

FROM MINISTER TO PRESIDENT: MEARSHEIMERISM IN INDONESIA'S DEFENSE DIPLOMACY UNDER PRABOWO SUBIANTO ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract

The invitation of John Mearsheimer as a geopolitical speaker at the ministerial candidates briefing event entitled “Hambalang Retreat” by President Prabowo Subianto on October 17, 2024, illustrates the president's particular preferences regarding geopolitical topics that are heavily influenced by thoughts of Mearsheimer that in this article are referred to as “Mearsheimerism”. This has been reflected since the beginning of Subianto’s leadership in the Indonesian Ministry of Defense, which is attractive to review regarding the extent to which the contextualization of structural realism has been in defense policy decision-making, especially in Indonesia's defense diplomacy. Explaining how the government carried out its defense diplomacy process under the Subianto administration is necessary and exciting. This research was conducted using the qualitative research method. The results found several linearities between the main ideas of Mearsheimer and the main ideas of Indonesia's defense diplomacy.

Keywords: John Mearsheimer, Prabowo Subianto, structural realism, defense diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION

Subianto's leadership in the Indonesian Ministry of Defense provides a different color in President Joko Widodo's second term. Despite this appointment's solid practical political aspects, the Ministry of Defense has become a more active ministry in managing defense policy in Indonesia. President Widodo has given Subianto full authority to lead the Ministry of Defense, in Subianto President Widodo trusts and thinks he does not have to tell him about his job. President Widodo assumed that Subianto knew more than he did (Gorbiano, 2019).

This can be interpreted differently by the two sides. The first side, President Widodo, does want to entrust the management of the defense sector to someone who is considered to have expertise in the field to cover his

shortcomings. The second side was welcomed by Subianto, who, with his military leadership, has the integrity and competence to lead the Ministry of Defense. Not to mention the criticism that uses a human rights perspective, which raises serious questions about whether Subianto is the right figure to carry out military reform in Indonesia (Gorbiano, 2019). It seems normal on the surface, but it is not impossible to be full of pragmatic political considerations if studied more deeply.

There is also another speculation, namely that President Widodo wants to show the public that the planned reconciliation is not just discourse by giving Subianto a stage, which of course for five years from 2019 to 2024, must be able to be used as a political showcase to face the next electoral contest. His dual role as minister and presidential candidate has sparked controversy, and the dividing lines are blurring. Nevertheless, the ball was indeed in Subianto's possession (Rayda, 2024). This strategy will make the government transition run smoothly and sustainably. Regardless of the steep political process that may be faced, this belief continues to be maintained until 2024.

In the previous period, the Ministry of Defense was led by representatives of “party officials”, which included many things in the business process that were taken into account. However, Subianto is different, although they both represent political parties, he comes as the “center of gravity.” In leading the Ministry of Defense, of course he can accommodate many personal preferences that are readily agreed upon in the ongoing political process. This makes it seem as if the Ministry of Defense is pragmatically personalized, this view at least emerged in 2019 due to public skepticism, which thought that this situation was too transactional. Opposing views on the performance of the Ministry of Defense have once again become a hot topic discussed in the presidential and vice-presidential candidate debates ahead of the general election 2024.

The Ministry of Defense had to explain Subianto's leadership achievements to answer public doubts. The ministry's progress is described to the public as both internally corrective and externally developmental.

However, this performance list is still about technical matters. Due to the geopolitical situation, only a little could be done then. This is undoubtedly a challenge for Subianto in navigating Indonesian defense diplomacy. However, at least the Ministry of Defense is making progress, which is urgently needed. Especially regarding military reform in Indonesia, whose professionalism must be increased in an original way, because there are determinants that are unique and different from other countries, so a leader is needed who understands the details (Subagyo, 2017).

Many obstacles exist to presenting Indonesia's proper face geopolitically through impactful defense diplomacy. Because in any case, the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs will undoubtedly be more active in being a mouthpiece for Indonesia's national interests in international relations. Not to mention the tasks President Widodo gave to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which tends to focus more on economic matters, so there is minimal potential space for collaboration between foreign policy and defense policy, which should go hand in hand in asserting national interests. A challenging task awaits the next president, how to get rid of Indonesia, which is trapped in mediocrity, and must emphasize Indonesia's more dignified position in international relations.

