

The US–Indonesian Strategic Partnership and Air Force Relations

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Abstract

This article analyzes the strategic partnership between the United States and Indonesia, focusing on their air force relations in the context of China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea and Indonesia’s Natuna Sea. The author assesses Indonesia’s security challenges, military capabilities, and the country’s expectations from the US and its air force in terms of capacity-building and capability development. The article also evaluates the potential scenarios for the future of the US-Indonesian engagement with a focus on the need for balancing regional security and internal stability. Drawing on a decade of research, the author concludes that the US partnership with Indonesia is crucial for maintaining regional stability, promoting diplomacy, and advancing self-defense capabilities. The US can continue to build partnerships with other Southeast Asian countries to prevent disputes with China from escalating into a war.

In 2015, the United States and Indonesia elevated their Comprehensive Partnership, established in 2010, to a Strategic Partnership.¹ This upgraded partnership has resulted in increased bilateral cooperation with a focus on promoting a “rules-based international order” in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in Southeast Asia and the South China Sea (SCS).² Jakarta has taken the lead in promoting an Association of Southeast Asian Nations’ (ASEAN) rules-based vision that includes support for the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), freedom of navigation (FON), and respect for 200-mile exclusive economic zones (EEZ), as well as the “ASEAN way” of neutrality, consensus-building, and multilateral diplomacy.³

The military of Indonesia, known as the *Tentara Nasional Indonesia* (TNI), is ranked as the most powerful in Southeast Asia according to the Global Firepower

¹ “Joint Statement by the United States of America and the Republic of Indonesia” (press release, The White House, 25 October 2015), <https://id.usembassy.gov/>. A *strategic partnership* is where two entities come together to form a quasi-alliance relationship focused on a strategic gain. A *comprehensive partnership* is lower on the diplomatic scale and indicates that there several areas of cooperation.

² “U.S. Relations with Indonesia” (fact sheet, US Department of State, 19 April 2022), <https://www.state.gov/>.

³ “Joint Vision Statement of the ASEAN-U.S. Special Summit, 2022” (press release, Washington, DC, 14 May 2022), <https://asean.org/>.

Index. However, it is currently less powerful and more internally focused than China's People's Liberation Army (PLA).⁴ Nevertheless, the TNI is gradually transforming into a stronger maritime and air power, which will enable it to better secure Indonesia's interests in the region, including defending against China's encroachment in part of Jakarta's EEZ in the Natuna Sea,⁵ which Beijing claims as its sovereign territory within its so-called "nine-dash line."⁶ The United States is assisting TNI force development and, through security cooperation, increasing Indonesia's ability to defend its interests and counter China's expansionism. The USAF cooperation with Indonesia's air force (the TNI-AU) is a significant part of this process, helping to develop the TNI-AU into a regionally strategic force. The recent acquisition of 36 US F-15EX advanced fighter aircraft represents a major step forward in the security cooperation between the two nations.⁷

Indonesia, the largest country in Southeast Asia, with more than 275 million people, is a free-market democracy that has achieved middle-income status.⁸ It controls, along with Malaysia, the vital Strait of Malacca, hosts the ASEAN headquarters, and is the only Southeast Asian member of the G20.⁹ However, in the past decade, Indonesia has struggled to maintain a unified ASEAN vision in the face of a rising China, which claims 90 percent of the SCS and part of the Natuna Sea as its sovereign territory and has swayed Cambodia and Laos to not oppose Beijing's position. Chinese military, coast guard, and paramilitary forces have harassed fishing boats, oil and gas exploration operations, and security forces from Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia in their respective EEZs. Despite China's challenge, Indonesia's long-term involvement in the Non-aligned Movement and commitment to ASEAN neutrality indicate that the country is not interested in an alliance with the United States but rather a strategic

⁴ "Global Firepower Index," *Global Firepower*, 2022, <https://www.globalfirepower.com/>. Indonesia is ranked fifteenth, and its "firepower" has been increasing. China is ranked third. Vietnam twenty-eighth. Indonesia is ranked behind Iran and ahead of Germany. "Global Air Powers Ranking (2022)," *World Directory of Modern Military Aircraft*, 2022, <https://www.wdmma.org/>, ranks the Indonesian Air Force (TNI-AU) twenty-ninth, ahead of the Singapore Air Force. Both the People's Liberation Army Air Force and Naval Air Force rank ahead of the TNI-AU.

⁵ John McBeth, "China Spiking Indonesia's Offshore Oil and Gas Risk," *Asia Times*, 2 September 2022. The Natuna Sea is on the southern edge of the South China Sea, and China's claim to Indonesia's EEZ there is making multinational energy companies reconsider exploring in those waters.

⁶ Marthen Napang, et al., "Contesting Views of the Philippines and China over the Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea," in *ASEAN International Law*, ed. E.Y.J. Lee (Singapore: Springer, 2022), 405–14.

⁷ Indonesian security experts and US officials, interviews with the author, Jakarta, July 2019.

⁸ "Indonesia: Country Overview," *World Bank*, 5 April 2022. Indonesia has more than twice as many people as the Philippines (110 million people and Vietnam 98 million).

