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Trends in Southeast Asia

THE NATUNAS: TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY
IN THE FOREFRONT OF INDONESIA–
CHINA RELATIONS

LEO SURYADINATA AND
MUSTAFA IZZUDDIN

ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK
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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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The Natunas: Territorial Integrity in the Forefront of Indonesia–China Relations

By Leo Suryadinata and Mustafa Izzuddin

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In May 2017 the Indonesian military conducted a large-scale exercise in the Natuna Islands. This was in the wake of three incidents in 2016 that involved Chinese fishing boats. Jakarta accused the vessels of “stealing fish” within the Indonesian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) but Beijing considered these boats to be carrying out “regular activities in Chinese traditional fishing grounds”.
- Both Beijing and Jakarta acknowledge that the Natuna Islands belong to Indonesia. But while the Chinese avoid mentioning the issue of the islands having an EEZ, Jakarta openly claims that the islands definitely do have an EEZ.
- The two countries are “strategic partners”, and while China needs Indonesia to help realize some of its “One Belt One Road” ambitions, Jakarta eyes funding from Beijing to help its “Maritime Power Dream”.
- Indonesia has adhered to its claim of being an Archipelagic State and has relied on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to support its territorial claims. China has also openly stated that the South China Sea issue would be resolved with reference to UNCLOS.
- However, Indonesians are divided over the issue. There are those who wish to bring the problem to an international tribunal, because they have no faith in bilateral negotiations as a possible path to a solution. The rise of hardline Muslims in recent months and their

critical view of Chinese investments in Indonesia may also affect Jakarta–Beijing relations.

- While the Natunas is likely to remain a perennial issue between Indonesia and China in the short to medium term, it is unlikely to derail the bilateral relationship as economics is likely to continue trumping politics in Sino-Indonesian relations, at least under Indonesian President Jokowi’s administration. It is also unlikely to bring about an outright naval confrontation between Indonesia and China.

The Natunas: Territorial Integrity in the Forefront of Indonesia–China Relations

By Leo Suryadinata and Mustafa Izzuddin¹

INTRODUCTION

On 18 and 19 May 2017, the Indonesian military conducted a large-scale training exercise in the Natuna Seas, known as Latihan Perang Pasukan Pemukul Reaksi Cepat (War Exercise of the Rapid Reaction Attacker Troops). This exercise was witnessed by all the governors from the twenty-three provinces of Indonesia.² On 19 May President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) came to Tanjung Datuk, Kabupaten Natuna (Natuna Regency) to observe the display of military weapons.³ He delivered a speech to 1,500 personnel there, advising the Indonesian military to upgrade their skills and defence system.⁴ Earlier he had conveyed his condolences to the families of the soldiers killed on 17 May during the military exercise due to a malfunctioning artillery cannon.⁵ The military exercise garnered increased attention from the Indonesian government to the Natuna Islands, following last year's tensions in the area.

¹ Leo Suryadinata is Visiting Senior Fellow and Mustafa Izzuddin is Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

² <<http://regional.kompas.com/read/2017/05/19/18514521/ini.foto-foto.23.gubernur.saat.ikuti.latihan.militer.di.natuna>>.

³ <<https://nasional.tempo.co/read/news/2017/05/19/078876945/tinjau-latihan-tempur-di-natuna-jokowi-minta-tni-terus-berbenah>>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <<http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2017/05/19/19334091/jokowi.sampaikan.belasungkawa.atas.gugurnya.4.prajurit.tni.di.natuna>>.

In early 2016, three incidents took place in the Natuna Islands (Natunas) over the span of three months involving Indonesia and the People's Republic of China (hereafter, China). These took place on 19 March, 27 May and 17 June, when Chinese fishermen and their vessels encroached into Indonesian waters.

On 19 March, the Chinese fishing boat *Kway Fey* strayed into the Natunas' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and was arrested by the Indonesian navy for illegal fishing. A high-capacity Chinese coast guard vessel suddenly emerged and succeeded in freeing the fishing boat. Eight crew members were detained by the Indonesian authorities.⁶

On 27 May, a Chinese fishing vessel entered the EEZ again, but this time, the Indonesian navy was better prepared. Not only did the Indonesian coast guard/navy detain the fishing vessel, but the Chinese patrol boat accompanying the vessel also refrained from intervening. Unsurprisingly, China's Foreign Ministry demanded the release of the fishermen, and its spokesman also said that Beijing and Jakarta "have different views" on the waters where the Chinese vessel was detained.⁷

The third incident occurred on 17 June where a Chinese fishing vessel was again intercepted by an Indonesian patrol boat. According to a Chinese media report, one fisherman was injured but was rescued by a Chinese patrol boat, while the fishing vessel and seven fishermen were detained by the Indonesian authorities. The Chinese patrol boat failed to liberate the fishing vessel primarily because three Indonesian warships had reportedly arrived in the vicinity to stop the rescue effort.⁸

The Chinese Foreign Ministry protested over this third incident and argued that the fishing vessel was plying its trade on "Chinese traditional fishing grounds", while Jakarta insisted that the vessel was in fact fishing in the EEZ, which extends for 200 nautical miles (370

⁶ "RI Confronts China on Fishing", *Jakarta Post*, 21 March 2016. The Chinese source says that one captain and eight crew members were detained, *Global Times*, 23 March 2016.

⁷ Leo Suryadinata, "The Natunas incident and Indonesia–China relations", *Straits Times*, 23 June 2016.

⁸ *Ibid.*

kilometres) from the coastline of the Natuna Islands.⁹ Moreover, Jakarta also resented the fact that the Chinese patrol boat or coast guard vessel had entered Indonesian waters illegally to intervene in the detention of the Chinese boat by Indonesian authorities. Jakarta also maintained that under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), of which both Indonesia and China are signatories, there is no concept of “traditional fishing grounds”. There is however a provision for “traditional fishing rights” but that can only take effect when there is an agreement between the country that controls the EEZ and the country that wants fishing rights there. According to the leadership in Jakarta, no bilateral agreement exists between Indonesia and China regarding “traditional fishing rights”.¹⁰ This has of course been disputed by Beijing.

The three incidents took place against the backdrop of public declarations from both Jakarta and Beijing that they have no territorial dispute in the South China Sea (SCS). China has also repeatedly acknowledged that the Natuna Islands belong to Indonesia, and Indonesia has been upfront in its stance that it is not a claimant in the SCS dispute and has no intention of making any territorial claims there, now or in the future. But it may be inevitable for Indonesia to be a part of the dispute, given its latitudinous coastline, and the fact that other countries in Southeast Asia have urged Indonesia to play an active role in managing or mediating in the SCS dispute, particularly in unifying the ASEAN claimants and standing up to China’s growing assertiveness in the region.¹¹

Further conflicts between Beijing and Jakarta over the EEZ in and around the Natunas have been avoided after the June incident. Arguably, the three incidents fuelled Indonesian nationalism to such an extent that Jokowi, following that incident, sailed to the Natuna Islands on a navy warship. This apparent show of force signalled his determination to protect the EEZ of the Natuna Islands. The proposal to rename the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Leo Suryadinata, “South China Sea: Is Jakarta no longer neutral?”, *Straits Times*, 24 April 2014.

waters around the Natuna Islands Laut Natuna Utara (North Natuna Sea) can also be viewed in that regard.¹²

This article seeks to discuss the origins and evolution of the Natuna Islands issue within the context of Indonesia's foreign policy, and in particular, its relations with China. It is argued that while the Natuna issue will continue to crop up from time to time and in the process elicit a variety of reactions and responses from Jakarta and Beijing, it is unlikely to bring about an outright naval confrontation between Indonesia and China in the short to medium term, not least because the governing elites of both countries appreciate the value of deepening bilateral economic engagement.

