

# Indonesia's National Interest and Perspective on Conflict in South China Sea

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**ABSTRACT:** *The dispute over ownership of the South China Sea has not ended until now. China claims to be the owner of most of the South China Sea. Likewise, Vietnam, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Taiwan claim to be the owners of the territory. On the other side, Indonesia has interests in areas directly adjacent to the South China Sea, namely the Natuna Islands. This study aimed to analyze Indonesia's national interests and perspectives on the conflict in the South China Sea. Qualitative methods and concepts of Indonesia's national interest and perspective were used to analyze this study. The results showed that in particular, there were two terms of Indonesia's National Interest in the South China Sea, namely Vital (Survival) and Major interests. Moreover, Indonesia's national interest was seen from two interrelated things, namely the dynamics that occur in the South China Sea dispute and the intersection in the North Natuna Sea. Furthermore, Indonesia's perspective on conflict in South China Sea, the South China Sea conflict could also be viewed from two perspectives, namely in terms of soft power and hard power.*

**KEYWORDS** –National Interest, Perspective, Conflict, South China Sea

## I. INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea area generally consists of waters and land from an archipelago of two large islands, namely the Spratly and Paracel, as well as the banks of the Maccles field River and Scarborough Reef which stretches from Singapore starting from the Malacca Strait to the Taiwan Strait. Due to this very wide expanse of territory, several countries, such as China, Taiwan, Philippines, Vietnam, and Brunei Darussalam, are involved in disputes and mutual claims over part or all of these territorial waters.



Figure 1. South China Sea Dispute Cross (South China Morning Post, AFP, 2020)

Table 1. South China Sea Dispute Cross

Dispute Trigger	Disputing countries in the South China Sea
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China claims 80% of the SCS (2,000km wide) with the Nine Imaginary Lines claim	Vietnam claims Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands	Philippines claims Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal	Brunei and Malaysia claim the southern part of the SCS and parts of the Spratly Islands	China, Republic of China (Taiwan), Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Vietnam, Philippines
2014 China established an oil drilling rig in the Paracel Islands, and built a reclaimed island that became a military base in the Spratly Islands	China establishes tourism city of Sansha on Woody Island, South China Sea	2016 International Court of Justice ruled China has no historical rights in the South China Sea	China rejects International Court of Justice's decision	<p><b>South China Sea Economic Potential</b></p> <p>The third busiest shipping lane in the world, reaching Rp 46 thousand trillion.</p> <p>80% of China's oil imports go through the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea.</p> <p>The South China Sea is believed to be rich in natural resources. It is estimated that there are about 22 billion barrels of gas and 8.2 trillion cubic meters of oil in the South China Sea.</p> <p>The South China Sea supplies about 10% of the world's fish catch.</p>

*Note.* Adapted from INFOGRAPHIC: South China Sea Dispute Cross (South China Morning Post, AFP, 2020).

In general, there are three things that make the South China Sea a water area prone to major conflicts and a disputed area for many parties. First, the potential of extraordinary natural resources contained in the South China Sea, especially oil and other energy sources. Second, because the South China Sea has a strategic geographical position in the path of international ships crossing the Malacca Strait, a trade link from Europe to Asia, and America to Asia, and vice versa. Third is the contradiction between rapid economic growth in Asia and the decline economic growth in Europe and the United States.

Conflicts of interest between countries in the South China Sea region have the potential to cause conflict and can create instability both globally and regionally. Conflicts of interest originating from economic, political and social interests not managed properly, can lead to direct conflicts involving military forces between certain countries who feel that their national interests are being disturbed. Likewise with the development of territorial claims conflicts in the South China Sea involving 6 (six) countries, 4 (four) ASEAN member

countries (Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei) with China and Taiwan, according to their respective arguments that part of the Sea South China is its sovereign territory.

Disputes in the South China Sea cannot be separated from the different national interests of each country, both claiming and non-claiming countries. Indonesia has no territorial claims in the South China Sea. Indonesia began to be involved in the South China Sea dispute after China claimed the Indonesian Exclusive Economic Zone in the northern region of the Natuna Islands since 2010. China's unilateral claims increased when illegal fishing activities emerged by fishing vessels from China in Natuna waters in 2016. China's assertive actions are related to with Indonesia's national interests, that the Indonesian government tries to secure its national interests in Natuna even though Indonesia is not a disputing country (Sulistiyani, Pertiwi, & Sari, 2021).

