

Indonesia's Defense Strategy in the South China Sea: Balancing Sovereignty, Security, and Diplomacy Amid China's Expansion

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ABSTRACT

This article examines China's strategic environment in the South China Sea (SCS), focusing on political, economic, and geopolitical factors influencing its regional policies and their implications for Indonesia. By incorporating the concepts of total war and people's war, along with Indonesia's maritime strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), this study provides a comprehensive analysis of power dynamics in the region. The research highlights Indonesia's strategic challenges, including breaches of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in Natuna, the growing economic reliance on China, and the necessity for diplomatic and military adjustments to safeguard national interests. Indonesia's role in ASEAN and its balanced foreign policy are essential in mitigating these challenges. Future research could further explore Indonesia's long-term strategic adjustments to counter China's influence while maintaining economic cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

China has played a crucial role in world geopolitics due to its increasing economic and military might (Ardila & Rodríguez, 2018). One of the primary locations where its national interests collide with global potential and problems is the South China Sea (SCS) (Deshmukh, 2020). Given its natural riches and geopolitical location, this area is strategically significant to China. Additionally, the SCS is a crucial maritime intersection that is significant for both military policy and international trade. Furthermore, a third of world trade goes through it annually, which makes it a key location for China's economic interests and power projection. Moreover, China's aggressive stance in the SCS is also driven by strategic nationalism, which aims to assert dominance and control over the region through military modernization and the development of several islands (Levesque, 2018) (Kelly, 2018).

With this background, Indonesia must strengthen cooperation with neighboring countries and other international actors to ensure that its foreign policy can counterbalance China's influence while maintaining its sovereignty and territorial integrity (Wuryandari, 2018). Indonesia may be a major player in establishing regional stability and security as well as a balance of power in the area with a proactive strategy and cautious diplomacy. Along with strengthening its status as a leader in regional organizations like ASEAN, this also gives Indonesia the chance to mediate possible disputes (Anwar, 2020). Therefore, strengthening military and diplomatic capabilities will be a crucial step in defending national interests and fostering advantageous partnerships with other nations in the area. To handle the increasingly complicated and dynamic global problems, Indonesia must also keep stepping up its defence and economic cooperation with friendly nations. In addition to safeguarding its own interests, Indonesia will be able to support international peace and stability by expanding its defense capabilities and diplomatic network (Setiawan & Paschalina, 2020). So why has China emerged as a major force in regional and international geopolitics? How does China safeguard its interests through the use of deterrent power? What effects do China's cooperation and strategies have on Indonesia?

Because of its quick economic development and growing political and military clout, China is a major player in both regional and global geopolitics (Markey, 2020). Furthermore, China's Belt and Road plan has strengthened bilateral relationships and increased economic dependency by opening up substantial investment and connectivity prospects in several nations, including Indonesia (Pasaribu et al., 2023). Therefore, Indonesia needs to assess the impact of this increasingly close relationship and develop strategies that can maximize benefits while minimizing the risks that may arise from this dependence. One of the steps that Indonesia can take is to strengthen multilateral diplomacy with other countries to create balance in international relations, so as not to rely solely on one major power (Risman, 2020). While preserving its sovereignty and national interests, this approach will assist Indonesia in growing its network of cooperation and opening up new trade, investment, and technological prospects. With an emphasis on the diplomatic,

economic, and security ramifications, the aim of this study is to examine China's deterrence policy in the South China Sea and its applicability to Indonesia.

Conceptual Framework

This study aims to analyze China's deterrence strategies in the SCS and their implications for Indonesia. Using Clausewitz's concept of total war and people's war, as well as contemporary Indonesian defense strategies, the research provides a comprehensive perspective on Indonesia's role in regional security. The concept of "total war" was first introduced through Clausewitz's writings, who derived his understanding from studying Napoleon's war strategies. In the 20th century, this concept evolved by incorporating the role of the "people," aligning more closely with Clausewitz's definition of war as the continuation of politics by other means (Priyanto, 2024). Since the people's will often drives politics and governs resource allocation, strategists employing total people's war must consider the political landscape behind every action. Mobilizing soldiers for war, whether partially or fully, requires significant resources, and if political leaders perceive a lack of public support, internal disunity may arise, ultimately undermining the entire campaign. This perspective reinforces the general definition of total people's war as a politically organized insurgency against an established order or imperialist forces (Marks & Rich, 2017).

