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[Jakarta left all at sea by island clash with China](#)

By

[Evan A Laksmana, Guest Contributor](#)

– 5 April 2016 **Posted in:** [China](#), [Indonesia](#), [Indonesian Politics](#)



Jakarta has taken a hard stance with those caught illegally fishing in its waters.

What the South China Sea reveals about Indonesia's foreign policy.

In mid-March, a Chinese Coast Guard rammed one of its own fishing boats to pry it free from Indonesian authorities who had seized it for illegal fishing off the Natuna Islands – the northernmost undisputed Indonesian island group.

The incident has put a spotlight on Indonesia's foreign policy under President Joko Widodo or Jokowi. Analysts have carefully examined the incident in great detail (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

In the incident's wake, the foreign minister, defense minister, and fisheries minister responded in different, and somewhat overlapping, ways. The fisheries minister has become the public face for Indonesia's visibly angry response, while the military, according to press [reports](#), continues preparations to upgrade its facilities in the Natunas.

Several diplomats wrote op-eds [slamming](#) Beijing for its disregard of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the rules-based order Jakarta has always pushed for in the management of the South China Sea. Jokowi's chief foreign policy adviser, currently ambassador to London, noted the [importance](#) of illegal, unreported, unregulated (IUU) fishing as the common challenge for Indonesia and China; rather than sovereignty as the Natunas are undisputedly Indonesian in the first place.

Yet, after delivering an official diplomatic protest to the Chinese Embassy, the foreign minister insisted that the incident [had nothing to do](#) with the South China Sea dispute. Jokowi also instructed Luhut Pandjaitan, the coordinating minister for political, legal, and security affairs, to take necessary steps but reminded him that China "[remains Indonesia's friend](#)."

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This seemingly incoherent response reveals some of the broader trends in Indonesia's foreign policy in recent years.

First, despite the growing [literature](#) on how the post-1998 democratic transition and consolidation has overhauled foreign policy-making, foreign policy remains strongly, perhaps even idiosyncratically, a presidential affair.

This is partially a legacy of the centralised system entrenched under Suharto's New Order, and partially because successive post-Suharto presidents never paid serious and sustained attention to developing a professional, well-funded foreign ministry and a well-oiled foreign policy-making system – particularly one that can span different parts of the government to harness the country's different tools of regional and global engagement.

For almost two decades after 1998, only the [organisational reforms](#) instituted under foreign minister Hassan Wirajuda are noteworthy. But even those reforms were not well-funded, nor were they sustainable given some of the entrenched bureaucratic challenges and the ebbs and flow of presidential support. It is not surprising therefore that the personal characteristics of different post-Suharto presidents shaped and shoved Indonesia's foreign policy.

What this means is that Jokowi's personal aloofness on foreign affairs, his seemingly narrow domestic economic agenda, and his concerns with domestic politics, have prevented the office of the president to marshal the nation's strategic community to forcefully, coherently, and consistently respond to day-to-day challenges, including in the South China Sea.

Furthermore, the absence of a dedicated foreign affairs staff inside the presidential palace (or an executive National Security Council, for that matter), the departure of key foreign policy advisers, and the increasingly lack of chemistry and trust between the president and foreign minister, Retno Marsudi, have further exacerbated this problem.

Second, Jakarta's over-reliance on the "non-claimant honest broker" position on the South China Sea suggests the 'path dependence' of institutionalist thinking within the foreign ministry. Two strands of institutionalist thought are particularly salient: the belief in the virtues of international law along with a rules-based order underpinned by UNCLOS 1982, and the utility of multilateralism and ASEAN.

The first strand goes back to the 1956 Djuanda Declaration and has been sustained and strengthened by a series of influential diplomats and foreign ministers trained in international law for the past several decades. In the early 2000s, there were reports of a growing network of influential diplomats under the tutelage of foreign minister Wirajuda that came through the Indonesian representative office in Geneva (all steeped in international law).

The second strand goes back to the founding of ASEAN and the New Order's efforts to ensure domestic stability and regime maintenance by pushing for regional stability in Southeast Asia. Indonesia's leadership of the grouping and its position as the country's foreign policy "cornerstone" – and the fact that many of Jakarta's achievements were done within a multilateral framework – has sustained this institutionalist thinking.

According to a former member of Jokowi's transition team, these institutionalist strands of thought often crowd out other "scenario-based realist" thinking on foreign policy, which is often critical in dealing with developments in the South China Sea. The institutionalist thinking has also led to pushbacks from the broader strategic community (including defense and fisheries ministries) in Jakarta [concerned](#) with China's militarisation of the region and its constant encroachment of Indonesia's maritime territories.

The logic of institutions is powerful but it is also glacial-paced. Meanwhile, as we can see, given the current escalations and rapidly changing "facts on the ground", so to speak, in the South China Sea, Jakarta may need to realise it is being strategically blinded by its own lens and hindered by maritime governance inter-bureaucratic infighting

Third, given the previous two trends, Indonesia's foreign policy-making requires better and improved inter-agency coordination and collaboration and larger funding and resources.

When it comes to the South China Sea, the Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal, and Political Affairs should get the foreign ministry to talk more regularly to other agencies, particularly the Navy, Maritime Security Agency, and the IUU fishing task force of the fisheries ministry. The foreign ministry should also invest more in sending senior officials to attend regular inter-agency meetings and expand the number of senior diplomats sent to inter-agency courses, such as those run by the National Resilience Institute.

Indonesia has had many good foreign ministers. Diplomacy played a very important part in the struggle for independence in the ...

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Powerful people don't like being punished any more than anyone else, but they have the means to prevent it happening. ...

