Business as Usual?
The Expanding Influence of the Indonesian Military under Jokowi

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Under Indonesian president Joko Widodo (popularly known as Jokowi), the Army-dominated Indonesian National Military (Tentara Nasional Indonesia – TNI) is experiencing a resurgence. The expansion of power that TNI has achieved is nowhere near the level of influence it wielded during the Suharto years (1967-1998), a period known as the New Order. However, indications are clear that TNI has benefited from Jokowi’s presidency as the self-styled civilian reformer has synergized TNI by extolling its powers and supporting its narrative of indispensability to national stability.

Recognizing TNI strategies and objectives as concerns its current expansion of power warrants an historical analysis of the military’s role in Indonesia and a critical review of its actions at present. This paper endeavors to do both in order to show that little has changed as concerns the calculations of TNI in the era of Jokowi. For the military in Indonesia, it indeed is business as usual, at least to a considerable extent.

Evidence suggests that under Jokowi, TNI, and in particular the Army, has entrenched its authority across a number of arenas as an outcome of the president’s declarations and actions. This paper discusses three of the areas in which the TNI star has ascended of late. The first is its role in Indonesia’s counterterrorism initiatives. The second is its efforts to (re)kindle two specters: proxy warfare and, in the terminology of the New Order, the latent threat of the communism (bahaya laten komunisme). Finally, there is the military’s suspected involvement in a rumored power play that suggests what some TNI personnel and their backers might currently hope to achieve. In April 2017, current and former TNI officials were alleged to have taken the lead on a coup plot against the president that involved the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and a number of prominent political figures and oligarchs.¹

TNI power is on the rise because despite his early claims not to be beholden to the military, Jokowi neither is able to truly constrain TNI nor operate independently from it. For their part, TNI personnel have sensed an important advantage in Jokowi’s position as an outsider to Indonesia’s military and political elite. Active and non-active military figures exploit this very fact to increase TNI’s political influence and undermine his authority. By so doing, they hope to increase the chance that present and former TNI personnel will maintain their immunity from prosecution under civil law and that the public will welcome TNI’s return to the political arena.

TNI: A Retrospective

TNI developed its role as the guardian of the nation during the Indonesian struggle for sovereignty following World War II then reached the height of its power under Suharto. Although it lost its formal political function following the Reformation (Reformasi) protest movement of the late-1990s to early-2000s, TNI remained an authoritarian institution that continued to engage in corruption and human rights abuses.

TNI’s role during the Indonesian National Revolution against the Dutch (1945-1949) had important consequences for military power that exceeded meeting national defense objectives. It provided the military with the narrative of being the savior of the nation and thereby facilitated its claim that TNI personnel deserved a seat at the political table. A series of constitutional crises under Sukarno resulted in the collapse of the parliamentary system in 1957. That development was a boon to TNI as the military’s declaration of martial law “enabled Army officers to take on broad political, administrative, and economic functions.”

However, by the mid-1960s, the Army became locked in a fierce rivalry with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), with both sides competing for Sukarno’s favor. As he ostensibly drew closer to the left and antagonisms grew with the United States, a key TNI ally and supporter, it appeared to be losing ground in that contest. Making matters worse was the considerable dissent within the armed forces, with some branches such as the Air Force lending their sympathies and support to the PKI. As such, the Army began to consolidate its power and demonstrate its indispensability by way of fulfilling the president’s directives, particularly the Confrontation with Malaysia (Konfrontasi). Unfortunately for TNI, PKI support for Konfrontasi gave the communists the leverage to present themselves as the true defenders of the nation. In January 1965 the party’s suggestion that workers and peasants be given arms and military training led Sukarno to propose the formation of a “fifth force” constituting a new branch of the armed forces tree. Faced with a formidable foe in the PKI, between October 1965 and March 1966 the Army, under the direction of Suharto, used a failed coup as a pretext to orchestrate and execute genocidal violence against the communists and their affiliates, who were blamed as the masterminds of the putsch. By the time power was transferred from Sukarno to Suharto on March 11, anywhere between 500,000 and 1 million people were dead and tens of thousands more detained as political prisoners.

