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The High Costs of Prabowo's Strategy Toward Trump

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President Prabowo Subianto's concerted efforts to forge close ties with Donald Trump to elevate Indonesia's global standing, enhance his stature as an international statesman, and safeguard Indonesia's national interests have failed. His controversial decisions to join the Trump Board of Peace (BOP), sign a tariff deal that grants asymmetric benefits to the United States, and refrain from criticizing Trump's war against Iran have not achieved his objectives. Instead, these steps risk diluting Indonesia's traditionally principled foreign policy, could impose economic costs, and may affect Prabowo Subianto's international image as well as his domestic political standing.

Prabowo's insight that Trump was the key architect of U.S. foreign policy and needed to be engaged was correct. Prabowo failed, however, to appreciate the utter transactionalism and zero-sum nature of Trump's worldview that would lead him to seek maximal gains for Washington with little regard for Indonesian interests.¹ Prabowo's decision to align with Trump at a time when his disruptive policies have triggered a concerted effort by middle powers to shape a new international order that reflects their interests is decidedly unfortunate. Indonesia has historically advocated the interests of the Global South and could play a role in this effort. Trump's war against Iran has led Prabowo to backtrack on some of his earlier commitments but whether he fully abandons his alignment with Washington to take advantage of this historical opportunity remains to be seen.

Perspectives on Prabowo's Attempts to Curry Favor with Donald Trump

Prabowo has attempted to curry favor with Donald Trump since before his second inauguration in January 2025. After making his first presidential visit to China, Prabowo flew to Washington in November 2024 seeking a meeting with the recently reelected Trump. Prabowo was granted a formal Oval Office meeting with then-President Joseph Biden, but it was clearly Trump Prabowo wanted to meet, offering to fly anywhere to meet Trump personally.² Prabowo had to settle for a phone call in which he repeatedly replied "yes sir" to Trump. Prabowo posted the video of the call online and it went viral.³ Many Indonesian elites criticized what they argued was the undue deference shown by the Indonesian President to the American one.

Precisely why Prabowo has gone to such great lengths to ingratiate himself to Trump is a matter of debate. Some contend that it is part of Prabowo's efforts to elevate Indonesia's standing on the global stage after a decade of President Joko Widodo's domestically focused foreign policy agenda. Furthermore, Indonesia's foreign policymakers have traditionally viewed Indonesia as a middle power and portrayed its longstanding commitment to international law, multilateralism, and peaceful resolution of disputes as classic middle power behavior. Prabowo, in contrast, clearly views Indonesia as a "*Negara Besar*" or big country and has downgraded core components of Indonesia's middle power posture such as its commitment to ASEAN.⁴ He clearly signaled his intention to adopt a more realist approach by inviting John Mearshiemer to speak at his inaugural gathering of cabinet ministers.⁵ In this view, Prabowo's engagement of Trump is part of a broader effort to engage large countries including China, Russia and Brazil.

¹ The Trump Doctrine: the World is a Zero Sum Game <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/07/world/trump-doctrine-zero-sum-game.html>.

² <https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2024/11/18/prabowos-balancing-act.html>.

³ <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/11/12/asia/indonesia-prabowo-trump-video-call-intl-hnk>.

⁴ <https://www.kompas.id/artikel/setengah-bulan-ke-luar-negeri-prabowo-diyakini-akan-bawa-pesan-indonesia-negara-besar>.

⁵ Devara, Dzulfiqar Galih. "Mearshiemer's presence signals Prabowo's realist foreign policy approach." *The Jakarta Post*, October 22, 2024. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2024/10/22/mearshiemers-presence-signals-prabowos-realist-foreign-policy-approach.html>.

