

## THE SOUTH CHINA SEA GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS AND INDONESIA'S MARITIME SECURITY: A POLITICAL DEFENSE ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the geopolitical dynamics in the South China Sea (SCS) region in relation to Indonesia's maritime security, viewed from the perspective of defense politics. The geopolitical dynamics in the SCS region are driven by China's claims through its Nine-Dash Line (NDL). China, as described by Cohen's Four Pillars (2015) as a country with extraordinary military power, has factually been willing to use it to legitimize and defend its claims. The surplus of economic power, besides being spent on modernizing its defense forces, is then utilized in the form of investment through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) policy. These two pillars have become China's strength to dominate the SCS region. This study concludes that Indonesia needs to develop a defense political strategy as a soft power to face the major challenges of geopolitical dynamics in the SCS region. This defense politics can optimize ASEAN as first-track diplomacy and other activities as second-track diplomacy.

**Keywords:** geopolitics; maritime security; defense politics

## DINAMIKA GEOPOLITIK DI KAWASAN LAUT CHINA SELATAN DAN KEAMANAN MARITIM INDONESIA: PERSPEKTIF POLITIK PERTAHANAN

### ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis dinamika geopolitik di kawasan Laut China Selatan (LCS) dalam kaitannya dengan keamanan maritim Indonesia yang ditinjau dari perspektif politik pertahanan. Dinamika geopolitik di kawasan LCS, digerakkan oleh China melalui klaim NDL-nya. China, seperti yang digambarkan oleh Empat Pilar Cohen (2015) sebagai negara yang mempunyai kekuatan militer luar biasa, secara faktual telah bersedia mengerakkannya untuk melegitimasi dan mempertahankan klaimnya. Surplus kekuatan ekonomi, selain dibelanjakan untuk memodernisasi kekuatan pertahanannya, kemudian dimanfaatkan dalam bentuk investasi dalam kebijakan *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI). Dua pilar ini, secara nyata menjadi kekuatan China untuk mendominasi di kawasan LCS. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahwa Indonesia perlu mengembangkan strategi politik pertahanan sebagai *soft power* untuk menghadapi tantangan besar dinamika geopolitik di kawasan LCS. Politik pertahanan ini dapat mengoptimalkan ASEAN sebagai *first track diplomacy* dan kegiatan lain sebagai *second track diplomacy*.

**Kata kunci:** geopolitik; keamanan maritim; politik pertahanan

### INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea (SCS) is a maritime region of immense strategic value, encompassing economic, political, and security dimensions. In addition to being a vital international trade route, the area holds abundant natural resources such as oil, natural gas, and fisheries. Politically, the SCS has become a hotspot for territorial disputes, especially since China has mobilized national resources to support its claim of the Nine-Dash Line (NDL).

The NDL, based on China's historical references, encompasses nearly 90% of the SCS and extends deep into the Exclusive Economic

Zones (EEZs) of other littoral states. This claim has triggered geopolitical tensions, prompting increased defense spending by several claimant states, such as Vietnam and the Philippines. China's pursuit of its NDL claim has escalated maritime security threats in the region, with the deployment of China Coast Guard (CCG) vessels to assert its presence. More recently, China has intensified its military display by sending its H-6 nuclear-capable bomber to Woody Island in the Paracel Islands—one of the disputed territories—based on satellite imagery from Maxar Technologies in May 2025 (Muhaimin, 2025).

From the perspective of international law, the NDL claim is incompatible with the 1982 United

Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which serves as the legal framework for determining EEZ boundaries. This was affirmed by the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016 in a case filed by the Philippines. Although the ruling is legally binding, the Tribunal lacks the authority to enforce it.

