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Prabowo's Post-Election Diplomacy: Domestic-driven International Activism

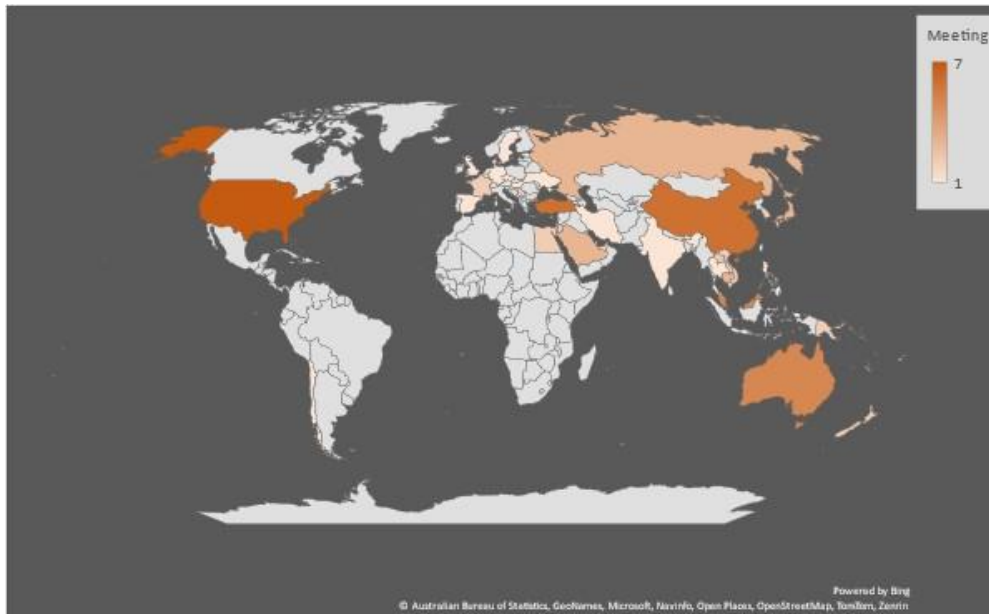
Adhi Priamarizki

SYNOPSIS

Following Indonesia's 2024 general elections, defence minister and president-elect Prabowo Subianto has held various meetings with foreign officials. Adhi Priamarizki highlights the key features of Prabowo's recent international activism and their implications for the incoming president's foreign policy approach.

COMMENTARY

Following Indonesia's general elections on 14 February, defence minister and president-elect Prabowo Subianto has held meetings with multiple foreign officials ahead of assuming the presidency on 20 October. As of September 2024, he has held at least 84 meetings with officials from 38 countries, both in domestic and overseas settings. He has interacted most frequently with officials from the United States, China, Turkey, Australia and Malaysia (see Figure 1). He has also held meetings with leaders of several international organisations and multinational corporations, such as OECD Secretary General Mathias Cormann and Apple CEO Tim Cook. Earlier, as defence minister, Prabowo utilised his meetings with his foreign counterparts to [foster defence cooperation, signalling his intention to boost Indonesia's defence development](#). Based on the available information, Prabowo discussed defence cooperation at least 48 times in his recent 84 meetings with foreign officials.



Prabowo's Post-Election Meetings with Foreign Officials, February-September 2024. *Data compiled by author from various news sources. Map produced on Microsoft 365 version 2407 powered by Bing, Australian Bureau of Statistics, GeoNames, Microsoft, Navinfo, Open Places, OpenStreetMap, TomTom, Zenrin (10 October 2024).*

Analysts and the media consider Prabowo a leader with greater [international awareness](#) than outgoing president Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”). Despite the greater attention that Prabowo is likely to pay to international affairs, he has [a strong sense of patriotism](#), so national interests could trump other considerations in his conduct of foreign policy. His post-election diplomacy hints at such a tendency. Closer observation of his various recent meetings with foreign officials provides some insight into the incoming president’s approach to external affairs.

First, fulfilment of national interests, including defence development, remains at the heart of Prabowo’s international activism. Second, his attitude towards the geopolitical competition between the United States and China is likely to be characterised by openness to all parties, reflecting Indonesia’s long-standing nonaligned, free and active foreign policy. Prabowo’s [“good neighbour foreign policy” concept](#), which he mentioned repeatedly during his presidential campaigns, also serves as a cue for such an approach. Third, Prabowo’s recent international activism signals his intention to establish stronger bilateral ties with countries in Southeast Asia.

