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# **The militarization of COVID-19: mixing traditional and non-traditional security?**

Rage Taufika

*Defense Policy Research Assistant, CSIS Indonesia*

*ragetaufika@gmail.com*

*“In the final analysis, human security is a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, a job that was not cut, an ethnic tension that did not explode in violence, a dissident who was not silenced. Human security is not a concern with weapons – it is a concern with human life and dignity.” (UNDP 1994: 22)*

As of April 23, Indonesia has the highest number of COVID-19 deaths in Southeast Asia with 635.<sup>1</sup> The number continues to grow despite the government changing tack in addressing its unpreparedness from about a month ago. On March 13<sup>th</sup>, Indonesia established the Task Force to Accelerate COVID-19 Management under Presidential Decree No. 7 of 2020, which directly reports to President Joko

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<sup>1</sup> WorldOmeter, accessed on 23 April 2020 (11.59 GMT+7)

Widodo.<sup>2</sup> The Head of the National Disaster Management Agency, Doni Monardo, was appointed as the chief executive of this task force.

One of the key functions of the task force is to coordinate, among others, the Ministry of Health, the police and the military (TNI), and as such it also forms local-based units as well (provincial and district/city levels). With this task force, a military officer, for example, could be found at the district and/or city coordinating with the local government the various functions related to COVID-19. In some instances, they would be assigned specific tasks, such as disinfecting the area, distributing aid, or encouraging people to stay home

Why should the military be deployed to address a public health issue? Are we currently facing a security or health crisis?

### **Militarization of COVID-19**

Just like security, *militarization* is a difficult and contested concept. Some argue militarization is frequently linked to ‘militarism’, which Alfred Vagts describes in *A History of Militarism* (1959) as simply a vast array of customs, interests, and actions associated with armies. But the Global Militarization Index (GMI) defines militarization more as an act to mobilize a state or society towards the needs of the military environment or to subject a community to military needs.<sup>3</sup>

I use militarization in this commentary as simply the utilization of military officers in managing and handling the COVID-19 pandemic. Indonesia has deployed the TNI in dealing with the pandemic in different capacities to support the Task Force. For example, Indonesia used a military aircraft to pick up medical supplies and assistance and facilitate their distribution.

Indonesia has also prepared its battleship in the Riau island waters, in case it needs to evacuate its citizen from neighboring countries.<sup>4</sup> The TNI also deployed its assets to help to evacuate citizens and distribute masks and personal protective equipment (APD) to the hospitals. Through the Task Force, military officers were deployed to spray disinfectants on public transportation in Grobogan.<sup>5</sup> They were also asked to build and monitor a public kitchen in Malang while Army officers were sent to guard the border of Sibolga city.<sup>6</sup> There are, of course, other examples of how the TNI has been helping the COVID-19 Task Force.

But the militarization of COVID-19 is not unique to Indonesia. In China, Xi Jinping gave the heaviest responsibilities of dealing with the pandemic to the army medical team. In Italy, military officers are given the responsibility to enforce the lockdown. In Germany, Merkel mobilized 15,000 soldiers to help local authorities tackle the crisis.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Presiden Teken Keppres Gugus Tugas Percepatan Penanganan COVID-19’ 2020, *Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia*. 14 March 2020. <https://setkab.go.id/presiden-teken-keppres-gugus-tugas-percepatan-penanganan-COVID-19/>

<sup>3</sup> ‘Militarisation’ *The Global Militarisation Index (GMI) of the Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC)*, <http://warpp.info/en/m3/articles/militarisation>

<sup>4</sup> Batubara, Puteranegara. 04 April 2020. “Komitmen TNI Putus Mata Rantai COVID-19 di Indonesia” *Okezone*. <https://nasional.okezone.com/read/2020/04/04/337/2194221/komitmen-tni-putus-mata-rantai-COVID-19-di-indonesia>

<sup>5</sup> Mustofa, Ali. 21 April 2020 “Waspada Penyebaran COVID-19, TNI Semprot Disinfektan ke Angkutan Umum” *Jawa Pos*, <https://radarkudus.jawapos.com/read/2020/04/21/190101/waspada-penyebaran-COVID-19-tni-semprot-disinfektan-ke-angkutan-umum>

