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SYNOPSIS

President Prabowo Subianto's Gaza troop offer shows less about what Jakarta can do militarily and far more about how Indonesian leaders imagine their place in the world. As Prabowo shapes his country's global profile, there are likely to be more high-visibility humanitarian signalling and gestures designed to assert moral presence rather than operational capability.

COMMENTARY

Indonesia's proposal to deploy up to [20,000 troops](#) to the Gaza Strip captured widespread attention at home and abroad after it was reported as a humanitarian initiative. The announcement was framed as a dramatic gesture by President Prabowo Subianto, one that seemed to signal Jakarta's willingness to assume a far more global security role than it has traditionally entertained. The real significance of the proposal lies not in its feasibility, but in what it reveals about Indonesia's evolving strategic imagination and emerging middle-power identity.

As several Indo-Pacific middle powers expand their global security footprints, Indonesia is testing what kind of role it wants to play beyond Southeast Asia. The Gaza troop offer is a window into this reorientation. It reflects Jakarta's aspiration to be seen not merely as a regional balancer, but as a values-forward humanitarian actor capable of shaping global narratives. For Prabowo personally, it signals a desire to position Indonesia as a state with moral authority in Muslim-world diplomacy, even where no operational mechanisms exist to follow through.

An Emerging Strategic Imagination

Indonesia has long grounded its foreign policy in a blend of non-alignment, moral legitimacy, and solidarity with postcolonial causes. Among these, the Palestinian issue occupies a uniquely symbolic position. [Survey data](#) repeatedly show that Palestine remains the most emotive foreign-policy issue for Indonesian voters, and public expectations for visible leadership on Palestine routinely outpace expectations for ASEAN or Indo-Pacific issues. This domestic landscape makes symbolic gestures politically rewarding.

Prabowo also faced domestic criticism for his recent UN General Assembly speech on Gaza, with commentary in Indonesian media questioning his assertiveness. In this context, a dramatic gesture provided reputational advantage: it repositioned him as a decisive humanitarian advocate without requiring him to negotiate or deliver complex outcomes. A recent article in [The Conversation](#) similarly highlighted public ambivalence toward Prabowo's early Gaza diplomacy, underscoring why a bold gesture carried political benefit.

This helps explain why the Gaza troop proposal was rhetorically powerful. High-visibility statements have long been a feature of Indonesia's moral diplomacy, and Prabowo has leaned into a style of foreign policy that privileges symbolic action. His earlier remarks about welcoming up to [1,000 Palestinian refugees](#), and his public alignment with elements of the Trump administration's "Riviera of the Middle East" rhetoric, indicate a willingness to engage in humanitarian signalling even in the absence of operational detail.

Why Gaza was the Perfect Symbolic Stage

Prabowo understands that Palestine occupies a foundational place in Indonesia's political imagination. Gestures such as humanitarian airlifts, field hospitals, and public support missions carry intense emotional and symbolic weight. The offer of 20,000 troops extended this tradition but dramatically raised the stakes. It portrayed Indonesia as a state willing to shoulder humanitarian risk and step beyond its region to defend a cause deeply tied to its national identity.

Crucially, proposing something that could not be implemented also minimised geopolitical risk. Indonesia's longstanding alignment with Arab and OIC positions on Palestine meant the gesture would not be diplomatically costly. And because neither Israel nor the United States would entertain such a deployment for now, there was no danger of Indonesia being asked to operationalise the idea. This made the gesture a high-visibility, low-risk act of political theatre: Prabowo could demonstrate bold leadership without exposure to diplomatic consequences.

This raises the question: Why propose something that Jakarta knew could not be implemented? The answer lies in the logic of symbolic diplomacy. The gesture allowed Indonesia to project humanitarian leadership while managing expectations. It was not intended to create policy so much as to shape Indonesia's image. It should be noted that Indonesian soldiers are not unfamiliar with peacekeeping operations as their country has been a large contributor of troops to the UN peacekeeping mission in Lebanon.

A Proposal Never Intended to Materialise

The operational constraints were insurmountable. Israel would categorically reject a foreign military presence from a state with which it lacks diplomatic relations, intelligence coordination, or interoperability. The United States would also oppose any such force. Any multinational presence in Gaza would require deep political alignment, NATO-level interoperability, and intelligence-sharing mechanisms, criteria that Indonesia does not meet.

Equally important is what did not occur. Indonesia did not consult Washington, Tel Aviv, the UN, or regional partners. There were no exploratory meetings, no diplomatic feelers, and no quiet negotiations. Had the proposal been serious, these discussions would have occurred immediately. Their absence is itself evidence that the offer was symbolic.

Symbolic Hard-power Diplomacy

To dismiss the Gaza troop offer as mere posturing, however, would be to overlook its strategic significance. What differentiates this gesture from Indonesia's long-standing [peacekeeping contributions](#) is its lack of any UN mandate or operational pathway. Indonesia's deployments to UNIFIL, MONUSCO, and MINUSCA occur under clear institutional frameworks. The Gaza offer was outside any such structure, indicating that its purpose was rhetorical rather than logistical.

Indonesia is experimenting with a hybrid model of diplomacy that blends humanitarian legitimacy with the language of military contribution. Whether the troop role is real matters less than the narrative Indonesia seeks to project: a morally anchored Muslim-majority democracy willing, at least symbolically, to participate in global stabilisation efforts.

This symbolic activism also reflects Indonesia's struggle to assert leadership where it has substantive capacity. The country's limited engagement on the Rohingya issue in Myanmar and the Thailand–Cambodia border dispute illustrate the gap between Indonesia's rhetorical ambition and its regional influence. On Gaza, there is an opportunity to project a role if the US and Israel can agree on Indonesian peace deployment contours.

The Making of a Middle Power

The Gaza troop proposal succeeded precisely where it was meant to: signalling ambition. It reinforced Jakarta's solidarity with Palestine, strengthened Prabowo's domestic legitimacy, and projected Indonesia as a state aspiring to a larger global role. Yet it is also clear that symbolic activism has not significantly elevated Indonesia's standing among major powers. Much of Prabowo's recent diplomacy, i.e., on Gaza, Ukraine, and humanitarian resettlement, has [generated media attention](#) without translating into strategic influence.

This does not negate the importance of the gesture. Rather, it reveals the emerging contours of Indonesia's middle-power identity. Indonesia is unlikely to project a middle-power status through hard power or alliance structures. Instead, it will do so

through symbolic humanitarian activism, using moral narratives to amplify its international presence without committing to operations beyond its political or material capacity.

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