Here’s why Jakarta doesn’t push back when China barges into Indonesian waters

A China Coast Guard vessel rammed a Chinese fishing boat free in March after Indonesian authorities had seized it for illegal fishing off the Natuna Islands, Indonesia’s northernmost territory in the South China Sea. The Indonesian patrol let the Chinese ships go, as has been the case in similar incidents.

Peaceful management of the area is in Indonesia’s strategic interests, even though the country is not part of the disputed South China Sea claims involving Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei and China. But China’s claim to roughly 90 percent of the area overlaps with the Natunas’ Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs).

And Indonesian President Joko Widodo — better known as Jokowi — has prioritized the development of marine resources and the protection of the country’s maritime borders since assuming office in 2014.

Is Jokowi about to stand up to Chinese encroachment into Indonesia’s coastal waters?

But Indonesia is not pushing back against China. Here’s what neo-classical realist international relations theory suggests about why this is happening: States should forcefully react, either through alliances or military buildup, to protect long-term security interests — known as balancing — against threatening states. Yet domestic
politics often hinders them from doing so.

I argue that Indonesia under Jokowi is under-balancing against China. Under-balancing happens when a threatened state fails to correctly perceive the threat posed by another state, or simply does not react appropriately to it.

That Indonesia has not forcefully responded, militarily or diplomatically, to China’s increasing presence on its doorstep reflects assessments of three main parameters:

1) Is China really a threat to Indonesia?

First, it’s not clear whether China — as the dominant power in Indonesia’s regional environment — poses an obvious threat. Many within Indonesia’s foreign policy elite believed Beijing’s private assurances in the 1990s that there is no dispute over who owns the Natunas. Jokowi’s foreign minister, in fact, reiterated this point after the March incident.

China’s forays into Indonesian maritime space, without publicly disputing the country’s ownership of the Natunas, seems consistent with a “salami slicing” tactic: the slow accumulation of small actions, none of which prompts a deep rift or call to arms but which add up over time to a major strategic change. In the South China Sea, this means slowly poking holes at maritime governance space, then taking control of smaller reefs and islands, and eventually consolidating claims through bilateral negotiations.

Beijing’s extensive regional economic engagement — from providing development assistance to promoting free-trade agreements — seems to send a different message, however. China also participates in the multilateral process to formulate a legally binding Code of Conduct for the South China Sea with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

So neo-classical realists would say Beijing’s behavior sends unclear signals, and states have a hard time figuring out what these signals mean. The less clarity there is over threats, the more likely a state’s foreign policy elites will pursue different solutions to a problem based on their particular interests. That’s what happened after the March incident with the China Coast Guard. The ministers of defense,
foreign affairs and fisheries responded in contradictory ways as Jokowi’s advisers and diplomats disagreed on what the real problem with China is. The military was unsure of the right response.

2) Indonesia’s foreign policy priorities aren’t clear, either.

Even if China presented an obvious threat to Indonesia or its regional environment, Jokowi’s fractured foreign policy elite would hinder balancing efforts.

As neo-classical realists argue, elite consensus and cohesion are often necessary for balancing behavior to occur. Both of these preconditions have been missing in Jokowi’s approach to the South China Sea and China.

Jokowi, as the chief foreign policy executive, has not seemed terribly interested in foreign affairs. Analysts note he seems to be less tuned in to ASEAN, traditionally considered the country’s foreign policy cornerstone. And public rhetoric over maritime security notwithstanding, Jokowi has been preoccupied with domestic economic agendas and aligning competing party interests.

Consequently, the ministries of foreign affairs, defense and fisheries, as well as the military, have different interpretations of what Indonesia’s foreign policy should be. And they have responded differently to China’s behavior in the South China Sea. These competing bureaucratic interests play into Indonesia’s historically rooted elite and public ambivalence over China’s economic and political importance.

With the public and elite already unsure of China, seeing Jokowi failing to pay serious attention to foreign policy makes bureaucratic politics worse — and this means threat assessments or balancing efforts will flounder.

3) So what’s the effect of all these uncertainties?

With the political elite disagreeing over China’s threat, Jokowi is unlikely to embark on a domestic military buildup (what Kenneth Waltz calls “internal balancing”)
designed specifically to respond to China. Indeed, contrary to news reports, the military’s efforts to beef up installations and deploy advanced weaponry in the Natunas did not begin under Jokowi, nor were they specifically targeted at China. Instead, they are part of the military’s post-authoritarian modernization plans formulated in the mid-2000s.

So Beijing gives mixed signals and Jokowi’s foreign policy has no clear focus — and that’s why Indonesia doesn’t tell China to back off. As I show in a forthcoming article, this isn’t really Indonesia’s style. Under-balancing hasn’t always been Indonesia’s China policy.

In fact, this behavior departs from Indonesia’s traditional approach of mixing institutional balancing (using multilateral institutions to counter threats) with hedging (aligning with great powers through positive engagement but preparing for contingencies). The previous Yudhoyono administration, for example, invested in ensuring ASEAN could be more effective in managing the South China Sea and dealing with Beijing, while at the same time expanding strategic ties with different regional powers and tripling defense spending.

Based on these findings, foreign policy contradictions are likely to continue in Indonesia, driven by domestic and bureaucratic politics. There’s little reason to think this will change anytime soon under Jokowi’s rule. And this means Jokowi won’t be taking a strong stance against Chinese encroachment onto Indonesian islands, or those of its South China Sea neighbors.

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