⁹ The G20 is the Group of Twenty Advanced and Emerging Economies, founded in 2007 to aid with the global financial crisis and recession. Indonesia hosted the 2022 G20 Summit.

partnership. The noted scholar of China and Asia, David Shambaugh, has assessed that Indonesia is an “outlier” among ASEAN countries, aligned with neither China nor the United States.¹⁰

In 2014, Indonesia’s president, Joko Widodo, introduced the concept of Indonesia as a “global maritime fulcrum,” which includes a strategy to enhance archipelagic security, defend its maritime EEZ, and guarantee FON through sea lines of communication (SLOC), especially the Indonesian Archipelago Seaways, including the Strait of Malacca, from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific.¹¹ China’s nine-dash-line claim and assertive paramilitary and military activities in the Natuna Sea played a role in President Widodo’s announcement. Indonesia has been developing its air force, navy, and coast guard to implement the strategy and has made weapons purchases to enhance national defense, develop multi-domain awareness (MDA), and project power more effectively. Indonesia’s more assertive stance has the potential for greater US security cooperation, which aims to build military capacity and develop capabilities. This includes USAF cooperation with the TNI–AU as the force expands and takes on more responsibilities, including assisting with MDA. Despite progress, Indonesia must overcome its traditional land-centric orientation and become better geared toward maritime security and airpower to implement its new strategy and fully engage with the United States.¹²

Indonesia’s Security Challenges

Indonesia’s faces several security challenges, including maintaining state sovereignty, territorial control, and national unity over its vast archipelago, which spans more than 5,000 kilometers and includes more than 300 ethnic groups. The country is also prone to disasters.¹³ Indonesia’s security forces are responsible for enforcing law and order; countering criminal activities and piracy; conducting counterinsurgency operations against separatist groups and violent extremist organizations; and carrying out humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations in a most intense portion of the Pacific volcanic “ring of fire,”

¹⁰ David Shambaugh, “U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia,” *International Security* 42, no. 4 (Spring 2018), 100–02.

¹¹ Penny Rajendra, et al., “Indonesia’s Vision as Global Maritime Fulcrum: A Geopolitical Strategy to Address Geopolitical Shifts in Indo-Pacific,” *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 6, no. 5 (2022): 8621–34.

¹² Indonesian security experts and US officials interviews.

¹³ Indonesia has five main islands, 30 smaller archipelagos, and almost 18,000 islets in more than 1.9 million square kilometers (735,000 square miles).

most notably in reacting to the 2004 tsunami that killed hundreds of thousands of people.¹⁴

Until the past decade, Indonesia concentrated on developing and maintaining sufficient maritime and air power to assist the Indonesian Army (TNI-AD) in meeting the security challenges of the archipelago.¹⁵ However, the nation's defense budget, which is less than USD 10 billion per annum and less than one percent of GDP, has made it difficult for the country to develop and maintain sufficient power in these domains. This has limited its ability to project force to defend its EEZ and fulfill its interests in the wider region.¹⁶

Indonesia has made significant progress since the 1950s and 1960s, transforming from a weak state into a middle-income nation and a free-market democracy.¹⁷ The archipelago was previously colonized by the Netherlands, which exploited the country's people and practiced divide-and-rule governance among the more than three hundred ethnic groups, leaving the newly independent country with the daunting task of nation-state building. Java was the most populous island and center of power, with poor integration of outlying areas, and "agricultural involution" had resulted in the impoverishment of the peasantry and a bleak economic outlook.¹⁸

After leading the fight for independence, 1945–1950, President Sukarno spearheaded a process of nation-building, with Java at the core, and committed to nonalignment. The country hosted the 1955 Bandung Conference, which set the state for the Non-Aligned Movement. However, the economic growth was sluggish, and political instability persisted. These challenges, coupled with Sukarno's links to the Indonesian Communist Party and his refusal to align with the United

¹⁴ Indonesia must contend with a long-running separatist insurgency in eastern Irian Jaya province on the western half of the island of Papua New Guinea. While Indonesia was able to defeat a violent extremist organization (VEO) in Aceh Sultanate in northwestern Sumatra, it faces VEOs in other parts of the archipelago, for instance, Islamic State (ISIS) in the eastern Sulu Sea.

¹⁵ "Asia Power Index," Lowry Institute, 2022, <https://power.lowryinstitute.org/>, ranks Indonesia below Singapore (with its economic power) and above Thailand, Malaysia, and Vietnam concerning power resources and influence. The Philippines ranks even lower.

¹⁶ Nate Haken, ed., *Fragile States Index* (Washington, DC: Fund for Peace, 2022), <https://fragilestatesindex.org/>, ranks Indonesia as more fragile than Singapore, Vietnam, and Malaysia and less fragile than the Philippines, Thailand, and Laos.

¹⁷ Cathryn Grothe, et al., *Freedom in the World, 2022* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2022), <https://freedomhouse.org/>. Freedom House has rated Indonesia as "partly free" due to "systemic corruption, discrimination and violence against minority groups, conflict in the Papua region, and politicized use of defamation and blasphemy laws." However, Freedom House also gives credit to Indonesia's democratic development since 2000.

¹⁸ Clifford Geertz, *Agricultural Involution: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963).

States during the Cold War led to a military coup and a massacre that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of suspected communists and ethnic Chinese.

During the 32-year rule of military dictator-turned president Suharto, Indonesia strengthened its nation-level institutions to control outlying provinces, initiated a process of export-driven economic growth, and applied “Green Revolution” technology to boost rice production and food security. In 1967, Indonesia took the lead in establishing ASEAN to resolve disputes among its five original members and ward off the spread of communism. However, as the Cold War ended, internal and external pressure mounted on Suharto to democratize, and the 1997 economic crisis forced him to step down. B.J. Habibie succeeded him in 1998 and began democratic reform and rapid political and fiscal decentralization to satisfy democratic and secessionist forces, paving the way for successful democratization.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the TNI’s human rights abuses in East Timor during the 1999 crisis led to sanctions against the military that delayed security cooperation by the United States and other powers. Despite this setback, Indonesia benefited from the 2000s economic boom and democratic stability, and President Widodo (2014–2024) has been instrumental in solidifying the nation’s position as a free-market democracy and regional power.