The historical application of total war underscores its significance in large-scale conflicts. The Soviet Union's adoption of total war principles during World War II exemplifies how mass mobilization contributed to victory (Edele, 2013). Similarly, the Vietnam War demonstrated the effectiveness of people's war strategies against technologically superior forces (Herberg-Rothe, 2007). These cases highlight the crucial role of integrating military strategy with civilian involvement in modern conflicts, including maritime security in Southeast Asia.

The intersection of total war and maritime security can be analyzed through the lens of realism and liberalism in international relations. Realism, as explained by Robert Jervis (1998), posits that states act based on national interests and prioritize military power as a strategic tool. Conversely, liberalism emphasizes international cooperation and institutions to foster collective security and diplomatic engagement (Zwolski, 2021). These frameworks provide valuable insights into regional geopolitical dynamics, shaping how nations navigate complex security challenges.

The practical application of these theories is evident in the various measures undertaken by Southeast Asian nations to ensure maritime security and stability. Collaborative efforts such as joint maritime patrols, diplomatic dispute resolution, and security agreements contribute to reducing tensions and fostering inter-state trust (Damayanti, 2017). As new challenges emerge, including climate change and increased military activity in strategic waters, regional cooperation becomes even more critical. Nations must commit to information-sharing, resource allocation, and the development of innovative maritime diplomacy mechanisms to effectively address environmental and security concerns. By integrating military strategy with cooperative diplomatic

efforts, countries can strengthen regional stability while navigating the evolving geopolitical landscape.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Total War Strategy

Total war strategy, rooted in Clausewitzian principles, underscores the integration of military, economic, and civilian resources to achieve war objectives. This concept has evolved into people's war, emphasizing the role of civilian engagement in national security efforts (Syarifuddin et al., 2021). In the South China Sea context, China's militarization strategy can be analyzed through this lens, as its approach incorporates economic expansion and regional influence alongside military power. Similarly, Indonesia's defense response necessitates a comprehensive approach that integrates national resources, diplomatic efforts, and military preparedness (Priyanto, 2024). A comprehensive total war strategy, integrating military and economic measures, enhances Indonesia's ability to respond to geopolitical challenges in the South China Sea.

Realism Theory

According to Robert Jervis (1998), realism is a theory in international relations that emphasizes that states act based on national interests and prioritize military power as a strategic tool to achieve geopolitical objectives (Jervis, 1998). In the context of the South China Sea, realism explains how China utilizes its economic, political, and military power to safeguard its interests in the region. Other countries, including Indonesia, respond by strengthening their defense strategies and diplomatic efforts to mitigate the risks of conflict escalation. China's increasing military presence in the South China Sea significantly impacts regional security and Indonesia's defense strategy.

Liberalism Theory

Liberalism focuses on international cooperation and the role of institutions in maintaining global stability (Zwolski, 2021). This theory is relevant in understanding how ASEAN and Indonesia seek to balance China's influence through multilateral diplomacy, security agreements, and economic cooperation such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Multilateral cooperation through ASEAN reduces geopolitical tensions and enhances regional security in response to China's influence in the South China Sea.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative methodology and descriptive analysis utilizing secondary data gathered from relevant literature, official documents, and journals. According to Sugiyono (2017), the descriptive qualitative method is a research strategy meant to thoroughly and methodically describe conditions or occurrences. This approach places a high value on a thorough comprehension of the topic under investigation, emphasizing the significance and context of the data collected (Sugiyono, 2017). It is anticipated that the study's findings will provide a more thorough understanding of how China's

policies impact the geopolitical dynamics in the area and will also help Indonesia develop practical solutions to these problems.