With the establishment of the New Order TNI influence substantially grew. The ‘dual function’ (dwifungsi) doctrine, first proposed in 1965 then formalized in 1966, gave

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3 Ibid., 87.
4 For a comprehensive analysis of the attempted coup and how Suharto leveraged it to seize control of the presidency see John Roosa, Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement & Suharto’s Coup D’Etat in Indonesia (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).
TNI sweeping national defense and national political authority. It was at this moment that, in the words of one analyst, the military’s insertion of itself into political life became “an acknowledged political reality.” The years of political instability that followed independence instilled in military officials the fervent belief that civilian leadership resulted in a weak state. Consequently, TNI personnel saw it as their duty to ‘right’ the nation through entering into the business of governing by way of military modernization. This business made many Army officers extremely wealthy; in the name of military modernization they personally profited from Suharto’s push for economic development. As such, concurrent to looking out for their own self interests, TNI personnel aspired to project a “new professionalism” as indicative of a military that “was politicized, highly bureaucratic, and well schooled in the curriculum of U.S. military assistance programmes that emphasized ‘counterinsurgency, civic action and nation building.’” Never far from the surface was the assertion that a PKI comeback remained a possibility, allowing the Army to claim that the public required, to quote Harold Crouch, “the strong leadership that only the army could provide.”

Suharto’s fall from power during Reformasi ended more than thirty years of military-backed rule and produced some successes in terms of instituting steps meant to limit TNI political and economic influence. For example, the retraction of the dwi fungsi doctrine meant the loss of its formal role as a participant in Indonesian politics. TNI also agreed to divest management of its businesses by 2009. Reformasi additionally brought to the fore one TNI’s biggest problems: its image. The corruption and nepotism among elite officers during the regime translated into a decline not only in the quality and professionalism of the Armed Forces, but also in the citizenry’s trust in TNI as an institution. TNI’s abominable human rights record was inescapable. Atrocities committed during the occupation of East Timor (1975-1999) resulted in both the United States and European Union cutting off arms sales, training, and aid in 1999.

Arguably, however, little change actually was made, prompting forecasts made in the early-2000s that military authoritarianism in Southeast Asia was on the wane to now appear premature. The military kept its territorial command structure which allowed TNI to “tap into economic resources at the grassroots and defend their role as a

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6 A classic example is Ibnu Sutowo’s helming of the state-owned Pertamina oil corporation. See Crouch, *Army and Politics*, 276-278.
significant player in local politics.”

A loophole in the 2004 TNI Law mandating that the military divest from its businesses meant that military officials still held (and continue to hold) the reins of a number of corporations and enterprises (both legal and illicit). Suharto’s fall did not translate to the removal from power of New Order acolytes in TNI or their political cronies, thus allowing TNI to retain power—plus protection from oversight and exemption from civil persecution—regionally and nationally. Prominent officers not only helped to install Suharto’s successor. They achieved electoral success following the post-Reformasi loss of confidence in civilian political leadership, the pinnacle of which was the two-term presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, also known as SBY (2004-2014). TNI used those political victories as evidence of its refurbished image. Yet, it seemingly remained untroubled with improving its image as concerns human rights, preferring to deny, obfuscate, or threaten, even when faced with universal condemnations of its past or current actions. The “War on Terror” and the threat that other nations would step in to provide weapons and training to TNI prompted the administration of George W. Bush to quickly reestablish military ties with Indonesia. By 2010, during the second SBY administration, President Barak Obama removed the last of the roadblocks on the resumption of aid, lifting the sanctions on Indonesia’s abusive secret forces, Kopassus.

The election of Joko Widodo in 2014 appeared to some to promise a new era of civilian leadership. Jokowi won the presidency by defeating retired Lieutenant General Prabowo Subianto (a result which the latter, at first, disputed before withdrawing ahead of the final vote tally). Suharto’s former son-in-law, Prabowo represented all of the ugliness of TNI during its New Order height: crony capitalism, corruption, and a dodgy human rights record. The victory seemed laden with symbolism. A so-called “child of the slum” with no traceable lineage either to the military or the political elite had dispensed with a man who traced his ancestry to the Javanese aristocracy and came of age during the New Order autocracy.

