

INDONESIA'S POLICY ON THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: Strategy, Challenges and Regional Implications

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolving dynamics of the South China Sea as a result of the interaction between international law, national sovereignty, geopolitical rivalry, and economic interdependence. It highlights China's incremental "salami-slicing" strategy in consolidating its claims, as well as the challenges posed to regional stability and the rules-based international order. Indonesia's position is analyzed as a non-claimant state with direct interests in the North Natuna Sea, where it adopts a dual approach combining assertive sovereignty enforcement and active diplomacy based on UNCLOS 1982. The study argues that Indonesia's calibrated combination of UNCLOS-based diplomacy and credible maritime enforcement offers a strategic model for defending sovereign rights without escalating great-power rivalry in the South China Sea. At the regional level, ASEAN's role through ASEAN Centrality, the Code of Conduct (COC), and confidence-building measures remains crucial but constrained by internal divisions and external pressures, particularly from US-China rivalry. The study also identifies global crises, including developments in Venezuela and Iran, as catalysts that may intensify tensions in the South China Sea by exposing weaknesses in the international legal order. The findings underscore the need for strengthening international law, enhancing regional unity, and promoting strategic autonomy through defense capacity, diplomacy, and inclusive cooperation. Ultimately, sustainable stability depends on balancing legal enforcement, power dynamics, and multilateral engagement.

Keywords: The North Natuna Sea, salami slicing strategy, regional stability, the rules-based international order, ASEAN Centrality.

ABSTRAK

Studi ini mengkaji dinamika yang berkembang di Laut Tiongkok Selatan sebagai hasil dari interaksi antara hukum internasional, kedaulatan nasional, rivalitas geopolitik, dan saling ketergantungan ekonomi. Studi ini menyoroti strategi inkremental "salami-slicing" yang dilakukan Tiongkok dalam mengkonsolidasikan klaimnya, serta menggarisbawahi tantangan yang ditimbulkan terhadap stabilitas kawasan dan tertib internasional yang berlandaskan aturan (*rules-based international order*). Posisi Indonesia dianalisis sebagai negara non-pengklaim (*non-claimant*) yang memiliki kepentingan langsung di Laut Natuna Utara, di mana Indonesia mengadopsi pendekatan ganda yang memadukan penegakan kedaulatan secara tegas dengan diplomasi aktif berdasarkan Konvensi

Hukum Laut PBB tahun 1982 (*UNCLOS 1982*). Studi ini berargumentasi bahwa kombinasi yang terukur antara diplomasi berbasis UNCLOS dan penegakan maritim yang kredibel menyediakan model strategis untuk membela hak-hak berdaulat tanpa meningkatkan eskalasi persaingan antar-kekuatan besar (*great-power rivalry*) di Laut Tiongkok Selatan. Pada tingkat kawasan, peran ASEAN melalui *ASEAN Centrality*, *Code of Conduct* (COC), serta langkah-langkah *confidence-building measures* tetap menjadi elemen krusial, namun terbatas oleh perpecahan internal dan tekanan eksternal, khususnya yang bersumber dari rivalitas AS–Tiongkok. Studi ini juga mengidentifikasi krisis global, termasuk perkembangan di Venezuela dan Iran, sebagai katalis yang berpotensi meningkatkan ketegangan di Laut Tiongkok Selatan dengan cara memperlihatkan kelemahan dalam tatanan hukum internasional. Temuan-temuan studi ini menegaskan perlunya penguatan hukum internasional, peningkatan persatuan regional, dan perwujudan *strategic autonomy* melalui kapasitas pertahanan, diplomasi, serta kerja sama yang inklusif. Pada akhirnya, stabilitas yang berkelanjutan bergantung pada penyeimbangan antara penegakan berbasis hukum, dinamika kekuatan, dan keterlibatan multilateral.

Kata kunci: Laut Natuna Utara, Strategi “salami-slicing”, Stabilitas Kawasan, Tatanan internasional berbasis aturan, Sentralitas ASEAN

INTRODUCTION

The sea is a mass of water and a water system that connects land masses, namely continents, islands, or countries. It is a complex geographical and ecological entity, serving as a habitat for a wide variety of marine flora and fauna. The sea can be utilized as a natural resource for livelihoods, shipping routes, defense interests, and various other benefits. These functions of the sea have been felt by mankind and provide momentum for the management and utilization of the sea by each country based on the concept of law and defense security, without ignoring the security stability of coastal countries (Buntoro, 2012).

The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

(UNCLOS 1982) regulates nearly all maritime activities and issues, providing the legal basis for coastal states' sovereign rights in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and continental shelf. These rights empower states to utilize the region's natural resources, particularly fisheries, natural gas, oil, minerals, and various other mining products (UNCLOS 1982, article 55-56).

The South China Sea is a strategically important waterway in Southeast Asia, spanning approximately 3.5 million square kilometers. Due to its strategic location, these waters serve as a vital international trade route, with approximately 30% of global seaborne trade passing through it. Furthermore, these waters are also blessed with rich fishery resources in their water column, as

well as potential reserves of oil, natural gas, and other minerals on their seabed (Mistry, 2025).

These waters are situated at a global crossroads, bordered by several coastal nations, including China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, and Indonesia. With all its appeal, these waters are a potential source of conflict between these countries. The conflict in these waters is one of the most complex and protracted maritime disputes in the Asia-Pacific region, involving overlapping claims among these countries and threatening regional and global security stability.

China claims almost the entire waters, using the "nine-dash line" concept, based on historical grounds and its traditional fishing grounds. Meanwhile, other countries base their claims on the provisions of the UNCLOS 1982, specifically regarding the EEZ and continental shelf. Taiwan, as a country with shared historical roots and still in conflict with China, also bases its claims similarly (Zhang, 2023).

Indonesia, however, has a slightly different position than the aforementioned countries. The archipelagic nation is not, in principle, a party to major territorial claims in the South China Sea, as it does not claim sovereignty over islands, reefs, or maritime features in the area. However, Indonesia's primary interest lies in its sovereign rights within its EEZ and the

continental shelf of the North Natuna Sea, parts of which overlap with China's "nine-dash line" claim (Fahmi, 2024). The Indonesian EEZ and continental shelf are drawn from the straight baseline of the archipelago of the Natuna Islands, which are located in Indonesia's northernmost border region, not from historical claims or disputed islands.

