

Is Indonesia 'militarizing' the South China Sea?

Following yet another incident with Chinese fishing vessels several weeks ago around the Natuna Islands' exclusive economic zone — the third time this year — President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo and his ministers personally visited the area.

As he led a meeting on board a warship, the Defense Ministry was reportedly preparing to upgrade the Natunas' military facilities. In a subsequent Cabinet meeting in Jakarta, Jokowi announced that defense capability improvements in the area was his third priority (after boosting the development of marine and hydrocarbon resources).

Lawmakers also signed a 10 percent surge to this year's revised defense budget (topping it up to US\$8.25 billion). Some of the extra funds will be used to obtain a new military communications satellite and provide major upgrades to the military facilities in the Natunas. The defense minister also claimed that advanced jet fighters would be deployed to the area.

Some regional observers find these military responses disconcert-

ing, especially in light of our Navy's forceful arrests of Chinese fishing vessels.

Is Indonesia contributing to the "militarization" of the South China Sea?

The irony in the question notwithstanding (many have recently called on Jakarta to step up measures in the South China Sea), such speculation is disingenuous, as Indonesia is merely strengthening the defense infrastructure on one of its own islands.

After all, analysts use the term militarization in the South China Sea to refer to those who illegally occupy contested reefs or islands and proceed to develop military facilities there — under whatever "emergency" or "humanitarian" cloak. It also refers to the use of military assets to make a political point (example: gunboat diplomacy), including pushing back behavior seemingly undermining international law, while escalating tension and flirting with brinkmanship.

Indonesia's military preparations in the Natunas do not fall within either of these interpretations. If anything, Jakarta seeks to deescalate

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the tension in the South China Sea to allow the ASEAN-China Code of Conduct (CoC) negotiations to fruitfully proceed.

More important, however, is the announced military capability and defense behavior.

For one thing, plans to militarily develop the Natunas have been around since president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's tenure (2004-2014). The military then prioritized the outermost islands under its "flashpoint-based defense" strategic framework highlighting potential conflict zones near or around our border areas (as mandated by

the 2004 Indonesian Military [TNI] Law and described in several Defense Ministry documents).

Indeed, plans for troop deployments, military hardware upgrades and base development in the Natunas (one of the 12 outer islands deemed as potentially conflictual) had already been on the books since 2008. As these plans further fell under the TNI's Minimum Essential Force concept meant for organizational overhaul, and not aimed at a single enemy, Indonesia cannot be said to be engaging in a classic tit-for-tat arms race with China.

One should not forget that when it comes to illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing within Indonesia's waters, China is not the only or even the biggest culprit — Vietnam and Thailand have been on top of the list as well for over a decade. Indeed, the Natunas have been considered one of the most vulnerable areas for IUU fishing since the mid-2000s, as the Navy's regular Western Fleet exercises under Yudhoyono's last term could attest.

Seen within this broader institutional context, therefore, it is dif-

ficult to sustain the argument that Indonesia is either militarizing the South China Sea or that it is directly responding militarily to Chinese behavior in its waters.

Furthermore, as IUU fishing has taken on a more strategic flavor recently, Indonesia's plans to militarily develop the Natunas are also in line with the country's commitment to maintain peaceful freedom of navigation within its archipelagic sea lanes, as mandated under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and our own domestic laws.

After all, the Natunas are part of Indonesia's archipelagic sea lanes 1 (ALKI 1) intended to facilitate navigation from the Indian Ocean through the Sunda Strait to the Natuna and South China seas.

Finally, the Natunas' military development plans — when situated within Jokowi's visit to the islands — are also shaped by domestic political contexts. The announced plans provided the President political breathing space to maintain a strong, albeit symbolic, stance against perceived Chinese encroachments without disrupting bilateral relations.

Without explicitly referring to recent Chinese claims that both countries have "overlapping maritime rights", President Jokowi's visit and the announced military plans can be optimistically construed as Jakarta slowly rethinking its "non-claimant" position without actually saying so.

Put differently, the military development plans are part of a broader effort to walk a tightrope of keeping close economic and business ties between Jakarta's political elite and Beijing while simultaneously demonstrating Indonesia's sovereign rights over Natuna waters in the face of Chinese tenuous maritime claims.

While it is understandable that analysts jump the gun when Jakarta makes even the tiniest movement in the South China Sea, the military plans in the Natunas should be seen through these institutional, strategic and domestic political lenses. Lest we forget that military plans and actions never arise in a vacuum.

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