



## Indonesia's Foreign Minister: The Tried and Tested Retno LP Marsudi

By

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### Synopsis/Abstract

On Wednesday 23 October 2019 – just a few days after Joko “Jokowi” Widodo was inaugurated for a second term as President – Indonesia’s new cabinet was announced. Whilst there were a number of new faces, as well as the surprise inclusion of long-time rival Prabowo Subianto in the Cabinet, the Foreign Minister position was retained by the tried and tested Retno Marsudi. However, it should be noted that her retention was far from guaranteed, and there had been speculation that others were waiting in the wing for the call to Merdeka Palace. Why was Retno Marsudi retained? Who were the other contenders? And what does it mean for Indonesia’s foreign policy for 2019-2024?

### Ibu Menlu

When Retno Marsudi was first appointed as Foreign Minister during President Jokowi’s first term, she made history by becoming the first woman to hold the position. In the past few years, Retno Marsudi notched up a number of foreign policy achievements, often in spite of a President seemingly disinterested with international relations. These included securing a non-permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council for 2019-2020 as well as most recently a seat on the U.N. Human Rights Council for 2020-2022. In both cases, Indonesia had to contest for its seat, securing overwhelming backing from fellow U.N. members after intense lobbying from Retno Marsudi and her team. The fact that these were achieved despite President Jokowi never attending a U.N. General Assembly in New York speaks volumes of Retno Marsudi’s efforts.



Indonesia's first female Foreign Minister can also take pride with the successful adoption of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. The initiative was remarkably adopted in less than two years, flying in the face of ASEAN's traditional slow pace, and can be credited to the relentless endeavours of Retno Marsudi who was even dubbed 'Miss Indo-Pacific' by her Southeast Asian counterparts.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, Retno Marsudi is a capable and familiar figure on the world stage that can be trusted by the President to advance Indonesia's interest. This was apparent when she accompanied Vice-President Ma'ruf Amin on his first overseas trip to Japan for the enthronement of Emperor Naruhito, despite technically no longer holding the position of Foreign Minister after the first Working Cabinet was dissolved on Friday 18 October 2019. As Bey Machmudin, Head of the Presidential Protocol and Press Bureau, explained on Tuesday 22 October 2019, Retno Marsudi was one of seven individuals tasked to continue assisting the Government during the vacuum period before the new Cabinet announcement.<sup>2</sup>

Retno Marsudi's retention can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it may be seen that President Jokowi wanted to signal a sense of continuity and stability in Indonesia's foreign policy. It may also be seen as further evidence that President Jokowi will remain focused on domestic issues leaving foreign policy issues largely to the Foreign Ministry. Given Retno Marsudi's capabilities, this may not be a bad thing.

## The Rest of the Pack

Despite the above, a number of names had been touted to take up the role of Indonesia's Foreign Minister. One such name was Mahendra Siregar who had been strongly tipped as Indonesia's next chief diplomat. Currently serving as Indonesian ambassador in Washington D.C., his presence in Jakarta last week for the 34th Trade Expo Indonesia only added to the rumours. Given President Jokowi's renewed focus on the economy and infrastructure – including suggestion he wanted to merge the Foreign Ministry and Trade Ministry – Mahendra Siregar's background made him a strong contender to advance the President's agenda.

These included serving in the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono Administration as Chairman of Indonesia's Investment Coordinating Board (BKPM) (October 2013 – November 2014), Vice Minister of Finance (October 2011 – October 2013) and Vice Minister of Trade (January 2010 – October 2011).<sup>3</sup> In addition he holds a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Economics from Universitas Indonesia and Monash University respectively.<sup>4</sup> However, having only just started his Washington D.C. posting in January 2019, it would have been surprising to be suddenly recalled to Indonesia. Another name that had been in the mix was Dino Patti Djalal. As a former Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs, he certainly has the credentials.





Moreover, as the former palace spokesperson in the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) administration, his appointment would have brought favours with Partai Demokrat which has recently been strongly rumoured to be interested in joining the ruling coalition. However, it soon became apparent that Partai Demokrat would not be joining the ruling coalition.

