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Indonesia Returns to the UN Stage: Prabowo's Grand Rhetoric, Old Dilemmas

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President Prabowo Subianto's debut at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) would always attract global and domestic attention. The UNGA is a platform for global performance, where leaders present visions not only of world order but also of themselves as statesmen. For a leader long marked by controversy, whether over his authoritarian past, transactional diplomacy, or reputation for symbolic rather than substantive moves, this speech offered Prabowo a chance to shape his image before a global audience.

It also marked the first time in a decade that an Indonesian president chose to attend the Assembly in person. During Joko Widodo's presidency, Indonesia's voice at the UNGA was delivered through Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, with Jokowi preferring to focus on domestic priorities. Therefore, Prabowo's arrival in New York signalled not just a personal

style but a recalibration: presidential diplomacy is back, and Indonesia wants to be seen by the other global payers.

And indeed, the speech had all the hallmarks of grandeur.¹ Prabowo invoked the language of universal human rights, evoked the memory of Indonesia's anti-colonial struggle, and painted himself as a defender of justice for the Palestinians, the oppressed, and the marginalized. He pledged ambitious contributions to peacekeeping, promised global leadership on food security and climate change, and ended with an appeal for peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

On the surface, this is the sort of rhetoric that plays well in the UNGA hall: uplifting, moralistic, and firmly aligned with familiar tropes of Indonesia as a leader of the Global South. However, when placed in the broader context of Prabowo's foreign policy record and Indonesia's structural realities, the speech reveals itself as less a coherent strategy and more an extension of his "fear of missing out" (FOMO) diplomacy. It was long on symbolism, thin on detail, and deeply contradictory in ways that may undermine rather than strengthen Indonesia's international credibility.

This commentary examines Prabowo's UNGA speech in the broader trajectory of Indonesian diplomacy, unpacks his rhetorical strategies, and assesses the risks of overpromising. It also considers his military framing for Indonesia's foreign policy identity and recommends recalibrating personal ambition into deliverable policies.

A Speech Built on Historical Traditions?

The speech heavily drew on rhetorical traditions that Indonesians know well. Prabowo's invocation of colonial suffering and international solidarity echoed Sukarno's famous 1960 "To Build the World Anew" address at the UN. His appeals to justice for Palestine resonated with a longstanding theme in Indonesian diplomacy. Even his embrace of the language of "one human family" fits neatly within the Bandung spirit that Indonesian leaders have sought to project across the decades.

Nevertheless, there is a striking dissonance here. Sukarno's performance at the UN was the culmination of years of activist diplomacy built on the Bandung spirit since 1955. It reflected actual positions Indonesia, under Sukarno, had taken on issues from anti-colonialism to nuclear disarmament.

Prabowo, by contrast, has offered soaring rhetoric without the consistent commitments from his government on many of the issues. Several of the issues are discussed below, but even the rhetoric of international solidarity with the Global South fell flat when Prabowo's government only had a muted commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Bandung Conference.² The

¹ "President Prabowo's speech at the general debate of the UNGA", Antara News, last modified at September 24, 2025 00:14 GMT+7, <https://en.antaranews.com/news/381920/president-prabowos-speech-at-the-general-debate-of-the-unga>.

² "A missed opportunity," *The Jakarta Post*, April 24, 2025, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2025/04/24/a-missed-opportunity.html>.

speech fits the form of Indonesian diplomatic tradition but not its substance. This gap between words and action risks making his foreign policy appear performative rather than strategic.

Palestine, Israel, and the Limits of Rhetoric

The speech devoted significant space to Palestine, culminating in a reaffirmation of support for a two-state solution alongside recognition of Israel's security. This position was carefully calibrated and, on the surface, seemed to be a restatement of Indonesia's long-held stance, wrapped in moral urgency and emotional appeals to the suffering in Gaza.

However, the contradictions are telling. Just a day earlier, during the historic Palestine Summit, Prabowo stated that Indonesia would recognize Israel if Israel first recognized Palestine as an independent state.³ This remark, essentially a conditional normalization formula, sparked unease at home, where public sentiment remains strongly pro-Palestinian and wary of any gestures toward Israel. The remark also continued his previous statements on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which had already created a heated societal debate.⁴

By returning to safer ground at the UN, restating the two-state solution without directly mentioning conditional recognition, Prabowo seemed to walk back from a misstep that risked undermining his domestic legitimacy.

