



U.S. Pacific Command Engagement with Indonesian Kopassus: Recommendations for a Phased Approach

by Michael Noblet

For a variety of security, economic, and diplomatic reasons, the U.S. - Indonesia bilateral relationship is increasingly important to both countries. Indonesia's transition from authoritarian to democratic rule and its subsequent military reforms have precipitated a corresponding increase in military to military engagements between U.S. and Indonesian armed forces.

U.S. military engagement with the Indonesian Special Forces, more commonly known as Kopassus, has been seen by many as a "barometer" for the overall state of bilateral U.S.-Indonesian relations. For many years, U.S. military engagement with Kopassus was prohibited in response to human rights violations committed by its forces.

A strategy of gradual re-engagement with Kopassus, conditioned upon continued Indonesian military reform, is important to U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) theater security and U.S. strategic interests. Such a relationship provides increased opportunities to strengthen bilateral relations, incentivize positive action, and build a credible special operations partner that could play an important role in future counterterrorism, peacekeeping, and disaster response operations in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Indonesia's Importance to the United States

On June 4, 2009, President Obama declared "a new beginning" in the relationship between the United States and Muslims around the world. The U.S. relationship with Indonesia, as the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, is central to the success of the President's vision.

Indonesia is home to more than 240 million people, the fourth-largest population in the world that continues to grow at a rate of approximately three million people per year. The overwhelming majority of Indonesians practice a moderate form of Islam that remains tolerant of religious minorities to include Protestant Christians, Catholics, Hindus, Buddhists, and others. Additionally, the literacy rate among Indonesians is more than 90 percent, providing for a relatively educated population when compared with many newly industrialized nations.¹

Indonesia gained its independence from the Dutch in 1949 and developed an increasingly authoritarian form of government, first under President Sukarno and then under President Suharto. During President Suharto's rule, Indonesia experienced relative political stability and

¹ Vaughn, Bruce, "Indonesia: Domestic Politics, Strategic Dynamics, and U.S. Interests", Congressional Research Service, October 27, 2010.

economic growth, but little freedom. Suharto remained in office until his resignation in 1998, after which a series of leadership changes have taken place largely through credible and peaceful democratic elections. These elections have demonstrated an Indonesian preference for secular, rather than Islamist leadership, and coincided with the development of a strong civil society and media. Current President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was elected in 2004 and re-elected in 2009, and now leads the world's third-largest democracy.²

Indonesia has a rapidly expanding economy and is by far the most significant economic force in Southeast Asia. The country's more than 17,500 islands lie in a strategically important location between the Indian Ocean, Pacific Ocean, and the South China Sea, thereby creating several of the most crucial shipping lanes in the world. For example, the Straits of Malacca, to the northwest of Indonesia, are a transit point for many of the resources entering and exiting the region, including approximately 80 percent of the oil imported by China.³ Indonesia itself is also home to a variety of minerals and other natural resources, such as liquefied natural gas, and has sustained economic growth of between 4.5 and 6 percent for several years.⁴

The Indonesian National Defense Force and Kopassus

The Indonesian National Defense Force, or Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI), has generally been regarded as the strongest institution in Indonesia and has been relied upon to unite the country, often through force. Although changing in recent years, the TNI has traditionally focused on quelling internal, rather than external, threats to the country.

The elite Indonesian Special Forces, or Kopassus, was formed in 1952, soon after Indonesia's independence. Kopassus reportedly totals approximately 6,000 troops specializing in irregular warfare tactics including covert/ clandestine activities, intelligence gathering, and counterterrorism.⁵ Kopassus has participated in the spectrum of Indonesia's violent conflicts through the country's history, ranging from countering secessionist movements to fighting with neighboring countries over disputed territory.

While the TNI is recognized as a strong institution, it has also played a destructive role. The TNI's problems and abuses were especially evident during the Suharto regime when the military had a formal role in the governance of the nation, including the placement of appointees to key legislative bodies. The TNI is also known to have undertaken revenue generating activities that fell outside the control and oversight of the central government.⁶ Most importantly, the TNI has been implicated in serious human rights violations since the 1950s as the Indonesian Government sought to counter perceived communist threats, forcibly integrate East Timor, and suppress separatist movements in Aceh and Papua. More specifically, members of Kopassus are alleged to have carried out kidnappings, torture, and murder in East Timor and Papua. Widespread allegations of murder and torture by TNI and Kopassus against the Papuan

² Ibid.

