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## Flankers, Friends and Opportunities

Indonesian defence minister Purnomo Yusgiantoro has announced his country's intention to acquire 180 Sukhoi Su-30s, an ambition which, according to an *Aviation Week & Space Technology* headline, will create 'A Fearsome Force of Flankers'. Even allowing for journalistic hyperbole, this assessment is wildly off the mark.

That is not to downplay the significance of the announcement. On the contrary, it may represent an important development - but not of the kind suggested by *AW&ST*. Before examining the announcement's strategic implications, two contrasting reality checks are in order.

First, should the Indonesian government want to buy a fleet of strike/fighters about twice the size of any other regional air force's, it could probably afford to do so. Indonesia's political and economic development in recent years has been a major success story. Politically, Indonesia is now one of the world's largest democracies, an extraordinary turnaround from the three decades of the Suharto/Army dictatorship. Economically, Indonesia's GDP continues to grow at about 6 per cent per annum, and the stock market, the rupiah, and foreign investment are all strong.

Second, notwithstanding the sound state of the economy, the likelihood of the Air Force (TNI-AU) acquiring and successfully operating such a large strike/fighter fleet inside the next fifteen years is so remote as to be negligible.

The TNI-AU consists of about 28,000 personnel, with bases located on an archipelagic chain of some 17,000 islands stretched across 5000 kilometres. The geographical challenge this presents is exacerbated by a modest infrastructure, and by long-standing weaknesses in personnel management, training, operational practices, planning, logistics, and maintenance. Matters are not helped by the difficulties inherent in trying to support a mixed bag of fast jets, including F-16s, Su-27s, Su-30s, F-5s, Hawks, and A-4s.

Aircraft serviceability rates average around 40 per cent, compared to 80 per cent for advanced air forces. Following a succession of fatal accidents, the airworthiness of the TNI-AU's fleet has been described as 'a matter of national concern'.

Set in that context, it is improbable that the TNI-AU could absorb large numbers of advanced strike/fighters and achieve a reasonable level of operational proficiency inside two decades, and even then considerable external assistance would be needed. The TNI-AU could be well-pleased if by 2020 it had three squadrons of Flankers operating to professional standards.

The real significance of Dr Purnomo's announcement lies not in inflated expectations of the TNI-AU's force structure, but in the shift it implies in Indonesia's strategic outlook, away from internal security and towards regional influence. The background to that radical change of policy - if it happens - can be found in the history of Indonesia's Army (TNI-AD) and Air Force.

From the time Indonesia became an independent state in the late-1940s, the Army has played a pre-eminent role because of its alleged ability to contribute to stability and nation-building. Following the military coup that led to the Suharto dictatorship in 1965, the Army's influence became even more

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pronounced, extending into 'every effort and activity of the people', including politics, ideology, economics, and culture.

For more than thirty years the TNI-AD and Suharto colluded to retain their hold on power. In the process they unquestionably served their own interests; whether they served those of the nation is less certain. By the time of Suharto's demise in 1998, the TNI-AD was regarded as one of the 'most corrupt and abusive' armies in the world.

A corollary of the Army's political and social power was the marginalisation of the Air Force. Denied reasonable funding, largely ignored by the country's leaders, and treated with overt disdain by the Army, the TNI-AU struggled. The systemic institutional weaknesses outlined above can be seen as an almost inevitable consequence of that relationship.

The possibility that the Indonesian government might now reverse its policy and expand its strategic vision by investing in the Air Force is likely to be reported with concern by some Australian commentators. Caution in matters of defence is always sensible. In this case, however, any initiative should be seen primarily in terms of opportunities.

None of Australia's foreign relations is more important than the one with Indonesia. Alliances come and go, but geography is permanent. It is infinitely better to try to shape events in the region by working constructively with friends and neighbours than to respond militarily after things have gone wrong.

Despite occasional periods of tension, the RAAF and the TNI-AU have enjoyed a long and often rewarding association. Successful initiatives have included the transfer of F-86 fighters, including training and logistics support; participation in exercises; staff college exchanges; technical training; and the like. If the TNI-AU is to take the very substantial step-up that the Flanker project would demand, it will need a lot of help. As the best air force in Southeast Asia, and with a strong history of cooperation, the RAAF is ideally placed to assume a leading role in any such program.

Shaping events in our region must be the centre-piece of Australia's defence policy. Indonesia's possible acquisition of a fleet of Flankers offers an opportunity to promote that strategy. Noting the need to consult carefully and to take a long-term outlook, the Australian Government should identify how RAAF can work with the TNI-AU in the best interests of both countries.