A pattern of oscillation emerges: bold or improvisational statements one day, careful recalibration the next. While the UNGA stage might have allowed him to reclaim the moral high ground for a brief period, the underlying problem persists. Even that brief period was then followed by his doubling down on "recognize, respect, and guarantee Israel's security" the next day.⁵ Indonesia's Palestine policy remains performative and resonant in symbolism but lacks concrete diplomatic initiatives to advance peace meaningfully. The symbolic recognition is important since it would add leverage for the Palestinians.⁶ However, the two-level game that Prabowo played (trying to act as a flexible bridge-builder abroad while dealing with domestic pressure)⁷ heightens the risk that his mixed messaging may eventually erode both domestic trust and international clarity about Indonesia's true stance.

³ "President Prabowo's Full Speech at the Palestine Summit at the UN," *Kompas*, accessed September 25, 2025, <https://www.kompas.id/artikel/en-pidato-lengkap-presiden-prabowo-dalam-ktt-palestina-di-pbb/amp>.

⁴ "Pro-Kontra Pernyataan Presiden Prabowo Soal Pengakuan Israel," *Kompas*, last modified May 31, 2025 13:15 WIB, <https://www.kompas.id/artikel/pro-kontra-pernyataan-presiden-prabowo-soal-pengakuan-israel>.

⁵ "Prabowo: Perdamaian datang bila semua menjamin keamanan Israel," *ANTARA News*, September 24, 2025, <https://www.antaranews.com/berita/5132304/prabowo-perdamaian-datang-bila-semua-menjamin-keamanan-israel>.

⁶ Muhammad Zulfikar Rahmat, "Unpacking Prabowo's UN speech on Palestine," *Middle East Monitor*, September 23, 2025, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250923-unpacking-prabowos-un-speech-on-palestine/>.

⁷ Azizah Astrina, "Mempertanyakan komitmen Prabowo terhadap Palestina: Dua kaki kebijakan luar negeri Indonesia," *The Conversation Indonesia*, September 23, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/mempertanyakan-komitmen-prabowo-terhadap-palestina-dua-kaki-kebijakan-luar-negeri-indonesia-258461>.

The Peacekeeping Gambit: Lofty Promises, Unlikely Execution

The other headline-grabbing promise was Prabowo's declaration that Indonesia is prepared to deploy 20,000 or more peacekeepers "to Gaza or elsewhere, in Ukraine, in Sudan, in Libya, everywhere." In theory, this would be transformative: Indonesia is already one of the world's top troop contributors to UN peacekeeping⁸, and such a massive surge would catapult Jakarta into the front ranks of global peace operations.

Here, the contradictions become obvious. Indonesia's military, while large, is already stretched across vast archipelagic defence commitments. Deploying an additional ten thousand troops abroad would require significant logistical capacity (airlift, sustainment, interoperability with other UN forces) and substantial financial resources. It is not clear that Indonesia possesses this capability, nor is there domestic political willingness to allocate resources to such an endeavour during economic pressures at home.

Moreover, peacekeeping is not simply about numbers. It requires training, political neutrality, and the ability to navigate complex conflict environments. In places like Gaza or Ukraine, where conflicts are deeply politicized and major power rivalries are at play, Indonesia's, and any other country's role would be tightly constrained due to the mistrust between the warring parties.⁹ Here again, Prabowo's bold offer seems more about theatrics. He signalled Indonesia's willingness to "take its share of the burden" without any clear thinking about the actual mechanism and resources needed.

Food Security and Climate Change: Ambition Meets Reality

Another key theme was Indonesia's supposed leadership in food security and climate change. Prabowo boasted of record rice production, framed Indonesia as a future "granary of the world," and highlighted renewable energy commitments and forest rehabilitation. On climate change, he warned of rising seas threatening Jakarta, detailed the construction of a giant sea wall, and pledged net-zero by 2060 (and perhaps earlier) through reforestation and a transition to renewables.

Again, the rhetoric is impressive. However, it sits uneasily with domestic realities. Food security remains vulnerable, dependent on state subsidies, import restrictions, and several imported commodities.¹⁰ Indonesia's agricultural productivity lags behind global competitors, and climate-induced disruptions will likely worsen. Sending rice to Palestine

⁸ Yokie Rahmad Isichwansyah, "Indonesia's Grand UN Peacekeeping Vision," *The Platform*, December 2, 2023, <https://intpolicydigest.org/the-platform/indonesia-s-grand-un-peacekeeping-vision/>.

