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*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

Jokowi's War on Pandemic: Growing Dependence on TNI?

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SYNOPSIS

President Joko Widodo's approach in curbing the COVID-19 outbreak has further strengthened the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI)'s role in the country.

COMMENTARY

FOLLOWING THE declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic as a national disaster, President Joko Widodo ("Jokowi") has granted the National Disaster Mitigation Agency (BNPB) a broader authority to handle the outbreak. Doni Monardo, an active three-star Army general who assumed the position of head of BNPB in 2019 before the pandemic broke out, was appointed to lead the COVID-19 Task Force.

His position as head of BNPB despite being in active military service is likely to shape the country's strategy in containing the pandemic. Relying on TNI's organisational capabilities and networks is aimed at expediting the disaster relief effort to offset the slow response of the civilian authority to the health crisis.

TNI's Tradition in BNPB Leadership

Originally, BNPB was not considered a strategic post for an active three-star general. Lieutenant General Monardo's predecessors, Major General Syamsul Maarif and Rear Admiral Willem Rampangilei were both retired military officers when they headed BNPB. Entrusting Gen. Monardo to lead BNPB suggests that President Jokowi may want to reform Indonesia's disaster relief management.

Monardo is qualified to lead BNPB with its organisational structure resembling TNI's own. Monardo's command experience and working relationships with TNI active-duty officers mean that BNPB's coordination with TNI commands on disaster relief operations should improve.

As chief of the COVID-19 Task Force, Monardo will receive ministerial support and access to TNI and the Indonesian National Police (Polri)'s operational assets and resources. The inclusion of both TNI and Polri chiefs of operational staff within the task force further enables Monardo to synchronise TNI and Polri operations to curb the pandemic.

TNI's Role in Containing Pandemic

With its logistical capabilities, manpower, and geographical reach, TNI's role has been critical in acquiring and distributing relief supplies across the archipelago. Minister of Defence Prabowo Subianto, himself now part of the COVID-19 Task Force, has directed TNI to collect medical equipment from China and employ its territorial commands to organise medical supply distribution, down to the remote and border areas.

TNI has established four Integrated Joint Task Commands (Kogasgabpad) which managed field hospitals in Jakarta (Kemayoran Athlete Village) and Natuna (Sebaru and Galang Islands).

Kogasgabpad is not necessarily a new organisation. It is formed on an ad-hoc basis and was first activated in 2018 to assist the earthquake reliefs in [Lombok](#), West Nusa Tenggara. Fortuitously, TNI's concept of Kogasgabpad mirrors BNPB's [holistic and integrated disaster management command](#) structure and this hopefully will improve coordination in Indonesia's response to the pandemic.

With TNI accelerating safe-the-people campaign at the national level, the territorial commands at the regional levels also initiated their own initiatives, such as [blood donation](#) drives to support the Indonesian Red Cross (PMI) which has been running short of blood stocks due to a drop in the number of donors. TNI is also starting soup kitchens to feed the poor.

Dilemma of the Military?

At the same time, TNI also needs to contain the virus spreading within its own ranks. On 15 April 2020, TNI Commander Air Chief Marshall [Hadi Tjahjanto reported that there were at least 1,187 cases](#) related to COVID-19 involving its personnel and their families. Most fall under the category of people under surveillance, with additional 55 positive cases and 15 fatalities, some of whom were medical officers.

He asserted that TNI will prioritise rapid tests for its frontline medical personnel. Beyond service on the medical frontlines, TNI should also pay attention to its [defence operations amid the outbreak, in view of the two foreign cases](#).

In the [USS Theodore Roosevelt](#), more than 100 out of 4000 sailors were tested positive for COVID-19 after a visit to Vietnam. In the [Taiwanese Panshih Navy Ship](#),

36 out of 750 crews were tested positive for COVID-19 after goodwill trip to Palau. Both cases demonstrate that physical distancing might not work out during military operations, exposing personnel to the risk of infection.

Ultimately, these cases accentuate the state's dilemma on military operations during the pandemic: should the military avoid unnecessary peacetime casualties or maintain its operational readiness during the health crisis?

Large-Scale Social Restrictions and Polri's Measures

To flatten the curve, President Jokowi has imposed large-scale social restrictions (PSBB) and banned the annual *mudik* (Eidil Fitri exodus) to the villages. [A lockdown](#) seemed unlikely as Jokowi does not believe such measures would eliminate the virus. Hence, the task force has ramped up PSBB measures by deploying Police and TNI personnel at various check points.

Law enforcement is solely under the jurisdiction of the Police, with TNI serving as an auxiliary force. The Police are [lenient](#) when imposing PSBB as the population is still not-well-informed about the regulations.

The Police, though, face challenges due to growing financial stress amid the pandemic. The country has seen an [11.8%](#) rise in crime rates with theft and burglary the most common criminal acts. Inevitably, the Police will be forced to adopt a firm stance to maintain order.

A crime prevention approach is a double-edged sword, though. While it might help the Police to induce compliance, there are negative repercussions for its image. [Human rights activists](#) oppose criminal charges for PSBB offenders as they believe this will only exacerbate prison overcrowding.

The Police struggles to improve its image. A 2019 Kompas survey that showed the [Police's](#) positive image among public was only 68.6%; while in a similar survey [TNI's](#) positive image was significantly higher at 96.6%.

Dependent on Military?

President Jokowi remains dependent on the military. This is evident in his appointment of Gen. Monardo as BNPB chief and the use of military agencies to compensate the delay and shortfalls in the civilian authorities' response to the pandemic. Notwithstanding, a "boots-on-the-ground" approach also requires clear protocols to protect soldiers from the risk of infection.

On the whole, current developments triggered by the pandemic have entrenched the notion of TNI as the guardian of the nation. Both TNI and Police's top brass are promoting inter-service cooperation to curb the virus; with their different jurisdictions, the public might have their own perceptions: the Police is seen as the "bad cop", while TNI is the "good cop".

Last year, the Police was criticised for its repressive approach to a [big rally](#) against the government. TNI though played safe by conducting [dialogues](#) with the protestors.

A similar pattern could play out if the pandemic leads to huge social unrest in the country.

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