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INDONESIA'S RESPONSE TO CHINA'S GREY ZONE STRATEGY

Diplomacy, Defence, and Law Enforcement

*Grey zone activities refer to state-driven activities to harm another state, using state and non-state means below the threshold of war. **RISTIAN ATRIANDI SUPRIYANTO** argues that Indonesia's response to China's grey zone strategy in the South China Sea is three-pronged, involving diplomacy, defence/the military, and law enforcement. Thus far none of them has succeeded to deter, let alone stop, China's grey zone activities.*



An Indonesian fisherman. KKP and Bakamla intend to develop a national fishing fleet to form the country's own maritime militia. *Image by Sopan Sopian from Pixabay.*

The Absence of “Grey Zone” in Indonesia’s Official Policy Lexicon

The online *Cambridge Dictionary* [defines](#) “grey zone” as “activities by a *state* [italics added] that are harmful to another state and are sometimes considered to be acts of war, but are not legally acts of war”. The perpetrator of grey zone (GZ) activities must be a state, even though non-state means are employed. Although the term “grey zone” has entered the English lexicon, it has not entered into Indonesia’s official use, where there are other terms with similar meanings. In the 2015 *Defence White Paper* (DWP), Indonesia mentioned “hybrid threats” (*ancaman hibrida*) for the first time, which included not only violations of its maritime boundary but also terrorism, separatism, armed insurrection, piracy, pandemics, and natural disasters. Some of these threats are not only non-state driven but also non-human in origin. Hybrid threats, taken in totality, are thus not in the GZ. Another related Indonesian term is “non-military threats” (*ancaman nirmiliter*). But, like hybrid threats, this term includes non-state and non-human drivers that are irrelevant to what we know as GZ.

The apparent absence of GZ in Indonesia’s official policy lexicon does not suggest Jakarta’s ignorance about it. President Joko Widodo aspires for Indonesia to become a “Global Maritime Fulcrum” (*Poros Maritim Dunia*, PMD), which has come under challenge from China’s GZ. For instance, Indonesia’s Presidential Regulation No. 8 in 2021 on General Policy on State Defence 2020–2024 specifically [invokes](#) “violations by Chinese Coast Guard in the North Natuna Sea” — Indonesia’s term for the South China Sea — as one of Indonesia’s main non-military threats. Still, the regulation does not consider such violations as worthy of classification within the ambit of GZ activity.

Indonesia’s Response

While the PMD has drawn domestic attention to maritime affairs, it is primarily non-security in nature. Indeed, much of its commitment and attention resides in the economic dimension, especially in capital investment and infrastructure development, where China is Indonesia’s most prominent underwriter. Thus, President Widodo must balance between the economic demands for capital investment and infrastructure development, and the security imperative to counter China’s GZ. This has elicited a three-pronged response: diplomacy, defence/military, and law enforcement strategies.

Diplomacy

“Lawfare” and “cartofare” characterise Indonesia’s diplomatic response. Lawfare is Indonesia’s employment of legal and diplomatic means in response to China’s GZ activities. Such means include the submission of notes verbales and lodging of diplomatic protests, some of which are undisclosed for fear of inflaming tensions with China. The most recent example is the non-disclosure of Indonesia’s protests over China’s incursions to disrupt oil exploration activities within Indonesian waters in August–October 2021. The public knew about the diplomatic flare-up only after an Indonesian politician raised the issue of the stand-off in parliament. Even then, the Indonesian foreign ministry (Kemlu) refused to answer media requests for clarification.

In addition to bilateral diplomatic means, Indonesia pursues multilateral diplomacy to voice its anti-GZ responses. Within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), however, Indonesia’s capacity to vent its diplomatic response is severely

constrained by the need for consensus with other member states. ASEAN joint statements have never ventured beyond usual concerns about the necessity for all parties to exercise restraint in line with international laws, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Indonesia's invocation of the Philippines versus China Permanent Court of Arbitration award came too late and too little. Indonesia's first public statement on the award skirted the illegality of China's nine-dash line (9DL) claim. Invocations are also few and far between ASEAN joint statements, in which some member states are wary about antagonising China.

