

## How do we know a successful defense minister when we see one?

Retired general Prabowo Subianto does not appear to have hit the ground running as defense minister. Last week, during his first public hearing with House of Representatives Commission I, which oversees, among other matters, defense, he acknowledged he was still “taking stock” of the numerous defense challenges.

This is perhaps why he did not propose anything fundamentally different from his predecessors. His presentation of Indonesia’s strategic outlook (“defensive, not offensive”), broad goals (“handling three hot spots simultaneously”) or basic defense posture are essentially decades-old ideas.

Some are also skeptical of his underdeveloped notion of reviving the Total People’s Defense system and his insistence on keeping budget details away from public scrutiny, although he probably gave details of his work plan to lawmakers in a closed-door meeting.

But the bigger question is, how should we measure Prabowo’s tenure as defense minister in

President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo’s second Cabinet?

The defense minister has essentially four overlapping roles: chief defense bureaucrat, chief adviser to the President on national defense, chief civilian representative of the military and chief defense diplomat. For each role, we can further assess whether he spends more of his time, energy, and capital on processes or outcomes.

As the chief defense bureaucrat, the minister formulates “internal” policies of the ministry as well as the broader policies of national defense.

We can ask whether he will focus on improving the day-to-day management (i.e. bureaucracy) of the ministry, or on personnel welfare, on technological procurement, on operational expenditure or on research and development within the defense budget.

As the chief adviser to the President on national defense, the minister helps implement the President’s strategic vision and advises him on defense-related



### INSIGHT

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challenges.

It is fair to ask whether Prabowo will give strictly professional advice and implement nothing other than the President’s vision, or whether he will carry water for his own political party. This question goes to the heart of the state of civil-military relations for the next five years.

As the chief civilian representative of the military, the minister advocates for and manages the defense budget and provides the necessary administrative and policy infrastructure for the Indonesian Military (TNI) to perform its duties.

Without operational command and control of the military, to what extent can he align his vi-

sion with those of the generals? How can he maintain a balance in the complex bargaining between individual armed services and between the military and the ministry over budget allocations? To what extent will he represent the military’s corporate interests in dealing with the House and the broader bureaucracy, such as the coordinating political, legal and security affairs minister?

Finally, as the chief defense diplomat, the defense minister represents the military establishment and the President in various international defense engagements.

Will he work well and closely with the foreign minister to formulate and articulate Indonesia’s strategic policy in the Indo-Pa-

cific? Will he sustain or diminish Indonesia’s growing network of defense diplomatic activities and cooperative engagements?

How will he manage the TNI’s procurement of weaponry from overseas, especially with an embargo from the United States still a possibility? How can he ensure Indonesia’s strategic environment remains stable and friendly despite his own efforts to boost the military’s force development and capabilities?

These questions give us a wider benchmark than simply picking apart every little thing the defense minister says. We need to focus on the forest and not the trees.

More importantly, measuring policy performance as whole rather than tea-leaf reading individual idiosyncrasies helps build a more institutionalized defense policy-making system.

It should not matter who the President chooses as defense minister, whether he is a “full” civilian or a retired general. Or whether the minister comes from

a political party, the bureaucracy or the “professional” realm.

Since the fall of the New Order, we have spent time, capital and energy on depoliticizing the military and ensuring democratic civilian control. But the defense policy-making system has been left almost unattended, although marginal bureaucratic reform and structural tinkering has taken place over the past decade.

Jokowi’s predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, gave his full backing to his two defense ministers to manage the policy-making process, while he actively handhelmed the military on a daily basis. Under Jokowi, however, civil-military relations and defense policy has been on autopilot for the past five years.

It is time we think of various “system building” activities to ensure that defense policy is no longer at the mercy of political alignments. As a retired general, surely Prabowo can recognize the importance of a properly functioning and professional defense policy-making.