

## **Geopolitics of the South China Sea during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Indonesia's National Interest and Geostrategy in the North Natuna Sea**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Problem of territorial disputes in the South China Sea have long occurred in the dynamics of Indo-Pacific international politics. However, it is interesting that during the Covid-19 Pandemic situation, the conflict between Indonesia and China is increasingly accompanied by the involvement of the United States and Russia in the region. This essay aims to describe Indonesia's national and geostrategic interests in the South China Sea conflicts region. This study uses qualitative methods, then data is collected using interviews and documentation. The results of this study found that Indonesia is interested in maintaining the sovereignty and economic potential in the North Natuna Sea. Indonesia is increasing patrols and military cooperation with the United States as a way to show sovereignty, even though China also influences the Indonesian economy, especially in investment. In addition, Indonesia is cooperating with Russia in exploring and exploiting oil and natural gas in the North Natuna Sea region. This military and business cooperation have become Indonesia's geostrategy in counteracting China's intervention in the North Natuna Sea region. The geostrategic implications strengthen Indonesia's position in regional politics, especially related to defending territorial sovereignty from the threat of other countries.

**Keywords:** China Sea, Indonesian Interests, Geostrategy.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Covid 19 pandemic which began to spread to various countries in 2020 caused various countries to implement lockdown policies, limiting people's activities and mobility within the country and abroad. The pandemic situation in the world began to be under control in 2021 with the discovery of vaccines and various methods of handling Covid 19 patients. Even though the world situation is facing the threat of a virus, the conflict situation in the South China Sea region continues. Such as China's claim to the North Natuna Sea

which is Indonesian territory, then China's attack on Vietnamese ships in the Paracel Islands, China's exploration of survey and coast guard ships in the South China Sea area, and the involvement of the United States (US) in the conflict (Azwar, 2020). Therefore, the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic in this study is to explain the limitation of study time focused on the Pandemic period, 2020-2021.

The international community knows the South China Sea as a geographical map of the sea bordering China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. This sea has various economic potentials, such as shipping lanes, fisheries, oil and natural gas. The South China Sea dispute began to become a public issue when China published the nine-dash line as their maritime area based on historical aspects. In 2009, China submitted a nine-dash line to the United Nations and received protests from Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia (Bangun, 2021). Indonesia filed a protest because the map entered the Indonesian Exclusive Economic Zone, to be precise in the northern region of the Natuna Islands (Prabowo, 2013).

Previous research about the South China Sea has been conducted by Nie (2016); Steffens (2013); Kim (2015); Prakoso, et al (2022). Nie (2016) discusses China's foreign policy dilemma between One Belt, One Road (OBOR) or the South China Sea (SCS), in this context, OBOR issues are seen as Xi Jinping's political performance because they are part of China's big agenda in the future. In addition, responding to China's big agenda, especially those related to the South China Sea, the United States is involved because the issues in this region are related to natural resource development, freedom of navigation, and sovereignty disputes. Steffens (2013) explains that the United States hegemon is likely to be rhetorical in this case and cannot solve the essential problem. After that, research related to territorial disputes in the South China Sea has been conducted by Kim (2015), this research emphasizes

that changes and continuation of China's foreign policy implicated territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Then, there is research related to China and Indonesia in the South China Sea which has been researched by Prakoso, et al (2022), this research focuses on discussing the intersection between the Belt Road Initiative and the Global Maritime Fulcrum so that this research suggests that Indonesia should pay more attention to foreign policy in responding to these issues.

Indonesia has an interest in maintaining state sovereignty and exploiting the potential economy that exists in the North Natuna Sea region through exploration and exploitation (Sulistyani, et al, 2021). Diplomatic efforts and preparing military forces have been carried out by the Indonesian government in response to the conflict in the South China Sea (Sulistyani, et al, 2021). Indonesia's position in the conflict is seen as strategic, so in 2021 the Government of Indonesia will be visited by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the United States, Anthony Blinken (Adhi, 2021), and the Secretary of the Russian National Security Council, Nikolay Patrushev (Chaterine, 2021). The two envoys discussed various strategic issues in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), such as Indonesia's role in regional security, especially related to the South China Sea. Therefore, this research is important to answer Indonesia's role in resolving territorial disputes in the North Natuna Sea. Thus, what distinguishes this research from other studies is not only looking at Indonesia's interests in maintaining sovereignty, but also other strategies besides strengthening defense and diplomacy.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research aims to describe Indonesia's national interests in responding to conflicts in the South China Sea, especially regarding the geostrategy of the Indonesian Government in building cooperation with the United States and Russia. The research design is descriptive qualitative, then the research data sources consist of primary data and also secondary data,