The proposed Code of Conduct (CoC) for the South China Sea might be another diplomatic means for Indonesia to respond to China's GZ strategy. Unfortunately, there is little information in the public domain on progress made on the CoC negotiations. Even so, one could safely assume that the CoC is unlikely to call for, much less exert, any restraining influence on China's GZ operations. As such, chances are that anti-GZ provisions will be significantly watered down during the CoC formulation and negotiations.

Besides lawfare, Indonesia's diplomatic response also projects "cartofare" — the drawing and publication of new maps, as well as the renaming of relevant waters. In 2017, Indonesia published a new map, called *Peta NKRI*, which renamed the Indonesian portion of the South China Sea as the "North Natuna Sea" (*Laut Natuna Utara*). While China protested the publication and renaming, Indonesia's actions had no practical implications whatsoever for what Indonesia could do about China's GZ. Admittedly, Indonesia's cartofare is nothing but a mere emulation of what other countries, including China itself, have done. For instance, China published the 9DL claim on its passport, while the Philippines and Vietnam have renamed the South China Sea as the "West Philippine Sea" and "East Sea" respectively.

Defence/Military

Indonesia's military and law enforcement responses to China's GZ strategy are no less ineffective than the diplomatic front. Jakarta simply does not wish to raise tensions with Beijing. The operational focus of the Indonesian National Armed Forces' (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, TNI) response is on security and sovereignty over the Natuna Islands and their surrounding waters. On land, TNI has established new operational command headquarters (HQ), both joint and service-based. Established in 2019, the first new regional joint command (Kogabwilhan I) on Bintan Island is the "[first responder](#)" to conflicts within its operational area, which includes the Natuna Islands. At sea, TNI is relocating the First Fleet Command (Koarmada I) HQ from Jakarta to Bintan Island. The fleet is slated to accommodate up to 120 fast patrol boats, including the new *Golok* class. Armed with fifth-generation Kongsberg naval strike missiles and with a speed of up to 55 knots, the *Golok* class could significantly upgrade Indonesia's patrol capacity in its exclusive economic zone. For airspace security, among other measures, Indonesia will maintain radar upgrades and potentially station the new Rafale and F-15ID combat aircraft in Pekanbaru and/or Pontianak — both offer closer reach to the Natuna Islands than does Java — after their induction into the air force.

The TNI organisational and force expansion is intended for combat operations and is thus ill-suited to counter China's GZ activities. The apparent mismatch between Indonesia's response and the nature of China's GZ activities seems emblematic of

Indonesia's dysfunctional strategy. In 2014, Indonesia's defence minister Purnomo Yusgiantoro [planned](#) to station 16 US-built AH-64 gunships on the Natuna airfield. The statement might have been a bluff to China, but it cast doubt on Indonesia's understanding of the mechanics of China's GZ. Today, Kogabwilhan I [consists](#) of a combat engineer battalion, ground-based air defence missiles, and field artillery. Everything considered, China's GZ may not even be the primary driver, if at all a driver, behind TNI organisational and force expansion. Surfeited with manpower for decades, TNI has taken China's GZ as a convenient excuse to pursue organisational and force expansion.

Law Enforcement

Indonesia's response to China's GZ comes more appropriately from the maritime law enforcement agencies, namely the Indonesian fishery surveillance or Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (KKP), and Indonesia's coastguard equivalent, Bakamla. KKP is responsible for many of the arrests of foreign fishermen caught operating illegally in Indonesian waters. Since 2016, KKP has made some high-profile arrests of Chinese maritime militia, during which multiple stand-offs with Chinese law enforcement vessels ensued. But KKP only addresses problems regarding maritime poaching, which renders it unable to address other forms of GZ activity, such as Chinese interference with Indonesia's oil exploration in the Natuna Islands.

