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Australia-Indonesia: Towards a Maritime Strategic Partnership

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Synopsis

In light of emerging trends in the regional strategic environment, Australia and Indonesia should expand their defence cooperation in the maritime domain.

Commentary

SHARING A long maritime boundary, Australia and Indonesia should mate their futures together at sea. The maritime security challenges that both nations face mainly revolve around non-traditional security issues, particularly people smuggling, illegal fishing, and marine pollution.

However, in light of three inter-related emerging trends in the regional strategic environment, both countries should move beyond these to expand their defence cooperation in the maritime domain.

New emerging trends

First, as noted in the white paper "Australia in the Asian Century" the world's economy is gradually gravitating toward Asia, which gives more strategic weight to the region. As a result, many regional countries, including Australia and Indonesia, are modernising their militaries, with a priority on maritime capabilities. A US naval analysis firm, AMI International, projects that Asia-Pacific navies will spend a combined US\$180 billion on almost 800 new ships, surface craft, and submarines through 2031. While military modernisation is a legitimate consequence of economic rise, it could provoke misunderstanding and miscalculation if not cautiously deployed. In response to this trend, the US has engaged in the "rebalancing," including repositioning more maritime forces in Asia, to maintain regional stability.

Second, the military rebalancing also emphasises Australia's role as a US ally. Aside from the US Marines deployed in Darwin, the rebalancing also involves rotational deployments of US navy and air force in Western Australia and Northern Territory. While the rebalancing has been well-publicised throughout the region, some countries are still suspicious of an increased US regional military presence, especially China. Beijing could respond by, for example, conducting surveillance activities within the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of countries which host US military forces, like Australia. This kind of activities would require China's maritime forces, particularly submarines, to expand into the Indian Ocean through the Indonesian archipelago.

Third, the Indonesian archipelagic waters could become more saturated by transiting foreign maritime forces,

particularly along the maritime chokepoints like the Sunda and Lombok Straits. Owing to their greater depth and lesser commercial shipping traffic than the Malacca Strait, the Sunda and Lombok Straits offer an attractive transit alternative for maritime forces. For instance, the Lombok Strait has the required depth for operations and safe navigation of nuclear submarines. Besides the US, Chinese and Indian nuclear submarines might also transit these straits to conduct patrols along the Indo-Pacific rim. A recent Indian Navy report, which confirmed Chinese submarine operations in the Indian Ocean, further supports this possibility.

As a result, the Sunda and Lombok Straits, as well as the maritime areas along the Australia-Indonesia boundary, could become more crowded with submarines and other types of maritime forces from different countries. These maritime areas, however, form the backyards of littoral states Australia and Indonesia, which have direct interests at stake. For example, a collision between opposing maritime units, like nuclear submarines, could result in politically and militarily destabilising consequences which undermine the security of littoral states, apart from creating an environmental disaster. Moreover, these areas harbour a large number of offshore infrastructures, which could risk collateral damage from incidents at sea between naval forces.

Maritime strategic partnership

In response to these trends, Australia and Indonesia should deepen defence cooperation in the maritime domain, especially along their shared maritime boundary, as provided for by Article 14 of the 2006 Australia-Indonesia Security Cooperation Framework Agreement, also known as the Lombok Treaty.

At the strategic level, both governments should form a maritime strategic partnership and strategic discussion forum, to complement the existing meetings of foreign and defence ministers, as well as annual military leaders' meetings. To start with, both countries could hold more substantive and frank discussions leading to a genuine 'strategic trust' about the potential implications of Australia's role in the US military rebalancing for Indonesia's national security, as well as China's potential military responses.

More importantly, they should conduct mutual strategic consultation with regards to specific responses to these trends. For example, there should be a consultation about whether and how they could be militarily involved in regional flashpoints, such as the territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas.

At the operational and tactical levels, both countries may translate their strategic initiatives into joint operational arrangements. For example, a joint maritime surveillance system could improve mutual situational awareness, which should include a joint operational command and control centre. Manned by defence personnel from both countries, this centre could coordinate the activities of military surveillance assets, such as ships, aircraft, and radar systems, to generate a common picture of mutually designated surveillance areas, such as the Timor Sea and southern approaches of the Lombok Strait. For instance, Australia's future acquisitions of high-end surveillance platforms, such as the Triton drones and P-8A Poseidon aircraft, could support Indonesia's awareness over the waters to its south.

Joint maritime warfare training and exercises could contribute to enhanced interoperability in a combat environment, specifically in undersea warfare. Indonesia could also participate in the US-Australia bilateral security arrangements, such as trilateral naval exercises in the Indian Ocean. As Indonesia and Australia also plan to field a large submarine fleet, they should discuss the possibility of bilateral submarine search and rescue (SAR) cooperation. Finally, a joint maritime doctrine planning should be contemplated to ensure smooth operational and tactical collaboration between their maritime forces during joint deployments.

Potential challenges

Challenges to such a deep partnership should be expected, especially on the Indonesian side. Many would criticise and protest that Indonesia has abandoned its "free and active" foreign policy by joining a coalition to contain China's military rise. Like Australia, Indonesia might well reject choosing between the US and China. However, juggling between Washington and Beijing indefinitely is also impossible.

Indonesia's central position along the Indo-Pacific rim means it could be caught in the crossfire should there be a Sino-US conflict. By partnering with Canberra, Jakarta could at least have a cushioning buffer down under from the potential flashpoints to its north.

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