Yet Jokowi bolstered TNI power in the early years of his administration and continues to amplify its authority. The explanation for this is rather straightforward. Within a year of being elected, he lost credibility and confidence among voters due a

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12 Numerous factors spurred this loss of confidence. These included socioeconomic stasis following the euphoria of Reformasi, the impeachment of Abdurrahman Wahid in 2001, and sweeping dissatisfaction with his successor, Megawati, seen as an out-of-touch political lightweight despite being the daughter of Sukarno.

13 Among this body’s human rights violations are torture, sexual assault and rape, murders, and disappearances.

number of perceived failures and disappointments. Jokowi’s promises of economic stimulation largely went unfulfilled. He seemed out of his depth when it came to controlling infighting within his party (PDI-P) and managing competing demands from elite interests. His outsider status translated into a dearth of allies in the parliament. A conflict between the police and the Anti-Corruption Commission (KPK), which played out messily in early 2015 augmented his lack of authority.\(^{15}\)

Feeling pressured to act, the president turned to Army generals to regain the support of his power base lost over the course of his tumultuous first year in office. Ostensibly to add a much-needed air of legitimacy to his presidency, Jokowi appointed a number of New Order figures, including officers prominent during the Suharto regime, to positions of power. Two of the more consequential appointments were that of putting Gatot Nurmantyo in charge of the military and naming Ryamizard Ryacudu as Minister of Defense.\(^{16}\) Both men since have proved adept at doing what they do best: engaging in threat inflation to justify calls for the military to amplify its role as a security apparatus.\(^{17}\) As investigative journalist Allan Nairn has recently contended, at present Jokowi is embracing another group of generals. His objective this time is to stave off the TNI elements and their associates who wish to overthrow him, of which, Nairn reports, Gatot holds the distinction of being the “main factor.”\(^{18}\) According to Nairn, the individual to whom the president has turned during the coup crisis is General A.M. Hendropriyono, who has been implicated in crimes that include the assassination of the human rights activist Munir in 2004.\(^{19}\)

The preceding section suggests that there is a strong historical precedent for the military’s passion for politics and vision of itself as more than a mere defense force. That the Army-dominated TNI seeks to renegotiate its role under the aegis of the current president is therefore nothing that hasn’t already been seen before. The ways in which it seeks to entrench its authority today are in some ways novel even as it casts back to a past that it can exploit to its present advantage.

**Counterterrorism**

Indonesia’s war on terrorism has caused some cleavages in the armed forces, which have had various consequences for TNI power. The rise of the Navy and Air

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\(^{15}\) For the details see “The Expanding Role of the Indonesian Military,” Report No. 19 (Jakarta: Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, 2015), 4-5.


\(^{17}\) Indeed, in 2003 during the Megawati presidency Ryamizard opined that, “the military’s security role should be reinstated due to threats of separatism and other disturbances in the country.” Quoted in Sebastian, *Realpolitik Ideology*, 341.

\(^{18}\) Nairn, “Trump’s Indonesian Allies.”

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
Force as integral partners in carrying out Jokowi’s maritime security objectives might pose a challenge to Army supremacy. However, any threat to the land-based military is offset by the loss in prestige of the national police. That force, with the possible exception of its elite Special Forces detachment, is seen to be less capable and competent than TNI in safeguarding Indonesia from terror and even more corrupt.