THE ARCHIPELAGIC STATE

The Republic of Indonesia was only proclaimed on 17 August 1945. Prior to that, it was known as the Dutch East Indies, given that it was ruled by the Netherlands. During the colonial times, there was only the Territorial Sea and Maritime Districts Ordinance of 1939 which proclaimed that “the territorial waters of the Indies were to be measured three nautical miles out from the low-tide line of each individual island”.¹³ According to one scholar, “[T]his meant that nearly all of the sea between the islands making up the Netherlands Indies had the status of international waters or high seas.”¹⁴ Even after Indonesia achieved its independence, and despite leaders such as Mohammad Yamin coming up with an embryonic version of an archipelagic state — officially designated by UNCLOS as an internationally recognized state that comprises a series

¹² Leo Suryadinata and Mustafa Izzuddin, “Nationalistic symbolism behind ‘Natuna Sea’”, *Straits Times*, 9 September 2016.

¹³ John G. Butcher, “Becoming an archipelagic state: The Juanda Declaration of 1957 and the ‘struggle’ to gain international recognition of the archipelagic principle”, in *Indonesia beyond the Water’s Edge: Managing Archipelagic State*, edited by Robert Cribb and Michele Ford (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), p. 33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

of islands forming the archipelago¹⁵ — was never enshrined in the 1945 Constitution or the 1950 Provisional Constitution.

Based on UNCLOS Convention Part IV Article 46, the archipelagic concept or doctrine refers to the archipelago as “a group of islands, including parts of the islands, interconnecting waters and other natural features which are so closely interrelated that such islands, waters and other natural features form an intrinsic geographical, economic and political entity, or which historically have been regarded as such”.¹⁶ Simply put, an archipelago is a consolidated single unit of large island groups in an extensive body of water (and the sea) that comes under the exclusive sovereignty of an archipelagic state such as Indonesia, which was designated as such, along with four others, in an international UNCLOS forum held in Jamaica in December 1982.¹⁷

In the mid-1950s, Indonesian leaders realized the importance of the archipelagic concept, and a decision was made to abandon the 3-nautical miles limit for the territorial waters in favour of the 12-nautical-mile limit based on the measurement from “baselines encircling the whole archipelago rather than from the low water line of each island”. This concept was reflected in an Indonesian declaration which came to be known as the “Djuanda Declaration”, promulgated on 13 December 1957 by then Prime Minister of Indonesia Djuanda Kartawidjaja (or Juanda Kartawijaya, 1911–63),¹⁸ who declared Indonesian islands and the seas as a total unit: “... all waters surrounding, between and connecting the islands constituting the Indonesian state ... are integral parts of the territory of the Indonesian state and, therefore, parts of the internal or national waters which are under exclusive sovereignty of the Indonesian state.”¹⁹

¹⁵ See <http://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/part4.htm>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ For a good discussion on the Djuanda Declaration, see Butcher, “Becoming an archipelagic state”.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 39.

This concept initially encountered opposition from Western countries including the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, France and even Japan. They submitted protest notes to Jakarta. It is worth noting that China did not join those countries in their protest, perhaps because Beijing was still preoccupied with its internal affairs, and was also actively seeking allies rather than enemies. Despite this opposition, Indonesia remained committed to seeking recognition as an archipelagic state, which finally bore fruit when the archipelagic concept was accepted internationally during UNCLOS in 1982.²⁰ With the exception of the United States, all major powers signed the UNCLOS as the law governing maritime matters. With UNCLOS 1982, archipelagic states including Indonesia were afforded some degree of security and legitimation. This is what continues to be utilized by Jakarta to defend its case for the full sovereignty of the Natunas.

A SNAPSHOT OF THE NATUNAS

There are four main ways to understand the Natunas in a nutshell: geographically, strategically, historically and domestically. Geographically, the Natunas — a long stretch of islands — is located in the northernmost point of the Indonesian archipelagic state, and in between Peninsula Malaysia to the west and Kalimantan (Borneo) to the east. They are also located a few hundred kilometres northeast of Singapore and sits below the southern tip of Vietnam. The Natunas, whose geographical coordinates are 4° north latitude and 108.15° east longitude, comprises one of four island groups belonging to the Tudjuh Archipelago, with the other three being the Tambelan Islands, Badas Islands and Anambas Islands.²¹

²⁰ Butcher called this “The 25-Year ‘Struggle’” for Indonesia, in “Becoming an archipelagic state”, p. 40.

²¹ On the Anambas Islands, see Deasy Simandjuntak, “Natuna and Anambas Intend to Separate from Riau Islands Province”, *ISEAS Commentary*, 6 February 2017.

The Natuna Islands cover 264,198.37 km², of which 2,001.30 km² are land while 262,197.07 km² are waters. They do not constitute a province, but rather make up one of seven districts of the Riau Islands Province (Provinsi Riau Kepulauan, known as Kepri in Indonesian).²² The Natuna district/regency (or Kabupaten Natuna) oversees 154 islands, of which only 27 islands are inhabited (17.53 per cent).²³ These 154 islands are themselves divided into three groups: North Natuna, which includes Laut Island (Pulau Laut); Middle Natuna, which includes Bunguran (or Natuna Besar) and South Natuna, which includes the Subi Islands and Serasan. The two largest islands are Bunguran and Serasan.

The Natunas are located just north of the Karimata Strait which not only divides the islands of Sumatra and Borneo, but also connects the South China Sea to the Java Sea. In Indonesian atlases in particular, the waters in and around the Natunas, particularly the northern tip of the Natunas, are described as the “Natuna Sea” to assert firmly Indonesia’s sovereignty over the Natunas. The “Natuna Sea”, however, does not feature in world atlases although there have been efforts to have “Natuna Sea” approved by the UN so as to have the name legitimized and subsequently reflected in international maps.²⁴

The Natuna Islands are of strategic importance in two ways. First, they are one of Indonesia’s richest districts or regencies in offshore natural resources, namely in oil and gas reserves as well as fisheries in their waters. According to one source, the East Natuna gas field (known previously as Natuna D-Alpha block), which is a large natural gas field located to the north (and as such, occupies a portion of the SCS) and discovered in the 1970s, houses around 500 million barrels of crude oil reserves and 222 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in-place reserves.²⁵

²² William J. Seta, *Atlas Lengkap Provinsi Republik Indonesia (Untuk SD, SMP, SMA dan Umum)* (Jakarta: PT Wahyu Media, 2010), pp. 18–19.

²³ See Website Resmi Pemerintah Daerah Kabupaten Natuna <<http://natunakab.go.id/>>.

²⁴ Suryadinata and Mustafa, “Nationalistic symbolism behind ‘Natuna Sea’”.

²⁵ “PTTEP to replace Petronas in Indonesia East Natuna Project”, <<https://www.2b1stconsulting.com/pttep-to-replace-petronas-in-indonesia-east-natuna-project/>>.

One other block is the West Natuna fields which feeds gas to Singapore. Fishing activities there are slated to yield around 500,000 tonnes annually, although the locals are able to haul in only a third of the yield due to the use of traditional methods and lack of proper infrastructure and processing facilities, and tend to fish mostly for subsistence.²⁶ Also, the area is rich in biodiversity, where, for example in 2002, 3,000 plant and animal specimens were identified and catalogued by a scientific expedition. It is thus apt to describe the Natunas as the Galapagos of Indonesia.

Second, the Natuna Islands are important for Indonesia to maintain its territorial integrity and fulfil its vision to be one of the largest archipelagic states in the world. Put differently, the Natunas are needed by Indonesia to demonstrate to the world that it is an archipelagic state, as prescribed by UNCLOS. The waters in and around the Natuna Islands establish archipelagic basepoints and baselines (*garis kepulauan*), as required by UNCLOS, and in the process, designate archipelagic waters or sea lanes (*laut kepulauan*) for Indonesia to command and control as an archipelagic state, including all the maritime areas within those baselines. Despite appearing to be geographically isolated from major trade routes, the Natuna Islands are actually positioned in the middle of an important trade passage linking East Asia and West Asia. So, in a sense, the Natunas could prove geopolitically important for Indonesia as regards safeguarding freedom of navigation, and preserving maritime security.

