

PERSPECTIVE

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What Does Indonesia's Renaming of Part of the South China Sea Signify?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In mid-July 2017 Indonesian deputy minister of maritime affairs launched the new map of the Republic of Indonesia which renames part of the South China Sea, which falls within the Indonesian EEZ, as North Natuna Sea.
- China responded by stating that it was senseless to do so and did not help the situation in the South China Sea. No country's name was mentioned in its response.
- Renaming part of the South China Sea is a way for President Jokowi to burnish his nationalist credentials and to deliver a strategic message to China.

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INTRODUCTION

On 14 July 2017 Deputy Minister of Maritime Affairs Arif Havas Oegroseno officially launched the new map of the Republic of Indonesia, pointing out that the Natuna Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) has been renamed as “Laut Natuna Utara” (North Natuna Sea). The area is part of the South China Sea. Moreover, the Natuna EEZ lies partially within China’s “Nine-Dash Line”, which has not been recognized by Indonesia. The new map, prepared over nine months from October 2016, was signed by 21 Indonesian ministers and state agencies.¹

Havas explained that the renaming is being done for two reasons: First, it is to prevent confusion among exploiters on the continental shelf as regards territorial sovereignty; and second, to provide clear guidelines to the Law Enforcement Team of the Indonesian Navy. However, as Indonesia did not consult its immediate neighbours in preparing the updated map,² the new maritime boundaries as reflected on the map may be disputed in the future.

Havas claimed that “we don’t have a territorial dispute with China,” and that the renaming is quite normal. Yet he added that “Indonesia will not negotiate with countries who claim sovereignty without reference to the UNCLOS.”³

The Foreign Ministry of China in its regular press conference responded to this renaming. Its spokesman Geng Shuang noted:

“The so-called change of name makes no sense at all and is not conducive to ... the international standardization of the name of places. We hope [the] relevant country can work with China for shared goals and jointly uphold the current hard-won sound situation in the South China Sea.”⁴

The response of China can be regarded as quite moderate as it does not mention the name of the country it involves. It also suggests that that country (read: Indonesia) should maintain the status quo since that situation is “sound”, and both countries have shared goals. This is clearly different from the usual “protests” usually issued by Beijing.

Several questions can be asked about the intention of the Joko Widodo administration in renaming part of the South China Sea, the response of China to the renaming, and the two countries’ positions on the South China Sea in general and the Natuna waters in particular.

¹ Marguerite Afra Sapiie, “New Map asserts sovereignty over Natuna”, *Jakarta Post*, 15 July 2017, p.1.

² *ibid.*.

³ *ibid.*.

⁴ <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/t1477975.htm> (Accessed 18 July 2017)

ORIGINS OF RENAMING AND INDONESIAN HISTORY

Indonesia began to focus its attention on the Natuna waters on 19 March when a Chinese fishing vessel encroached into Natuna waters and was arrested by an Indonesian patrol boat. However, a Chinese patrol vessel quickly appeared and intervened to free the Chinese fishing boat. The Indonesian Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries announced this episode to the press and protested to Beijing. Beijing's Foreign Ministry responded by stating that the Chinese fishermen were doing their regular work on their "traditional fishing ground". Prior to the Joko Widodo presidency, China's fishing vessel incursions issues were quietly handled as a rule.⁵ Apparently his Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Susi Pudjiastuti, decided to pursue a new policy.

The incident immediately became a national issue and Indonesian public opinion became hostile toward China. China quickly quietly sent an envoy to settle the issue and the Joko Widodo administration responded favourably.⁶ However, on 27 May 2016, about two months after the incident, there was another incursion. Jakarta protested while Beijing responded using the same argument. Joko Widodo was forced to show that he was serious about defending Indonesia's sovereignty. He visited Natuna in a naval warship with a few of his cabinet ministers and also had a limited cabinet meeting on the warship.⁷ The Indonesian parliament discussed the Natuna issue and approved the budget for developing a military base in Natuna. On 17 June 2016, there was yet another incursion but this time the Indonesian navy was well prepared and succeeded in detaining the China's fishing vessel.⁸

