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Can the COVID-19 pandemic transform Indonesia-China defense relationship?

Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia

Department of International Relations, Universitas Indonesia

lalisangyeremia@gmail.com

Indonesia's Defense Ministry has been recently active in channeling plenty of medical assistance from China to enhance the country's response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Throughout the process Indonesian defense minister Prabowo Subianto has reportedly establish a personal, closer working relationship with his Chinese counterpart. On the one hand, this might indicate a deepening bilateral defense relationship. But the growing defense ties should be situated within the broader historical and policy context, especially with regards to Indonesia's defense diplomatic engagements.

Between pragmatism and limitations

Indonesia's defense diplomatic engagement with China has gradually expanded over the past two decades.¹ Given that the diplomatic ties were only restored in 1990, the growth of Indonesia-China defense relations is a significant development.

The relationship gained further momentum when both countries' special forces units conducted a joint exercise "Sharp Knife" (SK) in 2011. The Indonesian forces saw their Chinese counterpart as an "alternative partner" for its Army Special Forces Command (KOPASSUS) amidst the American training ban on this unit.² This highlights the pragmatic nature underpinning the Indonesia-China military rapprochement.

The annual exercises however were suspended in 2015 in response to the growing Chinese incursion into Indonesia's exclusive economic zone surrounding the Natuna Islands.³ Since then, military exercises between the two countries have taken place indirectly through multilateral exercises. On May 2018, for example, Indonesian Navy hosted the Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo in which Chinese Navy together with navies from the other 32 countries participated.⁴

While SK's suspension suggests there are significant limits to Indonesia's pragmatism, Jakarta has been reluctant to allow the Natuna incidents to completely overturn its defense partnership with China. After all, Indonesia needed to sustain its strategic engagement with the largest power in the region. Indeed, on December 2018, a one-star Indonesian general was assigned as the defense attaché at Embassy in Beijing for the first time.⁵

Furthermore, following Prabowo's appointment as defense minister in 2019, Jakarta even appeared to signal to Beijing that it was seeking to deepen the bilateral defense ties. Indeed, China was the first major power Prabowo visited in his official capacity as a minister.⁶

Prabowo and China

Analysts had earlier tried to predict how Prabowo's appointment might affect Indonesia-China relations.⁷ After all, Prabowo's ambivalence towards China was a topic of concern going back to the campaign period last year. Back then, Prabowo's camp frequently criticized Indonesia's much closer economic relations with China under President Jokowi.⁸ As "anti-China" and "anti-Chinese" sentiments swelled-up, his camp also advanced the narrative of Indonesia's "heavy reliance" on China

¹ Evan A. Laksmana, "Regional Order by Other Means? Examining the Rise of Defense Diplomacy in Southeast Asia," *Asian Security* 8, no. 3 (2012): 251–270; Iis Gindarsah, "Strategic Hedging in Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy," *Defense & Security Analysis* 32, no. 4 (October 2018): 336–353.

² Frega Wenas Inkiriwang, "Garuda shield' vs 'sharp knife': operationalising Indonesia's defence diplomacy," *The Pacific Review*, (May 2020), DOI: 10.1080/09512748.2020.1772352.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ "Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo 2018 Concludes," *China Military Online*, accessed June 19, 2020, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-05/11/content_8029268.htm.

⁵ The author wishes to thank Frega Wenas Inkiriwang for highlighting this point. For further discussion on Indonesia-China defense relations, see Prashanth Parameswaran, "What's Next for China-Indonesia Military Ties?: A Closer Look at the Status of Defense Ties Between Jakarta and Beijing," *The Diplomat*, accessed June 19, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/07/whats-next-for-china-indonesia-military-ties/andrey>

⁶ "Prabowo kicks off first China working trip to discuss defense with Beijing," *The Jakarta Post*, accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/12/16/prabowo-kicks-off-first-china-working-trip-to-discuss-defense-with-beijing.html>.

⁷ Evan A. Laksmana, "Should China be concerned about Indonesia's new defense minister, Prabowo Subianto?," *South China Morning Post*, accessed June 3, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3034634/should-china-be-concerned-about-indonesias-new-defence-minister>.

⁸ Resty Woro Yuniar, "Indonesia to review China's belt and road projects if Prabowo beats Widodo in presidential election," *South China Morning Post*, accessed June 3, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2169655/indonesia-review-chinas-belt-and-road-projects-if-prabowo>.

to boost his election prospects.⁹ But Prabowo also showed admiration towards China. In an April 2019 presidential debate, he praised China for its “positive achievements” in eradicating poverty and stressed the importance of learning from China’s experience.

