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Indonesia's National Mobilisation Strategy: Growing Deeper Roots?

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SYNOPSIS

Indonesia's latest efforts to build up a national reserve system and cultivate awareness of the state ideology at the societal level has defence implications, but they are actually more about responding to internal security concerns than the needs of external defence.

COMMENTARY

THE INDONESIAN government recently released Government Regulation No. 3/2021 on the Management of National Resources for State Defence. The new implementing regulation provides the technical scope and executive guidance to the minister of defence to prepare for national mobilisation in a military emergency or a state of war.

From a domestic security angle, the regulation seeks to bolster national resilience and build national character through citizenship education in schools, community, and the workplace. From an external defence angle, Indonesia intends to develop a national reserve system, composed of a volunteer military reserve force and a network of supporting elements, including expert personnel, logistic areas, and strategic material reserves, to deal with military and hybrid threats.

The State Defence Programme

The State Defence Programme is the centrepiece of Indonesia's civilian defence mobilisation strategy. It seeks to cultivate core national values such as Pancasila, the importance of national unity, and the territorial integrity of Indonesia among students, workers, and society at large.

At this stage, the activities covered under the State Defence Programme remain

unclear. The Indonesian term State Defence (*Bela Negara*) originates from a total defence concept that all Indonesian citizens are required to serve in their varied capacities to defend the nation. Given the legacy of military rule under the New Order, younger Indonesians today are still uncomfortable with the use of militaristic terms and prefer a stricter separation of the civil and military sphere.

Currently, there are compulsory citizenship classes that disseminate knowledge about the Pancasila, the 1945 Constitution, and the obligations of citizenship. At universities, there are also semi-military clubs that provide military training. The State Defence Programme will likely utilise seminars and workshops as well as printed and online material to be disseminated through the national education system.

At the community level, the programme envisions a network of community leaders who will be at the forefront of the outreach effort to meet residents, conduct cultural activities, and disseminate printed materials. Overall, the programme appears to be about using formal institutions and informal networks to disseminate the state ideology and patriotic values.

National Reserve and Mobilisation

The formation of a national reserve system is intended to augment and supplement the Indonesian military. Volunteers for the national reserve go through a three-month basic military training, are inducted into the national reserve upon successful completion, and are required to attend periodic refresher training of between 12-90 days and serve until the age of 48.

The Ministry of Defence plans to [recruit two batches of 25,000 volunteers](#) in 2021 and 2022, with a goal to size the national reserve at [around 200,000 in 10 years](#) across the three branches of the military.

Recruitment is likely to be decentralised to the various military district commands at the city/regency level, estimated to [cost 1 trillion rupiah](#) (SGD 93 million) for 2021 or about 1% of the defence budget. If the plan is fully implemented, mobilisation could contribute an additional 50% to Indonesia's current active personnel strength.

Only the president can mobilise the national reserve with the agreement of Parliament in wartime or a military emergency. However, the regulation is worded such that the national reserve can be mobilised not only for external defence but also to deal with an internal military emergency, possibly including operations for counterterrorism, separatism, and disaster relief.

Relevance to Indonesia's Defence Policy

Nonetheless, the bigger question is whether Indonesia is preparing for the wrong fight. On one hand, the desire for a national reserve system is part of Indonesia's goal to develop military capabilities commensurate with its regional status and population size.

With manpower costs constituting the largest portion of the defence budget, a national reserve system provides a cost-effective way to enlarge military manpower. In

addition, efforts to build a strategic material reserve will likely help sustain warfighting in a state of war scenario.

However, the problem of modernisation of the Indonesian military appears to be a more pressing concern considering the approaching 2024 deadline for the [Minimum Essential Force](#), as well as the need for a stronger maritime presence throughout Indonesia's archipelagic waters. With defence spending hovering at 1% of GDP, limited resources could be better spent to invest in [key military technologies and equipment](#).

Indeed, in late December 2020, an underwater drone was discovered near South Sulawesi which was likely conducting an underwater survey of Indonesia's archipelagic waters. Indonesia's coastguard agency admitted in a public interview that Indonesia [currently lacks underwater monitoring capability](#) to track the movement of submarines and other underwater objects.

From an external defence perspective, the national reserve system is good to have but not urgent at this point. Nonetheless, the recently published General State Defence Policy for 2020-2024, a reference document outlining the state defence strategy, highlights that the national reserve system is second in priority only to the Indonesian military.

Back to Domestic Security

That said, the national mobilisation strategy makes sense as Indonesia's main threat conception remains internal and domestic. Indeed, the Indonesian state was [concerned](#) about communal conflict, terrorism, radicalism, criminal activities, the weakening of the spirit of mutual aid (*gotong royong*), and growing apathy in society when formulating legislation on the issue.

Thus, both the State Defence Programme and the national reserve system are part of the state's national mobilisation efforts to extend deeper roots into society. This is to monitor and respond to what they perceive to be genuine law-and-order problems plus a marked weakening of national and social resilience that underpins the country.

While part of the national mobilisation effort is about developing the manpower, expertise, and material needed for national defence, it also serves a nation-building role and as an early-warning system to monitor developments in society that the state views to be undesirable.

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