

Ending the era of defensiveness between Indonesia and Australian forces

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Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison walks with Indonesian President Joko Widodo during the welcoming ceremony at the presidential palace in Indonesia in August. *AP*

by Evan A. Laksmana

Many heralded the Indonesia and Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), signed during Prime Minister Scott Morrison's visit to Jakarta in late August, as the dawn of a new era.

But a single document does not erase decades' worth of volatile bilateral history. Perhaps no other aspect of the relationship has been historically more volatile than that between the Indonesian defence forces (TNI) and the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

Over the years, the defence relationship between has either sparked wider bilateral crises or has fallen victim to broader political controversies.

After the improvement in defence ties following the 2006 Lombok Treaty, Jakarta suspended defence relations in 2013 following revelations that Australia's intelligence apparatus had intercepted communications among members of president Yudhoyono's inner circle.

Such disruption came even after a defence co-operation arrangement was signed in 2012. The relationship was only restored in 2014 after both signed an intelligence code of conduct.

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By December 2016 there was another disruption. TNI commander Gatot Nurmantyo suspended discussions for future language-training activities after a TNI officer complained about some teaching materials at the Campbell Barracks in Perth. Co-operation was restored when President Jokowi visited Australia in February 2017.

Australian strategic analyst Hugh White calls this pattern in TNI-ADF relations a "sawtooth", short periods of rapid development followed by sharp and painful reversals.

How the CSP could elevate the bilateral ties into an Indo-Pacific strategic partnership depends on the ability of Jakarta and Canberra to gradually break this pattern. The TNI and ADF needs to recalibrate defence co-operation to ensure sustainability and stability.

Aim for specific outcomes

First, both sides need to halt the over-politicisation of defence relations that subordinates defence-specific goals to political ones.

For too long, the defence relationship has not been developed and institutionalised as a collaborative process to manage shared security challenges. It is instead driven by broader bilateral interests.

Of course, security relations serve broader political goals, but the subordination of defence engagements to bilateral interests has pushed TNI-ADF relations to the point where the defence character has faded.

Defence co-operation should be developed with defence-related outcomes in mind. If it is not designed to achieve defence-specific outcomes, then placing TNI-ADF relations as a benchmark of bilateral relations is problematic.

We cannot politicise defence co-operation and then criticise the relationship as insufficiently strong to withstand the political currents of the day.

Existing defence co-operation activities, from education and training to exercises and defence industrial collaboration, should be crafted based on the potential ability of the TNI and ADF to operate together to address common regional security challenges.

Second, if both the TNI and ADF could agree to reformulate a long-term defence engagement, the maritime domain provides a good starting point.

Both Indonesia and Australia share many common strategic interests in the maritime domain: maintaining good order at sea; preventing piracy, people smuggling and illegal fishing; protecting the marine environment; and managing regional instability, territorial disputes, and threats to the security of sea lines of communication.

Joint maritime challenges

Indonesian President Joko Widodo's Global Maritime Fulcrum doctrine and National Sea Policy provide an additional political momentum that Australia could certainly support.

Both sides could jointly list common maritime security challenges and set joint activities to address them. The list could build on the Maritime Co-operation Action Plan signed in March this year.

Canberra could further recalibrate existing defence education and training activities to focus on joint maritime challenges, including expanding the number of maritime-specific courses.

Of the top 10 education and training courses that Australia provided to TNI officers, none were exclusively maritime-related. Between 1999 and 2016, there were only 82 TNI personnel (about 5 per cent) who undertook seven maritime-related courses.

Meanwhile, most of the 55 TNI-ADF exercises since 2007 have been oriented towards the Army (especially the special forces), rather than Navy or Air Force. Indeed, there is a steep decline in maritime-related TNI-ADF exercises in the past decade compared to the previous three decades.

Once these maritime deficits are addressed, Canberra might want to formulate long-term plans to assist the "conventional" modernisation of the TNI with a focus on tri-service integration and maritime security while considering possible mutual defence-industrial base development.

After all Australia has expressed support towards the TNI's modernisation in the [2016 Defence White Paper](#). Such support signals Australia's willingness to help the TNI's long-term capability development and reducing trust deficit.

The CSP provides an Indo-Pacific vision that builds on stronger bilateral ties. But for the document to be sustainable, Jakarta and Canberra should craft more specific, maritime-based long-term defence engagement policies and activities.

The new strategic partnership does not automatically erase the past, even if it provides a signpost to the future.

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