

# Prabowo's Uphill Tasks as Indonesia's New Defense Minister

**D** [thediplomat.com/2019/10/prabowos-uphill-tasks-as-indonesias-new-defense-minister/](https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/prabowos-uphill-tasks-as-indonesias-new-defense-minister/)



Last week, Indonesia's second-term President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo shocked many when he appointed Prabowo Subianto as his defense minister. Prabowo's bitterly divisive presidential bids and his checkered military past raises questions about his fitness for the office.

He has also not kept close watch of military policies for over two decades. His defense-related speeches and debate performance during the campaign trail seemed outdated and out-of-touch with the current domestic and strategic environment.

He needs to quickly familiarize himself with the various civilian and military institutions and policy challenges. He needs to balance competing priorities and operate within the broader civil-military domain.

## **Technocratic Challenges and Quick Fixes**

Prabowo must first deal with personnel welfare. The Yudhoyono presidency made military welfare a top priority and pegged military salaries, health benefits, and pension to other state apparatus. While this move improved personnel welfare, it narrowed the fiscal space available for operational expenses and weapons procurement or R&D.

**Enjoying this article?** [Click here to subscribe for full access. Just \\$5 a month.](#)

The problem continued under Jokowi's first term, which boosted performance allowance, holiday benefits, and housing programs. More than half of the 2020 defense budget has been allocated for employee expenditure. Prabowo needs to find the effective balance between welfare, operations, and procurement.

Prabowo also inherits Jokowi's focus on rebuilding the defense industry and accelerating the Minimum Essential Force (MEF), the ministry's long-term force development plan. The MEF has progressed from 34 percent in 2015 to 61.8 percent in 2018. Various national defense companies have also provided almost half of the existing weapon systems (up from 28 percent in 2014).

Whether Prabowo can build on these progresses depends on how he handles the technocratic work of setting up the ministry's key documents – Strategic Plan, White Paper, Defense Strategy, Defense Doctrine, and Defense Posture – as well as planning the MEF's final stages. These documents inform Indonesia's strategic challenges and how it intends to address them.

But they will also tell us how Prabowo manages the ministry's tenuous relationship with the Indonesian military (TNI). A new strategy, for example, must account for the TNI's internal dynamics, including the adoption of emerging technologies like drones and cyber systems. The TNI has also created, *inter alia*, new combat units and bases across eastern Indonesia, a Joint Special Operations Command, and three new Joint Regional Defense Commands.

These changes reflect personnel challenges, especially promotional logjams, and a concerted effort to shift the TNI's outlook from inward-looking to outward-looking, from 'Java-heavy' to 'archipelagic-spread', and from 'independent units' to 'integrated operations'. Prabowo might have the necessary penchant and gravitas to facilitate this process. But as the defense minister does not have operational command and control over the TNI, he needs to proceed carefully. Re-energizing the lethargic TNI-defense ministry relationship is a long-term process.

But there are quick-fixes Prabowo could implement. First, he could appoint new executive members of the Defense Industrial Policy Committee; many members have served longer than they should. Prabowo might let Wahyu Sakti Trenggono, the newly appointed Vice Minister of Defense to take the lead. Trenggono was the chief treasurer of Jokowi's campaign team and has been entrusted by the president to deal with the defense industry.

Second, Prabowo should manage the possible U.S. embargo over Indonesia's procurement of Russian arms. This looming challenge has already caused a backlog of at least four big ticket items in the procurement plans. Finally, he should work with the TNI to move the military's center of gravity to the new capital in Eastern Kalimantan. The move could cost over \$9 billion and involve thousands of troops and dozens of high-value assets, bases, and units.

## **Civil-Military and Regional Challenges**

Prabowo also needs to complete several defense-related laws; there are still at least 11 defense-related bills on the books. This task highlights the broader civil-military domain that Prabowo needs operate in.

The defense ministry needs to work with the national legislature to formulate its budget and strategic policy as well as to pass any defense-related bills. On a daily basis, Prabowo also needs to work with the Coordinating Minister for Legal, Political, and Security Affairs, Muhamad Mahfud MD, a former defense minister and Constitutional Court chief justice.

**Enjoying this article?** [Click here to subscribe for full access. Just \\$5 a month.](#)

The defense ministry also needs to work with the foreign ministry under the re-appointed Retno Marsudi to address Indonesia's deteriorating strategic environment. China's arrival as a military power, its hegemonic behavior in the region, and its competition with the United States are creating a strategic flux. Multilateral institutions like ASEAN are rudderless as conflict flashpoints—from North Korea to the South China Sea—flare up.

The defense and foreign ministries could help each other and drive Indonesia's regional leadership. Jokowi's first-term foreign policy, after all, is characterized by buck-passing. The foreign ministry worked on either low-key (e.g. citizen protection) or domestically-appealing issues (e.g. Israeli-Palestinian conflict). While there is some global recognition (e.g. a UN Security Council seat), Indonesia spent capital on a flawed ASEAN Outlook for Indo-Pacific.

Prabowo's knowledge and assertive voice on regional affairs might fill some of the gaps. He should work with the foreign ministry to propose a more assertive Indonesian vision for regional order, perhaps to be launched at next year's Shangri-La Dialogue. He should also expand and deepen existing multilateral forums (e.g. the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting) and mini-lateral ones (e.g. the tri-lateral cooperation with Malaysia and the Philippines).

Boosting the foreign ministry's role in defense diplomacy might soften some of Prabowo's potentially hardline inclinations. As many defense ministry officials are also military officers, a closer cooperation with the foreign ministry could expand the former's diplomatic tools and repertoires. Together, both ministries could amplify Indonesia's regional voice.

## **Will Jokowi's Gambit Pay Off?**

Prabowo's relationship with Jokowi is paramount in all these challenges. Jokowi's appointment is hardly a matter of trust and respect. Jokowi needed Gerindra to dilute the potential domination of his own coalition members. He also assumed that a "larger coalition" will smoothen his agenda for the next five years.

But Prabowo and Jokowi might be caught in a future “security dilemma”. As Prabowo grows frustrated with the policy and civil-military challenges, he might seek to dominate the security establishment beyond his portfolio. Jokowi, sensing that Prabowo is undermining him, might instruct other retired generals and senior figures in the Cabinet to contain him. Prabowo, in turn, might feel that Jokowi is out to humiliate him.

Civil-military friction and intra-military conflicts might ensue as both feels threatened by one another. But if Prabowo becomes a “team player” and executes nothing but Jokowi’s agenda and tackles the uphill tasks outlined above, he might leave a positive legacy and improve his party’s public standing alongside. Time will tell whether Jokowi’s gambit pays off.

*Curie Maharani is Lecturer at the Department of International Relations, Bina Nusantara University and coordinates the defense transformation program of P8, a defense think tank in Jakarta, Indonesia. Evan A. Laksmana is a senior researcher at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Jakarta, Indonesia.*