Subianto is undoubtedly aware of this, so 2019-2024 is the time he uses to lay the foundations of the policies that will be implemented if he gains power in the next period. The endorsement given by President Widodo is a lubricant for this great intention, where everything must be prepared as early as possible. The achievements of the Ministry of Defense are claimed to include the procurement of the main weapons system equipment, the construction of military hospitals and in the education sector there is the formation of new faculties at the Indonesian Defense University, which is a campus supported by the Ministry of Defense.

From the several claims mentioned above, specifically related to the procurement of the main weapons system equipment, its implementation certainly requires the trust of the counterparts. This depends on how Indonesia can demonstrate a good bargaining position and power to gain this

trust through defense diplomacy, as defense minister Subianto took this role directly. Within one month of taking office, the Minister of Defense can be said to have immediately been active in holding meetings with friendly countries in Asia, Africa and Europe. As of the end of November 2019, the Minister of Defense has held bilateral meetings with eight countries (Sari, 2019). During his leadership, the Ministry of Defense was very active in representing Indonesia in international relations, both bilateral and multilateral. Subianto takes two roles simultaneously, technical and political, and should also receive support from stakeholders in other ministries, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Most political scientists believe that a leader is an important factor in a state's policy making process (Sulaiman, 2008). The work carried out by Subianto certainly must be done in collaboration. Group work is needed to optimize the results of this work. Support from other ministries is necessary. However, of course there are limitations to the duties, functions, and authority of the Minister of Defense, who must also respect the "back office" of other ministries. At least the policy foundations have been laid, and the defense diplomacy directions that will be implemented if Subianto becomes president in the next period have begun to be read. Indonesia will be encouraged to be more active in international relations, partially and comprehensively, in fighting for national interests.

After a long and dynamic political process, Subianto was finally elected President of the Republic of Indonesia. Names began to emerge as public speculation about who would become ministers under the leadership of President Subianto, especially in the circles of the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Names that appear range from retired generals to trusted people in Subianto's inner circle.

Apart from the names that appear, one sure thing is that President Prabowo Subianto invited Mearsheimer to the "Hambalang Retreat", a briefing event for prospective ministers who will assist President Subianto to talk about geopolitical topics (Widianto and Teresia, 2024). This illustrates that President Subianto has read many of John Mearsheimer's works, which have

had a tremendous influence on his thinking about geopolitics. He wants his thinking not only to be understood by one or two ministers but also by all officials in their respective ministries, who must understand geopolitics to equalize steps toward achieving national interests.

Geopolitics is considered necessary to equip prospective ministers with comprehensive situation-reading skills. Indeed, the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are the leading sectors. However, state policy management is a joint work, the implementation of which is difficult to separate between international and domestic aspects as a result of the development of globalization, which has the impact of losing the relevance of space and time (Shoelhi, 2011). The invitation of Mearsheimer to the "Hambalang Retreat" could answer what Subianto wanted when he first served as Minister of Defense. Positioning Indonesia through defense diplomacy as a subject of international relations is indeed very important. Excessive involvement in a ceremonial context reduces Indonesia's strategic role. Substantive activities will be an option to maintain and even increase the visibility.

By using the structural realism perspective developed by Mearsheimer, the 2019-2024 defense diplomacy, which is the domain of Subianto's duties at the Ministry of Defense, can be described through analyses that try to connect the dots in order to obtain patterns of Indonesian defense diplomacy in the future. It is not impossible to use these patterns to navigate defense and foreign policies, especially those that intersect. The decision-making process that is carried out will consider the geopolitical aspect so that the defense diplomacy can play an optimal role among the world's great powers as a manifestation of a free and active foreign policy and an active defensive defense policy.