METHODOLOGY

The research method used in this paper is analytical prescriptive research. The materials used are primary and secondary legal materials, including books, articles, journals, and written works by legal experts. The analytical technique employed in this study is qualitative analysis and is limited to the following aspects:

- a. An overview of the South China Sea conflict, including the main actors and the basis of each claimant's claim.
- b. The development of disputes and legal basis, including UNCLOS 1982 as the basis of international law in the maritime sector and the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration decision, Indonesia's status as an archipelagic state, the position of a non-claimant state and a "free and active" foreign policy.
- c. Sovereignty, operational responses and ASEAN Diplomacy, including principles of Indonesian sovereignty and jurisdiction, hard power response and law enforcement, renaming of the North

Natuna Sea, maritime boundary demarcation with neighboring countries, anti-IUU fishing policy and ASEAN Diplomacy.

d. Geopolitical and Economic Influences, including US – China rivalries and its impacts, the Venezuelan Crisis and Iran War, economic relationship and potential involvement of non-ASEAN countries.

DISCUSSION

1. Dispute Development

China's approach to the South China Sea aligns with its national interests and aspirations. China views these waters as part of its history and future, as its economy is heavily dependent on maritime trade. China wants to ensure control over shipping access in these waters and the natural resources they contain, so they can be optimally utilized for economic growth and national resilience.

Amidst overlapping claims by several coastal states in the region over these waters, China has taken a bold, radical and controversial step. Beginning in the year 2000s, China increased its military and fishing presence on several reefs, such as Fiery Cross, Subi, and Mischief Reefs, under the guise of scientific research and support for fishermen. Subsequently, starting in 2013, China has undertaken a massive reclamation and construction of artificial islands on reefs in the Paracel and Spratly

Islands, including equipping them with ports and military facilities. This has led to the use of these reclaimed islands as military bases, where Chinese military and coast guard vessels actively patrol and escort its fishing fleet (Sari, 2024).

China's unilateral actions have not gone unnoticed by other coastal states, who have deployed maritime assets into their claimed maritime territories. This has resulted in several incidents at sea and escalated tensions in the region. The Chinese Research Vessel Xiang Yang Hong 10 was escorted by China Coast Guard vessels into Vietnam's EEZ at Vanguard Bank in May – June 2023. Vietnam responded by sending a Fisheries Surveillance Vietnam vessel to shadow the vessel (WionWebDesk, 2023). On August 29, 2023 near the Paracel Islands, the CCG 4201 vessel attacked the Vietnamese fishing vessel QNG 90495 TS using a water cannon resulting in injuries to 2 Vietnamese fishermen (RadioFreeAsia, 2023). In November 2021, in the waters off Second Thomas Shoal, three China Coast Guard vessels intercepted and used water cannons to block a Philippine supply ship heading to the BRP Sierra Madre (Reuters, 2021). In June 2024 in the waters of Second Thomas Shoal, a CCG ship rammed a Philippine Navy rubber boat, followed by CCG personnel boarding the ship carrying sharp weapons, making threats and injuring Philippine personnel (BBCNews, 2024).

Other countries outside the region have also highlighted China's move and voiced their objections, as they have a vested interest in ensuring that the strategic shipping lane remains free from unilateral Chinese regulation (freedom of navigation). These countries stated that China's steps violate the 1982 UNCLOS and ignore the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling. Furthermore, there are concerns that if China's move is allowed to continue, it will set a negative precedent in international law, particularly in the maritime sector.

2. The 1982 UNCLOS

The 1982 UNCLOS is the foundation of international law governing the rights and obligations of states at sea. This convention regulates maritime boundaries, navigation regimes, rights to explore and exploit natural resources, and the settlement of disputes in territorial waters.

For Indonesia, 1982 UNCLOS is the most relevant international legal reference because its provisions regulate the classification of maritime territories, defining a country's territorial sea as 12 nautical miles from its baseline. Likewise, the contiguous zone regime is defined as 24 nautical miles, the exclusive economic zone as 200 nautical miles, and the continental shelf, which can be claimed up to 350 nautical miles under certain conditions (UNCLOS 1982). In the context

of the South China Sea, Indonesia emphasized that the boundaries of the EEZ have been determined entirely based on the provisions of 1982 UNCLOS, not based on the historical claims of any country.

1982 UNCLOS does not allow for unilateral claims based on historical rights, such as China's nine-dash line claim, unless recognized through a separate bilateral or multilateral agreement. The Convention also provides a dispute resolution mechanism through an arbitration tribunal, as decided in the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling in the Philippines-China dispute. The ruling affirmed that the historical nine-dash line claim has no legal basis under UNCLOS 1982, as China's claim exceeds the boundaries of modern maritime zones. The PCA also stated that the maritime features in the Spratly Islands are reefs, not islands, and therefore cannot be used as a basis for measuring the 200 NM EEZ. Activities carried out by China in these waters, namely the reclamation and militarization of artificial islands, harassing and obstructing Philippine vessels have violated the country's sovereign rights within its own EEZ. Furthermore, the reclamation has also caused severe damage to coral reefs and underwater ecosystems (PCA, 2016).

Although the PCA has declared the award final and legally binding, China has refused to recognize and enforce it.

Furthermore, UNCLOS lacks an enforcement mechanism that could force a state to enforce an arbitral award. Under international law, compliance with an arbitral award depends heavily on a state's will, reputation, international pressure, and geopolitical calculations.

3. Indonesia as an Archipelagic State

Prior to 1957, Indonesia's position under international maritime law was governed by the 1939 *Territoriale Zee en Maritieme Kringen Ordonantie* (1939 TZMKO), a Dutch legacy. This provision limited Indonesia's territorial waters to a maximum of 3 nautical miles from the coastlines of each island (TZMKO 1939). Therefore, waters between Indonesian islands such as seas, straits, and bays with a width of more than 6 nautical miles were considered high seas under international law. This created a legal view that the Indonesian archipelago was composed of separate islands, not a single geographical entity.

This weakens Indonesia's maritime sovereignty due to its lack of strategic and security control over these waters, opening up the potential for regional rebellions and territorial intervention through foreign military and intelligence infiltration. Economically, Indonesia also loses control over potential inter-island marine resources due to the influx of foreign

vessels, including fishing vessels, into these waters and their exploration.

Recognizing this, Indonesia has championed the concept of an archipelagic state for acceptance in international maritime law. This principle was first introduced through the 1957 Djuanda Declaration, "that all waters around, between and connecting the islands that are part of the land area of the Republic of Indonesia, regardless of their size or breadth, are a natural part of the land area of the Republic of Indonesia and thus are part of the inland waters or national waters that are under the sovereignty of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia" (Kartawidjaja, 1957). This declaration introduced the concept of drawing straight archipelagic baselines connecting the outermost points of the outermost islands, extending the territorial sea to 12 nautical miles measured from the straight archipelagic baselines, and claiming all inter-island waters as territory under Indonesia's full sovereignty (Indonesian Law number 4/1960 and 6/1996). With this declaration, Indonesia affirmed that all land, sea, and airspace are a single entity, including the waters between its islands. For Indonesia, these waters are not dividers but strategic links and unifier.

