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Indonesian President-elect Prabowo Subianto's Visit to Moscow: Laying the Groundwork for Enhanced Ties with Russia

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Russia's President Vladimir Putin (L) shakes hands with Indonesia's President-elect Prabowo Subianto as Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (R) looks on during a meeting at the Kremlin in Moscow on 31 July 2024. (Photo by Maxim Shemetov / POOL / AFP).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Defence Minister and President-elect Prabowo Subianto's visit to Russia on 31 July 2024 was a signal that his administration intends to pursue a balanced foreign policy vis-à-vis the major powers, and one that envisages a bigger role for Russia.
- Prabowo wants to strengthen economic ties with Russia and seeks its assistance to enhance Indonesia's food, energy and health security.
- To boost bilateral trade, Indonesia and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union are set to sign a free trade agreement. Direct flights between Russia and Bali will start in September.
- The president-elect welcomed Russia's offer to help Indonesia create a civilian nuclear energy industry.
- Prabowo wants to increase defence cooperation with Russia, including officer training and combined military exercises and possibly arms purchases.
- The Prabowo administration will not change its neutral stance on the Russia-Ukraine War.
- Despite Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, Indonesian public perceptions of Russia and President Putin remain very positive.

INTRODUCTION

On 31 July Prabowo Subianto, Indonesia's current defence minister and president-elect, paid a working visit to Russia.¹ The purpose of his visit was two-fold.

The first reason was to signal to domestic and foreign audiences that when he takes office as president on 20 October, his administration will remain firmly committed to the country's foundational *bebas dan aktif* (independent and active) foreign policy – neutral, 'a friend to all', and keeping its relations with all the major powers in balance. During the election campaign, Prabowo had argued that Indonesia needed to "rebalance" its foreign policy because it had become too pro-Western over the past few decades.²

The second reason for Prabowo's trip was to underscore Indonesia's long-standing friendship with the Russian Federation, and lay the groundwork for closer relations between his administration and Russia in key areas such as trade and investment, food, health and energy security, and defence cooperation. On meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin, Prabowo described Russia as "a great friend", and gratefully acknowledged the diplomatic, economic and military support Moscow had provided Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, in the 1950s and 1960s, adding "We learn from our parents that we must never forget those who helped us."³ Prabowo congratulated Putin on his re-election in March. He also revealed that over the past several months, Indonesian and Russian officials had "been discussing, quite intensively, the roadmap ahead that we would like to increase our cooperation with Russia".⁴

Russia welcomed Prabowo's visit for two reasons. First, it reinforced the Kremlin's narrative that Western attempts to isolate Russia following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 have been unsuccessful, especially in its relations with countries in the Global South. Second, Moscow is keen to strengthen commercial and military ties with non-Western countries as a means to develop the economy and circumvent Western financial sanctions and export controls. Russia's defence industrial sector is especially keen to resume arms sales to Indonesia.

This article examines the areas of cooperation Prabowo and Russian officials discussed, as well as Prabowo's stance on the Russia-Ukraine War.

TRADE, INVESTMENT AND TOURISM

Russia is not one of Indonesia's most important economic partners. However, trade between the two countries increased following the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to data from the International Monetary Fund, the value of two-way trade surged 86.5 percent between 2020 and 2022, from US\$1.93 billion to US\$3.6 billion.⁵ However, the Indonesian government estimates that in 2023, commerce fell to US\$3.3 billion.⁶ To increase bilateral trade, Indonesia has negotiated a free trade agreement (FTA) with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), membership of which includes Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. During Prabowo's visit, the two sides indicated that the FTA was ready to be signed. Indonesia would in such a case, become the third Southeast Asian country to conclude an FTA with the EAEU. In 2015, Vietnam became the first, followed by Singapore in 2019. It remains to be seen if the

FTA boosts trade between Indonesia and Russia when it comes into effect. The Vietnam-EAEU led to only a modest increase in bilateral trade while Singapore's trade with Russia actually fell between 2019 and 2022.

President Putin told Prabowo that Russia was willing to invest in Indonesia's infrastructure, although he did not provide any details. Russia's more recent investment projects in Indonesia have not been successful. In 2023, Russia's state-owned energy company Zarubezhneft announced it was pulling out of a joint venture with a British company to develop the Tuna gas field off the Natuna Islands due to Western sanctions.⁷ That same year, Indonesia's state-owned energy corporation Pertamina said it was looking for a new partner to run the Tuban oil refinery in East Java which it had agreed to set up with Russia's biggest oil company Rosneft in 2016.⁸ Moreover, given the economic problems its invasion of Ukraine has created, Russia cannot be expected to become a large-scale investor in Indonesia.

