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Can Bakamla Be at the Forefront of Indonesia's Natuna Sea Strategy?

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Saluting a Bakamla ship. A foreign sailor saluting a vessel of a country when arriving in its territorial waters is a maritime tradition showing respect. *The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

SYNOPSIS

In recent years, Indonesia's Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla) has grown in prominence as a key actor in securing Indonesia's maritime interests in the Natuna Sea. However, Bakamla's controversial acknowledgement as a maritime "coordinating body" (in the eyes of other maritime security agencies) and limited operational assets has put Indonesia's so-called "coastguard" in an untenable position. Without clear

political will from the central government to strengthen Bakamla's operational capabilities and its institutional position, Bakamla will be hard-pressed to become a robust coastguard unit or contribute significantly to Indonesia's Natuna Sea strategy.

COMMENTARY

Vice Admiral Aan Kurnia, the Bakamla chief, [stated](#) at the end of December 2021 that Bakamla's priority programme in 2022 will be to protect the North Natuna Sea area. More importantly, his institution has also planned to [convene a meeting](#) with maritime officials from five ASEAN countries (Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam) on Batam Island — a bastion of Indonesia's defence establishment in addition to Natuna and Bintan in the Riau Archipelago — to address the ongoing conflict in the South China Sea. The meeting aims to improve camaraderie between the different nations' coastguards and serve as a venue to discuss more tangible collaborative programmes, such as knowledge transfer and data exchange, when dealing with operational challenges in the South China Sea. This proposed sequence of events implies that Bakamla is positioning itself as the lead agency for Indonesia's Natuna Sea strategy.

Keeping Up the Game

Since gaining strong legal legitimacy under Law No. 32/2014 on Marine Affairs, Bakamla has slowly morphed into Indonesia's coastguard agency with a broad scope of roles and operational capabilities. According to the law, the original purpose of Bakamla was to act as a law enforcement agency at sea, with responsibilities spanning territorial waters to international seas. Yet it also stipulates the institution's role as a coordinating agency when it comes to dealing with other pre-existing maritime security agencies. Relying on small-sized patrol vessels lent by the Indonesian navy and the Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries at the initial stage, Bakamla found early success in its patrol missions and seized foreign fishing vessels in Indonesia's maritime jurisdiction.

Since 2017, Bakamla's role has intensified with the acquisition of larger offshore patrol vessels capable of reaching more distant seas, including Indonesia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and international waters. The ability to patrol on high seas has given Bakamla the confidence to be more active in intercepting foreign fishing boats from China and Vietnam.

Bakamla began to face more serious challenges from 2020 when Chinese coastguard vessels entered Indonesia's EEZ [without the involvement of fishing vessels](#). In December 2020, Bakamla faced ship 5402 of the China Coast Guard — a first time without the presence of a fishing boat — meaning that this encounter was qualitatively different from the previous clashes. Between August and October 2021, Bakamla also faced pressure with Chinese survey vessels and coastguards attempting to [interfere](#) with drilling activities near Tuna Block in the North Natuna Sea. These various patrol activities show that Bakamla has evolved into an important element of Indonesia's maritime security strategy in Natuna.

Limited Operational Assets

Bakamla continues to face problems arising from its meagre operational assets. To date, Bakamla has only acquired 10 coastguard vessels — 6 units measuring 48 metres, 3 units measuring 80 metres and 1 unit measuring 110 metres, as well as a handful of high-speed craft (HSC). In a CNA documentary, Bakamla's chief [revealed](#) that the institution aimed to acquire at least 80 large-sized vessels for better patrol coverage, longer endurance on rough seas, and better surveillance capabilities. The overall number of vessels owned by Bakamla is still small, although it underwent a rapid acquisition programme between 2017 and 2019 by relying on the capabilities of the domestic shipbuilding industry in Batam in the Riau Islands.

Besides the problem of limited patrolling capabilities, the weapons deployed onboard are minimal, limited to the AK-47s carried by Bakamla personnel and 5.56-millimetre rifles. There was [an attempt to modernise](#) the weapons systems onboard the vessels through the acquisition of the Aselsan 30-millimetre gun remote-controlled weapon system with the permission of the Ministry of Defence. Yet, the weapon systems will only amount to four units — most likely to be installed on their 110-metre and 80-metre ships. The primary reason behind the weapon acquisition is the wariness over China's well-equipped coastguard vessels in the Natuna waters. The capability limitation has implications for Bakamla at the operational level, where they are still much dependent on the Indonesian navy (TNI-AL) for backup support.

The Issue of Acknowledgement at Home

Another problem for Bakamla is its limited acknowledgement at home. The question over Bakamla's acceptability is attributed to the unclear institutional identity of Bakamla. On the one hand, Bakamla's establishment and status is affirmed by Law No. 32/2014 on Marine Affairs, and Presidential Regulation No. 178/2014 on Bakamla to serve as a coordinating agency overseeing other maritime security agencies. On the other hand, there is a desire among Bakamla's leadership to develop the institution in the mould of the United States Coast Guard. In fact, the development of Bakamla's paramilitary force; the strategic leaderships held by its personnel who are navy officers; its weapons system and large-sized patrol vessel acquisition, as well as its cooperation with the United States to develop a training centre in Batam have socialised Bakamla to emphasise its coastguard identity over that of being a coordinating agency.

This acceptance problem was apparent during the recent discussion over the draft Government Regulation on Bakamla (RPP Bakamla), resulting in the riling of sectoral egos and institutional competition over resources between the various domestic maritime agencies. Other security agencies including the Ministry of Transportation's Marine and Coast Guard Unit (KPLP), the Water Police (Polair), Customs (Bea Cukai), and Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries [rejected](#) the draft. Of particular concern was Article 36 of the RPP Bakamla which stipulated that other maritime security agencies would have to conduct patrols and arrests under Bakamla's attributes and identity. Additionally, they argued that the navy should have been involved in the discussion as one of the key maritime security actors, thus rejecting the proposition that Bakamla would become a "coordinating" agency for all other domestic maritime agencies.

The Way Forward

One could possibly argue that putting forward the white hulls is one applicable, if not the best, way of responding to China's grey zone tactics in the region. With Indonesia's firm position that it is not a claimant state in the South China Sea, Bakamla is front and centre of Indonesia's strategy to safeguard the North Natuna Sea. At the same time, a better equipped coastguard combined with the navy's prowess would be one crucial operational component of Indonesia's strategy to deal with China's unlawful claims.

The Jokowi administration will need to address the ego-sectoral issue among Indonesia's many maritime security agencies and accelerate the enactment of the RPP Bakamla — spelling out how inter-agency coordination among key maritime security actors can be operationalised. In this context, Bakamla should work with the government to determine its organisational goals and mission, promote organisational development, develop a better weapons procurement strategy, and a more comprehensive personnel training programme. It is also necessary to delineate in the Government Regulation precisely how Bakamla and the navy should work together and fulfil their respective duties in vulnerable maritime zones such as the North Natuna Sea.

The central government's willingness to resolve the inter-agency logjams and address Bakamla's equipment shortcomings would be crucial to a strong coastguard. For President Jokowi who aspires to have Bakamla as the coastguard of Indonesia, this could be one of the most prominent accomplishments of his administration.

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