

Is Darwin the Glue for US-Indonesian Cooperation?

Justin Goldman [Justin@pacforum.org] is a Sasakawa Peace Foundation Resident Fellow at the Pacific Forum CSIS.

Amid the flurry of diplomatic activity in November 2011, President Barack Obama announced that US Marines would begin rotations to Darwin in 2012 starting with some 250 personnel at the Australian Army's Robertson Barracks and growing to a target of 2,500 Marines in the years ahead. The Marine deployment is a signal of US commitment to Asia as our allies and partners worry about a shift in the regional balance of power. It also helps the US overcome the tyranny of distance by having forward-deployed forces for a variety of contingencies, including disaster relief.

Reassurance is increasingly important as Asian nations worry about the rise of China and evolving regional power dynamics. Vietnam, Singapore, and the Philippines have signaled their desire for a continued US presence in the region. Vietnam has opened Cam Ranh Bay to visits by US naval vessels, Singapore will host the forward deployment of US Navy Littoral Combat Ships, and the Manila Declaration was signed in November reaffirming the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty.

But what is seen as reassurance by some countries is seen as threatening by others. Chinese officials voice concern during the 12th round of US-China Defense Consultative Talks held in Beijing in early December and China's official media have been quick to see the move as another step in a strategy to contain China. It is difficult to construct a scenario where this Marine deployment would have a strategic consequence during a China-US contingency.

Between the limited numbers of forces deployed, the complex maritime geography that would separate the Marines at Darwin from China, and ongoing concern over adequate amphibious lift, the idea that these Marines are being sent to contain China makes no sense.

Potentially more troubling was the reaction of other regional countries. Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa expressed concern that the rotations might provoke a reaction that heightens tension and mistrust in the Asia-Pacific region. This comes when both Australia and the US tout their growing bilateral relationships with Indonesia. The US-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership, launched by President Obama and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in November 2010, deepens the US commitment to the bilateral relationship. While the announcement of the Marine presence in Darwin triggered some concern in Jakarta, it also offers an opportunity to enhance the military-to-military relationship with Indonesia, one that has grown in recent years beginning with the combined response to the December 2004 tsunami to deliver humanitarian assistance.

Relations between the US and Indonesia deteriorated since International Military Education and Training (IMET) was cut in 1992 following the killing of East Timorese demonstrators in November 1991; security assistance was suspended in 1999 in response to violence in East Timor after the August referendum favoring independence. While the Army remains the senior service in the *Tentara Nasional Indonesia* (TNI), many current Army officers missed their opportunity for training in the U.S. as a result of the suspension of IMET funding, a memory that lingers. The platform-centric Air Force and Navy bore the brunt of the ban on arms sales to Indonesia due to spare parts shortages, a ban they deem brought upon by the human rights abuses of their Army counterparts.

The Indonesian Marines (*Korps Marinir* or *KorMar*) are arguably the TNI component held in the most positive regard in Indonesian society, usually attributed to their conduct during the protests of 1998 that led to the resignation of Suharto. The image of protesters in Jakarta placing roses in the barrels of rifles held by Marines comes to mind. The KorMar-Marine Corps relationship has suffered the least from the cuts in security assistance to Indonesia. After a decade of focusing on land operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the USMC is returning to its amphibious roots. Gen. James Amos, commandant of the Marine Corps, has emphasized that the Asia-Pacific region is where that amphibious orientation is most applicable. NSC Senior Director for Asia Danny Russel underscored that the Marines in Darwin will "be rotating both jointly and unilaterally to cooperate with other security partners, allies and friends throughout Southeast Asia." The close proximity of Darwin to the KorMar base at Surabaya in Eastern Java could facilitate engagement between the two amphibious forces as the Marine Corps rebalances its posture for security cooperation following large-scale combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The March 2008 bilateral beach landing exercise was the first such exercise in over a decade.

The Marine Exercise of March 2009 grew to include a combined amphibious landing as well as a field training exercise focused on interoperability. A combined landing force exercise has been a key part of the US-sponsored Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT), a series of bilateral exercises in Southeast Asia. While primarily a naval engagement, Indonesia's 2007 CARAT event was limited to pierside activities in Jakarta's commercial port of Tanjung Priok. Injecting the KorMar-Marine Corps component has been critical to the expansion of Indonesia's CARAT exercise. The amphibious piece continued to grow with CARAT 2011 in June. Both sides benefit from these engagements, and they convey the aspiration of a partnership of equals, the strategic direction set forth by Presidents Obama

and Yudhoyono when the Comprehensive Partnership was launched.

While it is important to focus on the bilateral element of this new deployment with Australia, it also opens a potential avenue for trilateral cooperation among Australia, Indonesia, and the US. The Royal Australian Navy anticipates that its first Landing Helicopter Dock ship will enter service in 2014 and the 2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment has been identified as the core Army contribution to the joint amphibious capability. Australia participated in the recently completed *Exercise Bold Alligator* off the coast of North Carolina and Virginia, the largest amphibious training exercise conducted in over a decade. All three countries have been active in disaster relief operations and amphibious forces are critical to responding rapidly, a natural opening for trilateral cooperation. Darwin hosted the Exercise RAJAWALI AUSINDO 2011 in December, an interoperability engagement with their Indonesian counterpart C-130 Hercules crews. The Marines on-station would benefit from such an exercise and could contribute their experiences such as flying C-130 operations into northern Pakistan to provide flood relief in 2010.

In addition to deepening the excellent relationship with the Australian Defense Force, regular rotations of US Marines to Darwin are an important opportunity to enhance the growing relationship with their brothers-in-arms from one of America's key regional partners, Indonesia.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.

Applications are now being accepted for the 2012 SPF Fellowship position. Details, including an application form, can be found at the Pacific Forum web site [<http://csis.org/program/spf-fellowship>].