primary data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions, while secondary data were collected through library studies and documentation. In addition, the data analysis technique in this study refers to Miles & Huberman (1992: 16), starting with data reduction, then presenting data, and finally drawing conclusions.

The following discussion relates to Indonesia's national interest in the dynamics of conflict in the South China Sea and Indonesia's Geostrategy in the North Natuna Sea which has been claimed by China's nine-dash line.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **National Interest and Indonesia's Response to the Dynamics of the South China Sea Conflict**

The problems and disputes in the South China Sea are related to Indonesia because Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone in the North Natuna is claimed by China. In addition, China entered the Indonesian Exclusive Economic Zone area and carried out various activities so that it was given a warning by the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla). The South China Sea conflict began to involve Indonesia after China's claim to the northern Natuna Islands. China claims that they have the right to manage these waters with the traditional fishing zone argument (Dugis, 2016: 97). These claims continued from 2009, 2010, 2013, 2016, 2019, and 2020, it was recorded by Bakamla that several Chinese fishing vessels and coast guards sailed and entered the Indonesian Exclusive Economic Zone and carried out various illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing activities. In 2020, when the world was facing the Covid-19 Pandemic, Indonesia received a protest note from China because of oil and natural gas drilling activities in the North Natuna Sea area, China claimed that the area was its property (Iswara, 2020). Thus, the protest had an impact on the increasing problem of territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

Every country basically has interests to strive for and achieve, including

realizing and maintaining something in the interests of the country. National interests in the context of international relations are the assumptions of a nation related to state interests, such as security, freedom, justice, and prosperity (Jackson & Sorensen, 2013). In general, national interests are in the aspects of defense interest, economic interest, world order interest, and ideological interest (Williams, 2012). Defense interests relate to the role of the state in protecting its citizens, territory, and political system from other countries. Furthermore, economic interests relating to affairs in the economy are related to the welfare of citizens. In addition, the interests of the world order show the interests of the state in an international political and economic order. Meanwhile, ideological interests relate to the state's strategy in protecting state ideology and campaigning for it as a universal value in the international community.



**Figure 1. Territorial Disputes in South China Sea**

Source: McNamara (2018)

Facing problems in the South China Sea, the Government of Indonesia basically has an interest in protecting and defending state sovereignty in the territorial waters of the North Natuna Sea. In addition, Indonesia wants to defend its rights to explore and exploit the area (Sulistiyani, et al, 2021). Indonesia's interests in this context relate to defense and economic aspects. As a sovereign country and has the right to manage the Exclusive Economic Zone which has been claimed by China, the Indonesian government is obliged to maintain state sovereignty to maintain regional security and economic activity in the North Natuna Sea region. Apart from that, the Exclusive Economic Zone is also protected by UNCLOS 1982 so there is no reason for the Indonesian Government not to defend its sovereignty in the North Natuna Sea.

Indonesia carries out various strategies to achieve its national interests in the North Natuna Sea. Such as the collaboration between Bakamla and the United State Coast Guard (Aris, 2019), and the cooperation and military training between the Indonesian National Army and the United States Army (Yahya, 2021). China responds to this cooperation as a policy that can muddy the atmosphere in the South China Sea. However, by carrying out this cooperation, Indonesia can defend the country's interests in maintaining sovereignty, especially in the North Natuna Sea Exclusive Economic Zone. The cooperation between the coast guard and the military in carrying out joint exercises illustrates the country's vigilance and readiness in facing threats from other countries. In addition, cooperation with the US illustrates Indonesia's position in the South China Sea conflict which is more in favor of the US position to prevent China's control of the route.