Others attribute Prabowo's efforts to engage Trump to his self-perception as a strongman and desire to engage with world leaders of the same ilk. Prabowo is a former soldier who ran as a strongman in the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections and once rode into a campaign rally in a white horse, triggering comparisons with Mussolini.⁶ Prabowo ditched his strongman persona to win the 2024 election, but it returned soon thereafter when he demanded that all cabinet ministers wear military style uniforms to his first cabinet meeting.⁷ In this perspective, Prabowo's engagement of Trump illustrates his affinity for tough guys, as illustrated in his numerous meetings with China's Xi Jinping, Russia's Vladimir Putin, and Turkey's Recep Erdogan.

Still another view attributes Prabowo's efforts to seek Trump's favor as part of a personal quest for redemption after having been denied entry to the United States for over two decades due to his complicity in human rights abuses.⁸ According to this view, Prabowo is less interested in promoting Indonesia's national interests than in pursuing his personal political rehabilitation with the United States. Whatever the motivation, the policies Prabowo has adopted to secure Trump's favor have not succeeded in their stated objectives. They have, however, generated significant political opposition, potentially undermining the large governing coalition and concentration of presidential power that allowed him to adopt such unpopular policies in the first place.

Prabowo's United Nations Speech & the Decision to Join the Board of Peace

Prabowo used his first speech before the United Nations (UN) in September 2025 to deliver an impassioned speech that began by recalling Indonesia's history of colonialism and drawing parallels to current global conflicts that he argued were marked by "suffering, genocide, and blatant disregard for international law."⁹ In a bid to elevate Indonesia's role as a constructive international actor and his own stature as a peacemaker, he offered to send 20,000 Indonesian personnel to participate in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs) in global hotspots such as Gaza, Ukraine, Libya and Sudan "or anywhere peace needs to be enforced and guarded."¹⁰

Most surprising, Prabowo announced that Indonesia, which has never recognized Israel due to its occupation of Palestine, would extend diplomatic recognition once Israel recognized an independent Palestinian state. While recognition of Israel is implied in Indonesia's official support for a two-state solution, Prabowo's comments that "we must also guarantee the safety and security of Israel" marked a sharp departure from the stance of former President Joko

⁶ Mietzner, Marcus. *Reinventing Asian Populism: Jokowi's Rise, Democracy, and Political Contestation in Indonesia*. East-West Center (2015), p. 37. https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/pbei/ewc/0033988/f_0033988_27691.pdf

⁷ Ibrahim, Achmad and Edna Tarigan. "Indonesia's new President and ministers begin a military-style retreat which includes morning drills." *Associated Press*, October 25, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/indonesia-prabowo-subianto-military-retreat-af8cec0a57ba334a1f39912e89d1609a>

⁸ Dewi, Karina Utami. "Too close to Trump: How Indonesian President Prabowo gambles sovereignty, humanity for US' approval." *The Conversation*, March 3, 2026. <https://theconversation.com/too-close-to-trump-how-indonesian-president-prabowo-gambles-sovereignty-humanity-for-us-approval-276636>

⁹ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2025/09/25/prabowo-pushes-two-state-solution-multilateralism-in-debut-unga-speech.html>

¹⁰ <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/prabowo-offers-20000-indonesian-troops-for-future-un-peace-missions>

Widodo and his Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, who were recognized as staunch advocates of Palestine and strong critics of Israel.¹¹ Trump praised Prabowo's speech and invited him to the U.S.-led Multilateral Meeting on the Middle East held on the sidelines of the UN to discuss a peace deal between Israel and Gaza¹²

Prabowo's unexpected invitation to participate in the Sharm El-Sheik Peace Summit in Egypt in October 2025 appeared to illustrate that his efforts to raise his international stature were paying off. The forum endorsed a U.S.-brokered 20-point peace plan for Gaza agreed to by Hamas and Israel, which was subsequently approved by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on November 17. The plan called for temporary international governance of Gaza under a Board of Peace (BOP) and the creation of an International Stabilization Force (ISF) to demilitarize Gaza, protect civilians, secure borders, and train Palestinian police.