In the past decade, Beijing’s efforts to assert its sovereignty over the SCS and Natuna Sea through its nine-dash line claims have prompted Jakarta to lead ASEAN in a multilateral response. After China announced its claim, the Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs presented a *démarche* to Beijing. In 2016, the Indonesian Navy (TNI–AL) sank a Chinese fishing vessel in the Natuna Sea after warning China to respect Jakarta’s EEZ. However, the TNI–AL and Indonesian Sea and Coast Guard Unit (Indonesian: *Kesatuan Penjagaan Laut dan Pantai Republik Indonesia*, KPLP) have not escalated their tactics against their Chinese counterparts, merely shadowing vessels in the Natuna Sea, and they respond with force only in self-defense.²⁰ Indonesia’s cautious approach is partly due to trade with China and growing Sino-Indonesian economic interaction.²¹ Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has brought infrastructure development, including the Band-

¹⁹ Edward Aspinall, “How Indonesia Survived: Comparative Perspectives on State Disintegration and Democratic Integration,” in *Democracy and Islam in Indonesia*, ed. Mirjam Künkler and Alfred Stepan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 126–48.

²⁰ Emirza Adi Syailendra, “China, Indonesia, and Malaysia: Waltzing around Oil Rigs,” *The Diplomat*, 18 August 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

²¹ Indonesian security experts, interview with the author, Habibie Center, Jakarta, July 2019. There is a disconnect between Indonesia’s developing grand strategy and its economic interests. The TNI’s vision of Indonesia as a regional power is not shared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the economic ministries. This is reflected in Indonesian white papers downplaying the South China Sea dispute.

ung-to-Jakarta high-speed railway and a new capital city—Nusantara, which is slated to be built on the island of Borneo.²² China's Global Development Initiative has led to cooperation on agriculture and food security. In 2021, Beijing distributed the Sinovac COVID-19 vaccine for free to Indonesia, increasing public support.

Furthermore, Indonesia's security challenge from China is not as great as that facing Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, which are much closer to Hainan Island bases for Chinese forces. The Natuna Sea is more than 1,800 kilometers away from those bases, and it takes several days for PLA Navy (PLAN) warships to reach Indonesian waters. In 2017, the PLA had only 13 air-refueling tankers, 16 airborne early-warning system (AWACS) planes, and two aircraft carriers with 24 fighters, which meant that China would struggle to sustain an attack at that distance.²³ However, China is building more aircraft carriers, which may increase the security challenge for Indonesia in the future.

In sum, Indonesia's security forces have a "home-field" advantage against their Chinese counterparts. Moreover, Jakarta's positive interactions with Beijing have reduced the incentive to confront China's expansionist activities in the Natuna Sea and SCS—for now.

Indonesia's Security Sector and the Tentara Nasional Indonesia

Indonesia boasts the world's third-longest coastline, stretching more than 80,000 kilometers and encompassing hundreds of islands. Despite this strategic geography, an analyst would find that the country's security needs are not adequately met by its armed forces. Indonesia's moderate threat environment, democratic government prioritizing socioeconomic development, and an army that remains internally focused have all contributed to a shortfall in resources for the other services of the Indonesian military.²⁴ The army played a significant role in securing Indonesia's independence between 1945 and 1950 and still dominates the TNI, with its generals holding many of the key positions in the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and in the Joint Command (MABES). With more than 300,000 personnel and an excessive number of generals and colonels, the army is five times larger than the navy and nine times larger than the air force.²⁵ The TNI's wide-

²² Derek Grossman, "Indonesia is Quietly Warming Up to China," *The RAND Blog*, 7 June 2021, <https://www.rand.org/>; and Daniel Shields, "Borneo: ASEAN's Once and Future Island Crucible," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 5, no. 7 (November–December 2022): 3–11, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

²³ Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia," *International Security*, 42, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 78–119.

²⁴ Indonesia Ministry of Defense officials interviews.

²⁵ Indonesian security experts and US officials interviews.

spread garrisons throughout the archipelago make reorganization and downsizing challenging. Additionally, the TNI lacks a robust noncommissioned officer corps with strong leaders. A 2020 RAND report encapsulates challenges for Indonesia's security sector, citing "a sclerotic structure for making and implementing security policy, and a historical and ongoing underfunding of basic military needs," as well as "an institutional mission for all branches of the military that is geared more toward internal stability than external defense."²⁶

Despite the challenges, the Indonesian government continues to strive to transform the TNI into a strategically significant force, as envisioned in the global maritime fulcrum and free and open Indo-Pacific concepts. To achieve this goal, the TNI established bases in Sumatra, Sulawesi, Makassar, Berau, and Papua New Guinea in 2011–2012. The Minimum Essential Force (MEF) policy framework was initiated in 2009, which planned force development and modernization from 2009 to 2014, 2014 to 2019, and finally 2019 to 2024. As the economy was growing in the 2000s, the government was able to introduce the MEF and increase the defense budget, which facilitated the acquisition of new equipment and improved force training. However, Jakarta has had to scale back MEF projections due to budget constraints, and COVID-19 has further impeded progress, with the MEF now expected to achieve around 70 percent of planned development by 2024.²⁷ Furthermore, the MEF has been criticized by security experts a shopping list with insufficient strategic thinking behind the acquisitions.

Despite this, Indonesia has made significant purchases of fighter aircraft and naval vessels that promise to transform the TNI into a regional force. The country is also in the process of developing a grand strategy for defense policy that should better determine how to develop the force and personnel and which weapons to procure.

Indonesia is currently working on strengthening the MOD to bring greater civilian control of the military and focus the TNI's efforts on maritime and air defense.²⁸ To this end, the MOD's Strategy Office is responsible for developing and confirming force requirements based on TNI inputs, which is critical for defense procurement.²⁹

²⁶ Michael Mazarr, et al., *Security Cooperation in a Strategic Competition* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2022), 51–57, <https://www.rand.org/>.

²⁷ Andi Raihanah Ashar and Muhammad Fauzan Malufti, "Indonesian Military Modernization: A Race against Time," *The Diplomat*, 23 June 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

²⁸ Indonesia Ministry of Defense officials interviews. Ministry officials engage with parliamentary committees and defense industry officials once a month.

²⁹ Indonesia Ministry of Defense officials interviews. The ministry has four directorates, but they have challenges communicating with each other, which leads to deficient strategy, planning, and procurement.

Additionally, Indonesia has established the MABES to foster greater cooperation among the various branches of the armed forces. Several joint task forces have been created to nurture service integration. However, security experts suggest that the MOD and TNI need to revise their procurement practices so that a well-defined strategy guides weapons purchases as a whole.

Indonesia's commitment to nonalignment has led to the acquisition of weapon systems from a variety of countries, including Russia and China. While this approach poses challenges in terms of maintenance, training, readiness, and interoperability, the Minister of Defense holds significant political power and has played an outsize role in procurement decisions. The different services within the TNI have competing interests and priorities that are difficult to reconcile. For example, the TNI-AU operates AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters while the TNI-AD has AH-64 Apache helicopters, and it has been challenging to determine which service and which helicopter should take priority.

Indonesia's defense industries have the capability to assemble aircraft and weapons and are working jointly with South Korea to develop light jet fighters and submarines. They are also seeking to acquire technology to manufacture more-advanced weapons systems. However, manufacturing advanced fighter aircraft and destroyers independently remains a significant challenge for the country's defense industry.³⁰

In line with the maritime fulcrum concept and the country's strategic assessment, Indonesia has expanded the focus of the navy, air force, and coast guard beyond HADR and archipelagic security to developing the defense of its EEZ and SLOCs.³¹ One challenge is that the existing radar system provides coverage over only a small portion of the archipelago. To address this, Indonesia is developing an Integrated Maritime Surveillance System that will enable the country to monitor activity in all three of its major SLOCs.³²

To defend the EEZ, Indonesia has established Natuna Command, and the TNI-AL has two bases within a radius of 500 kilometers of the Natuna Sea, four bases within 800 kilometers, and has set up new bases on an island in the Natuna Sea and on Mempawah, which is less than 300 kilometers from the sea. However, the TNI-AL cannot focus solely on external defense and must support the coast

³⁰ Indonesian security experts and US officials interviews. Indonesia has a high degree of state-owned industries, which causes problems for the development of defense industries.

³¹ Indonesian security experts interview. Overlapping agencies create problems for maritime security governance. While the Indonesian Navy is nominally in charge, the experts recommended that the Indonesian Coast Guard be the single focal point.

³² Achmad Abdul Lathif, et al., "IMSS- Based Indonesian Defense Concept Map for the Sunda Strait Region," *International Journal of Social Science*, 1, no. 5 (February 2022): 747–56.

guard in securing the archipelago. The TNI–AL currently has only 60,000 personnel, 12 frigates, 20 corvettes, and 30 patrol boats, as well as five submarines (with 35 years of operational experience) and antiship missiles.³³ Meanwhile, the coast guard has fewer than 10,000 personnel.

A positive sign is that the government has purchased two French submarines and is in the process of acquiring three South Korean submarines. Additionally, the government is looking to acquire more vessels to bolster its defense capabilities.³⁴

The Indonesian Air Force

During the 2019 Airman-to-Airman Talks with their US Air Force counterparts, the TNI–AU leadership identified 10 air-domain-related threats to Indonesia. The threats include: (1) threats through and within the airspace, such as drones, electromagnetic pulse attacks, network-centric warfare, and hypersonic missiles; (2) natural disasters; (3) separatists; (4) cyberattacks; (5) trade wars in defense contracts; (6) terrorism; (7) lack of network-centric capacity and battle-field awareness; (8) lack of flight information region management; (9) unprofessional conduct by some personnel; and (10) dependence on foreign weapons and equipment.

The TNI–AU's threat assessment demonstrates an awareness that the more-advanced PLA poses a threat to Indonesia and the country needs to upgrade its defenses.³⁵ From 2015 to 2018, the TNI–AU suffered from an aircraft shortage, and since 2021, the service has been experiencing pilot and aircraft maintainer shortfalls.³⁶

To address these challenges, the TNI–AU's priority programs are focused on achieving zero accidents, accelerating procurement of modern weapon systems, and developing network-centric warfare.³⁷ Additionally, the service is working on developing night-fighting capabilities, deploying weapon systems throughout Indonesia, and improving the personnel recruitment system.³⁸

³³ Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia," 103.

³⁴ Resty Woro Yuniar, "Balancing China: Why Indonesia Is on a Multibillion-dollar Spending Spree for US and French Fighter Jets," *South China Morning Post*, 24 February 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/>.

³⁵ TNI–AU officials, interviews with the author, Jakarta, July 2019 and briefing slides, "Indonesian Air Force: Professional, Militant, Innovative," Indonesian and US Airman-to-Airman Talks, May 2019.

³⁶ Indonesian security experts interview. No pilot can leave the air force until a replacement finishes two years of required training.

³⁷ Indonesian security experts interview. There are issues with air traffic control where the TNI–AU is in charge and works with the parastatal, Aeronaut. Civilian aircraft have entered military airspace, which has led to accidents.

³⁸ TNI–AU officials, Indonesian security experts, and US officials, interviews, Jakarta, July 2019.

Despite having less than 40,000 personnel and core air domain tasks to perform, the TNI–AU has taken on a wide range of challenges and responsibilities, making it the most advanced service according to the TNI–AU threat assessment. The MOD and TNI have given the TNI–AU principal responsibilities for air defense, network-centric warfare, MDA, and cyberdefense.

Air defense is a top priority, and the TNI's Air Defense Command is 95-percent staffed and controlled by TNI–AU personnel. However, the main challenge of air defense is the lack of coverage, as the current NARJAM system only protects the capital, Jakarta. Indonesia needs to acquire longer-range surface-to-air missiles and 12 radar systems for air defense in strategic locations throughout the country.

Indonesia has recognized that cyberthreats pose a significant risk to national security, and the country needs to improve its capabilities to protect against them. However, the country has been lagging in this area and is considered to be behind the curve in terms of cyberdefense. In response, the Indonesian government has tasked the TNI–AU with leading the development of the country's cyberdefense capabilities since 2016. This initiative recognizes that the TNI–AU has the technical expertise to build a strong defense against cyberthreats.³⁹

Likewise, TNI headquarters has tasked the TNI–AU with developing network-centric warfare capability and battlefield situational awareness, including MDA.⁴⁰ To this end, the TNI–AU is currently undergoing training and practicing network-centric warfare using “TNI-Link” (Honeywell Link 10) and maritime-capable Casa CN235 medium-range twin-engined transport aircraft and Boeing 737 transport aircraft, which are being used for MDA operations, including over the Natuna Sea. In collaboration with the Pakistan Air Force, the TNI–AU has established a network-centric Command and Control Interoperability Board (CCIB) that provides a links bridge. Furthermore, the TNI–AU has installed a small adaptive bank of electronics resources (SABER) on C-130Js transports to improve network-centric capabilities. Looking ahead, the TNI–AU is investing in systems to improve MDA and has developed a plan for this in its Budget and Planning Division.⁴¹

By 2019, TNI–AU had achieved 67 percent of its MEF 2024 targets, which placed it ahead of the other services, as the entire TNI planned to reach only 70 percent by 2024. The TNI–AU has also developed strategic and operational requirements that TNI headquarters has approved. The strategic planning in-

³⁹ TNI–AU officials, Indonesian security experts, and US officials, interviews, Jakarta, July 2019.

⁴⁰ “Indonesian MOD Network Centric Warfare Program,” Honeywell briefing slides, June 2019.

⁴¹ TNI–AU officials, Indonesian security experts, and US officials, interviews, Jakarta, July 2019. Indonesia's F-16 network-centric warfare system was highly rated in an international forum in Switzerland.

cludes a focus on personnel development and aircraft acquisition. The force-modernization goal is to deploy weapons systems throughout the country, with operations expanded into three zones: Operations Command I, centered on Sumatra; Operations Command II, centered on Java and Kalimantan; and Operations Command III, centered on Irian Jaya and the eastern third of the archipelago. The TNI–AU has established two new squadrons and two air defense detachments, and it is upgrading old bases and establishing new ones.

The TNI–AU's aircraft fleet possesses a range of capabilities, though it faces interoperability and maintenance challenges. It has 49 fourth-generation fighters, including 33 F-16s (consisting of 19 F-16C and 5 F-16D Block 25s, among other versions), 11 Su-30s, and five Su-27s. The Su-30 has been the TNI–AU's primary fighter, while the older F-16s are less capable and can only be effective when integrated into an air defense strategy. In February 2022, Indonesia purchased 42 Dassault Rafale fighters and 36 F-16EX fighters, which will provide the TNI–AU with more than 100 fighter aircraft and a significant leap forward in capabilities. Additionally, Indonesia is jointly developing the KA-21 light fighter aircraft with South Korea.⁴²

The TNI–AU has only 25 C-130s, with only 10–12 regularly available for airlift operations, as the service is forced to cannibalize the other C-130s for parts. Given the requirements for HADR, the TNI–AU needs more mobility aircraft, forklift and palletizing capabilities, and improved airfield maintenance.⁴³

US Relations with Indonesia and the TNI

The United States and Indonesia have developed a strategic partnership after a tumultuous period in relations in the late 1990s. During the Cold War, US foreign policy in Southeast Asia relied heavily on the Suharto regime, particularly after the US withdrawal from Vietnam. However, increasing popular protest in Indonesia, coupled with US pressure for democratic change, strained the relationship. Washington played a key role in rescuing Indonesia from the 1997 fiscal crisis and supporting President Habibie's efforts to stabilize the country and democratize the country. However, the TNI's clampdown and human rights abuses in East Timor in 1999 led the United States to pause security cooperation with the TNI and sanction several military units.

In 2001, Washington began its Global War on Terror and assisted Indonesia in countering al-Qaeda and other violent extremist organizations (VEO) in the

⁴² Yuniar, "Balancing China."

⁴³ TNI–AU officials, Indonesian security experts, and US officials, interviews, Jakarta, July 2019.

country. The United States also helped Indonesia develop its democratic system. In 2011, the two countries established a Comprehensive Partnership, and in 2015, they upgraded to a Strategic Partnership. With the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," engagement with Indonesia increased, and the 2017 US *National Security Strategy* and the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* prioritized great-power competition with China in the Indo-Pacific. The Trump administration's Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, designated Indonesia as one of the five most important countries in the Indo-Pacific Command's area of responsibility.⁴⁴

Consequently, the US further boosted diplomatic relations and security cooperation with Indonesia. Since the Biden administration took office in 2021, the United States has further strengthened diplomatic relations and security cooperation with Indonesia. However, a 2020 RAND report warned of Jakarta's "deep-seated aversion to any partnership that might be characterized as aligning with one country over another . . . and a strong desire on the part of policymakers to balance Indonesia's security engagement activities among the widest possible array of partners."⁴⁵

The 2020 RAND report found "xenophobia in military circles, lack of military capability and interoperability sufficient for frictionless interaction with the US military and close partners, such as Australia or Japan."⁴⁶ Also, Indonesia's requirements for local sourcing and offsets ranging from 35 percent to 85 percent have posed obstacles. Despite these challenges, US security relations with the TNI have been growing closer in the past decade, and the United States is now Indonesia's top security partner in terms of joint combined exchange trainings (JCET), security cooperation, and foreign military sales.⁴⁷

According to the US Security Cooperation Fact Sheet of March 2021, there were USD 1.88 billion in foreign military sales from 2015 to 2019, which included F-16C/D Block 25 fighter aircraft, Apache Block 25 attack helicopters, Longbow helicopters, and Osprey aircraft. The sales also included AMRAAM, Sidewinder and Maverick missiles. During the same period, US direct commer-

⁴⁴ US officials, interviews, Jakarta, July 2019. The Indo-Pacific commander-in-chief had placed Indonesia only as one the top-20 countries.

⁴⁵ Mazarr, et al, *Security Cooperation*, 51–57.

⁴⁶ Mazarr, et al, *Security Cooperation*, 51–57. A mixed picture was derived from Indonesian security experts and officials and US officials, interviews, Jakarta, July 2019. Indonesia has been conducting multilateral discussions with the United States, Australia, and ASEAN states, among others, and has been developing multilateral concepts for a free and open Indo-Pacific. However, some TNI officials have been spreading falsehoods, such as "the US was using joint cooperation exercises and training to 'invade Indonesia'."

⁴⁷ US officials interviews. In Financial Year 2019, there were 19 activities including HADR, maritime security, high-level talks, professional development, maintenance, and air defense.

cial sales to Indonesia amounted to USD 546 million, which included aircraft and electronics. In 2020, US foreign military financing amounted to USD 14 million, with USD 2.3 million going to international military education and training (IMET).⁴⁸

In February 2022, the United States sold USD14 billion worth of arms sales to Indonesia, which included 36 F-15EX heavy combat fighter jets. This sale came after Indonesia cancelled the purchase of SU-35 heavy combat fighter jets from Russia due to the US Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act, which highlighted the importance of relations between the United States for Indonesia.⁴⁹

The United States is supporting Indonesia in developing the MOD to increase civilian control over the military and facilitate centralized, strategic decision making on national security and force development. Through the Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management at Wright–Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, and other DOD entities, Indonesian officials have been receiving training and developing communication channels between the MOD and TNI. Negotiations are underway for the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and a Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA), which would allow for increased information exchange and eventual interoperability. The United States is driving most of the development of these agreements, while Indonesian officials are learning the processes and procedures.⁵⁰

In addition to the GSOMIA and CISMOA, Washington is also working on an ASEAN “Our Eyes” intelligence-sharing initiative, providing technical assistance to Indonesia’s National Institute of Aeronautics and Space’s (LAPAN) Division of Security to develop geospatial imagery monitoring for enhanced MDA and building partial capacity and a common operating system for ships. However, Indonesia does not currently have the US CENTRIXS system, which is utilized by Malaysia and the Philippines.⁵¹ Overall, US–Indonesian security assistance is progressing, and Washington is playing a significant role in facilitating these developments.

⁴⁸ “US Security Cooperation with Indonesia” (fact sheet, Bureau of Political–Military Affairs, 23 March 2021), <https://www.state.gov/>.

⁴⁹ Anthony Capaccio, “US Backs \$14 billion Sale of Boeing F-15 Jets to Indonesia,” *Bloomberg*, 10 February 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/>.

⁵⁰ US officials interviews. Indonesian officials were slow to assign officials and develop manuals for the GSOMIA.

⁵¹ US officials interviews.

US security cooperation with Indonesia encompasses various joint exercises involving all three services plus special forces, such as Super Garuda Shield, Pitch Black, Pacific Angel, and Cope West. For instance, in March 2020, the US 1st Special Forces and Indonesian Air Force Specialized Force Corps conducted a JCET. The objective of JCETs is to sustain and enhance skills beyond basic training. The US special forces' JCETs are now accessible to the TNI after years of sanctions, but a challenge remains as the United States must develop and present a plan to TNI leaders, as Indonesia has been slow to create its own engagement plan. To establish a more-permanent relationship with the TNI, the Hawaii National Guard State Partnership Program has been implemented. Recently, the Super Garuda Shield, a multinational exercise held in southern Sumatra, boosted the confidence of US senior officers that the United States is a preferred security partner for the TNI compared to China.⁵²

The US Navy has been collaborating with the TNI-AL despite capacity constraints and political sensitivities. TNI-AL vessels have participated in the US-led multinational Rim of the Pacific exercises in Hawai'i and have also conducted joint exercises with the US Navy and Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force. The US Navy is supporting the TNI-AL in maintaining a persistent presence in the Natuna Sea and SLOCs with the Sea Vision satellite and Scan Eagle unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV). Additionally, the United States is assisting Jakarta in developing Indonesia's Integrated Maritime Surveillance System (IMMS) and has included the country in the Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative.⁵³

USAF Relations with the TNI-AU

The USAF's relationship with the TNI-AU is developing positively, which helping the latter become a more dynamic service.⁵⁴ Regular Airman-to-Airman Talks between the TNI-AU and US Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) are fostering mutual understanding and ideas for greater cooperation. The TNI-AU has a higher percentage of English speakers than Indonesia's other services, which facilitating security cooperation with the United States.

PACAF and TNI-AU have been holding Cope West exercises since 1989, with recent iterations focusing on F-16 and C-130 tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP). In September 2021, USAF B-52s, Japanese Air Self-Defense Force

⁵² US Embassy Jakarta, "Super Garuda Shield 2022 Showcases Multinational Partnership and Joint Interoperability," 3 August 2022, <https://id.usembassy.gov/>.

⁵³ US officials interviews. Indonesian officials support US Navy FONOPs behind closed doors, though they will not say so in public.

⁵⁴ Indonesian security experts and US officials interviews.

15Js, and TNI–AU F-16s conducted joint exercises around Guam. TNI–AU personnel have flown on US Navy 27th Squadron P-8s over the Natuna Sea and South China Sea.

USAF training emphasizes air safety cooperation, including maintainers and weapon systems. The USAF provides maintainer safety training, and the USAF's chief noncommissioned officer has visited TNI–AU squadrons to emphasize maintenance. The United States also facilitated the visit of TNI–AU personnel to Australia for flight safety training.

The USAF has subject-matter experts on safety and HADR available for Indonesia, with five C-130Js stationed in Guam as part of the 36th Contingency Response Group. The USAF is also partnering with the TNI–AU to develop MDA, such as providing products from the 613th Air Operations Center, Hickam AFB, Hawai'i, to detect thunderstorms for the TNI–AU and TNI–AL. Additionally, the USAF is working with the TNI–AU to lead Indonesia's development of cyberdefense. The USAF recognizes the significant potential for air defense cooperation with the TNI–AU.