For Indonesia, China's NDL claim—intruding into the Natuna Sea—requires a prudent response in line with the country's free and active foreign policy. Several incidents resulting from China's NDL claim that pose a threat to Indonesian sovereignty have been addressed effectively and proportionately by the Indonesian government. Notable incidents between Indonesia and China in the SCS occurred in 2016, 2021, and 2024. In 2016 alone, three incidents were recorded. In March 2016, a CCG vessel intervened when an Indonesian authority detained a Chinese fishing boat suspected of illegal fishing. In May 2016, China protested Indonesia's navy for seizing a Chinese vessel near the Natuna waters, followed by another incident in June when an Indonesian warship approached twelve foreign vessels suspected of illegal fishing in the Natuna Sea (Muhaimin, 2016). In 2021, tensions escalated qualitatively when China requested Indonesia to halt oil and gas drilling activities in the Natuna area. For several months, Indonesian and Chinese vessels shadowed each other around offshore rigs. In 2024, just days after President Prabowo's inauguration, CCG vessels were spotted multiple times within Indonesia's EEZ before being driven away by the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla). These recurring incidents in the SCS constitute a maritime security threat to Indonesia, as they jeopardize national interests.

These incidents illustrate the complexity of threats in the SCS concerning Indonesia's maritime security and sovereignty. This complexity is not only driven by geopolitical rivalries among claimant states but also by the involvement of external actors such as the United States, Australia, and several European countries, each pursuing their strategic interests, potentially escalating tensions in the region.

Given the strategic importance of the SCS in regional geopolitics and maritime security—coupled with the potential threats to Indonesian sovereignty—Indonesia has brought the Indo-Pacific geopolitical agenda, including the SCS tensions, to the ASEAN Summit 2025 held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Discussions on the SCS at the 2025 ASEAN Summit are expected to strengthen ASEAN's role as a stable and inclusive regional bloc amid global rivalries. Indonesia's initiative represents a strategic move from a defense policy perspective, maintaining ASEAN

centrality in regional diplomacy. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the geopolitical dynamics in the South China Sea and maritime security from the perspective of defense politics.

Geopolitical dynamics in the South China Sea (SCS) and Indonesia's maritime security—viewed from the perspective of defense politics—is fundamentally rooted in defense theories and concepts. In general terms, the concept of defense refers to the effort to safeguard the existence of the nation and the state. This general concept aligns with the philosophical objectives of the founding of the Republic of Indonesia, as stated in the Preamble of the 1945 Constitution (UUD 1945), which is to protect the entire Indonesian people and the whole of Indonesia's territory, and to participate in the establishment of a world order based on freedom, lasting peace, and social justice.

This general concept, inspired by the 1945 Constitution, is further articulated in Article 1(1) of Law No. 3 of 2002 on State Defense, which defines defense as all efforts to defend the sovereignty of the state, the territorial integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI), and the safety of the entire nation from threats and disturbances to national unity and integrity. These efforts are embodied in a system known as the Total Defense System (*Sistem Pertahanan Negara yang bersifat semesta*), which is designed to protect national interests—namely, the preservation of the unitary state based on Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution, and the assurance of sustainable and secure national development to achieve development goals and national objectives.

Referring to the above definition of state defense, defense politics can be essentially understood as comprehensive efforts to uphold the nation's and state's existence, implemented through various policies, strategies, or actions—both military and non-military in nature.

Thus, defense policies, defense strategies, and defense diplomacy constitute the practical manifestations of Indonesia's defense politics within the framework of its total defense system.

In line with the spirit of the Preamble of the 1945 Constitution to contribute to global order based on independence and eternal peace, the implementation of state defense also involves strengthening international cooperation, fostering good relations, building mutual trust, preventing and managing conflicts, and addressing international security challenges.

Applying the above conceptual framework, and with reference to the typology of maritime security thought proposed by Buzan (1987)—which distinguishes between traditional and non-traditional schools of thought—Indonesia's

defense posture tends to fall within the non-traditional category. This is due to two main reasons: (1) maritime security is viewed primarily as a matter of sovereignty, aligning with the total defense doctrine; and (2) the use of diplomatic approaches to address maritime security issues.

Because of this total defense character, the concept proposed by Lutz et al. (2013)—which defines maritime security as a combination of preventive and responsive measures to protect maritime domains from threats and illegal activities—is inherently accommodated within Indonesia's national defense system.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using descriptive analysis to explain the phenomenon of geopolitical dynamics in the South China Sea and its relation to Indonesia's maritime security from the perspective of defense politics (Patton, 2002).