Despite the UNSC authorization, many issues regarding how the ISF would operate and how Indonesian participation in it would be structured remained unresolved, triggering criticism of Indonesia's open-ended participation despite strong public support for aiding Palestine. Critics argued that Indonesia's participation in the ISF would force it to cooperate with Israel, which controlled over 50% of Palestine. The plan called for Hamas to be disarmed but there was no plan for accomplishing this and it would be unclear whether Hamas would comply, generating concerns over the safety of Indonesian troops. Despite such concerns, Indonesia's long history of participation in UNPOS and the opportunity to help Palestine initially muted criticism.

Prabowo's decision to join the BOP at the World Economic Forum in January 2026, only a week after receiving one of 60 invitations, triggered an immediate domestic backlash. He was criticized for not consulting with important domestic constituencies, particularly Indonesia's major Muslim organizations such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) which called for Indonesia to withdraw. Prabowo claimed it was an historic opportunity to contribute to peace for the Palestine cause, but critics argued that the Board's founding charter made no mention of Gaza, the crisis it was purportedly created to resolve.¹³ Opponents also argued that the Board's structure, which named Trump its Chairman for life and gave him veto power over its actions, meant that Indonesia had no formal mechanism of influence to ensure the Board worked to aid the people of Gaza and create an independent, viable Palestinian state. Finally, the \$1 billion price tag for permanent membership after an initial three-year term was slammed given Indonesia's budgetary shortfalls.¹⁴

In an attempt to quell public criticism of his policies, Prabowo convened a series of meetings with religious leaders, former foreign ministers, and other prominent figures to "explain" his view. Prabowo argued that there were no other international options on the table for

¹¹ Ramadhito, Garda. "Why Islamists let Prabowo shift on Israel." *New Mandala*, November 20, 2025. <https://www.newmandala.org/why-islamists-let-prabowo-shift-on-israel/>.

¹² <https://setkab.go.id/en/us-president-praises-president-prabowos-un-general-assembly-speech/>

¹³ Hermawan, Ary and Iim Halimatusa'diyah. "Indonesia Joining the Board of Peace: At What Cost?" *Fulcrum*, February 24, 2026. <https://fulcrum.sg/indonesian-islamic-groups-support-prabowos-gambit-of-joining-the-board-of-peace-but-at-what-cost/>

¹⁴ *Ibid*

addressing Palestine and therefore it was incumbent for Indonesia to be “inside” the agreement rather outside. Prabowo’s also sought to coopt his critics, granting the MUI a prized piece of Jakarta real estate for a new headquarters. Believing he had blunted public criticism, Prabowo attended the BOP’s inaugural meeting in Washington on February 19, 2026.

Prabowo continued his efforts to appease Trump in Washington despite the opposition at home, voicing his optimism that real peace in Gaza could be achieved “with the leadership of President Trump.”¹⁵ Trump returned the flattery, saying Prabowo was respected by everyone, claiming “He’s tough, and he’s smart.”¹⁶ At the meeting, it was announced that Indonesia accepted the role of Deputy Commander of the ISF and would send 8,000 troops, making it the largest contributor among a force that also included Morocco, Kazakhstan, Albania, and Kosovo.¹⁷

Prabowo and some of his advisors apparently hoped that joining the BOP would help Prabowo secure his coveted visit to Trump’s White House and concessions on the tariff deal.¹⁸ According to Secretary Prasetyo Hadi, because “Prabowo has a good relationship with Trump,” the meetings between the two leaders could result in policy changes “that will benefit our nation and country.”¹⁹ Both of these hopes were disappointed and Prabowo signed a bilateral Agreement on Reciprocal Tariff (ART) on the sidelines of the BOP meeting on February 19.