The study particularly relates to total war strategy by assessing the comprehensive mobilization of national resources—military, economic, and political—necessary to safeguard Indonesia’s sovereignty. It considers how Indonesia’s response mirrors the total war concept, ensuring the integration of defense, diplomacy, and economic policies to counterbalance China's influence. The methodological approach emphasizes the significance of strategic adaptation, military readiness, and multilateral cooperation as Indonesia navigates its security challenges in the South China Sea. Furthermore, this research will identify key factors influencing China's policy decisions and strategies, as well as their impact on bilateral relations with countries in the Southeast Asian region. With this approach, it is hoped that the research can produce an in-depth analysis of the interactions between Chinese policies and the responses of neighboring countries, as well as the long-term implications for regional stability.

RESULTS

China's Strategic Actions and Indonesia's Responses

The study analyzes China's strategic actions in the South China Sea and Indonesia’s responses based on total war strategy. The findings are categorized as follows:

Table 1. China's Strategic Actions and Indonesia’s Response

Key Factors	China’s Strategy	Indonesia’s Response	Implications
1. Military Expansion	Increased naval presence, island militarization	Strengthening defense capacity, joint patrols with ASEAN	Rising tensions, risk of regional conflicts
2. Economic Influence	Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), trade investments	Balancing economic ties, diversifying trade partnerships	Economic opportunities vs. dependency risks
3. Maritime Security	Coast Guard patrols, EEZ incursions	Strengthening maritime law enforcement	Challenges in Protecting Sovereignty
4. Diplomatic Strategy	Bilateral deals, regional coercion	Multilateral engagement through ASEAN	Need for stronger regional unity
5. Total War Strategy	Integrating economic, political, and military power	Enhancing national resilience across sectors	Long-term strategic balancing required

The findings presented in Table 1 illustrate the multifaceted strategies employed by China in the South China Sea and Indonesia’s corresponding responses. China’s military expansion, economic influence, and maritime security measures significantly impact Indonesia’s sovereignty and regional stability. In response, Indonesia has strengthened its defense capacity, engaged in multilateral diplomatic efforts, and diversified economic partnerships to mitigate dependence on China. These efforts reflect a strategic balancing act to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape.

Furthermore, the table highlights the role of total war strategy in shaping both nations' actions. China integrates economic, political, and military power to assert its dominance, while Indonesia employs a comprehensive approach to enhance national resilience. The implications of these strategies suggest a prolonged geopolitical struggle, where both countries must continuously adapt to emerging challenges and opportunities in regional security and economic affairs.

DISCUSSION

China's Deterrence Strategy in the South China Sea

To safeguard its strategic interests in the South China Sea, China has put in place a thorough deterrent plan. First, by constructing airports, military bases, and other facilities on the disputed islands, China bolsters its territorial claims. This is intended to improve military capabilities and make maritime operations and patrols in the area easier. Consequently, neighboring nations with overlapping claims have protested this action (Permal, 2014). Second, to increase its projection and deterrence capability, China has improved its military capabilities, such as nuclear submarines, contemporary warships, and long-range missiles. To support its claims, China has also stepped up military patrols and marine training in the South China Sea (Prayoga et al., 2021). Third, China has increased its regional influence through economic diplomacy. By funding infrastructure projects under the "Belt and Road" plan, China has been able to increase access to the region's natural resources and commerce routes while also establishing strong ties with nations surrounding the South China Sea. Fourth, China has exerted economic and political pressure on other nations—particularly the US—to refrain from activities that would jeopardize its South China Sea territorial claims (Prayoga et al., 2021).

However, tensions with neighboring nations and regional security competition have been brought on by China's deterrence strategy in the South China Sea. Tensions in the region have been greatly increased by China's growing military presence in the South China Sea, which is evidenced by the building of military installations on man-made islands and frequent naval drills. One important element of China's effort to bolster its military capabilities and assert its territorial claims in the South China Sea is the building of artificial islands and military facilities (Agustin et al., 2024). As a component of Xi Jinping's larger marine strategy, this militarisation approach seeks to bolster China's territorial claims and increase its power by strategic reliance and economic diplomacy, including the Belt and Road Initiative.