This ambivalence notwithstanding, some believed that Prabowo as defense minister would be more assertive in dealing with the provocative Chinese maneuvers in the North Natuna Sea.¹⁰ And yet, when another series of fishing incidents occurred in the area from late December 2019 to early January 2020, Prabowo downplayed the incidents.¹¹ Instead of taking a strong public stance, he noted that, “We are cool. We are relaxed. We can resolve this amicably. After all, China is a friendly nation.”¹²

This statement suggests that beyond electoral politics, Prabowo has also been pragmatic towards China. According to Fadli Zon, Deputy Speaker of the National Legislature (DPR) and one of Prabowo’s closest confidantes, “Mr. Prabowo sees that in fact, our military force there [in Natuna] is particularly weak...If we [decide] to engage in a physical confrontation with China, the chance of us suffering from defeat is very likely...Therefore, we have to be realistic in dealing with China.”¹³

COVID-19 and defense ties

Prabowo has closely engaged his Chinese counterpart throughout the pandemic. Under his coordination, two batches of medical supplies were successfully transported from China. On March 23, he personally welcomed an Indonesian Air Force transport flight from Shanghai carrying around 8 tons of medical equipment donated by non-governmental sources in China. The Indonesian Ambassador to China confirmed this was “the initiative of Indonesia’s Ministry of Defense.”¹⁴

In the widely covered event, Prabowo thanked Indonesian military personnel for successfully executing the “humanitarian aid operation”, which he further claimed was a “heroic contribution” by in the fight against the pandemic.¹⁵ Perhaps more importantly, Prabowo also conveyed that he had established a direct communication with General Wei Fenghe, the Chinese National Defense Minister, about possibly sending more medical supplies from China.

This relationship was partly an outgrowth of Prabowo’s working trip to Beijing in early December 2019. He met with General Wei and the Deputy Chairman of the Central Military Commission, General Xu Qiliang. Prabowo’s warm communication with the Chinese military top brass has proven

⁹ Huiheng Tan, “The Spectre of Chinese Investment Looms over Indonesia’s Election,” Asia Politics, CNBC, accessed June 9, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/04/16/indonesia-elections-jokowi-prabowo-and-the-topic-of-china.html>.

¹⁰ See *Ibid.*

¹¹ Gilang Ramadhan, “Prabowo Tak Pernah Garang ke Cina, Apalagi Soal Natuna,” *Tirto*, accessed June 4, 2020, <https://tirto.id/prabowo-tak-pernah-garang-ke-cina-apalagi-soal-natuna-erac>.

¹² Karina M. Tehusijarama, “Natuna conflict pits Prabowo against former allies,” *The Jakarta Post*, accessed June 3, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/01/10/natuna-conflict-pits-prabowo-against-former-allies.html>.

¹³ “Ada China di Natuna (Full Version) Mata Najwa,” *YouTube Narasi Newsroom*, January 10, 2020,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TtS0EORBib4>. Arief Poyuono, Prabowo’s deputy at Gerindra Party, also conveyed a similar statement, see Haris Prabowo, “Gerindra Bela Prabowo yang Dianggap Lembek Lawan Cina di Natuna,” *Tirto.id*, accessed June 19, 2020, <https://tirto.id/gerindra-bela-prabowo-yang-dianggap-lembek-lawan-cina-di-natuna-erac>.

¹⁴ “Pesawat TNI Bertolak dari China Bawa 9 Ton Alat Medis Corona,” *CNN Indonesia*, accessed June 5, 2020, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200322023226-20-485698/pesawat-tni-bertolak-dari-china-bawa-9-ton-alat-medis-corona>.

¹⁵ Kementerian Pertahanan Republik Indonesia, “Menhan Prabowo Serahkan Bantuan Alkes dari Tiongkok untuk Rumah Sakit Rujukan Covid-19,” Facebook, March 23, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/KementerianPertahananRI/posts/3191967057501293>; “Sambut Bantuan China, Prabowo: Covid-19 Ancaman Kita Semua,” *CNBC Indonesia*, accessed June 10, 2020, <https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/news/20200323131734-4-146943/sambut-bantuan-china-prabowo-covid-19-ancaman-kita-semua>.

to be fruitful. Indeed, Indonesia was one of only twelve countries that received the second batch of medical assistance from the People's Liberation Army (PLA).¹⁶

On May 12, a Chinese military aircraft carrying medical supplies landed in Jakarta. Once again, Prabowo addressed the handover ceremony. He described China's assistance as a token of solidarity between China and Indonesia. He added that "[Indonesia] sees China as a friend and together we will cooperate to maintain regional stability."¹⁷ On the same day, 30 military medical experts from both countries took part in a video conference on COVID-19 responses.¹⁸ The conference allowed both sides to share experiences and created opportunities to advance military-to-military exchanges.