After a long diplomatic struggle, this status was fully recognized in UNCLOS 1982 through the concept of an archipelagic state, which stipulates that archipelagic states have the right to draw

baselines connecting the outermost points of their islands, thus granting them archipelagic waters under their full sovereignty. In addition to this right, the convention also obliges archipelagic states to determine and provide archipelagic sea lanes through which ships of other states are granted the right of innocent passage. However, UNCLOS emphasizes that the sovereignty of an archipelagic state extends to the airspace, seabed, and subsoil (UNCLOS 1982, article 46-54).

The status of an archipelagic nation strengthens Indonesia's position in establishing an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the waters around the South China Sea, namely those north of the Natuna Islands as a jurisdictional area based on the archipelagic baseline.

4. Free and active foreign policy

Since its independence, Indonesia has adhered to the principle of a free and active foreign policy in conducting its international relations. The nation's goal is clearly stated in the Preamble to the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia paragraph four, which states “furthermore, to establish a government of the State of Indonesia that protects the entire Indonesian nation and all of Indonesia's territory, and to advance the general welfare, improve the nation's intellectual life, and participate in implementing world order based on independence, eternal

peace, and social justice”(Preamble to the 1945 Constitution).

This political principle was first explicitly stated by Indonesia's first Vice President, Mohammad Hatta, in 1948. “Indonesia must not be passive in the international political arena, but must always play an active role, have the right and full sovereignty to decide its own destiny” (Hatta, 1948). This principle arose from the realization that the newly independent Indonesia had to determine its own path amidst the global ideological conflict of the Cold War.

Free means that Indonesia is free to determine its stance and views on international issues without intervention or being bound by any power or bloc. With this principle, Indonesia aims to maintain its sovereignty, independence, and national integrity. Active means that Indonesia must not simply remain silent but must actively participate in efforts to create world peace, uphold justice, and participate in resolving international problems. With this principle, Indonesia plays an active role in maintaining a world order based on freedom, lasting peace, and social justice (Indonesian Law number 37/1999).

The primary goal of an independent and active policy is to serve the national interest. Therefore, every foreign policy adopted must aim to support national development, maintain national security and stability, gain international recognition

of sovereignty and independence, and uphold freedom and justice for other nations.

Indonesia has directly applied this political principle on the global stage. Indonesia pioneered and hosted the 1955 Asia-Africa Conference, which aimed to unite Asian and African nations to oppose colonialism and neo-colonialism. This initiative, along with India, Egypt, Ghana, and Yugoslavia, led to the founding of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade in 1961, an organization of countries that refused to side with either the Western or Eastern bloc during the Cold War (Prinada, 2025).

Regionally, ASEAN, founded in 1967, is one of the most concrete manifestations of Indonesia's principle of free and active participation in the region. Through ASEAN, Indonesia can actively lead and influence regional affairs, while simultaneously maintaining the region's independence from the dominance of global powers, which contributes to the stability of the Southeast Asian region and plays a vital role as a platform for great powers dialogue.

Meanwhile, Indonesia's active involvement in maintaining world peace and order is clearly reflected in its deployment of peacekeeping troops to various conflict zones worldwide under the UN flag. This involvement has been recognized, with Indonesia consistently being among the largest contributors of

peacekeeping troops in the world (Adryamarthanino and Ningsih, 2022).

Indonesia's foreign policy implementation in the South China Sea issue is demonstrated by its non-alignment with any country in the island dispute, maintaining good relations with all parties, including ASEAN member states and China. Indonesia is also actively promoting a peaceful resolution of the conflict within the ASEAN framework to help maintain regional stability. Indonesia stressed that the South China Sea must remain a peaceful, stable and open region for international trade.

5. Indonesia as a Non-Claimant State

In the conflict over islands and reefs in the South China Sea, Indonesia's position is not that of a claimant state, but rather that it has an interest in maintaining regional stability, as conveyed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs at the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference with China, July 26, 2024 in Vientiane, Lao PDR (Michaella, 2024).

Indonesia does not claim sovereignty over the islands, reefs, or maritime features in the disputed area. Indonesia has a significant interest in sovereign rights in the waters of its EEZ and the continental shelf of the North Natuna Sea, parts of which overlap with China's "nine-dash line" claim. Therefore Indonesia has also consistently rejected

that China's claim because it has no legal basis in UNCLOS 1982 (Wiryo and Ramadhan, 2024).

Indonesia also stated that the EEZ and continental shelf in the North Natuna Sea are legitimate jurisdictional areas where Indonesia has sovereign rights based on the determination of maritime boundaries as regulated in UNCLOS 1982. Indonesia is committed to freedom of navigation, enforcement of international maritime law and increasing state presence in its jurisdictional waters. For Indonesia, the Natuna Islands region has very strategic value from the aspects of defense security, energy and international shipping routes.

6. Principles of Indonesian Sovereignty and Jurisdiction

Indonesia's sovereignty over its maritime territory stems from international recognition in UNCLOS 1982, which regulates the rights of archipelagic states over their archipelagic waters, territorial seas, EEZs, and continental shelves. In the context of the North Natuna Sea, Indonesia has full sovereignty over its territorial sea and archipelagic waters.

Indonesia also has sovereign rights to explore and exploit natural resources within its 200-nautical-mile EEZ. It also has exclusive jurisdiction over marine scientific research, marine environmental protection, and fisheries regulation within the EEZ (UNCLOS 1982, article 56).

In December 2021, reports emerged that China had sent a letter of protest to Indonesia, demanding a halt to oil and gas drilling in the Tuna Block in the North Natuna Sea. This followed the entry of several Chinese coast guard vessels into the waters at the end of June 2021 and their provocation of the Noble Clyde Boudreaux drilling rig owned by Harbour Energy (UK) and Zarubezhneft (Russia), which was conducting drilling (Souisa, 2021). The Indonesian government responded by deploying maritime assets from Bakamla (Law and Security Agency) and the Indonesian Navy to secure the Tuna Block. With this security measure, the drilling rig was able to complete its drilling contract by the end of 2021. The Indonesian government further asserted that there was no sovereignty dispute with China, as the Tuna Block lies entirely within Indonesia's EEZ under UNCLOS 1982 (AMTINews, 2021).

The principles and strategic security measures taken above provide more than sufficient basis for Indonesia to consistently reject the historical nine-dash line claim and uphold its rights in the North Natuna Sea waters.

7. Hard Power Response and Law Enforcement

In response to the increasing activity of foreign vessels, particularly fishing and coastguard vessels escorted by military elements, Indonesia has

implemented a combination of hard power and law enforcement responses to ensure the country's sovereignty is maintained.

a. Strengthening Military Presence

The Indonesian Navy has increased the intensity of maritime patrols, particularly around the EEZ border with Vietnam and areas frequently intruded by Chinese vessels.

