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New wings, old woes

Faced with numerous security threats, Indonesia's new President Prabowo is putting his faith in drones. But that alone won't be enough

Indonesia's new president, Prabowo Subianto, is deeply rooted in the military. A retired military general and former defence minister, Prabowo is expected to take a more 'active' and 'hands-on' approach in regard to formulating and implementing Indonesia's defence policy. As defence minister of the previous administration, he has been looking into integrating drone technology into its military operations — an area that seems to have become a focal point early in his presidency.

In 2024, Indonesia signed a $300 million deal to procure 12 Anka drones from Turkey, designed for surveillance and reconnaissance missions, with the added capability of carrying out strikes. The deal also stipulates that the drones will be produced in collaboration with Indonesia's own defence industry, which is a common feature of Indonesia's arms procurement deals to allow for technology transfer. Indonesia has also expressed interest in procuring more of China's CH-4 and Turkey's Bayraktar drones.

Domestically, Indonesia has also inched towards developing its own medium-altitude, long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). However, this project has unfortunately been cancelled as the funds and resources that would have been used for the project have been diverted towards 'civil initiatives'. Other than that, while local drone production has already occurred, it is still at a relatively early stage compared to foreign manufacturers.

A range of security threats

The Indo-Pacific has seen a proliferation of drones in recent years, both for ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) and combat purposes. China has several models of UAVs that it can field for military purposes, including the Wing Loong series of UAVs and the Guizhou WZ-7 Soaring Dragon, both of which have ISR and strike capabilities.

The US, on the other hand, has deployed the RQ-4 Global Hawk and MQ-4C Triton in Japan and Singapore for ISR operations, presumably to monitor developments in the South China Sea and in other key areas near and around Japan.

Indonesia's recent surge in arms procurement is part of its broader plan to modernise its military under the Minimum Essential Force framework, which began under the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Achieving the modernisation targets of the framework has proven challenging for Indonesia due to various factors, including financial and budgetary constraints, reliance on the procurement of foreign-manufactured arms and fluctuating political priorities. In addition, former President Jokowi's preference for economic and infrastructure development meant that defence and security policy received less attention.

Although Indonesia is not a claimant in the South China Sea, the outbreak of conflict in the region is likely to involve or significantly affect its territorial waters and interests.

Military drones, if used strategically, can certainly help support Indonesia's military operations. First, they can enhance maritime domain awareness for Indonesia's naval forces, allowing its military and other relevant units to monitor and address potential security threats near or within its maritime territories. Drones like the Global Hawk or Triton could enhance Indonesia's ability to monitor and survey its maritime capabilities and provide the Indonesian Navy or Coast Guard with near real-time intelligence on developments in the maritime domain. They could also provide a limited degree of deterrence against potential adversaries or threat actors seeking to exploit Indonesia's maritime territories, while also significantly reducing the risk of injury or death to Indonesian military personnel.

Given the deteriorating security environment in the Indo-Pacific, Indonesia certainly needs better military 'hardware'. This can be seen in a number of key trends. The first is the increasing militarisation of key regional flashpoints, such as the South China Sea. Both China and Vietnam have engaged in significant artificial island building in the Sea, many of which are equipped with military installations. This militarisation has been accompanied by an increase in the frequency of violent confrontations in the Sea, such as those between China and the Philippines over the Second Thomas Shoal and between China and Vietnam near the Paracel Islands.

Although Indonesia is not a claimant in the South China Sea, the outbreak of conflict in the region is likely to involve or significantly affect its territorial waters and interests. Additionally, Indonesia also faces a range of non-traditional and transnational security threats in its waters, including illegal fishing, drug and human trafficking, piracy and incursions by foreign vessels. The integration of drones can thus play a role in helping Indonesia address these threats, if not through deterrence, then through increased maritime domain awareness.

Not a silver bullet

Nevertheless, while there is certainly an argument for Indonesia to buy more drones as part of its modernisation plans, drones would not be a 'silver bullet' for addressing the country's overall security needs. Not to mention that advanced drones come with a significant price tag — one that could compromise Indonesia's plans to modernise its other military equipment, such as fighter jets and warships. Indonesia also faces the challenge of dependence on foreign suppliers of military equipment, given that its defence industry is yet to be self-sufficient. This can be addressed through further investment in domestic research and development, as well as cooperation with foreign defence manufacturers in the US, Europe or elsewhere. However, this is a long-term investment, whereas Indonesia's myriad of both external and internal security threats requires a solution now, a solution that may be beyond what military drones or other 'hardware' can provide.

These threats include the need to ensure the security of Indonesia's various strategic sea lanes, the need to strengthen the country's control over its sovereign territories, and the need to deter potential adversaries and criminal actors from using Indonesia's territories for purposes contrary to its national interests. In addition, there is also a need to modernise and replace Indonesia's ageing major military equipment and platforms, to improve or restructure organisational structures within Indonesia's maritime law enforcement architecture, and to identify Indonesia's defence and security policy priorities and interests (particularly as Indonesia's last Defence White Paper was released in 2015).

The integration of drones into Indonesia's defence forces must be done in conjunction with

Indonesia's armed forces are also facing the challenge of 'promotional logjams', where there is a surplus of military officers and not enough positions or jobs to accommodate them. Indonesia's defence policy and procurement plans under President Prabowo must therefore

improvements to Indonesia's overall defence strategy and capabilities.

follow a clear assessment of what its broader national security strategy is, how to organise its military personnel effectively, and what threats need to be addressed. Military hardware alone will not solve or properly address Indonesia's security challenges.

However, this doesn't mean that Indonesia needs to stop procuring drones altogether. Their integration into Indonesia's defence forces must be done in conjunction with improvements to Indonesia's overall defence strategy and capabilities, following a proper assessment of what the country wants to achieve with its foreign and defence policy and what issues need to be addressed. Drones can certainly play a 'force multiplier' role for Indonesia's armed forces, supporting and enhancing its existing military capabilities, but they shouldn't be relied upon as the primary means of addressing a given security issue. Financial, budgetary, political and technological constraints will also pose significant hurdles to Indonesia's defence modernisation plans, not to mention the procurement and development of military drones. Balancing the national budget amidst competing priorities – such as Prabowo's free lunch programme, his targets for eight per cent economic growth and the relocation of the capital – with Indonesia's military modernisation efforts will be a major challenge for the Prabowo administration.



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