Why Indonesia's new map is not (all) about the South China Sea

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On 14 July, Indonesia released its new official map. During the press conference, Havas Oegroseno, Indonesia's deputy coordinating minister for maritime affairs, highlighted several changes to the old map, including the renaming of the waters northeast of the Natuna Islands bordering the South China Sea as the 'North Natuna Sea'.

A Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman condemned the move, arguing, 'The so-called change of name makes no sense at all and is not conducive to the effort to the international standardization of the name of places.' A Chinese expert quoted by the *Global Times* further claimed that Indonesia is merely seeking a bargaining chip before engaging in bilateral 'maritime boundary delimitation' talks in the future.

Regional analysts jumped on the name change and speculated whether Indonesia was deliberately taking a tougher stance against China in the South China Sea (see here and here), even if executed in a unilateral fashion. But the new map wasn't all about the South China Sea. Indonesia doesn't recognise any existing maritime delimitation dispute with China. The renaming of waters only applied to Indonesia's exclusive economic zone and continental shelf on the southern part of the Indonesian–Vietnam border and didn't encompass the entire South China Sea.

And the North Natuna Sea is not the only feature of the new map. The press conference noted updates to the map that related to Indonesia's maritime borders with Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Palau. The July 2016 Arbitral Tribunal ruling, in particular, was invoked to justify the 'expansion' of Indonesia's EEZ in its border with Palau by assigning Tobi Island, Helen Reef and Merir Island a 12-nautical-mile enclave rather than a 200-nautical-mile maritime entitlement.

That designation, it should be noted, remains subject to negotiation. Similarly, the designation of an enclave for Pedra Branca, Middle Rock and South Ledge will ruffle feathers in Singapore and Malaysia and might shape Jakarta's ongoing border negotiations with Kuala Lumpur. That said, the recently concluded agreements with Singapore and the Philippines were cited in the press conference as providing further momentum to the efforts to update the map.

Aside from these diplomatic–legal dimensions, the renaming of the Natuna waters was also pitched as an economic move to align the existing designations of oil and gas investment areas with Indonesia's EEZ and continental shelf. That is no small feature, considering the waters contain 16 oil and gas blocks (with eight of them having total proven reserves of some 47.2 trillion cubic feet). In fact, the East Natuna natural gas block is believed to hold one of the world's largest reserves of untapped gas. But its future is now embroiled in controversy as ExxonMobil recently announced that it's pulling out of development plans for the area.

While the new map shows some areas that require further maritime delimitation negotiations, Oegroseno also noted its importance in assisting maritime law enforcement agencies in Indonesia in patrolling the waters. In the absence of a specific code of conduct between the region's maritime law enforcement agencies—and at a time when incidents at sea over illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing are increasingly more frequent, with wider strategic ramifications—greater cartographical clarity of maritime zones is certainly beneficial.

Finally, while the map wasn't designed with the South China Sea in mind, there might be domestic political benefits to an announcement highlighting a seemingly tougher stance on China. At a time when Jokowi is fighting on multiple fronts domestically, including fending off criticism that he's becoming an 'anti-Islam dictator' following the Hizbut Tahrir ban, he doesn't need another weak flank. Jokowi in particular has been criticised for being 'too pro-China', sparking a wide range of conspiracy theories from the revival of communism to the role of ethnic-Chinese Indonesians. The North Natuna Sea name could take some of the pressure off.

Yet, perhaps in a move to minimise adverse reactions from the region, including from China, Luhut Pandjaitan, the coordinating minister for maritime affairs, commented on 24 July that the new map and the renaming of the Natuna waters was merely an 'exercise' and that the main purpose of the government was to strengthen economic cooperation. Oegroseno, however, previously noted that the map is an official government document signed onto by 21 different agencies and ministries, including the foreign ministry and navy.

This incoherent articulation of China-related policies underscores the ongoing debate within Indonesia's political elites—between those wanting Jakarta to take a tougher public stance on crucial strategic interests (including the South China Sea) and those preferring to eschew 'megaphone diplomacy' and engage Beijing and resolve tensions behind closed doors.

Nevertheless, the new map continues Indonesia's long-held tradition of strengthening an UNCLOS-based rules order in the region. Indonesia's citing of the Arbitral Tribunal ruling in drawing it (the first country to do so) is a clear testament to that. Like all strategic geography, however, there's more to Indonesia's new map than drawing lines in the water.

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