



16 MAY, 2025

Victory lap over, diplomacy rules

Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney

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Behind the smiles, Anthony Albanese's trade visit to Jakarta comes as Indonesia courts closer ties with Moscow. **NEWS PAGE 8**



Photo: Alex Ellinghausen



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Indonesian trade pledge tinged by Russian shadow

JAKARTA

ZACH
HOPE

SOUTH-EAST
ASIA CORRESPONDENT



Prime Minister Anthony Albanese will back Indonesia’s inclusion in a free trade deal that includes countries such as the United Kingdom, Japan and Canada, in what would be a boost to the nation’s economy and further strengthen its ties to Australia.

In his first foreign visit since his May 3 election win, Albanese declared in Jakarta that he would support Indonesia’s bid to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, as well as the OECD.

“This is the fastest-growing region of the world in human history and Indonesia is central to that growth,” he said, before Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto, a former special forces commander with a murky human rights record, personally drove him to a banquet on a golf buggy.

Earlier, Albanese railed against Russia during a news conference before meeting with Prabowo, who

visited Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin last year as president-elect.

Their meeting comes weeks after respected military website *Janes* reported that Russia had lodged a formal request to base warplanes in Indonesia’s easternmost province, Papua, just 1400 kilometres from the Australian mainland – a report Indonesia’s Defence Minister Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin later denied.

“Russia, of course, will try to increase its influence,” Albanese said, while dodging questions about what Moscow had or had not asked of Prabowo.

“We make very clear our position when it comes to Russia around the world – be it the brutal invasion of Ukraine, its interference in cybersecurity issues as well, its tolerance of criminal organisations that have been involved in that – are anathema to our values.”

Bound by geography

Albanese and Prabowo are both at the beginning of what is likely to be a years-long co-existence inside an already changed world and region, and geography and circumstance can be a powerful binder.

But while these vastly different men have some common interests and concerns – an unpredictable United States being just one – they diverge on others, including Indonesia’s ties with Russia.

Prabowo likes the proverb, “one thousand friends are too few, a single enemy is too many” – a clear expression of his country’s long tradition of not picking sides – and since his inauguration in October last year, Prabowo has taken this seriously, at least publicly.

His Kremlin visit last year came as Russia continued its invasion of Ukraine, and while he has also visited Australia and dozens of other



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countries, the newly elected leader of the world's third-largest democracy cosying up to a warmongering dictator was uncomfortable viewing for many in the West.

Russia and Indonesia held their first bilateral military drills soon after Prabowo formally assumed the presidency. Then, in February, he welcomed Putin's top security official, Sergei Shoigu, to Jakarta, just as he did Albanese this week.

This is the context behind the not-inconsiderable alarm in Australia when *Janes* reported that Russia had requested an airbase in Papua. Indonesia's selective denial of that report does not mean Moscow has not asked – it would dearly love a foothold in South-East Asia.

Speculation also remains – even if erroneous – that the Russians may have walked away from meetings with Prabowo or other offi-

cials feeling good about the prospects of future co-operation on this rather aggressive level.

Moscow's ambassador to Indonesia, Sergei Tolchenov, did not deny the discussions had taken place when he wrote an article in *The Jakarta Post* last month, in which he told Australian politicians and academics that it was none of their business what Russia and Indonesia did together.

Australia, which makes the Americans comfortable in the Northern Territory, should look in the mirror, he said.

The reality is that Indonesia's doctrine of non-alignment prevents Russia from plonking planes in Papua or elsewhere. This prescient point was probably discussed in the Prabowo-Albanese meeting at Merdeka Palace yesterday, alongside matters of trade, counterterrorism, people-smuggling

and a range of others in which the two nations are seeking closer co-operation.

"I think the main point [of the visit] is starting to build a personal relationship," Australian National University associate professor Marcus Mietzner said.

"While both Prabowo and Albanese acted during the congratulatory phone call by the Indonesian president, which was put on social media, as if the two were best friends, the reality is that they are only acquainted.

"For Albanese, it will be crucial to get Prabowo interested in Australia. Early indications are that Prabowo needs impulses to look at Australia as anything more than just a geographical neighbour."

The prime minister will fly out today for Rome, where he will attend the inauguration of Pope Leo XIV.

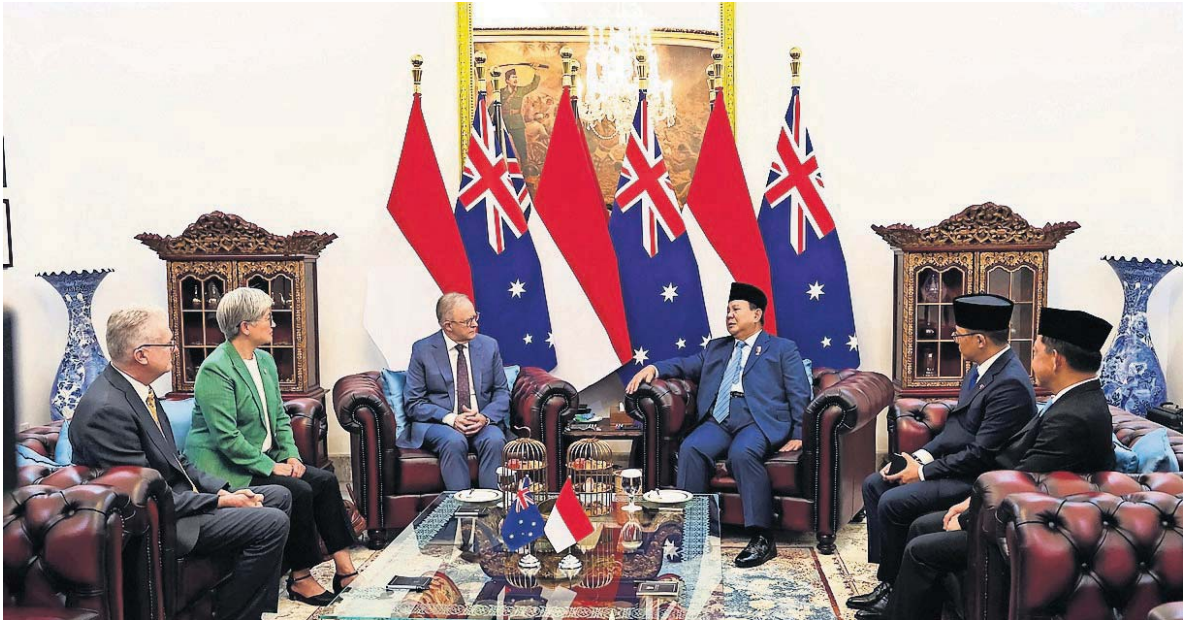




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Anthony Albanese arrives in Jakarta and swaps football shirts with Prabowo Subianto as children wave flags. Photos: Alex Ellinghausen



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