

**Indonesia, the TNI and regional security**

For the half-century following independence, the Indonesian National Armed Forces (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia* or TNI)<sup>1</sup> focused on maintaining law and order across the archipelago of some 1700 islands and on security threats, such as piracy, in the Strait of Malacca. That emphasis is now changing. Over the last decade or so since the restoration of democracy, the aspiration of national governments has been that the TNI should progressively transfer responsibility for internal security to the police services and instead focus outwards on national defence and regional security.

As a result of this policy change, significant steps are now being made in broadening the scope of the TNI from an internal security-focused land-based army into a regionally-significant maritime power. Concurrently, the TNI is strengthening its eastern flank in the Timor Sea, Arafura Sea, Celebes Sea and Pacific Ocean. New bases are planned in eastern Indonesia with a view to forming a new Eastern Command, which would be the TNI's third geographic command. In some quarters, this is referred to as 'eastern balancing'.

Last December, Indonesia opened a new military base located strategically in the Natuna Islands in the South China Sea between Borneo and peninsula Malaysia. The base will host composite battalions from the army and marines, as well as numerous advanced platforms from submarines, unmanned aerial vehicles and warships, to fighter jets, missile systems and supporting infrastructure.

The Natuna base will strengthen Indonesia's position,

including border security, in the North Natuna Sea and will facilitate force projection into the South China Sea. It also will send a strong message to China. China has some vaguely-defined territorial claims in the area and has been in dispute with Indonesia over illegal fishing by Chinese fishermen in Natuna Island waters, a dispute which flared in 2016 and 2017.

According to the *Eurasian Review* of 4 February 2019, Indonesia now plans to further strengthen its eastern flank by building bases for tri-service integrated units in Saumlaki, Morotai, Biak, and Merauke; and by establishing the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division (Army Strategic Reserve Command) in South Sulawesi, the Navy's 3<sup>rd</sup> Armada Command and 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Force in Western Papua, and the Air Force's 3<sup>rd</sup> Operational Command in Papua. Further, the number of major fleet units in the Navy is projected to increase to 12 submarines and 13 frigates/destroyers by 2025.

These, though, are still early days. As Indian defence analyst and retired vice-admiral, A. K. Singh, has advised the Institute's special interest group on strategy, Indonesia will now need to invest much more in enhancing the numbers and combat capability of their navy and air force, while also increasing maritime co-operation with India, Australia and other neighbours.

Nevertheless, the Natuna base and the eastern balancing are important first steps. With our region increasingly the subject of great power competition, the emergence of Indonesia as a regional ally would be a welcome development.

**David Leece<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>The TNI consists of the Army (TNI-AD), the Navy (TNI-AL) and Air Force (TNI-AU).

<sup>2</sup>Dr David Leece, editor of *United Service*, is chair of the Institute's Special Interest Group on Strategy. These are his personal views.