

Indonesia-Australia relations and the perils of success

Indonesia-Australia relations seem to have hit another snag this year. In early January, *Kompas* daily reported that the Indonesian military (TNI) was suspending all military cooperation with the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

As the news was confirmed by the TNI spokesman, the suspension made numerous domestic and international headlines. With the 24-hour news cycle, and the fact that Indonesia-Australia defense relations tend to be controversial, speculations ran wild and included some unnecessary ad-hominem attacks on the TNI commander.

It was only after the Coordinating Political, Legal, and Security Affairs Minister clarified that the “temporary suspension” only covered language training activities — rather than defense-wide cooperation — that the dust began to settle.

At a deeper level, the incident underscores the perils of success in Indonesia-Australia defense relations, which stems in particular from an overemphasis on (and occasional “public sanitizing” of) the TNI-ADF relationship.

Given the geopolitical history between the two neighbors, Ja-

karta and Canberra understandably believe that the relationship between their respective militaries is vital to the broader bilateral relationship. The 1999 East Timor debacle and the centrality of the 2006 Lombok Treaty in restoring bilateral relations only served to reinforce this perception.

Indeed, since then, TNI-ADF relations have quietly flourished. Thousands of TNI officers have gone through numerous Australian schools and training programs over the past decade, while exercises and other cooperative activities grew. The presence of an alumni association for graduates of both Indonesian and Australian military education and training programs, IKAHAN, seemingly solidified the defense relations.

These successes, however, may have had unintended consequences.

First, they have created, perhaps unconsciously, the impression that defense relations had matured by 2016. This may have led to complacency in some instances; such as not carefully and transparently managing every detail of the various education or training environments.

In other instances, it could lead to “tunnel vision” during crisis.

INSIGHT



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We can see this in one of the narratives sprung from the latest incident: rogue generals with political ambitions and anti-Australian sentiments are to blame. After all, the argument goes, defense relations have been so successful in restoring military trust that the suspension could not have possibly reflected deeper insecurities within the TNI over separatism or its own history.

Needless to say, such narratives were inaccurate and counterproductive. But perhaps more importantly, they also sidetracked potential opportunities to better review existing defense cooperation programs.

Second, the over-emphasis on and extra care of the TNI-ADF relationship may have inadvertent-

ly hindered the broader integration of defense cooperation into the wider bilateral relationship.

Paradoxically, military-to-military relations have been consequently more susceptible to the waxing and waning of the domestic politics in Jakarta and Canberra. One government source told me that during the 2013 wiretapping crisis, some considered defense cooperation more expendable (i.e. able to be temporarily suspended) because there were no “real and practical” ramifications in other areas of the bilateral relationship.

As such, we might want to stop seeing TNI-ADF relations as inherently unique and therefore needing “special status” or “protection”. Instead, moving forward, we could consider ways to expand and deepen the integration of defense cooperation within the broader bilateral relationship, rather than relying on the former to strengthen the latter.

We can do so by deliberately integrating multiple non-military stakeholders — from the police, Foreign Ministry, to scholars and industry players — into pre-existing defense cooperation activities or create new ones to accommodate them. This could integrate

the TNI further within the strategic community and create additional stabilizing layers into the bilateral relationship.

We can consider, for example, renewing engagement and institutionalizing partnerships between the civilian defense and strategic communities from both countries that could act as counterparts and counterweights to — and perhaps even communication channels between — the TNI and ADF.

In counterterrorism and maritime security, we could expand joint exercises and training specifically designed for multiple agencies to work together simultaneously. To counter illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, for example, we need the Navy, coast guard and the Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Ministry, among other institutions. Similarly with counter-terrorism, there are numerous activities that should involve elements of the army, police and intelligence community, as well as civilian agencies such as customs or prison authorities.

Developing and expanding various bilateral joint multi-agency activities — from education to exercises — involving both military and

non-military elements might also help alleviate some of the bureaucratic infighting and stove-piping prevalent on some of those issues.

Additional cooperation between the legislative and judicial branches of both countries over military policies — such as defense planning and budgeting, or the military justice system — could provide an additional layer too. After all, defense establishments tend to be wider than military organizations alone.

We can also perhaps consider possible joint defense industrial projects — whether bilaterally or regionally with other ASEAN members — to strengthen the business side of defense relations. This might, in the long run, help us jumpstart the relatively sluggish economic relations between the two countries.

Strengthening defense relations by focusing on non-defense policies may seem paradoxical but if done properly it might stabilize both TNI-ADF cooperation as well as the Indonesia-Australia relationship.

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