



CDiSS COMMENTARY

National Defence University Malaysia (NDUM)
Centre for Defence and International Security Studies (CDiSS)

cdisscommentary.upnm.edu.my

No. 18 – 26 April 2021

CDiSS NDUM Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. CDiSS commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from CDiSS and due recognition to the author(s) and CDiSS. To contribute article and provide comment or feedback, please email the Editor at bahamzah8@hotmail.com

INDONESIAN SUB TRAGEDY SENDS SEVERAL MESSAGES

By
Philip Bowring



Jakarta starts to look for wider alliances.

The 40-year-old German-built Indonesian submarine that was lost in the waters between Java and Bali captured attention as both a human tragedy and a symbol of the country's aging military hardware.

The KRI Nanggala-402 vessel, with 53 crew on board, was engaged in live-fire torpedo drills in the Bali strait, a narrow and shallow channel only 2.4 kilometers wide and 60 meters deep in most places. The vessel, however, dived

in the much deeper waters to the northeast where the Sunda shelf falls off. The military announced that the Nanggala was found at a depth of 850 meters.

It seems certain that the tragedy and the embarrassment of losing an outdated submarine will focus attention on the need for better equipment and a more robust maritime posture in the face of Chinese encroachment in the South China Sea. There is no known connection between the fate of the submarine and Chinese activities in the sea, but the past two years have seen several captures by Indonesian fishermen of Chinese underwater drones, mapping ocean floors, and recording submarine movements. Most recently, a 2-meter long one was caught in waters off Selayar island close to the sea route from the Makassar Strait to northern Australia.

The first message from the submarine loss was that Indonesia had, till then, just five submarines, two of similar age and three younger Korean boats, to patrol some of the world's most crucial straits. The Bali strait is too narrow to be of much significance but Lombok, between Bali and Lombok, is an internationally used waterway, as are the Makassar, Sunda, and Melaka (shared with Singapore and Malaysia) straits. Guarding these seas with their fishing rights and numerous strategic characteristics requires a vastly bigger navy than Indonesia currently possesses.

The second message was that the Indonesian navy, however poorly equipped, does conduct live fire exercises including the use of expensive torpedoes to an extent that it may not have done in the past when simply owning submarines was viewed as sufficient proof of defending the archipelagic concept. This had been created by Indonesia in 1957 and was finally enshrined in the UN Convention of Law of the Sea. Awareness of potential threats to those rights is now higher than ever.

The third is that ever since he came to power nearly six years ago, President Joko Widodo has been noted for the greater attention he has given to maritime affairs compared with his predecessors. That may not be saying very much but compared with some neighbors, notably the Philippines, he has shown some willingness to stand up against foreign, including Chinese, fishing vessels invading its archipelagic waters, and in particular its EEZ rights off its Natuna Islands.

The fourth gives a focus to a little-observed development - that the country has been quietly making significant moves to upgrade its defense capability in deals with the US, and at least in embryo with Japan and India. It also has military ties with South Korea and Australia to varying extents. So though it will never join the Quad (Japan, the US, Australia, and India) alliance of countries aiming to form a united front against Chinese expansionism, its sympathies are clear from various defense minister meetings with Quad members.

One key to this development is Jokowi's bitter two-time rival for the presidency, his current defense minister Prabowo Subianto. Once President Suharto's son-in-law, he has no record of liking communists or Chinese. He can be contrived to be an Islamist (when politically convenient) but is

essentially a nationalist and secularist like both his economist father and ex-father in law. A multi-year ban on him visiting the US, imposed for his supposed human rights violations in East Timor, was lifted by then-President Donald Trump after Prabowo joined the government, and he finally paid a visit to Washington last year. The US returned the favor with a visit to Jakarta by Defense Secretary Paul Austin in the last days of the Trump administration, which sources say likely yielded arms deals. Though from the army, Prabowo is said to favor more spending on the navy and air force for practical reasons and he seems well disposed to the US as a result of his military training at Fort Bragg.

Prabowo is also a rival of Luhut Pandjaitan, another former general and the Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs. Luhut has long been seen as too close to Chinese business interests and a promoter of Belt and Road Initiative projects in Indonesia. However, Luhut visited Washington in late 2020 - after the election - and was warmly received at the White House and as well as by Trump's then-influential son-in-law Jared Kushner. He received promises of project financing from the US Development Finance Corporation and sources say arms deals were also discussed during that trip. Under Biden, the US is likely to be more focused on Southeast Asia and its actual or potential friends there than was the erratic and transactional Trump.

Quad links with Indonesia were further highlighted by the visit in late March of Prabowo and Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi to Tokyo. Arms issues were also discussed though there was no indication of the type of weapons Japan might supply, or how it would help the development of Indonesia's own domestic armaments industry.

But the fact that the meeting happened, and its timing, were significant and clearly intended to send a message to China. From the Japanese side, ever threatened by Chinese claims to the Senkaku Islands and the region's seas, it was nothing new. After all, Japan had eagerly signed up to the Quad to challenge China's aggressive posture in the South China and East China seas. For Indonesia, on the other hand, the meeting and agreement represented a significant step toward a partial alignment, however modest, with a Quad member, and the US' closest Asian ally.

Likewise, there is some relationship developing slowly with India, a close as well as large maritime neighbor. Prabowo was in Delhi last year and some purchases and possible production cooperation are possible. However, shared strategic interests are partly shadowed by the anti-Muslim attitudes of Modi and his ruling BJP. Nonetheless, India has sent a ship steaming toward the submarine site in what is largely a symbolic gesture.

For sure, Indonesia still talks to others, notably Russia, about buying arms. Russia wants to sell its Sukhoi fighters though Jakarta is said now to prefer US planes. Nor is it looking for a fight with its major trading partner and infrastructure investor. Local ethnic Chinese money power also influences policy. Indonesia's fundamental non-alignment, dating back to Sukarno and the 1954 Bandung Conference, will not change. But China's maritime actions over the past two years, its actions against Muslims in Xinjiang, and now its

ambiguous role in Myanmar, have raised Indonesian consciousness even as it continues to benefit from investment – and supplies of the Chinese Sinovac Covid-19 vaccine.

This article was published in *Asia Sentinel* dated 25 April 2021. **Republished with permission from *Asia Sentinel*.**

CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES (CDISS)

National Defence University of Malaysia

Sungai Besi Camp, 57000 Kuala Lumpur

Phone: (+603) 9051 3400 ext. 4618

Fax: (+603) 9051 3031

E-mail: cdiss@upnm.edu.my