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When Everything Becomes National Defence

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The boundaries of what constitutes ‘national defence’ in Indonesia have become increasingly difficult to define. Food security, energy security, public health, economic resilience, technological development and even aspects of social welfare are increasingly discussed through the language of national security and defence. At the same time, the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) have assumed increasingly visible roles in civilian government programmes, from agricultural development and the Free Nutritious Meals programme to the Red-White Village Cooperatives.

There are understandable reasons for this expansion. Contemporary security challenges increasingly cut across the traditional boundaries separating defence, economics, technology

and civilian governance. Yet recognising that these issues have implications for national security is not the same as concluding that they should become military responsibilities. The administration's current approach thus deserves closer scrutiny, particularly amid growing concerns over the militarisation of non-defence sectors, the trajectory of Indonesia's civil-military relations, and the state of Indonesia's defence policymaking.

Expanding Scope of National Defence?

The Prabowo administration recently released the long-awaited General Defense Policy (Kebijakan Umum Pertahanan Negara) for 2025–2029, replacing the previous policy covering 2020–2024.

The document reflects a security environment considerably more complex than the one Indonesia faced only a few years ago. It rightly moves beyond conventional military threats to recognise the growing importance of hybrid and non-military challenges, including food and energy security, technological disruption, and the increasingly close relationship between economics and security. It also places greater emphasis on great-power competition as the defining feature of Indonesia's strategic environment, highlighting tensions in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, the Korean Peninsula, and beyond.

One of the more notable features of the 2025–2029 General Defense Policy is not what it changes, but what it leaves unchanged. The document continues to affirm civilian supremacy and the post-*Reformasi* division of labour between military and civilian institutions. Military threats remain the responsibility of the TNI, while civilian ministries and agencies retain the lead for non-military threats. Even in responding to hybrid threats, the policy emphasises coordination rather than transferring civilian responsibilities to the military.

At the same time, however, it significantly broadens the conceptual scope of national defence. Energy, food, science and technology, culture, spatial planning, and disaster management are all presented as integral components of Indonesia's defence system. Such an expansive understanding of national defence reflects the increasingly interconnected nature of contemporary security challenges. Yet it also raises an important institutional question: if more policy areas are framed as matters of national defence, where should the boundary between civilian governance and military involvement be drawn?

The policy itself maintains that civilian institutions should continue leading non-military defence, with the TNI providing support where required under existing legal provisions. In practice, however, Indonesia has increasingly moved in a different direction. The military now plays visible and significant roles across a growing number of civilian programmes, from

land-clearing for agricultural development,¹ implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals programme,² the Red-White Village Cooperatives,³ and in the management of public health during the past COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ Recently, proposals emerged also for the involvement of the *Babinsa* (Village Supervisory Non-Commissioned Officer) in tax monitoring⁵ and for the TNI to also address issues relating to street crime.⁶ While the tax monitoring episode was later clarified as limited to monitoring rather than enforcement,⁷ it nevertheless illustrates how military "assistance" can gradually extend into areas of routine governance. More recently, the President has also suggested that the military, again through the *Babinsa*, be involved in public education programs to counter forest fires.⁸

The result is an increasingly visible gap between formal policy and what implementation looks like in practice. While official documents preserve civilian leadership over non-military sectors, the TNI has become an increasingly prominent implementing partner in government programmes. Furthermore, the broader conceptualisation of what tasks fall under the definition of "defence" may create further incentives and justifications for the military's expanded responsibilities. However, this is not to suggest that the TNI should have no domestic role at all. Its role in operations such as disaster relief, humanitarian assistance and emergency logistics remain indispensable. The question is when military involvement in non-defence activities become 'normalised' and continuously expanded, and what consequences that may bring for Indonesia's civil-military relations and the TNI's own long-term effectiveness and operational readiness.

