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Proxy Wars Narrative: TNI-AD's Quest for Relevance?

By Keoni Marzuki

Synopsis

The 'proxy war' narrative had been frequently aired by the Indonesian military, especially the Army as an avenue to augment its presence in the civilian domain. The 'proxy war' narrative is also a broader effort by the Indonesian Army (TNI-AD) to preserve its relevance under the Jokowi government's Global Maritime Fulcrum vision.

Commentary

INDONESIA'S MILITARY Commander, General Gatot Nurmantyo, has frequently articulated his concern over proxy wars that have the potential of ripping the country apart. He emphasised that such a threat is intangible and its impact on national cohesiveness is serious.

This form of threat, according to General Nurmantyo, does not propagate organically, but is orchestrated vicariously by foreign entities wishing to assume direct control over the country's resources such as food, water and energy, through the use of strategically-placed domestic collaborators or subsidiaries, namely NGOs, media, social interest groups and individuals.

Forms of Proxy War

According to General Nurmantyo, there are at least three forms of proxy wars which Indonesia currently faces, namely secessionist movements, inter-group conflicts and mass demonstrations organised, assisted and funded by foreign entities. The degradation of moral and nationalistic values, especially on the youth, as well as emerging religious radicalisation and infiltration of foreign culture and values are also

frequently mentioned by the military as parts of various proxy wars to weaken the nation's unity.

The key in addressing the challenge posed by the amorphous threat of proxy war, at least according to the Army, TNI-AD, is to enhance Indonesia's resilience in various aspects. Initiatives aimed to bolster resiliency, for example the *serbuan teritorial* (territorial invasion) initiative that emphasises societal and physical development at the rural-local level, are precisely the proper response to be implemented to counteract the threat. Other initiatives, such as *Bela Negara* (State Defence) programme, complement the former initiative by reinforcing core national values such as Pancasila, which is grounded on the values of religion, human rights, national unity, democracy and social justice.

Arguably, the thesis of the proxy wars threat is not novel as noted by various articles and reports. In fact, this siege mentality has been championed by General Nurmantyo when he served as the Army Chief of Staff and can be traced back to the time when he served as the Commander of the Army Strategic Reserve Command (KOSTRAD).

Proxy War Narrative and Indonesian Insularity?

There are indeed several possible drivers that shape and influence the genesis of the proxy war narrative. First, it could be the inward-looking doctrine of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI), with emphasis on TNI-AD as the guardian of the state. This doctrine persists and continues to be preached religiously within the teaching institution even after the era of military reform.

Second, there is a widely-held belief about Indonesia as a staging ground for proxy wars in the past particularly during the chaos of the early and mid-1960s. Third, the current leadership lacks exposure to foreign military education and/or exercises, thus entrenching their insularity.

The proxy war narrative, as elaborated by General Nurmantyo, indicates the prevalence of the insular paradigm, at least within the TNI-AD, following efforts of military reform that were 'concluded' in 2004. The systematic diffusion of the narrative down to the rank—and-file at regional commands across the archipelago, however, indicates efforts to perpetuate the paradigm across the TNI-AD structure.

In addition to internal diffusion, it has spread further into the Ministry of Defence, as reflected, some say arguably, by the recent comments of the Defence Minister, General (Ret.) Ryamizard Ryacudu, regarding the LGBT issue in Indonesia as mendacious foreign influences that are utilised to precipitate dissent in society.

Military Operations Other Than War?

The absence of a clear and definite outline of what constitute tangible evidence of proxy wars and the loose usage of the narrative may present a problem in the era of *reformasi*. It may well be used as an avenue for the military, especially the Army, to justify greater involvement in civilian policy implementation under the blanket rubric of *Operasi Militer Selain Perang* (Military Operations Other Than War).

Minister Ryacudu's recent comment on the pro-LGBT movement as a form of proxy war indicates that the narrative is elastic and can be stretched or moulded to suit a variety of different issues and interests that lies beyond the directives of the TNI and the Ministry of Defence.

The whole narrative of proxy wars can easily be perceived as the intention of strengthening TNI involvement in internal security. It should be noted, however, that the involvement of the military in civilian affairs has been established and defined, albeit ambiguously, within the 2004 Law on TNI. Additionally, military involvement on civilian affairs requires political decision from civilian leadership on either the national or regional level.

Quest for Relevance

A recent report by the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) argues that the main value of the proxy war narrative for the Indonesian military is its unique fusion of international and domestic threats utilised as rhetoric to strengthen the TNI's role in internal security. This is achieved by means of a greater level of engagement with civilians - critical in repelling the external threat of proxy wars. Such a perspective is indeed valid.

However, the proxy wars narrative, and subsequent initiatives to repel it, possibly serves a greater purpose for the TNI-AD as a response to Indonesia's turn towards a maritime-oriented outlook. Alternatively, the narrative may serve as a response to the advent of fourth generation warfare whereby means of combat or force devolves into non-physical forms. Nevertheless, fully implemented and enforced, President Joko Widodo's Global Maritime Fulcrum strategy would potentially diminish the role of the TNI-AD as the dominant service in external defence and its replacement by the Navy, TNI-AL, as the leading service.

The shift to a maritime focus signifies a number of possibilities for the TNI-AD, most of which would compromise its status as Indonesia's stalwart protector. Most critically, however, the maritime-oriented shift calls for substantial resource re-allocation to critical sectors - in this case the TNI-AL - thus rendering the Army vulnerable to potential budget cuts on which it may not be able to maintain its primacy and legacy.

As such, it has to adapt to the changing environment and find a way to preserve its relevance under the Global Maritime Fulcrum vision. However, pushing the idea of proxy wars may not significantly enhance the Army's capacity and capability to operate in the maritime domain either.

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