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Should China be concerned about Indonesia's new defence minister, Prabowo Subianto?

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955 words

28 October 2019

scmp.com

SCMCOM

English

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* Prabowo, a former general, was suspected of playing a role in the May 1998 riots that targeted Chinese Indonesians

* His ambivalence towards China will continue but he cannot turn back the clock on Indonesia's growing security ties with its neighbour to the north

Indonesian President [Joko "Jokowi" Widodo](#) caused surprise and chagrin when he picked his election rival and chair of the Gerindra Party, retired general Prabowo Subianto, as his defence minister earlier this week.

[Prabowo's chequered military past](#) is well known. He was one of the country's most powerful generals under the authoritarian regime of Suharto, his then father-in-law. A few months after Suharto's downfall in May 1998, a disciplinary board convened by the military leadership effectively discharged Prabowo for allegedly kidnapping pro-democracy activists.

After a brief exile, Prabowo then founded the Gerindra party in 2008 and has sought the presidency ever since. His elevation into the defence ministry - his first public office as a civilian - will have profound consequences for civil-military relations and defence policymaking.

He is likely to retain his chairmanship of Gerindra, the third-largest party in the national legislature, and it is likely to field a presidential contender in 2024. He is also surrounded by influential retired generals. Given his extensive ties to the Army Special Forces, which he commanded in 1995, Prabowo has become the most powerful defence minister in over two decades.

While the defence minister himself does not have operational command and control over the military, the ministry does control its budget and formulates broader strategic policy.

Thus, worries have emerged that Prabowo will alter Indonesia's foreign policy, especially its relationship with [China](#).

For one thing, many have suspected that Prabowo helped instigate the [riots in May 1998 that targeted ethnic Chinese Indonesians](#). He also cultivated religious and political leaders who blamed the country's economic crises in 1996 on the ethnic minority group.

His populist rhetoric as Gerindra chairman over the past decade has been laced with hyper-nationalism and his campaign speeches have alluded to the destructive "foreign forces" undermining [Indonesia's](#) economy. He has also called for a review of the country's trade policy with China and has criticised major Chinese investments.

And yet, Prabowo has occasionally been reconciliatory on China as well. Last year, he characterised Indonesia's ties with China as "very important" and during one of the presidential debates earlier this year, he said Indonesia could learn from China on how to reduce poverty.

As defence minister, such ambivalence will continue. On the one hand, Prabowo is aware that China's arrival as a military power, its hegemonic behaviour in the region, and the current [trade tensions](#) between Beijing and Washington require the Indonesian military to accelerate its organisational transformation and technological modernisation. In fact, one of his campaign platforms noted how "weak" Indonesia's military has become.

On the other hand, he will also inherit Indonesia's growing security ties with China - along with those with other powers such as Australia, Japan and the United States. As the country's chief defence diplomat, Prabowo cannot easily turn back the clock on these ties.

But if the Americans impose sanctions on Indonesia's purchase of Russian arms, or if Prabowo cannot even enter the US over his human rights record, he might turn more to China and other world powers. Indeed, given Indonesia's sluggish defence transformation process, diversifying strategic engagements might be a necessary first line of defence.

Yet Prabowo is unlikely to have free rein in shaping Indonesia's China policy. Jokowi will no doubt continue to personally invest in his good rapport with Chinese President Xi Jinping and will also keep entrusting [Luhut Pandjaitan](#), recently appointed as coordinating minister for maritime affairs and investment, with Indonesia's participation in China's [Belt and Road Initiative](#).

More importantly, Retno Marsudi, who was reappointed as foreign minister, should take the diplomatic lead in China policy. Despite the occasional flare-ups with China in recent years, especially over the [South China Sea](#) and Chinese encroachment of Indonesian waters, some have credited Marsudi for stabilising bilateral ties. After a bumpy start, she has now apparently gained Jokowi's trust in managing the country's foreign policy.

Jokowi also installed other "balancers" within the cabinet to contain Prabowo if necessary. These include Mohammad Mahfud as coordinating minister for political, legal, and security affairs, who leads the broader security establishment, including the defence ministry. Mahfud, a constitutional law professor, was a defence minister in the early 2000s, and later served as chief justice of the Constitutional Court.

Luhut Pandjaitan, meanwhile, is a decorated retired special forces general who was Prabowo's senior in the military. As was Jokowi's new minister for religious affairs, retired general Fachrul Razi. He was a former deputy commander of the military and a member of the board that recommended Prabowo's discharge.

Prabowo's elevation is unlikely to overhaul Indonesia's China policy. Stronger economic ties will continue to underpin the bilateral relationship with diplomatic balancing and security partnerships following suit.

The new defence minister might take a stronger public stance on challenges to Indonesia's sovereign rights, including in the North Natuna Sea. But others in Indonesia's China policymaking circles could well provide a stabilising influence.

In the end, Prabowo might just have to learn to work with others to execute the president's wishes - something he is not yet accustomed to doing.

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