

Indonesia accuses China of encroaching on its territory

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The Indonesian government has adopted a confrontational approach to China after an incident last weekend involving a Chinese fishing vessel near Indonesia's Natuna Islands in the South China Sea. The more aggressive response from Jakarta takes place as the US is intensifying its campaign against Chinese land reclamation and alleged militarisation of its islets in the disputed waters.

The incident occurred after an Indonesian Maritime and Fisheries Monitoring Task Force vessel seized a Chinese fishing boat, the Kway Fey, and arrested its captain and eight-member crew. Jakarta claims they were trawling inside the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) surrounding the Natuna Islands. The Indonesian press reported that a Chinese coast guard ship chased the Indonesian vessel and apparently freed Kway Fey. Its crew, however, remains in Indonesian custody.

Indonesian Maritime and Fisheries Minister Susi Pudjiastuti claimed that the Chinese coast guard ship came within 4.3 kilometres of one of the Natuna islands and thus within Indonesia's territorial waters. Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi also issued a strong protest to the Chinese Embassy but stressed that the latest incident did not relate to wider disputes in the South China Sea.

After a meeting with Chinese embassy officials on Monday, Pudjiastuti declared that Indonesia has worked hard to maintain peace in the South China Sea, a reference to Jakarta's attempts to act as a mediator between China and the other claimants—the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei. She declared the weekend incident “interrupts and sabotages our efforts” and threatened to take China to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. Security Minister Luhut Pandjaitan issued a similar warning last November.

The Philippines, encouraged and assisted by the Obama administration, already has a case before the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague challenging China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. Beijing is reluctant to make any formal concession to Indonesia because its claims rest on historical territorial sovereignty and it maintains that the Hague court has no jurisdiction.

Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said that China and Indonesia have no rival claims in the South China Sea but insisted that the Chinese fishing vessel was operating in “traditional Chinese fishing grounds.” She denied that the Chinese coast guard vessel had entered Indonesian territorial waters. The ministry has demanded the return of the Kway Fey's crew.

Beijing formally acknowledged Indonesia's sovereignty over the Natunas last November but Jakarta has become increasingly frustrated over Beijing's refusal to state that China's “Nine Dash Line,” which maps out its South China Sea territorial claims, does not intrude on the EEZ around the Natunas. Jakarta has been seeking clarification of the issue since the 1990s.

As the most populous nation with the largest economy in South East Asia, Indonesia has had significant weight within the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) forums. It has not taken sides in the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and has resisted US efforts for ASEAN to take a collective stand against China. When the ASEAN summit broke up in 2012 without issuing a joint communiqué, Indonesia played a mediating role in the rift between China-aligned Cambodia and the Philippines which was pushing for an anti-Chinese statement on the South China Sea.

Jakarta's more strident stand recently has been

encouraged by Washington, which has directly challenged Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea by sending US navy warships inside the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit of Chinese-administered islets on two occasions—last November and again in January. The US intervention in the South China Sea is just one aspect of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” which is aimed at subordinating China to US interests by all means, including military.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo, who came to power in 2014, has taken a more assertive stance on the Natuna Islands in line with his strategy of making Indonesia a “Global Maritime Fulcrum”—reflecting its strategic location astride the main trade routes from the Middle East and Africa to East Asia. Jakarta has begun aggressive patrolling its maritime boundaries—resulting in the seizure and destruction of scores of “illegal” foreign fishing vessels. In one day last month, Indonesian authorities blew up 27 impounded boats.

At the same time, the Widodo administration is courting large-scale infrastructure investment from China, which is also Indonesia’s principal trading partner. China is already engaged in a major rail project. Like other countries in the region, Indonesia is attempting to balance its economic ties with China against strategic connections to the United States.

Widodo is undoubtedly under the pressure from Washington to more openly join in its anti-China “pivot.” The Indonesian military has longstanding ties with the Pentagon going back to the Suharto dictatorship and wants to strengthen them. A tough stance against China over the Natuna Islands is a signal to the US that Indonesia is also prepared to join the campaign against so-called Chinese expansionism.

Under the guise of preventing illegal fishing, Defence Minister Ryamizard Ryacudu last year outlined Indonesian plans to boost its military capacities in the South China Sea, including the deployment of jet fighters and three naval corvettes to the Natuna Islands. He said that the military would upgrade naval and air force bases and increase the size of its ground forces in the Natunas from 800 to 2,000 personnel.

The US has responded by expanding military cooperation. On March 11, the US Defence Department approved an Indonesian request to buy advanced AIM 120C-7 air-to-air missiles to arm its F-16 fighter jets.

The decision significantly augments the strength of the Indonesian air force which is discussing basing F-16s on the Natunas.



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