

China's Aid to Indonesian Submarine Retrieval Improves Trust

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

On 21 April, an Indonesian submarine sunk off the coast of Lombok leading to the deaths of all 53 people on board. The excerpted Indonesian-language article on 5 May for *kompas.com*, an Indonesian language publication with a pro-army perspective and a national readership, discussed Chinese naval support to Indonesia to lift the submarine from the ocean floor. According to the article, China offered condolences for the victims and promised to join the international effort to retrieve the three parts of the submarine that broke apart and are now 800 meters deep on the seafloor.

The article also notes that only one year ago a Chinese underwater drone was discovered in the sea near Sulawesi, which is not far from the Lombok Strait. The drone was suspected of mapping maritime routes to Australia. Nevertheless, this has not dampened Indonesian interest in collaboration with the Chinese navy, as it welcomed Chinese support to retrieve the submarine after the Malaysian, Australian, and Singaporean navies had completed their work to locate it on the seafloor. Further, Indonesia has begun conducting joint naval drills near Jakarta with China that coincided with the submarine rescue and were part of the People's Liberation Army's annual training program.



Submarine KRI Nagapasa, Indonesian Navy.

Source: Indonesian Navy, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Submarine_KRI_Nagapasa,_Indonesian_Navy.jpg, CC x 2.0

Another 9 May article from Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post*, which asserts its editorial independence but is known to defer to Chinese authorities on its reporting, noted that Indonesians were suspicious of China's first ever international submarine recovery mission in Indonesia. The article acknowledged that Chinese and Indonesian navies have already had disputes over fishing rights in waters claimed by China but that currently host Indonesian fishers. Despite this, the article stated that the joint training program and China's support to retrieve the submarine would improve trust-building between the two countries' navies.

“The Indonesian navy said that three Chinese ships, including the rescue ship Yongxingdao 863, were expected to join the rescue operation.”

Source: “Bantu Angkat Bangkai Kapal Selam KRI Nanggala-402, China Kerahkan 3 Kapal (Assistance to Lift the Wreckage of the KRI Nanggala-402 Submarine, China Deploys 3 Boats),” *kompas.com* (Indonesian language newspaper with pro-army perspective), 5 May 2021. <https://www.kompas.com/global/read/2021/05/05/215739470/bantu-angkat-bangkai-kapal-selam-kri-nanggala-402-china-kerahkan-3-kapal?page=all>

The Chinese Ministry of Defense announced that it sent a naval ship to the Lombok Strait to help lift the wreckage of the KRI Nanggala-402. The submarine's position was discovered on April 25 after disappearing for several days while conducting torpedo firing drills in the ocean waters north of Bali. KRI Nanggala-402 is confirmed to have sunk and broken into three parts with the wreckage now more than 800 meters deep.

The Chinese Ministry of Defense confirmed that it would join the international rescue effort after offering “profound condolences” to the victims. At the end of last year, the Indonesian military revealed an underwater drone allegedly belonging to China that was found by fishermen from Selayar Island. The assistance of the three Chinese naval ships was deployed after ships from Australia, Singapore, and Malaysia left the location after the KRI Nanggala-402 was found.

Source: “China, Indonesia hold joint naval exercises near Jakarta,” *South China Morning Post* (Independent newspaper owned by Alibaba Group), 9 May 2021. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3132821/china-indonesia-hold-joint-naval-exercises-near-jakarta>

China and Indonesia conducted joint naval exercises in waters off Jakarta, as the two countries work to improve trust and cooperation amid tensions in the South China Sea.

The exercises came just a week after Beijing announced it was sending three rescue ships, including one with a manned submersible capable of descending 10,000 metres (33,000 feet), to help recover the Indonesian submarine that sank late last month with the loss of all 53 crew members.

It was the first time China had joined an international submarine recovery mission. Observers said the operation would provide the PLA with valuable experience, though China's involvement was greeted with some suspicion in Indonesia and the West regarding its true intentions.