⁹ Edward Black, "United Nations Peacekeeping for Ukraine Under Scrutiny," *RUSI Commentary*, April 30, 2025, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/united-nations-peacekeeping-ukraine-under-scrutiny/>; Michael Peck, "History suggests Ukraine needs heavily armed peacekeepers to have a chance of success," *Business Insider*, March 30, 2025, <https://www.businessinsider.com/the-history-of-peacekeeping-doesnt-bode-well-for-ukraine-2025-3>.

¹⁰ CSIS Indonesia, "Indonesia's Strategic Dependencies," *Research Reports*, accessed September 25, 2025, <https://s3-csis-web.s3.ap-southeast-1.amazonaws.com/doc/StrategicDependency.pdf?download=1>.

may carry symbolic weight, but it does little to address the weaknesses of Indonesian food systems.

On climate, the contradictions are even sharper. While Prabowo pledged accelerated net-zero ambitions, his administration has remained committed to coal-fired energy and extractive resource projects.¹¹ The new capital city, Nusantara, touted as “green,” continues to involve deforestation and displacement. Once more, the speech presents Indonesia as a leader on sustainability while domestic policy trends move in the opposite direction.

The Credibility Gap

The tension between ambition and capacity is the central problem of Prabowo’s speech. On one hand, his rhetoric restored visibility, energy, and drama to Indonesia’s global image. On the other hand, it raised expectations that Indonesia may be unable to fulfil.

Credibility in international diplomacy depends on what leaders say and what states can deliver. Indonesia’s peacekeeping contributions are important but modest compared to larger troop contributors. Its food security, while improving, remains vulnerable to climate variability and domestic distribution challenges. Its climate commitments have been made before, but implementation has often lagged. If Indonesia fails to deliver on the promises laid out in New York, it risks eroding rather than strengthening its credibility.

This credibility gap is not new. Yudhoyono’s ambitious climate pledges often ran ahead of actual policy. Jokowi’s promises of maritime leadership were never fully realized. What makes Prabowo different is his tendency toward maximalist rhetoric, which, if unmet, can produce sharper disappointment. Indonesia struggles with poverty, governance capacity, and climate vulnerabilities. Its peacekeeping forces are respected but limited in logistics and funding. Its food security is fragile, with rice self-sufficiency often contested by experts. Despite some progress, its climate record remains undermined by ongoing deforestation and coal dependence. The gap between his dramatic words and Indonesia’s material capacity could undermine the very leadership he seeks to project.

¹¹ Tempo, “Kenapa Komitmen Indonesia kepada Perjanjian Paris Dinilai Buruk Sekali?,” *Tempo*, July 9, 2025, <https://www.tempo.co/lingkungan/kenapa-komitmen-indonesia-kepada-perjanjian-paris-dinilai-buruk-sekali--1945483>.

The Continuation of FOMO Diplomacy

Prabowo's appearance at the UNGA also reflects a broader pattern that characterizes his foreign policy style: what can be described as "FOMO diplomacy," or a fear of missing out on global moments.¹² FOMO, in this context, can be described as the condition when actors perceive their failure to benefit from strategic opportunities or to manage risks as effectively as others.¹³ In foreign policy and diplomacy, it can be understood as anxiety coming from the fear of being left out from the global moments, which could prompt leader to be reactive and opt for short-term gain without long-term strategic thinking.¹⁴ His decision to personally attend the General Assembly fits this pattern. Just as he rushed to appear at summits or commemorations abroad in the early months of his presidency, Prabowo's presence in New York was driven less by carefully crafted strategy than by a desire to be seen participating in the key diplomatic stage of the moment.

If the target is to increase prestige and branding abroad, he succeeded. A shower of praises from other leaders, even Donald Trump, was given.¹⁵ Even the Israeli newspaper, *The Times of Israel*, highlighted Prabowo's statement.¹⁶ Domestically, criticisms towards Prabowo only happened among several elite circles, but not widely enough. The government's account immediately praised Prabowo's speech, and social media such as Instagram and TikTok were full of praise for him.

This style of diplomacy projects activity, but it also creates problems. Prabowo risks diluting Indonesia's voice on the world stage by prioritizing symbolism and visibility over long-term strategic planning. His speech at the UNGA was heavy on gestures that grabbed attention, but these statements were not anchored in a coherent foreign policy framework. In this sense, the UNGA intervention mirrored his earlier diplomatic choices: reactive, headline-driven, and centred on the president himself rather than on Indonesia's established institutions.