Data were collected through document analysis of various sources and scholarly journals that examine issues related to geopolitical dynamics, maritime security, and defense politics. The analysis is organized into three major thematic categories: territorial disputes and geopolitical dynamics, their impact on Indonesia's maritime security, and Indonesia's defense political strategies.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Geopolitical Dynamics in the South China Sea

Conceptually, geopolitical dynamics reflect the close interrelation between a country's geographical position and its strategic policies, which are supported by its economic, technological, and demographic power. According to Bealey and Johnson (1999), one of the key factors influencing global geopolitical dynamics is the size and expanse of a country. This perspective is well suited to analyze the geopolitical dynamics in the South China Sea (SCS), which are largely driven by China's Nine-Dash Line (NDL) claim as its strategic policy. China—being the only major power in the region and backed by considerable economic, technological, and demographic capacities—meets all the theoretical and conceptual criteria of a dominant geopolitical actor in the SCS. These geopolitical advantages clearly distinguish China from other countries in the region and provide leverage in pursuing its interests and objectives in the SCS.

This condition is further reinforced conceptually by Cohen (2015), who argues that a country's claim to power rests on four pillars: (1)

overwhelming military strength and the willingness to use it; (2) economic surplus that allows the country to provide aid and invest abroad; (3) ideological leadership that serves as a model for other nations; and (4) a cohesive system of governance. Applying this framework, China's NDL claim can be empirically confirmed as part of its efforts to dominate the SCS.

China's growing economic and military power continues to solidify its position in the region, prompting reactions from neighboring countries. Vietnam, which has strategic interests in the SCS, has responded by modernizing its military forces and conducting joint exercises with India (Mitra, 2016). Meanwhile, the Philippines has opted to strengthen its military affiliation with the United States through the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), thereby legitimizing U.S. military operations in its territory (Saputra, 2021). These efforts by Vietnam and the Philippines aim to counterbalance China's advancing military capabilities, which have raised concerns about its dominance in the region.

Military strength remains the primary indicator of a country's geopolitical power, followed by its economic influence. This current regional landscape aligns with Cohen's four-pillar concept, which can be used to analyze the geopolitical dynamics of the SCS. The United States, once the sole determining force in the SCS's geopolitical order, now shares that position with the rising power of China. This power shift has significant implications for other countries in the region, particularly concerning the resolution of territorial disputes.

The territorial disputes in the SCS—which involve multiple countries—have become increasingly complex due to the shifting balance of global military power. These disputes offer a clearer understanding of the region's geopolitical dynamics. In this study, such disputes are categorized into two groups: (1) disputes that do not involve Indonesia, and (2) disputes that do involve Indonesia. It is important to examine the disputes that do not involve Indonesia for three key reasons: (1) they provide a comprehensive picture of China's assertiveness in its attempt to control the SCS; (2) some of these disputes occur near Indonesian waters; and (3) several of the countries involved are members of ASEAN. Analyzing these disputes helps to provide a broader understanding of the region's geopolitical dynamics and their impact on Indonesia's maritime security.

Territorial disputes in the South China Sea (SCS) that do not involve Indonesia as a claimant state include the disputes over the Spratly Islands, the Paracel Islands, and the Scarborough Shoal.

The Spratly Islands are claimed by multiple countries in the SCS. China bases its claim on historical and archaeological evidence dating back to the Han Dynasty (206–220 BC). Taiwan has claimed and occupied parts of the islands since World War II. Vietnam considers the islands part of its sovereign territory since the 17th century and also occupies several features. The Philippines has asserted its claim since 1968 and maintains a military presence in the eastern cluster of the Spratlys, known as the Kalayaan Island Group. Malaysia claims parts of the Spratlys based on its 1979 continental shelf boundary map and the concept of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Brunei Darussalam has also laid claims to parts of the Spratly Islands.

