



# Prabowo Subianto and Indonesia's Geostrategic Defence Outlook: Between US-China and ASEAN

By

**Naifa Rizani**Intern at The Habibie Center  
[thc@habibiecenter.or.id](mailto:thc@habibiecenter.or.id)

## Introduction

The appointment of the new Indonesian Minister of Defence, Prabowo Subianto, has stirred a lot of debate due to his questionable track record from his previous career in the Indonesian Military. After being appointed by President Joko Widodo in the new cabinet, Prabowo Subianto promptly held several meetings with foreign representatives, notably from the two great power countries, discussing defence cooperation while he also gave a bold statement urging the strengthening of regional security at the ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meeting (17/11).<sup>1</sup> This raised a discourse on how Prabowo will translate President Joko Widodo's vision and mission into Indonesia's defence policy in the future. What is his focus for Indonesia's Ministry of Defence? How will he maintain the defence ties between the great powers and with ASEAN? And how will Indonesia's defence ties turn under his watch?

## Prabowo Subianto as the New Defence Minister

Prabowo Subianto was (in)famously known for his military career and later as President Joko Widodo's contender in the general elections of 2014 and 2019. Nevertheless his military background and political standing are expected to help him in his new role as Defence Minister. As a former Army lieutenant general, he is well-informed of the need to improve Indonesia's defence situation, and is perceived to have gained the full trust of the President who even declared, "I believe I don't have to tell him about his job -- he knows more than I do."<sup>2</sup> Despite the criticism received by several human rights groups that are concerned by the possibility of a greater military role in the civil sphere and also his seeming lack of concern on human rights issues, Prabowo Subianto's longstanding experiences in the field appear



to have been enough to gain the position of Indonesia's new Defence Minister in the new Indonesia Onward Cabinet.<sup>3</sup>

In his first month as a Defence Minister, Prabowo Subianto has made several headlines. In a session with Committee I of the House of Representatives (11/11), he elaborated his ideas for the future direction of Indonesia's defence policy with the concept of "*Pertahanan Keamanan Rakyat Semesta*" (Hankamrata).<sup>4</sup> His defence concept focused on the power of the Indonesian Military (TNI) as the central power of defence whilst encouraging civil empowerment as a supportive actor in Indonesia's defence. He further revealed his strategic prospect will be more defensive-related policies and handling the three main areas of defence (Land, Sea and Aerial) altogether.

He also revealed his international outlook that would seek friendly relations with other states to support Indonesia's defence policymaking. Indeed, by mid-November 2019, Prabowo Subianto has conducted bilateral meetings with eight different countries and attended ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meeting (ADMM) in Thailand.

## **Commitment to Strengthen ASEAN Security**

On November 17, 2019, the ADMM was held in Bangkok, Thailand. There, Indonesia expressed its commitment to strengthen ASEAN and the need to attain autonomy in regional defence. Indonesia's Defence Minister highlighted the need to enhance cooperation in securing sea border, preventing border conflict, and improving defence industry under the umbrella of ASEAN centrality.<sup>5</sup> The South China Sea issue was also raised at the meeting as Prabowo Subianto stressed the importance of security stability and pledged Indonesia's support to finalize the Code of Conduct as well as other regional efforts to ensure lanes of communication and trade would not be hindered.<sup>6</sup> He also promoted the Indonesia-initiated ASEAN Indo-Pacific outlook, in which he outlined the possibility of ASEAN as the balancer and connector within the Indo-Pacific region towards a peaceful, stabilize and prosperous all together.<sup>7</sup>