This article does not intend to predict what President Subianto will do with defense diplomacy during his administration in 2024-2029. This article tries to dismantle the foundations of defense diplomacy, which often intersects with foreign policy. With this research, the public will know the ontological aspects of every defense diplomacy being or will be made in the

next five years from 2024. This is then referred to in this paper as Mearsheimerism, which is one of the most dominant inputs in the defense diplomacy decision-making process in Indonesia under the leadership of President Subianto. Several notable policies during the second term of President Widodo's leadership in the defense sector will be contextualized with the structural realism paradigm that is developing in this unpredictable era of contemporary global politics.

DISCUSSION

John Mearsheimer and Structural Realism

President Subianto leads Indonesia in a situation that requires work. Geopolitically, competition between powers is increasingly accurate, which is not impossible for many developing countries to be affected by. According to Mearsheimer, countries tend to compete to secure their own countries by gaining as much power as possible in an environment of anarchy and uncertainty (Mearsheimer, 2021). Indonesia must be wise in positioning itself to guarantee its national security through targeted defense diplomacy.

The urgency to create policies based on a “helicopter view” is driven by the reality of an international system that is increasingly complex and presents a different appearance, at least after the Cold War. The vision of “*Indonesia Emas 2045*” or “Golden Indonesia 2045” must be rationalized in various fields, including defense. However, in reducing this vision into policies and then into diplomacy, awareness of the external situation is needed, where loopholes must be found solely to provide maximum benefits, not the opposite. Defense diplomacy can pave the way towards this grand vision by utilizing President Subianto's understanding and experience, Indonesia may be able to say a lot in the era of contemporary global politics.

Mearsheimer believes that great powers are the main actors in world politics that operate in an anarchic international system. Anarchy means there is no highest authority standing above the state, in contrast to hierarchy, which has centralized high authority. This situation makes it seem that all countries have the same opportunities, so a race occurs to establish themselves as part of a great power (Mearsheimer, 2007). In playing its role,

Indonesia must remain vigilant with its free and active foreign policy and active defensive defense policy. This is important because every country has offensive capabilities or the ability to attack, in other words, every country has the power to cause harm to Indonesia, which, of course, can change dynamically and unpredictably from time to time (Mearsheimer, 2007). The reality regarding Indonesia's current defense sector is that Indonesia's defense system still needs to be more optimal, especially regarding the main weapons system (Rachmat, 2014).

Indonesia can respond to this international political situation by becoming more active in substantive international relations, such as through bilateral and multilateral meetings that Subianto actively carried out during his early tenure at the Ministry of Defense. This is done in the context of confidence-building measures because Indonesia will never know the intentions or goals of other countries, whether they intend to attack or actually want to change the balance of power, or they will remain silent and survive with the conditions they have (Mearsheimer, 2007).

The only goal that must guide the implementation of Indonesia's defense policy is survival. Each country will try to defend its territory for survival (Mearsheimer, 2007). The integrity of the Indonesia, which has been considered a fixed price, needs to be maintained because this is very important. On the other hand, the state pursues various interests, such as human rights and prosperity for the country. So, Indonesia's defense diplomacy must be able to moderate these various interests. The intelligence of President Subianto and his aides was tested in this context.

Rationality must be prioritized by reducing political pragmatism, which will actually disrupt the democratization of ideas in defense governance in Indonesia. This is in line with what Mearsheimer (2007) said that states are rational actors, where they can use strategies to survive. Theoretically, Mearsheimer provides two policy options that Indonesia can take. This depends on the achievement targets of implementing defense diplomacy. Does Indonesia want to increase its capabilities to produce something that has more impact on achieving national interests ? Alternatively, President

Subianto is quite satisfied with the current situation and tends to have the option to maintain what he has in this uncertain situation.