In fact, illegal fishing was a very serious issue in Indonesia even before these incidents. Minister Susi Pudjiastuti had established a task force called Satuan Tugas Anti-Illegal Fishing (SATGAS IF) in December 2014 to deal with it. Mas Achmad Santosa, a leading environmental law expert, was appointed as its chairman.⁹ On 19 October 2015, Jokowi issued Presidential decree no.115/2015 to form a task force known as SATGAS 115 [Satuan Tugas Pemberantasan Penangkapan Ikan Secara Ilegal (Illegal Fishing)] to combat illegal fishing in Indonesian territorial waters.¹⁰ The task force includes, among others, the Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, the Navy and the Attorney-General.

⁵ Rizal Sukma, "Indonesia and China Need to Combat the IUU Problem, Jakarta Post, 31 March 2016.

⁶ For a discussion on these events, see Leo Suryadinata, "Did the Natuna Incident Shake Indonesia-China Relations? "ISEAS Perspective, No.19 (26 April 2016).

⁷ Leo Suryadinata and Mustafa Izzuddin, "Nationalistic Symbolism Behind the "Natuna Sea", Straits Times, 9 September 2016.

⁸ See Leo Suryadinata and Mustafa Izzuddin, "The Natunas: Territorial Integrity in the Forefront of Indonesia-China Relations", *Trends in Indonesia*, 2017 no. 5, pp. 1-2.

⁹ <http://citraindonesia.com/mas-achmad-santosa-ketua-satgas-illegal-fishing/> (Accessed 21 July 2017)

¹⁰ <http://setkab.go.id/prihatin-pencurian-ikan-presiden-jokowi-bentuk-satgas-pemberantasan-illegal-fishing/> (Accessed 21 July 2017),

The task force was behind the capture and sinking of many foreign fishing vessels by August 2016. On 18 August 2016, Achmad Santosa proposed renaming part of the South China Sea within the EEZ of Indonesia as Laut Natuna (Natuna Sea).¹¹ He even noted that he would send a formal proposal to the United Nations. The proposal was supported by the Natuna authorities, including Natuna mayor Hamid Rizal.

A week later, a reporter asked Luhut Pandjaitan, the Coordinating Minister of Indonesian Maritime Affairs (Menko Kemaritiman), who was then in Batam to officiate the opening of a new hospital, about the name change. Luhut noted that there was Natuna Sea on Indonesian maps which is within Indonesian waters. The northern part of Natuna which is Indonesia's EEZ should be called "North Natuna Sea".¹² Nevertheless, Luhut stated that the naming was still under study and no final decision had been made.

Apparently, it took almost one year for the Task Force to publish the results of the study. The Indonesian government would register not only the new name for the sea but also names for 1,106 unnamed islands belonging to Indonesia.¹³ Both Deputy Minister Havas and Coordinating Minister Luhut stated that it is normal for a country to name or rename places within its own territories.

Indeed Indonesia has a history of renaming places. During the Sukarno era, Indonesia renamed several islands. In May 1963 when West New Guinea was "returned" to Indonesia by the Dutch, Sukarno named New Guinea Island as Irian, and the Indonesian part as West Irian.¹⁴ But international maps continued to call the island "New Guinea".¹⁵ During the Confrontation against Malaysia (1963-66), Sukarno named the whole of Borneo "Kalimantan" but international maps continued to call the island Borneo and the Indonesian part as Kalimantan.¹⁶

Also during the Sukarno era, part of the Indian Ocean near Indonesia was changed to Samudera Indonesia (Indonesian Ocean) but internationally, the name Indian Ocean continues to be used for the whole ocean. It is still not clear if the UN and the international community will accept the Indonesian renaming of part of the South China Sea.

¹¹ <https://www.voaindonesia.com/a/indonesia-berencana-ubah-nama-jadi-laut-natuna-/3470588.html> (accessed 20 July 2017).

