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Singapore-Indonesia Defence Relations: Key Building Block of Bilateral Partnership

By Leonard C. Sebastian

Synopsis

A key pillar of the overall bilateral relationship between Singapore and Indonesia over the past 50 years has been the close defence relations between them. This is notwithstanding the wide disparity in size, population, resources, development and historical perspectives between the two neighbours.

Commentary

FROM UNPROMISING beginnings when pre-independent Singapore, as a component state of the Federation of Malaysia, was the target of confrontation by Sukarno's Indonesia, to today's confident partnership of the largest and smallest members of ASEAN, the defence relationship between Singapore and Indonesia has progressed by leaps and bounds.

It is a relationship based on mutual trust and respect that has allowed both militaries to work well together. Both defence establishments now enjoy extensive interaction across the three services and at all levels. A highlight of this close partnership will be the joint fly-past of the F16s of both air forces over the Singapore waterfront today, 7 September, during the Leaders' Retreat between the leaders of Singapore and Indonesia symbolising the enduring partnership of the two countries.

Indonesia in Singapore's Defence Calculations

Indonesia has always entered into the defence calculations of Singapore. This was evident during *Konfrontasi* or Confrontation from 1963-1966 when Indonesia was perceived as a security challenge, and in recent times, as Singaporeans live with anxieties that the Indonesian archipelago can be used as stepping stones for a possible terrorist attack.

A popular perception of Indonesia as a potential security challenge arises in part from differences in size and the not unusual wariness of small countries which happen to have large neighbours. Indonesia's 261 million dwarfs Singapore's 5.6 million. Further public fears have been aggravated by common perceptions of Indonesia's past behaviour.

The Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) was formed in 1945 as a guerrilla force to fight Dutch colonialism and this experience continues to influence military doctrine to this day. The basic defence doctrine of the Indonesian military is "Territorial Warfare". This doctrine requires that the military, especially the Army, be organised principally along 'territorial' rather than 'functional' lines.

The whole nation is divided into territorial commands which are tasked to maintain contact with the local population so that they could be mobilised quickly to support guerrilla operations. Under a territorial warfare doctrine, the main emphasis was on the Army rather than the Navy and Air Force.

From Inward-looking to Outward-looking Posture

Like the majority of ASEAN militaries, the inward-looking focus of the TNI meant it was not configured to address changed security circumstances in Southeast Asia with the withdrawal of United States forces from Vietnam, the challenge posed by communist victories in Indochina and the threat of Vietnamese expansionism. At the Bali summit in 1976, ASEAN leaders agreed that bilateral arrangements implemented outside the ASEAN framework would be the appropriate form of military-military cooperation.

The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 provided the impetus for military cooperation among ASEAN members to be upgraded. The development of defence cooperation became interconnected with the idea of regionalism. Singapore supported Indonesia's emphasis for ASEAN members to improve their respective national resilience as the basis for regional resilience.

A key component of regional resilience was the need to upgrade bilateral military contacts particularly between Singapore and Indonesia. Notable agreements were registered. In March 1989, General Try Sutrisno and Lieutenant-General Winston Choo opened combined air weapons testing facilities at the Indonesian Siabu Air Weapons Range near Pekanbaru.

Three days after the Siabu opening, an MOU was signed covering the conduct of regular joint land exercises in Indonesia. In July 1989, it was announced that Singapore was granted access to an army training centre at Baturaja, Sumatra.

Speaking to reporters on 4 October 1989, General Sutrisno called for ASEAN members to 'spin their own defence [spider] web'. A key link in that web came into existence on 11 December 1989 when Indonesia and Singapore held their first joint land exercise in Singapore, entitled Safkar Indopura 1/89. The first of the series held at Stagmont Camp, Kranji, was a map-planning exercise without troop movements.

Today, the exercise has become a full-fledged field exercise stretching over two weeks

and involving more than 200 personnel from both sides. The SAF's longest-running bilateral exercise with any foreign military is Exercise Eagle Indopura with the Indonesian Navy, which was previously named Exercise Eagle, having been held since 1974.

The Bigger Context

The extensiveness of the bilateral defence relationship would place both countries at the forefront of moves to hone intra-regional military cooperation. Similar bilateral defence cooperation initiatives replicated elsewhere in ASEAN would allow militaries to develop joint procedures and doctrine allowing for a collective response in times of crisis; act as a confidence building measure helping participants overcome mutual suspicions; and raise awareness of the other's military-security requirements.

The personal friendships, forged and sustained by the generations of SAF and TNI personnel, have allowed both armed forces to come together to tackle challenges effectively. The TNI assisted in the search and rescue operations after the 1997 Silkair crash in Palembang, while the SAF assisted in the relief efforts for the 2004 tsunami and the SAR operations after the 2014 crash of an Air Asia flight in the Java Sea.

The Indonesian and Singapore armed forces have shared resources in training and military education, such as in their command and staff colleges. In the face of increased transnational threats in the region (such as in maritime security and counter-terrorism) both countries and their militaries are now required to work even closer together.

The success of the Malacca Strait Patrol (MSP) cooperation undertaken by Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand in combating piracy and sea robbery can be seen by the Lloyd's Joint War Risk Committee's decision to drop the classification of the Malacca Strait as a "war-risk area" in 2006. This achievement is also a testimony of the close links between the RSN and the TNI-AL western fleet.

Singapore-Indonesia Defence Nexus

Commander-in-Chief of the Indonesian National Defence Forces (TNI), General Gatot Nurmantyo, noted in July 2017 during the annual SAF-TNI meeting co-chaired with Singapore's Chief of Defence Forces Lieutenant General Perry Lim that Indonesia is committed to working together with Singapore to promote peace, security and stability in the ASEAN region, which would in turn contribute to a more stable world order.

The Singapore-Indonesia defence nexus is a key building block in the bilateral relationship. The special combined fly past of F-16 aircraft from the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) and the Indonesian Air Force (TNI-AU) performing two manoeuvres -- an "arrowhead" formation, accompanied by the aircraft forming the number "50" -- also highlights the inter-operability and integration among armed forces within ASEAN which bodes well for overall regional security.

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