



## Implementation of Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy in the Time of COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Introduction

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic which has become a global health crisis has caused a domino effect to other sectors such as the economic, social, as well as the defense sector. The impacts on the defense sector can be seen, among others, from the cuts and reallocation of the defense budget for COVID-19 countermeasures, the military's involvement in logistics and the implementation of health protocols in the society, as well as limiting movement of people and the holding of large-scale meetings. As a result, how is the implementation of Indonesia's defense diplomacy with other countries in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic?

### Implementation of Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy in the Time of Pandemic

According to Cottey and Foster, defense diplomacy is the peacetime use of armed forces and related infrastructure (primarily defense ministries) as a tool of foreign and security policy and more specifically the use of military cooperation and assistance.<sup>1</sup> The author tries to analyze the implementation of Indonesia's defense diplomacy in the time of the pandemic based on the forms of defense diplomacy activities defined by Cottey and Foster. First, bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the field of defense between Indonesia and other countries continues to run, either carried out directly (face-to-face) or virtually meetings. For instance, on 23 June 2020, the Indonesian Defense Minister, Prabowo Subianto visited Russia and conducted a bilateral meeting with the Russian Deputy Minister of Defence, Alexander Fomin. Both of them discussed increasing cooperation between Indonesia and Russia, especially in the fields of education, joint training and defense industry cooperation.<sup>2</sup>

Then, domestically, the Head of the Indonesian Military's International Cooperation Center (Kapuskersin TNI) received a working visit from the Australian Defense Attaché to discuss plans for the Australia-





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Indonesia High Level Committee (HLC Ausindo) which would be preceded by a virtual meeting among Sub Committees via video conference. One of the things that will be discussed at the Sub-Committee level is the collaboration between the Joint Regional Defense Command (Kogapwilhan) of the Indonesian Military (TNI) and the Australian Joint Operation Command, especially related to cooperation in handling the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to holding face-to-face meetings, the COVID-19 pandemic eventually forced defense diplomacy actors to adapt quickly so that they could still hold meetings using the technology of video conferences. Last May, a virtual meeting was held within the framework of ASEAN regional cooperation, namely the ASEAN Defense Senior Officials Meeting Working Group (ADSOM-WG) and the ASEAN Defense Senior Officials' Meeting (ADSOM). The ADSOM meeting was aimed at exchanging experiences in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic, discussing cooperation agendas in 2020, and organizing an online COVID-19 Table Top Exercise (TTX). Through this collaboration, the ASEAN region is expected to become an area capable of controlling the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

Second, the placement of Indonesian defense attaches in other countries also has an important role in the middle of a pandemic as a facilitator in the implementation of defense diplomacy activities. For example, the defense attache accompanied the Indonesian Ambassador to Nigeria in conducting a courtesy call and meeting with the Minister of Defense of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in order to strengthen diplomacy and defense cooperation between Indonesia and Nigeria. Both countries explored opportunities for defense cooperation in the fields of military training and education as well as the development of the defense industry.<sup>5</sup> Besides acting as a defense diplomacy actor, Indonesian defense attaches abroad are also tasked with making the latest reports on the condition of the COVID-19 pandemic in each country where they serve, as well as assisting the evacuation process of Indonesian citizens who live abroad in coordination with the government of the country they are posted in.

Third, the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic did not hamper the government of Indonesia from receiving humanitarian assistance from other countries and providing humanitarian assistance to other countries as well. For instance, the Indonesian government has twice received medical aid from the Chinese government. The Ministry of Defense together with TNI Headquarters successfully held a humanitarian aid operation to facilitate the delivery of medical supplies from China to Indonesia.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to receiving humanitarian assistance from other countries, Indonesia also sent humanitarian assistance to Australia affected by bushfires and Fiji hit by typhoon Harold. For Australia, the Indonesian government sent 38 TNI personnel to help deal with forest and land fires or known as bushfires that





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occurred in the Blue Mountain region, New South Wales.<sup>7</sup> For Fiji, the Indonesian government sent humanitarian assistance such as tents, food and drinks for people affected by Typhoon Harold in Kadavu Island, Fiji. Hercules from the Air Force was used to facilitate the distribution of humanitarian assistance.<sup>8</sup>

Fourth, related to peacekeeping operation, the United Nations (UN) has issued a rule that peacekeeping operations continue to run in the mission area by applying health protocols. However, to maintain the security and safety of peacekeepers and to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, the UN has suspended all rotations, new deployments to the mission areas, and repatriations temporarily.<sup>9</sup>

As an active country in promoting world peace, Indonesia is the 8th largest contributor in the world in the deployment of UN peacekeepers. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Indonesia's peacekeepers still play an active role and have been successful in carrying out the UN mandate in mission areas including preventing conflict among countries and conducting Protection of Civilian and Civil Military Coordination (CIMIC).

In the context of preventing conflict, for instances, the Garuda Contingent (Konga) in Lebanon succeeded in preventing armed conflict between Israeli and Lebanese troops on the border of both countries,<sup>10</sup> whilst Konga in Congo succeeded in reconciling three tribal conflicts in Kashege Village, Democratic Republic of Congo<sup>11</sup> that resulted in embracing and ensuring the militias surrender through routine patrols. Further, in terms of Protection of Civilian, Konga in Congo also played a role in the release of American hostages from the hands of bandit groups.<sup>12</sup>

Not only that, Indonesian peacekeepers also provide direct benefits to local communities through CIMIC activities, such as providing humanitarian assistance for the COVID-19 pandemic in the form of medicines and personal protective equipment (PPE) to the people in the target villages in Tulin, South Lebanon,<sup>13</sup> assisting to prepare land for a COVID-19 treatment center in the Republic of Central Africa,<sup>14</sup> providing free health services and field psychology, building a mini library, and socializing prevention measures of COVID-19 to local people in Congo.<sup>15</sup>

Fifth, in the context of joint military exercises, direct interactions among personnel have to be postponed due to current conditions which were not possible during the pandemic. An example is a joint military exercise between the Indonesian Military and the United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) originally planned to be held this year, but was postponed due to the pandemic.<sup>16</sup>





## Analysis/The Verdict

In the time of COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of Indonesia's defense diplomacy with other countries could still run, albeit with its own challenges. At the strategic level, meetings between defense diplomacy actors can still be held, either through direct (face-to-face) meetings for small scale, or virtually for large scale meetings. Furthermore, humanitarian assistance also continues to be delivered to help other countries affected by natural disasters. Through these activities, we can see Indonesia's commitment in the effort to increase confidence building measures (CBM) with partner countries. However, on the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic also presents its own challenges in the implementation of Indonesian defense diplomacy, especially at the operational level which requires direct interaction among military personnel on the ground, such as a temporary suspension for the rotation of UN peacekeepers and joint military training activities.

## Endnotes

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