Furthermore, the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) has deployed several key strategic defense weapons systems in the Natuna Islands, including combat vessels, surveillance radar, and maritime patrol aircraft. This completes the development and modernization of the Natuna integrated base, which encompasses logistics systems and defense facilities across land, sea, and air forces (Mawangi and Merung, 2024).

The move was not intended to trigger confrontation, but rather to demonstrate a credible defense capacity. Indonesia is well aware that to gain respect for its sovereignty, tangible evidence of the presence of state symbols in the region is essential. The deployment of these integrated troops also demonstrates the country's concern for the security of the people on the outermost islands. Furthermore, this step will encourage local communities to participate in national defense awareness.

b. Law enforcement by maritime agencies

In addition to the military aspect, Indonesia also emphasizes a law enforcement approach through maritime patrols by maritime security agencies as the vanguard of enforcing jurisdiction in the EEZ. This includes taking action against illegal foreign vessels, including expelling, arresting, or confiscating them in accordance with national and international legal procedures.

For the effectiveness of maritime operations, these law enforcement measures are not carried out solely by the Indonesian Coastguard but are strengthened by the integration of operations across other national maritime institutions, namely the Indonesian Navy and the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (Da Costa, 2024).

An example is the incursion of dozens of Chinese fishing vessels escorted by coast guard and military vessels into the North Natuna Sea at the end of 2019. The Indonesian government responded by dispatching Bakamla and Indonesian Navy vessels to secure the waters and expel the vessels (CNNIndonesia, 2020). Indonesia also followed up by sending a diplomatic protest note to the Chinese government for violating sovereign rights in Indonesia's EEZ (Darma, 2020).

8. Renewing the name of the Indonesian EEZ region of the North

Natuna Sea as a Political, Legal and Diplomatic Instrument

On July 14 2017, the Indonesian government officially updated the national map of Indonesia (Peta NKRI 2017). The main contents of the national map include the updated determination of Indonesia's maritime boundaries, including EEZ boundaries with neighboring countries. The map also includes the naming of the Indonesian EEZ waters north of the Natuna Islands as the North Natuna Sea (Junida, 2017a).

Indonesia emphasizes that the area called the North Natuna Sea is within 200 nautical miles of the baseline of the Indonesian archipelago, which means it is included in Indonesia's EEZ based on UNCLOS 1982. Indonesia views this naming as a legal action in the context of national jurisdiction in its maritime territory (Junida, 2017b).

The name change for the North Natuna Sea drew a strong reaction from China, which has long sought to establish territorial claims across much of the South China Sea that extend beyond the territories of several countries. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the name change was unreasonable and inconsistent with international standards for place names (KumparanNews, 2017). Indonesia responded by reaffirming that the area falls within its EEZ, thus reserving full rights to name it according to its own interpretation in accordance with

international law. Indonesia then registered the name change with the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) and deposited it with the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) for international recognition (Sambogo, 2018).

This step has several strategic objectives, namely affirming Indonesia's jurisdiction in accordance with UNCLOS 1982 and strengthening the legal standing of other countries' historical claims. Likewise, it provides confirmation of regional geopolitical identity, so that the global map uses nomenclature that is consistent with Indonesia's national interests. This naming policy is not aggressive, but rather sends a diplomatic signal that Indonesia does not recognize China's nine-dash line. This step also aims to avoid international perceptions that the area is disputed and is a form of legal diplomacy that strengthens Indonesia's long-term position.

9. Maritime Boundary Demarcation with Neighboring Countries

Indonesia is acutely aware that national development and cooperation with neighboring countries require clear borders, including maritime boundaries. In the South China Sea, Indonesia has completed most of its maritime boundary delimitation, although several sectors are still in the process of being agreed upon.

The territorial sea border with Singapore has been agreed upon in several agreements in stages from 2009 to 2014 (Indonesian Law number 4/2010 and 1/2017). Furthermore, cooperation on navigation safety and maritime security in these waters has been implemented very well to support the world's busiest shipping traffic lane.

The territorial sea boundary agreement between Indonesia and Malaysia has been largely finalized, although further negotiations remain on several issues, particularly in the Sulawesi Sea and the southern Malacca Strait. Regarding the delimitation of the EEZ in the South China Sea, including the area bordering the North Natuna Sea, the leaders of both countries agreed to emphasize the importance of constructive engagement in the negotiations (Joint Statement of the 13th Annual Consultation between Indonesia and Malaysia, 2025).

In December 2022, Indonesia and Vietnam successfully concluded negotiations on the delimitation of their respective EEZs. This ended lengthy negotiations that had lasted for more than 12 years (CNNIndonesia, 2022). With this agreement, Indonesia and Vietnam implicitly affirmed that the border area belongs to both countries in accordance with international law, UNCLOS 1982, while also emphasizing that China's nine-dash line claim has no basis in recognized international maritime law. This agreement

demonstrates that ASEAN countries are capable of resolving their own border disputes peacefully without involving third parties, as suggested by UNCLOS 1982 (UNCLOS 1982, article 74). It also strengthens their collective bargaining position against China's unilateral claims.

The finalization of the maritime boundaries between the two countries has attracted international attention, especially from China, as the EEZ lies directly in the South China Sea, overlapping with part of the nine-dash line claim. While there has been no official response from China, increased activity by Chinese Coast Guard vessels operating around Indonesia's Tuna Block and Vietnam's oil and gas block has been observed following the announcement of the maritime boundary agreement (Iswara, 2023).

Indonesia and Vietnam have now followed up on the agreement with the ratification process through their respective national legal procedures. This delimitation effort is a component of minimizing potential conflict and clarifying jurisdiction in the waters north of Natuna. Along with this process, cooperative activities between the maritime agencies of the two countries have been recorded as quite significant. In August 2024, the Indonesian Navy's KRI Bung Tomo-357 conducted joint exercise Codex 24B/2024 with VPN elements (ReportaseIndonesia, 2024). Later that month, the Bakamla's KN Pulau Dana-323 also conducted a port

visit and joint exercise with VCG coast guard elements (Bakamla.go.id, 2024).

10. Anti-IUU Fishing Policy

Indonesia views Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing as a threat to maritime security, economic sovereignty, and resource sustainability. Its anti-IUU fishing policy includes firm action against foreign vessels fishing in its EEZ. Indonesia actively implements integrated surveillance of these waters through joint operations by its maritime agencies, namely the Maritime Security Agency, the Indonesian Navy, the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, and the Water Police (Nurhakim, 2025).