TNI revealed in its newfound importance as a key strategic partner to the U.S. and its allies in the U.S. “War on Terror.” The Bali bombings in October 2002 and subsequent acts of terrorism in Indonesia enhanced this role. Although the police officially hold center stage in counterterrorism efforts, TNI territorial commands expanded their intelligence gathering capabilities and, in 2004, Army personnel joined counterterrorism units.20

While Jokowi remains committed to continuing the fight against land-based terrorism that his predecessors began, he has articulated a vision of establishing Indonesia as a global maritime axis (poros maritim dunia) in the Indo-Pacific region. Indonesia’s maritime territory spans greater than two million square miles; included in that territory are the Pacific and Indian Ocean shipping routes as well as important straits that have functioned as conduits of trade for centuries. Indeed, because an estimated one half of the world's trading goods and oil pass through its waters,21 Indonesia is a major player in regional maritime security initiatives. Piracy and other forms of maritime terrorism in Indonesian waters and the South China Sea conflict have prompted Jokowi to champion the Navy, and to a lesser extent, the Air Force, in his plans to develop an “integrated three-dimensional defense system” to be rolled out as part of a long-term strategic plan.22 To help achieve this, the president announced in 2014 that he would increase the defense budget to 1.5 percent of GDP in five years.23

While maritime defense largely leaves the Army on the sidelines, and with the elite Detachment 88 (Densus 88) of the National Police Force officially at the helm of counterterrorism operations, TNI has pushed for a more significant role in fighting terrorism in Indonesia. It has done so in part by drawing attention to police failures, particularly as concerned protracted attempts to locate and capture Santoso, Indonesia’s ‘most wanted’ extremist, in Poso, Central Sulawesi.24 Subsequently, as part of the joint task force Satgas Tinombala, TNI was side by side with local police and Densus 88 during the shootout that killed Santoso in July 2016. This fact only elevated its image, particularly in the wake of the aforementioned KPK-police conflict of 2015,

20 Mietzner, The Politics of Military Reform, 41.
23 Ibid.
which, due to the corruption in the police and judiciary that was unearthed, presented the military with an opportunity to “portray themselves as purer, more loyal, and ultimately more reliable than the police.”

TNI’s maneuvering both as concerns its jockeying for power in the counterterrorism realm and its alleged involvement in the plot to oust Jokowi from office appears to be paying off. A month after Nairn’s report on the coup broke, Jokowi called for the military to increase its involvement in Indonesian counterterrorism efforts. In late May the president then declared his desire for TNI to join parliament in drafting a much-awaited national security bill, a task, until now, from which it has been excluded. While politicians generally applauded this decision, it is a development that has troubled many. Human rights activists worry that it could give the military sweeping new powers to use and abuse. National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) chair Nur Kholis gave voice to those concerns, stating that TNI involvement should only be employed as a last resort. He was referring to the 2004 TNI law, which, in addition to ordering the military’s divestment from its businesses, identified military actions that may only be carried out by way of a state decree. The extent to which that will be honored remains to be seen.

Proxy Warfare and The Latent Threat of Communism

Two senior officials’ claims that “proxy wars” are taking place in Indonesia provide one avenue for TNI to call for a more substantial role in national defense. The most outspoken claimant of the existence of proxy warfare in Indonesia is TNI Commander-In-Chief General Gatot Nurmantyo. Gatot first raised the concept in 2014 as a way of promoting “back to basics” nationalism. Over the next year, he crisscrossed the country and took to social media to declare that Indonesia was under attack from unseen forces. Major powers, he claimed, were plotting, if not already attempting, to seize control of Indonesia’s natural resources in response to the world’s decreasing supply of fossil-based energy resources. According to Gatot, the secession of East Timor from Indonesia in 1999 was proxy warfare at work with the Timor Gap oil field as the fuel source under threat in that instance. Citing East Timor again, he

25 Ibid., 5.
continued with this message in 2016, calling for Indonesians to unite against the proxy warfare menace and protect the nation’s food and fuel sources. In September of that year Gatot announced a media proxy war defense pact, which eleven organizations, including the Association of Publishers, the Teachers Union, and the Muslim organization Nahdlatul Ulama signed. Joining Gatot in ringing the alarm was Minister of Defense Ryamizard Ryacudu, who suggested that the LGBT movement facilitates human rights observers’ destabilization of Indonesia by “skew[ing] the mindset of our nation away from our base ideology.”

