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TNI's 2019 Joint Exercise: Adding More Fire Power

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SYNOPSIS

Recent joint exercises of the Indonesian military demonstrate the institution's increasing focus on interoperability, network-centric warfare capability, and improvement of combat support roles.

COMMENTARY

FROM 9 to 12 September 2019, the Indonesian Armed Forces (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia*, TNI) conducted a joint-services exercise (*latihan gabungan*, latgab) code-named "Dharma Yudha". This joint-services exercise served as the pinnacle to TNI's series of annual exercises, which was preceded by the Army's (TNI AD) intra-branch exercise "Kartika Yudha", the Navy's (TNI-AL) "Armada Jaya" and the Air Force's (TNI-AU) "Angkasa Yudha".

This Latgab marked the fifth consecutive annual exercise during President Joko Widodo's presidency, which the previous administration was unable to do. This created a venue to test TNI's Network-Centric Warfare (NCW) capability and as a basis to assess the possible required platform in the Minimum Essential Force (MEF) Plan's third phase (2019-2024). Distinct from previous exercises, the 2019 Latgab features some novel characteristics. Firstly, it included TNI AL's Marine Corps into the primary combat unit. Secondly, TNI AU deployed the latest drone technology, adding attack capability on top of the existing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) drone capability.

More Firepower

In addition to these three exercises, TNI on 4 September also conducted a rapid-reaction strike forces exercise (*Pasukan Pemukul Reaksi Cepat*, PPRC) in Sentani

and Wamena, Papua Province. This was the first time TNI conducted a major exercise in Papua, employing the newly inaugurated Army Strategic Command (Kostrad)'s 3rd Infantry Division.

The 2019 joint exercise incorporated units that previously operated separately. The battle units consisted of Joint Army Task Command, Joint Air Force Task Command, Joint Navy Task Command, Joint Airborne Task Command, and Joint Amphibious Task Command.

The joint exercise also involved supporting units from the tri-services. Each service sent its ace military platforms to this year's joint training, such as the Army's Leopard tank, the Air Force's SU 27/30 and F-16, and the Navy's KRI Sultan Iskandar Muda-367 and KRI John Lie-385 corvettes.

In addition to the usual major combat systems, TNI also incorporated many of its auxiliary platforms, harmonising them in supporting the large-scale military drill.

Inter-operability & Network-Centric Warfare

The 2019 joint exercise puts special emphasis on interoperability and Network-Centric Warfare (NCW) capability, which signals continuity in recent developments within the TNI. Previously, in the 2018 exercise, TNI already highlighted the two elements. TNI is also trying to improve interoperability by developing a satellite-based system to enhance its communication, command, control and computer (C4) systems.

This year's exercise specifically marks two key dimensions of TNI's interoperability: among commands across the three services; and among TNI's primary weapons and communications systems. As mentioned, the exercise involved a highly mixed battle unit, including joint task commands from the three services, as well as related supporting units.

The exercise also demonstrated interoperability between TNI's main platforms — a capability which has been continuously questioned due to TNI's sustained practice to procure weapons systems from diverse suppliers and countries. For instance, the exercise featured a composite strike force consisting of two Sukhoi Su27/30s to perform suppression of enemy's air defence (SEAD) and four F-16s which functioned as sweepers.

However, these demonstrations do not answer criticism over inefficiencies due to the running of different trainings, logistics and maintenance, which come with procuring arms from widely diverse suppliers.

TNI's Ongoing Modernisation

Beyond the exercises, the issue of interoperability has been one of the main focuses in TNI's modernisation in the past few years. In December 2017, in his inauguration as TNI Commander, Air Chief Marshal Hadi Tjahjanto emphasised that one of his focuses would be enhancing interoperability and integrating the three TNI services under the NCW system.

Although these plans started to gain prominence under former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's administration (2004 - 2014), it was only recently that the idea started to be implemented. Most notably, by the end of September 2019, TNI established three new Joint Defence Area Commands (*Komando Gabungan Wilayah, Kogabwilhan*).

Each Kogabwilhan, equipped with naval, air and army assets, is designed to deliver flexible and quick deployment in the event of regional escalations. Although the establishment of Kogabwilhan was also motivated by internal issues, such as the surplus of military officers, the move signals a serious attempt to increase inter-service cohesion.

China-made Attack Drones & New Developments

TNI carried out the joint exercise at the Marine Corps facility in Situbondo, East Java as in the previous year. Despite the unchanged training location, there were several notable differences.

First, the Indonesian air force included its new Chinese-made attack and reconnaissance CH-4 drones for this year's exercise and showed the capability of the platform to the public for the first time. Although the CH-4 is not the air force's first operated drone, the service's other drone versions are limited to reconnaissance duty.

Second, the Marine Corps took part in the exercise through the amphibious landing scenario, the first time since the joint training in 2014. Furthermore, the recent exercise included combat-support (*bantuan tempur*) functions which was previously overlooked in this kind of mega-scale military drill.

Against this backdrop, TNI showed its commitment to augmenting combat preparedness. In addition, the occasion indicated a firm step towards advancing TNI's interoperability doctrine, the Tridek (*Tri Dharma Eka Karma*) doctrine.

Regional Security Implications

The 2019 joint exercise has provided a useful outlet for TNI to showcase and sharpen the armed forces' armaments, particularly those that were procured recently. While such venue manifests the importance and value of the training, the Indonesian military may want to further the drill to get more benefits.

The activity could further serve as a tool for defence diplomacy. Inviting representatives from foreign militaries, particularly neighbouring and strategic partner countries, can be an example to achieve the objective. Through its role in defence diplomacy TNI takes part in maintaining regional stability.

Moreover, the focus of NCW and improving interoperability of this exercise reflected TNI's readiness to address potential regional tensions which include dynamics in the South China Sea and the Sulu-Celebes Sea. This development also signals TNI's readiness to fulfill its mandate to have external power projection capability.

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