Inherent Risks

The first risk of these trends is borne by the TNI itself. Indonesia's strategic environment demands greater investment in readiness, modernisation and adaptation to emerging challenges ranging from maritime security and territorial defence to cyber threats, artificial

¹ Tempo, "TNI Kelola 2,5 Juta Hektare Lahan Program Ketahanan Pangan," July 2026, <https://www.tempo.co/politik/tni-kelola-2-5-juta-hektare-lahan-program-ketahanan-pangan-2253867>

² CNN Indonesia, "Bos BGN Sudaryono Ungkap Kelanjutan Keterlibatan TNI-Polri di MBG," July 23 2026, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/ekonomi/20260723110207-92-1383969/bos-bgn-sudaryono-ungkap-kelanjutan-keterlibatan-tni-polri-di-mbg>

³ Sekretariat Negara Republik Indonesia, "Presiden Prabowo Instruksikan Sinergi Nasional Percepat Penguatan Koperasi Merah Putih," accessed July 28, 2026, https://www.setneg.go.id/baca/index/presiden_prabowo_instruksikan_sinergi_nasional_percepat_penguatan_koperasi_merah_putih

⁴ Jun Honna, *Health Security in Indonesia and the Normalization of the Military's Non-Defence Role*, Trends in Southeast Asia no. 13 (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022)

⁵ Kompas.com, "Polemik Babinsa Awasi Pajak, TNI AD Tegaskan Bukan sebagai Penagih, Tak Ada...," July 23, 2026, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2026/07/23/05454571/polemik-babinsa-awasi-pajak-tni-ad-tegaskan-bukan-sebagai-penagih-tak-ada>

⁶ Kompas, "Batalyon Tempur Dikerahkan Buru Begal: Apakah Sesuai Mandat TNI?," <https://www.kompas.id/artikel/batalyon-tempur-dikerahkan-buru-begal-apakah-sesuai-mandat-tni>

⁷ Kompas.com, "Polemik Babinsa Awasi Pajak."

⁸ Kompas.com, "Prabowo Minta Prajurit TNI Edukasi Warga soal Bahaya Bakar Hutan dan Lahan," August 30, 2026, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2026/08/30/12224771/prabowo-minta-prajurit-tni-edukasi-warga-soal-bahaya-bakar-hutan-dan-lahan>

intelligence, autonomous systems and the undersea domain. Every additional non-defence responsibility competes for finite personnel, time and resources that could otherwise strengthen operational readiness and effectiveness. Indonesia's defence planning already struggles to prioritise resource allocation because of limited budgets and fragmented planning,⁹ which will be made increasingly difficult should the military's role continue to expand beyond its core responsibilities. Personnel assigned to agricultural production or welfare programmes are unavailable for operational training, while equipment and infrastructure deployed for civilian tasks still incur operating and maintenance costs. Even with a larger defence budget, strategic prioritisation remains essential. The solution is thus not to merely increase the defence budget or increase military personnel recruitment, but rather whether military resources are being strategically directed towards missions for which military capabilities are genuinely necessary.

The second risk is the gradual weakening of civilian institutions. The TNI is often called upon because it arguably possesses attributes many civilian agencies lack: territorial reach, logistical assets and the ability to mobilise quickly. In emergencies, these capabilities are indispensable. However, repeated reliance on the military to compensate for supposed civilian shortcomings can become self-reinforcing. Repeated reliance on military capabilities may reduce political incentives to invest in civilian institutional capacity, as immediate challenges appear to be resolved through military deployment rather than bureaucratic reform.

Oftentimes, the weakening of civilian supremacy does not necessarily begin with military insubordination. At times, it begins when civilian leaders voluntarily delegate responsibilities to the military in the name of political stability and compromise, as was the case in previous administrations.¹⁰ In many of the programmes mentioned above and in others as well, military participation has been requested by civilian leadership rather than initiated by the armed forces themselves. Civilian leadership can therefore maintain formal civilian control on paper while still contributing to the gradual militarisation of governance. Democratic civil-military relations depend not only on a professional armed forces but also on civilian leaders exercising judgement over when military involvement is appropriate, preserving institutional boundaries and investing in capable civilian bureaucracies.

