

Indonesia makes a small but significant purchase in Moscow

John Ward
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Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri signed a little-publicised deal late last month to purchase four Russia fighter jets and two helicopters as part of a much larger potential order. Still subject to a US ban on military purchases, Jakarta's decision to buy elsewhere marks a small, but significant shift from its current dependence on US military hardware.

The agreement signed on April 26 is to buy two Sukhoi Su-27 interceptor aircraft as well two Su-30 fighter-bombers plus spare parts. Indonesia has an option to purchase an additional 44 aircraft that would allow it to build four squadrons of 12 planes each. The deal is worth between \$100 and \$120 million, with \$15 million being paid in counter trade of rubber, tea, coffee and palm oil.

During her trip to Russia, Megawati also signed a friendship treaty with President Vladimir Putin. Speaking in Moscow, she declared that the "situation in Indonesia, including the state of the economy, has improved recently. This gives grounds for developing our relations in different areas". The visit was part of a three-nation tour that included Rumania and Poland.

The purchase will appreciably bolster the Indonesian air force, which has been badly affected by the US ban on equipment sales. Its existing warplanes are all US-built. Due to a lack of spare parts, only 17 of the 46 are considered airworthy and the rest have been grounded. The Su-27, with a range of 3,000 miles, is reputed to be one of the most sophisticated fighter aircraft in the world.

Indonesia previously bought Kalashnikov rifles and other military hardware from Russia but nothing of this magnitude. Jakarta had been negotiating with Russia to buy new fighter aircraft in 1997, but negotiations fell through after the outbreak of the Asian economic crisis and the overthrow of the Suharto regime in 1998.

The US Congressional bans were first put in place in 1991 after the infamous Santa Cruz massacre of pro-independence supporters in East Timor. They were further tightened in 1999, following the involvement of the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) in the rampages by pro-Jakarta militia in East Timor. After Bush came to office in 2001, the White House began pushing Congress for a resumption of US-Indonesian military ties.

The timing of Megawati's visit is significant. It came following widespread opposition in Indonesia to the US-led invasion of Iraq that compelled Jakarta to criticise Washington. Not normally inclined to make public statements at all, the Indonesian president described the war as an "act of aggression" in "contravention of international law".

Megawati made the criticisms, in part, to keep antiwar protests confined to official channels. The extent of the opposition was revealed when the mainstream Muslim parties and other organisations held a rally of between 250,000 and one million in Jakarta on March 30. But the remarks also reflect a broader unease in Jakarta at its military and political dependence on Washington as the US pursues an increasingly aggressive policy, particularly in the Middle East.

Small steps have been taken towards the resumption of US-Indonesian military ties. Last August US Secretary of State Colin Powell announced a three-year anti-terrorist program for the Indonesia army and police force worth \$50 million. In January, the US Senate passed a \$400,000 package for officer training under the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program—the first such funding since 1991.

But the IMET program has been delayed pending investigations into possible TNI involvement in the

murder of three people, including two Americans, in Papua last August. Indonesia is still not able to buy spare parts. Expressing the frustrations of the Indonesian military, Juwono Sudarsono, former defence minister, told the *Jakarta Post* on April 17: “It will be easier to procure arms from Russia, than to woo the US Congress to allow us to repair our F-16 planes.”

Broader concerns have also been raised in the Indonesia press about the US war on Iraq and its unilateral doctrine of preemptive strikes. Analyst Nurcholish Madjid told the *Jakarta Post*: “A counterbalance is required, not because we consider the Americans an evil power, but because it is important for the world to have a check-and-balance”.

While by no means a break with Washington, Megawati’s trip to Moscow was certainly intended to seek out other possible alliances. While there has been virtually no coverage in the US media, the Bush administration will certainly have noted the visit. The White House will possibly use the purchase of four Russian warplanes to press Congress for an end to the existing bans on the Indonesian military.



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