The South China Sea is claimed by China, resulting in disputes with countries in Southeast Asia, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. The territorial waters of these countries are claimed directly by China, so this issue was brought to international arbitration and it was decided that China had no rights over these waters. China's historical foundation cannot be

used as a legal basis in the international world. Indonesia's maritime territory is not claimed by China, but parts of Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone are claimed by the nine-dash line which is very far from mainland China. In addition, Indonesia is currently exploring and exploiting oil and natural gas in the Exclusive Economic Zone area. Then, China protested this exploration with the argument that this area was their territory (Sorongan, 2021).

International law (UNCLOS 1982) stipulates that the Exclusive Economic Zone area may be passed by ships from any country, so it does not require permission from the owner of the zone. However, to obtain economic potential in the region, it is the authority of the owner of the Exclusive Economic Zone. Chinese maritime ships and research ships have been patrolled in the Indonesian Exclusive Economic Zone area, if their interests are only to pass, then they are allowed and do not need to apply for a permit from the Indonesian government. However, if its interests are to exploit natural resources in the North Natuna Sea, then Indonesia has the right to expel China from the area. From time to time, the Indonesian Navy and Bakamla conduct patrols in the North Natuna Sea area, but this method is not optimal. Likewise, with the open protest strategy, this method is also not optimal. China keeps repeating and violating Indonesia's sovereignty in the North Natuna Sea. Most violations committed by China are resolved through semi-chamber diplomacy, meaning that they are mostly completed behind the scenes, not open to the public.

### **Indonesia's Geostrategy in the North Natuna Sea**

The geographical aspect is fundamental in determining a country's foreign policy. A country's foreign policy is greatly influenced by geographic location because it considers location, size, topography, climate, natural resources, and population. Likewise, the international geopolitical system was built based on a combination of the hierarchy of major and regional power (Cohen, 2015). Major power is a country that has the vision to dominate and

strengthen its influence as a whole, not only at the regional level. Meanwhile, regional power only has limited influence at the regional level. In this context, major power can be seen from the different interests between China and the United States. China has the ambition to expand its influence in the South China Sea with a nine-dash line policy, while the United States has an interest in maintaining freedom of navigation in the South China Sea region.

The hierarchical system in international geopolitics is dynamic so it can change according to the power conditions of a country. State power can be classified based on military capabilities, excess energy, and ability to invest in other countries, an ideology that can be a model, and a stable government system (Cohen, 2015). The role of China and the United States in the South China Sea signifies the conflict of interests between the two major countries. Apart from that, in the process, Russia is also involved in the issue, so this problem does not only involve one great power but several major powers in the world. Russia's involvement is related to Indonesia's geostrategic strategy in creating a balance of power in the South China Sea region. A country can use a hedging strategy through cooperation in bilateral relations and building insurance policies against potential threats from other countries (Kusumasomantri, 2015). In addition, a country can use a bandwagoning strategy using a country with less power allying with a country with more power (Dugis, 2016). Hedging strategy has been implemented by implementing bilateral cooperation and diplomacy, such as military and business cooperation which aims to strengthen Indonesia's presence in the South China Sea conflict area. Likewise, the bandwagoning strategy, this strategy is implemented by conducting joint exercises with the US and other interested countries in the South China Sea.

The United States has an interest in maintaining freedom of navigation in the South China Sea region. However, the territory is claimed by China, so the United States continues to maneuver to maintain a free and open Indo-



Pacific. The United States has the principle that the area must be open and there must be no threats. Then, the United States has an interest in keeping the area free, because it is a strategic shipping lane for trade from various countries, including US ships. China has ambitions to control the area because they want to dominate the South China Sea and limit the free passage of ships. These shipping restrictions can have a major impact on China's political and economic conditions in monopolizing shipping in the South China Sea region. One of the stages to increase China's influence on the world order is to control the shipping area of the South China Sea.

The South China Sea conflict does not only involve China and the United States but also countries that are members of AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and United States). In addition, Germany also provides support for freedom of navigation and AUKUS by sending a warship to sail in the South China Sea and transit at the Port of Singapore. Both China and the United States are strengthening various aspects, such as defense, and economy to foreign policy to increase their influence in the South China Sea region. Apart from that, conflicts in the South China Sea also occur among member countries of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), such as Vietnam, Philippines, and Malaysia. Sea borders between these countries are still polemic, but they are still within the scope of ASEAN so they can be communicated. Meanwhile, the conflict with China is more difficult to communicate because it is outside the scope of ASEAN.