Responding to Trump’s Tariffs

Following Trump’s April 2, 2025, imposition of a “Liberation Day” tariff of 32% , Indonesia was one of the first countries to send a high-level delegation to Washington for negotiations. After what Indonesia called an “extraordinary struggle,” the two sides announced a framework agreement that reduced the tariffs to 19% in July 2025 while lowering its own tariffs on many U.S. goods to zero.²⁰ Indonesia also committed to purchasing 50 Boeing jets, \$15 billion in US energy, and \$4.5 billion in U.S. agricultural products as well as address non-tariff barriers in subsequent negotiations for a final deal.²¹ Despite calling the deal a “Reciprocal Agreement” Trump’s transactional, zero-sum worldview were evident in the U.S. press release. It called the deal a “victory for American workers, farmers and manufacturers,” and included none of the diplomatic niceties about reciprocity, and mutual benefits normally found in trade agreements.²²

¹⁵ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/03/26/indonesia-needs-eyes-wide-open-on-trumps-board-of-peace>.

¹⁶ <https://en.tempo.co/read/2088164/trump-praises-tough-prabowo-at-board-of-peace-summit>

¹⁷ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2026/02/20/indonesia-to-take-deputy-commander-role-in-gaza-force-us-general.html>.

¹⁸ <https://www.csis.org/podcasts/southeast-asia-radio/indonesias-market-turmoil-mehu-sitepu>.

¹⁹ https://en.tempo.co/read/2087949/prabowo-to-attend-trumps-board-of-peace-sign-tariff-deal-today#goog_rewarded

²⁰ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/business/2025/07/16/indonesia-says-us-trade-deal-reached-after-extraordinary-struggle.html>.

²¹ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/business/2025/07/16/indonesia-says-us-trade-deal-reached-after-extraordinary-struggle.html>.

²² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2025/07/what-they-are-saying-u-s-indonesia-trade-deal-is-another-america-first-win/>.

Indonesia's negotiations with Washington continued to be difficult. Indonesia has a long record of market intervention to protect and nurture local industries, encourage technological transfers, and satisfy important domestic political constituencies.²³ U.S. demands that Indonesia fully open its market to U.S. imports and lift non-tariff barriers generated significant opposition. Amidst intensifying Sino-U.S. tensions, China's demand that Southeast Asian countries refrain from agreements that would negatively impact its interests created pressure on Indonesia, which counts China as its largest investor and trade partner. Following the October 2025 publication of the U.S.-Malaysia ART which revealed a Malaysian commitment to comply with U.S. sanctions on third parties, there was significant pressure on Jakarta not to concede to a similar sovereignty-violating "poison pill."²⁴

The talks reportedly stalled in December 2025, when U.S. Trade Representative Jamieson Greer accused Indonesia of reneging on its previous commitments, something one Indonesian official conceded.²⁵ Prabowo hoped to complete the ART by the end of 2025, but with Trump's legal authority to impose the tariffs under review by the U.S. Supreme Court, some Indonesians argued that Jakarta should delay signing any agreement until after the Supreme Court had ruled.²⁶

In the end, the final ART was decidedly one-sided. Indonesia agreed to allow 99% of U.S. exports to enter Indonesia tariff free while many Indonesian goods, particularly in the critical manufacturing sector, continues to be taxed at 19%. As one analyst observed, the term "Indonesia shall" appears more than 200 times in the document while the phrase "United States shall" appears 9 times, illustrating the asymmetric imbalance of the deal.²⁷ The agreement also contained a poison pill which stipulates that the tariff on Indonesian goods will return to 32 per cent if Indonesia enters trade arrangements with third parties deemed to undermine fundamental US interests.²⁸ One economist calculated that full ART compliance requires Indonesia to create 26 new regulations and amend 91 existing ones, which amounts to a complete restructuring of Indonesia's legal system.²⁹ Reaction to the substance of the ART was decidedly negative, former Vice President Jusuf Kalla decried the concessions in the ART and many argued it violated the Indonesian constitution.³⁰

As before, the ART's announcement was written in a decidedly Trumpian fashion, with little consideration for Indonesian political interests and sensitivities. The White House press release called it a "GREAT DEAL," mimicking Trump's use of capital letters in his tweets and

²³ <https://thediplomat.com/2025/12/indonesia-us-trade-agreement-at-risk-of-collapse-report-claims/>

²⁴ Shofa, Jayanty Nada. "Indonesia Denies Poison Pill Clause Stalling US Tariff Talks." *Jakarta Globe*, December 4, 2025. https://jakartaglobe.id/business/indonesia-denies-poison-pill-clause-stalling-us-tariff-talks#goog_rewarded.

