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Domestic Forces behind Indonesia's Paradoxical Maritime Policy

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Benjamin Nathan, researcher at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “In the wake of recent events, Jokowi has had to weigh the benefits of appearing to be a dynamic leader against the risk of actually provoking a conflict over fishing rights.”

Indonesian maritime policy under President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo has lately gone in two directions at once. On the one hand, Jakarta has assumed a highly publicized assertive stance on retaining sovereign rights over Indonesian waters. But at the same time, Jokowi and members of his inner circle have limited themselves to an extremely cautious rhetorical approach to territorial disputes in the South China Sea. These divergent tacks indicate an internally divided foreign policy establishment, as well as the impact of Indonesia’s populist voting base on policymakers’ decisions.

The main outcome of Indonesia’s recent hawkishness has been a series of diplomatic incidents with maritime neighbors, including China. The most prominent of these spats occurred on March 20, when a patrol boat captured a Chinese vessel that was fishing within Indonesia’s exclusive economic zone off the Natuna Islands in the South China Sea. The Chinese Coast Guard swiftly responded and interfered with the arrest process. The Chinese ship’s crewmen were detained, however, and Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi brought a strongly-worded protest to China’s *chargé d’affaires* in Jakarta.

Maritime Affairs Minister Susi Pudjiastuti has meanwhile taken a theatrically forceful stance against unlicensed fishing, destroying offending ships with spectacular displays of pyrotechnics. Her showmanship is rife with nationalist overtones. She often mentions worriedly that foreign crews sometimes falsely sail under Indonesian flags, hinting that the corrosion of national symbolism is as grave an offense as the act of illegal fishing itself. Last year, Susi scheduled the destruction of 70 impounded ships to coincide with the 70th anniversary of Indonesia’s independence.

Other members of Jokowi’s government have tried to limit the effects of such chest-beating. Some have even gone so far as to deny that there has been any conflict at all. Arif Havas Oegroseno, the Deputy Minister for Maritime Sovereignty, insisted in the wake of the March episode with the Chinese fishing boat that what happened was merely a “so-called incident” and that Indonesia has “no overlapping claim” with China or any other maritime neighbor. Cabinet Secretary Pramono Anung reinforced this message two weeks later, stating that hostilities were resolved and that “events which raise regional tensions should be dealt with in a peaceful manner geared toward mutual respect without involving parties outside the region.”

Jakarta’s overall ambivalence towards maritime policy stems in part from a diffuse leadership structure in which Jokowi’s policies do not flow smoothly down a chain of command. The president’s strategic initiatives, like the ambitious-sounding plan to turn Indonesia into a *Poros Maritim Dunia* (Global Maritime Axis), are often at odds with the independent aims of his ministers and the defense establishment. As Evan Laksmana wrote in the *Interpreter* on April 1, overlapping departmental jurisdictions and a lack of shared priorities between Indonesia’s foreign ministry and defense leaders have

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hampered Jokowi’s ability to pursue a coherent South China Sea policy. Laksmana’s point speaks to the general state of Indonesia’s political landscape since the fall of Suharto in 1998, in which presidents have struggled to control and direct institutions like the military which bear the authority of the state in effectively autonomous fashion across the country’s thousands of islands.

But while institutional weakness may be the mechanism that underlies Indonesia’s maritime policy, it is not a complete explanation for the cause. It is important to keep in mind that Indonesia is the third most populous democracy in the world, and that its democracy is no sham: it is functional at least in the sense that the decisions of national leaders reflect sensitivity to public opinion. What Indonesians want to see in their leaders affects how their leaders talk and behave. Jokowi, for his part, became president only because he was able to tap into a strain of nationalistic populism that continues to influence his policy choices and selections for cabinet posts. It has influenced, in other words, the uneasy mix of territorial nationalism and non-confrontation that defines Jakarta’s maritime policy.

This strain of populism is largely free of any serious anti-Beijing feeling. Though Indonesia’s ethnic Chinese minority has long faced persecution on suspicion of communist ties and other supposed subversions of national unity, their vilification as it occurs in 2016 does not take the form of a popularly accepted critique of Mainland China’s geopolitics. Tellingly, Indonesians have voiced little substantial opposition to their country’s close trade relationship with China. Chinese consumers make up the largest single-country market for Indonesian commodity exports. Indonesia, in return, has welcomed heavy Chinese investment in infrastructure projects like rail lines and smelters. With so many commercial ties already in place, it is unlikely that public resistance against Beijing’s economic incursions will suddenly materialize in the form of a dispute over fishing rights in a sliver of the South China Sea.

Indonesia’s voting public looks inward, not out. Their main concerns are domestic matters like the health of the economy, infrastructure growth, and the protection of national identity from perceived outside threats. Jokowi is responsive to this. To the extent that he plays to these demands of his constituency, he has little incentive to stoke needless flare-ups with maritime neighbors. Indonesians do in fact get a thrill when Susi dynamites an unlicensed fishing trawler—and rank her as their favorite minister in the cabinet for doing so—but only because they want their government to assertively protect Indonesian territory and resources from foreign meddlers. They harbor no specific ill will toward the maritime neighbors that have been inevitably provoked by such assertiveness. Sovereignty may be at the forefront of popular political discourse, but supremacy is not.

Despite these disincentives against saber-rattling, however, Jokowi’s popular credibility also depends on how much his leadership style seems to match the image of a fervent reformer – an image that he has traded on since his days as a campaigner. His patience for Susi’s rogue antics reflects such a political consideration. The more headstrong his cabinet appears on issues like maritime security, the more Jokowi can establish himself as a break from his predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who by the end of his presidency gained a reputation as an entrenched ditherer.

In the wake of recent events, Jokowi has had to weigh the benefits of appearing to be a dynamic leader against the risk of actually provoking a conflict over fishing rights. Pulled in two directions at once by the populist currents that buoyed him into office, his chosen compromise has been to allow enough militaristic aggression to cultivate an air of decisiveness while taking de-escalatory steps to preserve the foreign relationships that are vital to his priority of economic growth. The result of this balancing act has been the appearance of internal divisions within Indonesia’s already decentralized government.

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