³ Denmark, Abraham M., "Crafting a Strategic Vision: A new Era of U.S.-Indonesia Relations", Center for a New American Security, June 2010.

⁴ Vaughn, Bruce, "Indonesia: Domestic Politics, Strategic Dynamics, and U.S. Interests", Congressional Research Service, October 27, 2010.

⁵ Human Rights Watch, "What Did I Do Wrong? Papuans in Merauke Face Abuses by Indonesian Special Forces", June 2009.

⁶ Vaughn, Bruce, "Indonesia: Domestic Politics, Strategic Dynamics, and U.S. Interests", Congressional Research Service, October 27, 2010.

people persisted through the 2000s, many of which have not been investigated and prosecuted to the satisfaction of the international human rights community.⁷

In concert with Indonesia's democratic reforms, the TNI has also undertaken reforms to solidify civilian control of the military and to improve its human rights record. According to Congressional testimony by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (DASD) for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs Robert Scher, these reforms included "formally removing the military from political affairs, establishing a clear delineation between the responsibilities of the civilian police forces and the TNI, and enhancing the authority of the civilian defense minister."⁸ DASD Scher also commented that "the TNI has made great strides in institutionalizing human rights training for its forces" and "respect for human rights is now a core feature of TNI doctrine."

U.S. Military Engagement

In response to human rights abuses in East Timor, Congress prohibited assistance to the TNI in 1992. Assistance was partially restored in 1995, but additional violence against civilians in East Timor by Kopassus and other TNI forces in 1999 resulted in the "Leahy Amendment" to the Fiscal Year 2000 Foreign Operations Appropriations Act, which banned all military training and weapons transfers to Indonesia until significant progress could be demonstrated with regard to human rights.⁹ The first steps toward resuming a military to military relationship were taken when restrictions on International Military Education and Training, Foreign Military Financing, and Foreign Military Sales to Indonesia were removed in 2005, primarily for educational programs and non-lethal assistance.¹⁰

During a visit to the Indonesian capital Jakarta in July 2010, Secretary of Defense Gates announced the resumption of U.S. military engagement with Kopassus. According to a statement by Secretary Gates, "As a result of Indonesian military reforms over the past decade, the ongoing professionalization of the TNI, and recent actions taken by the Ministry of Defense to address human rights issues, the United States will begin an gradual, limited program of security cooperation activities with the Indonesian Army Special Forces." Secretary Gates continued, "Our ability to expand upon these initial steps will depend on continued implementation of reforms within Kopassus and TNI as a whole."¹¹

The Case for Renewed U.S. Military Engagement with Kopassus

As discussed above, Indonesia represents a key U.S. ally for a variety of security, economic, and diplomatic reasons. Secretary Gates and other senior defense officials have acknowledged the importance of the TNI, and Kopassus more specifically, to counterterrorism, peacekeeping, disaster response, and other activities in the PACOM area of responsibility.¹² However, because of the delicate political and human rights considerations, public discussions to

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs Robert Scher, House Foreign Affairs Committee, September 22, 2010.

⁹ Denmark, Abraham M., "Crafting a Strategic Vision: A new Era of U.S.-Indonesia Relations", Center for a New American Security, June 2010.

¹⁰ Vaughn, Bruce, "Indonesia: Domestic Politics, Strategic Dynamics, and U.S. Interests", Congressional Research Service, October 27, 2010.

¹¹ Statement by Secretary Gates at Presidential Palace in Jakarta, Indonesia, U.S. Department of Defense, July 22, 2010.

¹² Banusiewicz, John D., "Gates Recaps Discussions With Indonesian Leaders", American Forces Press Service, July 22, 2010.

date by U.S. officials have only focused on initial re-engagement with Kopassus without further examining what a more robust future partnership might look like and how it could be achieved.