²⁵ <https://thediplomat.com/2025/12/indonesia-us-trade-agreement-at-risk-of-collapse-report-claims/>.

²⁶ <https://www.csis.org/podcasts/southeast-asia-radio/indonesias-market-turmoil-mehu-sitepu>.

²⁷ <https://thediplomat.com/2026/03/what-does-indonesia-get-out-of-the-us-indonesia-agreement-on-reciprocal-trade/>.

²⁸ Supriatma, Made. "Proximity Without Leverage? Indonesia's Risky Bet on Trump's Board of Peace." *Fulcrum*, March 2, 2026. <https://fulcrum.sg/proximity-without-leverage-indonesias-risky-bet-on-trumps-board-of-peace/>

²⁹ <https://thediplomat.com/2026/03/the-indonesia-us-agreement-a-reciprocal-trade-deal-that-isnt/>

³⁰ https://www.asia-pacific-solidarity.net/news/2026-03-03/ugm-academics-us-trade-deal-violates-constitution-sovereignty.html#:~:text=UGM%20academics:%20US%20trade%20deal%20violates%20constitution%2C,3%2C%202026.%20*%20Foreign%20Affairs%20&%20Trade.

stated that the ART would lead to a “NEW GOLDEN AGE for the U.S.-Indonesian Alliance.”³¹ Indonesian analysts were shocked by the use of “alliance,” a term that is anathema to a country whose foundational foreign policy doctrine is non-alignment.

The day after Prabowo signed the ART, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that Trump’s use of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) to impose tariffs was unconstitutional, thereby invalidating the 32% tariff threat that pressured Indonesia into the deal. One leading think tank titled their analysis “A Deal Invalidated the Day After It was Signed.”³² Within twenty-four hours, Trump invoked Section 122 of the Trade Act of 1974 to impose first a ten, and then a 15% tariff on many countries, leaving Indonesia worse off under the ART than had it never concluded an agreement.³³ Sanctions imposed under Section 122 can only last six months or until July 24, 2026. Therefore, to strengthen its leverage over trading partners, in mid-March the USTR also opened Section 301 investigations into 60 countries for failure to enforce bans on imports made with forced labor and a separate probe into 16 countries over alleged excessive industrial capacity, both of which the United States classified as unfair trade practices. Indonesia was targeted in both investigations.³⁴ If Indonesia fails to marshal what Washington judges to be credible data to disprove these allegations, Section 301 allows the United States to impose steep new tariffs that could last for four years.³⁵

Many Indonesians viewed the Court’s decision as a welcome opportunity to avoid implementing an agreement that they believed harmed the country’s interests.³⁶ Prabowo’s key negotiator, Airlangga Hartototo, however, argued that the deal was not invalidated by the Court ruling and the Prabowo administration planned on sending it to parliament within sixty days for ratification as required for it to come into effect.³⁷ Once the USTR announced the Section 301 probe, however, the Indonesian government put plans for parliamentary ratification on hold to focus on compiling the data necessary to rebut the 301 allegations.³⁸ As of mid-March, the administration continued to maintain that it wanted to ratify the ART.³⁹

Trump’s War Against Iran Undermines Prabowo’s Policies & Illustrates Their High Costs

Trump’s decision to launch a war of choice against Iran in concert with Israel on February 28th--less than ten days after the BOP meeting--completely undermined both Trump’s

³¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2026/02/implementation-of-the-agreement-toward-a-new-golden-age-for-the-u-s-indonesian-alliance/>

³² <https://iifa.or.id/publications/iifa-policy-brief-on-indonesia-trade-agreement-with-the-us.>

³³ <https://iifa.or.id/publications/iifa-policy-brief-on-indonesia-trade-agreement-with-the-us.>

³⁴ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/business/2026/03/18/indonesia-puts-off-ratifying-art-as-us-opens-trade-probes.html>.