Geopolitical tensions in the Spratly Islands began to escalate in the 1970s when the Philippines started exploring the area. In 1976, natural gas reserves were discovered. However, the Philippines' claim over the Kalayaan Islands was contested by China, which asserted that it had occupied the islands since 200 BC. In 1990, clashes occurred between Chinese and Philippine forces over disputed waters in what the Philippines refers to as the West Philippine Sea. In 1995, China occupied Mischief Reef in the West Philippine Sea and constructed infrastructure for fishermen. The Philippines, rejecting this action, expelled Chinese personnel and destroyed Chinese markers in the area (Rowan, 2005). To this day, the Philippines continues to assert its claim over the Kalayaan Islands, basing its position on the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Although the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled in favor of the Philippines in its case against China regarding the Spratly Islands, geopolitical tensions in the SCS remain unresolved. This is evident from repeated incidents of ship collisions, altercations, and accusations of armed threats near Sabina Shoal, one of the islands in the Spratlys. According to BBC Indonesia, as of mid-August 2024, two incidents had occurred between China and the Philippines at Sabina Shoal, now described as a new flashpoint in the SCS geopolitical landscape. On August 19, 2024, Chinese and Philippine vessels collided in the disputed waters of the Spratly Islands. The China Coast Guard accused the Philippine vessels of "deliberately ramming," while the Philippines alleged that Chinese ships conducted "aggressive maneuvers." A second collision occurred on August 25, 2024, with both sides blaming each other. The confrontation continued on August 26, 2024, when the Philippines accused 40 Chinese vessels of deliberately blocking two of its ships on a

"humanitarian mission" to deliver supplies to Teresa Magbuana, a Philippine Coast Guard vessel stationed at Sabina Shoal months earlier.

The Paracel Islands are claimed by both China and Vietnam. Geographically, the Paracel Islands are located in the northwestern part of the East Sea, approximately 185 nautical miles east of Vietnam's coast and 165 nautical miles southeast of China's Hainan Island. This low-lying atoll chain consists of two main sub-groups: the Crescent Group in the west and the Amphitrite Group in the north, with isolated atolls scattered across the sea.

As a coastal state bordering the South China Sea, Vietnam asserts sovereign rights over the Paracel Islands based on historical claims and international maritime law. Vietnam's assertion of sovereignty over the Paracels would significantly affect the expansion of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and continental shelf, as well as its interests in safeguarding freedom of navigation for commercial vessels, oil tankers, fishing boats, maritime patrols, and warships (Muhar, 2016). Differing interpretations of the conflict area between China and Vietnam have led to heightened diplomatic tensions. One such instance occurred in 2011, when two Chinese fishing vessels allegedly disrupted Vietnam's oil exploration activities by cutting seismic survey cables. China denied the accusation and instead accused Vietnam of violating its maritime sovereignty.

In 2012, Vietnam reaffirmed its territorial integrity based on the Law of the Sea. However, the Chinese government and the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) responded by publishing a map indicating that the Nine-Dash Line (NDL) encompassed Vietnamese and Philippine waters in the South China Sea, which had already been designated as exploration zones by foreign companies working with China. In response, Vietnam lodged an official objection, arguing that China's exploration activities were taking place within Vietnam's EEZ. Vietnam then advocated for an independent international agreement, involving ASEAN member states, as a measure to defend its territory and counter China's expansion in the South China Sea.

The Scarborough Shoal Dispute Scarborough Shoal is claimed by China, the Philippines, and Taiwan. It is the largest atoll cluster in the South China Sea, located about 120 nautical miles (220 km) west of Zambales Province on Luzon Island, the Philippines. Covering an area of approximately 150 square kilometers, the shoal comprises several small islets and coral reefs. During high tide, much of the atoll—including several reefs—is submerged.

The Philippines believes that Scarborough Shoal may be developed by China into its eighth artificial island to consolidate its strategic presence in the South China Sea. According to Philippine authorities, China plans to equip the shoal with military infrastructure, such as radar systems, communication facilities, and an airstrip, as part of its strategy to eventually establish a comprehensive Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the South China Sea.