China with the ambition of a nine-dash line map has an interest in strengthening defense and economic aspects, as well as exploiting oil and gas, fisheries, and shipping permits in the region. There is a global fight between China and countries with interests in the South China Sea. The United States wants the status quo in the Asia Pacific and sees China as a country with the potential to become a new hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. The United States with its military and economic power opposes China's expansion by increasing

the frequency of Freedom of Navigation Operation activities (Hutama, 2019). China has a nine-dash line vision and maritime sector to secure strategic lines, energy supply, and trade routes. However, not all agree with China, such as Vietnam, even though it is a communist country, they see China as a threat, as well as other countries in the South China Sea who feel disturbed by China.

The United States is strengthening cooperation with various countries in the South China Sea region with joint military exercises to maintain free navigation. Countries that cooperate with the United States to balance China's strength include South Korea, Japan, and India. These countries territorially have different views from China in terms of the South China Sea. The United States continues to strengthen maritime defense and security cooperation in the Asia Pacific region to maintain the status quo and prevent China from becoming bigger and growing as a regional hegemony in the region.

Based on geopolitics in the South China Sea, both during the Covid-19 pandemic and before, Indonesia must adhere to the principle of free and active. The Government of Indonesia has made various efforts, ranging from diplomacy, and defense and security cooperation. However, based on research observations, in the end, during the Covid-19 Pandemic Indonesia must support countries that respect the sovereignty of each country and also respect freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific. Indonesia has implemented various strategies in responding to China's claims over the waters of the North Natuna Sea. In the context of sovereignty, Indonesia supports the United States' idea to maintain freedom of navigation in the region. The Indo-Pacific terminology is strongly avoided by China as it depicts the strong US influence in the Asia Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific concept relates to free and open navigation, and this terminology is used by Indonesia in order to recognize US influence and conduct defense and military cooperation at sea and in the air.

In addition, Indonesia has also conducted joint military exercises with the US since 2009, and more intensely in 2021 and 2022, this exercise was

named "Garuda Shield" (Welle, 2022). However, that does not mean that Indonesia is fully on the side of the US, Indonesia is cooperating with a Russian national company in exploring and exploiting natural resources in the North Natuna region, Indonesia is also strengthening bilateral relations by buying Russian defense equipment despite the threat of an embargo from the US. The arrival of the US Secretary of State and the Secretary of the Russian Security Council illustrates the geopolitical cooperation between Indonesia and these countries. Even though China is one of the biggest investors in Indonesia, it is worth appreciating that Indonesia's foreign policy in dealing with threats to sovereignty from China in the North Natuna Sea cannot be intervened.

Conflicts in the South China Sea can be used as political capital to increase a country's leverage in the region. Indonesia's national interest in this context is to gain access to improve defense, if the US wants freedom of navigation and a free open Indo-Pacific, then Indonesia's interest is to maintain sovereignty. The position of defense and security cooperation between conflicting countries in the South China Sea should be used to gain access to military technology transfer, and defense cooperation, without having to get involved in a defense fact. In addition, Indonesia and China can continue to increase trade and investment cooperation.

Everything depends on the national interests of a country, countries in ASEAN can learn from diplomatic relations and cooperation between Australia and China. Australia's biggest trade cooperation is with China, not with the US. However, in terms of regional defense and stability, Australia's Deputy for Defense straightforwardly considered China as a threat, so Australia joined AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States) because sovereignty for a country is number one. AUKUS is a trilateral security commitment between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (US) established on September 15, 2021, the group was formed to develop and mobilize nuclear submarines, and Western military in the Pacific region. China is needed for

investment, and trade cooperation, but sovereignty remains a priority for the country. Indonesia can join with the US to defend its sovereignty and can also cooperate with China for investment. Just like Bung Hatta's foreign policy philosophy "rowing between two rocks", meaning that you don't have to go straight, but you can also zigzag according to circumstances. The Indonesian Government's way of building cooperation with Russian SOEs is quite a smart geostrategy because China's foreign policy is often in the same direction as Russia's so China will think again if it interferes with Russia's business interests in the North Natuna Sea.

