

The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

No. 006/2021 dated 5 October 2021

Nominating a Panglima TNI: Between Organisational Needs and Politics

By Keoni Marzuki and Adhi Priamarizki

SYNOPSIS

Nominating a commander for the Indonesian Armed Forces is a decision that not only revolves around the military's organisational needs but also the incumbent government's political interests. The next commander of the forces would need to grapple with various challenges beyond those in the traditional military domain.

COMMENTARY

The incumbent *panglima* (commander) of the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI), Air Chief Marshal Hadi Tjahjanto, is slated to retire in November this year. With the TNI's 76th anniversary in October drawing closer, the subject of succession becomes increasingly pertinent. The 2004 Law on the TNI stipulates that the president can nominate for parliament's approval a flag officer who currently holds or has previously held the post of chief of staff in any of the three services. However, given the unwritten tradition of rotating the TNI commander position among the three services, it is unlikely that another air force man will be nominated to replace ACM Tjahjanto. Thus, speculations over who President Joko Widodo will nominate to succeed ACM Tjahjanto narrows down to the navy chief of staff and the army chief of staff.

The Two Likely Contenders

Admiral Yudo Margono, the navy chief of staff, has held various appointments onboard vessels and in naval bases and naval commands. He was the inaugural flag officer who helmed the 1st Joint Regional Defence Command (Kogabwilhan) — part of a

recently established command structure that organises the TNI into three theatres of operation, each directly coordinating military units from the three services within its jurisdiction. As commander of Kogabwilhan I, he played a role in Indonesia's Covid-19 pandemic management, overseeing the construction of emergency medical and quarantine facilities on Galang Island and the management of quarantine facilities in Jakarta. Admiral Margono also supervised the evacuation of overseas Indonesian citizens from Wuhan, China. However, under his leadership as the navy's chief of staff, the Indonesian navy lost one of its submarines, *KRI Nanggala-402*, during a naval exercise. The incident stands as the navy's worst peacetime loss and prompted calls for the TNI to review its safety protocols and equipment maintenance.

General Andika Perkasa, the army chief of staff, started his career at the army's Special Force Command (Kopassus) before assuming an appointment at the Ministry of Defence and several posts at the army's territorial commands. He rose to prominence since being assigned as the commander of the Presidential Security Force (Paspampres) in 2014. It has been believed that General Perkasa was groomed for the chief of staff post owing to his familial ties: his father-in-law, A. M. Hendropriyono, who was formerly the head of the state intelligence agency, BIN, is a close confidant of the PDI-P's matriarch, Megawati Soekarnoputri, and a trusted adviser of President Widodo. General Perkasa's rapid promotion from the army's Training and Education Command (Kodiklatad) to chief of the army's Strategic Reserve Command (Kostrad) and eventually army chief of staff in 2018 has only given credence to the speculation.

Implications and Trajectories

Both contenders offer different leadership qualities and experiences that would benefit the TNI in different ways. Admiral Margono's experience in coordinating various units of the TNI as commander of Kogabwilhan I would be beneficial in fostering the development of a joint operations doctrine and a tradition of tri-service operations in the future. For his part, General Perkasa has recently introduced progressive policies — such as the abolition of the controversial virginity test for female army recruits — as well as encouraging army personnel to continue their education at the army's Staff and Command College (Seskoad) and/or overseas.

For both candidates, the position could be a springboard to further their post-retirement aspirations. Former TNI commanders have generally transitioned into political office soon after leaving service. Some examples include Djoko Suyanto, the coordinating minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs under President Yudhoyono, and most recently Moeldoko, the current chief of staff to the president. In electoral terms, former TNI commanders are generally well received by voters, making them potential candidates to run for political office.

Whichever candidate President Widodo chooses to nominate will have different implications. General Perkasa is due to retire next year. This means that should he ascend to the post of TNI commander his stint would be relatively short. President Jokowi would then have to nominate his successor, which will add another round of politicking and lobbying among political elites. On the other hand, nominating Admiral Margono would provide some degree of stability to the TNI leadership as his retirement is due only in 2023. Yet, picking Admiral Margono over General Perkasa means that

President Widodo would be snubbing his inner circle and risking a loss of support. A compromise scenario would be that President Widodo nominates General Perkasa first and then Admiral Margono as his successor before picking another army general in time for the 2024 election — which would reinforce an unwritten tradition in post-Soeharto Indonesian politics of having a TNI commander from the army during election time.



The TNI has to step up defence diplomacy in response to developments like Chinese displeasure at Garuda Shield. *The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

Future Agendas

The incoming TNI commander will have to grapple with several structural challenges as well as matters beyond the military domain. First, he needs to reaffirm the TNI's commitment to the development of a joint operations doctrine and improving inter-service interoperability, which the Indonesian military has embarked upon. The concept of joint operations and interoperability is increasingly being adopted at multiple levels — exemplified by the formation of Kogabwilhan in 2019, as well as the formation of the Special Operations Command (Koopsus), a joint command consisting of special forces elements from the three services.

Second, as Indonesia's ongoing defence transformation programme — the Minimum Essential Force (MEF) programme — will end in 2024, the new TNI commander's agenda for the intermediate term is to set the course for a future defence modernisation plan, in partnership with the Ministry of Defence. [A report that surfaced in August 2021](#) indicated that the Indonesian government's long-term defence budget amounting up to US\$125 billion — mostly sourced from loans — was geared towards defence procurement for the next 25 years. As the end user, it is imperative that the TNI formulate a roadmap geared towards deriving maximum value from the amount spent on its future defence procurement.

Third, recent developments in the Asia-Pacific region — namely China's increasing power projection in the South China Sea and the formation of new security groupings, namely the Quad, involving the United States, Australia, India and Japan, and AUKUS, a defence agreement between the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia

— show that regional security dynamics have grown increasingly complex and volatile. One of Indonesia's actions too has had a tangible impact on the dynamics. [Tempo magazine recently reported](#) that Beijing did not take a favourable view of the Garuda Shield bilateral army exercise between the TNI and the US Army in August 2021. Given these trends, the TNI would need to step up its defence diplomacy role. In line with Indonesia's "free and active" foreign policy, it would need to shrewdly engage the other regional players in order to enhance mutual trust and maintain regional stability amid heightening Sino-US rivalry.

Fourth, it is clear that the TNI has had a major role in Indonesia's Covid-19 response and contributes to the recovery process, even though the country is not out of the woods yet. While involving the military in pandemic management is not unique to Indonesia, prolonged and overly deep involvement could result in mission creep, which may have an adverse effect on military professionalism and the health of civil-military relations. Striking a balance between the practical needs of the country and military professionalism is a challenge that the next TNI commander would need to address.

Keoni Marzuki and Adhi Priamarizki are, respectively, Associate Research Fellow and Visiting Fellow with the Indonesia Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), RSIS.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg