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Beijing's dubious claims undermine Indonesia's role as South China Sea's honest broker

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* Beijing is squandering strategic capital with its actions in the Natunas

* Its game of maritime chicken with Jakarta is doing nobody any favours

This year [Indonesia](#) and China will celebrate 70 years of diplomatic relations. But the journey has not always been smooth sailing. When Indonesia broke off diplomatic ties in 1967, the relationship went into a deep freeze.

Even when ties were restored in 1990, it took more than a decade until the two sides could sign a Strategic Partnership in 2005 (upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2013).

Since then, Indonesia and China have enjoyed closer economic and diplomatic engagements. China is among Indonesia's top regional partners and Beijing considers an open and warm relationship with Jakarta among its strategic priorities.

Even amid all the problems surrounding the [South China Sea](#) over the past decade, Indonesia and China have been trying to ensure that the strategic capital accumulated over the years is not lost. Some say that Jakarta has been at times less attentive to its fellow Southeast Asian neighbours because its relationship with Beijing takes precedence.

But the latest round of maritime incidents and [diplomatic spats over China's encroachment of Indonesia's Natuna waters](#) since mid-December could reverse this trend. For Indonesia, there are several layers to the problem.

Chinese vessels were fishing in Indonesia's legally sanctioned exclusive economic zone (EEZ), thus violating Indonesia's sovereign rights. That Chinese coastguards were escorting and hindering Indonesia's law enforcement efforts further breaches Indonesia's sovereignty. These are serious problems that cannot easily be swept under the rug.

Furthermore, China's insistence on using dubious terms - from "historic fishing rights" to "jurisdiction over relevant waters" - stemming from its "nine-dash line" claiming sovereignty over most of the South China Sea - undermines one of Indonesia's core interests: the preservation of the 1982 UN Conventional on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Indonesia's status as an archipelagic state and its overall strategic outlook as the fulcrum between the Pacific and Indian Oceans is rooted in UNCLOS. Jakarta does not look favourably on efforts undermining the UNCLOS-driven rules-based maritime order.

Further, by trying to draw Indonesia into implicitly acknowledging China's maritime rights in the Natuna waters, Beijing is undermining Jakarta's long-held position as an "honest broker" in the decades-long process to negotiate the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations ([Asean](#)).

More importantly, China's behaviour and public statements raise the domestic political tension for the administration of President [Joko Widodo](#), popularly known as Jokowi.

In recent years, Jokowi's detractors have politicised public issues involving China, from infrastructure projects to maritime incidents, to pressure the government. Given Indonesia's closer engagement with China under Jokowi,

hardline members of the opposition often paint his government as a “foreign lackey”. Even worse, the anti-China sentiments often spill over or are manipulated into [negative views against ethnic Chinese Indonesians](#).

Under these conditions, the recurrence of maritime incidents is eroding the strategic capital that China has accumulated in Indonesia. No amount of economic benefits or prosperity could beat “sovereignty and autonomy” in domestic political contests.

Beijing would do well to pay attention to these strategic and political interests that Jakarta holds dear. There are several steps to consider as Indonesia and China move forward to sustain and build the broader strategic partnership.

First, Indonesia should not and will not agree to any kind of bilateral talks or negotiations over “overlapping maritime rights” with China as there are none to begin with under UNCLOS. Of course Jakarta is open to all kinds of communication and engagement activities as the bilateral relationship is not defined solely by maritime incidents.

Second, to ensure that both countries can avoid future crises over the Natuna waters, both Jakarta and Beijing need to improve strategic communication channels, including perhaps some creative back door diplomacy.

Neither Jakarta nor Beijing are likely to move from their public positions and statements - especially as these help cement their domestic legitimacy. So diplomatic efforts to prevent future crises might have to be settled through informal understandings and conversations.

Maritime crises prevention cannot begin and end with “operational escalation” through the further militarisation of the waters. Indonesia will continue to maintain effective control of its waters and strengthen maritime law enforcement capabilities. But neither sides should rely on “a game of chicken” at sea to see who blinks first and sail away.

Third, maritime arrangements or cooperative agreements in the future between Indonesia and China will be harder to sustain unless Chinese fishing vessels and coastguards stay clear of the Natunas EEZ for extended periods of time.

The economic potential for bilateral cooperation over fisheries should not be ignored but it cannot proceed as long as Chinese encroachments of the Natunas continue. Ideally, both sides should find creative ways to prevent the recurrence of maritime incidents in the Natunas through “win-win” solutions, such as fisheries cooperation, without undermining UNCLOS.

China and Indonesia need each other. The region does not benefit from a strategic disruption between Jakarta and Beijing. Given the centrality of the maritime domain, both sides would do well to ensure that the sea remains open to all, beyond the control of a single nation, and underpinned by international law and the 1982 UNCLOS.

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