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## Advancing the US–Indonesia defence relationship

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There has been a flurry of high-level security engagements between the United States and Indonesia in recent months. In mid-October, Indonesian Minister of Defense Prabowo Subianto visited the United States after being barred from entering the country for over two decades due to human rights concerns. This paved the way for high-level US officials visiting Jakarta, including the Secretary of State and the Acting Secretary of Defence.



From Washington’s point of view, Indonesia remains an important regional strategic prize regardless of election outcomes. Given Indonesia’s location at the heart of the Indo-Pacific, which side Jakarta backs in the US–China strategic competition matters a great deal. Coupled with its strong regional and economic potential, Indonesia could be the fulcrum that tilts the strategic balance one way or the other.

But US–Indonesia bilateral relations have grown lethargic in recent years. President Donald Trump and President Joko ‘Jokowi’ Widodo took a [transactional approach](#) <sup>[1]</sup> to bilateral relations. This focussed on possible cooperation surrounding trade deficits, counter-terrorism and the South China Sea, while sidelining the much more impactful and wide-ranging [Strategic Partnership](#) <sup>[2]</sup> framework signed in 2015. Jokowi has not visited the United States since 2015 and Trump has never visited Indonesia.

That the Trump administration takes a myopic view of Indonesia despite its strategic significance should not be surprising given Indonesia’s growing ties with China and the underwhelming state of its armed forces. Prabowo’s arrival as Minister of Defense in 2019

may have opened a small but potentially significant window of opportunity to change this.

Even if China is outcompeting the United States <sup>[3]</sup> in many areas in Indonesia — including economics, trade, investment and education — it is unlikely to replace the long and enduring US–Indonesia security relationship. The United States and its Western allies have been and will likely continue to be the largest provider of military education and training as well as weapons systems and equipment.

Despite many challenges <sup>[4]</sup> facing the US–Indonesia security relationship, including the arms embargo of the early 2000s and potential sanctions under the *Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act*, the relationship remains a core foundation of bilateral ties. The security relationship could be an initial springboard for whatever direction Washington and Jakarta takes. This is where Prabowo comes in.

As an army special forces officer, Prabowo was trained in the United States. He has been close to US policymakers and reportedly prefers US hardware and training. His concerns about China’s rise and economic presence in Indonesia <sup>[5]</sup> during his failed presidential campaigns are likely to further endear him in Washington. But perhaps more importantly, Prabowo is making military hardware procurement his top priority as a minister.

Over the past year he has travelled to more than a dozen countries in an effort to procure a wide range of weapons systems in an effort to complete the military’s modernisation plans. Military hardware and training is something the United States can offer Indonesia much more readily than China at this point in time. But grounding US–Indonesia defence relations on military procurement alone is a mistake.

First, state-of-the-art weaponry is necessary but not sufficient to boost Indonesia’s military capabilities. It needs to seriously address organisational challenges, including doctrinal development, personnel management and broader strategic planning systems. A scattergun approach to military procurement is unlikely to improve operational readiness and organisational capability to meet pressing strategic challenges.

Second, the long and enduring US–Indonesia defence ties are built on more than just hardware. Professional military education and training programs as well as various officer exchanges, visits, and engagements between Indonesian and US forces have proven to be the most resilient and useful part of the relationship. But the onus lies with Jakarta to provide a long-term blueprint of what it hopes to train officers in the United States for.

Indonesian military leaders should ensure that US-trained officers can be promoted at the right time to the right positions upon their return. Research shows that between 15 to 25 percent of US-trained officers make it to the top of the ladder. Indonesian military leaders should also properly assess their personnel needs — not just in terms of size and rank, but also in terms of professional qualifications and skills — and how the United States might fill the gap. Without a long-term professional military education framework, who goes where and when in the United States may depend on *ad hoc* considerations or bureaucratic necessities.

Most importantly, while the defence relationship is central to broader US–Indonesia ties, it does not replace the Strategic Partnership framework. Both Jakarta and Washington should figure out how to revitalise the defence relationship and ensure that this momentum continues into other areas within the Strategic Partnership. Without deepening other areas with strategic purpose and energy, the defence relationship may revert back to old patterns of ‘transactionalism’ devoid of strategic ballast and direction.

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[1] transactional approach: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/indonesia-us-relations-sweating-small-stuff>

[2] Strategic Partnership: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/26/joint-statement-united-states-america-and-republic-indonesia>

[3] outcompeting the United States: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/05/25/covid-19-unmasks-indonesias-investment-conditions/>

[4] many challenges: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/04/18/are-military-assistance-programs-important-for-us-indonesia-ties/>

[5] China’s rise and economic presence in Indonesia: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/11/20/belt-and-road-investment-under-fire-in-indonesias-presidential-elections/>

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