The Indonesian government is also continuously empowering local Natuna fishermen by providing fishing vessels, improving port and fisheries facilities, and ensuring access to fuel. The goal is to revitalize the local fishermen's economy, acting as the eyes and ears of the nation. The consideration is that if the North Natuna Sea waters are filled with Indonesian fishing vessels, it will automatically deter foreign vessels from entering Indonesia's EEZ. To optimize fisheries yields, Indonesia has also implemented an electronic monitoring system for its domestic fishing vessels (Leonardo, 2024).

Indonesia also divides its maritime territory into fishing zones. The North Natuna Sea falls within this tightly guarded

zone to ensure there is no overexploitation and to provide legal grounds to expel foreign fishing vessels that do not have fishing quota permits (Government Regulation Number 11/2023). Indonesia has transformed the sensitive issue of sovereignty in the North Natuna Sea into a functional one through its anti-IUU fishing policy. By prioritizing fisheries law enforcement and maritime ecosystem protection, Indonesia emphasizes that its actions in the area are not military provocations, but rather the universal obligations of coastal states under UNCLOS 1982 (UNCLOS 1982, article 73).

For Indonesia, the implementation of an anti-IUU fishing policy and enforcement of fisheries law in the North Natuna Sea is not only related to the preservation of natural resources, but also a way for Indonesia to assert its sovereignty without having to trigger open military conflict. On the other hand, Indonesia is also actively pursuing fisheries diplomacy and cooperation with neighboring countries, namely Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines. This is intended to reduce violations of EEZ boundaries and convey a clear message that these waters are not devoid of economic activity by coastal states' maritime communities. These strategic policies strengthen Indonesia's position as a maritime balancer in the region.

11. ASEAN Diplomacy

a. ASEAN Centrality

ASEAN Centrality is a fundamental principle that positions ASEAN as the central axis in the regional architecture of Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN Centrality has two main dimensions. First, the institutional dimension, namely ASEAN's ability to provide forums, mechanisms, and norms that serve as a shared reference for its member states and external partners. Second, the normative dimension, namely the affirmation of values such as peaceful dispute resolution, the non-use of force, mutual respect for sovereignty, and adherence to international law, particularly UNCLOS 1982 (ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, 2019).

For Indonesia, ASEAN Centrality serves as a strategic instrument to prevent the dominance of one major power over the dynamics of the South China Sea, to ensure that the South China Sea issue remains managed through a multilateral approach, rather than a potentially asymmetric bilateral one, and to ensure that the interests of non-claimant ASEAN states, including Indonesia, are accommodated in the formulation of regional norms.

However, the implementation of ASEAN Centrality faces serious challenges, primarily due to differing interests among ASEAN member states, both between claimant and non-claimant states, and in each country's bilateral relations with China.

Within the ASEAN framework, Indonesia is encouraging the initiation of cooperation between ASEAN and the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDEC) to standardize e-ACDS (Electronic ASEAN Catch Documentation Scheme), a digital certification system to ensure that fish caught in the South China Sea are not the result of theft or IUU fishing, so that they can be exported to the global market (Saraphaivanich, Imsamrarn, and Sorragittayamate, 2025).

SEAFDEC actively works with the RPOA-IUU (Regional Plan of Action to Promote Responsible Fishing Practices including Combatting IUU Fishing), which is a coordinated framework among ASEAN countries to combat IUU fishing with the aim of ensuring sustainable and responsible fishing practices (Projects ASEAN-SEAFDEC Strategic Partnership, 2026). Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, Myanmar and Cambodia have also ratified the PSMA (Port State Measures Agreement), an international agreement under the FAO that contains cooperation to close port access for vessels suspected of carrying out IUU Fishing (FAO PSMA, 2021).

ASEAN has identified IUU fishing as a common enemy that harms the economies of all coastal states, while simultaneously negating China's claims to "traditional waters." This fisheries diplomacy provides ASEAN with significant

bargaining power in regional negotiations with China over the drafting of a Code of Conduct (COC). This demonstrates that such technical cooperation reinforces the principle of ASEAN Centrality and is easier to implement than typically complex political agreements.

b. ASEAN-China Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC)

The ASEAN-China Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) is a continuation of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC), which was political in nature and not legally binding. The DOC was deemed insufficiently effective in preventing escalation and unilateral actions, necessitating a more substantive, operational, and binding COC (El Dora, 2026).

The Code of Conduct (COC) is not an instrument for resolving sovereignty claims, but rather a conflict management mechanism to prevent open escalation. The COC aims to establish norms of behavior for states in the South China Sea, prevent incidents and miscalculations at sea, and foster long-term stability through mutually agreed rules (Trang, 2022).

ASEAN and Indonesia have special interests in the COC negotiation process, namely to maintain regional stability and security, comply with international law, safeguard economic interests and regional cooperation, and serve as a means of strengthening diplomacy and multilateral

relations. Indonesia has consistently pushed for the COC to have clear substance, measurable implementation mechanisms, and not simply be a political declaration without binding force (Michaela, 2023).

However, the COC negotiations face a number of structural challenges, including (Lin and Sothirak, 2025):

- 1) Differences in ASEAN's internal interests, particularly between claimant and non-claimant countries.
- 2) Overlapping claims of disputed territories, both between ASEAN member countries themselves and with China.
- 3) Implementation and monitoring constraints and the nature of the COC, between legally binding or non-binding.
- 4) The geographical complexity of the South China Sea means that many claims overlap with the EEZs of several countries.

c. Confidence Building Measures in the South China Sea

Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) are practical steps aimed at building trust, reducing suspicion, and preventing conflict escalation. In the context of the South China Sea, CBMs are a crucial instrument due to the region's high sensitivity and increasing intensity of maritime interactions. They serve as an

intermediary step before a permanent legal solution can be reached.

CBMs are explicitly stated in DOC 2002 article 4, namely the Parties concerned undertake to resolve their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means, without resorting to the threat or use of force, through friendly consultations and negotiations by sovereign states directly concerned, in accordance with universally recognized principles of international law, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (DOC in the SCS, article 4, 2002).

The CBMs are not intended to resolve sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea, but rather to foster mutual trust between ASEAN member states and China, promote transparency and communication between the countries, reduce the risk of incidents at sea, and prevent misinterpretation of military or law enforcement activities.

On September 7, 2016, leaders from China and ASEAN member states issued a Joint Statement at the 19th China-ASEAN Summit in Vientiane, Laos, reaffirming their commitment to implementing CUES (Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea) in the South China Sea (Joint Statement of the 19th ASEAN-China Summit, 2016). The Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) is a non-binding, multilateral framework designed to reduce the risk of maritime incidents and prevent escalation when

naval ships or aircraft from different countries unexpectedly encounter each other at sea. Originally formulated at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) in 2014, CUES serves as a set of safety procedures, communication protocols, and maneuvering rules to manage unplanned encounters safely (Lagrone, 2014).

