US administration pushes for military presence in Indonesia

Peter Symonds
12 April 2002

Under the banner of its "global war on terrorism," the Bush administration is pushing the Indonesian government to reestablish close military relations with the US, including the possible stationing of American troops in the archipelago. As US-Indonesian military cooperation remains the subject of a ban by US Congress, Washington's moves have been relatively low-key but nonetheless concerted and insistent.

The most revealing indication of US ambitions was an article published in *USA Today* on March 20 entitled "Pentagon wants to send troops to Indonesia." Citing unnamed US defence and intelligence officials, the report repeated a theme that has been unrelenting in the US media in recent weeks—that Indonesia has become a safe haven for Islamic extremists and terrorists. "Dozens of Al Qaeda operatives," it claimed, have "sneaked" out of Afghanistan via Pakistan to find refuge "in the world's most populous Muslim nation."

Pointing to "anti-terror training missions" run by the US military in the Philippines, Yemen and Georgia, *USA Today* explained "some Defence Department officials say they want to restart military training missions [in Indonesia]... Congressional sources say the Pentagon wants to get forces on the ground to assess the strength of Al Qaeda."

The article provoked an immediate reaction in Jakarta, where President Megawati Sukarnoputri has been involved in a delicate balancing act—backing Bush's "war on terrorism" but not so publicly as to trigger opposition from those hostile to Washington's military aggression in Afghanistan. Top White House officials quickly denied the report but clearly the article reflected the frustrations in top US defence circles over the Congressional ban and the Indonesian administration. "We would certainly like the handcuffs removed," a senior Pentagon official told the newspaper.

A day after the article appeared, Admiral Dennis Blair, head of the US Pacific command, reiterated the Pentagon's message, albeit in somewhat more cautious terms. Speaking of the need for US assistance in the intelligence and security, Blair declared: "[T]here will be some sort of military element because the armed forces of Indonesia, the TNI, have counterterrorism responsibilities... and it's in both our interests for them to do it better and more effectively." Aware of Jakarta's sensitivities, he downplayed any US military presence, saying it "will be much more tailored and playing much more of a support role" as compared to the Philippines.

Also responding to the article, US Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz made Washington's intentions clear. While placating Jakarta by describing any immediate deployment of troops as "counterproductive," Wolfowitz held out the possibility of resuming military cooperation over counterterrorism and counternarcotics operations. He indicated that the Bush administration intended to operate, in the short term at least, through the Indonesian police and intelligence services. Unlike the Philippines, he said, where Islamic separatist militias operate, Indonesia presented "much more of a law enforcement challenge".

Wolfowitz's remarks underscored the visit to Jakarta in mid-March of FBI director Robert Mueller III who met with Indonesia's chief security minister and the national police chief. Wolfowitz indicated that Megawati's administration had already provided significant behind-the-scenes assistance to the US. He noted that the country's central bank was now helping to track or freeze the assets of alleged terrorist organisations and pointed to Jakarta's "significant cooperation" in handing over a Pakistani "terrorist suspect".

The latter incident illustrates the type of "cooperation" the Bush administration is insisting on. An article in the *Washington Post* last month explained in detail how Muhammad Saad Iqbal Madni was detained in January on the basis of CIA allegations and within days whisked out of the country to Egypt bypassing all extradition and legal procedures. Iqbal's case was cited as an example of what the CIA terms "a rendition"—the dispatch of suspects to countries such as Egypt and Jordan where, under US supervision, information can be extracted by interrogation and torture. Jakarta media were told that Iqbal had been deported for "visa violations". As one senior Indonesian official explained to the *Washington Post*, "We can't be seen as cooperating too closely with the United States."

The dirty hand of Indonesian intelligence may also have been involved in the arrest of three Indonesians—Agus Dwikarna, Tamsil Linrung and Abdul Jammal Balsas—at Manila airport on March 13, allegedly for carrying bomb-making materials. The Philippine police claim that the three met with Fathur Rohman al-Ghozi who was detained previously over alleged links to the Islamic extremist organisation Jemaah Islamiyah and a series of bombings. However, Linrung, a former deputy treasurer of Indonesia's conservative National Mandate Party (PAN), has denied the charges and accused the Indonesian intelligence services of setting him up.

As Wolfowitz indicated, Washington is grateful for such services but is still quietly pushing for military involvement in Indonesia. A string of US officials and politicians have delivered the message to Megawati's administration over the last month. On March 30, two US senators—Daniel Inoue and Ted Stevens—met with Indonesia's chief security minister and top military officers to discuss military cooperation between the two countries. In discussions with Megawati in Jakarta last weekend, US trade representative Robert Zoellick stepped outside his usual brief to emphasise the importance of Indonesian cooperation on security issues. The none-too-subtle message is that Washington's trade and economic assistance lies in the balance.

Running parallel with the US diplomatic efforts has been a sustained and far more strident campaign in the US media to brand Indonesia as a dangerous haven for terrorism. Attention has been focused on two Indonesians—Abu Bakar Baasyir and Riudan Isamuddin, also known as Hambali—who are accused of being behind a plot to attack US and other Western facilities in Singapore. The allegations are based on the police

© World Socialist Web Site

interrogation of suspects rounded up in Singapore and Malaysia last year and held under legislation providing for lengthy detention without trial.

