

# Indonesian military suspends “cooperation” with Australia

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6 January 2017

A representative of Indonesia’s armed forces, the TNI, confirmed on Tuesday that overall commander General Gatot Nurmantyo had ordered the “suspension” of all cooperation with the Australian Defence Forces (ADF). A flurry of diplomatic activity has resulted in statements of “clarification” from the Indonesian government, to the effect that only minor cooperation will be temporarily affected.

The incident nevertheless sheds light on the deep concerns in the highest echelons of the Indonesian military over the prospect of the country becoming embroiled in, and destabilised by, a confrontation with China by the US and its key allies such as Australia.

The rift was triggered by complaints in November by an Indonesian military language instructor who was on exchange in Perth to teach Indonesian to Australian special forces.

The complaints include:

- A paper authored by an Australian officer in which the Indonesian province of West Papua was referred to as part of Melanesia and should be given independence.

- References by Australian personnel to the 1999 independence of East Timor from Indonesia, which was overseen by an Australian-led United Nations force.

- An incident in which former TNI general Sarwo Edhie Wibowo was referred to as a “mass murderer” for his central role in the US and Australian-backed 1965–66 Indonesian coup, during which at least 500,000 alleged Communist Party members and supporters were massacred. In 1989, just prior to his death, Sarwo Edhie asserted that the actual number of victims was closer to three million. His daughter is

married to Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Indonesia’s president from 2004 until 2014.

- A laminated sheet on which “Pancasila,” the “five principles” of Indonesian independence, had been rewritten as “Panca-gila”—or the “five crazies.”

From the standpoint of the Indonesian military, the allegations have been interpreted as reflecting the underlying imperialist arrogance and contempt within their Australian counterparts. In November, an exchange of letters occurred at the highest levels of both militaries, with the ADF apologising, pledging to carry out a “full investigation” and reportedly reprimanding at least one Australian officer. Australian Defence Minister Marise Payne was informed of the controversy but made no public statements.

The Australian actions clearly failed to satisfy General Gatot, a vocal Indonesian nationalist with a record of expressing the resentment of the Indonesian elite, particularly within the TNI, over Australia’s history of neo-colonial intrigue in the country. On several occasions, he has accurately labelled Australian and US support for East Timorese independence in 1999 as a “proxy” operation to secure Australian ambitions over the oil and gas resources of the Timor Sea. Prior to 1999, Australian governments had fully supported Indonesia’s annexation of East Timor and brutal rule over its population.

Since 2014, Gatot has also stated that international education institutions, non-government organisations, Islamic extremists and drug dealers are examples of “proxies” of unnamed “foreign powers”—implicitly linking them to countries such as Australia and the US—that are being used to destabilise Indonesia and threaten its territorial unity.

Gatot was appointed as TNI commander by current President Jokowi Widodo in June 2015. He has presided over a major military build-up by Indonesia to entrench its control over the Natuna Islands group and their rich gas resources, to the south of disputed islands in the South China Sea. The Natunas are not claimed by China, but would be transformed into part of a war zone if conflict broke out, above all by the operations of US and Australian warships and aircraft.

At the same time, Gatot and the TNI, along with police units, have been directing an ever more brutal crackdown against unrest and separatist agitation in West Papua. More than 500 people were arrested during a protest for self-determination on December 18.

Gatot first aired the latest tensions with Australia in a speech in November, in which he asserted that Indonesian officers sent on exchanges to Australia had been “recruited” in the past and would “certainly be recruited” in the future—presumably as agents and spies. Indonesian suspicion of Australian espionage has been intense since the 2013 leaks by whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed Australian intelligence was, in 2009, tapping the phone calls of the country’s then President Yudhoyono, Yudhoyono’s wife and a number of other leading political figures.

In the same speech, Gatot also raised concern over the rotational basing of US marines in Darwin, northern Australia, just 800 kilometres from resource-rich West Papua, declaring that the TNI had to “wonder what it’s all about.”

In a speech in December, he referred to the complaint over West Papuan independence and declared he had “pulled the teacher” out of Australia and received an apology from the ADF. On December 29, despite the apologies, he sent a cable instructing all elements of the TNI to cease exchanges and training with the ADF.

Gatot’s statements and actions coincide with the tremendous uncertainty across Asia over the policies that will be pursued by the Trump administration in the US, and their economic and political impact. Since the Obama administration launched its anti-China “pivot” to the region in 2011, the Indonesian elite has sought to maintain a stance of impartiality and not aggravate relations with either Washington or Beijing. Such balancing is becoming increasingly difficult, under conditions in which the incoming US president is threatening to impose tariffs that will plunge the entire

region into economic turmoil and heightening the danger of war.

Figures such as Gatot are well aware that Indonesia, the most populous state in southeast Asia, with 240 million people, is viewed in Washington and Canberra as strategically and economically crucial. The military apparatus is also acutely conscious that the country is rent by class antagonisms, social inequality, democratic grievances among ethnic minorities, sectarian divisions and political conflicts that can be exploited to try and threaten and pressure the Indonesian ruling elite to line up behind the imperialist powers—or to plunge Indonesia into turmoil if it does not.

Currently, Indonesian politics is dominated by a bitter power struggle between rival camps of the ruling class ahead of major provincial-level elections this year. Protests, laced with sectarian and anti-Chinese rhetoric, have been held by Islamist parties and organisations demanding the prosecution of Jakarta’s ethnic Chinese and Christian governor and ally of President Widodo, Basuki “Ahok” Tjahaja Purnama, for alleged “blasphemy” against Islam.

In response, in November, General Gatot had the TNI mobilise thousands of uniformed soldiers to take part in a 30,000-strong rally in support of “inter-faith unity,” waving ribbons in Indonesia’s national colours. He has labelled the anti-Basuki and implicitly anti-Widodo protests as “dangerous” and ominously declared that the TNI would wage a “jihad” for national unity.

The sensitivity of the TNI commander to any denigration of Indonesian nationalism within the Australian military underscores the growth of political tensions in Indonesia compounded by intensifying geo-political rivalries throughout the region.



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