Since the beginning of Subianto's leadership at the Ministry of Defense, public pros and cons have often colored his policy steps, especially those related to procuring the main weapons system equipment. This policy causes the allocation of debt for defense equipment expenditure to increase. Few people think this has something to do with the 2024 presidential election. However, in Mearsheimer's view, this movement seems reasonable, considering its urgency. Mearsheimer explains in his book "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics" that the state will never be safe and security will only be achieved if the state maximizes its power (military and economic), only then can the state ensure its security (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Whether procuring the main weapons system equipment is essential or not, one thing that is certain and needs to be questioned is where the governance of Indonesia's defense sector leads. Reading Subianto's steps when previously leading the Ministry of Defense is an asset for projecting a picture of the Indonesian Defense Policy in the future. This is in line with Mearsheimer's opinion, which states that theories of international politics should be able to look at events that continuously repeat themselves. Emphasis will only be given to the significance of the international structure or system, which can constantly change and emphasize pressure on international actors (Dugis, 2016).

In the context of offensive structural realism, Indonesia can pay attention to three main things when implementing its defense policy. However, this choice is not without risks and sacrifices. In his book, Maersheimer explains that states have three essential characteristics or behaviors according to offensive structural realism, self-help, power maximization, and outgroup fear (Maersheimer, 2001). To practice offensive structural realism, Indonesia is faced with various problems. Starting from how Indonesia plays its strategic role in international relations to technical issues related to the budget, it can become a significant obstacle if not paid attention to. The rationality for this choice must, of course be built on logical

assumptions, not just limited to rhetoric, even though it seems that this option tends to be more heroic and populist.

Meanwhile, if Indonesia still wants to enjoy being trapped in mediocrity which has been going on for the last ten years, then practicing defensive structural realism is the most rational option. According to Mearsheimer, in the context of defensive structural realism, states tend to have an interest in maintaining the status quo (Mearsheimer, 2003). Of course this will involve minimal risk, but at the same time efforts to achieve national interests may be less than optimal. Maintaining the status quo is a policy worth to buy, considering the dynamics in the Southeast Asia region, which is relatively calm outside of the movements in the South China Sea. Not to mention that Indonesia, under President Subianto's administration, intends to continue strengthening relations with Beijing. This will undoubtedly mean that the South China Sea does not need to be too concerned about a security threat. In "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics", Mearsheimer explains regional security, where when a country in the region does not feel too threatened, that country can develop a balance of power or use a defensive structural realism strategy (Mearsheimer, 2001). The situation is indeed quite complicated and difficult to predict. Flexibility is needed in carrying out defense diplomacy which is neither black nor white, but moderate.

The Subianto's Way

Leading the Ministry of Defense is Subianto's first stage in showing his leadership qualities, especially to generations X and Y, who did not follow his track record when leading in the military environment before retiring. Mearsheimer was invited to the "Hambalang Retreat", not without reason. His main ideas have become guidelines since Subianto took office in Medan Merdeka Barat. Subianto understands what Mearsheimer said, that to survive, every country must be strong, by being strong, it will compete and tend to clash with other countries (Subianto, 2023). This is the basis for Subianto's strategic steps at the Ministry of Defense, to immediately actively build good relations with potential partner countries that can help him

achieve this goal, in addition to internal improvements that are simultaneously being carried out.

Realizing “*Indonesia Emas 2045*” is a big dream that must be managed thoughtfully. The desire to make Indonesia a strong country has been internalized in Subianto. Meaersheimer's words were quoted in a book entitled “*Paradoks Indonesia dan Solusinya*”, whose essence is that if Indonesia becomes stronger, its neighboring countries will be afraid and try to reduce or balance its strength (Subianto, 2023). So, apart from efforts to strengthen national defense, responses from other countries also need to be taken into account so that the policies made do not backfire, which makes it difficult to achieve the national goals that have been proclaimed.

The challenges of geopolitical instability marked Subianto's leadership. The threat of war in Niger is still an issue. Conflicts related to elections and regulations also occur in the DRC and CAR. Tensions on the borders of India and China, especially the Manipur region, are increasingly volatile. The incident between China and the Philippines near the shallow waters of the Spratly Islands has raised tensions in the region. Last but not least important is the prolonged war between Russia and Ukraine (Subianto, 2023).