In addition to raising concerns for ASEAN nations, these moves also promote defense cooperation and new alliances among nations that perceive China's expansionist policies as a danger. In response, the US and its allies—including Australia and Japan—have bolstered security alliances and encouraged regional freedom of navigation. One example of this is the establishment of AUKUS, a trilateral security agreement between the US, UK, and Australia (Budiana & Djuyandi, 2023). Other nations are starting to think about bolstering their defense capabilities, establishing deeper ties with long-standing allies, and creating new plans to deal with the shifting geopolitical

landscape as a result of the region's growing tensions. By improving collaboration and military capabilities, the Philippines has also taken a more assertive posture in its South China Sea policy as a result of improved US-Philippines defense relationships (Yi, 2024).

The Significance of China in Geopolitics

China is an important actor in world geopolitics since it has a sizable military budget and the second-largest economy in the world (Chuprii, 2022). China's influence is growing, particularly in Southeast Asia, where projects and investments like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have solidified its status as a superpower with the ability to shape neighboring nations' policies (van der Zwan, 2023). Chinese investment in Indonesia has grown dramatically in recent years, generating both economic benefits and worries about dependency and its effects on national sovereignty. According to the Ministry of Investment/Investment Coordinating Board (BKPM), between 2019 and the first quarter of 2024, China invested over US\$ 30.2 billion in Indonesia. During this time, 21,022 cooperative projects have been started. China has been one of the top five foreign investment donors to Indonesia during the last five years, according to Riyatno, Deputy for Investment Cooperation at the Ministry of Investment/BKPM. China effectively established itself as Indonesia's second-largest investor in 2023, behind Singapore (Kontan, 2024). This investment growth indicates strong interest from Chinese investors, but it also demands attention to how this can affect local sectors and government policies in maintaining a balance between economic growth and national sovereignty. It is important to evaluate the long-term impact of this foreign investment, including the potential development of infrastructure and jobs that can be generated, as well as the challenges that may arise in terms of regulation and protection of local industries.

The question of how Indonesia can strike a balance between luring in foreign investment and defending its interests and economic independence is brought up by this growing reliance. In order to safeguard national interests and sovereignty in the face of foreign influence, Indonesia must balance this connection by fostering cooperative relationships that benefit both parties. With the correct approach, Indonesia may use foreign investment to boost economic expansion while maintaining domestic regulations that safeguard the nation's natural resources and important industries (Pramono & Larasati, 2022). In this situation, establishing inclusive and open policies is essential to fostering an atmosphere that is favorable to investment, where investors feel safe and local people benefit in real ways. With a holistic and participatory approach, the government can enhance trust between foreign investors and the local community, thereby creating a synergy that supports sustainable development.

Due to its key international commerce routes and possible oil and gas reserves, the South China Sea region has drawn attention. China is a major player in the global supply chain in this regard, especially in the manufacturing and technology industries. Beijing has a strong negotiating position in international negotiations because other nations rely on Chinese goods and raw commodities. However, China is under pressure from the US, which wants to

preserve freedom of navigation, as well as from nations like Vietnam and the Philippines who assert sovereignty in the South China Sea (Lee, 2017). China is using its military might to achieve this goal by establishing bases on man-made islands and a robust navy. China uses economic, diplomatic, and military might to carry out a deterrence policy (Pejić, 2022). While collaboration with ASEAN is sought to ease tensions in the South China Sea, initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are used to increase economic influence. US freedom of navigation activities are among the external dangers that the military might is deployed to deter (Oktaviano et al., 2020). To establish a reputation as a positive cooperation partner, China actively engages in the ASEAN framework and other regional forums within the framework of international collaboration (Ho, 2023). But this strategy frequently runs counter to its unilateral activities in the South China Sea, posing difficult diplomatic problems. To achieve a lasting equilibrium in its foreign relations, China must carefully balance upholding its national interests with satisfying the demands of the international community. China must encourage peaceful, mutually agreeable solutions and increase communication and diplomacy with its neighbors in order to meet this challenge.