<sup>6</sup> Simatupang, Jhonny. 23 April 2020 “Sibolga Lepas Tim Penjaga Perbatasan Cegah Masuk COVID-19” *Gatra.com*, [https://www.timesindonesia.co.id/read/news/266906/kapolres-malang-bersama-forkopimda-tinjau-dapur-umum-di-lawang](https://www.gatra.com/detail/news/476619/kebencanaan/sibolga-lepas-tim-penjaga-perbatasan-cegah-masuk-COVID-19-;Gumilang, Binar. 22 April 2020 “Kapolres Malang Bersama Forkopimda Tinjau Dapur Umum di Lawang” <i>Times Indonesia</i>, <a href=)

<sup>7</sup> Nia, Oliver. 27 March 2020. “Germany deploys 15K soldiers to combat COVID-19 crisis” *AA*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/germany-deploys-15k-soldiers-to-combat-COVID-19-crisis/1782352>

Countries appear to militarize the COVID-19 management, albeit in different degrees and under different scope conditions, even though the pandemic is not a war among humans. This is a war between humans and the virus. Is it the military's job to win this particular war?

### **The role of the military in COVID-19**

In Indonesia, article 5 of Law No 34 of 2004 on the TNI states that the military is an *instrument* of the state in the field of *defense* based on state policy and political decisions.<sup>8</sup> National defense are all efforts to uphold national sovereignty, maintain territorial integrity, and secure the people from *military threats and armed threats*. Article 6 further notes that the military should be a counter to *any form of military threat and armed threats* from outside and within the country. While the military could conduct Military Operations Other Than War (article 7), such as humanitarian assistance, the role of the TNI is arguably to protect the state from armed threats. In other words, the TNI's role should be seen through the lens of traditional security.

In fact, there is no global health security role for the Indonesian military noted in the TNI Law of 2004, although the TNI has historically been involved in a wide range of non-combat operations including humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Again, Indonesia is perhaps not unique in this regard. Only very few countries explicitly regulate a global health security role for their armed forces. After all, pandemics and disease outbreaks are traditionally the purview of public health experts and the medical community within many countries.

However, as the COVID-19 pandemic makes clear, what is often seen as non-traditional security is perhaps increasingly becoming a traditional security concern that may require some degree of militarization. As the UNDP epigraph above notes, the pandemic is threatening human life and dignity and could lead to dire economic and security conditions, including violent conflicts.

At a conceptual level therefore, if public health concerns have become a traditional security issue, then it is reasonable to expect that the TNI should bear some responsibility in fighting the virus. But of course, unless they are military doctors, the armed forces cannot directly “combat” the virus. What the military can do is to be the best *instrument* to support the government in carrying out its policies, duties, and functions.

For example, as scientists argue that social distancing is one of the best tools to reduce or prevent the spread of the virus, then the military could be deployed to enforce various social distancing or quarantine measures. The military is also critical in supporting the rapid distribution of logistics, medical assistance, or evacuations. In other words, military officers could provide input on how to *execute* pandemic policies and military assets could provide crucial logistical help, but the armed forces are perhaps not at the best position to *formulate* government policies on public health emergencies.

### **Shifting or mixing security?**

When the COVID-19 pandemic is over, we should perhaps reconsider the scenarios under which the military could be deployed. Health security duties, whether at the national or global level, should be more explicitly and specifically delineated for the Indonesian military. More broadly, there should be conversations about how armies view *defense* and *security*. If human security as identified by UNDP a few decades ago may seem like a normative illusion, the pandemic makes it clear that non-traditional security challenges like public health is a clear and present danger.

As COVID-19 clearly threatens human security as well as national and global security, it is time we answer the decades-long call to widen the concept of security. This does not mean that we are simply

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<sup>8</sup> Law No.34/2004, Article 5 about role of Indonesian Defense Forces

shifting our focus from traditional to non-traditional security. I argue that we need both as one is not mutually exclusive to the other.

In other words, the COVID-19 has “mixed” the various dimensions of security—from human, societal, national, regional, and even global. One of the key actors may still be “traditional”, such as the armed forces”, but they also need a wider range of civilian experts, the medical profession, and others. The “enemy” after all is “non-traditional”. This “mixed security” brings new challenges for the Indonesian military to formulate and measure operational readiness, training needs, defense planning, and even scenario development. This is a hard-earned takeaway from the militarization of COVID-19 in Indonesia—it is both a security and health issue.

**CSIS Indonesia, Pakarti Centre Building, Indonesia 10160**

**Tel: (62-21) 386 5532 | Fax: (62-21) 384 7517 | [csis.or.id](http://csis.or.id)**

**COVID-19 Commentaries Editors**

*Philips J. Vermonte, Shafiah Muhibat, Vidhyandika Perkasa, Yose Rizal Damuri, Beltsazar Krisetya*