



## Indonesia Steps up Military Presence in the Natuna Islands

**OE Watch Commentary:** Indonesia is stepping up its military presence in the Natuna Area, Riau Islands Province, on the edge of the South China Sea. The accompanying two article excerpts from the *Japan Times* and *Republika*, an Indonesian news source, discuss some of the updates over the past couple of years. In 2016 reports began to emerge about Indonesia's plans to upgrade its military base in the Natuna Islands as demonstrated by the *Japan Times* article. The article states that a bigger, more sophisticated air base would be built on the islands and Indonesia would purchase three frigates and a jet fighter to be stationed there. Justifying its upgrades, the article goes on to describe scenes that involved Chinese fishing vessels operating illegally within Indonesia's exclusive economic zone. While China recognizes Indonesia's sovereignty over the Natuna Islands and Indonesia is not a claimant state in any disputes over islands and reefs in the South China Sea, the issue lies within overlapping claims for maritime rights and interests falling within China's "nine-dash line" claim to nearly the entire South China Sea.

Indonesia reportedly had about 800 military personnel stationed in the Natuna region in 2016. That number was expected to rise to 2,000 that same year. The second, and more recent article from *Republika*, states that about two thousand personnel are going to be deployed from Java to the Natuna area. It is not clear if they will replace 2,000 military personnel already there, provided they had actually transferred as reported in the 2016 article, or if they will be supporting them. The *Republika* article reports that, "the deployment is meant to fill positions in the facilities that have been built there."

As of the April 2018 article, there were a "number of military facilities... under construction in Natuna Islands," and the deployment of military forces was part of the "command and control transfer." The 2,000 personnel will reportedly range from Indonesian Army field artillery batteries and radar units to the Marine Corps. Infrastructure built, or being built, includes a command post and supporting facility and residential compounds in the field artillery; a pier in the Lampa Strait; a hangar for three helicopters; a seaport; and a hospital. The current military base is also expected to be "reinforced," perhaps meaning upgraded. **End OE Watch Commentary (Hurst)**



Source: Author, based on By Goran tek-en, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:South\\_China\\_Sea\\_vector.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:South_China_Sea_vector.svg), CC 3.0.

*“TNI [Indonesian Defense Forces] Chief Air Marshall Hadi Tjahjanto will deploy around two thousand troops from Java to the Natuna area, Riau Islands Province. The deployment is meant to fill positions in the facilities that have been built there.”*

**Source:** “Indonesia Set to Upgrade Military Base in Islands Perched on Edge of South China Sea,” *Japan Times*, 29 June 2016. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/06/29/asia-pacific/indonesia-set-upgrade-military-base-islands-perched-edge-south-china-sea>

*According to [Defense Minister] Ryamizard [Ryacuda], a bigger, more sophisticated air base will be built in the [Natuna]islands. Indonesia will also buy three frigates and a jet fighter to be stationed at the base.*

*Two weeks ago, an Indonesian warship fired warning shots at escaping Chinese fishermen accused of fishing illegally in Indonesia's exclusive economic zone, before finally managing to stop their boat and arrest them.*

*In March, an Indonesian patrol boat intercepted a Chinese fishing vessel inside the EEZ and detained eight crew members, but a Chinese coast guard vessel physically intervened and forced its release.*

*Indonesia currently has about 800 military personnel in the Natuna region. This year, the number will rise to about 2,000.*

*Although Indonesia is not a claimant state in the disputes over islands and reefs in the South China Sea, it has been warily monitoring China's activities there, including its reclaiming of land on features it occupies, its building of military infrastructure there, and its surveying and fishing activities.*

**Source:** Nidia Zuraya, “TNI akan Geser Pasukan ke Wilayah Natuna (TNI to Move Troops to Natuna Area),” *Republika Online*, 24 April 2018. <http://nasional.republika.co.id/berita/nasional/umum/18/04/23/p7n49p383-tni-akan-geser-pasukan-ke-wilayah-natuna>

*TNI [Indonesian Defense Forces] Chief Air Marshall Hadi Tjahjanto will deploy around two thousand troops from Java to the Natuna area, Riau Islands Province. The deployment is meant to fill positions in the facilities that have been built there.*

*“The deployment of personnel and combat troops is part of the command and control transfer,” the TNI Chief said after visiting Sekatung Island and a number of military facilities that are under construction in Natuna Islands, Monday (23 Apr).*

*“The troops range from those of Army field artillery batteries, radar units to the Marine Corps,” Tjahjanto said.*

*At the same occasion, DPR [People's Representatives Council] Speaker Bambang Soesatyo reaffirmed that the construction of a military and defense base in the Natuna area, Riau Islands, must be reinforced to safeguards the integrity of the Unitary Republic of Indonesia (NKR) from foreign intervention.*

*According to Soesatyo, the Natuna area, which is near the South China Sea (SCS), had been targeted by the United States and China, which want to control the SCS, so reinforcement to the national defense was needed in the Natuna area.*