Tourism was also on Prabowo's agenda. The Indonesian resort island of Bali has long been a popular destination for Russian tourists, but since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War, and especially since Putin announced a partial mobilisation of military reservists in September 2022, arrivals have soared. In the first three months of 2023, 43,622 Russians entered Bali, compared with 59,854 for the whole of 2022, making them the second largest group of foreign visitors after Australians.⁹ Overall, 160,000 Russians travelled to Indonesia in 2023, making it the tenth most popular foreign destination for Russians.¹⁰

The influx of Russians into Bali has not been without problems. Many Russians have overstayed their three-month visas, worked illegally and had run ins with the authorities over illicit activities, anti-social behaviour and traffic violations.¹¹ This led Bali's governor, Wayan Koster, to call for an end to the visa-on-arrival scheme for Russians (and Ukrainians, a smaller number of whom had also fled to Bali to escape the conflict).¹² A crackdown on those who had overstayed their visas and engaged in inappropriate behaviour followed, leading to deportations as well as a ban on foreigners driving motorcycles.¹³ In May 2024, residents of Bali reacted with consternation when the name of the resort village of Canggu, popular with Russian visitors, was altered on Google Maps to "New Moscow".¹⁴ Despite these problems, Russian state airline Aeroflot's request for landing rights at Denpasar International Airport on Bali has been approved, with flights scheduled to start in September.¹⁵ To deal with the surge in Russian nationals arriving in Bali, Russia will open a consulate-general on the island in the near future.¹⁶

FOOD, ENERGY AND HEALTH SECURITY

The biggest impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on Indonesia has been to exacerbate rising food and energy prices. Russia and Ukraine are both leading producers of wheat (used in the production of instant noodles, a staple in Indonesia) and sunflower oil, while Russia is a major exporter of fertilisers and energy resources. The war has contributed to an increase in the price of foodstuffs, cooking oil and fuel, raising the cost of living for millions of Indonesians. It was the war's impact on food and energy security which motivated President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo's "peace mission" to Kyiv and Moscow in June 2022, when he lobbied Putin to support a UN-backed "grain corridor" in the Black Sea to allow for the export of Ukrainian wheat.¹⁷

In Moscow, Prabowo discussed food and energy issues with senior Russian officials. Putin promised that Russia would increase agricultural exports to Indonesia, though he did not provide any details.¹⁸ Regarding energy security, Prabowo stated that his administration would be open to cooperation with Russia to establish a civilian nuclear power industry, including the construction of small modular reactors (SMRs) as well as conventional nuclear power plants (NPPs).¹⁹

Among the countries of Southeast Asia, Indonesia has the most advanced nuclear technology infrastructure. The country's nuclear power agency, BATAN, was established in the 1950s and operates three research reactors. Indonesia has considered adding nuclear power to its energy mix since the 1990s, but these plans have never been realised due to cost and safety concerns. In 2014, however, nuclear power was formally included in the country's national energy policy and in 2020 the Jokowi administration announced plans to bring an NPP online by 2039.²⁰ Nuclear power would help meet the country's growing demand for electricity and enable Indonesia to reduce its carbon emissions.

Russia has been keen to assist Indonesia realise its nuclear power plans. Over the past decade, Russia's state-owned atomic energy agency, Rosatom, has signed several memorandums of agreement with BATAN for the design and development of SMRs and floating nuclear power plants. During President Jokowi's visit to Moscow in June 2022, Putin offered Russia's help to generate nuclear power in Indonesia, an offer the government said it would consider.²¹ But Russia's ambitions to play a role in Indonesia's atomic power plans faces two challenges. The first is competition from other countries, including the United States which has also offered its support to develop SMRs.²² The second is the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, including US sanctions against Rosatom which would make it difficult for the agency to obtain certain kinds of technology used in the construction of NPPs. In addition to sanctions, due to the adverse impact of the war on the Russian economy, Rosatom may no longer be able to offer generous financial support in the design and construction of NPPs.

The Prabowo administration will also look to Russia to help improve Indonesia's health security. The president-elect revealed that Indonesia would seek Russia's assistance to train medical staff. In his meeting with Putin, Prabowo noted that Indonesia had a shortfall of 160,000 doctors and to reduce this number, he would introduce a major scholarship programme for Indonesian medical students to study overseas, including in Russia.²³ Indonesia thus intends to take a leaf out of Malaysia's book, which recognised Russian medical degrees in the early 2000s, leading to a surge in Malaysian students at Russian medical schools.