Defense sales are a crucial aspect of the USAF–TNI–AU relationship, and the recent sale of 36 Boeing F-15EXs is a testament to this fact. The USAF is working closely with the TNI–AU to enhance its internal processes for building requirements and streamlining procurement. Lockheed-Martin has been instrumental in sales of F-16Vs, C-130-Js, and upgrades to the TNI–AU's 33 F-16s to Block 72 capability. However, some challenges have arisen, such as the lack of personnel to perform upgrades and the budgeting and delivery of software and advanced missiles. To address these issues, the United States has been working to provide the TNI–AU's C-130s and other air mobility aircraft through the excess defense articles program. Differences in financial and reporting systems between the US and Indonesia have also posed challenges. While US foreign military sales offer more flexibility in finance reporting, Indonesia operates on an annual finance system—US foreign military sales are multiyear. To address this issue, the TNI–AU is a member of the US System Improvement Program and Advanced System Improvement Program, which will help provide greater evidence that Indonesia is meeting US foreign military sales targets.

What Would Indonesia and the United States Like Each Other to Do?

Indonesian leaders expressed a desire for increased US assistance, particularly in two areas: archipelagic security and countering China's expansion in Southeast Asia. The security establishment seeks greater US security cooperation, access to advanced weaponry, and reassurance as the TNI (including the TNI–AU) and coast guard confront internal challenges and China's assertiveness. The TNI, in-

cluding the TNI–AU, also desires expanded US IMET support for officers to attend US professional military education (PME) institutions. Some in the security establishment advocate for a more assertive US strategy to enable Indonesia to take a stronger stand and defend its rights, as well as those of Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines. However, President Widodo and other top leaders are committed to maintaining nonalignment and limiting the scope of the strategic partnership. Additionally, Indonesian leaders seek continued US FON operations in the SCS, while exercising caution to avoid escalation.

The TNI–AU desires the USAF to aid in developing the air-domain aspect of the strategic partnership to promote shared understanding, greater capacity, and improved capabilities. One way to achieve this goal is through improved coordination of Airman-To-Airman Talks. Although a channel for classified items exists, the TNI–AU needs easier and cheaper access to vital information, which could be facilitated through the US diplomatic pouch or by TNI–AU personnel regularly visiting Guam. The TNI–AU would like more maintenance technicians to receive English-language training and more technicians for the its F-16s. Additionally, they want to develop technical schools with US syllabi tailored for Indonesia, particularly for senior noncommissioned officers. To improve capabilities, the TNI–AU requires more sophisticated equipment and training for its F-16s, C-130Js, SU30s, and newly purchased aircraft. It also seeks US assistance with intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), such as the Scan Eagle and accompanying network-centric capabilities and air defenses.

Budgeting for procurement is another area of concern for the TNI–AU. It requires details on how to account for US excess defense articles sustainment consumables and would like a breakdown of different system costs from the United States for the Ministry of Finance. The TNI–AU also needs standardized documentation from US vendors and the US government. Concerning the development of TNI–AU cyber capabilities, the service would like the United States to provide cyber equipment and experts to provide training in cyber basics and other aspects of information and communications technology. It also hopes to send personnel to the United States for training. Finally, the TNI–AU seeks USAF assistance in developing an air command and staff college and noncommissioned officer academies for Indonesia.⁵⁵

Since 2016, the United States has identified great-power competition with China as its top national security priority. As a result, Washington is encouraging Indonesia to increase its air and maritime capabilities to counter China's presence

⁵⁵ Senior TNI official, interview with the author, Jakarta, July 2019.

in Southeast Asia. To achieve this, Indonesia has acquired 76 advanced fighter aircraft. US officials would like the TNI, including the TNI–AU, to develop its capacity and capabilities, enabling it to play a greater role in countering China’s activities in the SCS and conducting counterterrorism and HADR missions. However, some US security cooperation officials in Jakarta believe that the TNI needs greater HADR capabilities, such as airlift and sealift, more than advanced platforms and capabilities. This means that US messages to Indonesia could be contradictory. Additionally, the United States would like Indonesia to focus on maintaining its C-130s and other air mobility and reconnaissance aircraft.

One of the US objectives is for the TNI–AU, TNI–AL, and coast guard to conduct routine maritime security and MDA patrols in the Natuna Sea and vicinity of the SCS, and the major SLOCs between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. This would enable Indonesia to deter and respond to illegal and coercive activities within its EEZ, ensure FON and regional stability, and protect natural resources. The United States would like Indonesia to develop greater command-and-control and interoperability capabilities and the ability to conduct contingency operations. This would include implementing the GSOMIA and CIS-MOA.⁵⁶ Additionally, the United States would like to support the TNI–AU’s in countering the PLAAF and PLAN air arm. Finally, the United States strongly encourages Indonesia to avoid purchasing military hardware from China and Russia, as doing otherwise could result in US sanctions.⁵⁷

Scenarios

It is likely that China will continue to assert its claim over part of the Natuna Sea and most of the SCS, while using economic incentives to discourage forceful reactions from Indonesian leaders. Despite its expansion, there are no indications that China will escalate toward open conflict. Meanwhile, the United States and Indonesia will gradually enhance their partnership, including stronger security cooperation. With the growing mutual interest of Indonesia and the United States in the SCS and Natuna Sea, the prospects for the partnership and constructive USAF–TNI–AU relations are positive. However, much will depend on Jakarta’s orientation and Washington’s policy toward Indonesia in the future. The relationship may encounter occasional obstacles, depending on political conditions and security-cooperation situations. This scenario could facilitate stronger

⁵⁶ US officials interviews. The GSOMIA enables the sharing of information in cyberspace and for encryption.

⁵⁷ US officials interviews.

USAF–TNI–AU relations, and Indonesia may acquire more US defense products, leading to greater interoperability. However, Jakarta could also decide to slow cooperation, resulting in a plateau in USAF–TNI–AU relations.

A second scenario involves China escalating and becoming aggressive in Indonesia's EEZ in the Natuna Sea, or against Vietnam, the Philippines, or Malaysia, with Jakarta seeking support from Washington. The United States would need to respond proportionately to cause China to deescalate, while reassuring Indonesia and other nations. If the United States responds appropriately, it would strengthen the partnership and increase security cooperation with the TNI, including the TNI–AU, and coast guard, and facilitate the TNI–AU developing interoperability with the USAF. However, if a conflict ensues, the United States may have to decide whether to take Indonesia's side and provide support or not. While the US, INDOPACOM, and PACAF aim to strengthen their partnership and eventually achieve interoperability with the TNI–AU, intervening on Indonesia's behalf risks escalation to war with China.

A third scenario involves the possibility of growing tension in US–Indonesian relations, particularly if the future Indonesian administration becomes authoritarian and prompts a reaction from Washington. This could potentially halt or slow down the progress of both the strategic partnership and USAF–TNI–AU relations. Moreover, if the next Indonesian administration moves closer to China, it could further exacerbate the impasse in the partnership. In a worst-case scenario, the United States and Indonesia may have to pursue their interests independently.

Conclusion

The strategic partnership between the United States and Indonesia is essential in upholding the rules-based order in the SCS and Natuna Sea, as well as in enhancing Jakarta's defense capacity and military capabilities through bilateral and multilateral diplomatic initiatives. Both countries acknowledge that China will continue to expand its control over the SCS, northern Natuna Sea, and the EEZs of Indonesia and other ASEAN states. Therefore, regular dialogue and a shared approach are necessary to address EEZ issues and promote the free and open Indo-Pacific principle. The United States has indicated its willingness to incorporate Indonesia into a growing multilateral network, based on the Quad, to support a free and open Indo-Pacific. Despite a mutual desire for a stronger partnership, there are barriers hindering the relationship and the development of a more capable Indonesian military and air force. While both parties seek a stronger partnership, they have distinct reasons and varying levels and rates of speed. It is unlikely that Indonesia and other partner countries would join the United States in using military force against China in the event of a significant escalation. Although chal-

lenges exist, with the right amount of will and creative effort, the United States and Indonesia can overcome them and strengthen their relationship.

US security cooperation with Indonesia is crucial for burden sharing and deterrence in the Natuna Sea, SCS, and eventually the wider Indo-Pacific region. As Beijing's grand strategy aims to eventually dominate Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific, stronger partnerships and burden sharing are necessary for the United States to address the rising security challenge from China. Indonesia can contribute by developing greater capabilities for ISR and patrolling in the Natuna Sea and SCS. Meanwhile, the US military can focus on deterrence and denial tasks. To effectively deter China's aggressive behavior in the region, the United States and Indonesia must commit to a division of labor in the event of PLA aggression in the Natuna Sea.

Multilateral security cooperation and joint exercises, including those involving Indonesia, the Quad, and other ASEAN militaries, are optimal ways for Indo-Pacific countries to develop regionally capable militaries, including air forces, and enhance surveillance and deterrence. The systematic buildup of maritime and air forces in collaboration with the United States is essential for regional cooperation and deterrence. Military leaders of the United States and Indonesia, including their air forces, continue to discuss the strategic situation in the Indo-Pacific and their respective roles in providing deterrence. This includes discussions about the Natuna Sea and sovereignty issues, as well as FON and overflight. The USAF and TNI–AU can play crucial roles in preventing China from achieving regional dominance by developing a shared outlook and respective strategies and capabilities to deter China from further encroaching in the Natuna Sea and infringing on Indonesia's rights.

To help the TNI, including the TNI–AU, become a significant regional force, the United States can undertake various initiatives. Washington can provide assistance in training and equipment, such as supporting the development of the F-15X program and working toward expediting Indonesia's training and squadron development. Bilateral mechanisms can be developed to enhance information sharing and intelligence, including ISR capability boost. The United States and USAF can work with TNI–AU in increasing the sharing of logistics and information, enhancing joint exercises focusing on HADR scenarios, and securing relations. US INDOPACOM and PACAF can allocate more resources, planning, and engagement to the TNI and TNI–AU. The State Partnership Program with the Hawaii National Guard has been a useful engagement vehicle, and the United States should expand and develop this program further.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ US officials interviews.

The United States should focus on building a strong strategic partnership with Indonesia by expanding and strengthening high-level dialogues, simulations, and exercises, as well as promoting security assistance and exchanges. The USAF and PACAF can play a leading role in developing this partnership, while avoiding a transactional and paternalistic approach. Additionally, the United States and USAF should continue to promote US aircraft, weapons, and equipment, with the long-term goal of developing increasingly complex exercises with the TNI–AU. The United States should also collaborate with Indonesia to build capacity and develop capabilities to make the TNI–AU a regionally significant force.

Given the importance of the SCS and Southeast Asia in the Indo-Pacific region, Indonesia is a key component of the larger US strategy to maintain a free and open region while deterring China’s unlawful territorial expansion. The United States has expanded its basic rights with the Philippines near contested waters and strengthened partnerships with ASEAN states such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia, as well as increasing multilateral engagement with them. By enhancing security cooperation with these states, they can defend their EEZs and other interests.

However, deterring China from controlling the area inside the first island chain, including the SCS and Natuna Sea, poses a more challenging task that falls on the shoulders of the United States and its allies, particularly the recently formed AUKUS alliance between the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. The Quad—composed of the United States, India, Japan, and Australia—provides AUKUS with diplomatic and military support, along with the US–Japan–South Korea partnership. The United States has been countering China’s expansion in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the SCS and East China Sea, through increased security cooperation, partnerships, alliances, and freedom of navigation operations, and should continue to do so. 🌟

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