

**ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK**

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

INDONESIA'S PRABOWO PRESIDENCY: IS THE ASIA PACIFIC READY FOR IT?**Natalie Sambhi**, Founder and Executive Director of Verve Research.

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While Indonesia's General Elections Commission will take a few more weeks to confirm the electoral result, former army general and current Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto is set to succeed Joko Widodo (Jokowi) as the country's eighth president. Upon the president-elect's inauguration in October, the identity of his new cabinet, including Indonesia's key foreign policy players, will be revealed. That said, we can get a head start by filling in some blank spaces about what this presidency might mean for the Asia Pacific.

Under Prabowo, Indonesia will seek as much continuity in its strategic environment as possible. Branding himself the "continuity" candidate and heir apparent to Jokowi, Prabowo must seek to maintain, if not strengthen, relationships that support high levels of economic growth and trade. Another crucial task is to attract much-needed foreign investment to continue the current president's infrastructure development agenda.

For Jakarta, an ideal Asia-Pacific will be one with minimal shocks and low levels of competition between the United States and China. To this end, Indonesia is best served by maintaining its status as a nonaligned state and balancing the strategic system by fostering relationships with all global players, including the US, China, Russia, India, and Japan, while avoiding the perception of bloc politics. Interestingly, there was no hostility between the former general and the AUKUS pact, which [he did not see as a threat to Indonesia's interests](#).

Maintaining this diversity of strategic relationships also benefits Indonesia's military modernisation requirements. As Defense Minister, Prabowo courted a range of countries with major defence industries, particularly the US, France, South Korea, Turkey, and Russia, to further [Indonesia's policy of diversifying the armed forces' suppliers](#) and deepening defence cooperation.

An unfavourable future for Indonesia involves scenarios such as another pandemic or serious natural disaster in the Asia-Pacific, political crises in neighbouring countries, armed confrontations in the South China Sea, or recessions in major economic partners. In such circumstances, Prabowo would need to deploy greater economic and diplomatic resources to respond and assist, especially if fellow Southeast Asian countries are impacted. There is already talk about Indonesia having to [expand its market access to](#)

[global trade in light of Japan's recession](#). In these situations, opportunity awaits not only for Indonesia but also for the incoming president to step up.

This brings us to another key point: Prabowo's penchant for international affairs. Not only is the former army general much more at ease than Jokowi in global settings, owing to his cosmopolitan and elite upbringing, but he has also, on more than one occasion, positioned himself as a foreign affairs figure.

On one hand, this could yield positive outcomes for Southeast Asia and its regional body, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), if Prabowo's sense of self can be translated into greater action on issues such as peaceful political transition in Myanmar or improved intra-ASEAN security cooperation.

Prabowo's presidency also arrives at a time of growing calls among developing countries in Asia and Africa for a greater say in international institutions. With [approval ratings of around 78% at the time of publication](#), India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi will likely stay in power this year, creating the potential for two leaders from major Global South states to demand a more equitable international order.

On the other hand, a president with an impulse to create his own foreign policy could present challenges, particularly where personal rather than national interests are prioritized. For instance, in June of last year, Prabowo unveiled [an impromptu peace plan for Ukraine and Russia during the Shangri-La Dialogue](#), which involved Russian troops remaining in Ukrainian territory. Prabowo's failure to consult either Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi or the President led to the plan being shut down by Retno just two days later. Analysts saw the improbable plan, which was championed by China, as a misguided "[stump speech](#)" and "[self serving](#)" endeavour.

A final note on personality: during this recent campaign, the former military man toned down his rhetoric of accusing foreign forces of shamelessly "looting" Indonesia's wealth. [The transformation of Prabowo's public image from a textbook populist](#) and firebrand defender of Indonesian sovereignty to a "keen student and follower" of Jokowi could be more than skin deep. If not, then the Asia-Pacific foreign policy community might consider potential scenarios in which Indonesia's leader adopts a more strident and less cooperative stance.

One example might involve the future president bristling at the mention of human rights abuse allegations from his operational service in East Timor and his role in the kidnapping and disappearance of student activists in 1998, for which he was forced out of the military. While liberal democracies such as the US and Australia set aside official concerns about this track record once Prabowo became Defense Minister, his reaction to criticism from foreign journalists will be a factor in his diplomatic style.

In sum, the arrival of Prabowo as leader of the world's fourth largest country heralds considerable continuity in Jakarta's international relations, yet also holds the potential for change. A more colourful and engaged president could mean many things for Indonesia and the Asia-Pacific, but we will have to wait and see.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

This commentary is also published on the [APLN website](#).

ABOUT APLN

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