CBMs in the South China Sea encompass various cooperative mechanisms, including marine environmental protection, marine scientific research, safety of navigation and communication at sea, search and rescue operations, and combating transnational crime, including but not limited to trafficking in illicit drugs, piracy and armed robbery at sea, and illegal traffic in arms (DOC in the SCS, article 6, 2002).

On October 22-28, 2018, the ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise 2018 was successfully held in Zhanjiang, Guangdong, China. This first-of-its-kind maritime exercise between China and ASEAN countries included joint search and rescue operations, medical evacuation, ship and navigation maneuvers, and cross-deck helicopter landings between ships (Shengyun, 2018). The main objectives of this exercise were to build trust and cooperation between the navies of ASEAN and China, enhance interoperability in maritime operations, practice CUES, and foster professional exchanges in the military field (mindef.gov.sg, 2018).

12. US – China rivalry in the South China Sea

The strategic rivalry between the United States and China is the most dominant external factor shaping security dynamics in the South China Sea. This competition is not only military but also encompasses political, economic, technological, international norms, and control over vital international trade routes.

The United States views the South China Sea as a vital part of the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Global Commons that must remain free, with its focus on (Ahmad, 2025):

- a. Maintaining freedom of navigation and over flight. The US wants to ensure that no single hegemonic power can block the world's main trade routes.
- b. Opposing maritime claims deemed excessive and inconsistent with international law and upholding a rules-based regional order.

On the other hand, the South China Sea also has high strategic value for China, because (AMTINews, 2021):

- a. It is a symbol of sovereignty, nationalism and a crucial front page for its national security, making the issue highly sensitive domestically.
- b. Strategic depth and national security, especially related to the buffer zone as protection of the eastern coast, protection of vital sea

lanes and power projection capabilities.

- c. Economic and energy interests, including potential fishery and hydrocarbon resources.

13. Implications of Great Power Rivalry for Indonesia and ASEAN

The US-China rivalry increases the risk of regional militarization, escalating maritime incidents, and putting pressure on ASEAN countries, including Indonesia, to take specific positions (Asruchin, 2025). This situation narrows the room for diplomatic maneuver and reinforces the importance of a careful balancing strategy. For Indonesia and ASEAN, the US-China rivalry impacts not only security but also economic dimensions and internal organizational cohesion, as follows:

- a. Implications for ASEAN (Saputra, 2025)
 - 1) This rivalry threatens the principle of ASEAN Centrality and ASEAN's position as a key actor in the region. There are concerns that ASEAN will be marginalized by new, exclusive security alliances like AUKUS or the QUAD.
 - 2) ASEAN countries face a dilemma between economic interests closely tied to China and security interests often linked to the US as a balancing force.

3) The differences in the level of economic and political dependence of each ASEAN member country on China or the US have the potential to weaken ASEAN's unified stance on the South China Sea issue.

4) The COC negotiations between ASEAN and China are progressing slowly and it is difficult to reach an agreement because ASEAN itself has not yet reached a unanimous desire to confront China's bargaining position.

5) The increasing military presence of the US and China due to militarization and reclamation of artificial islands increases the risk and complexity of incident management at sea.

b. Implications for Indonesia

1) Increased US and Chinese military activity in the South China Sea increases the risk of an incident in the North Natuna Sea. Indonesia must also increase maritime patrols in the region to ensure there is no spillover into Indonesia's EEZ (Safriadi, 2025).

2) As the largest country in ASEAN, Indonesia bears the burden of keeping ASEAN united through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).

14. The Implications of the Venezuelan Crisis and the War between

the US and Israel against Iran on China's Strategy and the Dynamics of the South China Sea

a. The Venezuelan Crisis

Recent developments in Venezuela in early January 2026, particularly the United States' direct involvement in the country's political and security dynamics, have added a new dimension to the global geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China (Hendarto, 2026).

Indonesia, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, expressed its deep concern over any action involving the use or threat of force that risks setting a dangerous precedent in international relations and could disrupt regional peace and stability, as well as undermine the principles of sovereignty and diplomacy. Indonesia further called on all parties to prioritize dialogue and to comply with international law, including the principles enshrined in the UN Charter and international humanitarian law, particularly the protection of civilians, which must be a top priority. Indonesia also stated that it is crucial for the international community to respect the rights and will of the Venezuelan people to exercise their sovereignty and determine the direction and future of their nation (Ferida, 2026).

From China's perspective, the Venezuelan incident reinforces the perception that the US is willing to use a combination of political, economic, and

military pressure to limit Chinese influence in areas traditionally considered outside its sphere of influence (Ying, 2026). While geographically and substantively unrelated to the South China Sea, the incident has implications for how China views, responds to, and calibrates its strategic policies in the Indo-Pacific region, including the South China Sea.

b. The War between the US and Israel against Iran

The escalation of the war between the United States and Israel against Iran, which finally broke out in late February 2026, has created significant geopolitical uncertainty at the global level, with direct implications for the regional security landscape in Asia, including the South China Sea. The conflict began after a joint US-Israeli attack on Iran's capital and key facilities, triggering a retaliatory attack from Tehran and a response from global energy markets. The conflict has spread to the Persian Gulf region and disrupted key energy routes such as the Strait of Hormuz, a vital passageway for global oil exports (CNNIndonesia, 2026).

Indonesia, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, deeply regrets the failure of negotiations between the US and Iran, which has resulted in military escalation in the Middle East. Indonesia calls on all parties to exercise restraint and prioritize dialogue and diplomacy. Indonesia reiterates the importance of respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each

country and resolving differences through peaceful means. Furthermore, Indonesia also expressed its readiness to facilitate dialogue if agreed to by both parties. The escalating tensions in the Middle East have the potential to disrupt regional stability and global peace and security. At the same time, Indonesia is prioritizing intensive communication with Indonesian citizens currently in Iran to ensure their safety (Planasari, 2026).

The author argues that direct US involvement in conflicts in the Middle East has the potential to temporarily shift Washington's strategic focus away from the Indo-Pacific for the time being, which could indirectly create a strategic window for China to strengthen its position in other regions. China may see this opportunity as an incentive to further assert its claims, but it will still adopt a cautious and diplomatic approach to avoid direct confrontation with the US (Dang, 2026).

The Venezuelan crisis and the ongoing Iran war are seen as clear evidence of the erosion of international law, particularly the principles of sovereignty and the prohibition on the unilateral use of force. Unilateral actions without the legitimacy of the United Nations Security Council have weakened these fundamental norms. Similarly, the deadlock in the UN Security Council, particularly due to the use of its veto power, has prevented this body from responding decisively to conflicts. This demonstrates

that the international system relies heavily on the consensus of major powers, which are often divided by their respective national interests. This phenomenon reflects Western hegemony and double standards in the application of international law. This situation has encouraged other countries, such as Russia and China, to strengthen their regional influence with similar logic (IOLReporter, 2026). Major powers are often perceived as violating rules without facing significant consequences—a long-standing pattern. The major powers referred to here include not only the Western nations holding veto power—namely the US, France, and the UK—but also major powers from the East, specifically Russia and China.