From a defense standpoint, this assumption reflects heightened Philippine vigilance over China's maneuvers around Scarborough Shoal. Although the Philippines holds a stronger position under international law following the 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration, it lacks sufficient military capabilities for effective deterrence. Consequently, the Philippines has chosen to strengthen its military ties with the United States through the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), considering it the most viable strategic option. Under this arrangement, any attempt by China to deploy dredging fleets to Scarborough Shoal would likely provoke a U.S. response. Such a response could involve coercive measures, including potential intervention by the U.S. Navy as a form of deterrence (Storey, 2020).

Third, territorial dispute. The territorial dispute involving Indonesia centers on the North Natuna Sea. This area is claimed by both China and Indonesia. The North Natuna Sea is a shallow water region adjacent to Natuna Regency. The official naming of the area as the "North Natuna Sea" was declared by Indonesia in July 2017, although this name had long been used by the local Malay communities residing in the Natuna region. China strongly protested Indonesia's official renaming of the area.

Indonesia's strategy to officially name the North Natuna Sea has had significant international political implications in asserting the sovereignty of the Republic of Indonesia. Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 1982, Indonesia has legal rights over the North Natuna region, based on its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and continental shelf. In contrast, China bases its claim on the so-called Nine-Dash Line (NDL).

China's military strength, which is readily available to protect its national interests in the South China Sea, combined with its economic surplus, grants China considerable bargaining power in the region. China's dominance in the South China Sea is closely linked to the effective leadership of President Xi Jinping, who has led the country since 2013. President Xi's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic laid the foundation for China's emergence as a new global leader, amid the relative decline of U.S. influence in other

regions. His Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), proposed in 2013, is a strategic framework aimed at expanding China's global dominance through infrastructure development. From a geopolitical perspective, the BRI reflects China's ambition to reinforce its global economic leadership by fostering economic cooperation and connectivity among participating countries.

The BRI is carried out through two primary strategies: the Silk Road Economic Belt (land route), which connects China to Europe via Central Asia and Russia, and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (sea route), which links China with Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. The maritime component of the BRI essentially reflects China's Nine-Dash Line claims and thus serves as a strategic driver of geopolitical dynamics in the South China Sea. This policy, therefore, forms a critical part of China's strategic calculations (Cai, 2017).

China's economic surplus has, in practice, become a tool to strengthen its strategic position in the South China Sea. In addition to military spending, this surplus is used to support the BRI through economic investments. Investment has become one of China's strategic instruments, especially as many countries—including ASEAN member states—maintain investment ties with China, particularly in infrastructure development.

Since China declared its broad sovereignty claims over the South China Sea in 2009, the region has increasingly been militarized by China to legitimize and defend its claims. ASEAN claimant states—especially Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines—have sought to modernize their military capabilities to maintain the status quo. However, their efforts pale in comparison to China's spectacular military advancements. Among these countries, only Vietnam has made notable strides in military modernization to keep pace with China's growing strength, but even Vietnam still lags significantly behind (Grossman, 2019). China's military and economic capabilities remain the key strategic instruments shaping geopolitical dynamics in the South China Sea.

### **Indonesia's Maritime Security as an Impact of Geopolitical Dynamics in the South China Sea**

The escalation of territorial disputes in the South China Sea (SCS)—particularly between China and the Philippines, often marked by minor physical confrontations—along with the increasing frequency of incursions by the China Coast Guard (CCG) into the North Natuna Sea, has prompted Indonesia to remain vigilant toward the region's geopolitical dynamics. Referring to the concept of maritime security by Lutz et al. (2013), which defines it as a combination of

preventive and responsive measures to protect the maritime domain from threats and illegal activities, Indonesia's vigilance serves as a national interest imperative to protect all Indonesians and the entire territory of Indonesia, while contributing to global order based on independence and lasting peace. In this regard, ensuring maritime security is both a response to the country's national interests and a consequence of the geopolitical turbulence in the SCS.

The geopolitical dynamics in the region have had direct impacts on Indonesia's maritime security—both conceptually and empirically—due to China's growing hegemonic expansion in the SCS. Conceptually, referring to the U.S. Navy (2010), which defines maritime security as the tasks and operations carried out to safeguard maritime sovereignty and resources, Indonesia is compelled to deploy its maritime strength to defend its sovereign waters in the North Natuna Sea, which China claims. Empirically, multiple incidents involving China—particularly through the CCG—and Indonesian authorities in the North Natuna Sea demonstrate the existence of actual threats to Indonesia's maritime security.

