

South China Sea & Indonesia's New Maritime Strategy Analysed

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By Dr. Subhash Kapila

Strategically responding to China's conflict escalation in South China Sea, newly elected President Widodo announced Indonesia's New Maritime Strategy in November 2014.

Contextually, Indonesia should have responded much earlier for a redefinition of Indonesia's maritime postures in keeping with China's enlarging escalation of conflict in the South China Sea against Indonesia's ASEAN neighbours.

Regrettably this did not take place for multiple reasons which prompted earlier Indonesian political dispensation to adopt a "Hands-Off" policy posture on South China Sea conflicts.

Indonesia's previous Foreign Minister thought it more prudent to adopt such an attitude as China's military brinkmanship had directly not touched Indonesia. Also, the prevailing view was that with such a posture, Indonesia would be enabled to play the role of a 'honest broker' and not antagonise China.

Such a policy steered and dominated by the previous Foreign Minister was strongly contested by Indonesia's powerful military who viewed with alarm China's conflict escalation with Vietnam and the Philippines and China's creation of artificial islands in the South China Sea for supplementing China's strategy to achieve what I have always termed at international seminars as China's strategy of achieving "Full Spectrum Dominance of the South China Sea".

The Indonesian military was also disturbed that Indonesian Foreign Ministry's posture was ignoring the fact that Chinese claim-lines in the

South China Sea also impinged on Indonesian waters around the Natuna Islands and it was only a matter of time that China would focus her strategic gaze on the Natuna Islands as it had done in the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands.

The above strategic reality emerged forcefully last year when Chinese PLA Navy ships exercised in the waters around Natuna Islands and Chinese Navy ships passed through the Indonesian straits into the southern waters of Indonesia and the northern waters of Australia.

Further China continued to be silent on persistent Indonesian demands to provide the exact co-ordinates of the southern limits of its so-called and self-claimed Nine Dash Line to enable Indonesian assessment of China's illegal claims on Indonesian waters around the oil-rich Natuna Islands.

Political sensitivity within Indonesia on the evolving China Threat in the southern segment of the South China Sea and Indonesia's lack of adequate maritime security thereof commensurate with Indonesia's strategic archipelago configuration bridging the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean forced this issue into electoral politics of last year's presidential elections.

It was during his election campaign in May 2014 that now Indonesian President Joko Widodo spelt out his vision of what is now Indonesia's New Maritime Strategy or Maritime Doctrine.

The Strategic Doctrine envisioned that on assumption of office of Indonesia's President he would essentially focus on reinforcing Indonesian maritime security, modernisation and upgradation of Indonesian Navy maritime capabilities across the board and that Indonesian foreign policy would be significantly enlarged towards full coverage of the Indo Pacific region.

The East Asia Summit last November was the apt venue for the new Indonesian President to unveil this new strategic doctrine formally to an international audience of global leaders.

Indonesia had therefore given clear notice that it was intent on emerging as a strong maritime power in the Indo Pacific region commensurate with her stature in South East Asia and her archipelago configuration.

Essentially, Indonesia's New Maritime Strategy in terms of operationalization has surfaced in three areas. First, nearly \$6 billion has initially been earmarked for upgradation of Indonesian naval bases and ports besides establishing new naval bases. Second, the strategic Natuna Island on which China's strategic gaze is now fixed is being developed into a major Navy and Air Force military base. Third, Indonesia has commenced expansion of the Indonesian Navy by ordering two naval frigates from the Netherlands, three naval corvettes from the United Kingdom and three submarines from South Korea. More acquisitions are on the cards.

The implications of Indonesia's New Maritime Strategy can be strategically analysed and encapsulated under two heads of the regional and global impact with reference to the conflict escalation in the South China Sea.

Regionally, Indonesia now ceases to sit on the fence with a 'Hands Off' attitude in relation to China's extending her unimpeded aggressive maritime footprints in the southern waters of the South China Sea. This should reinforce ASEAN unity in relation to limiting China's brinkmanship in the South China Sea.

Relating this development specifically to the South China Sea conflict escalation by China, countries like Vietnam and the Philippines already victims of Chinese military aggression would stand strategically heartened as Indonesian hither-to-fore "Hands Off Strategy" was encouraging China's military aggressiveness. Logically, one can expect sometime in the near future a semblance of an integrated South China Sea maritime strategy between Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia.

Globally, Indonesia's emergence as a maritime power of consequence in relation to both the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean would be widely welcomed by the United States, Japan, Australia and India. With maritime security synergy already in evidence in the region between these Indo Pacific Powers, the addition of like-minded maritime posture by Indonesia would significantly add to their combined maritime weight and capabilities.

China is likely to be significantly impacted as this development contributes to a significant maritime counterweight emerging in the Indo Pacific in response to Chinese maritime designs in the South China Sea and ultimately in the Indian Ocean.

Closer home where India and Indonesia are only about a hundred kilometres apart, far more strategic synergy can be expected between the two nations to reinforce their strategic ties not proactively followed in the past few years.

Concluding, it can be observed that upgradation of Indonesia's maritime posture and capabilities were a long overdue process. Indonesia wasted years neglecting this imperative on a misreading of Chinese intentions in the South China Sea. President Jokowi has taken the bold step of initiating the process of modernisation and expansion of Indonesia's naval capabilities which can be hoped would restore a strategic balance not only in the South China Sea but also in the Indian Ocean eastern segment.

(Dr Subhash Kapila is a graduate of the Royal British Army Staff College, Camberley and combines a rich experience of Indian Army, Cabinet Secretariat, and diplomatic assignments in Bhutan, Japan, South Korea and USA. Currently, Consultant International Relations & Strategic Affairs with South Asia Analysis Group. He can be reached at drsubhashkapila.007@gmail.com [1])

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