For Indonesia and ASEAN, these two major incidents, occurring within a relatively short period of time, have created a strategic environment increasingly consolidated by great power rivalry and directly resonate with the South China Sea issue.

15. Economic and Structural Relations

a. Economic Relations between Indonesia and China

China has been a key export market for Indonesia for over a decade, with approximately 23-25% of Indonesia's total non-oil and gas exports going to China, with key commodities including iron and steel, coal, and palm oil (Irdhansyah,

2024). Conversely, China supplies approximately 28-33% of Indonesia's total import needs, including capital goods, such as factory machinery and electronic products. The total value of bilateral trade between the two countries has exceeded USD 130 billion annually (Statistik Perdagangan Luar Negeri Indonesia Impor 2024, 2025).

This dominance is reinforced by massive foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows into the downstream mineral sector, positioning China as a key investor in the national downstream strategic vision. China consistently ranks among the top three foreign investors in Indonesia, alongside Singapore and Hong Kong. Cumulatively, investment from China and Hong Kong accounts for over 25% of total FDI in Indonesia (Nurdifa, 2025).

These deep integrations in economic relations pose challenges for Indonesia's foreign policy in the North Natuna Sea. This has led Jakarta to implement a Double-Track Diplomacy strategy, firmly maintaining territorial sovereignty through the 1982 UNCLOS international legal instrument, while also ensuring the stability of bilateral relations to sustain domestic economic growth (Julian, 2025).

b. Economic Relations between Indonesia and the US

On the other hand, economic relations with the US are also crucial for

Indonesia, as the US is Indonesia's second or third largest non-oil and gas export market. The US absorbs approximately 10-12% of Indonesia's total non-oil and gas exports. The majority of Indonesian commodities shipped are ready-to-use manufactured goods (Rachman, 2025). This manufacturing sector is crucial for Indonesia as it employs a significant workforce. Over the past 10 years, Indonesia has consistently recorded a trade surplus with the US, with the surplus averaging USD 12-15 billion per year from 2021 to 2025 (Rahayu and Setiawan, 2025).

US investment through Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has been recorded in strategic, technology- and capital-intensive sectors, particularly energy, mining, technology, and the digital economy. The US consistently ranks among the top 10 foreign investors in Indonesia, with annual realizations between USD 2.5 and 3.5 billion (Lidyana, 2025).

However, the global financial system, dominated by the US with the US dollar, means that US monetary policy has a significant impact on the stability of the rupiah exchange rate. This is also supported by US institutional investors' significant shareholding on the Indonesia Stock Exchange (Widiyastuti, 2025).

The above explanation demonstrates that Indonesia's relationship and dependence on China are primarily

volume and infrastructure-based, while its economic relationship with the US is strategic and financial. A consistent trade surplus with the US provides a crucial foreign exchange cushion for national economic stability. Therefore, in addressing the South China Sea conflict, Indonesia must not only assess sovereignty risks but also maintain a balance to maintain open access to the US manufacturing market and financial system, as a counterbalance to China's investment dominance.

Therefore, a functional approach in the form of maritime security cooperation and the eradication of IUU Fishing is a middle way to assert the state's presence in border areas without having to trigger an escalation that has the potential to damage the established economic integration.

16. Involvement of Non-ASEAN Countries

a. Japan's Role and Interests

Despite having no claims in the South China Sea, Japan emphasizes the security of maritime routes and freedom of navigation as strategic priorities. This is understandable, given that the shipping lanes of the Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea, the Lombok Strait, and the Sulawesi Strait are Japan's energy lifeblood. Approximately 90% of Japan's crude oil, liquefied natural gas, and coal imports from the Middle East, Africa, and

Southeast Asia must pass through these strategic shipping lanes (Suryowati, 2026).

Besides energy, Japan also has political and economic interests in ensuring ASEAN stability, as well as ensuring the security of Japanese companies that operate in ASEAN countries.

In response to the above, Japan launched a Proactive Contribution to Peace policy, strengthening military capabilities, assisting with defense capacity development, actively participating in joint military exercises with Southeast Asian countries and the US, and strengthening defense alliances to balance China's influence in the region (Zaelani and Rahayu, 2022). Japan also supports local capacity development in strategic areas like Natuna through fisheries infrastructure assistance (Sutriyanto, 2026).

For Indonesia and ASEAN, Japan's involvement in the South China Sea issue is strategic and relatively acceptable, focusing on constructive cooperation, maritime stability, and compliance with international law. Japan actively participates through three main pillars: strengthening maritime law and coast guard cooperation, defense cooperation, and addressing emerging security issues such as disaster management and cyber security (Reyhansyah, 2025). Japan also supports the enhancement of ASEAN countries' maritime capacity through

grants or soft loans for the procurement of patrol vessels, joint exercises, and the transfer of defense technology based on international law. This support strengthens regional stability and prevents military misunderstandings (Da Costa, 2026).

ASEAN respects Japan's role as a non-claimant strategic partner contributing to regional security. Japan's support is seen as aligned with ASEAN's interests in safeguarding vital trade routes, upholding maritime norms, and mitigating tensions through diplomatic engagement (Pradana, 2024).

b. Involvement of Other Non-ASEAN Countries

Apart from Japan, there are also several other non-ASEAN countries that have shown increasing involvement, including:

- 1) Australia actively participates in maritime security cooperation, military exercises, and supports international law-based rules. Australia was one of the most vocal in its support of the 2016 Arbitration Ruling, which declared the nine-dash line claim to have no basis in international law (Soehandoko, 2024).

- 2) India has a strategic interest in ensuring freedom of navigation and expanding its role in the Indo-Pacific, including cooperation with ASEAN. This includes active

involvement in joint military exercises with ASEAN countries and its support for the 2016 Arbitral Award. Through the QUAD alliance, India seeks to balance China's influence in the region (Debora, 2024).

3) The EU also engages in normative diplomacy, emphasizing the importance of freedom of navigation and non-traditional security cooperation. The EU consistently emphasizes that disputes must be resolved through international law, reaffirming its commitment to a rules-based international order and curbing aggressive behavior (Fajri, 2023).

4) South Korea has a significant interest in the stability of shipping and trade routes and seeks to enhance maritime security cooperation with ASEAN. South Korea also fully supports the implementation of international legal principles and the unhindered passage of shipping for all countries (rtm.gov.my, 2024).

The involvement of these state actors and regional entities not only creates strategic diversification opportunities for Indonesia and ASEAN, but also adds to the complexity of managing regional stability.