Relevance and Implications of China's Strategy for Indonesia

Indonesia has a strong stake in preserving regional stability because it borders the South China Sea directly. China's policies and tactics in this area have an impact on Indonesia's diplomatic and economic policies in addition to maritime security (Farida & Setiyono, 2022). To safeguard its national interests when dealing with the issues that are emerging in the South China Sea, Indonesia must thus increase its cooperation with its neighbors and with international organizations. Here are some key points on how China's plan for Indonesia is relevant. First, in reference to the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) infringement. Diplomatic tensions have increased as a result of Chinese ships breaching Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in Natuna. This demonstrates the difficulties Indonesia faces in preserving its territorial integrity in the face of China's growing military presence (Pratyush Gandhi et al., 2023). As part of this measure, Indonesia must improve maritime defense and surveillance and fortify its stance in international fora to defend its rights. Second, it has to do with economic reliance. China is Indonesia's biggest trading partner and a source of growing investments. Although this relationship offers opportunities for economic growth, the increasing dependence also poses risks to Indonesia's economic sovereignty (Iksan & Soong, 2023). Therefore, it is important for Indonesia to formulate policies that can maximize the benefits of foreign investment while minimizing the risks of dependency.

The final point about the role in ASEAN follows. As ASEAN's head, Indonesia plays a crucial role in encouraging the peaceful settlement of disputes in the South China Sea. Indonesia can work with other ASEAN members to reach an agreement and develop a coordinated plan to counter China's influence (Abadi, 2023). Including initiatives to fortify regional security and diplomatic ties. A multilateral diplomatic approach comes up at number four. Indonesia has to improve multilateral diplomacy with other nations, notably

the US and other Asia-Pacific countries, in order to combat China's growing influence (Anwar, 2023). Indonesia can improve the balance of power and safeguard its interests as a nation by forming strategic alliances and fostering international cooperation. Fifth, regarding the significance of improving defense capability. Improving Indonesia's defense capabilities becomes crucial given the possible danger posed by China's unilateral operations in the South China Sea (Zou, 2023). Enhancing naval capabilities and investing in defense technology will help Indonesia preserve its maritime sovereignty and act as a deterrent to possible aggression. Seventh, in relation to prospects for economic collaboration. Along with a number of difficulties, Indonesia's commercial relationships with China offer chances to take part in significant infrastructure initiatives that might improve connectivity and spur local economic expansion (Wijaya, 2020). To guarantee that these initiatives do not jeopardize environmental or national interests, specific policies are necessary.

China's strategy is highly relevant to Indonesia in a variety of ways, including political, economic, and security. Both economically and in terms of national security, Indonesia is greatly impacted by China's growing influence in the South China Sea. Economically speaking, China is Indonesia's biggest trading partner and the two countries have a tight trading connection. Additionally, after Singapore, China is Indonesia's second-largest foreign investor (Pertwi & Saputro, 2023). However, there are risks and vulnerabilities associated with growing economic reliance on China, particularly in the case of geopolitical unrest. As a result, Indonesia must look for ways to expand its markets and sources of foreign investment while preserving equilibrium in its economic ties with China. In this context, efforts to strengthen cooperation with other countries in the Southeast Asian region also become important so that Indonesia does not rely solely on one main trading partner. By enhancing regional cooperation, Indonesia can create a more diverse trade network and strengthen its position in the global economy. Building closer relationships with countries in the region can also open up new opportunities for investment and economic growth, as well as enhance Indonesia's competitiveness in the international market (Yoshimatsu, 2022). Thus, the strategic measures taken will greatly determine the future of Indonesia's economy and its ability to adapt to the ever-evolving global challenges.

Given the Natuna region that borders the disputed territory, Indonesia's interests may be directly impacted by the escalation of the South China Sea conflict from a security standpoint. The South China Sea is home to Indonesia's most remote island, Natuna Island, which is a geopolitically delicate region. China claims the region is part of the "Nine-Dash Line" that spans nearly the whole South China Sea (Sobarini et al., 2021) and has frequently dispatched Coast Guard and military vessels to the waters of Natuna (Prayoga et al., 2021). There is no doubt that this threatens Indonesia's security and sovereignty along the border.

