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India-Indonesia Defence Cooperation: Back on Track?

By Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto

Synopsis

India-Indonesia defence relations are relatively underdeveloped, notwithstanding their mutual interests. Improving bilateral defence cooperation would require Indonesia to pay more attention to its Indian Ocean neighbourhood.

Commentary

DESPITE BEING Indian Ocean littoral neighbours separated by a mere 80 nautical miles of water, the defence relationship between India and Indonesia is still underdeveloped.

Yet, both share mutual interests, having large Muslim populations, sharing common democratic values, and equally priding themselves as non-aligned countries. These factors should warrant closer cooperation in many areas including defence cooperation. But they seem mired in mutual neglect.

Indonesia's 'mental map'

The fact is inter-state relations depend less on geographical proximity of countries than mental maps, defined by Alan Hendrikson as 'an ordered but continually adapting structure of the mind to understand (its) large-scale geographical environment'. In Indonesian perception, the Indian Ocean and India have remained a 'black hole' in its mental map for most of its diplomatic and strategic history for two critical reasons.

Firstly, Indonesia mainly looked to the Pacific Ocean, particularly toward America and Northeast Asia, for its security and economic raison d'être. Except for a brief period in the 1950s, Indonesia was noticeably reluctant to see India as either its security provider or economic benefactor. Secondly, there were suspicions about India's close relationship with the erstwhile Soviet Union, and its alleged hegemonic ambitions in the Indian Ocean. These reasons discouraged Indonesia from looking at India as its potential strategic partner.

Shortly after Indonesia's independence proclamation in 1945, India shone brightly in its mental map, viewing it as a 'distant-cousin' and fellow fighter against colonialism. Precisely for this reason Indonesia's President Sukarno called for both nations to "intensify the cordial relations" that had existed "for more than 1,000 years" as crystallised in the Treaty of Friendship of March 1951. This path-breaking treaty established the framework for bilateral cooperation in various fields, including defence.

Past relations

Three separate security agreements were concluded between their air forces, navies, and armies in 1956, 1958, and 1960, respectively. The air force bilateral agreement envisaged exchange and training of pilots, sale, loan, and exchange of aircraft spares. The naval agreement provided for cross attachment of naval officers, training exercises, and bilateral visits. Following these agreements, India provided military assistance to Indonesia's counter-insurgency campaign in the 1950s and both countries conducted their first joint naval exercises in July 1960.

Relations however gradually soured following the 1962 Sino-Indian War until the end of Sukarno's administration. Jakarta put its stake on Beijing to reciprocate China's support for Indonesia's Confrontation against the newly-formed Malaysian Federation and its British Commonwealth backers. Suharto's assumption of power in 1966 also did little to mend relations.

Instead, relations became frostier when India and the then Soviet Union entered into a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty in 1971 during the war with Pakistan over Bangladesh. Relations between India and Indonesia remained distant for the next two decades.

Defence cooperation redux

Suharto's ouster from power in 1998 brought democracy and a more nuanced foreign policy to Indonesia. The post-Suharto period saw a rejuvenated foreign policy bent on cultivating cordial ties with all countries, particularly major regional powers like India which had embarked on a Look East policy by then. The 2005 India-Indonesia Strategic Partnership Agreement was a milestone in Indo-Indonesian bilateral relations. It is not only a resurrection of defence cooperation established during the Sukarno years, it also signalled a positive turn in Jakarta's perceptions of New Delhi.

In a reprise of defence cooperation during the Sukarno era, Indonesia has resumed defence engagement with India across all branches of the armed forces. The maritime security cooperation is perhaps the most significant, as both countries share a common boundary as littorals of the Indian Ocean. Such cooperation includes coordinated patrols, joint bilateral or multilateral exercises, as well as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Cooperation between the air forces is also being discussed, with the recent progress including India's support and training for the Indonesian Air Force's Sukhoi fighter jets and pilots.

Army-to-army cooperation primarily revolves around counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency. For example, in March 2012, Indian and Indonesian armies conducted their first-ever joint training exercise codenamed 'Garuda Shakti' at the Indian Army's elite Counter Insurgency and Jungle Warfare School (CIJWS) in Mizoram.

What is new in the agreement is defence science and technology cooperation. New Delhi's maturing defence technology and industry offers an attractive opportunity for Jakarta to develop its defence self-reliance. However, New Delhi seems reluctant to enter into a technology transfer scheme with Indonesia, as evidenced by Jakarta's failure to procure the Brahmos supersonic missiles.

Convergence of mental maps

Reinvigorating bilateral defence cooperation would require Indonesia to seek a convergence of its mental map with India by improving the awareness of its Indian Ocean neighbourhood in the same way it regards the Pacific. This could start with practical security initiatives, such as cooperation in maritime domain awareness, joint or coordinated patrols and exercises for sea lanes security, maritime search and rescue, as well as defence technology and industry. Sea lanes security is paramount for Indonesia's Indian Ocean maritime trade as its natural resources and mineral exports to India grow.

Notwithstanding the revival of defence cooperation, both countries would need to be realistic about the challenges they face. The Pacific Ocean will remain dominant in Indonesia's mental map, as China is now Jakarta's largest trading partner and investor. Indonesia's "a thousand friends and zero enemies" diplomacy to seek multiple strategic and comprehensive partnerships also would not accord India a privileged status as compared to other countries.

But at least New Delhi is an alternative partner for Jakarta in its geopolitical juggling act of "dynamic equilibrium" by engaging all the major powers to keep them mutually in check.

Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto is a Senior Analyst with the Maritime Security Programme at the S. Rajaratnam

School of International Studies in the Nanyang Technological University. He was a researcher with the Centre for East Asian Cooperation Studies (CEACoS) at the University of Indonesia.