



GROWING INDONESIA-INDIA STRATEGIC TIES

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June 7, 2018

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Several media reports emerged in May 2018 regarding India's access to strategic Indonesian port of Sabang.¹ These reports came after the visit of Indonesian Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs Gen. (Retd) Luhut Pandjaitan to India from May 17-18, 2018. Among other official engagements, the visiting Indonesian minister called for greater maritime cooperation between India and Indonesia at the talk he delivered at Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi titled "Indonesia's Maritime Policy & Thinking of Ways Forward for India-Indonesia as Maritime Neighbors."²

Gen.(Retd) Luhut was quoted as saying:

"We do not want to be controlled by BRI."³ He further added that, "Indonesia had positioned a plan called the "global maritime fulcrum" that is "designed to balance the BRI." Indonesia and India are big enough that, "we don't have to lean towards any superpower, and this makes India a sensible partner for Indonesia."⁴

¹ Chaudhri, Pramit Pal, "Indonesia gives India access to strategic port of Sabang," *Hindustan Times*, May 17, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/indonesia-gives-india-access-to-strategic-port-of-sabang/story-KPXWKy7PGAHFUi0jCL26yJ.html>

² ND, Indonesian Embassy, Twitter Post, May 17, 2018, 01:02 AM, https://twitter.com/KBRI_NewDelhi/status/997024635878281217

³ Chaudhri, Pramit Pal, "Indonesia gives India access to strategic port of Sabang," *Hindustan Times*, May 17, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/indonesia-gives-india-access-to-strategic-port-of-sabang/story-KPXWKy7PGAHFUi0jCL26yJ.html>

⁴ Ibid

The Quint quoted from his speech:

“India-Indonesia relations are important for the balance of power in Asia.”⁵

Further development on this proposal by Indonesia happened during the first official visit of Indian Prime Minister Modi to Indonesia on May 30, 2018 where Indonesian President Mr. Widodo told the news conference after meeting with Indian Premier:

“India is a strategic defence partner ... and we will continue to advance our cooperation in developing infrastructure, including at Sabang Island and the Andaman Islands.”⁶

Mr. Modi in his prepared press statement added:

“As maritime neighbors and strategic partners our concerns are the same. It is our duty to ensure the safety and security of the maritime routes ... In today's changing Indo-Pacific region, ours is a very special geo-strategic location ... India-ASEAN partnership is such a force for peace and shared progress in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.”⁷

These developments are in line with the growing strategic partnership between India and Indonesia which is now also expanding in the maritime domain.

Weh Island, often known as Sabang after the largest city, is a small active volcanic island to the northwest of Sumatra. Weh Island is located in the Andaman Sea, where two groups of islands, the Nicobar Islands and Andaman Islands, are scattered in one line from Sumatra to the north up to the Burma plate.

Weh Island is a part of Aceh province of Indonesia.

Sabang Island lies near the north-western entrance to the narrow Malacca Strait - one of the world's most important waterways, connecting the Indian and Pacific oceans, and also a key vulnerability for China, given the potential for a naval blockade by the US and its allies.

⁵ “Indonesia Gives India Strategic, Military Access to Sabang Seaport,” *The Quint*, May 18, 2018 <https://www.thequint.com/news/world/india-indonesia-military-island-cooperation>

⁶ Da Costa Agustinus Beo, “Indonesia, India plan to develop strategic Indian Ocean port,” *Reuters*, May 30, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-india/indonesia-india-plan-to-develop-strategic-indian-ocean-port-idUSKCN1IV0S9>

⁷ Indian Ministry of External Affairs, *English translation of Press Statement by Prime Minister during visit to Indonesia* (May 30, 2018), <http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29934/English+translation+of+Press+Statement+by+Prime+Minister+during+visit+to+Indonesia+May+30+2018>



Source: Google images

There are strategic and economic imperatives for both India and Indonesia for joint cooperation in the maritime infrastructure development.