Defence Development Ambition

Defence cooperation and bilateral relations have emerged as the two most discussed topics during Prabowo’s meetings with his foreign counterparts. In several of these meetings, he specifically discussed regional security, military education and training, and defence industry cooperation, notably technology transfer. This emphasis on defence cooperation is not unexpected since most of Prabowo’s recent interactions were conducted in his capacity as defence minister.

As defence minister, Prabowo often reiterated his ambition to foster Indonesia’s defence development. In 2023 he outlined a 25-year defence modernisation plan,

[Nusantara Trident Shield](#). The plan is aimed at continuing Indonesia's defence modernisation, which was previously guided by the Minimum Essential Force (MEF) programme, by expanding the force size through the acquisition of major military platforms such as submarines, frigates, and jetfighters. Initiating defence cooperation with various countries opens wider possibilities to obtain the best technology transfer deals for Indonesia. The mastery of cutting-edge military technology remains a major challenge for Indonesia's defence industry. In addition to technology transfer, it is imperative for the Indonesian military to secure the supply logistics. Maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) activities do not only require expertise but also the availability of spare parts. Lack of access to spares can prolong the MRO process or even undermine its efficacy. Here defence cooperation can help to patch such gaps.

A More Balanced Approach towards the United States and China

Prabowo had at least seven interactions with US officials, which is the highest number of interactions he has had with his foreign counterparts during the period in question. Prabowo met US secretary of defence Lloyd James Austin III and US secretary of state Antony Blinken, not to mention his meeting in September with General Bryan P. Fenton of the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) prior to this year's annual Super Garuda Shield military exercise, a multinational exercise co-hosted by the US and Indonesian armed forces. On top of that, [president Joe Biden](#) made a phone call in March to Prabowo, congratulating the later upon his victory in the presidential election.

Meanwhile, Prabowo met Chinese officials at least six times in the same period. He visited China in April 2024, which was [his first official overseas visit](#) after clinching the presidency. During his visit to China, he met President [Xi Jinping](#), Defence Minister [Dong Jun](#) and Prime Minister Li Qiang. Prior to the visit to China, Prabowo met the Chinese ambassador to Indonesia at least two times – in [February 2024](#) and [March 2024](#). Prabowo also met Chinese foreign minister [Wang Yi](#) when the latter visited Jakarta in mid-April 2024.

The above interactions hint at Prabowo's willingness to embrace both the United States and China. Furthermore, they can be read as an initial signal that Prabowo intends to adopt a more balanced approach towards the two countries.

Ties with Southeast Asian Countries

In avowing his intention to deepen bilateral relations with Indonesia's Southeast Asian neighbours, Prabowo has acknowledged the importance of Southeast Asia in supporting Indonesia's development. Since his election, Prabowo has visited all the ASEAN countries, except Myanmar, and met with key leaders. The major talking points during those meetings, apart from bilateral issues, included the deepening of cooperation within the ASEAN framework, notably to maintain regional security and stability. This inclusion signals Prabowo's commitment to ASEAN. During his visit to Vietnam, Prabowo discussed the possibility of enhancing the two countries' strategic partnership with a view to building closer relations and boosting bilateral trade turnover to [US\\$18 billion by 2028](#). Another key discussion point was the prevention of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, which suggests Prabowo intends to tackle the issue. Earlier this year, the Indonesian newspaper *Kompas* reported [massive](#)

[intrusions of Vietnamese fishing vessels into Indonesia's exclusive economic zone \(EEZ\) around the North Natuna Sea.](#)

Prabowo's attempt to build stronger ties with Southeast Asian countries does not only reflect the president-elect's good neighbour foreign policy but also Indonesia's long-standing foreign policy outlook in which Southeast Asia sits at the core. Indonesia's national security concept, Sishankamrata, views it a necessity to [pursue friendly relations and close cooperation with foreign countries](#), notably those in Southeast Asia. Sishankamrata acknowledges the importance of forging amicable relations with neighbouring countries as a means of safeguarding Indonesia's development agenda.

Concluding Remarks

Prabowo's recent international activism reflects the importance he places on international affairs, which is underpinned by his good neighbour foreign policy idea. Prabowo's past record as defence minister also showcases [the same enthusiasm](#), although his defence diplomacy gave [little attention to global and regional issues](#). Meanwhile, his post-election diplomacy suggests he sees the building of good relations with all parties as an important aspect of defending national interests. Prabowo's recent visits and meetings with officials of Southeast Asian countries hint at his intention to forge closer relations with countries in the region. Nonetheless, those interactions mainly focused on improving bilateral ties in furtherance of the national agendas of the involved parties. Thus, Indonesia's domestic agenda is likely to continue to be a major driver of its foreign policy for the next five years.

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