In historical terms, the Natuna Islands were a centrepiece of the Malay Archipelago (Nusantara) even before the formation of Indonesia. This is because the Natunas and its inhabitants were mostly influenced by polities on the Malay Peninsula as early as 1597 when the first ruling government in Natuna was established by the sultanates of Patani and Johor-Riau. While Johor-Riau controlled territories extending beyond the Malay Peninsula to include Sumatra, the Riau Islands and the Lingga

²⁶ Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto, "Indonesia's Natuna Islands: Next Flashpoint in the South China Sea", *RSIS Commentary*, 16 February 2015.

Islands in the South China Sea, Patani ruled the northern part of the Malay Peninsula over what are now the States of Kelantan and Terengganu and the present-day Thai provinces of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani. It is claimed that the son of a royal couple — a princess of Natuna and a Patani royal — by the name of Datuk Kaya became the first legitimate ruler of Natuna. Following that, there had existed a close relationship between the rulers and inhabitants of Natuna and the Malay Peninsula.²⁷

The turning point in the status of the Natunas came after the Anglo-Dutch Treaty was signed by the United Kingdom and Netherlands on 17 March 1824. This treaty, which effectively divided the Malay Archipelago, did not specifically mention whether the Natunas should belong to the British or to the Dutch sphere of influence. But because the Natunas were much closer to the Malay Peninsula than to the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia), it was logical to assume that the Natunas were located in the British sphere of influence. However, on 18 May 1956, the Natuna Islands were subsumed into Indonesia based on the “Letter of the Indonesian Delegation, Central Sumatra Province”, and a little more than forty years later, the Kabupaten Natuna was created within the Riau Islands Province on 12 October 1999 based on Law No. 53, Year 1999.²⁸

Despite the long history between the Natunas and the Malay Peninsula, why then did Malaysia not lay claim to the Natuna Islands. One plausible reason is that when Indonesia claimed the Natunas in 1956, Malaysia was still Malaya and therefore, not an independent nation capable of staking its claim on the Natuna Islands.²⁹ Soon after, the Indonesia–Malaysia Confrontation (or *Konfrontasi*), stemming from Indonesia’s opposition

²⁷ Mohd Hazmi Mohd Rusli and Wan Izatul Asma Wan Talaat, “The Natuna Islands: ‘Malaysian in geography’, Indonesian in sovereignty”, Astro Awani, 15 February 2016 <<http://english.astroawani.com/world-news/natuna-islands-malaysian-geography-indonesian-sovereignty-94430>>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Malaya obtained independence in 1957 and became the Federation of Malaysia in 1963.

to the formation of Malaysia, commenced in 1963 and lasted till 1966. As a result, the priority of Malaysian leaders was to bring the crisis to an end rather than fuel the conflict by pursuing claims on the Natuna Islands.³⁰ Once *Konfrontasi* ended, the focus of both Malaysia and Indonesia were primarily domestic; and thus, the leaders of both countries wanted to keep relations as calm and peaceful as possible.³¹

Domestically, the Natunas have long been neglected by Jakarta, and, as a result, the Natunas remained underdeveloped, and the inhabitants on the islands have been impoverished and bereft of the modern facilities available to those on the bigger Indonesian islands, especially in the major towns and cities. This is most evident in Ranai, which is located in Bunguran, and is the capital city of the Natuna district. It has less than 84,000 people, 85 per cent of whom trace their ancestry from the Malay Peninsula, speak a distinct variety of Malay similar to that found in the State of Terengganu, and profess Islam.³² Thus, in a sense, the inhabitants on the Natunas are as much Malays as they are Indonesians, and so have continued to keep close ties not least culturally with the Malaysians.

This sense of neglect in centre–periphery relations has much to do with a distinct lack of funds disbursed by Jakarta to the Natuna Islands, and a lack of a sustainable development strategy.³³ But because the islands do not generate their own revenue and most of the population are fishermen, the Natuna administrative regency has had to rely heavily on funds disbursed by the central government. Without such funds, the inhabitants would suffer near-starvation, poor transportation and bad telecommunications.³⁴ Although the Natunas have the potential to become a highly profitable tourist destination, the lack of investment means that tourist travel to the islands is not an attractive proposition — in fact, before 2016, there was no proper airport runway in the whole of the Natuna district.

³⁰ Mohd Rusli and Wan Talaat, “The Natuna Islands”.

³¹ See Joseph Chinyong Liow, *The Politics of Indonesia-Malaysia Relations: One kin, two nations* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), pp. 97–106.

³² Mohd Rusli and Wan Talaat, “The Natuna Islands”.

³³ *Jakarta Post*, “Saving Natuna, the nation”, 25 June 2016.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

EMERGENCE OF THE NATUNA ISSUE

Indonesia and Vietnam

The Natunas first emerged as an issue of concern not between Indonesia and China, but rather between Indonesia and Vietnam. Despite holding continental shelf talks, the first being in 1977, Vietnam under Prime Minister Pham Van Dong and Indonesia under President Suharto were still unable to settle the maritime border in the Natuna area. Put differently, the Vietnamese were quite reluctant to acknowledge Indonesia's jurisdiction for the whole of the Natunas, especially the northernmost tip of the Natunas which is geographically proximate to the southern tip of Vietnam.

Indonesia–Vietnamese relations were further rattled when Indonesia began to provide concessions and signed deals with oil companies to explore prospective oil and gas areas in the Natunas. Protests and objections from Vietnamese leaders followed, along with a warning to the companies involved not to continue prospecting. These protests alarmed Jakarta so much that they proceeded to conduct military exercises on the Natuna Islands, build an airbase there, and rather oddly, carry out “population transfer” to the islands.³⁵ Given Vietnam's persistent objections, it seemed to some that “the Indonesian Armed Forces cannot avoid the possibility of facing a sea battle in the South China Sea”.³⁶ Hence, for instance, in March 1980, about 50,000 troops were reported to be moving to several Islands in the South China Sea, including the Natunas where they would take part in the biggest military exercise ever to be held by the Indonesian armed forces.³⁷ Taking an even more alarmist view was then-Malaysian Defence Minister Amar Taib

³⁵ Ian Storey, *Southeast Asia and the rise of China: The search for security* (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 199.

³⁶ *Business Times*, “War exercise for battle at sea”, 9 February 1980.

³⁷ Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 88.

who argued that the territorial claims over the Natunas could erupt into a prolonged regional conflict.³⁸

For much of the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, every attempt was made to bring an end to the maritime dispute between Vietnam and Indonesia, but to no avail. There were high-level visits by officials from both Indonesia and Vietnam; for example, the visit to Hanoi at least twice by Benny Murdani, Chief of the Military Intelligence body of Indonesia.³⁹ The fact that Indonesia also pursued its claims more assertively upon being designated an archipelagic state by UNCLOS in 1982 complicated matters further.

Although relations between Indonesia and Vietnam improved significantly in the aftermath of the Indochina conflict, that was not sufficient to break the impasse regarding the Natunas. Attempts to resolve the issue continued in the post-Suharto era — in fact, a breakthrough was only achieved eventually during the Megawati Sukarnoputri administration. The two countries then had signed a formal agreement — The Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Indonesia and the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam concerning the delimitation of the Continental Shelf Boundary — in Hanoi on 26 June 2003. Through this agreement, Vietnam recognizes the whole of Natunas as belonging to Indonesia, and Indonesia reaffirms that it has no claims in the Spratly Islands, of which Vietnam is a claimant.⁴⁰

Indonesia and China (Before the Jokowi Presidency)

Indonesia–China relations have had its share of ups-and-downs. Under Sukarno (1959–65), with the exception of a 1959 hiccup, Sino-Indonesian relations were generally cordial and towards the end of Sukarno’s era,

³⁸ *New Nation*, “Natuna claims may fuel conflict”, 3 January 1980.

³⁹ Leo Suryadinata, *Indonesia’s Foreign Policy under Suharto: Aspiring to International Leadership* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1996), pp. 127–28.