Basically the concept of national interest explains that in order to achieve the survival of a country, it must fulfill its needs by fulfilling its national interests. National interest is a goal and ideals to be achieved by a country in conducting international relations interactions. "The national interest is an elastic interest" (Rochester, 1978). Indonesia has a national interest in the area in the form of Indonesian waters and jurisdiction in the form of jurisdictional waters (Wiranto, Juwana, Sutisna, & Buntoro, 2015). National interest is a very important factor in Indonesian actor because without national interest, Indonesia will not be able to carry out international interactions. Indonesia acts rationally by prioritizing strength, especially increasing defense power to achieve national interests. It is a necessity for Indonesia to defend its sovereign territory as a national interest from threats that can be dangerous.

Many perspectives on the conflict in the South China Sea emerge between claimant or non-plaintiff countries such as the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and ASEAN. The term perspective in Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia is defined as "a point of view or view" (Utara, 2016).

Previous study, (Sulistiyani et al., 2021) analyzed Indonesia's national interests in South China Sea region and its responses amidst the dynamics of South China Sea dispute during the reign of President Joko Widodo. Study on Indonesia's national interest and perspective on conflict in the South China Sea has never been carried out by any party before; therefore the writer took the initiative to conduct study.

Based on the above background, this study aims to analyze Indonesia's national interest and perspective on conflict in South China Sea.

#### Research Problems

1. How is Indonesia's national interest in the South China Sea?
2. How is Indonesia's Perspective on Conflict in South China Sea?

## II. RESEARCH METHODS

The writer used a qualitative research design in this study. Bogdan and Taylor defined qualitative research as research that produces descriptive data in the form of written and spoken words from individuals and observed behavior. The writer chose this research design because the phenomenon under study can be explored using various data sources. Qualitative research was descriptive analysis making it easier for researchers to present the data obtained comprehensively. The writer obtained data from primary data sources such as official documents and secondary data sources such as journals, books, media, and official websites. The data obtained were then analyzed using data analysis techniques proposed by John W. Creswell, which consisted of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. Data reduction was done to facilitate researchers in analyzing the data that has been obtained. Furthermore, the writer presented it in the form of descriptive analysis, tables, or figures that could support detailed information about this study. The last step was drawing conclusions interpretive from the data that had been analyzed.

## III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Indonesia's National Interest in the South China Sea

Nuechterlein formulated the intensity of interest into four broad categories, namely survival, vital, major, and peripheral (No Title, 2017).

**Table 2.** Four Broad Categories of the Interest Intensity

Survival	Vital	Major	Peripheral
Critical interests were those concerning the physical existence of a country in great danger (jeopardy) due to an attack from outside or a real threat of attack from another party.	Hazardous intensity was a condition in which an environmental condition that could endanger the state could only be eliminated or overcome through taking strong measures, including the use of military force.	Serious intensity was when the situation develops in such a way that it exerted a strong influence on the political, economic, social and ideological life of the country as a whole.	Disturbing intensity was where the national environmental situation not affected by the international environment, but the interests of communities and companies located abroad were threatened.

*Note.* Adapted from INFOGRAPHIC: South China Sea Dispute Cross (South China Morning Post, AFP, 2020).

In particular, there were two terms of Indonesia's National Interest in the South China Sea, namely Vital (Survival) and Major interests (Wiranto et al., 2015).

**Table 3.** Two terms of Indonesia's National Interest in the South China Sea

Vital (Survival)	Major
Vital interests were absolute Indonesian interests because they involved the survival of the nation and state, including sovereignty and sovereign rights in the marine area of national jurisdiction.	Major interests were such as ensuring maritime safety, safety of navigation from threats of violence and lawlessness, transnational crimes and environmental safety were common interests for nations in the region.