Maritime security issues in the SCS are a serious concern for several ASEAN countries, especially those involved in territorial disputes with China—such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia—as they are expected to protect their sovereignty and maritime resources. On the other hand, China has increased its assertiveness to legitimize and defend its claims. This assertiveness is not limited to the deployment of maritime forces via the CCG but also includes aggressive acts such as the use of water cannons or intentional ramming of vessels.

ASEAN countries have initiated a joint maritime security program, notably through the Programme to Implement the ASEAN Plan of Action to Combat Transnational Crime (ASEAN, 2017). However, in practice, this program does not specifically address maritime security issues in the SCS. It targets a broad spectrum of transnational crimes, including drug trafficking, arms smuggling, money laundering, human trafficking, piracy, terrorism, financial crimes, and even cybercrimes (Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Indonesia, 2015).

Additionally, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia have separately collaborated on maritime security through the Malacca Strait Patrols (MSP) initiative (MINDEF Singapore, 2015). This cooperation aims to jointly tackle maritime crimes and enhance protection in the maritime zones connecting these four nations.

The 46th ASEAN Summit in 2025, held in Kuala Lumpur, could serve as a strategic momentum for enhancing ASEAN regional

maritime cooperation in the SCS, particularly as the issue was raised by Indonesia. However, the final outcome—the Kuala Lumpur Declaration—did not explicitly establish a maritime security cooperation framework for the region. The reluctance stemmed from diverging national interests, such as dealing with the U.S. tariff strategy, avoiding open confrontation with China, and upholding ASEAN's foundational principle of peaceful resolution of disputes. Consequently, the Summit favored relatively safer international issues. The ASEAN Community Vision (ACV), a core outcome of the Declaration, revolves around four main pillars: Political-Security, Economic, Socio-Cultural, and Connectivity—requiring follow-up actions by Indonesian maritime security stakeholders to translate them into concrete implementation.

The SCS conflict, limitations in Indonesia's national defense budget, intensifying regional military competition, and various transnational crimes all illustrate the complexity of Indonesia's maritime security landscape—largely shaped by the evolving geopolitical dynamics in the SCS that generate significant vulnerabilities.

From a defense strength perspective, China—the principal actor in the SCS geopolitical landscape—is the region's dominant power. According to Global Firepower's 2022 Military Strength Ranking, China ranks 3rd out of 140 countries in terms of comprehensive military capability, with most indicators assessed as "Excellent." In defense budget, China holds the second position globally after the United States. However, based on Global Firepower 2021, Russia remains superior in overall strength. The top three defense budgets globally are: the U.S. at USD 770 billion, China at USD 230 billion, and Russia at USD 154 billion.

China, the central actor in the region's geopolitical dynamics, is the most powerful military force among South China Sea stakeholders. According to the 2022 Global Firepower ranking, China ranked 3rd out of 140 countries in overall military strength, earning predominantly "Excellent" scores across capability indicators. In terms of defense budget, China ranks second globally—behind only the United States. However, according to the Global Firepower 2021 Index, Russia slightly outperformed China in terms of comprehensive military strength. In budget terms, the United States led with USD 770 billion, followed by China at USD 230 billion, and Russia at USD 154 billion.

As the world's largest archipelagic state, with over 3.6 million km<sup>2</sup> of maritime area, Indonesia should ideally allocate a sufficient defense budget to develop a robust maritime fleet capable of

protecting its territory (Lisfianti, 2022). This need becomes even more urgent given that global powers—especially China and the U.S.—prioritize maritime dominance in their defense expenditures.

Ideally, Indonesia's maritime security capacity should be reflected in the budget allocated to the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla RI / Indonesia Coast Guard). However, with funding covering less than 30% of total operational needs, Indonesia's maritime security forces remain under-resourced in addressing threats stemming from South China Sea geopolitical dynamics.