⁴⁰ Gregory B. Polling, *The South China Sea in Focus: Clarifying the Limits of Maritime Dispute* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2013), p. 13.

Jakarta and Beijing moved even closer to form an “anti-imperialism” partnership.⁴¹ However, when General Suharto came to power (1966–98), the relationship soured, and on 31 October 1967 Indonesia severed diplomatic ties with China, which were not restored until 1990, twenty-three years later. China in 1989/90 was isolated diplomatically due to the 1989 Tiananmen Incident and was thus eager to establish relations with the largest country in Southeast Asia, while Suharto’s Indonesia also felt that in order to be recognized as a regional leader, Jakarta had to normalize relations with the giant to the north.⁴²

During the thirty-two years of Suharto rule, there was no report on Indonesia–China conflict over the Natuna waters. China was still preoccupied with its internal problems and there were no Chinese patrol boats escorting Chinese fishing vessels in the Spratly Islands in general and the Natuna waters in particular. Suharto’s Indonesia was also unaffected by the territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, Indonesia, which often perceived itself as the leader of the region, was concerned that those disputes might affect regional political stability. From the late 1980s up to mid-1990s, Indonesia conducted four informal workshops on the South China Sea, but initially China refused to participate.⁴³ It was after the normalization of ties in 1990 that China sent delegates to the workshop. Since then, China has been willing to jointly explore the Spratly islands with other claimants on the condition that Chinese sovereignty is acknowledged.

During the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ meeting held in Manila in July 1992, then Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen suggested that a

⁴¹ For a discussion on Indonesia–China relations during the Sukarno period, see Rizal Sukma, *Indonesia and China: The Politics of a Troubled Relationship* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 16–43.

⁴² For a study on Indonesia–China relations up to the Suharto period, see Leo Suryadinata, *Pribumi Indonesians, the Chinese Minority and China: A study of perceptions and policies* (new ed.) (Kuala Lumpur and Singapore: Heinemann, 2005), pp. 149–70.

⁴³ For a brief discussion on the Indonesian initiative, see Suryadinata, *Indonesia’s Foreign Policy under Suharto*, pp. 16–117.

“China-ASEAN Forum” be set up to discuss the South China Sea dispute. ASEAN representatives were however not interested in the idea as shown in the post-meeting declaration which made no mention of the proposal. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers felt that there was no need to create a new forum just between China and ASEAN as there were enough forums to discuss the issue.⁴⁴ In March 1995 a conflict over Mischief Reef between Beijing and Manila led to renewed suspicions among the ASEAN states over Beijing’s pledge to resolve the issue by peaceful means.⁴⁵

The Natunas rose to become a bone of contention in Sino-Indonesian relations when China was reported to have included a segment of the Natunas into “its map of claims to a broad swath of the South China Sea”.⁴⁶ As Indonesia portrays itself as not being a party to South China Sea disputes, it has sought to play an impartial or neutral role to bring about a resolution. But at the 1993 workshop at Surabaya, when Indonesia’s status as a non-claimant was called into question by the Chinese, Indonesia had to suddenly dispense with its role as arbiter. This is because the Chinese delegation had produced a map — presumably a rehash of the 1947 map showing China’s claims in the South China Sea as delineated by the U-shaped nine-dash line — which showed China’s “historic waters” overlapping with the 200-nautical mile EEZ generated by the Natuna Islands.⁴⁷ So though officially Indonesia was not a party to in the SCS dispute, this Chinese map caused Jakarta to pay closer attention to safeguarding the full sovereignty of the Natunas.

Although this map came to the attention of the Indonesian government in 1993, it only took the matter up with Beijing in July 1995 by asking them to clarify the map. In between the two years, Jakarta put in place contingency measures aimed at protecting its maritime claims in the

⁴⁴ “Lain di meja lain di laut”, *Tempo*, 1 August 1992, p. 77.

⁴⁵ John McBeth, “Oil-Rich Diet”, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 April 1995, p. 28.

⁴⁶ Suryadinata, *Indonesia’s Foreign Policy under Suharto*, p. 116.

⁴⁷ Storey, *Southeast Asia and the rise of China*, p. 199.

Natunas — these included population transfer to the Natuna Islands, persuading energy corporations to invest in Natuna gas fields, and lastly, stationing fighter aircraft near the Natuna Islands.⁴⁸ In response, Beijing clarified that while it acknowledged Indonesia's sovereignty over the Natunas, both Indonesia and China needed to negotiate the overlapping maritime boundaries as was demarcated on the map that was presented by the Chinese at the Surabaya workshop.

Significantly, Indonesia's then Foreign Minister Ali Alatas stated that "Indonesia had no territorial problem with China near the Natuna Islands in the South China Sea", arguing that "the Chinese map is only an illustrative one and could not be seen as an attempt to establish an actual position."⁴⁹ However, Chen Jian, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson later reiterated that while there was no dispute between China and Indonesia over Jakarta's ownership of Natuna Islands, China was willing to hold talks with Indonesia on the demarcation of the maritime area around the Natunas.⁵⁰

When Ali Alatas visited China in July 1995 to clarify, among other things, "the inclusion of waters off Indonesia's Natuna Islands on the Chinese map",⁵¹ he was informed by the Chinese that "China had no ownership over the [Natuna] islands."⁵² Qian Qichen also added that China would base any solution on the 1982 UNCLOS. Alatas was quoted as saying that "I see this explanation quite satisfactory, because if China bases itself on the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention, then we are in the same position."⁵³ While the response of the Indonesian Foreign

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Simon Sinaga, "No problem with China over Natuna isles, says Alatas", *Straits Times*, 27 June 1995.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ "Alatas in China for N-test and Map Issue Talks", *Straits Times*, 19 July 1995.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Simon Sinaga, "Natunas belong to Indonesia", *Straits Times*, 22 July 1995. It is interesting to note that at that time, China had not signed the 1982 UNCLOS. It became a signatory only in August 2009.

Minister was mild, the Indonesian military's was not. Indonesia's Defence and Security Minister General Edi Sudrajat was critical of China. He was quoted as saying that "the map, which showed that parts of the Indonesian territorial waters around the Natunas — between Borneo and Malaysian Peninsula and near the multi-nationally disputed Spratly islands — belonging to the Chinese, was made without respect to international sea laws."⁵⁴ In the end, Jakarta dismissed the need for negotiations as the Natunas and the surrounding waters belonged to Indonesia as an archipelagic state and were thus non-negotiable. It was also no coincidence that, in a deliberate show of force, the country's army conducted a large-scale military exercise in the Natunas in 1996.⁵⁵

On 1–2 March 1996, President Suharto attended the Asia-Europe Summit in Bangkok and spent 40 minutes with China's Prime Minister Li Peng during which he

reaffirmed Indonesia's commitment to the one-China policy ... Li Peng reportedly assured Suharto that China will respect the Law of the Sea Convention on the issue of overlapping claims in the South China Sea and said that it was China's desire to foster long-term stability in the region.⁵⁶

Be that as it may, the Natuna Islands issue regarding the EEZ was not completely resolved though the Indonesian leaders were reassured that China would respect UNCLOS.

After the fall of Suharto, bilateral relations improved further. Presidents Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur, 1999–2001), Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001–04) and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY, 2004–14) all visited China. During the SBY presidency, Jakarta and Beijing even

⁵⁴ "Natuna Islands: Indonesians Preparing Defence Plan", *Straits Times*, 30 June 1995, p. 19.

⁵⁵ Storey, *Southeast Asia and the rise of China*, p. 199.

⁵⁶ "Indonesia", in *Asia Yearbook 1997: A Review of the Events in 1996* (38th ed.), p. 138.

established a special strategic partnership. An agreement was signed in 2005 and further enhanced in 2013 to become a comprehensive strategic partnership when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Indonesia. The deal covered more areas and fostered closer cooperation between the two countries. That Xi selected Indonesia to visit soon after assuming office underscored the importance to China of Beijing–Jakarta relations.

