

Indonesia and Japan pledge to deepen military ties

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During a visit by Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba last weekend, Indonesia and Japan pledged to deepen their defence and economic relations. The two countries' leaders agreed that Japan will provide the Indonesian navy with patrol boats, while discussion will resume on the joint development of naval warships.

Ishiba visited Indonesia and Malaysia as part of efforts to integrate the Southeast Asian nations into Tokyo's preparations for a catastrophic US-led war against China. The two countries are maritime powers near vital shipping lanes in the South China Sea which has been subject to countless military provocations by US imperialism.

Before embarking on the trip, his first for solely bilateral summits as prime minister, Ishiba said, "We are placing more importance than ever on our relations with Southeast Asia when the global environment is increasingly becoming uncertain."

In Malaysia, Ishiba held talks with Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. The two agreed to strengthen military cooperation and stabilise their supply chains. Anwar announced he is seeking Japan's participation in building a rare earth element processing plant. The supply of rare earths is currently dominated by China.

Ishiba arrived Friday in Indonesia's capital Jakarta, where he was welcomed by President Prabowo Subianto at the Bogor presidential palace. The welcome ceremony had a distinctly militarist character, involving a military inspection by the two leaders, both former defence ministers, and a performance of national anthems by an army band.

During the meeting, Ishiba and Prabowo discussed plans to support Indonesia's food and energy self-sufficiency and the industrialisation of its natural resources, including the mining of strategic minerals.

Japan's growing economic support will include a \$573 million loan for infrastructure projects, including a new port at Patimban in West Java, Indonesia's primary export port, in order to improve transportation and distribution systems.

The two-hour meeting focussed, however, on boosting military ties. This included Tokyo's provision of two high-speed patrol boats as part of its broader defence assistance program. The leaders also agreed to hold a third round of "two-plus-two" talks between their foreign and defence ministers later this year.

Ishiba pledged in the meeting that Japan will cooperate "as much as possible" in helping Indonesia improve its military capabilities as "comprehensive strategic partners." Japan and Indonesia already have a bilateral agreement on the transfer of defence equipment and technology, reached in 2021.

The groundwork for Ishiba's visit was laid earlier that week by a meeting between Japanese defence minister Gen Nakatani and his Indonesian counterpart Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin in Jakarta. At that meeting, the ministers settled on a landmark agreement to resume their suspended joint warship development project, including determining the specifics of production and equipment involvement.

Nakatani told reporters after the meeting: "It is strategically important for Japan to strengthen ties in the defence sector with Indonesia, which has important maritime transport routes such as the Strait of Malacca."

Japan has proposed joint construction of a Mogami-class frigate, a multi-role warship designed for modern combat. With a range of operational features, from stealth capabilities to electronic warfare systems, the Mogami frigate is built for anti-submarine warfare and land attacks.

Under its current guidelines on military equipment transfer, Tokyo is unable to export domestically built frigates or submarines. However, Indonesia and Japan both expressed their intention to bypass this obstacle by co-developing warships, with the initial vessel expected to be built in a Japanese shipyard.

Japan is in discussion on similar joint projects to manufacture fighter jets with Britain and Italy, as well as frigates for Australia and Germany.

The warship development project stalled under Indonesia's previous Joko Widodo administration which prioritised the relocation of the capital city to Borneo. The naval project's resumption under Prabowo, among his first foreign policy acts after his October inauguration, marks a significant step in Indonesia's military preparation amid growing tensions in the South China Sea. The bilateral talks took place one week before US President-elect Donald Trump assumes office.

Prabowo, a former general responsible for countless atrocities during the bloody US-backed Suharto military dictatorship, has opened his presidency claiming that Indonesia will not take sides between Washington and Beijing. This is an extension of Indonesia's non-aligned policy, *bebas aktif* ("free and active"), which is enshrined in the constitution.

Nevertheless, Prabowo's election campaign promises and his actions as president indicate a certain shift towards Washington by the Indonesian ruling elite. Between his election and inauguration, Prabowo met with US officials on seven occasions, more than any other country. The Biden administration sent a special delegation to his inauguration ceremony, while Prabowo recently made a fawning telephone call to Trump upon his election victory.

Despite these overtures, Prabowo is still attempting to play both sides amid mounting geopolitical tensions. At the same time as Prabowo's summit with Ishiba, Indonesian officials met with Chinese military representatives to plan for joint military exercises.

Additionally, on January 6, Indonesia became the first Southeast Asian country to join the economic bloc BRICS as a full member. In a move aimed at BRICS, in which China is the major economic power, Trump has threatened to impose 100 percent tariffs on any country that tries to create a rival currency to the US dollar.

Nevertheless, tensions between China and Indonesia continue to rise. Last October, Indonesian patrol ships reportedly drove a Chinese coast guard vessel away from an Indonesian survey vessel in a disputed area of the South China Sea three times in one week according to a statement from Indonesia's Maritime Security Agency.

While Indonesia has no territorial dispute with China, Beijing's ten-dash-line overlaps with Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone around the Natuna Islands in the South China Sea. Washington will no doubt look to exploit this fact to cajole and push Indonesia into taking a stronger stance against Beijing.

Tokyo, for its part, is escalating its decade-long remilitarisation as it prepares to wage war against China alongside the US. It has all but thrown out the legal limitations set in Article 9 of the constitution, which bans Japan from acquiring military weaponry and waging war overseas. Ishiba's cabinet recently approved a record-high military budget for 2025, making this the 13th consecutive year that Japan has increased military spending.

During his Jakarta visit, Ishiba declared that "any attempt to unilaterally change the status quo by force or coercion is unacceptable anywhere in the world." Clearly aimed at Beijing, such a statement distorts reality: it is US imperialism that is recklessly intensifying conflict in the region with the aim of maintaining its global hegemony.



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