The most obvious initial opportunities for engagement with Kopassus are in the areas of human rights awareness, rule of law training, and basic military professionalization. U.S. officials have generally alluded to these efforts, which should include increased International Military Education and Training, participation in U.S.-sponsored regional training exercises, and exchanges with other U.S.-trained special operations forces – possibly from the Philippines, Colombia, and Jordan. Such opportunities will develop and positively model the qualities of a disciplined and professional special operations force to members of Kopassus, particularly the officers and enlisted personnel who have joined the force since past human rights violations occurred. Involving other U.S.-trained forces would demonstrate the progression Kopassus must go through to become not only a capable force, but also one which is respected for its professionalization, rather than feared for its ruthlessness.

After a determination that sufficient progress has been made with regard to discipline and professionalization, the second stage of engagement with Kopassus could focus on non-lethal skills training activities, especially those related to personnel recovery and the provision of trauma care. Such skills would be immediately relevant to disaster response activities in Indonesia and throughout the region. As the recent earthquake and tsunami in Japan, the 2004 tsunami, and other natural disasters since have demonstrated, disaster response capabilities in the PACOM AOR are much needed and frequently overwhelmed. Specialized disaster response skills for Kopassus would build upon the infiltration, exfiltration, and mobility capabilities, which are already resident within the force. Utilization of Kopassus personnel for disaster response activities would help demonstrate progress towards the development of a professional special operations force and may begin to change the domestic and international perception of the unit.

The third stage of engagement with Kopassus could focus on improving those skills needed for peacekeeping activities, activities that are already frequently undertaken by TNI and Kopassus personnel.¹³ U.S. training to prepare Kopassus for peacekeeping activities could focus on defensive operations and indirect action capabilities, including foreign internal defense, information support, and civil affairs. While useful in a peacekeeping context, these capabilities are also critical to carrying out a successful counterinsurgency, a key special operations task, and providing options short of the use of force.

The fourth stage of engagement with Kopassus could focus on counterterrorism partnership, for the first time developing additional lethal capabilities in the force. Demonstrated by a series of significant terrorist bombing attacks and other violent extremist activities, the U.S. and Indonesia face common threats from transnational and al Qaeda-affiliated terrorist groups, including Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyef. Building the counterterror capabilities of Kopassus would nest with PACOM's "by, with, and through" approach to countering violent extremist groups and expand the network of credible partners with whom U.S. Special Operations Forces could operate in the future. The provision of lethal aid and training to Kopassus by the U.S. would certainly be the most controversial of all engagement activities and should only be undertaken after a mutual determination by the Department of Defense and State Department that sufficient progress has been made on the development of a respect for human

¹³ Ibid.

rights and efforts to bring to justice those responsible for past abuses. It will undoubtedly take a period of several years to reach this level of progress.

The future steady state goal for U.S. engagement with Kopassus should be a credible special operations partner that is respectful of human rights and is interoperable with U.S. Special Operations Forces across a spectrum of operations ranging from disaster response to counterterrorism. As part of this long-term goal, PACOM could also seek to build the capabilities of Kopassus to serve as a trainer of other special operations forces from partner nations in the region – much the same as U.S. Southern Command has done in Colombia and U.S. Central Command has done in Jordan.

Counterpoint

Arguments against re-engagement with Kopassus relate to concerns that members of the unit continue to perpetrate gross human rights violations and those implicated in past violations have not been held accountable for their actions. However, Secretary Gates made the point in July 2010 that, “if people are making an effort to make progress, recognizing that effort and working with them further will produce greater gains in human rights for people than simply standing back and shouting at people.”¹⁴ Furthermore, the TNI has complied with U.S. requests that Kopassus members convicted of past human rights crimes be removed from the unit and any member credibly accused of such a crime in the future be suspended, tried in a civilian court, and removed from the unit if convicted.¹⁵

Conclusion

If initiated in the deliberate and gradual manner laid out by Secretary Gates in July 2010 and expanded according to the recommendations above, U.S. military re-engagement with Kopassus would serve to strengthen the bilateral relationship with Indonesia, positively impact the professionalism of Kopassus and the TNI more broadly, and support U.S. security objectives “by, with, and through” Kopassus.

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¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Banusiewicz, John D., “Gates Seeks Stronger Military Ties With Indonesia”, American Forces Press Service, July 22, 2010.