Under Jokowi, Indonesia and China drew even closer to each other. Jokowi’s vision of making Indonesia a maritime power, as per his Global Maritime Fulcrum doctrine, would require a lot of funding for infrastructure development, and China seem a willing major contributor to such projects. A good example is China constructing the high-speed rail between Jakarta and Bandung. Trade and foreign investments from China steadily increased, particularly after Jokowi visited China in March 2015, and Xi also included Indonesia in his “One-Belt One-Road (OBOR)” initiative, which culminated in Jokowi being invited to Beijing’s inaugural OBOR Summit in May 2017.

Nevertheless, between 2010 and 2013 (during the SBY presidency), it was reported in the foreign press that there were incursions of Chinese vessels into Natuna waters, but in both reported cases, Jakarta appeared to have resolved the issue quietly.⁵⁷ Such incursions continued under the Jokowi administration, as was mentioned earlier, and will also be discussed below.

CHINA’S RESPONSES

In response to the 19 March 2016 incident, the Indonesian Foreign Ministry (DEPLU/KEMLU) summoned the Chinese ambassador to Indonesia (but since he was in Beijing at that time, the Minister Counsellor represented him) to protest against a Chinese coast guard vessel entering Indonesian waters with the aim of intervening in the capture of a Chinese fishing boat by the Indonesian coast guard. In reply however, Hua Chunying, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson argued that:

⁵⁷ See, for example, Aaron L. Connelly, “Indonesia in the South China Sea: Going It Alone”, Lowy Institute for International Policy, December 2016, p. 5.

When the incident happened, the Chinese fishing boat was in the Chinese traditional fishing grounds, doing the normal productive activities. On 19 March the boat was attacked and harassed by an Indonesian armed vessel, and China's coast guard came to the rescue. As it did not enter the Indonesian waters, we demand that the Indonesian authorities immediately release the crew of the fishing boat.⁵⁸

She also noted that “The sovereignty of the Natuna Islands belongs to Indonesia. China does not have any other opinion. Regarding the dispute on the sea, both sides should resolve it through negotiations”.⁵⁹

In the same vein, the *Global Times*, the English newspaper which is linked to the *People's Daily*, a media arm of the Chinese Communist Party, published an “opinion” article written by Ding Gang, a senior editor with *People's Daily*. He argued that “There is no territorial dispute between China and Indonesia in [the] South China Sea. Jakarta claimed the area that the Chinese vessel fished in is within the EEZ derived from the Natuna Islands, but it also overlaps part of China's nine-dash line.”⁶⁰ Taken together, the above statements illustrate the attitude of China towards the Natuna Islands and its EEZ — that is, there is a dualism in China's interpretation of the Natunas.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry have repeatedly stated that the Natuna Islands belong to Indonesia without mentioning the EEZ and very crucially, the “nine-dash line”. In fact, it has never told Jakarta that Indonesia only owns the Natuna Islands but not the surrounding EEZ. Equally important is that the “nine-dash line” has tended to be used by

⁵⁸ Yinni jiu Zhongguo haijing chuan ‘yuejing’ shijian zhaojian Zhongguo dashi zhong fang fanying “印尼就中国海警船‘越境’事件召见中国大使中方回应” <<http://dailynews.sina.com/bg/chn/chnoverseamedia/chinesedaily/20160322/06347242113.html>>.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ding Gang, “Fishing clash offers chance to move forward”, *Global Times*, 23 March 2016.

some other organs of the Chinese government and the mass media. This suggests that at the official level, Beijing has been cautious not to push the nine-dash line narrative.

INDONESIA’S RESPONSES

Indonesia does not recognize the “nine-dash line”. As such, on 8 July 2010, Indonesia’s UN representative submitted a letter to then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and also gave a copy to the Division on Ocean Affairs and Law of the Sea. The request was to circulate the letter — questioning the legal basis of the Chinese nine-dash line — to all UN members.⁶¹ Below is a summary of the letter:

On 7 May 2009, Beijing circulated a map in the United Nations (UN) depicting “the Chinese indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjunct waters, and its sovereign rights and jurisdiction over relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof”. Although Indonesia is not a claimant state in the South China Sea dispute, yet it sees itself to have played an active role in making contribution to the production of “Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea” in 2002. Indonesia also claims that it follows the statements of Beijing’s representatives in the International conferences in 2009, at which the Chinese representatives argued that the rock or “uninhabited, remote or very small islands” cannot be used as the bases of claiming a 200 miles EEZ. Indonesia therefore maintains that China should also use this principle to the South China Sea.

⁶¹ See “Letter No. 480/POL-703/VII/10, submitted on 8 July 2010 by Permanent mission of the Republic of Indonesia, the UN, New York”. It is not clear who the Indonesian UN representative was when the submission was made because on 22 October 2009, Marty Natalegawa, who was the Indonesian UN representative, was made foreign minister by President SBY, and Hasan Kleib only became the UN representative in August 2010.

Once this principle is adopted, it is clear that “the so-called nine-dotted-lines (sic) map” as contained in the circular note Number: CML/17/2009 dated 7th May 2009, “clearly lacks international legal basis and is tantamount to upset the UNCLOS 1982”.⁶²

Interestingly, China chose not to respond to the letter. From the Indonesian point of view, as China and Indonesia are signatories of the 1982 UNCLOS and thus recognize the concept of the EEZ, this means that the Natuna Islands are entitled to an EEZ extending 200 nautical miles. As such, Indonesia assumed that China also accepted the Indonesian EEZ based on its ownership of the Islands, which to restate, China does not dispute. As the Indonesian UN representative never received any response from his counterpart from China, this was taken by Jakarta to mean that China had no problem with Indonesia as far as the so-called nine-dash line was concerned, not least with regard to the Natunas.

To calm matters, Jakarta and Beijing have repeatedly stated at the government-to-government level that there is no territorial dispute in Sino-Indonesian relations. But as noted earlier, the *Global Times* article has openly stated that there is in fact a dispute over the EEZ of the Natuna Islands as “it overlaps with the nine-dash line”. The author of that article opined that Beijing and Jakarta should cooperate to resolve the South China Sea issue “with the basic principle of ‘shelving and carrying out joint development’ put forward by late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping”.⁶³ What the *Global Times* however failed to mention regarding Deng’s proposal was that this joint development is based on the proviso that “the sovereignty of the disputed area is with China.”⁶⁴

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ding Gang, “Fishing clash offers chance to move forward”.

⁶⁴ This is the basic principle of China in dealing with the South China Sea dispute; it was first mentioned by Deng Xiaoping. See Gezhi zhengyi, gongtong kaifa “搁置争议，共同发展”, Foreign Ministry of China website.

Referring to the 19 March 2016 incident, Indonesia's Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Susi Pudjiastuti posited that this was not the first time a Chinese fishing boat had entered Natuna waters. In fact, on 26 March 2013 (during the SBY presidency), Indonesia had succeeded in stopping a Chinese boat from fishing in Indonesian waters.⁶⁵ As in the 19 March incident, the fishing boat managed to escape after the Chinese coast guard intervened. But both Jakarta and Beijing handled the incident quietly. However, this time Susi, a Minister in Jokowi's cabinet publicly accused the Chinese of stealing fish and deplored that the Chinese coast guard had intruded and intervened in Indonesian waters. She even threatened to file a case with the International Tribunal.⁶⁶ Moreover, Susi also summoned China's Ambassador to Indonesia in order to express her disapproval and displeasure at the actions of the Chinese in Indonesian waters.⁶⁷

It is also noteworthy that Susi has even advanced a new strategy to combat illegal fishing: sinking captured fishing boats that had entered Indonesian waters. In total, Susi has organized the destruction of more than 200 illegal fishing boats since 2014.⁶⁸ In May 2015, the Indonesian Navy sank thirty-five foreign boats caught illegally fishing in Indonesian waters.⁶⁹ One of them was a Chinese fishing boat which was detained in 2009. The boat was sunk together with other boats in May 2015, the

⁶⁵ "Coastguard Cina lindungi pencuri ikan, Susi protes keras" <<https://m.tempo.co/read/news/2016/03/21/090755406/coastguard-cina-lindungi-pencuri-ikan-susi-protes-keras>>.

