

Indonesian foreign policy tilts towards the US and its allies

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31 December 2015

The Japanese foreign and defence ministers met their Indonesian counterparts in Tokyo on December 17 in the first “2-plus-2” meeting involving Japan and a member of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

For Japan, the meeting was part of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s aggressive diplomatic strategy of forging closer economic and military ties with countries in the region in collaboration with the US and its “pivot to Asia.” Over the past five years, Washington and its allies have taken an increasingly confrontational approach to China, in particular inflaming maritime disputes in the South China Sea between Beijing and its neighbours.

Like every country in the region, Indonesia is being drawn into this geo-political rivalry and is engaged in an ever more difficult balancing act between US imperialism and China, which is a major source of trade and investment. The talks in Tokyo, however, were another indication of a shift by Jakarta towards the US and its allies.

A key focus of the meeting was “maritime security”—that is, the military build-up in the Western Pacific against China—and closer defence relations.

Japanese Defence Minister Gen Nakatani announced that a deal had been struck to transfer defence technology between the two countries and that Japan would join a multilateral maritime exercise next year led by Indonesia. “I stressed the importance of cooperation in maritime security,” he said.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi declared that Indonesia wanted “to enhance stability in the South China Sea” and called on all claimants to “work to lower regional tensions.” Defence Minister Ryamizard Ryacudu suggested that China could be included in South China Sea naval exercises.

Prior to the talks, Ryamizard outlined Indonesian plans for strengthening its military capacities in the South China Sea. He said Indonesia was planning to deploy jet fighters and three corvettes to the Natuna islands and to upgrade its naval and air force bases there. In addition, the army would increase the size of its ground force in the Natunas from 800 to 2,000 personnel.

The Indonesian military build-up on the Natuna Islands, ostensibly to prevent illegal fishing or an “illicit intrusion,” is clearly aimed at securing the country’s territory in the South China Sea. While China does not claim any of the Natuna group, its vague nine-dash line covering much of the region potentially cuts across Indonesia’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) surrounding the islands.

The more assertive Indonesian stance is in line with Indonesian President Joko Widodo’s strategy of transforming the country into a “Global Maritime Fulcrum.” The phrase underscores Indonesia’s strategic importance, sitting astride key shipping routes from Africa and the Middle East across the Indian Ocean and through to North East Asia and the Pacific Ocean.

Amid rising tensions in the South China Sea, Indonesia has shifted its stance, adopting a tougher approach to China, while at the same time seeking to avoid open confrontation. At a public forum in November, Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, Luhut Pandjaitan, threatened to take China to an international tribunal unless its rights over the Natuna Islands EEZ were recognised.

The threat was an obvious reference to the Philippine case before the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in which Manila is challenging, with US assistance, China’s claims in the South China Sea

based on the 1947 “Nine Dash Line” map. Beijing has bitterly opposed the case and refused to take part, insisting that the court has no jurisdiction.

As well as forging closer ties with Japan, Indonesia has strengthened relations with the US. During his visit to Washington in October, President Widodo met with President Obama and agreed to upgrade bilateral ties to a strategic partnership. The two also signed a joint statement on comprehensive defence cooperation, including co-development and co-production of defence equipment, and a memorandum of understanding highlighting the importance of maritime issues.

The US has longstanding relations with the Indonesian military stemming from its support for the bloody 1965-66 Indonesian coup and subsequent Suharto dictatorship. After US bans on military-to-military engagement imposed over human rights abuses were eased in 2005, the ties have rapidly resumed. A Centre for Strategic and International Studies report estimated that there are now more than 200 engagements between US and Indonesian forces annually. US military sales have also ballooned, including with the purchase of F-16 fighters and Apache attack helicopters.

The Indonesian military has been in the forefront of pushing for a stronger stand against China including on the Natuna Islands. In April 2014, Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) commander General Moeldoko, without consulting President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono or the Foreign Ministry, called for a tougher attitude to China in a *Wall Street Journal* article.

The more aggressive attitude of the military was also evident in a recent demand that Singapore surrender its 70-year control of aviation in airspace over the Riau and Natuna islands. A director of the air navigation agency told Bloomberg on December 4 that the air force wanted to control its own air space.

Widodo’s Vice President Jusuf Kalla made it clear that the target of these moves was China. He told Bloomberg that while China had now acknowledged that the Natuna Islands belonged to Indonesia, Jakarta was “worried” by Chinese reclamation and construction on islands under its control in the South China Sea. “We are not thinking to have a war with China, but we must preserve our borders,” he declared.

Kalla’s reference to China’s land reclamation is in

line with Washington’s campaign over the past year condemning “Chinese expansionism” in the South China Sea. The US has exploited the issue to justify its own military build-up and secure stronger strategic ties in South East Asia. In October, the US navy provocatively sent the guided missile destroyer, the USS Lassen, within the 12-nautical mile limit of one of China’s islets.

Fearful that US actions could provoke war, Indonesia was critical.

Pandjaitan bluntly declared: “We disagree, we don’t like power projection. Have you ever heard of power projection solving problems? In Afghanistan? In Iraq? The United States has spent trillions of dollars in Afghanistan and Iraq. What are the results? Hundreds of thousands of people were killed. And now, violence continues to happen in Iraq.”

Widodo, who was in Washington at the time, urged all sides to “exercise restraint”. Defence Minister Ryamizad Ryacudu, who was returning from China, said it would be better if regional countries managed the South China Sea on their own, without involving others—a rather pointed reference to the United States.

The response not only highlighted concerns about a war, but indicated the limits, at present, to Indonesia’s shift towards Washington. Even after the 1965-66 coup, Indonesia sought to maintain its non-aligned status which has underpinned its foreign policy. However, its criticisms of US actions in Asia and the Middle East, which are also aimed at containing anti-war sentiment at home, cannot disguise the fact that Indonesia is tilting towards Washington and its confrontation with China.



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