer of Indonesia's defence sector, Sjafrie has increasingly operated as Prabowo's political enforcer, executing national development priorities that extend well beyond the traditional sphere of defence policy.

One prominent example is the leading role the defence ministry has assumed in the government's crackdown on illegal mining and unauthorised use of forest areas. Public discourse surrounding Sjafrie throughout 2025 has also reflected this changing focus from external security challenges to safeguarding natural resources from domestic or foreign threats.

The defence establishment has become central to the government's food security agenda through the creation of the army's territorial development battalions, with plans to form 750 new battalions over the next four years. While initially framed as units providing agricultural training and support, their scale and deployment suggest broader aims to generate rural employment, expand territorial military presence and divert attention and resources away from long-discussed force restructuring and modernisation.

The military also plays a prominent role in implementing Prabowo's flagship free meals program for students, both in the early establishment of hundreds of industrial kitchens and in the recruitment and training of more than 30,000 staff at the Indonesia Defence University for the Nutrition Provision Service Units that operate these facilities. The defence ministry has become an instrument for delivering social policy.

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Meanwhile, the defence sector continues to reflect a pattern established during Prabowo's own tenure as defence minister from 2019 to 2024 — an expanded defence posture with rapid procurement yet limited strategic context, systems integration or sustainment.

Sjafrie expanded the army through the establishment of six new territorial defence commands (Kodam), helping realise Prabowo's long-standing idea of aligning one Kodam with each province. The Ministry of Defence also broadened the scope of the reserve component (Komcad) by engaging the private sector to support employee training.

On the procurement front, Indonesia signed a contract with Turkey to purchase 48 KAAN fighter jets, as well as deals to procure combat drones and frigates. The government has also greenlighted foreign loans for Italy's decommissioned aircraft carrier Giuseppe Garibaldi. Indonesia has also announced plans to acquire China's J-10 fighter aircraft. Yet Indonesia has formally slashed its financial contribution to South Korea's KF-21 joint fighter development program by more than two-thirds, from the initial 1.6 trillion won (US\$1.17 billion) to just 600 billion won (US\$440 million).

These initiatives follow a period of defence spending concentrated on high-profile procurement, including Rafale fighter jets and large naval platforms including FREMM, Merah Putih and PPA frigates. This suggests defence procurement is likely to remain business as usual and perpetuate long-standing challenges such as underfunded maintenance, stretched budgets and limited absorption capacity within the domestic defence industry.

The current leadership — facilitated by more centralised defence procurement under the ministry — could have pursued a different path in building a defence posture more attuned to the realities of modern warfare. The war in Ukraine and India–Pakistan airstrikes in 2019 and 2025 have demonstrated the growing vulnerability of conventional military platforms to drones, electronic warfare and networked surveillance. Yet as many militaries shift resources towards unmanned systems, network-centric and electronic warfare capabilities, Indonesia's procurement approach remains focused on high-visibility conventional assets.

Taken together, these initiatives suggest that Sjafrie will not be a reformer. Rather, his position appears deeply intertwined with Prabowo's domestic political agenda as he prioritises execution of development programs that rely on military discipline, territorial infrastructure and bureaucratic reach. This expanded political portfolio leaves limited room for technocratic reform to address structural problems within Indonesia's defence establishment, ranging from force fragmentation, bloated personnel structures and weak sustainment systems.

For those who once hoped Sjafrie would steer Indonesia towards a more coherent, modern and sustainable defence architecture, the reality is sobering. Indonesia's defence sector is likely to remain characterised by unchanged procurement patterns poorly aligned with evolving warfare realities, elusive structural reform as resources are diverted to non-defence priorities, and armed forces increasingly serving the political needs of the presidency rather than the strategic demands of the state.

Without a strategic adjustment, the likely outcome is an inflated domestic military footprint that prioritises internal political functions over external defence — ultimately hollowing out deterrence capability.

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