⁶⁶ "Menteri Susi akan laporkan Cina ke Pengadilan Internasional" <<https://m.tempo.co/read/news/2016/03/21/090755620/menteri-susi-akan-laporkan-cina-ke-pengadilan-internasional>>; Also Tama Salim, "RI-China Sea Spat Continues", *Jakarta Post*, 22 March 2016.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Jakarta Post*, "Indonesia marks Independence Day by sinking illegal ships", 17 August 2016.

⁶⁹ <<https://www.merdeka.com/foto/peristiwa/543157/20150520171849-aksi-tni-al-tenggelamkan-35-kapal-asing-001-dru.html>>.

delay being due officially to incomplete documentation. As expected, China protested against the sinking of its boats.⁷⁰ Thereafter, exercising caution in managing relations with China, Indonesian authorities have attempted to halt the sinking, or at least carry out the sinking of captured boats away from the public eye. The latter was indeed the case when on 17 August 2016, Indonesia's Independence Day, sixty foreign ships were sunk at eight locations across the Indonesian archipelago, according to Susi.⁷¹ Although the sinking was meant to be a low-key affair, it was covered by both the local and foreign media, and as a result, became a highly publicized episode.

Since the sinking of the boats on 17 August 2016, there has been a near-absence of any further sinking of captured boats covered in the Indonesian media. This could mean one of two things: either the boats were no longer sunk or if the boats were sunk, these were done quietly and discreetly. Be that as it may, the message was clear to its neighbours, including China: illegal fishing will not be tolerated by Indonesia, and that Indonesia will defend its vast territory of 17,000 islands. It is also plausible that the sinking of the boats were done for domestic consumption and in particular, to cater to rising nationalist sentiments.⁷² The expectation here is that the Jokowi government can stand up to China as far as the Natunas is concerned.

Besides Susi, the Foreign Minister of Indonesia, Retno Marsudi, upon receiving the news of the 19 March 2016 incident, summoned Beijing's ambassador to explain the behaviour of the Chinese coast guard. Even retired general Ryamizard Ryacudu, the Minister for Defence, expressed his desire to summon China's ambassador.⁷³ This was a rather confusing

⁷⁰ <<https://www.merdeka.com/dunia/china-marah-kapal-nelayannya-diledakkan-menteri-susi-dan-tni-al.html>>.

⁷¹ *Jakarta Post*, "Indonesia marks Independence Day".

⁷² Suryadinata and Mustafa, "Nationalistic symbolism behind 'Natuna Sea'".

⁷³ "Ikan laut dicuri, menteri Ryamizard panggil dubes Cina" <<https://m.tempo.co/read/news/2016/03/21/063755468/ikan-laut-dicuri-menteri-ryamizard-panggil-dubes-cina>>.

situation because according to diplomatic protocol, only the Indonesian Foreign Minister is authorized to summon China's ambassador. What this suggests is that there is a lack of elite coordination in Jokowi's government on external relations. This, together with Jokowi's general disinterest in foreign affairs (unless there is an economic element of trade and investment benefiting Indonesia domestically) encourages competing interpretations among the political elite on how to respond to China's behaviour.⁷⁴ Jokowi's fractured political elite does not bode well for conducting a sound and principled foreign policy that is congruent with Indonesia's long-standing "*bebas dan aktif*" (independent and active) foreign policy doctrine.⁷⁵

The Indonesian Press

The 19 March 2016 maritime incident in particular captured the attention of the public in Indonesia. Jakarta newspapers such as *Kompas*, *Tempo*, *Suara Pembaruan* and the Muslim daily *Republika* published editorials and/or reports, with some very critical of Beijing while others were more restrained.⁷⁶ But the majority criticized Beijing's coast guard for encroaching into Indonesian waters and urged the Indonesian authorities to be firm in preserving Indonesia's territorial integrity. According to Hikmahanto Juwana, an International Law Professor at the University of Indonesia, who published an article in *Kompas*, there is no concept of "traditional fishing grounds" in the 1982 UNCLOS, but rather "traditional fishing rights" which are supposed to be based on a bilateral agreement. Juwana added that there was no such agreement between Jakarta and

⁷⁴ Evan Laksmana, "Here's why Jakarta doesn't push back when China barges into Indonesian waters", *Washington Post*, 28 April 2016.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Editorial, "Demi Keadilan, Kita harus tegas", *Kompas*, 24 March 2016; Editorial, "Pemerintah Tiongkok dukung nelayannya mencuri ikan di wilayah NKRI?", *Suara Pembaruan*, 22 March 2016; Opini, "Cina yang bukan Pedagang", *Tempo*, 28 March 2016; "TNI AL awasi ketat Natuna", *Harian Republika*, 23 March 2016; Editorial, "Restrained on the sea", *Jakarta Post*, 22 March 2016.

Beijing. He even called for the Jokowi administration to review existing Sino-Indonesian projects and end the economic collaboration with China as such joint efforts would not be in the national interest of the Republic.⁷⁷

While *Tempo* called China's behaviour "arrogant", the *Republika* noted that this was a test of the durability of Indonesia–China relations. The People's Coalition for Fishery Justice (Koalisi Rakyat untuk Keadilan Perikanan) even postulated that the Chinese had become the "common enemy of ASEAN".⁷⁸ Parliamentarians were generally critical of China's behaviour, and the defence and foreign affairs committee in parliament wanted Jokowi to manage the issue personally. This was because Chinese boats had encroached into Natuna waters many times, which can be viewed as an indication that Beijing wanted to lay claim to the Natunas. In addition, the Indonesian parliament approved the budget to develop military facilities in the Natuna Islands together with the Indonesian navy, stating that it wanted the military presence strengthened in the Natunas. All in all, the authorities have decided to fortify the Natunas akin to a "Pearl Harbour".⁷⁹

Both Retno Marsudi and then Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs Luhut Pandjaitan⁸⁰ expressed concern over the 19 March 2016 incident. It was thus unsurprising that Jakarta refused Beijing's demand to release the detained crew members before the issue was satisfactorily resolved.⁸¹ But when Minister for Defence Ryamizard Ryacudu was asked about the incident, he refused to link it to China's unilateral claim over the South China Sea. Ryacudu felt that it was possible that the Chinese coast guard took action without the knowledge of the Chinese government. In his words: "We know very well that an

⁷⁷ *Kompas*, 30 March 2016.

⁷⁸ Yu Gechang (余歌沧), *Zhongguo Yinni nanhai yushifenzheng zaiqi* "中国印尼南海渔事纷争再起", *Yazhou Zhoukan* 《亚洲周刊》, Vol. 30, No. 14 (10 April 2016).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ He is now Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs in Jokowi's Cabinet.

⁸¹ Francis Chan, "Indonesia to charge Chinese fishing crew with poaching", *Straits Times*, 23 March 2016.

army should be well disciplined, but there are always members of the army who are undisciplined. It is possible that the incident was caused by the undisciplined personnel within the army. Therefore I would like to ask [this of] the Chinese ambassador myself.”⁸² But Ryacudu did not summon the Chinese ambassador as he felt that this was not in line with diplomatic protocol. Quite clearly however, his initial response to the incident was a conciliatory one. It should be pointed out that Ryacudu’s view deviates from mainstream military thinking in Indonesia.⁸³

Ryamizard Ryacudu and Joint Patrol

More often than not, the Indonesian military, including the Minister for Defence, are extremely critical of Beijing especially on matters that have to do with sovereignty. Interestingly, Ryacudu proposed the concept of “Joint Patrol” (Patroli Bersama) to General Fan Changlong, the Deputy Defence Minister of China who attended the 2015 Shangri-La dialogue in Singapore. Ryacudu explained that “this Joint Patrol is not a Security Patrol (Patroli Securiti), but a Peace Patrol (Patroli Perdamaian) ... [General Fan] agreed with my proposal.”⁸⁴ But there was no further explanation on the difference between Peace Patrol and Security Patrol. Instead, Ryacudu pointed out that he had reported this four-eyed meeting with General Fan to his ASEAN counterparts, and they agreed that Ryacudu should be the contact person and coordinator for ASEAN members.⁸⁵

Ryacudu’s “Joint Patrol” proposal appeared not to get much attention at the outset. On 21 October 2015 however, *Suara Pembaruan*, a

⁸² “Ikan laut dicuri, menteri Ryamizard panggil dubes Cina”.

