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Indonesia's New Submarines: Impact on Regional Naval Balance

By Koh Swee Lean Collin

Synopsis

Indonesia's new submarines are intended to plug capability shortfalls of the Indonesian Navy. While they will not upset regional stability, the latest acquisitions do reflect an expansion of submarine inventory in the region. This requires an enhanced capacity for submarine emergency response in Southeast Asia.

Commentary

THE INDONESIAN NAVY'S latest US\$1.1 billion contract for three Type-209/1400 diesel-electric submarines looks set to breathe new life into its overall capacity. It represents the third major purchase by TNI-AL (Tentara Nasional Indonesia - Angkatan Laut) after the acquisition of new corvettes and landing ships since 2000. This purchase has also been described as a move to 'maintain power balance in the region', with various analysts attributing the purchase to Jakarta's attempt to play regional submarine 'catch-up'.

Persistent shortfalls for TNI-AL submarine force

For over three decades, TNI-AL operated two German-built Type-209 submarines. However, they are deemed insufficient for Indonesia's wide-ranging maritime security needs over its vast archipelagic expanse. This capacity shortfall has been afflicting the TNI-AL in general, not just the submarine fleet. Economic straits often put paid to major purchases and the TNI-AL only managed to see the light after 2000, when Indonesia's economy gradually recovered from the Asian financial crisis.

The TNI-AL's minimum required capabilities are prescribed by Defence Strategic Plan 2024 which called for at least 10 submarines. However with its mandated routine maintenance and training cycle, only one Type-209 boat is available at all times. This submarine force will most likely be stretched to its limits in times of crises. It is reasonable to assume that the two Type-209s have already completed a major portion of their useful operational lifespan notwithstanding recent refurbishments.

Nonetheless, the pair of submarines does offer a modicum of deterrent against potential foes considering decades of experience gleaned by TNI-AL's submarine crews and their familiarity with the Indonesian archipelagic environment. The new submarines may eventually replace the existing pair, thus leaving the TNI-AL with only three operational boats by end of 2025.

Such a force is still small and barely sufficient for Indonesia's needs. In contrast, Vietnam, also with a long

coast line, will be able to muster six submarines once its Russian-built Kilo Project-636 boats become operational by 2020. Singapore, with considerably much smaller coast line to cover, will probably muster four submarines assuming that the ageing ex-Swedish Sjoormen-class is retired and replaced by the newly-inducted Vastergotlands.

No 'breakthrough capability' expected

From the technical perspective, it is moot whether the newly-acquired Type-209/1400s were what an earlier TNI-AL chief once promised back in 2009 - 'more superior' than those possessed by neighbouring navies. Even though they sold the Type-209 to Indonesia, the South Koreans no longer rely on this class; it has been gradually supplanted by the more advanced Sohn Won-II class (Project KSS-2) which is a modified German Type-214 variant. Therefore, the Type-209/1400 represents little incremental capability over existing Type-209 models.

Moreover, the new boats are not known to be equipped with 'breakthrough' capabilities that may tip the balance of naval power in Southeast Asia. For instance, there is no provision known for air-independent propulsion that can prolong submerged endurance as in the case of Singapore's Vastergotlands. Even if TNI-AL's new boats can submerged-launch anti-ship cruise missiles, this capability is not new too, given that Malaysia's Scorpene-class submarines are already outfitted with the SM-39 Exocet. The Vietnamese Kilos are reported to be armed with Russian-designed Klub-S missiles.

Naval balance unaffected

In sum, quantitatively and qualitatively, TNI-AL's newest submarine purchase may not adversely affect the regional balance of naval power. However, this acquisition reflects an expansion of the regional submarine inventory, which from the maritime security and safety point of view, still warrants concern.

On the one hand, the confined Southeast Asian maritime geography – characterised by semi-enclosed and narrow water-bodies – makes for excellent submarine operations (though a bane for anti-submarine hunters). On the other hand, this provides an ideal recipe for potential incidents, inadvertent or otherwise. Virtually all submarines operated by regional navies are equipped with signal intelligence capabilities and this amplifies the risk of naval incidents at sea with potential security ramifications. This is so given sensitivities over longstanding maritime-related interstate disputes.

Need for regional capacity-building

Moreover, the increased population of submarines roaming in regional waters gives rise to dangers of collisions, whether with naval or civilian vessels. Regional submarine rescue capacity is far from adequate considering the numbers of submarines in or about to enter service. To date, only Singapore musters a full-fledged submarine rescue capability in the form of the Swift Rescue submarine rescue vessel and its DSAR-6 submersible. Currently, the Malaysian and Indonesian navies do not yet possess equivalent capabilities and their ongoing modernisation programmes do not appear to include their acquisition.

By comparison, most Northeast Asian submarine operators possess relatively significant submarine emergency response capabilities. Japan for instance possesses dedicated, specialised capabilities for complex submarine rescue operations. Even the antiquated North Korean Navy possesses a Kowan-class catamaran-hulled rescue ship equipped with rudimentary diving bell for its force of over 20 operational combat submarines.

Southeast Asian countries can leverage on an earlier agreement in late 2011 to bolster regional naval cooperation by considering collective submarine emergency response capacity-building. Given the operational sensitivities of national submarine activities, confidence-building measures such as zonal restrictions on submarine operations are not likely to materialise. However, collaboration in submarine emergency response offers an alternative avenue. In this regard, Singapore can play a lead role.

One way to do so is to pool submarine emergency response capacity and devise regional protocols to deal with contingencies related to submarine incidents. However, no regional cooperation can wholly substitute capacity-building at the national level. Existing submarine operators and aspirants should ensure that such capacity is prudently developed in parallel with the introduction of submarine capabilities.

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