Finally, emerging threats require stronger civil-military coordination, not the militarisation of civilian governance. Pursuing the latter risks reducing Indonesia's ability to address and adapt to these increasingly complex challenges. Cybersecurity, critical infrastructure protection, and the governance of emerging technologies such as autonomous weapons, artificial intelligence,

⁹ Evan A. Laksmana, "Retail Path-Dependence: Indonesia's Post-Authoritarian Defence Planning," in *Defence Planning for Small and Middle Powers: Rethinking Force Development in an Age of Disruption*, ed. Tim Sweijts, Saskia van Genugten, and Frans Osinga (Abingdon: Routledge, 2025), 113–127.

¹⁰ Evan A. Laksmana, "Civil-Military Relations under Jokowi: Between Military Corporate Interests and Presidential Handholding," *Asia Policy* 14, no. 4 (2019): 63–76; Honna, *Health Security in Indonesia*.

biotechnology and quantum computing in the defence sector cannot be achieved by either the military or civilian ministries acting in siloes. In the digital and cyber domain, for example, much of Indonesia's telecommunications and overall digital infrastructure is owned or operated by civilian agencies, state-owned enterprises and the private sector, while expertise often resides in universities, research institutes, and again the private sector. The military contributes operational planning, intelligence and defence capabilities, but effective responses require close collaboration among government, academia, industry and the armed forces. Future and even several contemporary security challenges therefore require not a larger military role across all sectors, but the strengthening of civilian institutional capacity and expertise combined with closer civil-military coordination.

Strengthening the Civilian Institutions of the Defence Sector

Reversing these tendencies requires reforms on both sides of Indonesia's civil-military relationship. For the TNI, professionalism and effectiveness should not be measured by the continued expansion of domestic responsibilities, particularly non-defence responsibilities. Its modernisation, organisational reform and personnel development should strengthen readiness, joint operations, maritime and air defence, cyber capabilities and adaptation to emerging technologies.

Professional armed forces alone, however, cannot sustain democratic civil-military relations. Indonesia also needs civilian institutions capable of formulating defence policy, evaluating military proposals and exercising effective oversight. Civilian institutions such as the Ministry of Defense and Commission I of the House of Representatives should play critical roles in translating political direction into strategy, and in ensuring effective civilian oversight over the military and its operations. This can be further aided by a healthy and functioning civilian defence ecosystem outside government, which is equally essential. Universities, think tanks, civil society organisations, independent experts and the media contribute independent analysis, strengthen public accountability and develop expertise in emerging fields. Engagement between this ecosystem and government must also be meaningful and wholly transparent rather than symbolic. Civilian institutions and experts require access to non-sensitive policy documents, parliamentary deliberations and opportunities to participate in policy consultations. While some degree of secrecy is unavoidable, it should not become the default justification for limiting public consultation and scrutiny at large.

Challenges certainly still remain. The Ministry of Defence remains only partially civilianised, with active and retired military officers continuing to occupy key bureaucratic and ministerial positions,¹¹ while political opposition against the current administration is rare in Parliament.

¹¹ Muhamad Haripin, Adhi Priamarizki, and Sigit S. Nugroho, "Quasi-Civilian Defence Minister and Civilian Authority: The Case Study of Indonesia's Ministry of Defence during Joko Widodo's Presidency," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 8, no. 1 (2023): 164–183, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911221141016>

Strengthening these institutions, together with the broader civilian defence ecosystem, is essential not only for democratic accountability but also for developing the expertise and strategic leadership needed to formulate defence policy, oversee military planning, and ensure that Indonesia's increasingly complex security challenges are addressed by the institutions best equipped to do so.

Conclusion

Indonesia's increasingly complex strategic environment demands closer coordination of civilian and military institutions amidst the growing significance of economic resilience, technological disruption and other challenges that transcend traditional institutional boundaries.

Yet responding effectively requires not simply expanding the definition of national defence or the jurisdictions which the military can justifiably operate in. It requires a two-way transformation: a military focused on developing the capabilities needed for contemporary warfare, and capable civilian institutions capable of leading governance policymaking in both military and non-military sectors while ensuring effective oversight, transparency and democratic accountability.

A democratic defence ecosystem ultimately depends on both sides of Indonesia's civil-military relationship: a military that understands and works effectively within the boundaries of its professional role, and civilians with the expertise, institutional capacity and political willingness to preserve and enforce its authority over the defence sector.

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