Over the past week, there have been renewed calls for Jakarta to take a tougher stance against Beijing following an incident where a Chinese coast guard vessel rammed one of its own fishing boats to pry it free from Indonesian authorities who had seized it for illegal fishing. Several analysts have examined the incident in great detail (see here and here).
Indonesian Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Susi Pudjiastuti on board an illegal fishing vessel, 14 March 2016

The calls came amid a seemingly contradictory response by Jakarta. Fisheries Minister Susi Pudjiastuti was visibly angry and publicly accused Beijing of 'sabotaging' Indonesia's peace efforts while being 'arrogant' and disrespectful of Indonesia's sovereignty.

Yet, after delivering an official diplomatic protest to the Chinese embassy, the Indonesian Foreign Minister insisted that the incident had nothing to do with the South China Sea dispute. President Widodo Jokowi also instructed Luhut Pandjaitan, the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs, to take necessary steps but reminded him that China 'remains Indonesia's friend.'

That Indonesia has strategic interests in the South China Sea, and that its 'delicate equilibrium' approach needs a re-examination, is not in doubt. What is less debated, however, is the broader domestic political context behind such a discordant response.

First, there is the dueling logics of the foreign ministry and the defense establishment over how to best manage developments in the South China Sea.

The foreign ministry believes that maintaining a 'non-claimant' status — not acknowledging in any way that a disputed maritime boundary with China exists — allows Jakarta to become an 'honest broker' in the ongoing ASEAN-led process to form a binding Code of Conduct (CoC) with China. This position derives from Indonesia's unyielding support for a particular 'rules-based order', one driven by UNCLOS, rather than by American naval primacy or Chinese control over the waters.

This diplomatic-legal logic, the ministry believes, allows Indonesia to continue exploiting hydrocarbon resources within the Natuna Islands while upholding full sovereignty over its territorial sea and EEZs. They also think that following a strategic-military logic would lead to escalation, undermine a decade-worth of progress over the CoC, and might even inadvertently recognise Beijing's claim (Pandjaitan's off-the-cuff suggestion that Indonesia should take China to an 'international tribunal', for example).
The defense establishment, meanwhile, seems to have little faith in what some describe as the foreign ministry's 'institutionalist' or 'legalistic' logic in dealing with Beijing's behavior. In particular, they are concerned with the growing number of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing incidents within Indonesia's EEZs around the Natunas involving not just Chinese fishermen but also Beijing's maritime law enforcement agencies.

In other words, they believe that while diplomatically Indonesia maintains its non-claimant status, China is gradually encroaching the country's maritime governance space. Some officers have even invoked the loss of Sipadan and Ligitan to Malaysia in 2002 as a possible 'worst case scenario' down the line for the Natunas.

The merits of these competing logics notwithstanding, they have hindered a coherent South China Sea policy. They are also partially a consequence of Jokowi's aloofness over foreign policy-making and his overly narrow domestic economic agenda, which has also led to different interpretations of his Global Maritime Axis (GMA) doctrine.

Second, while the history of Indonesia's chaotic maritime governance goes back to the New Order era, the different interpretations of the GMA doctrine has exacerbated the bureaucratic jumble.

For one thing, the inauguration of the Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla) in 2014 did not resolve the overlapping and uncoordinated maritime authorities shared by over a dozen agencies. For another, Jokowi's elevation of the popular and assertive Susi Pudjiastuti as Fisheries Minister escalated the bureaucratic infighting. Some of her policies, especially the unnecessarily frequent detonating of foreign vessels caught and convicted of IUU fishing, have led to growing, albeit less public, friction with the Navy for example.

This bureaucratic scramble matters because as IUU fishing takes a more prominent space in Jakarta's strategic landscape under Jokowi, who gets to patrol Indonesian waters under what authority and capacity will have strategic implications for the South China Sea.

Third, Indonesia's foreign policy-making has dwindled under Foreign Minister Marsudi. While some within the ministry applaud her focus on accelerating bureaucratic reforms and her leadership over the ministry's first strategic planning document, others believe that Indonesia's regional and global profile has been declining under her watch.

Moreover, some within Jakarta's broader foreign policy community are increasingly concerned with the seeming lack of trust and chemistry between the President and Foreign Minister; most recently seen when the cabinet secretary announced last year the appointment of seven 'liaison ministers' to better facilitate foreign investments.

Given the elimination of the Yudhoyono-era foreign affairs spokesperson office, the
appointment of Jokowi’s chief foreign policy adviser, Rizal Sukma, as ambassador to London and the removal of Andi Widjajanto (a noted foreign policy analyst prior to his cabinet secretary appointment), it is not far-fetched to argue that the President’s ability to manage day-to-day foreign policy challenges, including the South China Sea, is less than ideal.

Finally, as infrastructure-driven development is likely to be one of the centerpieces of Jokowi’s re-election campaign, maintaining stable relations with Beijing seems to have taken precedence over nationalistic public chest beating.

With momentum growing for a cabinet reshuffle, Jokowi may also feel the need to keep a lid on domestic pressures against his economic and finance team – whose performance are often tied to their engagement with China and whose positions are often bargaining chips in coalition-forging negotiations. After all, the next round of reshuffles may be crucial for his bid to balance the influence of Megawati and her PDI-P while containing their ‘spoiler behavior’ over his agenda.

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