Joint military exercises conducted by Indonesia and the US, coupled with Japan, Australia and Singapore in support of freedom of navigation caused protests from China, but the government did not respond to the issue. The military exercise attracted more than 5,000 troops and was claimed to be the largest such exercise since 2009, with the US Embassy in Jakarta explaining that the exercise was to strengthen cooperation in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific (Welle, 2022). Although ideally it can be responded to because it alludes to sovereignty and foreign intervention in the country's domestic affairs. Indonesia's interests in terms of sovereignty are based on common interests. It can be predicted that if Indonesia supports China, it is likely that other countries will protest. The national interest in maintaining sovereignty is the main thing. Ideally, Indonesia could be firm and straightforward like Australia in defining potential threats from every direction of the border, be it sea, land, or air. However, Indonesia still carries out politics so that everyone is happy. To be able to act decisively and straightforwardly, Indonesia must have modalities in the military, economy, and foreign policy, so that it can be categorized as a strong country. Military cooperation with various countries illustrates that Indonesia is not completely dependent on China, even though many national strategic projects depend on investment from China. In the case of the South China Sea, the influence of Chinese investment cannot intervene

in Indonesia's foreign policy, especially regarding the nine-dash line claims in the North Natuna Sea.

In essence, every country must work together to build world peace (Doyle, 1983). Diverse interests are one of the causes of the difficulty in building world cooperation and peace. Like the difference in interests between China and United States, China has an interest in fighting for its historical territory through a nine-dash line, while US interests are maintaining freedom of navigation in the Asia-Pacific region. These different interests have created tensions among countries that oppose China's ambitions in the South China Sea. In general, countries in ASEAN support the US role because of their national interests. Every interest is of course based on economic calculations, and security considerations. Goerevitch (1978) explains that the international system encourages each country to strengthen its economic and military capabilities. Strong countries can influence the international system, but weak countries tend to follow the flow of the international system. Apart from that, Mearsheimer (2006) explains that the state must pursue power because the anarchic structure of the international system illustrates that there is no guarantee that a country will not attack other countries, so every state must be strong. Conflict and dispute situations require the state to design foreign policies as well as possible, national interests are the main consideration in formulating a policy. When compared, China's military and economic strength are greater than the combined strength of countries in ASEAN. The defense equipment of countries in Southeast Asia has also not been able to match China's military strength. Thus, Indonesia and the countries that are in the South China Sea conflict must be able to increase their strength, both in soft power and hard power.

## CONCLUSION

Indonesia's national interest in the South China Sea conflict is to maintain the sovereignty and economic potential that exists in the North

Natuna Sea because it has been claimed by China. Indonesia took various strategies to maintain its sovereignty, starting from responding to China's violations, conducting diplomacy, increasing patrols, and military cooperation with the United States. Even though China has a great influence on investment in national strategic projects in Indonesia, in terms of Indonesian sovereignty it cannot be intervened. Then, in terms of exploiting the economic potential in the North Natuna Sea, Indonesia is exploring and exploiting oil and natural gas resources in the region.

Indonesia's geostrategy is built with cooperation between countries, in terms of Indonesia's sovereignty in favor of common interests and against the nine-dash line. The political maneuvers of the United States in maintaining the status quo terminology of the Indo-Pacific and freedom of navigation strengthened Indonesia's position in maintaining its sovereignty. Furthermore, the exploration and exploitation cooperation between Indonesia and Russia in the North Natuna Sea region strengthens Indonesia's position in managing the Exclusive Economic Zone, because Russia is a strong country that has good relations with China.

The South China Sea conflict provides many lessons for the Government of Indonesia, that it is a strong country that influences the world's geopolitical situation. Meanwhile, weaker countries will be affected by the ambitions of strong countries to dominate the world order both politically and economically. Therefore, Indonesia and the countries in ASEAN must increase their capabilities in various fields, both in increasing military technology, economy, and political influence in international politics.

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