¹² <http://www.antaraneews.com/berita/581111/luhut-penamaan-laut-natuna-utara-masih-proses> (accessed 26 July 2017)

¹³ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20170117140515-20-186924/pemerintah-siapkan-nama-1106-pulau-untuk-dibawa-ke-pbb/> (Accessed 18/7/2017)

¹⁴ Robert Cribb, *Historical Atlas of Indonesia*, Surrey, U.K., 2000, p.167. After 2001, the Indonesian name has been changed to Papua. See Robert Cribb and Audrey Kahin, *Historical Dictionary of Indonesia*. 2nd Edition, Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2004, p.165.

¹⁵ *The Times Atlas of the World*, London: Times Newspapers Ltd, 1968, "The Pacific Ocean", p.122; In the 1987 edition, the name for the whole island is still New Guinea, p.122.

¹⁶ *The Times Atlas of the World*, London: Times Newspapers Ltd, 1968, "The Pacific Ocean", p.122.

WHY RENAME?

The factors that led to the renaming of part of South China Sea are complex but judging from the nature of Indonesian attempts to pacify domestic opposition and promote nationalism there are basically two reasons. The Jokowi government has from the outset been considered “pro-Beijing”, and relied too much on China, especially in terms of investments and loans. The opposition groups, especially radical Islamic groups, are anti-PRC and distrustful of ethnic Chinese Indonesians. Some even spread fake news about Chinese labourers and migrants coming to Indonesia. However, the rise of China and its assertiveness in the South China Sea, especially in view of various incursions into the Indonesian EEZ, forced the Jokowi government to take tougher action. The military base in Natuna was established and the exercise to rename part of the South China Sea was launched.

The renaming is also a signal to China of the seriousness of Indonesia’s concerns about the sovereignty of its EEZ around the Natunas. A leading academic at the University of Indonesia, Hikmahanto Juwana, noted that the renaming was “a move to step up Jakarta’s stance against Beijing’s claim on the Natuna Waters”.¹⁷ Another academic from the University of Gadjah Mada, I Made Andi Arsana, also argued that “the renaming carried no legal force but was a political and diplomatic statement.”¹⁸ Although Beijing had “protested” against the renaming, the *Jakarta Post* was of the view that Indonesia-China’s “bilateral ties are too big to fail”.¹⁹

VIEWS OF INDONESIA AND CHINA ON THE NATUNA WATERS

Indeed, both parties appear to know each other’s position on the Natuna waters. China has been more assertive in the South China Sea after Xi Jinping became the president of the PRC, and it continues to use the “nine-dash-line” to claim sovereignty over 90 percent of the Sea. When there was a conflict over the fishing vessels in the Natuna waters, however, Beijing’s Foreign Ministry did not invoke the nine-dash line, and instead used the term “traditional fishing grounds” when responding to Indonesia.

It seems that China does not want to push Indonesia into a corner and wants to avoid turning Indonesia hostile because that would harm not only Beijing’s security interests but also its politico-economic interests. Beijing’s 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which is part of the OBOR initiative, needs close co-operation of Indonesia.

The Jokowi government has also been conciliatory towards China. It also echoes Beijing’s claim that there is no territorial dispute between Indonesia and China in the SCS. It assumes

¹⁷ Marguerite Afra Sapiie, “New Map asserts sovereignty over Natuna”, *Jakarta Post*, 15 July 2017, p.1.

¹⁸ Indonesia renames part of South China Sea”, *Straits Times*, 15 July 2017, p.16.

¹⁹ “What’s in a name?”, *Jakarta Post’s* editorial, 18 July 2017, p. 6.

that since the Natuna Islands have been recognized by Beijing as Indonesian territories, its EEZ based on UNCLOS would also belong to Indonesia. It therefore uses the illegal fishing issue to deal with Chinese fishing vessels. Jakarta needs economic aid and investment from Beijing, especially for its infrastructure projects, and Chinese tourists to increase its national income. As long as Beijing observes the bottom line that the Natuna Islands and their EEZ belong to Indonesia, Jakarta-Beijing relations should remain peaceful. Indeed, in the last 10 months after the Chinese fishing vessel incursions, no further similar incident in the Natuna waters has been reported.

The renaming of Natuna Waters may irritate Beijing but Beijing understands that it will not change the status quo. It seems that Beijing also understands that the renaming is a reflection of domestic Indonesian nationalism, which is strategically important to Jokowi's government.

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