Despite Gatot and Ryamizard’s ready explanations that Indonesia is under threat, neither man actually appears able to define, explain, or articulate with any clarity how this all is supposed to be happening and exactly which parties are involved. This fuzziness perhaps is not by chance but rather by design. As one observer recently has noted, “the main selling point of the proxy narrative is the ambiguity and elasticity of the concept. The secretive character of proxy wars makes it easy to pin the narrative on even the flimsiest of issues, often to the point where it can be equated with conspiracy theories.” The talk of Proxy War among TNI’s conservative elements might yet be an embarrassment to some of their more progressive colleagues. However its inclusion in the Ministry of Defense 2015 “White Paper” as part of a discussion on how states seek to “divide and conquer” nations by way of “asymmetrical weaponry” such as cyber warfare warrants consideration that TNI is using this idea to its own advantage. By increasing paranoia amongst the public and legislators, it can justify an expanded role for itself, silence its critics and opponents, promote its own concept of nationalism, and preserve the territorial commands.

http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2016/05/19/14103921/panglima.tni.proxy.war.mengancam.indonesia.
34 “The Expanding Role of the Indonesian Military,” 15.
36 “The Expanding Role of the Indonesian Military,” 15.
The growing effort to revive the New Order narrative of the latent threat of communism is a second avenue by which TNI seeks to justify its necessity and push for a larger internal security role for the Army. That the renewed use of this alleged threat to justify TNI’s continued political relevance in advance of the 2019 presidential election and as a means to undermine presidential authority is taking place well into the post-Suharto era is notable. Indeed, it suggests that Indonesia has not actually evidenced, as one analyst suggested in 2011, an “ability to dilute heavy historical legacies... and establish firm civilian control over the armed forces.”

The notion that a communist resurgence threatens Indonesia gained traction following a 2016 government-sponsored symposium that granted Indonesian Genocide survivors and their descendents a forum to openly share their narratives of persecution and suffering. The FPI and a group of retired New Order-era generals denounced the symposium. They responded moreover by convening a symposium of their own to address, as the title indicated, “the threat of the PKI and other ideologies.” This action joined warnings from none other than Ryamizard Ryacudu, who, along with retired general Kivlan Zein, warned that he had received indications that the PKI was going to be revived. The latest claim in these circles, one that is alleged to be part of ideological training at Indonesian Army bases, is that the nation is under threat from something called New-Style Communism (Komunisme Gaya Baru – KGB). KGB seeks to infiltrate the populace by way of inuring them to things such as “free healthcare and education programs.” More nefariously, the KGB ‘agent’ is bent on “separating the army from [the] people [and] using human rights and democracy issues while positioning oneself as a victim to gain sympathy.” As another claim goes, Jokowi himself is a communist, or, at the very least, is the descendant of a PKI family. This allegation arose during the 2014 presidential election and is expected to reemerge again in 2019.

The PKI resurgence propaganda campaign has put Jokowi on the defensive. As recently as June 3, he used the occasion of a speech at Muhammadiyah University in East Java to emphatically declare his opposition to communism. “If you can show me [evidence of a PKI resurgence], I will strike them down this very second,” he declared.

39 Ibid.
40 Nairn, “Trump’s Indonesian Allies.”
41 Ibid.
This is quite a different tone than the conciliatory note that he sounded last year, when it appeared that he was going to issue a formal apology to survivors, their families, and the descendants of the dead. However, that very note was what opened him up to such fierce criticism, gave his enemies fodder for their cannons and, if the reports are true, provided the impetus for the TNI-backed action known as “the coup.”