Time magazine, for instance, has published articles on "Asia's War on Terrorism" in seven of its issues over the last three months. Not all the articles deal primarily with Indonesia but a common thread runs through the series: unlike other South East Asian countries, Indonesia has failed to take tough action on terrorism. The main accusation is: Hambali is still at large and Abu Bakar, who runs an Islamic religious school in Central Java, has not been detained. No solid evidence is offered to support the demand—the implication being that Indonesia should simply follow the anti-democratic methods of Malaysia and Singapore.

The *Time* stories are sensationalised beat-ups based on bald assertions padded out with information and opinion provided, for the most part, by unnamed sources in US defence, intelligence and diplomatic circles or local police. The latest article, which appeared in the April 1 issue, devotes five pages to the results of an investigation into Hambali, who is described as "the terrorist mastermind of the Asian operations of Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network and the guiding force for the past decade of most of the major acts of Asian terrorism". The only evidence for this grand assertion are mundane accounts by a former landlord, his mother, relatives, former friends and associates filled out with unsubstantiated police intelligence and a liberal serving of colourful prose.

The major newspapers have plugged away on the same line. An article in the *Washington Post* entitled "Indonesia a 'Big Disappointment' in Terror War" stated that, while the Bush administration's public stance towards Jakarta was conciliatory, in private US officials were "seething". The newspaper cited an unnamed US diplomat as saying: "It is hard to think of another country in the world that has such a potentially big terrorism problem and has done so little to deal with it." A nameless senior defence official complained that Indonesia had failed to act quickly enough on requests for assistance. Another unnamed American diplomat referred to a recent CIA assessment that "there was a significant threat of Al Qaeda basing further operations in Indonesia".

These vague and anonymous assertions were to substantiate an editorial in the same newspaper which declared: "Despite considerable prodding, Mrs Megawati's government has been slow to act; police have failed to find key suspects, and at least one Islamic militant believed to be closely tied to the terrorists continues to operate openly. US analysts believe Mrs Megawati hesitates to take more decisive steps for fear of undermining her own government, which depends on the support of Islamic political movements. The same concerns make her reluctant to accept the sort of direct US support now going on in neighbouring Philippines."

The media campaign is designed to serve two purposes. The first is to keep the pressure on Megawati to find ways to open the door for the US military, perhaps under the same guise as in the Philippines where a protracted "training exercise" involving 660 US troops is currently underway. The second is to push the US Congress to lift the present ban on US-Indonesian military links, imposed after the Indonesian army was implicated in the widespread attacks on pro-independence supporters in East Timor in 1999. While completely cosmetic in character, the current Indonesian trial of middle-ranking military officers accused of directing the violence in East Timor could provide the pretext for revising or overturning the ban.

The Bush administration's moves to establish close defence ties, including a military presence in Indonesia, are not directed to countering the threat of Islamic extremism. Rather, as in other key areas of the world, the US is exploiting the September 11 attacks to advance long-held ambitions to secure a dominant position in South East Asia, where Washington has substantial economic and strategic interests.

Following its defeat in Vietnam and then withdrawal from Subic Bay and Clark airfield in the Philippines, the US has had no direct military presence in the region. Its nearest bases are thousands of kilometres away in Guam, Japan, South Korea and Hawaii. Since September 11, however, the Pentagon has sent troops to the Philippines for at least six months and has forged closer ties with a number of countries in South East Asia, including Singapore and Thailand.

In a submission to a US Congressional subcommittee in December, Angel Rabasa, a senior policy analyst with the US-based RAND Corporation, outlined what is at stake for Washington in South East Asia. The region, he explained, has "vast natural resources" and an "enormous strategic importance that has not always received the level of attention it deserves". He pointed in particular to the key position of the region astride the straits and sea lanes that are crucial to trade between Northeast Asia, Australia, the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East and are key important to the US military for similar reason.

Like other analysts, Rabasa identified China as "the primary area of concern" in the "conventional military arena" and went on to outline measures that, in the name of "fighting terrorism," neatly dovetailed with the Pentagon's ambitions to secure military bases in South East Asia. Control of the key straits and sea-lanes through the South China Sea and the Indonesian archipelago not only facilitates the passage of US warships but implicitly threatens China, as well as Washington's main economic rival in the region—Japan.

Within this strategic equation, Rabasa explained, Indonesia, "because of its size and geopolitical weight is the key to regional security". Summing up relations with Indonesia, he commented: "There has been progress in the Bush administration to strengthen ties at senior levels through high-level visits, conferences, and seminars. However, because of restrictions on International Military Education and Training (IMET) funding for Indonesia since 1992 there has been a 'lost decade' in which few Indonesian military officers were exposed to American methods and values. Therefore, there is a need to expeditiously normalise military-to-military relations, including the restoration of IMET funding to Indonesia."

Rabasa's comments simply make explicit the thinking behind the continuing pressure on Jakarta to reestablish close military links with the US. Making up for the "lost decade" will no doubt be high on the agenda at a high-level US-Indonesian security forum scheduled for April 25-26 in Jakarta.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site