⁸³ Leo Suryadinata, “Did the Natuna Incident Shake Indonesia–China Relations?”, *ISEAS Perspective*, 26 April 2016.

⁸⁴ “Cerita menhan yang berhasil ‘merayu’ soal Laut China Selatan” <<https://news.detik.com/berita/2933752/cerita-menhan-yang-berhasil-merayu-tiongkok-soal-laut-china-selatan/komentar>>.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Jakarta daily, published an article discussing this proposal.⁸⁶ Nuning, an Indonesia observer on security affairs, opined that the “Joint Patrol” concept differed from the “Coordinated Patrol” concept, as the former required a supreme command, and the Indonesian navy would come under the command of the Chinese navy. This would not be acceptable to Jakarta. Most importantly, this proposal would drag Indonesia into a dispute between the major powers and hence jeopardize the country’s national security interest.

The same article also reported the visit of Ryacudu, as Indonesia’s Defence Minister, to Beijing (no exact date given, but very likely on 15 October 2015). He met his China counterpart, General Chang Wanquan to discuss deepening bilateral cooperation. Ryacudu was quoted as saying to General Chang that “If the claimant countries in the South China Sea were able to reduce the tense situation and manage the dispute, other sides (*pihak lain*) do not have to intervene in resolving the issue regarding the South China Sea.” Ryacudu proceeded then to suggest that “those ASEAN claimants in the South China Sea and China should establish a joint Peace Patrol (Patroli Perdamaian Bersama) to ensure peace and stability in the South China Sea.”⁸⁷

General Chang agreed with the proposal. In his words:

The above proposal is very constructive; we welcome the Indonesian proposal and its efforts in maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea through the formation of a “Joint Peace Patrol”. In order to realize the above proposal, Indonesia and China have to strengthen dialogues; ASEAN and China should also strengthen dialogues.

General Chang added that “Indonesia is a country with influence, and also plays an important role in ASEAN. Therefore China would rely on

⁸⁶ “Soal ‘Joint Patrol’ di Laut China Selatan, RI harus hati-hati”, *Suara Pemanduan*, 21 October 2015.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

Indonesia to have dialogues with ASEAN states so that the ‘Peaceful Joint Patrol’ would be formed for the South China Sea.”⁸⁸

A few days earlier, Merdeka.com⁸⁹ and SindoNews.com⁹⁰ both reported that General Chang proposed that the claimant states hold a joint military exercise in the South China Sea to maintain peace and stability. However, the Indonesian Military Commander-in-Chief, General Gatot Nurmantyo, responded that “any military action in the South China Sea would affect peace and stability in the region. No matter which country invited Indonesia to have a joint military exercise, the Indonesian military will not accept. This is the foreign policy of Indonesia and to have a joint military exercise is against Indonesian foreign policy principles.”⁹¹ In response, Ryacudu lamented that Gatot had misunderstood the proposal as Indonesia was not invited to conduct a joint military exercise but rather a joint patrol.⁹² Despite its unpopularity among the military, Ryacudu continued to talk about his concept of Joint Patrol with China in November 2015, but the concept became confusing and ambiguous as he also talked about Joint Patrol as proposed by the United States and Japan.⁹³ In 2016, the idea was amended to include Australia, after it was proposed to Australia’s Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Defence

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ “Panglima TNI tolak ajakan China latihan perang di Lautan China Selatan” <<https://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/panglima-tni-tolak-ajakan-china-latihan-perang-di-laut-china-selatan.html>>.

⁹⁰ Sucipto, “Panglima TNI tolak ajakan latihan perang menhan China” <<https://nasional.sindonews.com/read/1054254/13/panglima-tni-tolak-ajakan-latihan-perang-menhan-china-1445232470>>.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² “Ketika menhan-panglima TNI beda pernyataan soal latihan perang” <<http://www.suara.com/news/2015/10/19/160758/ketika-menhan-panglima-tni-beda-pernyataan-soal-latihan-perang>>.

⁹³ “Menhan Ryamizard usul Patroli Bersama di Laut China Selatan” <<http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2015/11/12/17261021/Menhan.Ryamizard.Usul.Patroli.Bersama.di.Laut.China.Selatan>>.

Minister Marise Payne.⁹⁴ As stated earlier, Ryacudu’s viewpoint often differed from mainstream military thinking; it also deviated from the stance of Indonesia’s foreign ministry.

The Military versus the Diplomats

On 11 November 2015, Security Minister Luhut Pandjaitan told the Indonesian press that if the issue of the EEZ of the Natuna Islands and the nine-dash line could not be resolved through dialogue, Indonesia could bring the case to the International Criminal Court.⁹⁵ It is not known on what basis Luhut made such a statement, but it was certainly widely publicized and garnered international attention.

Subsequently, some journalists asked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about Luhut’s statement. The spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Arrmanatha Nasir, said that while he did not want to comment on Luhut’s statement, he reiterated the fact that there was no territorial dispute between Indonesia and China. Nasir also added that Jakarta has never recognized the nine-dash line as it has no legal basis in international law.⁹⁶ He also mentioned that Indonesia had submitted its question on the legal basis of the nine-dash line to the relevant department in the UN, but was yet to receive any reply. In other words, given that China already recognizes Indonesian sovereignty over the Natuna Islands, it follows that China also recognizes the Natuna EEZ. But Luhut appeared to have a different view as reflected in his statement to the local press.

⁹⁴ Leo Suryadinata and Mustafa Izzuddin, “Mismatched Expectations in Jokowi’s Maiden Visit to Australia”, *The Diplomat*, 3 March 2017.

⁹⁵ “Clarify South China Sea Claims, China told”, *Straits Times*, 13 November 2015. Luhut probably meant an international tribunal such as the Permanent Court of Arbitration instead of the International Criminal Court.

⁹⁶ “China includes part of Natuna waters in its map — Antara News”, <<https://www.google.com.sg/#q=China+includes+part+of+Natuna+waters+in+its+map%E2%80%94Antara&spf=1494655025733>>; Zachary Keck, “China’s Newest Maritime Dispute”, *The Diplomat*, 20 March 2014.

The difference between the stance of the military and foreign ministry on the Natuna issue was also noticeable in an earlier event. On 12 March 2014, Commodore Fahu Zaini, assistant deputy to the chief security minister for defence strategic doctrine, remarked that “China has claimed Natuna waters as their territorial waters. This arbitrary claim is related to the dispute over Spratly and Paracel Islands between China and the Philippines. This dispute will have a large impact on the security of Natuna waters.”⁹⁷ But on 18 March, then Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa disavowed Zaini’s statement. He was quoted as saying that “There is no territorial dispute between Indonesia and China. No dispute.” He added that there was ongoing maritime cooperation between China and Indonesia at the deputy foreign minister level. One of the projects was direct foreign investment in the Natuna Islands for fish processing and canning. However, Natalegawa also noted that Indonesia rejected the nine-dash line and had asked China for its legal basis but had yet to receive any reply. He stressed that this had nothing to do with the Natuna Islands.⁹⁸ The contrast between Zaini’s and Natalegawa’s comments suggests some degree of internal dissension among the policy elite, and in this case, between the military and diplomats.

Also notable is that China’s Foreign Ministry through its spokesperson Hong Lei replied to Luhut’s statement with a glib answer: “Indonesia did not claim any territory from the South China Sea. The Natuna Islands belong to Indonesia, China does not have any disagreement with that.”⁹⁹ The newsworthiness of Luhut’s statement soon fizzled out.

