

What's Next for Indonesia-Vietnam Defense Relations?

The second iteration of a new defense policy dialogue highlighted some of the ongoing and future developments in the two nations' security ties.

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Earlier this month, Indonesia and Vietnam held the second iteration of their new defense policy dialogue, a key part of their broader security relationship. The dialogue spotlighted ongoing efforts between the two key Southeast Asian countries to further cement their defense ties amid wider domestic, regional, and international developments.

As Indonesia-Vietnam relations have developed over the years, from a comprehensive partnership inked in 2003 that was then elevated to a strategic partnership in 2013, both sides have also looked to make progress in the security aspect of their relationship as well. The two fellow Southeast Asian countries have attempted to build progressively upon the initial memorandum of understanding reached in 2010, including better coast guard collaboration and a coordination mechanism for protecting fishermen and fishing vessels in the wake of maritime infringements.

Among these developments is the creation of the Indonesia-Vietnam defense policy dialogue. After years of consideration, both countries held the first iteration of what became the new Vietnam-Indonesia Defense Policy Dialogue (DPD) back in 2019 in Vietnam, with an initial plan to hold it every two years alternating between the two countries amid other ongoing engagements at various levels. The dialogue was an addition to the expanding infrastructure of the defense relationship, which had included an array of exchanges, joint working groups, and coordinating mechanisms.

On October 14, Indonesia and Vietnam held the second iteration of the DPD. The dialogue came amid several changes that have occurred on both sides since 2019, including personnel changes that have occurred under Indonesian President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo's second term which kicked off in October 2019, the holding of the 2021 iteration of the quinquennial Vietnamese Communist Party Congress, and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic last year, which has also affected the regional security landscape.

The dialogue, held virtually, was co-chaired by Vietnamese Deputy Minister of National Defense Hoang Xuan Chien and the secretary general of the Indonesian Defense Ministry Donny Ermawan Taufanto. Per a press release by Vietnam's Ministry of National Defense, during the meeting, both sides took stock of some recent developments in their defense cooperation, including the fourth meeting of the joint working group on military-defense cooperation and the second meeting on defense industry cooperation, both held in September. They also touched on other areas of common interest, including developments on their national defense white papers, progress on issues such as the South China Sea disputes, and cooperation in multilateral fora, with Vietnam finishing up a term as non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and Indonesia to chair ASEAN in 2023.

Both countries also addressed the future issues that they should prioritize in advancing their defense ties. According to the official account of the deliberations, these included areas such as technical cooperation between their coast guards, the development of military medicine amid the continued challenge of COVID-19, and other training exercises and high-level delegation exchanges. Indonesia's defense ministry also highlighted the participation of defense industry companies in the virtual meeting, spotlighting an aspect that Jakarta has emphasized previously in defense ties.

Unsurprisingly, few additional specifics were publicly disclosed about the private talks between the two sides. For instance, while the press release mentioned discussion of the South China Sea, it did not fully note the heightened concerns that both countries have been displaying on this front amid visible manifestations of China's continued assertiveness in the region. Additionally, though there was reference to greater efforts towards collaboration in the maritime realm, issues involving the management of ongoing infringement of fishermen into foreign waters continue to complicate the management of wider relationship as well on both sides.

Nonetheless, the DPD spotlighted some of the ongoing opportunities and challenges evident in a growing defense relationship amid evolving regional and global developments. While there will no doubt be changes in the wider strategic environment when both sides hold their next DPD meeting – expected in 2023 to be hosted by Vietnam and hopefully held face-to-face – the second DPD nonetheless provided enough of a bilateral agenda for the two countries to work towards in the coming months and years.

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