

Indonesia has a stake in Australia's Lombrum plans too

By Evan A Laksmana ,

During the November APEC Summit, Vice President Mike Pence announced that the US will work with Australia and Papua New Guinea to develop the [Lombrum naval base](#) on Manus Island.

Analysts have debated whether the plan is part of a [pushback](#) against Chinese encroachment in the Pacific and how [militarily useful](#) the base would be in a future conflict.

But the debate has been focused on the US-China military dimension and almost entirely ignores Indonesia.

The Indonesian military (TNI) has been building its forces in and around eastern Indonesia in recent years. In May, President Jokowi approved the establishment of the Third Infantry Division of the Army's Strategic Reserve Command in South Sulawesi, the Navy's Third Armada Command and the Third Marine Force, both in West Papua, and the Air Force's Third Operational Command in Papua.

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While the process of infrastructure building and force restructuring might take several years, the TNI is set to "rebalance" its forces from the western to the eastern part of Indonesia. As the US and Australia build the Lombrum base in the coming years, and perhaps build their capability in and around the Pacific more broadly, engaging Indonesia should be part of the process.

Indonesia-Australia defence cooperation has increased markedly in recent years. But Australian strategic planning should not assume passive neutrality on the part of Indonesia in thinking about a future regional conflict.

Indonesia has a direct stake in ensuring stability in the archipelagic sea lanes that facilitate navigation from the Timor Sea and Arafura Sea to the Pacific Ocean through the Seas of Sawu, Banda, Seram, and Maluku. Any military conflict involving the US, Australia, and China would also have to "go through" Indonesia's strategic geography one way or another.

The underlying asymmetry of security concerns between Australia and Indonesia further highlights the need for Canberra to engage Jakarta over the Lombrum plan. While the US and Australia might see the Lombrum plan as one of several pieces of strategic pushback against China, Indonesia might see it as potentially increasing its strategic exposure, vulnerability, and risk.

Thus far, however, Indonesia's official response has been mild and in some quarters incoherent.

The [Defence Ministry](#) said Australia did communicate its plans and that "No one can forbid them from doing what they are doing, as long as [the naval base] is not built in our territory." The Foreign Ministry, meanwhile, hasn't offered a response. It seems preoccupied with managing the bilateral downturn over Australia's Jerusalem embassy proposal.

Members of the national legislature (DPR) warned that the Lombrum plan could increase [regional tension](#) and "[militarisation](#)". They also call on the Foreign Ministry to boost its diplomatic engagement in the area to minimise the potential for conflict.

Some Indonesian analysts went a step further and called on Jakarta to publicly [reject the plan](#) and [speed up](#) military development plans. Others even [wildly concocted](#) the idea that the Lombrum plan was related to US and Australian support for Papuan separatists.

These divergent reactions suggest that, on the one hand, military-to-military communication between Indonesia and Australia has improved. When the US announced in 2011 that it was planning to build a base in Darwin for 2500 marines, Indonesia's response was largely negative, with TNI leaders claiming to have been kept largely in the dark.

That the Lombrum plan was [conveyed](#) early to the Indonesian Defence Minister and discussed further at the Indonesia-Australia Defence Strategic Dialogue a few weeks ago signals that both defence establishments increasingly value transparency and consultations. It also shows the gradual maturity of defence engagement between the two countries.

But on the other hand, bilateral defence relations have been developed in a protective bubble in which policymakers communicate with each other without broader discussions with the public, civil society groups, and other political stakeholders like the DPR.

This is understandable given the sensitive nature of defence engagements. But without buy-in from the broader defence, public, and political establishments, military-to-military ties are open to politicisation when bilateral ties turn sour.

Therefore, while military-to-military communication is important, at some point, defence engagement – including plans to develop Lombrum – should involve the wider public as well.

Understandably, Canberra needs to balance its alliance commitments to the US, its concerns over Chinese military power, and its strategic partnership with Indonesia. But given the [“sawtooth” trajectory](#) of Indonesia-Australia defence relations – short periods of rapid development followed by sharp and painful reversals – boosting mutual transparency in defence posture development is critical.

At the end of the day, debating the operational utility of a naval base without accounting for the broader regional environment is to miss the forest for the trees.