

## How Prabowo is rewriting Indonesia's diplomatic playbook



*Credit: Facebook.com/PrabowoSubianto*

**With 26 overseas visits in nine months, the president is betting big on face-to-face diplomacy. His approach has won visibility, but critics warn of unintended regional consequences.**

Under President Prabowo Subianto, Indonesian diplomacy has taken a distinctive turn. Rather than relying solely on his foreign ministry, Prabowo has been personally performing diplomatic roles on the international stage. In the nine months since his inauguration on October 21, 2024, he has visited 26 countries for bilateral and multilateral meetings.

This practice of diplomacy at the highest level is known as summit diplomacy. It involves heads of state or government engaging directly with their counterparts to negotiate, build trust or assert national interests.

[Summit diplomacy](#) is not new or uncommon in international relations. Many political leaders have, from time to time, taken direct control over aspects of foreign policy. Historically, summit diplomacy reflected

the urgency or gravity of the issues at hand—topics such as war and peace, nuclear disarmament or the founding of new global institutions. These were seen as matters too consequential to be delegated entirely to professional diplomats.

Examples include the meetings between British Prime Minister [Neville Chamberlain and German Chancellor Adolf Hitler](#) before World War II, the [wartime conferences](#) between Winston Churchill representing the UK, F.D.Roosevelt representing the USA, and Josef Stalin representing USSR in 1945, US President John F. [Kennedy's 1961 summit with USSR's Nikita Khrushchev](#), and President [Ronald Reagan's meeting with President Mikhail Gorbachev](#) in 1985.

In more recent decades, however, summit diplomacy has broadened in scope. It is no longer confined to issues of high politics. Instead, it is increasingly used to advance economic, technological and regional agendas. Prabowo's approach fits within this trend, though his intensity and frequency of engagement mark a significant shift in Indonesia's diplomatic posture.

His preference for summit diplomacy may also reflect a key pledge, made during his presidential campaign, to [raise Indonesia's global stature](#) and expand its influence. Summit diplomacy supports this goal not only by enhancing visibility but also by signalling Indonesia's readiness to take on a more active role in global affairs.

A president's personal involvement often attracts media attention and international recognition. More importantly, direct dialogue can build stronger bilateral ties and demonstrate Indonesia's commitment to multilateral frameworks.

## Mixed results

Prabowo, who was earlier Defence Minister, began his engagement with foreign affairs even before his inauguration as president by visiting 15 countries. At the 2023 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, he sparked [controversy with his proposal](#) to end the war between Russia and Ukraine. Prabowo floated the idea of a [demilitarized zone between Russia and Ukraine](#) and a United Nations referendum in what he called disputed territory without consulting or informing his colleagues at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the president.

His [summit diplomacy](#) as president has drawn praise from some quarters. His state visits to Saudi Arabia, Brazil and various European countries have been described as highly productive. Indonesia's recent accession to the BRICS grouping of countries and his attendance at the 2025 BRICS Summit in Rio de Janeiro signalled Indonesia's deeper alignment with emerging global powers.

A tangible outcome of Prabowo's summit diplomacy was the political agreement with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, which advanced the stalled [Indonesia-European Union Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement](#). The agreement has since moved into its final negotiation stage. Similarly, Prabowo's direct phone diplomacy with US President Donald Trump led to a breakthrough trade deal: the reduction of US import tariffs on Indonesian goods from [32 percent to 19 percent](#). As a result, Indonesia now enjoys the [lowest tariff](#) rate of any Southeast Asian country trading with the United States.

But summit diplomacy is not without its detractors. While it can help build partnerships or resolve crises, there are also instances where it has produced limited or even counterproductive outcomes.

One such example is the 2018 meeting between [Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un](#) in Singapore. Hailed initially as a diplomatic breakthrough, the summit ended without a formal agreement and failed to halt North Korea's weapons programme. Within months, tensions between the two countries had returned.

The appeal of summit diplomacy lies in personal contact. When leaders meet face to face, they can cut through bureaucratic inertia and establish rapport that formal channels may struggle to achieve. However, the highly personalised nature of summit diplomacy also brings risk. Diplomacy conducted without sufficient institutional backing or consultation can lead to missteps.

In Prabowo's case, his [meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping](#) in November 2024 has generated controversy. The joint development agreement signed between the two leaders in disputed maritime areas was criticised for overlooking the sensitivities of Indonesia's ASEAN neighbours. Analysts warned that the move could [heighten tensions](#) in the already volatile South China Sea.

Prabowo was also seen as making another blunder with his plan to evacuate 1,000 Palestinians from Gaza. To support his plan, [Prabowo travelled to the five key countries on the Palestinian issue](#): the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkey, Egypt, Qatar, and Jordan. However, the plan did not resonate positively at home. At the same time, the major Arab countries have made it very clear that they [reject any relocation plans for Palestinians](#) out of their territories in Gaza and the occupied West Bank.

## Role of institutions

These two policies illustrate a broader concern: summit diplomacy, while useful for signalling intent and building momentum, often lacks the institutional depth needed for durable policy outcomes. Many high-profile summits conclude with joint declarations but no clear mechanisms for follow-up implementation.

To be effective, summit diplomacy needs to be integrated into a broader institutional framework. Institutionalisation helps ensure that agreements are not only negotiated but also monitored, executed and evaluated. This is especially true in multilateral settings, where complex coordination is required.

Indonesia's hosting of the G20 Summit in 2022 offers a model of institutionalised summit diplomacy. Despite deep global divisions at the time over the war in Ukraine, rising inflation and economic instability, the G20 produced a joint communiqué. Much of the credit went to the preparatory [work done by sherpas](#), the senior government officials who engaged in months of negotiations to craft language acceptable to all sides. Without this groundwork, the summit might have ended in deadlock.

As Indonesia under Prabowo pursues a more assertive foreign policy, summit diplomacy will likely remain a key instrument. However, to avoid the pitfalls of over-personalisation, it must be supported by sustained institutional engagement, regional coordination and clear implementation strategies.

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