DEFENCE COOPERATION

Enhanced defence cooperation between Indonesia and Russia was also on Prabowo's agenda in Moscow. Indonesia is one of Russia's oldest defence partners in Southeast Asia. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Soviet Union was the Sukarno regime's primary source of arms, providing the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) with fighter aircraft, bombers, surface warships and submarines. In addition, Soviet military officers trained thousands of TNI officers, in both Indonesia and the USSR. It was the strength of the TNI that influenced the Netherlands' decision to transfer Irian Jaya to Indonesia in 1962. Prabowo acknowledged Moscow's support during this period when he told Putin "You also helped us build up our military forces when

we were under threat.”²⁴ Under President Suharto (1966-98), Indonesia purchased most of its military equipment from Western countries, but the country’s defence relationship with Russia was renewed in the post-New Order era, mainly to reduce dependence on the United States. Under presidents Megawati Sukarnoputri and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Indonesia procured ten Sukhoi fighter jets (a mix of Su-27 and Su-30 Flankers) as well as military helicopters and infantry fighting vehicles.

Under Jokowi, however, Russia’s arms sales to Indonesia suffered a serious setback. In 2021, Indonesia cancelled a US\$1.14 billion order it had signed three years earlier for 11 Su-35 Flankers, Russia’s most advanced fighter jet for export.²⁵ Although no reason was given for the cancellation, the decision seems to have been based on a combination of factors, including the threat of US CAATSA sanctions,²⁶ an offer by Washington to sell F-15 fighter jets to Indonesia if the Russian deal was dropped, and the TNI air force’s concerns about the performance capabilities of the Su-35 (which also led Egypt and Algeria to axe orders for the fighter jet). In 2022, Jakarta announced it would buy 36 F-15s and 42 French-made Rafales instead of the Su-35s. Earlier this year, however, Indonesia’s ambassador to Russia, Jose Tavares, told the media that the Su-35 contract had not been terminated and that Jakarta was merely waiting for a “more accommodating environment” before proceeding with the deal.²⁷

Will the Prabowo administration provide a more accommodating environment for Russian defence companies? The threat of US sanctions remains, though Washington has used CAATSA only twice (against China and Turkey) and their use against Indonesia would be a setback for US-Indonesia military ties at a time when the United States is trying to strengthen its defence partnerships with regional states. A more serious obstacle to future Russian arms sales to Indonesia are the problems facing Russia’s defence industrial sector post-invasion. Western financial sanctions and export controls have created severe financing and production problems for Russian arms companies. Moreover, any new military equipment manufactured in Russia today is used to recapitalise the Russian armed forces which has suffered huge battlefield losses in occupied Ukraine. Nevertheless, despite these problems, Prabowo may be interested in procuring military equipment from Russia, though arms sales do not appear to have been discussed when he met Russian Defence Minister Andrey Belousov. However, a strong indication that Prabowo is interested in buying Russian arms for the TNI was that he has invited Russian defence companies to participate in the Indo Defence Expo and Forum which will take place in Jakarta in November.²⁸ Since Russia invaded Ukraine, Russian arms makers have been absent from major defence shows in Southeast Asia, except in Hanoi in December 2022.

The two areas of defence cooperation the two sides did discuss are less problematic. In his talks with Belousov, who referred to Indonesia as a “key partner”, Prabowo requested that Russia raise the number of places for TNI officers to study at Russian military academies.²⁹ The two sides also discussed increasing the frequency of combined military exercises. Although Belousov suggested that Indonesian troops participate in ground exercises in Russia, the immediate focus is likely to be on increasing the size and frequency of naval exercises. Over the past decade, the TNI-Navy and the Russian Navy have exercised together every few years, both in multilateral and bilateral drills (see Table 1). Prabowo also said that the Indonesian navy was willing to take part in Russia’s annual Navy Day Parade in St. Petersburg in July 2025.

Table 1: Indonesia-Russia Naval Exercises, 2014-23

Name of Exercise	Participating Countries	Location	Dates	Assets/Personnel from Russia	Type of Exercise
Multilateral Naval Exercise KOMODO (MNEK) 2014	Indonesian-led multilateral naval exercises	Batam, Natunas and Anambas	29 March-3 April 2014	<i>RFS Marshal Shaposhnikov</i> (Udaloy-class destroyer) <i>RFS Irkut</i> (oil tanker) <i>RFS Alatau</i> (rescue tug)	Search and Rescue (SAR)
N/A	Indonesia and Russia	Jakarta, Indonesia	29 December 2015	<i>RFS Bystry</i> (Sovremenny-class destroyer)	Communications exercise
MNEK-2016	Indonesian-led multilateral naval exercises	West Sumatra	9-16 April 2016	<i>RFS Admiral Vinogradov</i> (Udaloy-class destroyer) <i>RFS Fotiy Krylov</i> (rescue tug) <i>RFS Irkut</i> (oil tanker)	SAR
MNEK-2018	Indonesian-led multilateral naval exercises	Lombok	4-9 May 2018	<i>RFS Perekop</i> (Smolnyy-class training ship)	SAR
Rusindo-20	Indonesia and Russia	Surabaya, Indonesia	27 October 2020	<i>RFS Admiral Panteleyev</i> (Udaloy-class destroyer) <i>RFS Admiral Tributs</i> (Udaloy-class destroyer) <i>RFS Pechanga</i> (oil tanker)	Passage exercise

