



# Indonesia's Special Forces and the Quest for Contemporary Relevance

*Chaula Rininta Anindya and Adhi Priamarizki*



*The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at [RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg).*

## Indonesia's Special Forces and the Quest for Contemporary Relevance

*Chaula Rininta Anindya and Adhi Priamarizki*

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The recent change to the organisational structure of the Indonesian armed forces' various special forces indicates the Indonesian government's commitment to developing a "Large Islands Defence Strategy".
- The change also serves as a quick fix for the military's perennial promotional bottleneck. However, it does not address the susceptibility of the special forces to being drawn into non-defence roles.
- The absence of a proper blueprint for special forces deployment could jeopardise their force multiplier status.

### COMMENTARY

In August 2025, Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto issued [Presidential Regulation No. 84/2025](#) on the Organisational Structure of the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI). The regulation inaugurated 162 new units and created 49 new positions for higher-ranked military officers. It also introduced changes to the organisational structure of the Indonesian armed forces' various special forces (SF), including establishing additional units and promoting their commanders. The organisational changes affected the army's SF (Kopassus), the navy's marine corps (Marinir), and the SF of the air force (Kopasgat). What do these changes signify for the SF?

## Between Strategic and Bureaucratic Necessities

The new presidential regulation mandated two notable organisational changes for the Indonesian SF: (1) the promotion of the Indonesian SF commander from a two-star general to a three-star general, and (2) the expansion of the number of groups under Kopassus from three to six. TB Hasanuddin, a retired army general and a member of the national parliament (DPR), [noted](#) that the promotion of the SF commander was necessary due to the growing size of the SF. He argued that the commander and deputy commander of each service's SF can no longer adequately handle leadership responsibilities. Additional assistants are required to support the SF leadership, and such additions can only be justified through rank elevation. This expansion, however, will arguably further increase the number of personnel. The current size of Kopassus is approximately 4,000 to 6,000 personnel. It is estimated that this number will be doubled in the next four years.

The Indonesian army (TNI AD) asserted that the organisational change within Kopassus is in line with the "[Large Islands Defence Strategy](#)", which aims to enhance the ability of each large island – Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Papua – to defend itself against threats. Prior to the organisational changes, all three Kopassus groups were based in Java. Through the changes, Kopassus is now located in each of the five largest islands: Groups 1 and 2 in Java (Banten Province and Surakarta, Central Java Province, respectively), Group 3 in Sumatra (Dumai, Riau Province), Group 4 in Kalimantan (Penajam, Nusantara capital city), Group 5 in Sulawesi (Kendari, Central Sulawesi Province), and Group 6 in Papua (Timika, Central Papua Province). Meanwhile, the Kopassus headquarters remains in Jakarta.

Another important development is the transformation of the Indonesian navy's *lantamal* (navy base) into *kodaeral* (regional navy commands), which demonstrates the navy's intention to develop the service's newly introduced [coastal defence plan](#). Under the new regulations, Marinir, the navy's SF, has expanded its structure with the addition of one infantry brigade and five infantry battalions. The expansion of Marinir's structure highlights its critical role in the coastal defence plan through its capability to intercept amphibious attacks.

## What Do the Changes Mean for Indonesia's SF?

On the one hand, the expansion of the SF and TNI's organisational structure showcases the military's commitment to the development of its "Large Islands Defence Strategy". The existence of a Kopassus group in each of Indonesia's five largest islands means that each island would be able to have more or less equal TNI muscles. Moreover, as the TNI continues to suffer from the perennial issue of a [promotional logjam](#), the expansion of the number of SF groups can help to ease the congestion – although this is no more than a band-aid solution.

On the other hand, there are underlying challenges that may undermine the efficacy of the Indonesian SF. First, the line between SF and conventional forces is increasingly blurred. SF have been known for their small size and niche character. However, the latest organisational changes have boosted the number of SF officers. Moreover, SF units often take part in supporting central government programmes, such as Prabowo's *ketahanan pangan* or [food resilience project](#). Both conventional

forces and SF are involved in the food security programme, suggesting that the division between special and conventional forces is becoming less distinct.

The next issue is the potential rise in the cost of maintaining the readiness of the SF. It is no secret that SF units receive elite training regimes and utilise cutting-edge military gear. The expansion in the number of SF units will require additional funding to sustain the quality of the units.

Third, representational disparity is another possible challenge that may arise. The formation of the SF unit known as [Koopssus](#) back in 2019 was meant to provide the TNI commander the flexibility to deploy SF units for counterterrorism operations. Koopssus members are drawn from different TNI SF units. [Distributing personnel into Koopssus](#) was not an easy task, as the transfer of officers means the original units would have to fill the workforce gap. A similar challenge could arise with the recent expansion of SF units: they will draw the required additional personnel from other units, affecting their readiness, not to mention the readiness of the new SF units

The formation of new SF units may also pose challenges related to interoperability between various SF units as well as with other TNI units. In addition, the introduction of new thinking in TNI's overall strategy, including the Large Islands Defence Strategy and the navy's coastal defence plan, requires these newly formed units to acclimatise to the changes they entail. Thus, ensuring interoperability, such as through regular exercises, should be a priority.



The recent expansion of Indonesia's special forces indicates the government's commitment to its "Large Islands Defence Strategy", but it also raises critical questions about cost and interoperability.

*Image source: Wikimedia Commons.*

Although the SF have the status of force multipliers, they are not designed to be a panacea for all defence and security challenges. The Indonesian military must avoid overreliance on the SF just because they are available. Crafting a proper strategy can help to guide the optimal utilisation of SF units.

## **The Future of Special Forces**

The issue of the Indonesian SF often escapes the attention of defence analysts even though it is critical to understanding the [TNI's defence strategy and operational characteristics](#). The SF have been the preferred option for policymakers owing to their agility and cost-effectiveness. However, the expansion of SF units increases the cost of maintaining them.

This leads to another question: is the expansion a proper response to the evolving nature of warfare? The expansion of Kopassus groups underlines Indonesia's hefty land-oriented defence structure. The Russia-Ukraine war, however, demonstrates the limitations of land warfare owing to the rise of [advanced electronic warfare](#), which has restricted the ability to conduct, or even thwart an adversary's, rapid manoeuvres. In a similar vein, adding marine battalions is not a silver bullet to the contemporary threat landscape. The prominence of anti-access area denial (A2/AD) technologies has reduced the strategic advantage of traditional amphibious warfare. For example, the use of long-range weapons and electronic warfare could undermine the efficacy of frontal amphibious assaults.

The Indonesian SF have always been under the spotlight due to their physical capabilities. However, the contemporary security landscape shows that physical presence and capabilities alone are insufficient. The adoption of modern technologies and innovative warfare methods is the first step in ensuring battle readiness. On top of that, having a proper blueprint for the development and deployment of the SF is a necessary prerequisite for the readiness of the units. Doing so will help to keep the "special" in special forces meaningful.

**Chaula Rininta Anindya** is a lecturer in the Department of International Relations, Universitas Indonesia, focusing on strategic studies. She was previously a research analyst with the Indonesia Programme, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS). **Adhi Priamarizki** is a Research Fellow with the Indonesia Programme, RSIS.

*Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.*