Rizal Sukma, current Indonesian ambassador in London and formerly President Jokowi's foreign policy advisor was also seen as a contender. Indeed, his posting was seen as an effort to prepare him for a ministerial job. Given the former scholar's intellect and access to the President he may well find himself being recalled to Jakarta for an important role in the Government sometime soon at the end of his posting.

## **What It Means?**

The re-appointment of Retno Marsudi's is a clear signal that President Jokowi wishes to project a sense of continuity and stability in Jakarta's foreign policy and that he trusts Indonesia's first Foreign Minister to carry on with the job. Whilst it may also signal that the President will remain focused on domestic issues leaving foreign policy issues largely to the Foreign Ministry, there will likely be some shift in priorities.

Chief among them is enhancing Indonesia's economic diplomacy which is now of paramount importance for the President. Indonesia's economic growth is predicted to slow to 5.0 percent this year, down from the 5.2 percent forecasted by the World Bank earlier in April 2019.<sup>5</sup> Concern has been raised at how Indonesia has not benefitted from the US-China trade war, losing out to Vietnam which has made more concerted effort to take advantage of the economic dispute between the world's two largest economies.<sup>6</sup> It is likely that in future, Jakarta's foreign policy may be focused on engaging with countries that can help boost its economy. Securing free trade agreements and foreign direct investment (FDI) for major infrastructure project may well be high on the agenda and this may see Indonesia continuing to draw closer to countries such as China at the expense of the United States.

Indonesia's relationship with ASEAN may also see similar emphasis on ensuring the regional organization brings about meaningful economic benefits. This may transpire in Jakarta pushing a greater economic agenda for the regional organization, including the early conclusion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).





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**No. 02 / 23 October 2019**  
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Lastly, a question mark surrounds who will be the face of Indonesia in international gatherings. Previously, President Jokowi often delegated this role to his former Vice President Jusuf Kalla. However, his successor Ma'ruf Amin is an inexperienced and unknown entity in international diplomacy. The recent Presidential Regulation (Perpres Nomor 63 Tahun 2019) restricting government officials (including the President) to using Bahasa Indonesia in any official speeches both for a domestic and international audience may well be setting President Jokowi up to be more active on the world stage. Alternatively, he may entrust the task to the proven Retno Marsudi.

## **Analysis/The Verdict**

After much speculation, it is now known that Retno Marsudi will continue in her role as Indonesia's Foreign Minister. Whilst she will continue to advance Indonesia's interest on the international stage and make up for the President's seemingly lack of foreign policy interest, Jakarta's foreign policy will likely be defined by a greater emphasis on economic diplomacy. Although Retno Marsudi's background may not be in this area, her past achievements suggest she can be relied upon to get things done.





## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Bayuni, E.M. (2019, July 12). 'ASEAN unites in claiming centrality in Indo-Pacific region.' *The Jakarta Post*. Retrieved from: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2019/07/12/asean-unites-in-claiming-centrality-in-indo-pacific-region.html>

<sup>2</sup> Sekretariat Presiden (2019, October 22). 'Keterangan Pers Deputi Bidang Protokol, Pers dan Media Setpres, Jakarta, 22 Oktober 2019.' Youtube Video. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wd9kJgY5Y24>

<sup>3</sup> Gunandha, R. and Wijana, E.P.E. (2019, October 19). 'Dubes Mahendra Siregar Diprediksi Gantikan Menlu Retno? Ini Profilnya.' *Suara.com*. Retrieved from: <https://www.suara.com/news/2019/10/19/135546/dubes-mahendra-siregar-diprediksi-gantikan-menlu-retno-ini-profilnya>

<sup>4</sup> Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia – Washington D.C. (Undated). 'The Ambassador.' Retrieved from: <https://www.embassyofindonesia.org/index.php/the-ambassador/>

<sup>5</sup> Gorbiano, M.I. (2019, October 11). 'World Bank downgrades Indonesia growth outlook, calls for reforms on grim global economy.' *The Jakarta Post*. Retrieved from: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/10/11/world-bank-downgrades-ri-growth-outlook-calls-for-reforms-on-grim-global-economy.html>

<sup>6</sup> Aisyah, R. (2019, August 15). 'Jokowi faces herculean task of boosting export as trade war escalates.' *The Jakarta Post*. Retrieved from: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/08/15/jokowi-faces-herculean-task-of-boosting-export-as-trade-war-escalates.html>





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