*Note.* Adapted from INFOGRAPHIC: South China Sea Dispute Cross (South China Morning Post, AFP, 2020)

Indonesia's interests in the sea that must be fought for include the survival or part of the political interest in the form of sovereignty and sovereign rights over the territorial waters and jurisdiction of Indonesia was absolute because it involved the lives of the Indonesian people. The complexity of the South China Sea dispute involving many actors would certainly threaten Indonesia's national interests, both from the political aspect, namely regional stability and from the economic aspect, namely Indonesia's energy security, which originates from gas fields in the South China Sea Exclusive Economic Zone (Prabowo, 2013). Various policies made by claimant states towards the South China Sea dispute were inseparable from efforts to fight for their national interests. Indonesia's national interest was seen from two interrelated things, namely the dynamics that occur in the South China Sea dispute and the intersection in the North Natuna Sea. Even though Indonesia was not a claimant state, the nine dash line claimed by China has crossed with Indonesia's national interests in the North Natuna Sea.

According to Nuechterlein, Indonesia's national interest in the North Natuna Sea included defense interests, economic interests, and world order interests. Indonesia's defense interests were related to territorial sovereignty. Then, economic interests were related to sovereign rights and special jurisdiction in the use of natural resources in the Exclusive Economic Zone. Lastly, it was in the interest of the world order to maintain security stability in the region as an international trade and shipping route. First was the interest of defense in

order to maintain territorial sovereignty. The South China Sea dispute was a test for Indonesia in defending its territory in the North Natuna Sea. Indonesia claimed the territorial waters as part of its sovereign territory by referring to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982. The legal basis then expressly gave Indonesia sovereign rights to explore the natural resources contained therein. Indonesia's economic interest referred to the Decree of the Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries of the Republic of Indonesia No.47 of 2016. The Natuna Sea was rich in marine resources such as various types of fish and other marine biota. In addition, the potential of other natural resources was the content of oil and natural gas. The Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources noted that the East Natuna Block has a potential oil content of 36 million barrels of oil and an initial gas in place (IGIP) volume of 222 trillion cubic feet (tcf), as well as natural gas reserves of 222 trillion cubic feet (tcf).46 tcf. Based on this potential, Indonesia had the right to manage resources in the North Natuna Sea in order to improve the welfare and economic development of Indonesia.

Indonesia was obliged to participate in maintaining security stability in the South China Sea region by reviewing the dynamics of the deployment of military forces and the strategic value of the region. Indonesia had the potential to directly feel the impact if there is an escalation of conflict in the South China Sea because its territory was directly adjacent to the South China Sea. Referring to these facts, maintaining security stability in the region, both from major power competition and international shipping security, were two of Indonesia's national interests related to the interests of the world order.

In the reign of Jokowi, Indonesia's approach to the issue of claiming ownership of the South China Sea had shifted from an active actor approach seeking peace over the existing disputes to one primarily focused on protecting its own national interests, especially around the Natuna Islands. Indonesia viewed China as having violated Indonesia's sovereign territory around the Natuna Islands. Indonesia carried its national interest, only as a bridge over the actors who were directly involved in the South China Sea conflict (Saragih & Nasional, 2018). Indonesia's national interests in the South China Sea included maintaining territorial sovereignty, sovereign rights to explore and exploit natural resources, and maintaining regional stability in the North Natuna Sea (Sulistiyani et al., 2021).

**Indonesia's Perspective on Conflict in South China Sea**

According to Purnomo Yusgiantoro, there were two important points of view or angles that must be observed in the South China Sea dispute. In addition to the nine points that China claims as its territory, there was also a struggle for energy resources around the Spratly and Paracel. The South China Sea conflict could also be viewed from two perspectives, namely in terms of soft power and hard power (Fakultas et al., 2016).

**Table 4.** Two Perspectives on Conflict in South China Sea

Soft Power	Hard Power
Diplomacy carried out by ASEAN and China was halted due to the Covid-19 outbreak. Negotiations could be continued even though it is virtual diplomacy. This diplomacy was more desirable to use face to face diplomacy.	Declaration on Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) was a guideline for action for ASEAN member countries and China in maintaining peace and stability in disputed areas with a spirit of cooperation and mutual trust.

*Note.* Adapted from Diplomatic Power to Resolve South China Sea Disputes (Beritasatu.com, 2020).

According to Joseph Nye Jr. Soft power was a concept developed to describe the ability of a country to invite other countries to cooperate without using hard power, namely weapons or materials. There were several things that support the creation of soft power, including Culture, Political Values, and Diplomacy. Legal settlement and political and diplomatic efforts were the most appropriate way at this time for disputes in the South China Sea, Joseph Nye said that the form of government policy in soft power included Public Diplomacy, Bilateral, Multilateral diplomacy (Alfath & Nugroho, 2017).

