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Scaling up the Ladder: Expanding Indonesia's Naval Defence Diplomacy

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SYNOPSIS

Indonesia's navy has maintained and developed robust naval cooperation with several of its foreign partners. However, as the threat of maritime insecurities continues to grow in the region, the navy needs to find ways to address these threats through stepped-up naval and defence diplomacy.

COMMENTARY

Within the last couple of years, the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) has sought to promote closer ties with other foreign armed forces through various defence diplomacy activities. It has been particularly active in developing naval cooperation between the Indonesian navy (TNI-AL) and other navies by way of bilateral and multilateral naval exercises. This paper will delve into how TNI-AL could expand Indonesia's naval defence diplomacy to help it scale up the ladder and become a more capable navy.

The Indonesian Navy

The TNI-AL sits in a unique position among the three services of the TNI: it is authorised to support Indonesia's foreign policy. This responsibility is mandated under [Law No.34/2004](#) on the Indonesian National Armed Forces, as part of the TNI reform process. Neither the army (TNI-AD) nor the air force (TNI-AU) enjoys such an authority. Hence the TNI-AL is able to conduct operational tasks as a tool of diplomacy.

During the New Order period, President Soeharto actively assigned key ambassadorial and high-ranking diplomatic positions to [military generals](#), particularly in countries with strong security cooperation such as the United States and Singapore. In the post-New Order era, the role of the military in exercising foreign policy was largely curtailed by the government, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs given more

prominence in this respect. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the then president, announced that the conduct of external defence and security interactions must be done in consultation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Nonetheless, the TNI continued to expand its role in defence diplomacy during the leadership of President Yudhoyono, and later under President Joko Widodo.

A significant milestone was achieved in 2005, when Indonesia resumed regular military exercises with the United States after the latter lifted its military embargo on Indonesia. Both parties re-commenced the [Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training \(CARAT\)](#) Exercise in 2005, which had been halted in 2000. In addition, Indonesia joined the multinational US-led naval exercise Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) in 2010 and sent a ship for the first time to RIMPAC in 2014.

TNI-AL also began a bilateral naval exercise with the Royal Australian Navy in 2010 under [Exercise Cassowary](#), held in Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara. The participation of TNI-AL in these naval exercises signalled TNI and Indonesia's willingness to reinstate and develop relations with the West, particularly after having gone through the military embargo ordeal [post-East Timor](#), and the adverse effects of the Asian financial crisis.



Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo (MNEK) was launched in 2014. At its fourth iteration in 2023, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) continued to be the fundamental theme for MNEK. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Given the complex geopolitical situation emerging in the early 2010s, Indonesia realised that it would need to play a bigger role in mitigating the growing geopolitical tension in the region. Hence, under the leadership of Admiral Marsetio as chief of navy (2012–2014), Indonesia established a multinational naval exercise aimed at enhancing cooperation among partnering navies in military and non-military operations. Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo (MNEK) was launched in 2014, involving some 4,800 TNI-AL personnel and 27 warships. It saw the participation of around 18 countries, including the United States and China, as well as observers from the European Union and the United Nations.

The 2014 MNEK focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations. HADR was deemed to be less sensitive and it was relevant to the Asia-

Pacific region, which is prone to natural disasters. At its fourth iteration in 2023, HADR continued to be the [fundamental theme](#) for MNEK. MNEK constitutes an achievement for TNI-AL as it helps to promote multilateral naval cooperation among different actors. It serves as a platform for interaction among competing powers, such as the United States, China, and Russia. Such interaction helps to augment efforts through other regional mechanisms such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) [Experts Working Group on HADR](#), and the [East Asia Summit's Conference](#) on Maritime Security Cooperation in promoting peace and stability globally and regionally.

Future Trajectory

Given TNI's recognition that the volatile geopolitical dynamic can potentially affect regional stability, it should be no surprise if more naval exercises and engagements are planned between TNI-AL and its counterparts. Under the presidency of Widodo, TNI-AL initiated new regular bilateral exercises with [France](#) (2018), [India](#) (2018), [Malaysia](#) (2022), and [Vietnam](#) (2022). Indonesia and [Russia](#) held their first joint exercise in November 2024, and exercises with [China](#) will resume in 2025. Although the inclusion of several non-Western states may put into question the interoperability of participating navies, such exercises nonetheless serve as an important catalyst for confidence-building and people-to-people connections between Indonesia and its foreign counterparts. Both are important social commodities.

As improved confidence with its counterparts improves, TNI-AL can start expanding the scope of its naval exercises. TNI-AL generally conducts passing, manoeuvring, live-fire, and helicopter exercises with its partners under a single exercise. Only with Singapore does the TNI-AL conduct a separate specialised naval exercise under [Exercise Joint Minex Pandu](#), which simulates underwater threats. It would be beneficial for TNI-AL to organise similar specialised naval exercises with other partners to improve its own capabilities in areas such as submarine rescue or countering CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear) threats, aspects that have assumed greater relevance in contemporary times.

Another dimension involves non-traditional maritime insecurities in Indonesia's outlying maritime domain, which continue to pose a challenge for the country and its neighbours. Illegal fishery and exploitation of workers in the [Arafura Sea](#) and the eastern waters of Indonesia have persisted even after the high-level [Benjina case](#) in 2015. In addition, broader maritime insecurities in the [Sulu-Sulawesi seas](#), particularly illicit smuggling of wildlife and illegal fishery, call for attention, given that the existing INDOMALPHI trilateral law enforcement maritime patrols involving Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines are concerned mainly with countering armed robbery, kidnappings, and cases of maritime terrorism.

TNI-AL and the Indonesian government must reinvigorate regional cooperation to combat these non-traditional maritime insecurities and find new political alignments to expand information and intelligence sharing to effectively combat these threats. As an example, the last coordinated maritime patrol between Indonesia and Australia was conducted as far back as [in 2021](#) and took place over just five days. Although both countries have advanced their strategic security alignment in the face of geopolitical development, they would need to continually reinforce existing tactical security cooperation to ensure a stable and safe maritime environment.

As Indonesia welcomes its new administration under President Prabowo Subianto, it must continue to reinforce its capacity to respond to regional challenges as well as to global concerns. With its unique position in Indonesia's foreign policy structure, TNI-AL will need to scale up its capability and capacity to pull its weight for peace and stability.

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