⁹⁷ Keck, *China’s Newest Maritime Dispute*”.

⁹⁸ “Indonesia pernah sampaikan keberatan atas peta Natuna” <<http://www.antaranews.com/berita/424961/indonesia-pernah-sampaikan-keberatan-atas-peta-natuna>>.

⁹⁹ On 12 November the spokesman of Chinese foreign ministry Hong Lei replied to the question on Luhut’s statement; he said: “印尼对中国的南沙群岛没有提出领土要求。纳土纳群岛主权属于印尼，中方也没有表示异议。” See 2015年11月12日外交部发言人洪磊主持例行记者会，中国外交部网站 (Foreign Ministry of China website). The translation was provided in the text of this paper.

CHINA'S HARDENING ATTITUDE

As more claimants over the South China Sea began explorations, China's attitude hardened. Apart from the contention over fishing rights in the disputed territories, there was also a conflict in 2012 between Beijing and Manila over the Scarborough Shoal. When China in November 2012 issued a new passport that included a map of the South China Sea, the Indonesian government raised concerns. Natalegawa commented that "they can issue [the map] but it will have no effect."

In 2013 the Philippines referred its territorial disputes with China to an international tribunal. China objected to third party arbitration, and it was against this backdrop that the Natuna issue was revisited in Indonesia. While the Indonesian military sought to increase its defence capability in and around the Natuna Islands, the foreign ministry was more guarded in its response. For example, when the arbitral tribunal handed down the ruling in favour of the Philippines in July 2016, the statement issued by the Indonesian foreign ministry was anodyne and bizarrely made no reference to the tribunal at all. To be sure, there has always been a dualism between the defence and foreign ministries in their responses towards the Natuna Islands. Although the foreign ministry may continue to have the upper hand, the persistent incursions (including on 19 March 2016) have elevated the importance of the military, especially in the eyes of the Indonesian public.

Unlike in the past, the 19 March 2016 incident in particular captured national and international attention. Indonesia has also begun to strengthen its military presence, including devising a plan to deploy fighter jets on the Natunas.

TWO VIEWS ON THE NATUNA INCIDENT

There are two principal ways of understanding the Natuna incident: as a territorial dispute, or as a matter of illegal fishing. The former puts Indonesia among the claimants in the South China Sea, which then means that Indonesia would no longer be able to play the role of honest broker in ASEAN. Alternatively, Indonesia could instead try and unite all ASEAN claimants to face China's assertive behaviour in a collective fashion.

The Indonesian government however sees the dispute to be about illegal fishing. Ambassador Rizal Sukma, who is widely believed to be one of the major architects of Jokowi's foreign policy doctrine, suggested that China should help Indonesia combat IUU (illegal, unreported and unregulated) fishing.¹⁰⁰

China's assertiveness often makes many ASEAN states lose trust in the Chinese leadership. Beijing is acutely aware of this, and so a few hours after the 19 March 2016 incident occurred, it was reported that a top Chinese diplomat pleaded with an Indonesian official to stop publicizing the incident to the press.¹⁰¹ Jakarta eventually adopted a more conciliatory attitude towards Beijing.

So far, not only has the Chinese foreign ministry refrained from using the nine-dash line to refer to the Natunas, it has also not openly declared that any part of the Natuna EEZ belongs to China. Both Indonesia and China appear to benefit mutually from being ambiguous in their policy stances and responses, especially to each other.

THE RISE OF ANTI-CHINA SENTIMENTS

The Jokowi administration, as well as former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (also known as Ahok) are increasingly perceived in Indonesia as being pro-China. Prabowo Subianto, a former general and former son-in-law of Suharto, represents a group opposed to most things Jokowi comes up with. Prabowo is supported by Islamic parties and has exploited hardline Muslims to achieve his political objectives.¹⁰²

During the Jakarta gubernatorial elections on 19 April 2017, Anies Baswedan, supported by Prabowo, played up Islamic issues and capitalized on Muslim hardliners to defeat the incumbent Ahok. Ever since Jokowi became president in October 2014, his group of opponents

¹⁰⁰ Rizal Sukma, "Indonesia and China need to combat the IUU problem", *Jakarta Post*, 31 March 2016.

¹⁰¹ Chris Brummitt, "Frantic phone call failed to halt China-Indonesia sea spat", *Bloomberg Business*, 23 March 2016.

¹⁰² Leo Suryadinata, "Indonesia's Ideological War", *Straits Times*, 2 December 2016.

have ceaselessly tried to undermine him by misrepresenting a whole host of issues including Chinese investment in Indonesia, the presence of mainland Chinese companies and workers, and joint projects in Indonesia involving China.

In early December 2016, a false claim was made that there were 10 to 20 million Chinese migrant workers in Indonesia. The manpower minister had to deny this and stated that there were only 21,000 Chinese workers in Indonesia. Jokowi's opponents have also been using the social media platform to stage campaigns to discredit him.¹⁰³

Most recently, Bachtiar Nasir, an influential figure who chairs the National Movement to Safeguard the Fatwa of the Indonesian Ulema Council, succeeded in organizing hardline demonstrations against Ahok. This contributed to Ahok's loss to Anies. Nasir then gave an interview to Reuters that his group is preparing another movement, "Our next job is economic sovereignty, economic inequality ... The state should ensure that it does not sell Indonesia to foreigners, especially China."¹⁰⁴ Nasir is known to be close to the Prabowo camp, and therefore critical of the Jokowi administration.

CONCLUSION

The Natuna issue is complex and important to Indonesia. The Natunas became an issue in Sino-Indonesian relations towards the end of the twentieth century when China began to assert its claims over the South China Sea. Incursions into Indonesian waters started in 2010 during the Hu Jintao presidency and intensified in 2016, under President Xi. During the SBY administration there was no reported conflict in the Indonesian press on the incursion of Chinese vessels into Natuna waters. However,

¹⁰³ Leo Suryadinata, "Anti-China Campaign in Jokowi's Indonesia", *Straits Times*, 10 January 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Tom Allard and Agustinus Beo Da Costa, "Exclusive — Indonesian Islamist leader says ethnic Chinese wealth is next target", Reuters <<http://mobile.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN18817N>>.

Indonesia under Jokowi began to take action against all incursions, including those of Chinese vessels. Jakarta has however been cautious when dealing with the leadership in Beijing.

Beijing has also been cautious when dealing with the Jakarta leadership on the Natuna issue and has not referred to the nine-dash line in any official sense. Although for Jakarta the Natuna issue has already been settled based on UNCLOS, Beijing may consider the Natuna waters to still be in need of demarcation and to do so through negotiations. As long as Sino-Indonesian relations are stable, there is no reason for Beijing to adopt a hostile attitude towards Indonesia.

Jokowi's "pro-China" policy has been criticized by his opponents. So perhaps recognizing that being too close to China could lead to domestic dissent, Jokowi has sought to hedge by cultivating good relations with Australia, Japan and even the United States.¹⁰⁵

Despite the many incursions by the Chinese into the Natuna waters, and which are likely to continue, they are unlikely to trigger an outright naval confrontation between Indonesia and China. This is because of the deepening Sino-Indonesian economic engagement.

So while the Natunas is likely to remain a perennial issue between Indonesia and China in the short to medium term, central to which is the dispute over illegal fishing and the attendant concern of Indonesia regarding its territorial integrity, it is unlikely to derail the bilateral relationship as economics is likely to continue trumping politics in Sino-Indonesian relations, at least under the Jokowi administration.

¹⁰⁵ On Australia, see Suryadinata and Mustafa, "Mismatched Expectations in Jokowi's Maiden Visit to Australia". On Japan, see Leo Suryadinata and Mustafa Izzuddin, "Divergence of interests in Abe's maiden visit to Indonesia," *Straits Times*, 28 January 2017. On the US, see Leo Suryadinata and Mustafa Izzuddin, "What Trump's Victory Means for Muslim-Majority Indonesia" *The Diplomat*, 16 November 2016.

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