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## **Indonesia's Strategic Shift: Prabowo Subianto's Nuclear Energy Gambit with Russia Amid Global Tensions**

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Indonesia's recent diplomatic gesture towards Russia following the request by Indonesia's president-elect Prabowo Subianto to assist him in developing nuclear energy is a new transformation in Jakarta's diplomacy. Indonesia's request for Russia's support in nuclear energy and defense upgrades in the context of the Russia-Ukraine crisis poses essential questions regarding Indonesia's strategic interests and the role of the country and Asia, more broadly, in international politics. This engagement puts Indonesia as one of the few countries in the world that has not turned its back on Russia as most countries have done due to the situation in Ukraine.

Since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war, many countries have opted to turn their backs on Moscow, imposing sanctions and condemning its actions. Nonetheless, Indonesia, a country of geopolitical significance in Southeast Asia, has chosen a different path of more profound engagement with Russia by cooperating in the areas of defense and nuclear energy. Such a position is unique as it defies the global consensus and signals Jakarta's readiness to prioritize national interests over international norms.<sup>1</sup> This is due to a few reasons.

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<sup>1</sup> Eurasia Review, "Prabowo Visits Russia to 'Emphasize' Wish for Deeper Bilateral Ties As Indonesian President," *Eurasia Review*, August 1, 2024, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/01082024-prabowo-visits-russia-to-emphasize-wish-for-deeper-bilateral-ties-as-indonesian-president/>

First, the demand for energy and the need to intensify efforts to combat climate change remains at the top of Indonesia's concerns about connecting with Russia. Indonesia is the world's fourth most populous country and an energy consumer and producer with rising energy demands. Indonesia has pledged to cut carbon emissions unconditionally by 31.89% and up to 43.20% with international support by 2030, aiming for net-zero emissions by 2060 or sooner. Given that over 60% of Indonesia's energy currently comes from fossil fuels, there is, thus, hope for nuclear energy as a solution to decarbonization in the future. Hence, cooperating with Russia, one of the world leaders in nuclear technologies, Indonesia plans on diversifying away from the country's reliance on fossil fuel sources of energy. This very practical-oriented strategy indicates the Indonesian government's efforts to become free of energy imports by cooperating with a state isolated from the global stage.<sup>2</sup>

Second, Indonesia's diplomatic outreach to Russia aligns with its need to enhance its defense capabilities, particularly in maritime defense. This is particularly important with the escalating conflicts in the Indo-Pacific region, including China's military presence in the South China Sea and growing tensions between the U.S. and China.<sup>3</sup> By diversifying its defense partnerships, Indonesia aims to achieve strategic independence and reduce reliance on any single power. Indonesia has been a significant buyer of Russian military equipment, purchasing over \$2.5 billion worth of arms since 1992, including Sukhoi fighter jets, helicopters, and tanks. Russia's advanced military technology and willingness to cooperate make it an attractive partner for Indonesia.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Russia may be interested in providing technology to Indonesia to strengthen its presence and influence in Southeast Asia, a region of growing strategic importance. Russia also benefits economically from the arms sales, while this cooperation will help Indonesia develop a more independent defense industry, allowing it to compete more effectively in the region as well.

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<sup>2</sup> Khofsoh, None Afida, None Ariyana Dwiputra Nugraha, None Benita Dian Purnamasari, None Dedi Rustandi, None Beny Harjadi, None Erwandi, None Hanan Nugroho, et al. "Indonesia's Energy Transition Preparedness Framework Towards 2045." *Penerbit BRIN eBooks*, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.55981/brin.892>.

<sup>3</sup> Darmawan, Aristyo Rizka. "Assessing Indonesia's Potential Presidents' South China Sea Strategies," *East Asia Forum*, February 13, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.59425/eabc.1707818400>.

<sup>4</sup> Tass. "Russia's Arms Exports to Indonesia Top \$2.5 Bln Over 25 Years." *TASS*, February 21, 2018. <https://tass.com/defense/991061>.

Third, economic factors are also among the key factors influencing Indonesia to get involved with Russia. Amid the global disruptions in food supply due to the Russia-Ukraine war, Indonesia, one of the largest consumers of wheat, is highly likely to feel the pinch. Hence, Russia's offer to supply more agricultural products, especially grains, presents an attractive solution for Indonesia to reduce food insecurity risks. In 2023, trade turnover between Russia and Indonesia reached approximately \$4 billion, with key areas of cooperation including agriculture, energy, and potential free trade agreements. Strengthening economic ties with Russia addresses immediate concerns and aligns with Indonesia's broader strategy to diversify its trade partners and ensure food security.<sup>5</sup>

On the domestic agenda, on the other hand, Prabowo Subianto's approach to Russia may be viewed as a strategy to establish and strengthen his presidency besides to underscore his capability in securing agreements that are conducive and beneficial for Indonesia. In this way, by framing himself as a competent leader who can manage a challenging international environment and produce valuable outcomes, Prabowo seeks to strengthen his position in domestic politics before being sworn in as president. His activities to attract Russian energy, defense, and economic partnership will help him improve his image as a competent and pragmatic president who actively works for the Indonesian national interest.

Throwing light on Indonesia's approach towards Russia, it is also essential to understand the country's primary foreign policy of balancing between big powers, wherein Russia, for Indonesia, is instead a hedge rather than an ally because historically, Indonesia has used a policy of no clear association with any single power and diplomacy with numerous superpowers in the world. In this regard, developing an increasingly closer relationship with Russia may help Indonesia to maintain the balance between the superpowers, including the U. S., China, and the EU. This approach will allow Jakarta to optimize its strategic possibilities in the sphere of foreign policy and remain relatively free from the influence of this or that actor in the existing complicated world.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tass. "Russia-Indonesia Trade Turnover Reaches Around \$4 Bln in 2023." *TASS*, June 11, 2024. <https://tass.com/economy/1802327>.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher S. Chivvis, Elina Noor, and Beatrix Geaghan-Breiner. "Indonesia in the Emerging World Order." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 9, 2023. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/11/indonesia-in-the-emerging-world-order?lang=en&cr=russia-eurasia>.

However, Indonesia's interaction with Russia when the world turns its back on Moscow harbors considerable risks. That is easier said than done if it were to come at the expense of Indonesia's relations with its old friends in the U.S. and the E.U, who are increasingly critical of Russia's role in Crimea. Even though there is increased cooperation between Indonesia and Russia, exemplified by President-elect Prabowo Subianto's interest in nuclear energy cooperation with Jakarta insisting on energy self-sufficiency and modernization of its army, this, however, has not only underscored Indonesia's hedging approach to managing the relationship with major powers, but also new possibilities of diplomatic tension with western partners. This may be due to its strategy of embracing pragmatic national interests instead of seeking to attain international consensus to the norm. Hence, Indonesia may be gradually putting itself in a strategic position of a 'middle power' in a bipolar or polarized world order. This strategic shift may change Indonesia's regional and global role. Still, to achieve this, it has to manage its Southeast Asia relations without losing China or domestic reformist allies.

Prabowo Subianto's ties to Russia, a bold move for Indonesia, show the country's commitment to achieving energy security, military modernization, and economic and sociopolitical stability. While this decision may spark criticism and controversy, particularly from its allies, it demonstrates Indonesia's determination to assert its independence in competing and shaping the global power dynamics of the early twenty-first century for its benefit. Therefore, for Indonesia, maintaining a balance between different powers is crucial in securing its strategic interests and aiming to survive and thrive in the long term with minimal external interference.

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