From the practitioner's point of view, according to Defense Minister Purnomo Yusgiantoro, there was currently a paradigm shift in the world in conflict resolution, namely from hard power to soft power. Therefore, Indonesia prioritized diplomacy in finding a solution to the South China Sea dispute. According to the Minister of Defense, Indonesia believed that the dispute could be resolved diplomatically. In other words, the Minister of Defense believed that the South China Sea dispute would not spill over into Indonesian territory, especially the Natuna Sea (Prabowo, 2013). Indonesian government needed to take firm action with hard power or military approach in addition to soft power or diplomatic in addressing the Natuna issue.

During the reign of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the government used a cautious approach since they did not want to offend China as the largest and most powerful country in the region, and Indonesia's main investor and trading partner. Indonesia's concerns about China's intentions had been heightened when there have been three serious attacks on the Natuna Exclusive Economic Zone since 2009 by Chinese fishing vessels protected by FLEC vessels. In June 2009, the Indonesian navy detained 75 Chinese fishermen on eight vessels for illegally fishing in the Natuna Exclusive Economic Zone. This triggered an immediate demand from China to immediately return fishermen and their boats. The second incident came when an Indonesian navy vessel detained 10 Chinese fishing vessels north of Natuna but deep within their Exclusive Economic Zone. The Indonesian government claimed the fishermen have violated territorial boundaries in a deliberate and coordinated manner. It wasn't long before two armed FLEC boats arrived, and there was tension before the fishing boat was released. The third incident occurred in March 2013, involving Indonesian and Chinese maritime law enforcement vessels.

The Indonesian government chose to minimize the incident because it was anxious to avoid conflict with China and give substance to China's claims to Natuna. The Indonesian government voiced their doubts about China's intentions and the clear coordination between harassing fishing vessels and Chinese maritime agencies. Indonesia had begun to adopt a tougher looking line in the South China Sea because of the incident. Indonesia persistently reminded all parties that the only option for solving problems was through peaceful means regarding the issue of the South China Sea. The use of force or the threat of use of force was not an option.

In 2009, a public declaration emerged of China's nine-dash line map outlining its territorial claimed in the South China Sea overlapping the borders of Riau Province and the Natuna Islands. This showed Indonesia was responding more strongly to further Chinese attacked on Natuna and significantly increases the likelihood of a serious maritime incident at sea between ASEAN's largest maritime nation and China. Furthermore, the Commander of the Indonesian National Armed Forces, General Moeldoko, had announced that Indonesia would increase its military presence in Riau Province, including the addition of army battalions, fighter aircraft, and naval vessels, with a larger portion of Indonesia's defense upgrades and budget allocated for maritime security (Hiebert, Nguyen, & Poling, 2014).

Indonesia initially thought that the South China Sea conflict involving China, Taiwan, and several friendly countries in Southeast Asia, did not involve Indonesia at all. Indonesia was a non-claimant state in this conflict. However, the incident that occurred at the end of 2019 in which Chinese fishing vessels entered Indonesian waters in Natuna, had opened the eyes of the government that there was a threat to Indonesia's sovereignty. A number of foreign fishing vessels belonging to China were found to have entered the Natuna Waters, Riau Islands Province, on December 19, 2019. The vessels were declared to had violated the Indonesian Exclusive Economic Zone and carried out illegal fishing activities. In addition, the Chinese Coast Guard, which was escorting the fishing boats, was also declared to have violated Indonesia's sovereign territory.

The study of (Utomo et al., n.d.) was to analyze the dynamics of the conflict in the South China Sea from an Indonesian perspective. The national priority of Jokowi was infrastructure development, where currently most of the investment invested in Indonesia comes from China. This made some parties consider the role of the Indonesian government in the South China Sea to be closely related to the investment provided by China to Indonesia. The Chinese government had a financial scheme that could be utilized by many countries including Indonesia. However, this view began to change considering that on June 23, 2016, Jokowi for the first time was aboard the KRI Imam Bonjol in Natuna waters by holding a limited meeting. This is considered a strong signal about ownership of the Natuna waters.

