

# Redefine neutrality and threat perception

By Ratih Kabinawa

*Indonesia should consider redefining its neutral position and threat perception when confronted with a possible Taiwan conflict in the future.*

In a future conflict scenario in the Taiwan Strait involving China and the United States (US), Indonesia should consider several military options in addition to diplomatic ones. These options include evacuating its citizens from Taiwan, developing its own anti-access warfare capabilities, and redefining its ‘neutral’ position and threat perception. Let me elaborate on these options.

First, the Widodo administration has prioritised the protection of Indonesians living in Taiwan. In 2018, the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) created a unit to protect Indonesian citizens in Taiwan under the Indonesian Economic and Trade Office (IETO) in Taipei. This unit, led by a diplomat, may have been the MOFA’s first official dedicated team to manage Indonesia’s relations with Taiwan.

Members of the national legislature have also expressed concerns for Indonesians in Taiwan should cross-Strait tensions escalate and have **supported** evacuation options. As of August



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2022, there were **240,509 Indonesian migrant workers** and **8,682 Indonesian students** residing in Taiwan. There is also a substantial population of Indonesian citizens married to Taiwanese citizens as well as several thousand undocumented migrant workers.

These people-to-people ties are part of Taiwan’s New Southbound strategy to engage members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The strategy has worked, generating fruitful engagement with ASEAN citizens, creating a complex interdependence among them, and using people’s connections to leverage Taiwan’s status. The Indonesian government should be able to navigate these dynamic relations, especially in promoting the protection of its citizens.

As we have learned from the Ukraine war, evacuation operations should ideally

commence before the onset of conflict. But the MOFA in a recent August 2022 [statement](#) did not mention the protection and contingency plans for Indonesians should China use military force to unite Taiwan.

A full-scale military invasion scenario would make evacuation options more challenging. If the evacuation team, for example, is not allowed to pass through the military blockade over Taiwanese waters, Indonesia would need transit countries for an indirect evacuation. This requires prudent negotiations and diplomatic costs, not to mention that these countries might pursue their own agenda and interests.

Given the number of Indonesians and other Southeast Asians living in Taiwan, an evacuation would be a massive humanitarian mission requiring resilient logistics and cooperation. It might also require the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre) to expand its mandate and capacity. It would negotiate with China to secure a safe passage for ASEAN citizens or even establish a joint humanitarian task force.

The second policy option Indonesia should consider is developing its own anti-access warfare capabilities. This would enable Indonesia to deter or prevent the spill over of the conflict into its strategic waterways and airspace, either by [military or diplomatic means](#). This capability is particularly pertinent to deter the spill over into the North Natuna Sea where China often deploys its coast guard vessels. An anti-access warfare

capability would entail boosting Indonesia's naval and air force presence in the vicinity of the Natunas.

Under Xi Jinping, China has become more aggressive in the maritime domain and has carried incursions into and around Indonesia's exclusive economic zone. The basis for such behaviour—much like China's claims over Taiwan—revolves around historical pretexts, such as the nine-dash line map. Beijing mentioned in its latest white paper that unification with Taiwan is a "[historic mission of the Communist Party of China \(CPC\)](#)".

It is plausible then that once Taiwan is successfully seized, the next step could be to fully grab the South China Sea. Normalising Beijing's use of force against Taiwan would also mean normalising the use of military approaches by China in solving territorial disputes where Beijing also claims sovereignty.

Indonesia's plans to relocate its capital city to East Kalimantan also contribute to the [strategic importance](#) of the North Natuna Sea because of its proximity to some of the busiest shipping lanes in the region. Any spill over from an armed conflict in Taiwan to the North Natuna Sea would present a direct threat to Indonesia's new capital city. Thus, developing anti-access warfare capabilities should be at the heart of Indonesia's defence policy.

In a Taiwan conflict, Beijing might also deploy its own anti-access/area-denial

(A2/AD) capabilities to deny the US from joining the conflict. The US could then seek to block Beijing's oil supply routes in the Straits of Malacca, where **80% of China's oil supply** passes.

This scenario creates strong pressures for the Straits' littoral states—Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. They could be asked to confront or cooperate directly with the US. The presence of US military assets would challenge Indonesia's neutral position. Who should Indonesia consider as an 'enemy' between the US and China?

Indonesia should therefore consider redefining its neutral position and threat perception when confronted with this question. Having a clearer threat perception could also shore up its defence policy and diplomatic strategy. If being 'neutral' prevents Jakarta from evacuating its citizens, fails to deter a spill over into its waters, and prevents the US from blocking the Malacca Straits, would it be in the best interests of the country?

All these scenarios and questions should be within the calculation of diplomats as well as defence and military officials in Jakarta. But one must not abandon the fundamental principle of Indonesia's independent and active foreign policy while trying to redefine its neutral position and threat perception in a future Taiwan conflict.

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