

Indonesian presidential candidates back greater military spending

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With less than two weeks remaining before the 2024 Indonesian presidential elections, each of the three candidates has presented their foreign policy, especially regarding the escalating confrontation between the United States and China.

In a televised presidential debate on January 7, the candidates elaborated their programs for international relations, defence expenditure and tensions with China in the South China Sea.

The outgoing government of President Joko Widodo, who has held office for two terms since 2014, was characterised by a heightened development of business relations with China. Widodo attracted Chinese investment for infrastructure projects, green energy transition, the development of a new capital city and the country's nickel mining industry. China is Indonesia's largest trading partner and investor, with imports rising from under \$US40 billion in 2014 to over \$71 billion in 2022.

At the same time, Widodo, in the past two years, has overseen Indonesia's participation in major joint military exercises with the US, called Garuda Shield, involving other imperialist powers such as Britain, France, Japan, Australia and Canada. Moreover, Widodo met with US President Joe Biden in Washington last November when the two leaders agreed to elevate their ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, the highest level of diplomatic cooperation.

During last month's presidential debate, all three candidates indicated a tilt away from economic dependence on China and the boosting of military spending to assert Indonesia's claims in the South China Sea. While not explicit, this orientation would imply closer relations with US imperialism.

They also expressed their commitment to continue Widodo's promotion of economic relations with China while expanding Indonesia's military presence in the region amid rising geo-political tensions throughout the region.

Prabowo Subianto, who served as Widodo's top defence minister and is currently leading in polls, said disputes in the South China Sea underline the need for a strong defence

force, increased platforms for military patrols and additional satellites in the region.

In his opening remarks, Prabowo reiterated Indonesia's longstanding policy of non-alignment, or *bebas aktif* ("free and active") as it is known, which is enshrined in the country's constitution. He rejected the notion that Indonesia would take sides or join any security bloc.

Nevertheless, Prabowo's remarks indicate a certain shift towards Washington. Despite pledging to continue Widodo's cultivation of Chinese investment, Prabowo indirectly criticised Beijing saying: "We understand our country is very huge and rich; hundreds of years ago, countries from far away came to this archipelago to intervene and pit us against each other, to fight and to steal our wealth until we became independent. And now we have to deal with our natural wealth being taken cheaply."

Prabowo, a notorious general in the Suharto military dictatorship, declared he was "determined to have a strong defence system" to meet the geopolitical challenges in the coming period. He promised to expand military spending, without providing an exact figure, and modernise military equipment if elected on February 14.

He directly linked the building of Indonesia's military capability to territorial disputes with China around the Natuna Islands in the South China Sea. In recent years, Chinese fishing vessels have operated in waters Indonesia considers part of its exclusive economic zone around these islands, parts of which Beijing also claims. Prabowo stated that China's maritime claims are inconsistent with international law.

At the same time, Prabowo indicated that he was open to Indonesia joining the BRICS economic group of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. Significantly, the Widodo administration declined an invitation last year to join BRICS due to concerns that Indonesia might be seen as openly aligning with Russia and China against the United States.

Over the course of the debate, the other two candidates—Anies Baswedan and Ganjar Pranowo—both

attacked Prabowo as defence minister for being insufficiently aggressive in building Indonesia's presence in the region. They presented themselves as better suited to building up the military and asserting Indonesia's interests in the South China Sea.

Anies, the former governor of Jakarta, criticised the defence ministry's decision to purchase 12 second-hand Mirage fighter jets from Qatar. He pledged to modernise military equipment and improve soldiers' official residences.

However, the most concrete proposals for boosting military spending came from the third candidate, Ganjar, the representative of Widodo's PDI-P party, who has pitched himself as a "progressive" committed to addressing the plight of ordinary Indonesians.

Ganjar said he would seek to more than double Indonesia's defence budget, from the current 0.78 percent of the nation's GDP up to as much as 2 percent. This massive increase in military spending will inevitably come at the expense of social programs, hitting the poorest layers of the population that he falsely claims to want to help.

Ganjar said he would prioritise Indonesia's naval capability, developing weaponry and resupplying patrol ships. As reported by *Antara*, he spoke of "the need to strengthen our patrolling capacity in the South China Sea. To that end, we need to provide accessible logistics to the Indonesian Navy through tankers."

"No attack will come overland as Indonesia is an archipelago. Thus, the sea must be fortified," he went on. He referred to private conversations with figures in the Navy in which they demanded greater sensor technology and sonars to guard from seaborne attack. If elected, Ganjar would also allow defence industries to build more tanks, helicopters, submarines and enhance cyber technology.

On conflict in the South China Sea, Ganjar proposed to push for "temporary agreements" between Indonesia and China "with the aim of avoiding unwanted events," without elaborating what that would amount to or how it would be possible.

Referring obliquely to the dangerous tensions across the Taiwan Strait deliberately inflamed by Washington, he warned: "Equipment modernisation in China will be completed by 2027; by then it will be strong [about enforcing] its one-China policy ... Then there will be other conflicts that we can be affected by."

Most provocatively, Ganjar declared his intention to begin exploiting gas reserves in the North Natuna Sea, that is, in waters which Beijing claims as its own maritime territory.

In other election forums, Ganjar has confirmed he would continue fostering economic relations with China established under Widodo, including investment cooperation and the

"downstreaming" policy of domestically processing minerals. However, in opposition to Prabowo, Ganjar, as well as Anies, hinted at their preference to diversify economic partnerships to reduce its dependency on China.

Political analysts have noted Anies's history of strong relations with Western countries dating from his time as Jakarta governor. At a Jakarta forum last November of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a leading US think tank, Anies said he would be more inclined to encourage co-operation with countries in the European Union and East Asia than with China.

Anies promised to move away from Widodo's foreign policy which he criticised as "transactional"—a reference to Indonesia's economic dependence on China. Experts have said it is likely he would re-evaluate several of Widodo's infrastructure projects, including the new capital city, financed by China.

Instead, he has put forward a "values-based" policy based on deepening engagement with institutions like ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Anies said his government would lead ASEAN to play a bigger role in resolving the South China Sea disputes.

During the campaign, Anies has also argued Indonesia should take a stronger position on the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine against Russia. This was an indirect criticism of Widodo who has not condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

All the candidates, which represent the political and economic interests of the venal Indonesian ruling class, are engaged in an increasingly precarious balancing act between Washington and Beijing as the US plunges the world towards all-out war. The interests of Indonesian workers and youth will not be served by any of these figures, who have no progressive answer to the growing danger of nuclear war and imperialist barbarism.



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