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No. 040/2023 dated 16 May 2023

Indonesia's Ministry of Defence 25 Years after *Reformasi*

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SYNOPSIS

*This month marks 25 years since the fall of Indonesia's New Order regime. Indonesia's ministry of defence has significantly improved its role and authority in the defence-related decision-making process since then. Nonetheless, the ministry has some issues and potential challenges to manage, including growing challenges to the notion of civilian primacy over the military. **ADHI PRIAMARIZKI** discusses the role of the defence ministry in Indonesia's defence transformation and the potential challenges that the ministry will face.*

COMMENTARY

During Indonesia's so-called New Order regime, President Soeharto treated the position of defence minister as a tool to strengthen his political grip by appointing his trusted military men, usually retired or retiring senior military officers, to helm the ministry. Furthermore, there was no clear distinction between the ministry of defence or *Kemhan*, and the military, then named ABRI and now TNI. The fall of the New Order regime in 1998 and the demand for reform or *reformasi*, however, ushered in a change of status for *Kemhan*. The ministry was perceived as the focal point for efforts to strengthen civilian control over the military.

***Kemhan* and Defence Transformation**

In 2009, the Indonesian military embarked on a military modernisation effort under the umbrella of the Minimum Essential Force (MEF) programme. This was not just a modernisation effort but also a transformational journey. *Kemhan* was able to play an

integral role in designing the programme, enhancing its participation in defence policymaking, notably in the area of arms procurement. Although the military has the prerogative to determine the technical specifications, the overall procurement plan needs to adhere to the guidelines outlined by the MEF.

The establishment of a reserve component of TNI, known as *Komcad*, in January 2021 marked another significant decision in which *Kemhan* played an important role. *Komcad* was formed following the promulgation of Law No. 23/2019 on National Resources Management for State Defence and was aimed at [beefing up TNI's manpower](#). The possibility of Indonesia facing an external threat from a larger military adversary was the driving force behind the formation of the reserve component. *Kemhan* manages the reserve component through the *Komcad* Directorate under its Directorate General of Defence Potential (*Pothan*). These developments had the effect of strengthening the ministry's role in defence policymaking, including oversight of TNI's military doctrine.



The Designation Ceremony of 2,974 National Defense Reserve Components (*Komcad*), held at Suparlan Airport, Special Forces Education and Training Center (Pusdiklatpassus) Kopassus, Batujajar, Bandung, West Java, 2022. The establishment of the *Komcad* as a reserve component aimed to strengthen TNI's manpower.
Image from Wikimedia Commons.

The Indonesian government has also ensured that *Kemhan* is placed at the core of defence development by giving it a central role in the defence industry ecosystem. This position was galvanised by the formation of the Defence Industry Policy Committee (KKIP) through Presidential Regulation No. 42/2010 and then strengthened with Law No. 16/2012 on Defence Industry. The introduction of this and other regulations provides *Kemhan* with the authority not only to oversee the national defence supply chain but also to guide TNI's force structure.

***Kemhan* under Prabowo Subianto**

Soon after his election to a second term of office in 2019, President Joko Widodo appointed as his defence minister Prabowo Subianto, who had run unsuccessfully against him in both the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections. Given Prabowo's military background, the appointment reignited criticism that civilian supremacy over the military was waning. Prabowo's predecessor as defence minister, Ryamizard Ryacudu (2014–2019), was also a former military general. Thus, Prabowo's appointment only

reinforced the perception of a setback for democracy as the ministry's role seemed to have become subservient to that of the TNI.

However, the two quasi-civilian defence ministers have taken [different approaches](#) to their roles. Unlike Ryamizard, Prabowo has confined his main activities to a narrow interpretation of defence, focusing on accelerating TNI's military modernisation. In a parliament hearing in 2021, Prabowo mentioned his intention to modernise the TNI under the [Perisai Trisula Nusantara](#) (Nusantara Shield Trident) scheme, an ambitious project that aims to procure cutting-edge military platforms, such as submarines, main battle tanks, and 4.5 generation jetfighters, [within a 25 year-timeframe](#). To facilitate TNI's ability to purchase military equipment and components, he orchestrated defence diplomacy campaigns focused on [brokering defence cooperation](#). However, Prabowo's proactive efforts to accelerate the ongoing defence transformation also come across as part of a public relations campaign intended to increase his popularity, which will come in handy for his renewed presidential bid. Prabowo also continues to allow [military officers to dominate](#) various *Kemhan* posts, a practice that has long been criticised.

What Next?

The ongoing geopolitical as well as domestic dynamics have created multiple challenges for Indonesia, which require the readiness of *Kemhan* to tackle them. We can identify at least five issues that the ministry needs to carefully address in the near future. First, *Kemhan* needs to ensure the progress of the MEF programme, which was scheduled to be completed by 2024. The tardy pace at which the programme has been progressing means that it will miss the 2024 deadline. Thus, ensuring the completion of MEF should be a priority for *Kemhan*.

Second, the ongoing development of Nusantara as Indonesia's new capital (Ibu Kota Negara or IKN, for short) requires having a proper defence system in place for its protection. The TNI plans to establish military bases in the new capital to accommodate the military's three services. Building an appropriate [air defence system](#) for the new capital is another concern. *Kemhan's* role in this case is crucial as the ministry must ensure that protection of IKN is integrated into the TNI's defence strategy.

Third, *Kemhan* must prepare itself to face the impacts of geopolitical dynamics. Technology decoupling resulting from the geopolitical competition between the United States and China will affect Indonesia's ambition to modernise and transform its military. Technology decoupling in the defence realm also means that Indonesia may not be able to freely access certain defence technologies without joining a particular military alliance. The inability to access new technology will be detrimental to both Indonesia's ambition for military transformation and the development of Indonesia's defence industry.

Fourth, the development of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence and robotic technology, may affect the future of warfare. This requires that *Kemhan* not only keep abreast of technological advances, but also understand how to introduce and integrate new technologies into Indonesia's overall defence strategy.

Fifth, the ministry needs to strengthen the state of civil–military relations. Although the current state of civil–military relations seems stable, this situation can change. [Recent suggestions](#) from the TNI regarding revisions to Law No. 34/2004 on the TNI hinted at its reluctance to have its finances subjected to *Kemhan*'s control. Under the current regulation, *Kemhan* manages the military budget. Since the management of TNI's budget has hitherto served as a carrot and stick mechanism for *Kemhan* to keep the military in line, any change to this regulation will reduce *Kemhan*'s authority and undermine civilian control of the military.

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