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KRI Nanggala-402: Time to Boost Maritime Cooperation

By John Bradford

SYNOPSIS

The search for Nanggala reaffirms the need for the maritime forces of Southeast Asia to continue expanding their cooperative capacity. The region should be ready to do better when the next maritime crisis situation develops.



A poignant image of the crew of the KRI Nanggala-402 performing their daily prayer on the surfaced submarine sometime before it sank off Bali. The photograph went viral in the Indonesian social media, according to iNews.id from where this is republished. It says some netizens were moved to tears by this image. The crew are seen here wearing long-sleeve navy jerseys with the words "Kapal Selam" (Submarine) on the back. It is not clear from the iNews.id story where the photo was sourced from although it was marked "Foto: Istimewa" [Photo: Special]. "This photo was taken before tragedy struck the submarine," says iNews.id. – Editor

COMMENTARY

TIME TRAGICALLY ran out for the crew of Indonesia's submarine *KRI Nanggala-402*. When the Indonesian Navy lost contact with the boat conducting a torpedo exercise in waters north of Bali on Wednesday 21 April 2021, leaders immediately knew they were in a race against time to bring their sailors home safely.

When they did not hear from the submarine via a battery-power backup channel and did not detect an emergency beacon, it became clear the best-case scenario was that the crew was alive, but unable to surface. Even in this optimal situation the crew would be trapped with limited oxygen supplies, just 72 hours according to estimates shared with the public. The Indonesian Navy immediately deployed ships and aircraft to locate the missing vessel.

Turning to Friends for Help

Indonesia also turned to friends for help. In particular, Jakarta asked partner navies to deploy search assets and specialised sub-rescue equipment. The international

support that followed reaffirmed the value of international maritime cooperation and demonstrated the continued need for further expansions to cooperative maritime capacity.

When the Indonesian Navy alerted the International Submarine Escape and Rescue Liaison Office (ISMERLO), the cooperative body manned its operations room to provide continual assistance and international coordination. Singapore was the first to deploy response forces.

On Wednesday afternoon, the Republic of Singapore Navy's submarine rescue vessel *Swift Rescue* sailed from Changi Naval Base. Thursday morning, Malaysia's submarine rescue ship *Mega Bakti* got underway from Kota Kinabulu. On the same day, the Indian defence ministry announced that its Deep Submergence Rescue Vessel (DSRV) had been ordered for dispatch from Visakhapatnam Naval Base. These vessels would only offer moderate assistance to the search operations, but, if *Nanggala* was found submerged, Indonesia would be unable to rescue the crew without this sort of specialised assistance.

By Friday evening, Australia announced its contribution. Its frigate *Ballarat*, equipped with advanced sonar and a helicopter, and the support ship *Sirius*, able to replenish other vessels, would do more to assist with the search. Early Saturday, a US Navy P-8 Poseidon, arguably the military kit most capable of locating a lost submarine, arrived to support the operations.

No One Nation Can Go It Alone

This is a familiar story in the intensely maritime Southeast Asian region. When tragedy strikes at sea, rarely can one nation go it alone. Friends assemble to assist. When AirAsia flight QZ8501 disappeared from radar above the Java Sea in 2014, surface ships, aircraft, and search and rescue experts from more than a dozen countries assembled to support the response.

Similar coalitions also developed to search for Malaysian Airlines Flight MH370 and to render assistance after natural disasters such as the 2013 Super Typhoon Yolanda and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Southeast Asian maritime partners also cooperate day-in and day-out in their fight against terrorists, pirates, and other criminals. Coordination is also key to responding to steady-state maritime threats such as the trafficking of humans and illicit goods and the unlawful harvesting of marine resources.

Bringing international assets into the fold provides much-needed additional capacity, but also creates additional challenges regarding coordination and management. If the forces are not ready to work together, then the arrival of a foreign ship, aircraft or expert can become a distraction that does more harm than good.

Steps Towards Greater Cooperation

The search for *Nanggala* reaffirms the need for the maritime forces of Southeast Asia to continue expanding their cooperative capacity. Such capacity must be based on

mutual trust, confidence, and some degree of interoperability. While high-end systems that connect electronically to one another can be incredibly useful, it is the human-to-human element that is most important.

The first step toward cooperation is the confidence to ask for help. Then, there is a more technical challenge related to making sure the requests and reciprocal responses are delivered in formats that enable the legal and bureaucratic mechanisms of both partners to quickly make decisions.

The early deployment of MV *Swift Rescue*, suggests that the Indonesian-Singapore relationship was able to work through these steps more quickly than the other bilateral partnerships.

Once the forces are on scene, unit commanders must understand each other's protocols to efficiently cooperate. Such efficiency can only be built upon familiarity developed through practice.

Southeast Asia's Maritime Challenges

Southeast Asia's maritime challenges will not disappear anytime soon. Nefarious actors will continue to undermine safety, conduct illicit activities, and commit crimes against others at sea. Terrible accidents will happen.

Southeast Asian states have made tremendous strides to build confidence and interoperability between their maritime forces. However, readiness to execute complex maritime operations is not like riding a bicycle. Proficiency must be maintained through practice and partners can always do better.

Therefore, multilateral exercises such as those sponsored by international mechanisms like the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) and Western Pacific Naval Symposium as well as hosted by states, like Indonesia's *Komodo* and the US' *SEACAT*, are so vitally important.

There is a common desire for the officers planning those events to push them toward the "high-end" and focus on "advance warfare" tactics. Such pressure is not all bad, but the planners, and those supplying them with policy oversight, should remember that the next time they assemble it will probably not be to conduct combined war-at-sea.

More likely, it will be to conduct missions such as counter-terrorism, search and rescue, or disaster response. Including the policymaking and diplomatic participants would be a valuable step forward.

There is nothing wrong with training for the most likely scenarios. In fact, the trust and interoperability developed in these constabulary missions are the exact same foundations upon which combined navy warfare operations are built.

It will be some time before we have enough information to know if a faster, more able, international response would have made a difference for the crew of *KRI Nanggala-402*. But when the Indonesian Navy announced, four days after the sub had gone

missing, they had found the boat well below its crush depth; it became clear that more international cooperative measures are needed to deal with such emergencies. In this case, 53 souls onboard were lost.

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