Even though these regions seem far away geographically, but geopolitically it is not impossible that this instability could have a collateral impact on other countries, including Indonesia. Reading geopolitical dynamics must be done comprehensively. Be it things from the past, updates on current situations or predictions about what will happen. Do not let the wrong reading mean Indonesia fails to achieve its national interests. As a country part of world history, it certainly needs leaders who can identify the challenges that must be faced. Nevertheless, more is needed, leaders must be able to ensure that the country can face these challenges. However, the challenges faced may be different or even more fantastic (Diamond, 2004).

Amid this geopolitical uncertainty, it seems that Subianto-way military leadership could be the answer. Military leadership is often identified with authoritarian leadership, even though this is untrue. Subianto and military

leadership were internalized from an early age until were finally forged through education and experience. Military, warrior, samurai, struggle, and soldier values are beneficial and multidimensionally helpful in the world of business, politics, and even the world of science (Subianto, 2023). He believes this leadership way can positively impact Indonesia's progress through his leadership in the Ministry of Defense.

When Subianto gained power as President, he wanted to ensure that the management of the defense sector in Indonesia continued according to what he wanted. He needs people who can articulate ideas. This person's experience will also be an added value for leadership within the Ministry of Defense, which must be open to existing geopolitical dynamics. Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin being chosen does not seem like it could be more surprising. Subianto and Sjamsoeddin have known each other since they were Second Lieutenant. The two often work together in the context of education in the military environment and the assignments they undertake. It was clear that Sjamsoeddin was the person who could be trusted to continue the foundation.

Not to mention Sjamsoeddin's series of experiences confirming the integrity and competence of his military leadership. Precisely at the Indonesian Ministry of Defense alone, Sjamsoeddin served as Deputy Minister of Defense and Secretary General of the Ministry of Defense until he became part of Subianto's inner circle during His tenure at the Ministry of Defense 2019-2024 (Subianto, 2023). Sjamsoeddin is a complete figure, to spearhead Indonesia's defense diplomacy.

Making Indonesia capable to geopolitically dancing between two lines is more than just the task of the Minister of Defense. Many policy parts cannot be separated from the critical role of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. This is why this position must also be occupied by someone who can be trusted and can embody the President's vision. According to Hikmahanto Juwana, Sugiono, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, indicated that President Subianto was serious about dealing with Indonesia's foreign policy issues (Wiryo and Ramadhan, 2024). As the ideological son of President Subianto, Sugiono

certainly already understands the foreign policy “textbook” that his superiors want, especially regarding defense issues, where Sugiono also has a military background, albeit a short one.

Defense Diplomacy in Southeast Asia: First Stage

As the 26th Minister of Defense, Subianto's presence in the Cabinet is notable. It is not just about him being President Widodo's political rival in two consecutive elections but also about other privileges, such as the budget allocation, which is quite large. In 2020, the budget of the Ministry of Defense is IDR. 127.35 trillion makes the Ministry of Defense the institution with the largest budget allocation. The amount continues to increase in 2021, namely Rp. 129.3 trillion (Asmara, 2020). With this fantastic budget, the expected results are not mediocre but must be commensurate with the allocated budget. Not to mention that if it is linked to the 2024 presidential election, Subianto's figure and all his actions will attract public attention.

Subianto does not seem like something other than the typical leader who focuses on one thing only partially. Under his leadership, officials within the Ministry of Defense were busy with work, both internal improvement and external development. Some of the superior policies that were then widely discussed included defense diplomacy, defense industry, modernization of Indonesian National Army, defense equipment, development of human resources in the defense sector, development of an education system through the Indonesian Defense University, and clean water assistance projects for the community (CNBC, 2024). These policies are only part of the various breakthroughs that Subianto has made since the beginning of his leadership at the Ministry of Defense. These multidimensional policies are implemented simultaneously and are slowly starting to attract public satisfaction.

In this situation, Indonesia prefers to carry out international cooperation schemes with other countries in the world to increase its military capacity. So far, this has been a superior cooperation scheme for Indonesia, and it will continue to be one of the mainstay strategies in Indonesia's defense through defense diplomacy efforts (Ginanjar, 2024). It is not surprising that

since winning the election in February and being inaugurated in October, President Subianto has been very active in making foreign visits. He also practiced the same thing when he was still in his early months as Minister of Defense.