This tendency significantly affects Indonesia's diplomatic machinery, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Kemlu). Kemlu has long cultivated Indonesia's reputation as a measured, credible, and consensus-oriented actor, carefully balancing domestic sensitivities with international commitments. Unfortunately, Prabowo's FOMO diplomacy sidelines Kemlu's expertise in favour of presidential improvisation. The remark that Indonesia would recognize Israel once it recognized Palestine exemplifies this tension. It triggered backlash at home precisely because it bypassed the institutional caution and layered diplomacy that Kemlu

¹² Radityo Dharmaputra, "Diplomasi FOMO Prabowo: Simbolis, reaktif, berisiko mengancam legitimasi," *The Conversation Indonesia*, September 16, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/diplomasi-fomo-prabowo-simbolis-reaktif-berisiko-mengancam-legitimasi-264989>.

¹³ Cristian Nitoiu, "The anxious and resilient European Union: experiencing FOMO in the increasingly geopolitical world order," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 33, no. 2 (2025): 537. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2024.2389121>.

¹⁴ Dharmaputra, "Diplomasi FOMO Prabowo,"

¹⁵ "US President Praises President Prabowo's UN General Assembly Speech," Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, September 24, 2025, <https://setkab.go.id/en/us-president-praises-president-prabowos-un-general-assembly-speech/>.

¹⁶ "At UN, Indonesian president says guaranteeing Israel's security is key to peace, ends speech with, 'Shalom'," *The Times of Israel*, September 23, 2025, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/at-un-indonesian-president-says-guaranteeing-israels-security-key-to-peace-ends-speech-with-shalom/.

would normally employ on such a sensitive issue. The more foreign policy is personalized and securitized around Prabowo, the weaker Indonesia's institutional foundations become, making policy more vulnerable to missteps and contradictions.

Policy Implications: From Rhetoric to Realism

Prabowo's speech at the UN General Assembly highlights the tension between symbolism and substance in Indonesia's foreign policy. If this tension is not addressed, Indonesia risks drifting into a mode of diplomacy that prioritizes visibility and prestige over coherence and institutional strength. Several policy implications follow.

First, Indonesia must restore balance between presidential diplomacy and institutional foreign policy. While it is natural for presidents to play a prominent role in international forums, excessive personalization risks sidelining Kemlu. Prabowo's off-the-cuff remark about recognizing Israel once Palestine is recognized exemplifies the dangers of bypassing institutional processes. Future engagements should be anchored in strategies jointly formulated with Kemlu, ensuring coherence across speeches, summits, and negotiations.

Second, the government should strengthen Kemlu's role in strategic planning. Kemlu has historically been Indonesia's safeguard against overreach, carefully calibrating positions to manage domestic sensitivities and international credibility. To counteract the ad-hoc nature of FOMO diplomacy, Kemlu should be empowered with greater authority to vet presidential statements, prepare unified positions, and brief the president more comprehensively before high-level events. Without this, foreign policy risks becoming reactive and contradictory.

Third, Indonesia needs to clarify its strategic priorities in multilateral forums. Prabowo's speech was ambitious, but ambition without focus can reduce credibility. A more precise articulation of Indonesia's comparative advantages, such as its leadership in ASEAN, its role as a G20 member, and its experience in peacekeeping, would enable Jakarta to project influence more effectively.

Fourth, Indonesia's credibility abroad depends on coherence at home. The backlash against Prabowo's remarks on Israel and Palestine reflects the political cost of neglecting domestic opinion. Indonesian diplomacy has always been rooted in a delicate balance between international commitments and domestic legitimacy. Therefore, any attempt to project leadership abroad must be matched by sensitivity to the home front. This effort requires stronger mechanisms for public communication and parliamentary engagement in foreign policy, ensuring that international commitments do not generate domestic political liabilities.

Finally, Indonesia should invest in institutional resilience for the long term. If foreign policy revolves around presidential visibility, it will be vulnerable to the idiosyncrasies of whoever occupies the office. Strengthening institutional culture within Kemlu, ASEAN-related agencies, and the national security apparatus will ensure that Indonesia's diplomacy remains consistent, regardless of leadership changes. This institutionalization is essential if Indonesia wishes to sustain its credibility as a middle power in an era of growing global uncertainty.

In short, Prabowo's UNGA speech marked an important return to the global stage, but its execution underscored the risks of FOMO diplomacy. Indonesia must recalibrate the balance between presidential ambition and institutional grounding to move from symbolism to substance. Only by empowering its foreign policy machinery, clarifying its strategic priorities, and maintaining domestic legitimacy can Indonesia translate high-profile appearances into enduring global influence.

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