MALAYSIA-INDONESIA RELATIONS SURMOUNT NEGATIVE PUBLICITY

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For the past two months, the bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Indonesia has been quite 'tense' due to the Sulawesi Sea dispute. Although the Malaysian press was relatively muted regarding the incident, the Indonesian Press gave wide publicity to the issue, much of it with negative overtones concerning Malaysia. The negative publicity was cited by some factions in Malaysia as evidence that the Indonesian Press was trying to discredit and humiliate Malaysia and thus 'force' Malaysia to relinquish its claim in the Sulawesi Sea. To them, the Indonesian media appeared to be functioning as a 'force multiplier' during the diplomatic spat and became the front line in Indonesia's 'psychological warfare' against Malaysia.

Indeed, since Petronas publicly announced the award of an exploration contract to Shell in the Sulawesi Sea, the Indonesian media has been very active in reporting developments - from the official Indonesian government protest to the mobilization of warships and fighter jets in the contested area. The wide coverage made the Sulawesi Sea dispute a national issue for Indonesia and prompted public outrage. This was evidenced by demonstrations, protests and the gathering of a mob in front of the Malaysian Embassy in Jakarta and its Consulate in Pekanbaru.

Incidents of hacking into government websites occurred in both Indonesia and Malaysia, indicating that the maritime dispute had breached the cyberspace boundaries of both countries. Many high profile websites in

both countries were defaced with rude messages by the 'hacktivists'. It is difficult to determine who started the hacking rampage. The general Malaysian and Indonesian public knew of the incidents only when the media reported it and the reports came only after the hacktivist war had lost momentum. Thus there was no conscious planned direct connection between the media and the computer hackers.

Realizing that negative and aggressive reporting by the Indonesian Press could result in uneasy bilateral relations, both Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhuyono expressed their determination to solve the dispute peacefully and tried their best to calm tensions. A joint statement issued by Indonesia's Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda and his Malaysian counterpart Syed Hamid Albar said the two sides would "take necessary steps" to ease the tension. According to Hassan, the President of Indonesia and the Prime Minister of Malaysia had decided to use peaceful means to resolve the maritime border issue in the Sulawesi Sea.

Tension in the area then receded. But it suddenly rose again when the Indonesian warship KRI Tedong Naga and the Malaysian warship KD Rencong brushed each other while patrolling in the disputed maritime area leaving both vessels with minor damage. Both countries lodged diplomatic protests over the incident. The Indonesian media gave the incident wide coverage while the Malaysian media was once again muted. One Indonesian newspaper, Kompas, was accused of false reporting by the Malaysian government. Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak was reported to be considering taking legal action against the Kompas for publishing a report which said he had apologized to Jakarta over the incident, which, according to him, was not true.