

Should Indonesia and Australia jointly patrol the South China Sea?

In an interview with *The Australian* shortly before his visit to Sydney on Feb. 26 and 27, President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo reportedly opened the door for Indonesia and Australia to jointly patrol the South China Sea.

This notion, however, never made its way to the joint statement or the Joint Declaration on Maritime Cooperation issued at the end of the visit. Subsequently, on the sidelines of the Indian Ocean Rim Association Summit in Jakarta last week, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull downplayed the idea further.

Similarly, Indonesian officials never confirmed specific plans for a joint patrol as such. Instead, they reiterated the shared strategic interest with Australia and the cooperative opportunities in the broader maritime domain.

This rise and fall of the “South China Sea joint patrol” narrative is reminiscent of the aftermath of the Indonesia-Australia Foreign and Defense Ministers 2+2 Dialogue in Bali last October.

Then, Indonesian Defense Minister Ryamizard Ryacudu told a

post-meeting press conference that he had discussed a joint “peace patrol” in the South China Sea with his Australian counterpart. The Indonesian Foreign Ministry was mum, however, and Ryamizard backtracked within a few days.

These rollercoaster developments suggest several cautionary notes.

First is on terminology. While press reports throw around “joint patrols” to describe activities done together at sea to “guard” the waters, regional states employ distinct terms.

There’s a difference between “joint” and “coordinated” patrols. While in some instances a joint (or combined) operation refers to a navy-air force-army activity, it often denotes the integrated pooling and deployment of assets from different countries for an agreed-upon mission.

The “Eyes-in-the-Sky” operation in the Malacca Strait, for example, uses maritime patrol aircraft from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand to form a patrol mission team. Or more broadly, consider the UN Security Council-mandated multination-

INSIGHT



Evan A. Laksmana

SEATTLE,
WASHINGTON

al forces patrolling the pirate-infested waters off the coast of Somalia and the Horn of Africa.

While joint patrols under such task forces are more mission-oriented, “coordinated” patrols (CORPAT) are limited to each country focusing on its own waters. Put simply, you patrol your waters while I patrol mine, but we coordinate the specific time and area.

For example, the Malacca Strait Sea Patrol — the original model for the recently launched Sulu Sea trilateral patrols — allows participating navies to conduct coordinated sea patrols while facilitating information sharing between ships and their operational centers. A similar log-

ic applies to the existing Australia-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol launched in 2010 covering the shared maritime boundaries to the south of West Timor.

So, while we can debate the different interpretations held, locating the patrolling terminology within its proper policy context is not mere semantics; it has legal, strategic and operational implications. We should keep this in mind when assessing reports claiming that Indonesia “proposed” (or “backed down from”) joint patrols in the South China Sea.

The second point is on strategic logic. If we can consider the “South China Sea joint patrol” narrative as the product of media hype and Jakarta’s haphazard political communications, we should be cautious in examining the merits of the idea itself.

It goes without saying that Indonesia and Australia share a common interest in ensuring peace and stability in the South China Sea, but it does not follow that the only way to advance this interest is through a joint patrol, especially if it is pitched as a Freedom of Navigation Operation against China’s now-ille-

gal “nine-dash line” claims.

As Indonesian and Australian leaders recently acknowledged, there is no need to unnecessarily escalate the tension in the area. Therefore, the commitment to the ASEAN-China Code of Conduct process as stated in the Joint Declaration on Maritime Cooperation is a step in the right direction; although alternative strategies to push it forward are sorely needed.

Bottom line, the South China Sea alone does not and should not define the strategic relationship between Indonesia and Australia.

For one thing, the South China Sea could turn into ugly domestic and regional quicksand for Indonesia and Australia as two non-claimants, especially if the United States-Chinese strategic dynamic remains the driving force. For another, there is already plenty of work to do on the maritime domain between the two countries as the maritime Joint Declaration highlights.

Finally, on operational reality. Assuming we can ignore the above concerns — which would be foolish — the “South China Sea joint patrol” narrative does not make operational sense.

If it is a joint patrol, are we expecting an Indonesian-Australian taskforce to run counterpiracy operations around the Natunas? If it’s a coordinated patrol, where would the specific waters be? Australia does not border the Natunas, while Indonesia’s EEZ in the area has been declared but is still being negotiated with neighboring countries.

Indonesia has always been particular about agreeing to coordinated, rather than joint, patrolling mechanisms, for historic, political and operational reasons. Also, Indonesia is unlikely to conduct FONOP-style operations in the South China Sea on its own, let alone with Australia.

Taken as a whole, the Indonesia-Australia “South China Sea joint patrol” narrative is ultimately flawed and should be discarded if the above concerns still hold.

The writer is a researcher at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta and currently a visiting fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research in Seattle, Washington. The views expressed are his own.