The Indonesian Navy (TNI AL), as Bakamla's main supporting institution in securing national maritime interests, has seen modest growth in maritime assets aligned with the government's vision of restoring Indonesia's maritime prominence. As of 2022, TNI AL operates 7 frigates, 24 corvettes, 4 submarines, 181 patrol vessels, and 11 mine warfare ships (Global Firepower, 2022). However, these assets remain insufficient when viewed in relation to the vastness of Indonesia's territorial waters.

This inadequacy becomes more evident when compared with military developments in other ASEAN countries. Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand possess smaller coastlines and maritime zones but invest strategically in their naval capabilities—particularly Thailand, which has added a helicopter carrier to its fleet. This acquisition significantly enhances Thailand's maritime defense capacity according to Global Firepower's assessment criteria.

In terms of total naval assets, Indonesia outmatches other ASEAN states. Nonetheless, when considering the sheer expanse of its maritime territory, Indonesia's current naval strength remains suboptimal relative to its defense requirements. This gap should prompt the Indonesian government to increase its maritime defense budget.

Given the financial constraints limiting Indonesia's maritime buildup, and the rising frequency of incidents in the South China Sea, the country must turn to soft power strategies—particularly through defense diplomacy—to minimize the geopolitical risks and losses stemming from the region's instability.

### **Indonesia's Defense Political Strategy**

Amid the intensifying geopolitical dynamics in the South China Sea (SCS), Indonesia has optimized its strategy by fostering inter-state relations through ASEAN, while simultaneously strengthening its defense strategy to minimize the impact of regional insecurity.

Indonesia's strategy of utilizing ASEAN as a platform to safeguard its national interests in the SCS was notably implemented in 2003 with the establishment of the ASEAN Security Community (ASC), signed in Senggigi, Lombok on September 12, 2003. The ASC plays a crucial role in maintaining security and order within the ASEAN region, including the SCS, by conducting defense diplomacy among ASEAN member states and beyond.

The achievement of stability and geopolitical order in Southeast Asia has been one of ASEAN's primary objectives since its inception. A key initiative in this regard is the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). At the 25th ASEAN Summit, ASEAN welcomed the interest of non-member states in joining TAC and recognized the importance of harmonizing various regional security proposals (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014).

Indonesia's vision of positioning ASEAN as a central mechanism for protecting national interests is further reinforced through continued maritime security cooperation and joint military exercises, aimed at strengthening the regional security architecture, especially in the SCS in the short term.

In 2019, Indonesia once again utilized ASEAN as a strategic fulcrum. At the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok, Thailand, Indonesia introduced the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) as part of its defense political strategy. Given the SCS's location within Southeast Asia, Indonesia pushed for ASEAN to take a leading role in maintaining peace and regional stability. AOIP thus emerged as a collective ASEAN effort to confront regional challenges, including securing the SCS. The AOIP reflects Indonesia's ambition to promote maritime cooperation across the Indo-Pacific, aligning with its national agenda of advancing its domestic maritime sector and positioning itself as a Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF). Through AOIP, Indonesia's geostrategic position can serve as a strength in navigating geopolitical challenges that may escalate into conflict.

Potential conflict in the SCS has also been mitigated by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 1982. Article 56 of UNCLOS stipulates that a coastal state has sovereign rights within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), including the right to exploit marine resources. Indonesia has adhered to this principle by intercepting Chinese vessels operating illegally within its EEZ. This demonstrates Indonesia's assertion of its sovereignty in accordance with UNCLOS, and aligns with the AOIP's emphasis on interstate cooperation and mutual respect to preserve territorial peace.

To pursue its independent and active foreign policy, Indonesia not only strengthens relations within ASEAN, but also engages with China on multiple fronts. One such engagement is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a China-funded global development strategy. Indonesia has welcomed the BRI as a means to achieve its maritime development goals, with financial assistance from President Xi Jinping proving instrumental in realizing strategic projects (Lai, 2019). Among these is the development of the Kuala Tanjung Port in North Sumatra, alongside the financing of the Jakarta–Bandung High-Speed Railway.

