

Australian “border protection” regime fuels dispute with Indonesia

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A diplomatic row has erupted between Indonesia and Australia over the punitive asylum seeker policy being implemented by the new Liberal-National Coalition government in Canberra. During the campaign for the September 7 election, the Coalition and Labor Party engaged in a reactionary bidding war over “border protection” policies to block refugees arriving in Australia by boat.

After less than two weeks in office, Prime Minister Tony Abbott is due to fly to Indonesia on Monday—his first overseas trip as government leader—amid sharp criticisms from Jakarta of Canberra’s plans to use the Australian navy to turn refugee boats back to Indonesia, buy up Indonesian fishing boats, and pay informants inside Indonesia.

Tensions flared publicly this week after Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa met with his Australian counterpart Julie Bishop in New York on Monday. Following that meeting, Natalegawa declared that he had conveyed “loud and clear” to Bishop that Indonesia could not “accept any Australian policy that would, in nature, violate Indonesia’s sovereignty.”

When Bishop dismissed his comment as a misunderstanding, Natalegawa, normally a model of restraint, delivered what amounted to a diplomatic slap in the face. He released minutes of the private meeting, which confirmed that he had warned of a potential breach in relations. In the discussion, he declared that “unilateral steps by Australia may constitute a risk to the close cooperation and trust” built through previous multilateral negotiations.

Natalegawa’s comments reflect mounting anger in Jakarta over the Abbott government’s anti-refugee plans, which involve an expanding Australian air and naval presence in sensitive strategic waters between the two countries. The military character of Canberra’s plans, named Operation Sovereign Borders, was highlighted by

installation of Australian army deputy chief Angus Campbell last week to oversee all related activities, military and civilian, including those of intelligence agencies, police, immigration and foreign affairs.

Last week, Mahfudz Siddiq, head of Indonesia’s parliamentary commission for foreign affairs, warned Canberra to “be more careful when it comes to another country’s sovereignty,” saying the issue could “damage the Indonesia-Australia bilateral relationship.” This week, Indonesian naval spokesman Major Andy Apriyanto called on Canberra to revise its policy, warning that lives could be lost if the Australian navy turned refugee boats “commonly in poor condition and overcapacity” back to Indonesia.

Former Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer fuelled the dispute on Thursday by criticising Natalegawa. Drawing an absurd equation between Australian warships and small privately-owned Indonesian fishing vessels, he declared: “Instead of a lot of pious rhetoric about the Australian government threatening their [Indonesian] sovereignty, their people, their boats, their crews are breaching our sovereignty.”

While both governments took steps yesterday to lower the temperature, there is no doubt that next week’s meeting between Abbott and Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono will be tense. Abbott dismissed the issue as a “passing irritant,” while Indonesia’s foreign ministry issued a statement saying that the publication of the Natalegawa-Bishop meeting minutes had been an unintentional error.

In today’s *Australian*, editor-at-large Paul Kelly criticised Natalegawa’s “extraordinarily inept decision” to release the minutes and insisted that Abbott could not back down on his refugee policy, but warned: “The future of Australia-Indonesia ties, perhaps for years, will be determined in Jakarta early next week. The stakes for Abbott are huge... This test overall goes to Abbott’s

ability to be a successful PM.”

Successive Australian governments maintained the closest relations with the Suharto dictatorship before its fall in 1998, and subsequently with its successors. Canberra has forged close military ties, and relied on Jakarta as an advocate for Australian imperialist interests in South East Asia. In 1995, former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating declared that “the emergence of President Suharto’s New Order government in the 1960s was the event of most positive strategic significance to Australia in the post-war years.” During the US-backed 1965–66 coup that brought Suharto to power, military-backed death squads slaughtered at least 500,000 workers, peasants and members of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI).

Both Indonesia and Australia, facing increased economic instability and slowing growth rates, are looking to lay a framework next week to boost trade and investment. Abbott will be accompanied by a delegation of 20 business leaders, including the CEOs of major banks, construction companies and the Australian Agricultural Company, which is seeking to revive beef exports.

Yet the talks could unravel over the Australian refugee policy, which is bound up with wider strategic questions. As well as whipping up anti-refugee xenophobia at home, Coalition and Labor governments have exploited asylum seekers arriving on boats as a pretext to establish a substantial naval and air presence in waters off northern Australia. Under the guise of “border protection,” Australian military forces conduct extensive surveillance adjacent to key shipping lanes through South East Asia, including Indonesia’s Sunda and Lombok straits.

The strategic importance of such operations has been brought into sharper relief by the Obama administration’s aggressive “pivot” to Asia, aimed at undermining Chinese influence and interests throughout the region. The US is strengthening military alliances and building up its forces, including in Australia with the basing of US Marines in Darwin and greater use of Australian air and naval bases. A key aspect of the Pentagon’s war plans is the ability to mount an economic blockade by controlling sea lanes through South East Asia that China depends upon to import energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East.

Like its counterparts throughout the region, the Indonesian government has been attempting to balance between its economic dependence on trade with China and its longstanding military ties with the US. Jakarta is

concerned that the Obama administration’s efforts to undercut China are fuelling regional disputes, including in the South China Sea. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), which Indonesia has long regarded as a means to exert its regional influence, has become increasingly polarised.

These rising regional tensions have led to unease in Jakarta over the US military build-up in Australia and the threat posed to Indonesia by a confrontation between the US and China. In November 2011, Foreign Minister Natalegawa publicly warned that stationing US Marines in Darwin could “provoke reaction and counter reaction... a vicious cycle of mistrust and distrust” within the region.

While Australia-Indonesian relations were smoothed over, partly by inviting Indonesian troops to participate in joint exercises in Australia, the underlying distrust and concern remains, now compounded by the prospect of Australian warships escorting refugees boats back to Indonesian territorial waters. University of Melbourne law professor Tim Lindsay noted in the *Australian* today: “Apart from what happens on the seas, this issue goes to one of Indonesia’s greatest political sensitivities. Indonesia’s problem is that it has a weak air force and navy and it cannot actually defend its own borders and its own maritime boundaries.”

These sentiments were underlined by comments yesterday by Indonesian vice-presidential adviser Dewi Fortuna Anwar, who said the entry of the Australian navy into Indonesian waters would be “totally unacceptable.” She continued: “I can just imagine that the Indonesian navy will not take kindly to that. Let’s not be hypothetical about it. Any act by a foreign navy that infringes on a neighbouring country’s territorial waters... could cause incidents at sea.”

The diplomatic row over Australia’s refugee policy is another indication of the dangerous tensions being fanned throughout Asia by the Obama administration’s military build-up against China.



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