



## Bakamla's Duty and the Challenges in Securing Indonesia's Waters

By

**M. Habib Pashya**

Master's in International Relations Program, Universitas Gadjah Mada  
pashya808@gmail.com

**Gufron Gozali**

Master's in International Relations Program, Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta  
gufrongozali1979@gmail.com

### Introduction

For almost a decade, the Maritime Security Agency of the Republic of Indonesia (Badan Keamanan Laut, hereinafter Bakamla) has played a vital role in protecting Indonesia's waters based on Law No. 32 of 2014 on the Sea.<sup>1</sup> Geographically, Indonesia is located in an area that is vulnerable to threats. Indonesia is located between the Pacific and Indian Seas, surrounded by the Malacca Strait, the South China Sea, and Sulu. In recent years, the region has been riddled with problems, such as China's unilateral claims in the South China Sea, pirates, and illegal fishing. For example, the Indonesia Ocean Justice Initiative (IOJI) recorded that in February-March 2023, 6 Vietnamese fishing vessels were carrying out illegal fishing in North Natuna – including the South China Sea region.<sup>2</sup>

Acknowledging such a massive threat, in June 2023, Indonesia, represented by Bakamla, was appointed as the host of the 2023 ASEAN Coast Guard Forum (ACF), which was attended by Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia.<sup>3</sup> ACF is a forum to facilitate exchange information, operational cooperation, and capacity building related to maritime threats. This is not the first forum between agencies of the security services overseeing maritime affairs. There have been several similar cooperation forums, including the Southeast Asia Maritime Law Enforcement Initiative (SEAMLEI), the Head of Asian Coast Guard Agency Meeting (HACGAM), and the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery (ReCAAP).



In early January 2023, Bakamla sent its largest warship to the North Natuna Sea, aiming to dispel the performance of the Chinese ship CCG 5901 or “Monster.” In October 2022, Bakamla arrested a Malaysian ship in the Riau Islands for illegal fishing. In July 2023, Bakamla arrested the Iranian ship MT Arman 114 for illegal activities in North Natuna.

However, Bakamla’s recent performance has been criticized for technical and operational matters. For example, Sukamta, Deputy Chair of the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera) faction, criticized Bakamla’s performance due to the massive entry of foreign vessels. Sukamta said that Indonesia must act decisively, if necessary, and issue a policy akin to those propounded by Former Minister of Marine Affairs and Fisheries, Susi Pudjiastuti, which was sinking foreign ships.

## **Bakamla’s Challenges**

First, ASEAN does not prioritize maritime threats, especially the South China Sea dispute. The dispute involved several ASEAN countries, such as Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Brunei Darussalam, against China’s unilateral claims. In 2020, the 36th ASEAN Summit did not schedule a discussion on this issue. The Indonesian side acknowledged this through the ASEAN Director General of the Ministry of the Republic of Indonesia, Sidharto Suryodipuro, who emphasized that maritime disputes would not be a matter for regional organizations.

Moreover, the Code of Conduct (CoC) between ASEAN and China has yet to be completed since 2002. Even though ASEAN and China will hold a CoC meeting in 2026, Aristyo Rizka Darmawan, a lecturer in International Law at the University of Indonesia, said that the CoC would not resolve the conflict, but would add a new conflict. Moreover, Collin Koh, a researcher at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, argued that some countries in ASEAN do not see disputes in the South China Sea as a major problem that must be faced and resolved.<sup>4</sup>

In this respect, Bakamla faces many difficulties in coordinating directly with the ASEAN countries involved. This should be prioritized by ASEAN by creating solidarity against maritime threats, considering that the South China Sea is a vital route that passes through Southeast Asia.

Second, Indonesian maritime agencies are not well integrated.<sup>5</sup> Indonesia has 18 agencies that have duties on maritime security. Out of these agencies, 5 of them have the authority to carry out patrols, such as Bakamla, Indonesian Navy, Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (KKP), Water and Air Police,





and Ministry of Transportation.<sup>6</sup>

Initially, the government tried to reduce and resolve it through Government Regulation No. 13 of 2022 concerning implementing Security, Safety, and Law Enforcement in Indonesian Waters and Jurisdictional Areas. The Coordinating Minister for Politics, Law and Security, Mahfud MD, said that the regulation would not reduce the authority of ministries or agencies in law enforcement at sea.<sup>7</sup>

However, this law does not address existing problems. The government continues to maintain many agencies with similar powers and even plans to establish a coast guard. Therefore, Indonesia must reduce the number of institutions by prioritizing the Indonesian Navy and Bakamla. The two agencies are expected to coordinate, especially by holding a "Joint Maritime Security Command." Then, the government can save, focus, and optimize the budget that is currently divided among 18 similar agencies.

