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Insight

Defence pact: Getting the message across

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LATE last month, the Indonesian Parliament's Commission I, which oversees defence and foreign affairs issues, announced its refusal to ratify the Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with Singapore in its present form.

The commission's view contrasted markedly with that of the Indonesian government. It argued that the DCA did not benefit Indonesia and should not be tied to the extradition treaty.

Both the treaty and defence agreement were negotiated by the Foreign and Defence ministers of Singapore and Indonesia as a package, and endorsed by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono on April 27.

But buffeted since then by parliamentary and public pressure, Indonesia's Defence Minister made paradoxical statements portraying Singapore as trying to undermine negotiations because it does not want the extradition treaty.

Recent statements, however, indicate Indonesia wants the treaty - but not the defence agreement.

Singapore has stood firm on the package deal, which could unravel if the defence agreement is not honoured or is decoupled.

Political sentiment in Indonesia - the culmination of an ongoing debate by MPs, political party leaders, prominent national figures and observers - now threatens to unravel the package deal.

It is hard to be sanguine about these developments.

Beyond the apparent damage to Singapore-Indonesia ties, we can only hope such acrimony will not jeopardise the special friendship between the Singapore Armed Forces and Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) - for so long the stabilising capstone of the bilateral relationship.

Initially, the defence agreement was greeted with suspicion by the Indonesian public.

Unlike a similar agreement that Jakarta signed with Australia (the 'Lombok Treaty') late last year, the discussion process and the draft of the defence agreement was not revealed by both sides.

This allowed the agreement to become politicised.

President Yudhoyono wants the extradition treaty to be a key building block in his anti-corruption drive. As a consequence, the Indonesian government acceded to negotiating the treaty and the defence agreement as a package.

Indonesian legislators, having regularly pressured the government to conclude an extradition treaty, now reject the

defence agreement on the grounds that it was too high a price to pay for something they deem would not guarantee the return of financial assets allegedly parked in Singapore.

They maintain that both deals should be decoupled.

This position has been endorsed by members of the Indonesian political elite, national figures and the public.

A poll by the Tempo magazine last month found that 67.97per cent of the 434 respondents were not convinced that Indonesia would benefit from the defence agreement.

Debate on the agreement has transcended the political elite in Jakarta.

And public sentiment has itself been stoked by the views of independent commentators, non-governmental organisations, and the media.

Even the regional government of the Riau archipelago - whose area was designated as part of the military training area - took part in the debate, along with members of the Jakarta-based Regional Representatives Council.

The debate underscored the internal political dynamics surrounding Dr Yudhoyono's current term.

First, there is the 'anti-corruption' image, with the extradition treaty being a useful platform to boost his image in the campaign for the 2009 presidential election.

A second consideration is the fact that although the idea for an extradition treaty and DCA was mooted in 2005, it appears that several stakeholders were not consulted properly.

The government appeared to have taken minimal initiative to publicise the rationale behind concluding the agreements as a package - a cardinal sin in Indonesia's rumbustious democracy.

This undoubtedly explains the uniform rejection of the package by politicians, observers and local government officials across a broad political spectrum - including in the coalition of parties supporting the Yudhoyono presidency.

The third aspect of the internal political dynamics relates to the Indonesian military, which has been relatively quiet and somewhat 'balanced' in its initial support for the defence agreement.

Is this a signal that the TNI has not fully thrown its weight behind the agreement because it senses a nationalist backlash?

The development of the Baturaja Land Forces Training Area in Sumatra notwithstanding, one could also argue that the defence pact would mostly benefit the air force and navy, not the army - the TNI's main power holder.

Considering its history, the army's relative quiescence is not surprising.

But given the current TNI leadership's close ties with the President, any opposition within its ranks will be muted as it would not want to be seen to openly defy him.

The final issue relates to the idea of territorial sovereignty and integrity.

Here, many Indonesians share the same sense of nationalism with the military and the government.

Thus the issue of a foreign 'foothold' on Indonesian soil would be easily exploited, particularly by younger-generation parliamentarians keen on brandishing their nationalist credentials to raise their profile.

Dr Yudhoyono has said he wants talks on the defence agreement to continue.

This is a positive development. But optimism should be guarded on three counts.

First, it is important to gauge whether the negotiating counterparts can deliver.

As was the case in the lead-up to the signing of the Helsinki Accord on Aug 15, 2005, which ended the civil war in Aceh, deliberations on the extradition treaty and DCA were veiled in secrecy.

In that situation, a key stakeholder - Vice-President Jusuf Kalla, as leader of the largest political party in parliament - was able to mobilise Golkar to support the outcome of the Helsinki process.

In this regard, much now depends on President Yudhoyono, and whether he has the tactical skills to manage the process of building a coalition in parliament that is capable of ratifying the agreements.

Second, the parliament has to understand that bilateral agreements are based on the principle of reciprocity.

Opportunities and costs are subject to a time frame.

Over time, benefits will accrue to Indonesia and what may be perceived as a negative outcome today could become a positive one in future.

The perception that Singapore stands to gain more out of the package deal has been exploited politically and is misleading.

Third, the relevant stakeholders responsible for ratifying both agreements need to be better acquainted with them.

The agreements also must be better explained, and in a manner that can placate the public sentiments stirred by nationalistic rhetoric.

What undermined the credibility of the defence agreement has been its misrepresentation to the Indonesian public as an agreement beneficial only to Singapore - rather than as a bilateral agreement that emphasises mutual gains.

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Guest writers alternate with Chua Mui Hoong in this weekly column.

BOTH SIDES STAND TO GAIN

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