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Rising Tensions in Natunas: Test for Indonesia's New Defence Commands

by Tiola

SYNOPSIS

The Indonesian military's newly-established Joint Regional Defence Command has been deployed to drive away Chinese vessels from waters off Indonesia's Natuna Islands. Does this mean Indonesia has adopted a more confrontational approach in asserting sovereignty over its own waters?

COMMENTARY

THE RECENT skirmish between Chinese and Indonesian authorities in the South China Sea has emphasised the sensitivity surrounding waters off Indonesia's northern Natuna Islands, which overlaps with China's nine-dash line claim. The rift, which saw Chinese fishing vessels operating illegally in Indonesia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) accompanied by Chinese Coast Guard vessels, is hardly the first time.

Since 2010, Indonesia has had at least six clashes with Chinese authorities in the area, which typically involved Chinese Coast Guard vessels interfering with Indonesian authorities' attempts to chase away Chinese vessels illegally fishing in the area. The latest round of tensions, however, marked a bigger rift in a number of ways, although there was no direct clash between Indonesian and Chinese authorities.

Worsening Tensions in the Natunas?

To begin with, the fishing vessels came in significantly larger numbers. Indonesia's Maritime Security Agency (*Badan Keamanan Laut*, Bakamla), which first spotted the Chinese vessels in the area, claimed that there were around 50 fishing boats, along with two Chinese Coast Guard vessels and a frigate. Secondly, the Chinese vessels

stayed in the area for a prolonged period: from at least 19 December 2019, and leaving the area only on 9 January 2020.

This followed President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo’s visit to an Indonesian warship deployed in the Natunas. Moreover, in response to a formal protest from Indonesia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson reasserted that Chinese fishermen are free to conduct activities in their “traditional fishing ground”, and that nothing would change “the objective fact that China has rights” over the relevant waters.

For its part, Jakarta decided not to resort to its usual low-key option in dealing with the issue. This time, the government appointed the Indonesian military (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia*, TNI) to handle the intrusion, unlike previous clashes which were mostly handled by civilian agencies — including Bakamla and the Ministry of Marine and Fisheries Affairs (MMFA).

While this is not the first time that TNI is involved in such operations in the Natunas, the scale and publicity of the operations are bigger and more intense. Moreover, the operation is carried out by the Joint Regional Defence Command, a new unit within TNI.

Joint Regional Defence Command: Operation “Battle Standby”

In September 2019, TNI Chief Air Marshal Hadi Tjahjanto inaugurated the establishment of three new Joint Regional Defence Commands (*Komando Gabungan Wilayah Pertahanan*, Kogabwilhan), each responsible for Indonesia’s western, central and eastern parts. The unit is designed to deliver flexible and quick deployment in an event of regional conflict.

Each Kogabwilhan has the capability to mobilise naval, air and army assets; and led by a three-star general who answers to the TNI Chief. Kogabwilhan I, responsible for overseeing the western part of Indonesia, is located in Tanjung Pinang, Riau Islands province. According to Air Chief Marshal Tjahjanto, Kogabwilhan I is essential to address threats from the Malacca Strait “and the North Natuna Sea”.

Kogabwilhan II is located in Balikpapan, East Kalimantan province, primarily meant to strengthen the air defence of the region, which will host Indonesia’s new administrative capital. Lastly, Kogabwilhan III is in Biak, Papua, to keep security in its borders and waters.

In less than four months after its establishment, Kogabwilhan I is already in the spotlight for its first major task: Chief of Kogabwilhan I Vice Admiral Yudo Margono is leading the operation to drive the Chinese vessels off the Natunas, dubbed “Operation Battle Standby” (*Operasi Siaga Tempur*). In the operation, Kogabwilhan I mobilised assets from the First Fleet Command (*Koarmada 1*) and the First Air Force Operational Command (*Koopsau 1*), which included seven warships and maritime surveillance aircrafts – the largest deployment in the Natunas so far.

After over a week of manoeuvring around the flashpoints, the operation culminated with the departure of Chinese vessels from the area, presumably after President Jokowi boarded one of the warships.

Significance for Indonesia's External Defence

The operationalisation of Kogabwilhan in the Natunas was a significant step for Indonesia's external defence, for three main reasons. Firstly, the position of Kogabwilhan Chief reduces dependency on the TNI Chief. Prior to the existence of Kogabwilhan, joint operations between any services were conducted directly under the TNI Chief. This either means the TNI Chief would not be able to allocate sufficient strategic focus; or operations become less flexible.

With the entry of the Kogabwilhan Chief, more attention could be given for joint operations. For instance, during the Natuna operation, the Chief of Kogabwilhan I was based in the Natunas, and was able to instruct changes of plans based on reports on the whereabouts of the Chinese vessels.

Secondly, the existence of Kogabwilhan emphasises the element of interoperability among TNI commands — a quality that TNI has been pursuing in the past three years. Lastly, the operations imply recognition of Kogabwilhan as a new TNI unit, whose establishment has been scrutinised by critics. The detractors highlighted that the unit might have been established to accommodate the surplus of high-ranking officers and colonels within the TNI. However, the Natuna operations demonstrate that domestic dynamics and concerns can also bring significant impact to the way TNI responds to external threats.

Kogabwilhan as the New Norm?

Although Kogabwilhan managed to carry out the Natuna operation without apparent hiccups, this does not mean that the unit would be the default institution to answer threats from the North Natuna Sea. Under the Jokowi administration, a number of institutions have been assigned to be in charge of the waters off Natuna Islands.

In 2015, for instance, the government demonstrated its preference to deploy a civilian agency through the establishment of Anti-Illegal Fishing Task Force called Satgas 115, headed by former Minister of Marine and Fisheries Affairs (MMFA) Susi Pudjiastuti.

The unit has the authority to coordinate and organise resources from other institutions, including the Indonesian Navy, the National Police, and Bakamla; and was active in capturing foreign fishing vessels in waters off the Natunas. However, such approach took a turn in March 2016 when Jakarta took a more assertive stance following an incident where a Chinese Coast Guard vessel forced free a Chinese fishing vessel which was being towed back to the Natunas by a MMFA boat.

After the incident, the Indonesian Navy was tasked to patrol waters around the Natunas, presumably as a more forceful deterrent. In the most recent skirmish, the Kogabwilhan also did not operate alone — the Bakamla was still running routine operations in the Natunas.

According to a well-placed source in Jakarta, during the meeting relating to the Chinese presence in the area, some members of the government had intended to let Bakamla take charge of the issue instead of TNI, although the push for Kogabwilhan finally prevailed. In the future, it should not be surprising if Indonesia alters its approach again, depending on the scale of the tension; the mood surrounding Chinese investments; and the domestic politics surrounding institutional competitions.

Tiola is a Senior Analyst at the Indonesia Programme of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg