

Indonesia to Arm Up with Rafale, F-15 Fighter Jets

Jakarta backs away from previous plan to buy Russian Su-35 air defense fighters under threat of US sanctions

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Asia-Pacific Research, March 02, 2021

[Asia Times](#) 21 February 2021

Region: [South-East Asia](#)

Theme: [Defence](#)

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*After a series of pandemic-defying trips across the world, Indonesian **Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto** appears to have settled on the French-made Rafale and an under-strength squadron of American F-15EX jet fighters to bolster Indonesia’s front-line air defenses, with deliveries expected over the next three years.*

Along with the 36 Dassault Rafales and eight Boeing F-15s, the wish list also extends to three Lockheed Martin C-130J Super Hercules transport aircraft, three Airbus A330 tankers for aerial refuelling, six MQ-1 Predator drones and Italy’s Leonardo early-warning radar system.

It could be Jakarta’s biggest-ever defense purchase if it goes through in its current form, but serious questions remain over whether debt-burdened Indonesia can afford the estimated \$11 billion it will cost for the aircraft alone and the early availability of the F-15 variant, only two of which have been built so far.

Indonesia’s defense budget for 2021 stands at US\$9.2 billion, an increase over the 2020 allocation that started out at \$9.3 billion and dropped to \$8.7 billion because of fiscal pressure from the pandemic. The 2021 spending includes \$3 billion for military modernization.

Widodo’s first-term government had hoped to increase the defense budget to \$20 billion by 2019, or 1.5% of gross domestic product (GDP), but that was predicated on 7% growth, not the average 5% the country has achieved over the last five years as it struggled to attract foreign investment.

What the February 17 announcement does seem to have settled is that Indonesia has decided not to risk US sanctions with the \$1.1 billion deal to buy a further 11 Sukhoi Su-35 air defense fighters to go with the 16 twin-engine Su-27 and Su-30 Russian jets it already has.

Then-US president Donald Trump signed off on the Countering America’s Adversaries

Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in mid-2017, three years after the Barack Obama administration introduced the legislation to punish Russia for its invasion and annexation of Crimea from Ukraine.

If the deal is finalized, Indonesia will become the first East Asian country to operate the Rafale, a twin-engine, delta-winged multi-role aircraft introduced in 2001 and currently in service with the French air force and navy, Egypt, Qatar and, most recently, India.

India paid \$9.4 billion for its 36 aircraft, which began arriving last July amid tensions between India and China over the contested Ladakh region in the western Himalayas. New Delhi also wants to purchase 21 MiG-29s and 12 Su-30MKI fighters.

Washington has yet to respond to India's request for a waiver from CAATSA for the aircraft, but senior Pentagon officials have made it clear that sanctions would be applied if New Delhi goes ahead with a plan to buy Russia's self-propelled S-400 missile system in a deal worth \$5.5 billion.

The Rafales will add a third logistical tail to the Indonesian Air Force, which apart from its fleet of Sukhoi fighters also has three squadrons of refurbished Lockheed F-16s, recently deployed on patrols over the southern reaches of the South China Sea where Chinese Coast Guard vessels have conducted past intrusions.

Concerns have mounted since China passed legislation authorizing its Coast Guard to use weapons against foreign ships that are considered to be intruding into its waters, a move that could also be aimed at enforcing its unlawful maritime claims inside Indonesia's economic exclusion zone (EEZ) north of the Natuna islands.

Prabowo had previously shown interest in buying 15 second-hand Eurofighter Typhoon fighters offered by the Austrian Air Force, but despite the favorable price he has always said privately that he wants new-generation aircraft that will stand the test of time.



Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto takes aim in a file photo. Image: Facebook

The 4.5 generation Rafale always appeared to be on his radar, however, due in small part to his affinity for France. A French speaker, the retired special forces general spent his early years in Europe, where family members once came across him standing in front of the mirror pretending to be president Charles de Gaulle.

The history of the proposed sale appears to go back to 2017 when the two countries signed a letter of intent to increase defense cooperation, but it was Prabowo's two meetings with French Defence Minister Florence Parly, last October and in January, that appeared to lay the groundwork for the deal.

Armed with a range of air-to-air and air-ground missiles and advanced French-developed avionics, the 4.5 generation Rafale has a maximum speed of 2,200 kilometers an hour and a combat range of 1,850 kilometers. It can be used in air superiority, interdiction, ground attack or anti-ship roles.

Prabowo had initially hoped to also acquire Lockheed's stealthy F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, but was persuaded to accept the latest version of the F-15, which only now is entering service with the US Air Force to fill a gap left by cuts in the F-22 Raptor program.

Then US defence secretary Mark Esper reportedly told Prabowo on a visit to Washington last October that Indonesia would have to wait at least a decade for the delivery of the F-35s because of a long waiting list of buyers, including Japan, South Korea and Singapore as the only Asian customers.

While it is the first time the US has sold the F-15 in 20 years, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have continued to fund upgrades worth \$5 billion over the intervening years to a point where the EX variant is very different from its predecessors.

Military experts point to its more powerful twin engines, updated cockpit systems and sensors, data fusion capabilities and an ability to carry 29,500 pounds of ordnance over 2,200 kilometers as examples of the improvements to the purpose-built air superiority fighter.



The F-15EX in a file photo. Image: Facebook

They also note that the F-35 is far more expensive to operate and more problematic to repair compared with the F-15EX, which has a reputed 20,000-hour lifespan and, according to some sources, may cost half as much as the F-35 to operate.

That would present a major challenge to Indonesia. It already has difficulties maintaining the army's eight sophisticated AH-64 Apache attack helicopters, which have been barely visible since they were delivered nearly three years ago.

Claims by Indonesian officials that six of the new F-15s will be ready for delivery in 2022 appear to be overly ambitious when the US Air Force and Air National Guard will get priority in replacing up to 144 aging F-15C/Ds that are reaching the end of their service years.

Each jet has a fly away price of \$87.7 million, but the avionics and weapons systems are expected to add as much as \$40 million to its overall cost. The experts also note that some of America's cutting-edge technology is banned for export to countries like Indonesia.

The acquisition of the mobile Leonardo interdiction radar system will help to bolster Indonesia's air defenses and, if positioned at a high elevation on frontier islands like Natuna Besar and Sebatik, could conceivably cover more than 500 kilometers of both air and sea, far beyond its EEZ.

Known as unmanned aerial combat vehicles (UACVs), the Predators are a surprise addition to the shopping list, but Indonesia has been operating unarmed Chinese, Israeli and French-made surveillance drones for three years.

Indonesia's Agency for the Assessment and Application of Technology is also developing the country's first armed Black Eagle drone, which will carry a home-built 2.75 folding fin aerial rocket already used by attack helicopters and jet fighters.

Deployed extensively across Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Middle East, the Predator's precision-guided Hellfire missiles have killed thousands of Al Qaeda and Islamic State militants since they were introduced in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

The US Air Force replaced it with the heavier, more capable MQ-9 Reaper in 2018, but it remains in service with the Italian, Turkish and Moroccan air forces and would probably be based at Pontianak, West Kalimantan, the main drone base on the edge of the South China Sea.

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Featured image: Indonesia is set to take delivery of the France-made Rafale fighter. Credit: AINonline.

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