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Indonesia's Sukhoi Acquisitions: A Mixed Bag of Tools

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Synopsis

Indonesia's continued acquisition of Russia's Sukhoi jet fighters represents a diversifying of its air force fleet away from an over-reliance on the US for its air force. How will Indonesia's air power feature in the country's strategic outlook?

Commentary

THE INDONESIAN Air Force (TNI-AU) is proceeding apace with the diversification of its fleet of fighter aircraft with a programme of acquisition of up to eight Sukhoi fighters – the much-acclaimed Russian jets. After the initial procurement of four Sukhois - SU27 & SU30 - in the early 2000s, TNI-AU acquired six more SU27 and SU30 by 2010. Four SU30 were acquired earlier this year with two more expected in the latter half of the year.

These acquisitions, besides augmenting the TNI-AU's combat capability, diversify its fleet of American-built fighters, comprising Fighting Falcon F16s and Tiger F5Es. These US aircraft were affected badly by the US embargo imposed due to the alleged human rights violations in Timor Leste in the late 1990s. The Asian economic crisis of 1997-98 that crippled the country's economy also affected the acquisition of the Sukhois. As Indonesia recovered from the crisis and began to enjoy stable economic growth in the 2000s Jakarta resumed its armaments acquisitions, including for air capability.

Diversification and specialisation

In 2010, Defence Minister Purnomo Yusgiantoro stated that Indonesia aimed to procure 180 Sukhoi jet fighters in the next 15-20 years. However, this plan would be beyond the country's military budget. In fact, with the coming four units of Sukhois, Indonesia will only have one squadron of Sukhoi jet fighters so far to add to its combat aircraft fleet.

Indonesia will also receive 24 second-hand F-16 C/D from the US by 2014. Jakarta has also signed an agreement in 2010 to jointly develop the KFX/IFX jet fighter in a programme with South Korea though this has yet to take off. With these procurements, Indonesia will possess several types of jet fighters with more or less similar functions. Thus, the Sukhoi jet fighter is just one of the tools in Indonesia's kit to improve its air force capability.

In Indonesia's assessment, the Sukhois have the upper hand in air-to-air combat compared with the F16s which

Indonesia also has in its fleet. The Indonesian Sukhoi jet fighters have more advanced technology than the country's F-16s. On the other hand, having logistical support from different sources will increase the maintenance costs and weapon life-cycle risks.

From the technical point of view, having a fleet of varying models of jet fighters could create problems such as tools and spares compatibility, including radar recognition between different types of aircraft which is crucial to ensure coordination between those jet fighters. Additionally, the question of maintenance and operational readiness would arise given the diverse platforms which will create further challenges for the Indonesian air force.

Nevertheless, these aircraft acquisitions could give other benefits, such as maintaining close political relations with manufacturer countries and reducing dependency on a certain arms suppliers.

Armament life cycle

Like other countries with limited budgets Indonesia has had bitter experience of poor life cycle management of its military aircraft. The practice of upfront acquisition that neglects long-term strategic planning of defence purchases compromises the life cycle of the procured weapon platform and the quality of armaments which in the end jeopardise the air force's combat readiness.

As recently as 2012 at least two airplane mishaps involved the air force's Fokker F-27 and FFA AS-202 Bravo. Indonesia also has a significant number of aircraft that have been used for more than 30 years, such as the F-5E, F-5F and C-130H. Particularly in the case of F-5, Indonesia and Singapore received F-5 jet fighters more or less around the same time, yet Singapore had been able to upgrade its F-5 significantly while Indonesia has not made a comparable improvement.

Low military budget is partly blamed for the lack of a long-term upgrade scheme, yet the country is focusing heavily on procurement but not so much on maintenance. It should be noted that maintenance and upgrade play crucial parts as both ensure the life-cycle and safety of jet fighters, even though the aircraft are aging.

On the other hand, Indonesia's capability in platform maintenance has not reached a satisfactory level. This is exemplified in national aeronautics company PTDI's inability to meet the overhaul requirement for the majority of TNI AU's aircraft. The enhancement of this capability is crucial for the country to develop, as it will maximise the performance of the armed forces as a whole.

Indonesia's future procurement strategy

In 2010 Indonesia formulated its Strategic Defence Plan to reach minimum essential force (MEF) capabilities by 2024. However, Minister Yusgiantoro expressed confidence that MEF can be reached in 2019 due to the big budget that the Indonesian government pumped into the defence sector. Last year, the country's defence spending was US\$6.9 billion, in which a quarter went to procurement (US\$1.7 bil). This is consistent with the first stage of the Strategic Defence Plan that projected the nation's acquisition budget to as high as US\$15.8 bil for 2010-2014.

On the surface the amount might seem big, yet the efficiency of its spending is still in question. Indonesia can improve its acquisition by making the procurement bureaucracy more efficient while increasing accountability in the acquisition process so that corruption can be reduced.

According to the strategic plan, TNI-AU is to procure 14 new types of weapon systems, including fighter jets, carriers, helicopters, as well as training and surveillance jets, with a total of 102 units, by end 2014. As the number is not small, Indonesia should generate significant benefits from the large procurements, including upgrade and maintenance schemes, as well the transfer of skills and technology from arms-producer countries. At the same time, Indonesia needs to develop its local capacity so that the procurement efforts will not be short-lived.

It should not be surprising, however, if this Sukhoi procurement raises eye brows in the region. Some analysts believe that the Sukhoi is more superior to a few other types of jet fighters, including the F-18 Hornets and F-111 Aardvark. Indeed, this is speculated to be behind Australia's affirmation to purchase 100 F-35 earlier this year.

Nevertheless, a platform's combat capability also depends on its armaments' comprehensiveness – an area in which Indonesia still needs to play catch-up. Besides, the country's procurement is aimed more at modernisation than expansion. Thus, Indonesia's recent air-platform acquisition should not be cause for concern.

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