From a strategic point of view, both India and Indonesia have convergence of views regarding perceived threat from China. Indonesian President Widodo made his first visit to India in 2016 where a separate joint statement was issued on maritime cooperation. In a veiled reference to China, the statement read:

“Both leaders recognized that India and Indonesia share common interests in ensuring maritime security and the safety of sea lines of communication. Both leaders recognized the importance of freedom of navigation and over-flight on the high seas, unimpeded lawful commerce, as well as resolving maritime disputes by peaceful means, in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law including the UNCLOS.”⁸

Moreover, the administration of Joko Widodo and Narendra Modi have formulated their maritime doctrines/vision of their respective countries. The Indonesian document is called “Global Maritime Fulcrum White Paper”, while the Indian document is titled “SAGAR” (Security and Growth for All). These doctrines are aimed at strengthening their respective maritime sector including further enhancement of naval forces and power projection capabilities at sea.

In the big picture, the influence of US is making regional countries of South East Asia wary of China’s growing economic and military clout. Therefore, the regional countries have courted military and

⁸ Indian Ministry of External Affairs, *Statement by India and Indonesia on Maritime Cooperation* (December 12, 2016), <http://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/27806/Statement+by+India+and+Indonesia+on+Maritime+Cooperation>

economic alliances with the US and extra regional middle powers like India and Australia to increase their weight against China. Moreover, India itself oppose port construction activities by China in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Maldives and Eastern Africa and considers them strategic projects to project Chinese power in the Indian Ocean.

From an economic stand point, Indonesia is trying to revitalize its maritime potential to enhance its regional connectivity. It is important to mention here that negotiations for joint development of Sabang Port with India was initiated in 2013, but the pace was very slow. However, it now appears that an agreement has been reached for a broad consensus for port development in Sabang. Indonesia also has an agreement with Japan that was concluded in 2017 to build fishery infrastructure at Sabang.⁹

There has been no official reaction from China regarding the Indian access to Sabang Port yet, but an influential Chinese communist party newspaper *The Global Times* ran an article severely criticizing India and expressed concerns about the development. The paper read:

“If India really seeks military access to the strategic island of Sabang, it might wrongfully entrap itself into a strategic competition with China and eventually burn its own fingers. A misconception by India in terms of outbound investment is that it always sees China as a rival that it pits itself against.”¹⁰

The article warned that:

“India’s investment in Southeast Asian ports is welcome. But if new infrastructure facilities financed by India in those ports are designed for military use, China can take various countermeasures ... We believe India is unwilling to face a military race against China. New Delhi's wisdom will be tested if it seeks to increase its presence in the Strait of Malacca but inflame conflicts with other countries, including China. If New Delhi doesn't pass this test, the country will face disastrous consequences.”¹¹

The current status of Indian access to Indonesia’s Sabang Islands at the opening of the Straits of Malacca is in the realm of consensus between the two countries. There is no specific agreement till date that clarifies and explains the scope of Indian activities at Sabang. That said, it’s a major win for both India and Indonesia that increases their negotiating leverage against China.

⁹ *Japan Times*, “Japan agrees to help develop Indonesia’s outer islands, promote fisheries,” September 7, 2017 <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/09/07/national/japan-agrees-help-develop-indonesias-outer-islands-promote-fisheries/#.WxD3s0iFOUk>

¹⁰ *Weijia , Hu*, “Investment in Indonesia’s Sabang port will be test of India’s diplomatic wisdom,” *The Global Times*, May 28, 2018 <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1104493.shtml>

¹¹ *Ibid.*

This development will further strain India-China ties and this development indicates that no major breakthrough has been achieved at Modi-Xi summit in Wuhan in April 2018. The potential deterioration of China-India ties creates several opportunities for Pakistan to further strengthen its strategic partnership with China as Beijing's strategic anxiety increases.

The Indian access to Sabang will definitely accelerate the geopolitical rivalries in the maritime and political domain, and increase the chances of miscalculations and conflict involving China both in the Subcontinent and in South East Asia.