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FAILURE TO LAUNCH?

Indonesia against China's Grey Zone Tactics

*Indonesia has been unable to strategically respond to China's grey zone tactics in its North Natuna Sea exclusive economic zone. **EVAN A. LAKSMANA** argues that despite China's clearly escalatory steps in the area, Jakarta's response has been to compartmentalise and downplay them, a consequence of muddled strategic thinking and policy paralysis. Indonesian political leaders and strategic policymakers focus on toning down maritime crises when they arise, rather than preventing them from emerging in the first place as they should.*



The Indonesian coastguard, Bakamla, being trained shortly before Covid-19. Indonesia will need to do much more than it has in recent years to respond strategically to China's grey zone tactics. The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

China has been subjecting Indonesia to maritime grey zone tactics — competitive acts between states short of all-out warfare. In the North Natuna Sea, Indonesia's exclusive

economic zone (EEZ) closest to the South China Sea, China has been mobilising its fishing vessels, to the accompaniment of its coastguard and maritime militia. In recent years, there have been multiple public crises over China's illegal fishing activities in the area; the most recent occurred between December 2019 and January 2020. Conversations with Indonesia's maritime law enforcement officials, however, suggest that China's incursions have never truly stopped; they have only become less publicised.

Recently, China has upped the ante. A Chinese survey vessel spent seven weeks from August to October 2021 conducting intensive seabed mapping inside Indonesia's EEZ, south of the Harbour Energy Tuna Block concession. Jakarta has kept relatively mum about the matter, even though up to nine Indonesian navy and coastguard (Bakamla) patrol craft were standing by and observing, with [apparent orders](#) not to intervene. A *Reuters* report of December 2021 suggests that China has effectively crossed Indonesia's "red line" by demanding that Indonesia [stop its drilling activities](#) in the area.

China's Objectives

Why does China subject Indonesia to grey zone tactics? The answer is naturally dyadic — China pursues certain objectives, in the knowledge that Indonesia will fail to properly respond.

China believes it has "overlapping maritime rights" with Indonesia as per its interpretation of their "[informal understanding](#)" reached in the 1990s. China's behaviour is also less about legal disputes, as such, and more about a gradual strategic push to get Jakarta to inadvertently or implicitly acknowledge China's rights. Now that China has control over key strategic areas in the South China Sea, it feels more confident in pushing the envelope further.

But that is to be expected. Hegemonic powers expand until there is no more room left or there is sufficient pushback. Indonesia has failed to show strong pushback. Its diplomatic response has been publicly tepid, even if officials insist that they have conveyed Indonesia's strong "rejection" privately. Its military/security response has been haphazard, inconsistent, and largely symbolic. There is certainly no strong economic or political pushback, nor costs imposed on China.

Explaining Indonesia's Non-Response

For one thing, Indonesian policymakers are not clear on what the goal of such pushback would be. Some believe the goal of getting China to renounce its "nine-dash line" map is simply unattainable. Others only seek crisis resolution rather than prevention — President Joko Widodo abhors strategic noise crowding out his domestic agenda. Moreover, many believe there is no strategic problem with China as they see its behaviour as constituting merely a law enforcement issue.

This lack of clarity on the strategic goal is the first sign of failure. Rather than seeking a limited, achievable goal — that of how to stop China's illegal incursions into the North Natuna Sea — Indonesian policymakers dilute the problem and settle for a general response sufficient to tone down the crisis. They also settle for hollow responses that

they can sell to the domestic audience as signs of “strongly asserting” Indonesia’s sovereignty, such as conducting a cabinet meeting aboard a warship.

Part of the reason for such muddled thinking by Indonesian policymakers is their insistence that the country is not in the same boat as the South China Sea claimants. After all, Jakarta does not stake a claim in the disputes. It has a strong bilateral relationship with China and a legally recognised position under international law. Consequently, Indonesian policymakers are prone to viewing the grey zone incursions as short-term, maritime law enforcement problems, rather than a wider strategic gambit by China.

From the lack of clarity on goals, comes the lack of strategic coherence and the growth in strategic paralysis — the inability to integrate a wider range of instruments, from the diplomatic to the military and the economic, in an all-out pushback. Instead, Indonesia compartmentalises the problem — separating its bilateral ties with China from the North Natuna Sea issue, the South China Sea disputes, and great power politics. This approach seems ostensibly reasonable given the complexity of each of those areas, and the fact that China is the most domestically polarising foreign policy issue of today.

The Indonesian elite are also increasingly dependent on, and vulnerable to, the private benefits and public goods that China has been providing, especially during the pandemic era. But the more they worry about public scrutiny over dealings with China, the less transparent strategic policymakers have become. Therein lies the nub of the problem: China’s grey zone strategy is succeeding where there is a lack of transparency in Indonesia. It is even more so when Indonesia’s policymakers seem unable to conceive of a range of options beyond knuckling under quietly on the one end of the spectrum, and at the other extreme going to war over fisheries.

These broader flaws in Indonesia’s strategic policymaking ecosystem explain Jakarta’s failure to launch a meaningful response to China’s grey zone tactics. There are various options that Jakarta policymakers have yet to seriously contemplate, such as projects involving minilateral maritime alliances, or the reviewing of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in Indonesia. But if the president is not personally invested in directing a strategic response, each strategic policymaking agency and actor — from the navy and coastguard to the foreign ministry — will develop its own responses disparate from those of the others.

By way of an ideal response, Indonesia’s strategic policymakers would need to clearly articulate a limited, attainable goal in pushing back against China in the North Natuna Sea. With measurable goals, one could better specify the appropriate tools available to achieve them. But, more importantly, Indonesia needs to integrate — not just coordinate — those different tools of statecraft to properly respond.

Alas, those are not conditions likely to occur soon. We will instead continue to see recurring maritime “encounters” and “crises” between Indonesia and China every now and then. China’s gradual strategic inroads will continue even as Indonesia claims victory in each instance. The underrated success of grey zone tactics lies in the strategic delusion that the targets of those tactics experience and hold on to.

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