Sustaining closer communication

But it remains to be seen whether the growing engagement sparked by the pandemic has or will considerably transform the bilateral defense ties. For starters, Prabowo and his Chinese counterparts have to sustain the growing channels of communication. Future closer engagements might create more opportunities and build confidence. This might also contribute to Indonesia's plan to partner with China's defense industrial companies.

During his last trip to Beijing, Prabowo met with Xu Zhanbin, the Deputy Director of State Administration for Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense (SASTIND).¹⁹ Several Chinese state-owned enterprises (e.g. China Precision Machinery Import-Export Corporation, Norinco, and China Electronics Technology Group Corporation) reportedly participated as well. A stronger defense industrial collaboration could potentially expand Indonesia-China defense relations beyond its traditional domain.²⁰

Strengthening Indonesia's defense partnership with China is also in line with the proposal by one analyst that Indonesia should "expand its strategic toolkit" in dealing with the South China Sea.²¹ Closer military-to-military relations might positively affect how both actors perceive each other's positions on and maneuvers in the South China Sea. This is not to say that closer those interactions will completely prevent China from making incursions in the North Natuna Sea. But it might just provide Indonesia with an alternative crisis communication channel; after all, the PLA is one of the key actors in China's foreign and security policy decision-making process.²²

As territorial integrity remains a sensitive issue for both Indonesia and China, maritime incidents such as those recurring in the North Natuna Sea will attract domestic public attention—often demanding the governments to respond firmly.²³ In some instances, the response might include military elements.

¹⁶ Yang Han, "Chinese Military Helps Neighbors in Virus Fight," *China Daily Hong Kong*, accessed June 8, 2020, <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/article/130562>.

¹⁷ "China Kembali Berikan Bantuan Alat Kesehatan untuk Penanganan Virus Corona," *KompasTV YouTube*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8v-V54jIso>.

¹⁸ "Tiongkok dan Indonesia Menyelenggarakan Konferensi Jarak Jauh Pakar Medis Militer Tentang Penanggulangan COVID-19 Tanggal 12 Mei, Tahun 2020," *Chinese Embassy Jakarta*, accessed June 10, 2020, <http://id.china-embassy.org/indo/xwdt/t1779440.htm>.

¹⁹ Hari Widowati, "Prabowo Kunjungi Tiongkok, Ini Lima Alutsista Andalan Negeri Panda," *Kata Data*, accessed June 10, 2020, <https://katadata.co.id/berita/2019/12/18/prabowo-kunjungi-tiongkok-ini-lima-alutsista-andalan-negeri-panda>.

²⁰ See Laksmana, "Regional Order"; Gindarsah, "Strategic Hedging"

²¹ Evan A. Laksmana, "Insight: Indonesia needs new strategy to deal with China," *The Jakarta Post*, accessed June 19, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2020/01/08/insight-indonesia-needs-new-strategy-to-deal-with-china.html>.

²² See Linda Jakobson and Dean Knox, "New Foreign Policy Actors in China," *SIPRI Policy Paper*. Stockholm: SIPRI, 2010 and Lee Jones, "Theorizing Foreign and Security Policy in an Era of State Transformation: A New Framework and Case Study of China," *Journal of Global Security Studies*, (2018): 1–19, DOI: 10.1093/jogss/ogy030

²³ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "China's Militarisation in the South China Sea: Three Target Audiences," *East Asian Policy* 8, no.2, (April 2016): 15–24.

This is where a military-to-military direct communication will be useful. Such a mechanism would be instrumental in avoiding any misunderstanding or miscalculation on both sides.

Military-to-military ties could thus contribute to bilateral tension management efforts. In the near future, both countries' defense establishments should put more effort in sustaining intensive communication mechanisms. But without strong political support and follow-up actions, the closer contact established during the pandemic might lose its steam in boosting the defense partnership.

CSIS Indonesia, Pakarti Centre Building, Indonesia 10160

Tel: (62-21) 386 5532 | Fax: (62-21) 384 7517 | csis.or.id

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