CONCLUSION

The dynamics of the South China Sea are the result of a complex interaction between international legal factors, national sovereignty interests, geopolitical rivalries, and regional and global economic interconnectedness. This conflict is not only related to territorial claims but also reflects the shifting balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region.

China's actions in the disputed area demonstrate a structured approach commonly referred to as a salami-slicing strategy. China systematically continues to dispatch its fishing vessels to operate in these waters, escorted by its maritime assets. Meanwhile, China also continually disrupts the maritime patrol assets of other claimant states while continuing to build on the ground, including the reclamation and militarization of artificial islands. In this approach, China also seeks to bypass ASEAN as a regional organization and prioritize bilateral relations between claimant states, leveraging its military and economic superiority.

Indonesia occupies a unique and strategic position in this context. Although not a claimant state in the disputed islands and reefs in the South China Sea, Indonesia, as an archipelagic state, has significant direct interests, particularly regarding sovereign rights in the North Natuna Sea Exclusive Economic Zone, parts of which overlap with China's nine-dash line claim. Under the 1982 UNCLOS,

Indonesia's claim to the area has a strong legal basis, while China's historical claims lack international legal legitimacy.

Indonesia's response to these dynamics has been implemented through a combination of strategic measures, including assertive sovereignty enforcement and a cautious diplomatic approach. Strengthening its military presence and maritime law enforcement, naming the North Natuna Sea, finalizing maritime boundary delimitation with neighboring countries, and implementing an anti-IUU fishing policy demonstrate Indonesia's commitment to protecting its national interests. At the same time, Indonesia remains consistent with the principles of a free and active foreign policy and positions ASEAN as a key pillar of regional diplomacy.

At the regional level, ASEAN plays a crucial role through the principle of ASEAN Centrality, negotiations on the ASEAN-China Code of Conduct (COC), and the implementation of confidence-building measures (CBMs). However, the effectiveness of this role remains limited by the differing internal interests of ASEAN member states and external pressures stemming from the rivalry between the United States and China. The involvement of non-ASEAN countries such as Japan, India, Australia, and the European Union not only opens up opportunities for diversifying maritime cooperation but also

adds to the complexity of regional management.

The crises in Venezuela and Iran in early 2026 were not merely regional dynamics but also catalysts for escalation in the South China Sea. For China, the inability of the rules-based global order to prevent unilateralism in Venezuela and Iran was evidence of the collapse of Western hegemony. China's response in the region was predicted to become increasingly assertive, exploiting the US's strategic overstretch to consolidate its territorial claims. In this context, Indonesia and ASEAN must recognize that instability in Latin America and the Middle East directly increases security risks in the South China Sea, as China will use this momentum to test the resilience and defense independence of countries in the region.

The combination of the weakening rule of international law, which is facing existential challenges, the decline of US legitimacy, and the decline in trust in the US due to the crises in Venezuela and Iran, are strong signals that the Western security umbrella is under threat. Therefore, independent military modernization and strengthening ASEAN Centrality are not merely options, but strategic imperatives for Indonesia and ASEAN to secure their respective national interests in the South China Sea.

Suggested Actions

To address the dynamics of the South China Sea sustainably, here are several strategic steps that can serve as action suggestions for countries and other global actors.

Indonesia

- a. Strengthening consistency based on international law. Indonesia needs to continue to affirm UNCLOS 1982 as the sole legitimate legal framework for maritime governance, through bilateral, regional, and global fora diplomacy.
- b. Increasing the state's presence in the North Natuna Sea. This presence will not only be military, but also involve civil law enforcement, maritime economic development, and empowerment of Natuna's coastal communities.
- c. Integrating hard and soft power. Strengthening defense must be balanced with active diplomacy, including establishing clear but measured redlines to prevent escalation.
- d. Strengthening Indonesia's role as an ASEAN agenda-setter. Indonesia needs to continue promoting ASEAN unity and ensuring that the Code of Conduct (COC) does not harm the interests of non-claimant states, particularly regarding the North Natuna Sea EEZ.
- e. Diversifying strategic partnerships. Indonesia is advised to expand maritime security, technology, and economic

cooperation with non-ASEAN partners such as Japan, Australia, and the European Union without compromising the principle of free and active cooperation.

Countries in the Region (ASEAN)

- a. Strengthening ASEAN Unity and ASEAN Centrality. ASEAN countries need to prioritize the collective interests of the region over short-term bilateral interests.
- b. Promote the development of a substantive and effective Code of Conduct. The Code must be consistent with UNCLOS, have a clear implementation mechanism, and serve as a conflict management instrument, not a tool for legitimizing unilateral claims.
- c. Continually increase the presence of symbols of each country's sovereignty within its territory. Facing a salami-slicing strategy, countries in the region must not weaken under pressure. This is because China will continue to pressure those perceived as weak and impose its "facts on the ground" to become normal and acceptable to those countries.
- d. Expanding Confidence Building Measures (CBMs). ASEAN needs to strengthen incident prevention mechanisms, military transparency, and non-traditional maritime cooperation.

Global Actors and Non-ASEAN Countries

- a. Respect international law and ASEAN's role. Global actors need to

support UNCLOS 1982 and not undermine ASEAN centrality through unilateral approaches.

b. Support stability without escalation. Presence and engagement in the South China Sea should focus on conflict prevention and regional capacity building, not military provocation.

c. Promote inclusive maritime cooperation. Cooperation in the areas of navigational safety, marine environmental protection, and disaster management can be a means of building trust.

Conflict management and stability management in the South China Sea require a multidimensional approach that combines international law, regional capacity, regional diplomacy, and the management of global geopolitical and economic power. For ASEAN, this presents a challenge to demonstrate the principles of ASEAN Unity and ASEAN Centrality through strategic steps on the ground and through diplomacy with China, consistently and sustainably. For Indonesia, this challenge also presents an opportunity to affirm its role as a constructive, principled, and peace-oriented middle power in the region.

Overall, the stability of the South China Sea depends on a balance between the enforcement of international law, the management of great power rivalries, the ability of regional countries to enhance their defense capacity and independence,

and maintaining ongoing constructive dialogue and cooperation with both regional and international countries. This study has limitations as it relies on data and information that are dynamic and constantly evolving in response to political, security, and diplomatic developments at both regional and global levels. Portions of the analysis also depend on media reports and official statements from various parties, which may be subject to bias, differing framing, limited access, or information that has not been independently verified. Consequently, the study's findings should be understood as a snapshot based on information available during the research period rather than as definitive conclusions. Further research is recommended to periodically update data; broaden triangulation through official documents, international judicial rulings, academic sources, and field data; and conduct comparative and longitudinal analyses to assess changes in state positions, veto usage practices, the consistency of international law application, and the impact of the shift toward an increasingly multipolar global order.

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