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## **New Defence Structures in Riau Islands: Implications and Challenges**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*In addition to the recently established Joint Defence Regional Command I (Kogabwilhan I), Indonesia's Riau Islands province will soon also host the navy's First Navy Fleet (Koarmada I). **ADHI PRIAMARIZKI** addresses the potential implications of and challenges arising from the establishment of these new defence structures in the province.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Tanjung Pinang, the capital of Riau Islands province (KEPRI), has been the location of Joint Defence Regional Command I (Kogabwilhan I) since Indonesia began establishing *kogabwilhans* back in 2019. Kogabwilhan II and III are located respectively in Kutai Kartanegara (East Kalimantan province) and Timika (Central Papua province). The Indonesian navy (TNI AL) also recently made plans to move the First Navy Fleet (Koarmada I) from Jakarta to Tanjung Pinang. Koarmada I is expected to operate in the new location from [5 December 2022](#). The relocation is part of the establishment of the Republic of Indonesia Fleet Command (Koarmada RI) in Jakarta. TNI AL will also relocate its Naval Main Base IV (Lantamal IV) from Tanjung Pinang to Batam, also in KEPRI. The relocation will move TNI AL operational units closer to its priority operational areas: the Malacca Strait, Natuna Sea and Archipelagic Sea Lane I (ALKI I).



U.S. Navy warships participating in Exercise Garuda Shield 2022. *The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

## **The Strategic Importance of KEPRI**

The Indonesian government has long acknowledged Natuna waters, which is part of Riau Islands province, as one of its defence flashpoints, primarily because of the geopolitical dynamics and tensions in the South China Sea. Thus, it was no surprise that the 2022 Super Garuda Shield (SGS) multilateral naval exercise initially included the Natuna Sea as one of its training spots. However, the Natuna Sea option was later dropped and the location [changed with no official explanation](#). The exercise was eventually held in several locations, i.e., Dabo Singkep waters (Riau Islands province), Baturaja (South Sumatera province) and Amborawang (East Kalimantan province).

The annual Garuda Shield exercises, a prominent feature of the military partnership between Indonesia and the United States, morphed in 2022 into an expanded SGS, with the participation of [11 other armed forces](#): Australia, Japan, and Singapore deployed military personnel for the exercise, which was conducted from 1 to 14 August 2022, while Canada, Timor Leste, France, India, Malaysia, South Korea, Papua New Guinea and the United Kingdom sent military observers. The United States perceives SGS as a platform to enhance regional cooperation in support of its concept of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Prior to the SGS exercise, in early 2022, the commander of Kogabwilhan I, Vice Admiral Muhammad Ali, held separate meetings with Australia's then navy chief, Michael Noonan, and the US ambassador to Indonesia, Sung Kim. Discussions at the two meetings revolved around the possibility of deepening maritime security cooperation between Kogabwilhan I and its Australian and American counterparts. Based on the writer's record, these meetings were the first time that Kogabwilhan I had hosted foreign representatives since the outbreak of COVID-19. The meetings showcased the strategic importance of Kogabwilhan I in the region.

Moreover, the Riau Islands province holds considerable economic prominence, not only for Indonesia, but also the region: the province has been long acknowledged as part of the regional maritime trade system and it serves as an important source of raw materials for its domestic and international neighbours. The strategic significance of KEPRI has thus made the task of ensuring the defence and security of the province and its surroundings a paramount one.

### **New Structures, New Challenges**

The new defence and security structures in KEPRI pose several challenges, the first of which is the question of readiness. In the last two years, Kogabwilhan I has been focused on supporting pandemic management within its jurisdiction, including supervising the COVID-19 emergency hospital in Galang Island, which may have affected its readiness level.

In 2009, the Indonesian government crafted the so-called Minimum Essential Force (MEF) programme as a framework for its military modernisation and transformation. The scheme not only aimed to modernise TNI's arsenal but also to further develop the military's organisational posture. As the MEF programme is slated to end in 2024, it is imperative that the Indonesian military ensure that the new combat platforms acquired are interoperable across services. This consideration made the SGS exercise more important than ever for Kogabwilhan I. The selection of several locations under Kogabwilhan I's jurisdiction as SGS training spots provided an opportunity for the TNI to gauge the readiness of the regional command. Moreover, the SGS was not solely an army exercise. Unlike the previous Garuda Shield exercises, the 2022 SGS included the navy, air force, and the marines. The involvement of all the military services allowed the TNI the opportunity to exercise its joint-warfare doctrine as well as learn from the experiences of the other participants.

The second challenge is that the establishment of Kogabwilhan I and Koarmada I may add new layers of bureaucracy to the already crowded bureaucratic environment in KEPRI. Consequently, these new defence structures will create a coordination challenge, not only between the military and the civilian authorities, but also among the defence and security apparatuses. For example, the existence of Koarmada I in Tanjung Pinang may add another authority in the management of the seas surrounding the province. For now, the territorial sea surrounding KEPRI is supervised by the Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla), the Transportation Ministry's coast guard (KPLP Kemenhub), the water police (Polairud) of POLRI or the national police, the Marine Resources and Fisheries Ministry's marine and fisheries resources management directorate (PSDKP), and TNI AL.

The third challenge is related to the manpower issue. The new defence structures require manpower to operate. This requirement can be met by relocating officers from other regions and recruiting new officers. But relocating soldiers and non-military officers from other regions entails bringing over their families as well. My discussion with officials and academics in KEPRI indicated that catering for the housing needs of these officers and their families poses a challenge for the local civilian and regional military authorities, especially in view of the limited housing resources in the province, notably in Tanjung Pinang city. Providing for the housing and welfare needs of these officers and their families could be an added burden on the already high manpower-related spending in the national defence budget.

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