³⁵ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/business/2026/03/13/indonesia-still-seeks-to-ratify-art-despite-us-trade-probes.html>.

³⁶ <https://iifa.or.id/publications/iifa-policy-brief-on-indonesia-trade-agreement-with-the->

³⁷ <https://en.tempo.co/read/2088660/airlangga-indonesia-us-trade-deal-unaffected-by-us-court-ruling>

³⁸ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/business/2026/03/18/indonesia-puts-off-ratifying-art-as-us-opens-trade-probes.html>

³⁹ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/business/2026/03/13/indonesia-still-seeks-to-ratify-art-despite-us-trade-probes.html>.

credibility as a peacemaker and Prabowo's policy of appeasement.⁴⁰ Despite a loud public outcry over U.S. and Israeli aggression, the Prabowo administration failed to condemn it, urging all parties to exercise restraint and prioritize dialogue and diplomacy instead.⁴¹ Critics condemned the government's unwillingness to take a principled stance against such a blatant violation of international law. By refusing to name the aggressors, it was argued, Indonesia effectively legitimizes their actions.⁴² Prabowo's abandonment of a principled stance in an attempt to preserve good relations with Washington while sustaining symbolic solidarity with Muslim publics, critics contend, fails because Muslim audiences see cowardice while American elites see compliance.⁴³ The costs of Prabowo's effort to appease Trump was severe damage to Indonesia's foreign policy principles and international reputation.

With protesters outside of the U.S. embassy directing anger not only at Trump but also at Prabowo for aligning with Washington, the costs to Prabowo's domestic political standing were rising.⁴⁴ In an attempt to diffuse the domestic political pressure against him, Prabowo offered to fly to Iran to mediate between the United States and Iran. Critics like former Deputy Foreign Minister Dino Djajal slammed the idea as totally "unrealistic," noting that the United States does not accept mediation, Prabowo has never visited Tehran and lacked the contacts necessary for mediation, and successful mediation would require meeting with Netanyahu.⁴⁵ As another editorial argued, "mediators must be trusted by victims and feared by aggressors. Indonesia is neither. It holds no leverage over Washington. It exerts no pressure on Tel Aviv. It cannot alter strategic calculations in Tehran. In such conditions, mediation becomes nothing more than ceremonial participation, a diplomatic performance staged for local and global audiences."⁴⁶

As Indonesian public opinion tilts decidedly against Washington, Prabowo has backtracked on some of his earlier decisions. In early March, Indonesia suspended its participation in the BOP due to the war on Iran and the need to focus attention on its consequences, particularly the safety of over 500,000 migrant workers in the region and energy security. Later, Jakarta announced that Indonesia's plans to deploy troops to Gaza under the ISF had been suspended.⁴⁷ In late March, when the economic consequences of Trump's war against Iran began to hit home, Prabowo declared that Indonesia would not contribute the \$1 billion fee for permanent BOP membership, claiming that was "never the plan"⁴⁸ While it is true that Prabowo did not publicly commit to the funding, many of his ministers spoke openly about

⁴⁰<https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/03/26/indonesia-needs-eyes-wide-open-on-trumps-board-of-peace>.

⁴¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2026/3/7/indonesian-presidents-us-ties-questioned-amid-public-anger-over-iran-war>.

⁴² <https://omong-omong.com/editorial-prabowos-unserious-peace-broker-offer-amid-us-israel-attacks-on-iran/>.