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Given the prevalent view that Indonesia's best and brightest tend to join the foreign ministry, policymakers should not let it become an isolated actor within the broader national security system and establishment. Additionally, House of Representatives' Commission for defence, foreign affairs and information – charged with discussing issues related to its portfolio and formulating plenary bills for consideration by parliament – needs to be more involved in foreign policy-making and increase the budgetary resources for the foreign ministry.

The current budget only stands at roughly \$549 million, with roughly 80-85 per cent devoted to routine expenditures and personnel salaries. This lack of budgetary support is not unique to Jokowi of course. According to budgetary documents compiled by CSIS Jakarta, the foreign ministry's annual budget from 1999 to 2014 leveled at around \$305 million on average, or roughly 0.69 per cent of the national budget.

We should bear in mind these broader trends and limitations in Indonesia's foreign policy-making when expecting Jakarta to play a more proactive role in balancing the ongoing US-China strategic rivalry, and the peaceful management of the South China Sea disputes.

Evan A Laksmana is a researcher at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Jakarta, and a political science doctoral candidate at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. He tweets @EvanLaksmana.

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6 Comments

1. #1

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Ken Ward

Posted April 5, 2016 at 4:23 PM

This is a very thought-provoking post.

In referring to Rizal Sukma, though without mentioning his name, I assume that the author meant he was Jokowi's former foreign affairs advisor, not his current one. It would be difficult for Rizal to combine that earlier role with being ambassador to the Court of St James, though he did admittedly find time to write an Op-Ed for the Jakarta Post on this question.

The author suggests that the successive post-1998 governments' failure to upgrade Kemenlu has resulted in foreign policy remaining very much a presidential affair. I can't express an opinion on this judgement. I am prepared to point out, however, that Retno Marsudi is not the strongest foreign minister Indonesia has had. I think, in fact, that she rivals Alwi Shihab as the worst in the post-1998 era. Maybe a more competent foreign minister would have been able to keep Jokowi in check.

Jokowi seems to have little diplomatic or strategic sense. It is for China to tell the Indonesians that, despite its recent aggressive behaviour, it is still 'Indonesia's friend'. It is fatuous for Jokowi to say this. Maybe Susi Pudjiastuti understands this better.

I agree with the author that Indonesia over-relies on its 'non-claimant honest broker' role. The fact that the adoption of this role many years ago has accomplished nothing at all is reason enough to abandon it.

A more strategically-minded president should see that it would be better for Indonesia if some fellow ASEAN members enjoyed sovereignty over various islands or land features in the South China Sea rather than allowing China to gobble them all up. This is simply a question of balance.

The Chinese ramming incident shows, in my view, that Indonesia cannot assume China recognises its Natuna EEZ. If China wants to exploit 'traditional fishing rights' in that EEZ, it should negotiate an agreement with Indonesia.

Quality comment or not? 10 0

2. #2

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[Jatin Chhabra:](#)
Well good to hear that this brige is on now as travelers in India will love to travel by rod ...

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[Ryan K:](#) I whole heartedly agree with Eric C.'s comments, which is "right on target." A day of reckoning will soon ...

o [Buddhist politics and Thailand's dangerous path \(48\)](#)

[John Smith:](#)
The robe itself is the sacred object. Which is why one has to make sure that any accusations against a ...

[vichai n:](#) Just because a criminally minded, a serial pervert, a kleptomaniac, or a paedophile had donned a yellow robe immediately transforms ...

[John Smith:](#)
Your use of such pejorative language says more about you than it does about this monk. In Buddhism it is ...

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Wong Jowo

Posted April 29, 2016 at 7:52 AM

I agree with Ken Ward's assessment about Retno Marsudi's performance as foreign minister. Mochtar Kusumaatmaja or Ali Alatas would have reacted stronger even though both men realized that maintaining good relations with the PRC is important and will benefit both countries. I can also imagine Xi Jinping telling his men not to start another incident with the Indonesians.

Quality comment or not? 0 0

- o #2.1 [Reply](#)



Ken Ward

Posted April 29, 2016 at 1:55 PM

Indonesia has had many good foreign ministers. Diplomacy played a very important part in the struggle for independence in the years 1945-49, so it is perhaps understandable why so many Indonesian foreign ministers have been highly capable. Incidentally, two former foreign ministers who were extremely helpful to me were Mohammad Roem and Roeslan Abdulgani.

Mochtar, still alive at 87, has been one of Indonesia's great experts on the law of the sea. He played a very important role in achieving international acceptance of Indonesia's status as an archipelagic state. I see this as one of Indonesia's main diplomatic triumphs since it became independent. Mochtar would certainly consider the Chinese ramming incident as a violation of Indonesian rights under UNCLOS, which is what I believe. I don't know exactly what Ali Alatas' attitude would have been, but am happy to accept your judgement.

Retno Marsudi's appointment was one of the unfortunate results of Jokowi's inexperience in national government. I can only guess what Luhut Panjaitan, who is a much savvier operator in foreign affairs, thinks of her.

This is really quite a serious matter. As you say, a stronger Indonesian response would probably have prompted caution in the future on Xi's part. If China comes to dominate the whole of the South China Sea, there will be serious repercussions for Indonesia.

Quality comment or not? 1 0

- #2.1.1 [Reply](#)



neptunian

Posted May 3, 2016 at 1:35 PM

So, if the US continues to dominate the South China Sea, then its all good?
What has the US really done except sell arms to dictators in SEA?

The US dominated Phillipines for decades and all we have are warlords and murders. Metal detectors in shopping complexes. machine guns totting guards, even at smallish shops. etc etc

Quality comment or not? 0 0

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