Indonesia continues to leverage Chinese financial assistance through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), aiming to reinforce bilateral cooperation with China. AIIB funding presents an alternative source of investment for infrastructure development, particularly in projects that support inter-island connectivity, urban development, and energy infrastructure. Through AIIB and BRI, Indonesia seeks not only to boost national security but also to enhance its geopolitical competitiveness in ASEAN by strengthening inter-island integration.

In observing Indonesia's defense political maneuvers to protect its national interests, it is evident that the country must exercise diplomatic flexibility. While the BRI is perceived by some as an extension of China's Nine-Dash Line claim—strategically designed to influence regional geopolitics—Indonesia has welcomed BRI financing for domestic infrastructure development. A rejection of BRI could provoke Chinese displeasure, while blind acceptance may risk weakening Indonesia's bargaining position. Hence, Indonesia must balance its strategic interests with prudence and foresight.

### **Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy**

Indonesia's defense diplomacy, which primarily relies on ASEAN as the first track of engagement, contains several vulnerabilities that must be carefully considered. One notable challenge is China's tendency to divide and dominate certain ASEAN member states to serve its long-term strategic interests. This strategy was exemplified when Cambodia opposed discussions on the South China Sea (SCS) issue following the ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016. Such opposition hinders Indonesia's defense political strategy, particularly when countries like Cambodia—and potentially Myanmar—refuse to support ASEAN-based initiatives to address Chinese violations of Indonesia's sovereignty.

Second, China's increasingly assertive policies regarding territorial disputes in the SCS—especially against the Philippines and

Vietnam—are likely to be met with opposition from ASEAN, which in turn could strain Indonesia's bilateral relations with China.

Given these limitations in relying solely on ASEAN as the first track of defense diplomacy, Indonesia must diversify its diplomatic efforts by engaging in second and third track diplomacy, mobilizing its entire range of diplomatic capabilities at all levels.

Indonesia's second track diplomacy to address geopolitical dynamics in the SCS was pioneered by Hasjim Djalal in 1990 through the launch of the workshop Managing Potential Conflicts in the South China Sea, held in Bali. This initiative aimed to strengthen cooperation among countries bordering the SCS and promote sustainable conflict management. The workshop brought together participants from several nations, including Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Taiwan. Over the years, it has evolved into a regular forum, with its 33rd iteration held in Semarang, Central Java, in August 2024, focusing on constructive dialogue and technical cooperation to manage potential SCS conflicts.

Another form of second track diplomacy is joint naval exercises. Indonesia initiated the Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo (MNEK) in 2014, held in Batam, the Natuna Islands, and the Anambas Islands. This event involved 4,800 Indonesian Navy personnel and 27 ships, along with participants from the United States, China, ASEAN member states, and other countries such as Japan, India, South Korea, Australia, Russia, and New Zealand. MNEK 2014 focused on disaster response and humanitarian crisis management. The second iteration, held in 2016, included the 15th Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), themed Maritime Partnership for Regional Stability. Through this initiative, Indonesia aimed to foster mutual trust and enhance regional maritime cooperation.

Indonesia's successful implementation of second track diplomacy as a component of its defense political strategy to address SCS geopolitical challenges stands out as a strength, particularly amid its limited maritime defense capabilities.

### **CONCLUSION**

The geopolitical dynamics in the South China Sea (SCS) have driven an increase in defense spending among countries in the region, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam. In addition to boosting defense budgets to modernize their military forces, these countries have also pursued strategic military partnerships with the United States, as exemplified by the Philippines. Such strategies aim to counter growing pressure from China. Indonesia faces significant



challenges in protecting its national interests amid maritime security threats arising from the evolving geopolitical landscape in the SCS. Several incidents involving China in the North Natuna Sea have so far been managed effectively by Indonesia. However, the development of Indonesia's maritime defense capabilities remains hindered by budgetary constraints. At the same time, the rising frequency of incidents could pose a threat to national sovereignty. To address the negative impacts of the SCS geopolitical tensions, it is essential to optimize Indonesia's defense political strategy.

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