Indonesia must improve its military capabilities and security patrols in the Natuna region to fortify its defense against security threats in the South China Sea. To counterbalance China's influence in the area, defense diplomacy

is also crucial for fostering collaboration with other nations, particularly ASEAN (Sobarini et al., 2021). To preserve Indonesia's sovereignty and national interests in the South China Sea, these initiatives must be implemented thoroughly (Angkasari & Sujatmoko, 2022). Furthermore, Indonesia needs to adopt calculated measures to preserve its national sovereignty while seizing its current chances in the face of China's growing influence. Indonesia can make a significant contribution to regional stability and global peace and security by enhancing its defense capabilities and using tactful diplomatic methods. Therefore, the secret to Indonesia's success in overcoming these obstacles will be the creation of a foreign policy that is both balanced and sensitive to geopolitical developments.

Indonesia can forge a strong coalition to meet problems in the South China Sea by putting a high priority on multilateral cooperation and enhancing ties with its neighbors. To guarantee that national interests are upheld in the face of complicated international concerns, Indonesia must keep improving communication and cooperation with regional forums and international organizations. Indonesia will have the chance to spearhead peace initiatives and promote amicable resolutions to potential regional disputes through an active and inclusive foreign policy. By taking this strategy, Indonesia will improve regional stability and security in addition to solidifying its place on the global scene. Indonesia can boost its competitiveness internationally and encourage sustainable economic growth by fortifying its partnerships with other nations. These programs will also create chances for the sharing of technology and expertise, which are essential for tackling global issues like public health and climate change. Therefore, effective implementation of these initiatives will require close cooperation between the public and private sectors, guaranteeing that all stakeholders are engaged in building a better future for Indonesian society.

Total War Strategy and Its Relevance to the Study

The findings indicate that China's geopolitical strategy in the South China Sea embodies the principles of total war by integrating military strength, economic influence, and diplomatic maneuvering. Indonesia's response also reflects a total war approach, as it requires a coordinated effort across defense, foreign policy, and economic sectors. This study highlights the necessity for Indonesia to develop a comprehensive national strategy that aligns with total war principles to maintain sovereignty, economic stability, and regional influence. The implications suggest that Indonesia must enhance its strategic adaptability, strengthen its military capabilities, and deepen diplomatic engagement with regional allies to effectively counterbalance China's growing presence in the South China Sea.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study highlights China's strategic approach in the South China Sea, integrating military expansion, economic influence, and diplomatic leverage to assert its regional dominance. Indonesia, as a key regional player, faces significant challenges in maintaining its sovereignty and economic stability

while balancing its diplomatic ties with China. The findings suggest that Indonesia's response through maritime defense enhancement, multilateral diplomacy, and economic diversification is essential in countering potential security threats and mitigating economic dependency. A strategic and adaptive foreign policy is necessary to safeguard Indonesia's national interests in the face of evolving geopolitical dynamics.

To address these challenges, Indonesia should strengthen its maritime defense capabilities, particularly in the Natuna region, to secure its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Enhancing regional cooperation through ASEAN and other multilateral platforms is also crucial in maintaining a balanced regional security environment. Furthermore, reducing economic dependency on China by expanding trade and investment partnerships with other nations will contribute to greater economic resilience. A well-coordinated national strategy that integrates military preparedness, diplomatic engagement, and economic sustainability will be critical in navigating the complex geopolitical landscape of the South China Sea.

FURTHER STUDY

While this research provides a comprehensive analysis of China's strategic influence in the South China Sea and its implications for Indonesia, further studies are necessary to explore Indonesia's long-term geopolitical positioning. Future research could examine Indonesia's strategic policy options for managing economic and security dependencies while maintaining diplomatic equilibrium. Additionally, investigating the role of technological advancements, including cybersecurity and artificial intelligence, in maritime defense and surveillance would provide valuable insights. Comparative studies on ASEAN member states' responses to China's maritime policies could also offer a broader perspective on regional security dynamics and strategic cooperation.

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