**TNI Involvement in “The Coup”**

In mid-April, Allan Nairn broke the sensational news of the plot to oust Jokowi. Nairn cited sources that included Indonesian military and intelligence officials, internal military documents, and NSA intercepts, to support the claim that a cabal of active and retired generals working in concert with the FPI leadership was spearheading the planning. According to Nairn, speaker of the Indonesian House of Representatives Fadli Zon, and Donald Trump’s closest business partner in Indonesia, Hary Tanoesoedibjo among others also lent their support to the coup movement.43

The coup plotters are alleged to have been motivated by the notion that Jokowi’s apparent softness on communism might eventually lead to redress for survivors and prosecutions of Army perpetrators of mass killings and other crimes. As one of Nairn’s sources, Kivlan stated that the 2016 symposium spurred his group to take action and seek a partnership with the FPI. “So many retired military – and in the military – are with the FPI… Because the goal of the FPI is also against the communists,” he declared. Kivlan also shared that the movement furthermore had the backing of Gatot Nurmantyo, a fact of which, according to another of Nairn’s sources, Jokowi is well aware.44

Nairn’s sources stated that the coup plotters were using as a pretext for their actions street protests against the re-election of the incumbent governor of Jakarta Basuki Tjajaya Purnama. Ahok, as he is better known, recently was convicted of committing religious blasphemy for his comment about his opponents misinterpreting a Quranic verse to suggest that people of other faiths cannot govern Muslims. Calling the FPI-led protests against Ahok an entry point to get at the “final destination” of Jokowi, retired Admiral Soleman Ponto shared with Nairn intelligence he received that SBY had surreptitiously funded the movement and that “almost all the retired military [and] some current military back SBY” in supporting the protests.45 Nairn’s sources suggested that rather than an army assault on Merdeka Palace, the coup plotters proposed two alternate avenues. In the first scenario, echoing the popular uprising that toppled Suharto, FPI-led protestors would flood the palace and the congress grounds whilst the Army would stand by as the president fell. In the second, the FPI would wreak havoc on Jakarta and other cities, creating the perfect opportunity that would see “the army

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43 Nairn, “Trump’s Indonesian Allies.”
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
stepping in and assuming control to save the state."\textsuperscript{46}

Coup plots aside, as Sydney Jones, the director of the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) has recently pointed out, the Ahok case is a troubling sign of cracks in system of Indonesian democracy. "The trial and conviction of Ahok have generated fears that the country’s social fabric is fraying, that sectarianism is on the rise, and that Indonesia’s democratic institutions are too weak to withstand a concerted assault from Islamists.\textsuperscript{47} TNI has provided both the kindling for these fears as well as proposed that only it is capable of solving these problems. Even if Jokowi’s presidency successfully weathers the machinations of the active and non-active sectors of TNI who seek a return of military prominence, the Army appears yet again to have regained at least a modicum of its former strength.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Writing in 2003, Damien Kingsbury noted that, “while the military is in one sense not as directly powerful as it was when one of its own was president, it has developed a new type of power by only becoming close to politicians on its own terms.”\textsuperscript{48} The latest events in Jakarta substantiate that claim. Despite a number of changes following \textit{Reformasi}, the lack of true political reforms as concerns the TNI role suggests that the military certainly is not enjoying its old levels of power. Rather, it has established a new kind of authority that still is tied to the presidency.

From Sukarno to SBY, TNI derived its power from using presidential directives to consolidate its power and assert its indispensability in ways that exceeded national defense. Its power was at a peak during the New Order and the authority that it established during that time was enough to carry over to a considerable extent into the post-Suharto years. At present, TNI appears to banking on its influence to creep back into political power by taking advantage of Jokowi’s reliance on prominent military leaders to regain his base whilst using the president’s weaknesses to undermine his leadership.

In terms of what the TNI wants, the answer is twofold. On the one hand, some in TNI perhaps fear losing the impunity they have enjoyed these many decades and seeing its New Order holdovers brought to justice for past crimes should a strong civilian leadership prevail. On the other hand, there appears to be a longing for the not-so-long-ago past, in which TNI itself held the leading political role. The return of an (ex-)military official to Merdeka Palace is a real possibility. The next general election is scheduled to be held in April of 2019 and Prabowo already has declared he is considering taking

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} Kingsbury, \textit{Power Politics}, 230.
another shot at the presidency. It appears as if TNI is in an increasingly better position to resume its seat at the table if and when that time comes.

**Works Cited**