This section will discuss outward-looking defense policies, especially defense diplomacy. Moreover, the discussions only refer to substantive and impactful defense diplomacy activities. Because quite a few diplomatic activities, including defense diplomacy, are used as "talk shop" events. As Minister of Defense, Subianto is also the chairman of the ASEAN Defense Minister's Meeting in 2023. He successfully organized a series of activities for the 17th ADMM and the 10th ADMM Plus. Even though he only acts as minister, his contribution to efforts to assert Indonesia's leadership in the region is clearly visible, and of course this is one of the credit points given to government at that time.

Indonesia's leadership in the 17th ADMM was accompanied by essential initiatives resulting in agreed documents. These documents include Jakarta Joint Declaration of the ADMM for Peace, Prosperity and Security; Concept Paper on the Implementation of ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific From a Defense Perspective; Discussion Paper on the Use of Military Assets of ASEAN Member States to Support Food Security in the Region; Guidelines for Implementation of the Observer Status Granted to Timor-Leste in ADMM, ADMM-Plus and Its Related Meetings; and revised Standard Operating Procedures of the ASEAN Our Eyes (CNBC, 2024).

Subianto wants Indonesia to contribute to regional security, which could put other countries in a condition that Mearsheimer calls defensive structural realism. This means that a relatively safe region will not make countries, especially those in Southeast Asia, feel threatened and suspicious of each other. This effort has also expanded its scope through the 10th ADMM-Plus. One document was agreed upon thanks to an initiative from Indonesia, namely, the ADMM-Plus Joint Statement on Women, Peace and Security. (CNBC, 2024). Indonesia does not want to maintain the status quo, but an

existence is being built as Indonesia's social and political capital in conducting defense diplomacy.

Apart from that, Indonesia was also able to assert regional leadership by initiating the birth of the Chairman's Statement of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting on the Situation in the Middle East as a manifestation of shared concern and concern regarding the humanitarian tragedy that occurred in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as one of the achievements of Indonesia's chairmanship in ADMM in 2023 (CNBC, 2024). This is very important because Indonesia still has constitutional responsibilities, as per the mandate of the Preamble to the 1945 Constitution. This initiation means that Indonesia is showing the consistency of its struggle, which is a sign that Indonesia always takes geopolitical challenges into account when formulating its defense policies, including with neighboring countries through holding the 43rd GBC Malindo Session (CNBC, 2024).

Subianto is also actively disseminating his ideas as a speaker in international forums. These forums include The 17th International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Manama Dialogue 2021, The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Riyadh Defense Forum 2022, and the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Shangri-La Dialogue 2023. (CNBC, 2024). This shows that Subianto indeed has international capabilities, illustrating his competence in carrying the Indonesian ark across the high seas among the world's great powers.

CONCLUSION

In the last five years, Subianto's breakthroughs in the defense sector have continued to attract public attention. The public suddenly became concerned about this issue even though previously, defense issues were less attractive to discuss, in contrast to issues related to the economy and welfare. The spotlight and high hopes of the Indonesian people for the figure of Prabowo Subianto are why the defense issue has become a massive public discourse. Every action he takes always receives support; on the other hand, it also receives criticism. This happened from the beginning when Subianto

served as Minister of Defense until the early days of his leadership in Medan Merdeka Utara. Subianto's overseas visits were incredibly intensive in carrying out defense diplomacy. Everything was done not without purpose but solely to achieve national interests. The progress of the Indonesian Ministry of Defense in the next five years under the leadership of Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin will undoubtedly be an extension of the policies carried out in the previous period. The Indonesian Ministry of Defense is on a sustainable policy track. Let us look closely at the common thread of the defense diplomacy that Subianto carried out from 2019 until at least the end of 2025. It shows a deep understanding of structural realism, which was Mearsheimer's idea. In the first five years, a strong foundation was built in Southeast Asia. 2025 is predicted to be the time for Indonesia to raise its level of international relations.

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