ASEAN-Russia Naval Exercise (ARNEX)	Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Russia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam	Belawan, Sumatra	1-3 December 2021	<i>RFS Admiral Panteleyev</i> (<i>Udaloy</i> -class destroyer) Seven warships from Southeast Asia	SAR, Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES)
MNEK-2023	Indonesian-led multilateral naval exercises	Makassar, South Sulawesi	4-8 June 2023	<i>RFS Gromky</i> (<i>Steregushchiy</i> -class corvette) <i>RFS Sovershenny</i> (<i>Steregushchiy</i> -class corvette) <i>RFS Pechanga</i> (oil tanker)	Humanitarian and Disaster Relief

Source: Author’s compilation from various press releases and media stories.

PRABOWO AND THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

Indonesia has taken a neutral position on the Russia-Ukraine War. Although it has consistently voted in favour of United Nations General Assembly resolutions condemning Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine, it has not condemned Russia by name nor imposed sanctions on it. However, Indonesia is keen to see a resolution to the conflict because it continues to impact food and energy prices. Mention has already been made of Jokowi’s “peace mission” to Kyiv and Moscow in 2022. In June 2024, Indonesia participated in the Ukraine Peace Summit in Switzerland, though it did not send a government minister (Indonesia’s ambassador to Switzerland represented his country) and declined to sign the final communique.³⁰

In June 2023, at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Prabowo announced his own “peace plan” which had not been sanctioned by the Jokowi administration before he delivered his speech. His plan calls for an immediate ceasefire, the withdrawal of both sides to 15 km behind the line of conflict, the creation of a demilitarised zone and the deployment of UN peacekeepers, followed by UN-supervised referendums in “disputed areas” (presumably the Donbas and Crimea).³¹ Prabowo’s plan was immediately rejected by Ukraine – then Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov said Ukraine had not been consulted about the proposal and dismissed it as “more like a Russian plan than an Indonesian one”³² – though Russia, while lukewarm, did not discount it entirely. Although Indonesian and Russian officials discussed Prabowo’s initiative in Moscow soon after his speech, there was no follow up.³³

The only official mention of his plan was by Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, who told the media that Russia “highly appreciates” Indonesia’s efforts to help resolve the conflict, but that there had been no “reciprocity” from Ukraine.³⁴ Nevertheless, Prabowo is still serious about his initiative, arguing at the 2024 Shangri-La Dialogue that it remained “logical, relevant and necessary”.³⁵

When Prabowo becomes president on 20 October, he is likely to continue promoting his peace plan, though other foreign policy issues will take a higher priority, especially the Israel-Hamas War which has had deep resonance in Muslim-majority Indonesia. Moreover, so long as Ukraine remains opposed to the plan, and Russia unenthusiastic, it will fail to gain traction. Overall, there are unlikely to be any major changes in Indonesia’s approach to the war in Europe. Although the Indonesian elite continues to view Russia as an old friend, and has some empathy with Moscow’s security concerns over NATO expansion, Indonesia still places a high value on sovereignty (which Russia has violated in Ukraine) and is vehemently opposed to separatism (which Russia has promoted in the Donbas).

CONCLUSION

Prabowo’s visit to Russia was a signal that his administration intends to pursue a more balanced foreign policy in its relations with the major powers, including Russia. Prabowo wants closer economic ties with Russia, and envisages a role for it in improving the country’s food, energy and health security. Domestically a closer relationship with Russia will be viewed positively, as Indonesians have very favourable impressions of both Russia and Putin, which have been unaffected by Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine. Russia is generally seen as an Islamic-friendly country due to its long-standing support for Palestinian statehood. According to a public opinion poll conducted by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in July 2022, when Indonesians were asked to identify the country they most admired, 86.8 per cent chose Russia, higher than the United States (81.8 per cent), the EU (86.5 per cent), Japan (86.5 per cent) and China (78.2 per cent).³⁶ When asked which country they thought was important for Indonesia, 88.6 per cent said Russia, above ASEAN (87.7 per cent), America (86.8 per cent) and China (86.6 per cent). According to the Pew Research Center, the percentage of Indonesians who had “a lot of confidence” in Putin’s ability to “do the right thing” in world affairs rose from 39 per cent in 2019 to 43 per cent in 2023 (unfavourable views of Putin in Indonesia were the lowest among the 24 countries surveyed).³⁷ However, a closer defence relationship with Russia will be met with disapproval by Indonesia’s Western partners, especially if Jakarta were to place orders for major weapons systems such as fighter jets or submarines. Next year, Indonesia and Russia will celebrate the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties. A trip to Indonesia by President Putin in 2025 is therefore a high possibility.³⁸

ENDNOTES

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