⁴³ <https://omong-omong.com/editorial-prabowos-unserious-peace-broker-offer-amid-us-israel-attacks-on-iran/>.

⁴⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2026/3/7/indonesian-presidents-us-ties-questioned-amid-public-anger-over-iran-war>.

⁴⁵ <https://en.tempo.co/read/2089902/indonesias-ex-deputy-minister-calls-prabowos-iran-mediation-plan-unrealistic>.

⁴⁶ <https://omong-omong.com/editorial-prabowos-unserious-peace-broker-offer-amid-us-israel-attacks-on-iran/>.

⁴⁷ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20260318-indonesia-suspends-gaza-troop-deployment-amid-middle-east-tensions/>.

⁴⁸ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20260323-prabowo-said-no-1-billion-but-his-ministers-signaled-otherwise-on-the-board-of-peace/>

it, tied it to Gaza and suggested ways to fund it.⁴⁹ Finally, Prabowo declared that if he decided that the ART threatened the country's national interests⁵⁰

What Prabowo got Right and Wrong about Donald Trump

Prabowo's insight that Trump himself was the key to unlocking support for his objectives was spot on. Just as Indonesian foreign policy is largely dictated by Prabowo himself and a small cadre of aides, U.S. policymaking under Trump is largely a personalized process. In Washington today, foreign policy is made not through inter-agency meetings by diplomats and experts but by Trump and a handful of trusted personal aides in the White House. President Trump views U.S. ties with other countries largely through the prism of his personal ties with them. His personal respect and affinity for Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu has led him to reverse controls on the export of advanced computer chips to China, adopt policies that favor Russian interests in negotiations to end the war in Ukraine, and to launch a war against Iran that Netanyahu has long advocated. These policies faced significant opposition from the American public and much of Washington's foreign policy establishment.

What Prabowo didn't seem to appreciate is the utterly transactional nature of Trump's foreign policy, which is rather surprising given his own downgrading of Indonesia's normative foreign policy approach in favor of a more pragmatic one. In Trump's second term, he threatened war against Denmark, a NATO ally, unless it ceded sovereignty over Greenland and destroyed the U.S. relationship with Canada—arguably the best neighbor a country could ever have. For Prabowo to think Indonesia, located halfway around the world with less robust economic, security and political ties would be treated more benignly was simply unrealistic. It was also inconsistent with Trump's coercive policies toward Indonesia during his first term, when he threatened to withdraw GSP privileges, impose sanctions over Indonesia's large trade surplus and impose CAATSA sanctions if Indonesia purchased Sukhoi fighter jets from Russia. Trump had clearly demonstrated his transactional, zero-sum approach to Indonesia during his first term and for Prabowo to believe that appeasement would change was unrealistic.

Conclusion

Prabowo's efforts to appease Trump have failed, negatively impacting Indonesia's international standing, Prabowo's domestic support and potentially its economic sovereignty. Prabowo's decision to align so closely with the United States at this historical juncture is particularly unfortunate. As Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney has argued, Trump's policies have disrupted the international system amidst U.S.-China competition, creating challenges but also opportunities for middle powers. Echoing Sukarno, Carney and others argue that rather than accept subordination to great powers, middle powers must unite to

⁴⁹ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20260323-prabowo-said-no-1-billion-but-his-ministers-signaled-otherwise-on-the-board-of-peace/>.

⁵⁰ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/business/2026/03/26/prabowo-vows-to-defend-national-interests-as-us-trade-deal-draws-scrutiny.html>.

form a third way by leveraging their collective economic and strategic weight to shape global rules. Indonesia's status as the world's fourth largest state, 16th largest economy and traditional leader of ASEAN give it the potential to play an important role in helping to shape a new, more equitable global order. Playing this role effectively, however, requires Prabowo to abandon his policy of appeasing Trump and return to Indonesia's principled diplomatic tradition. Whether Prabowo chooses that course remains to be seen.

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