Evan Laksmana argues that this step is necessary to optimize the approach to overcome maritime challenges. This argument was also reinforced by Vice Chairman III of the Indonesian National Shipowners Association (INSA), Darmansyah, who believed that Indonesia should and must have a single agency to resolve maritime issues and properly uphold law enforcement.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, Indonesia needs a strategic blueprint on maritime security. Bakamla's position in the international world is also still weak. In the nine years since it was formed, Bakamla is still a national coast guard agency without recognition from the international community, such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO). The recognition from IMO is important because it will give Bakamla legitimacy and strengthens cooperation among similar institutions; if Indonesia is involved in a confrontation, Indonesia will be more likely to receive support from the international community.

Third, Bakamla has limited infrastructure or operating units. Bakamla's operational area is more than 24 miles of coastline. Specifically, Bakamla's operating zone is divided into West, Central, and East. Each zone has operations centers like Batam, Manado, and Ambon. This division of territory requires a large fleet.

In 2022, Bakamla only had 40 vessels, but only 10 will fall into patrol and offshore patrol vessels.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, these vessels consist of one offshore patrol boat with a length of 110 meters, three training ships with a length of 80 meters, six coastal patrol boats with a length of 48 meters, and the remaining





30 are small patrol boats (high-speed craft/HSC). Of the 40 ships, Bakamla could only place them at 22 vital points. Therefore, according to Colonel Bakamla, Wisnu Pramandita, Bakamla should have at least 77 ships to operate optimally. This has been proposed in the Bakamla's Strategic Plan (*Rencana Strategis*) proposal for 2020-2024. Even the majority of the 900 personnel in Bakamla are still filled by the Indonesian Navy.<sup>10</sup>

Even though Bakamla's budget has increased more than three times from IDR 380 billion to IDR 960 billion, this figure still needs to be added to the ideal budget.<sup>11</sup> Bakamla proposes to increase the budget to at least IDR 5 trillion.<sup>12</sup> This budget is intended for infrastructure and facilities such as the purchase of ship units to weapons supplies.

Fourth, China's naval fleet is increasingly powerful. Based on the Chinese Ministry of Defense report for 2023, China's military budget is IDR 3.436 trillion, an increase of 7.2% from 2022. The report does not release details on China's maritime fleet. However, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), it is predicted that the fleet will get stronger, considering that China continues to promote maritime security, especially in the South China Sea.

In June 2023, China developed an anti-missile coastal guard ship equipped with a 76-millimeter cannon and is believed to be larger than the United States (US) ship. This year, China is patrolling massively in areas such as Second Thomas Shoal, Luconia Shoals, Scarborough Shoal, Vanguard Bank, and Thitu Island.<sup>13</sup> Although it is not directly adjacent to Indonesia, China's program is believed to threaten Indonesia's territory. This is driven by the fact that China is showing dominance in the South China Sea waters. In recent years, China has also entered Indonesian territory in North Natuna, especially for illegal fishing, and forced Indonesia to stop drilling for oil.

In response to this problem, Bakamla does not have more capacity than China. In 2020, the new Bakamla was equipped with cannons of 12.7 mm and 30 mm caliber; these cannons are two times smaller than those owned by the Chinese (and even Vietnamese) coast guard, which reached 70 mm.<sup>14</sup> Previously, Bakamla only had rubber bullets for self-defense.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, Bakamla could only "reprimand" by implementing a "shadowing" strategy against the Chinese coast guard when this case occurred. Unlike the Indonesian maritime agencies, Chinese institutions are more structured with clear commands. In 2018, China commissioned the China Coast Guard (CCG) under the command of the People's Armed Police (PAP).





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China's increasingly aggressive movements elicited responses from the US. The US Government views China as a big threat because it implements illegal maneuvers such as the nine-dash line<sup>16</sup> and violation of the freedom of navigation. The feud between the two countries can potentially lead to an open war, posing a danger for Indonesia and its waters. Therefore, Indonesia, especially Bakamla, must strengthen its maritime defense quickly.

## Conclusion

Through the explanation above, it can be concluded that even though Bakamla has communicated with several ASEAN countries, Bakamla still encounters difficulties. An intensively involved party, particularly the government, needs to increase capacity and help Bakamla optimally, such as through operational or other funds. With various weaknesses, Indonesia needs to consider maritime threats as a priority threat. By strengthening Bakamla, at least, Indonesia's maritime security can be maintained to the maximum.





## Endnotes

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- 16 This article was written prior to China's latest update to its map in the end of August 2023, wherein the nine-dash line was replaced with the ten-dash line.





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**Contact:**

The Habibie Center

Jl. Kemang Selatan No. 98, Jakarta 12560

Tel: +62 21 781 7211 | Fax: +62 21 781 7212

Email: [thc@habibiecenter.or.id](mailto:thc@habibiecenter.or.id)

Website: [www.habibiecenter.or.id](http://www.habibiecenter.or.id)