Even so, KKP and Bakamla plan to create the "Indonesian National Fishing Fleet" (*Nelayan Nasional Indonesia*), which will become Indonesia's own "maritime militia", or the "eye and ear" at sea for Indonesian authorities. The plan is controversial since it may involve introducing long-distance fishermen from Java to the Natuna, which has drawn consternation from local Natuna fishermen due to competition for fishery resources. The only solution, should the plan pass, would be to empower the local fishermen themselves with skills and resources for long-distance fishing. But some Indonesian officials have also suggested re-allowing foreign fishermen to operate in Indonesian waters. The return of foreign fishermen in Indonesian waters could make law enforcement more challenging. Even with the promise of thorough government monitoring, such operations could precipitate corrupt practices like those of the past in which foreigners and authorities colluded to evade laws and regulations.

Limitations in KKP mission scope and authority present Bakamla as the most relevant civilian maritime law enforcement agency to confront China's GZ in the South China Sea. During the Indonesia-China stand-off in August–October 2021, Bakamla deployed three patrol vessels to shadow Chinese survey and coastguard vessels. Satellite images from the Center for Strategic and International Studies Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative or [CSIS/AMTI](#) suggest that "Indonesian authorities seem more likely than their Malaysian counterparts to confront Chinese vessels at closer ranges". In response to the stand-off, Bakamla in December 2021 suggested meeting some of its ASEAN counterparts to develop shared standard operating procedures (SOPs) when responding to China's GZ activity in the South China Sea, especially by its maritime militia. Possibly, Bakamla expects ASEAN coastguards or their equivalents to coordinate actions to address China's GZ in a more effective way.

Indeed, Bakamla is under pressure from overstretched resources in responding to the scale of China's GZ. Bakamla complains about fuel shortages and inadequate vessels

and equipment when addressing China's GZ, not least the activity of Chinese coastguards. This is why Bakamla continues to rely heavily on naval support for much of its operations, including personnel for its visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) operations. During the stand-off, AMTI found the navy to have deployed three vessels. Even then, the number of patrols remains far from sufficient. The stand-off saw Indonesian patrol ships "only one at a time, spending two or three days there before heading back to shore".

Contrary to prevailing security norms in the South China Sea, Indonesia seems less hesitant about deploying naval assets than do other claimants to the geographical ambit of China's GZ activity. The norm suggests that grey-hull naval warships — due to their combat ability — are more provocative and escalatory than law enforcement or white-hull vessels. The deployment of naval warships in anti-GZ response could thus raise tensions or worse, lend China the justification to mount a stronger counter-response. However, there is more to Indonesia's naval-centric law enforcement than meets the eye. While there are suggestions to upgrade Bakamla into a full-fledged coastguard in the fashion of its American or Japanese counterparts, it is waging uphill turf battles against more senior and established Indonesian peer agencies, not least the navy and KKP.

In response to turf battles, the Indonesian government is pushing for an "omnibus law" on maritime security that modifies all relevant laws and regulations in order to elevate Bakamla as Indonesia's lead agency in maritime law enforcement. Understandably, the omnibus bill faces great opposition from other maritime security agencies, which mount all sorts of political pressures and bureaucratic resistance. Until the bill's passage, Bakamla will likely face tough competition for resources with other agencies, rendering it continually underprepared to address GZ challenges.

An Ineffective Response

Indonesia's response to China's GZ in the South China Sea is three-pronged. Diplomatically, Indonesia pursues lawfare and cartofare to seek international solidarity on UNCLOS in response to China's 9DL. In addition, Indonesia's diplomacy aims to impose upon China reputational costs over its GZ activities. Militarily, Indonesia implements organisational and force expansion, including increased deployment of combat, surveillance, and patrol assets, in and around the Natuna Islands. The military approach goes in tandem with law enforcement measures. These measures include deployment of patrol vessels to shadow Chinese vessels alleged to have infringed upon Indonesian waters. Further measures include collaboration between Bakamla and some of its ASEAN counterparts to develop shared SOPs in response to China's GZ in the South China Sea. But none of these has succeeded in deterring, let alone stopping, China's GZ.

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