Prabowo Subianto also held a number of bilateral meetings with ASEAN member states, both prior and on the sidelines of the ADMM. For example, he was visited by Malaysia's ambassador in Indonesia prior to the regional ADMM and expressed his hope to improve friendly relations and cooperation in armaments.<sup>8</sup> This was followed by a visit to the Malaysian Ministry of Defence for talks on further cooperation in defence industry mainly towards training and education.<sup>9</sup> During the ADMM, Prabowo Subianto held a bilateral meeting with the host country—Thailand—that resulted in a joint agreement





on improving the ability of military personal and eradicating terrorism.<sup>10</sup> He then discussed the plan to move Indonesia's capital to Kalimantan with the Minister of Defence from Brunei Darussalam, which was reportedly fully supported by Prabowo Subianto's counterpart as it will bring the two countries closer for improving partnerships.<sup>11</sup> Indonesia's Defence Minister also offered Indonesian-made medium tanks by PT Pindad to the Philippines alongside discussing exchanging intelligence information, joint patrol and partnership in improving military personnel of both countries with his Philippine counterpart.<sup>12</sup> Prabowo Subianto further promised to visit all ASEAN countries in the near future.

## Defence Ties with US-China

Beside ASEAN, Indonesia's defensive relationship with major powers will also be closely watched under the new minister. During the ASEAN Summit, Prabowo Subianto met the US Secretary of Defence during a bilateral meeting to discuss further partnership. The discussion tied around US prioritizing the Indo-Pacific, where Indonesia has an important role, the conduct of joint military training, and sending Indonesian cadets to study in US military academy.<sup>13</sup> The US Secretary of Defence also wished to visit Indonesia soon to continue the cooperation.

At the same time when defence relations between Indonesia and the US are seemingly getting closer, it should be noted that Prabowo Subianto met with the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s ambassador several weeks before. On October 30, 2019 the China's ambassador paid a visit to the Indonesian Ministry of Defence and the two agreed on the importance of state sovereignty of the two nations and the need to attain citizen's security for nation's stability from internal and external.<sup>14</sup> The Defence Minister stated his intention to have friendlier relations in the future in order to keep the security stability.

## Indonesia's Defence Approach in the Region

The Indo-Pacific region has always been an integral part in Indonesia's defence policy. The interest on the Indo-Pacific region was shown in Indonesia's Defence White Paper 2015 as it mentioned that the Asia-Pacific's rapid development requires certain observations as it will be the area where US-China have clashing interests.<sup>15</sup> Under the US rebalancing policy and Chinese's modernize military, geographical conditions around ASEAN has been stressed by two major power for the past five years. Facing the contestation of US-China closely to the region, Indonesia has brought numerous discussions towards the concept of the Indo-Pacific and why it matters. With the growing significance of border and maritime issues in the Indo-Pacific, many ASEAN countries, including Indonesia, have participated in military joint





training with the US or China and even more, they also involved in sea patrols.

With regard to the South China Sea dispute, Indonesia's defence action is more focused to the securitization of the Natuna Sea. Between the promised partnerships to ASEAN members and US-China, Indonesia's defence policy is heavily focused to accommodate the concept of Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF). This led to emphasis towards Indonesia's sovereignty around the sea and strengthening sea border.

## **Analysis/The Verdict**

With Prabowo Subianto as Indonesia's new Minister of Defence, most likely Indonesia will be following programs from the previous predecessor with several innovations that would ease the directions towards Indonesia's defensive policies. During his first month, Prabowo has shown his spirit to strengthen Indonesia's security through integrated programs that concentrated on improving military capabilities from joint-training, exchange information, and even exporting locally-made tanks for the necessity of the country's defence industry. Alongside his proposed directions to bring Indonesia's Ministry of Defence to a more defensive-related policy, Indonesia's approach in improving military power can be expected through diplomatic conduct.

On the issue of geostrategic defence, Indonesia will seemingly prioritize peaceful dialogue and regional collaborations to ensure security stability. Prabowo has promoted the idea of the Indo-Pacific at the ADMM and suggested the possibility to involve US-China closer in strengthening the region in the future. Despite the pressure from both countries, Indonesia intends to involve them both in the Indo-Pacific.



## Endnotes

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**Contact:**

The Habibie Center

Jl. Kemang Selatan No. 98, Jakarta 12560

Tel: +62 21 781 7211 | Fax: +62 21 781 7212

Email: [thc@habibiecenter.or.id](mailto:thc@habibiecenter.or.id)

Website: [www.habibiecenter.or.id](http://www.habibiecenter.or.id)