



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on December 19, 2022

Indonesia Struggles to Build Military That Can Counter China

SINGAPORE — Indonesia is struggling to expand its declining military despite a spending splurge to counter threats arising from a long-standing territorial dispute with its largest trading partner, China.

Jakarta has been on the alert for incursions by Chinese vessels into waters around the Natuna Islands, between Malaysia and Indonesia.

The government recently shifted a major naval fleet command to Riau, near the islands, after beginning construction on a submarine base in 2021. It also declared plans to spend US\$125 billion on new weapons, even as the country's defense budget shrunk.

Yet Indonesia is beginning to realize that expensive weapons cannot address all of its defense challenges.

The country's dependence on various foreign suppliers such as Russia implies that its existing hardware faces interoperability problems, said Dr. Evan Laksmana, senior research fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore.

An oversupply of new recruits and a quick system of rotation that can see troops change roles after a few months are some factors hindering the quality of the military, he said.

"You can get all the new hardware you want, but if you don't improve the quality of the man behind the gun then it doesn't really matter," Laksmana said.

In November, Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto announced that a US\$14 billion deal to purchase 36 new U.S. F-15 fighter jets from Boeing is in advanced stages after lauding collaboration with the United States during a visit by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. Days later, he met French counterpart Sebastien Lecornu in Jakarta amid speculations that Indonesia is discussing with France the possible purchase of two *Scorpene*-class attack submarines.

Indonesia had already ordered 42 Rafale fighter jets in a US\$8.1 billion deal in 2022. It has also expressed enthusiasm for purchasing Turkish-made armed drones, contributing to the list of countries keen on unmanned weapons that have proven devastating in conflicts like the Ukraine-Russia crisis, Reuters reported in September.

General Andika Perkasa, until recently the nation's top military commander, said in November that he would also like to expand ties with the Quad — the security partnership between India, Australia, Japan, and the United States — as well as enhance Indonesian involvement in the Garuda Shield military exercises led by the United States.



Indonesian naval vessels



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Said Dr. Greg Poling, head of the Southeast Asia program at Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies: "Indonesia's security sector, if not all of its political leadership, has woken up to the threat of China's gray-zone coercion."

"Its planned naval and air procurements seem pointed at enhancing domain awareness, patrol and deterrence capabilities with regard to China."

Indonesia, a non-aligned nation during the Cold War, is trying to pursue a delicate balancing act between its economic dependence on China — its biggest trading partner — as well as the United States and its allies, to whom Jakarta is turning for a more robust security partnership.

Total trade between China and Indonesia amounted to nearly US\$114 billion in 2021, based on International Monetary Fund import data. The United States was a distant second at US\$37 billion.

An instance of Indonesia's balancing act is the fact that the country still conducts military exercises with both the United States and China.

However, China is a major factor when it comes to Indonesia's security posture, with retired General Perkasa emphasizing the Natuna Islands when admitting the military's flaws.

"I'm not going to be embarrassed to say this, but our ability to operate patrolling in our EEZ around Natuna" can only last days, he told Nikkei Asia, referring to his country's exclusive economic zone.

President Joko Widodo, better known as Jokowi, has not let his country's economic reliance on China prevent him from taking action for security purposes.

Widodo dispatched warships to the area around the Natuna Islands on various instances after Chinese vessels were spotted. He has also announced the right to exploit natural resources in the EEZ around the islands, despite China demanding it to stop, based on reports from Reuters.

However, in an indication that Jakarta is treading carefully so as not to strain ties with Beijing, the new top military officer — Admiral Yudo Margono — drew attention to the potential for instability due to "the presence of foreign powers in the South China Sea region." Some regional specialists deemed the admiral's comment as a rebuff against American defense activities in the region.

"I don't think there's a consensus that China is the adversary," said Laksmana. "Some would see China as a nuisance. You will still find those who would argue that China remains the most important economic partner."

Besides the risk to the Natuna Islands, Indonesia also finds itself caught in an increasingly militarized and tense region: U.S.-China tensions over Taiwan have risen in 2022, Japan wants to greatly increase military spending, and Australia is hoping to purchase nuclear submarine technology from the United States and Britain.

Unless the armed forces undergo an effective overhaul with credible platforms and a real increase in capacity and capabilities, addressing threats from China and other nations will be complicated, said Anastasia Febiola S, head of defense at Semar Sentinel Indonesia, which offers political risk and security advice to companies.

Friction between China and coastal nations along the South China Sea have been rising for years as Beijing reinforces its claim to a huge chunk of territory in the resource-rich waters.

While open conflict is improbable, countries across Asia and Southeast Asia are ratcheting up their defenses for multiple scenarios, and the United States and its allies are keen to help. Recent years have



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seen various public crises over China's illegal fishing activities in the area. According to Indonesia's maritime law enforcement officials, China's incursions have never truly halted; they have only become less publicized.



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