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## **Safety First in Managing Airspace**

*By Barry Desker*

### **Synopsis**

*A recent article by a former Indonesian air force chief over-simplifies a complex operational and technical issue.*

### **Commentary**

ON 21 MARCH 2016, The Straits Times re-published an article ‘*A strange anomaly in management of airspace*’ by Chappy Hakim, former Indonesian air force chief, which appeared in the Indonesian language newspaper *Kompas* on 14 March. He argued that Indonesia must reclaim the airspace over the Riau islands currently managed by Singapore as a matter of sovereignty, pride and nationalism.

Although Chappy acknowledged that Europe Flight Information Regions (FIR) crossed national boundaries, he exclaimed that “we are not Europe”. Chappy’s comments display a fundamental misunderstanding of the international system of FIRs established by the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), which has been in operation since 1946.

### **FIRs and ICAO arrangements**

ICAO has emphasised safety of navigation in periodic discussions on re-aligning FIRs. Sovereignty has not been the key issue. Chappy Hakim’s argument is ironic as Indonesia manages the airspace over Australian-owned Christmas Island and independent Timor Leste.

The Indonesian Minister of Transportation Ignasius Jonan has pointed out that Indonesia was not ready to take over the management of airspace above Riau and

Riau Islands provinces from Singapore because of limited resources and the huge investment needed to do so.

“It [the takeover of the airspace] is a safety issue. We will take it over when we are ready, but currently we are not ready,” he said in Batam, Riau Islands, on 13 March 2015, as reported in the Jakarta Post.

Indonesian commentators are often mistakenly under the impression that Singapore retains the revenue from managing the airspace. In reality, the agreement between Singapore and Indonesia provides for Indonesia to receive the revenue collected by Singapore for air navigation charges on civil flights over Indonesian airspace delegated to Singapore.

Operational aspects determine the delineation of the FIR by ICAO based on the need to provide smooth and efficient air traffic control services, with paramount consideration being placed on aviation safety. As a major international air traffic hub, Singapore’s interest lies in ensuring that safe, reliable and effective air traffic management facilitates civil aviation in the region.

Although Hong Kong’s Chek Lap Kok airport handles more air traffic than Singapore’s Changi airport, the total volume of air traffic which passes through the Singapore FIR is higher because of the large number of overflights. In 2015, the total volume of air traffic movements exceeded 650,000, including 350,000 air traffic movements in and out of Changi.

### **FIR and flight safety**

As someone who was involved in civil aviation negotiations from the late 1970s, a key takeaway was that it was essential to manage the FIR fairly and transparently. Air traffic controllers are trained to deal with flights on a first come, first served basis, dealing with flights entering the region and passing them on smoothly when they transfer to the next FIR as they head to their destination. Over the years, no civil aviation authority in the region has raised any issue regarding the efficiency and impartiality in which the Singapore FIR has been managed.

A critical component has been investment in technological upgrades and state-of-the-art air traffic management systems. This has been accompanied by a commitment to cutting edge research on possible improvements to air traffic management, supported by the establishment of the Centre of Excellence Air Traffic Management Fund of \$200 million.

From a Singapore perspective, a key consideration would be the safety risks of a fragmented airspace around Singapore. Traffic in the airspace around Singapore is particularly complex as five airports (Changi, Seletar, Senai, Batam Hang Nadim and Bintan Raja Haji Fisabilillah), with a sixth opening shortly serving the Bintan tourist resorts, are situated within a radius of 50 nautical miles (90 kilometres) of Singapore.

If the Singapore FIR were fragmented and re-drawn based on territorial boundaries because of ‘sovereignty’ considerations, coordination of aircraft and air traffic movements would be more complicated, increasing the complexity of air traffic

management. This raises the risk of accidents occurring and reduces the efficient use of airspace.

But the safety risks posed by a fragmented airspace surrounding Singapore are not a concern to Chappy Hakim. On the contrary, he considers it “sad” that the delineation of FIR boundaries is viewed from the perspective of “aviation safety”. Given the frequent media reports of Indonesia’s poor safety standards, the international community should be concerned if Indonesia is entrusted with the responsibility of managing the complex airspace surrounding Singapore.

### **Over-simplifying A Complex Operational Issue**

By emphasising the sovereignty and nationalism issues, Chappy Hakim and other Indonesian observers with similar views such as the Governor of the Riau Islands province H M Sani raise concerns that air traffic management of the FIR will be seen as a policy tool to advance the national interest, not to provide a service in the most efficient, safe and smooth manner for the international community.

Their approach over-simplifies a complex operational and technical issue and reminds us that a bid to take over the management of airspace over Riau and the Riau islands will entail major costs as well as the need to develop a corps of well trained personnel.

More significantly, Chappy’s article highlights an issue with broader implications for bilateral relations. The ‘strange anomaly’ that Chappy was referring to was how “the biggest country in ASEAN” had to submit the management of a part of Indonesia’s sovereign airspace to “a small country”. Chappy called this “very inappropriate” and an affront to “the nation’s honour and dignity”. It reflects the turn to more nationalist policies in Indonesia in the post-Suharto era and a tendency to see relations through the distorted prism of ‘*abang-adik*’ (big brother-small brother) views on the Indonesia-Singapore relationship.

The risk is that such attitudes could influence the way bilateral and regional relations are handled in Indonesia, with the expectation that Indonesia’s neighbours defer to Indonesia because of its size, population and perceived importance in regional and global affairs. Such an approach is likely to result in countervailing relationships among Indonesia’s neighbours.

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