From a security perspective, Indonesia through ASEAN sought to accelerate the completion of the Code of Conduct (CoC) in the South China Sea between the ASEAN navy and the Chinese navy. With the enactment of the CoC, each navy implemented a conflict prevention mechanism in the South China Sea. Viewed from the perspective of state security and sovereignty, the resolution of the South China Sea conflict, Indonesia through ASEAN carried out a settlement in the form of a CoC in resolving maritime conflicts. The implementation of CoC was very efficient in avoiding conflict without the occurrence of war. The CoC had international legal rules that limit each country involved in the South China Sea area (Prayuda, Angeli, Internasional, Islam, & Indonesia, n.d.).

Indonesia's geopolitical and geostrategic perspectives on the South China Sea were described by (Triwulan, Tiongkok, Serikat, & Selatan, 2014). This area was an international political commodity within a political framework for countries seeking to increase their position of power that the related countries tried to maintain their hegemony in the region in order to take advantage of the potential along the Pacific Rim. As one of the countries located in the coastal area of the South China Sea, Indonesia had an interest in the area, and had ideals regarding the conditions that should be realized in it. Indonesia's attitude towards this condition was actually a reflection of the national goal as stated in the preamble to the 1945 Constitution, to participate in implementing world order based on independence, eternal peace and social justice. The formulation of these national goals became the basis for the perception of the Indonesian people regarding the desired condition of the South China Sea. Potential conflicts in the region had the opportunity to turn into lighters that not only involve countries in the Southeast Asia region or the Asia Pacific region, but also countries outside the region.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

##### **4.1 Conclusions**

Indonesia had a national interest in the South China Sea, particularly in maintaining territorial sovereignty in the North Natuna Sea. In addition, Indonesia also had perspectives on conflict in the South China Sea. In particular, there were two terms of Indonesia's National Interest in the South China Sea, namely Vital (Survival) and Major interests. Moreover, Indonesia's national interest was seen from two interrelated things, namely the dynamics that occur in the South China Sea dispute and the intersection in the North Natuna Sea. Related to Indonesia's perspective on conflict in South China Sea, the conflict could be viewed from two perspectives, namely in terms of soft power and hard power. The resolution of the South China Sea dispute with asymmetric soft power diplomacy was considered very effective considering that the bargaining positions of countries in conflict are not comparable.

Indonesia was responding more strongly to further Chinese attacks on Natuna and significantly increased the likelihood of a serious maritime incident at sea between ASEAN's largest maritime nation and China. Indonesia's approach to the issue of claiming ownership of the South China Sea had shifted from an active actor approach seeking peace over the existing disputes to one primarily focused on protecting its own national interests. Although the Indonesian government had realized that the South China Sea conflict could cause regional security instability and would have a broad impact on Indonesia's national interests. However, the anticipation was still limited to diplomatic efforts.

##### **4.2 Recommendations**

Coordination between institutions at the national level, such as the Indonesian Navy, Bakamla RI, POLAIR, the Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs and Investment, and the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, must continue to be improved to defend Indonesia's national interests. Meanwhile, peace diplomacy efforts at the bilateral, regional level, both through executive actors such as meetings between the Ministers of Foreign Affairs or through legislative actors such as AIPA, and international forums can be focused on efforts to resolve the South China Sea dispute in order to maintain security stability and create peace in the ASEAN region. Therefore, Indonesia needs multilateral diplomacy and the establishment of a cooperative body to protect and achieve its national interests.

All countries should share the perspective of a peaceful atmosphere in the South China Sea area since a protracted conflict can affect security, political and economic stability in the region. Moreover it will affect relations between ASEAN members. In addition to efforts to encourage the creation of a common perspective among its member countries regarding conflict resolution, ASEAN also needs to intensively make diplomatic efforts to China government to formulate a more legally binding regulation in relation to conflict management in the South China Sea region as a form of finalization of the Code of Conduct (CoC) through peace talks. The reason this effort needs to be carried out continuously is in the context of efforts to resolve the conflict for the long term that the South China Sea conflict does not continue to drag on. Indonesia has a very strategic position in the South China Sea or in the waters of North Natuna. Indonesia must remain as a neutral country and not be dragged into conflict.

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