

Analysis of Threats to Indonesia's Maritime Sovereignty Due to the Expansion of Chinese Vessels in the South China Sea

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Abstract: China's dominance in the South China Sea has become a global concern due to its implications for the maritime sovereignty of neighboring countries, including Indonesia. This research investigates the specific threats to Indonesia's maritime sovereignty arising from the expansion of Chinese vessels in the South China Sea. Using a qualitative approach and document analysis, data were collected from various primary and secondary sources to comprehend the dynamics of China's vessel expansion and its implications for Indonesia. The analysis is conducted through three main stages: first, a review of the expansion of Chinese vessels in the South China Sea, including the number of vessels, claimed areas, and expansion objectives; second, identification of specific implications for Indonesia's maritime sovereignty, including violations of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and impacts on natural resource interests; and third, evaluation of the Indonesian government's response to this threat. The main findings reveal that the expansion of Chinese vessels poses a significant threat to Indonesia's maritime sovereignty, with Chinese vessels penetrating Indonesian territorial waters and violating the EEZ. The Indonesian government has responded with various policies and measures to protect maritime sovereignty, though challenges remain. This analysis provides in-depth insights into the complexity of threats to Indonesia's maritime sovereignty due to the expansion of Chinese vessels in the South China Sea and offers relevant policy implications for maintaining Indonesia's maritime security in the future.

Keywords: Maritime Sovereignty, South China Sea, Expansion of Chinese Ships, Security Threats, Maritime Policy.

I. INTRODUCTION

The scientists in the fields of political theory, political philosophy, international relations, and law have studied the issue of sovereignty in-depth and in detail. Historically, the concept of sovereignty emerged in the Treaty of Westphalia signed in 1648 and developed throughout the post-World War period [1]. Consequently, there is little consensus among scholars regarding a universal understanding of sovereignty and its implications. Nevertheless, despite the lack of agreement, experts have managed to outline the broader contours of sovereignty. Sovereignty is broadly defined as the right of a state to conduct its affairs within its territorial boundaries with full autonomy. According to Ernst Kantorowicz, state sovereignty is “the highest authority within a territory” [2]. The absolute definition of sovereignty has been criticized in the works of scholars such as Jacques Maritain and Bertrand de Jouvenal, who sought to redefine the concept by incorporating human rights ideas and elevating the status of international law within the theoretical paradigm of sovereignty. Thus, this paper seeks to shed light on key discussions in addressing the complexities of sovereignty issues in the Indo-Pacific.

Regardless of the truth about sovereignty, territoriality remains one of its core and fundamental characteristics. Sovereignty claims by more than one country over disputed territories have raised daunting questions for political philosophy and international

law because such claims challenge the notion of absolute sovereignty and its practical application in the international context [3]. In the contemporary world, in the region referred to by international relations experts as the Indo-Pacific, there are several unanswered questions related to sovereignty around territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

The South China Sea has become the focus of international attention in recent decades due to the political and security complexities it faces [4]. One of the most prominent issues is the increasing dominance of China regarding territorial claims and maritime activities in the region [5]. This dominance not only affects neighboring countries but also poses a significant threat to Indonesia's maritime sovereignty, the largest maritime nation in the region.

This research aims to comprehensively investigate the concrete threats faced by Indonesia due to the expansion of Chinese ships in the South China Sea. This expansion not only includes an increase in the number of ships but also involves territorial claims that may conflict with Indonesia's maritime sovereignty. Through a qualitative approach and document analysis, this research will attempt to identify the direct implications of the expansion of Chinese ships on Indonesia's maritime sovereignty.

The importance of this research lies in a better understanding of the political and security dynamics in the South China Sea, as well as their impact on Indonesia's maritime sovereignty. With a deeper understanding of the threats faced, it is hoped that the Indonesian government can take appropriate steps to protect the country's maritime sovereignty and ensure security and stability in the region.

This research is expected to make a significant contribution to the academic literature on maritime security and interstate relations in the Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, the findings of this research are also expected to provide valuable insights for policymakers in designing effective strategies to face these complex challenges.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach to analyze the political and security dynamics in the South China Sea and their impact on Indonesia's maritime sovereignty. This approach was chosen due to its capacity to provide a deep understanding of complex and dynamic phenomena. The study will use document analysis methods, where data is collected from various sources such as academic journal articles, government reports, and international legal documents. These documents will be analyzed to identify concrete threats faced by Indonesia due to the expansion of Chinese ships in the South China Sea. Additionally, this research will evaluate China's territorial claims and how these claims conflict with internationally recognized principles of maritime sovereignty.

The study will utilize theories of sovereignty and international relations as its analytical framework. These theories will assist in understanding and interpreting the collected data, as well as in illustrating the implications of China's maritime expansion for Indonesia. This research aims to make a significant contribution to the academic literature on maritime security and interstate relations in the Indo-Pacific region, providing a comprehensive understanding of the importance of national security, particularly in uncharted maritime areas. The findings are expected to offer valuable insights for policymakers in designing effective strategies to address maritime sovereignty threats in the Indo-Pacific region.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Indonesia's Position in the South China Sea

Indonesia plays a unique role in the dynamics of the South China Sea (SCS) [6]. Unlike other countries that have direct territorial claims over various disputed islands, Indonesia is not involved in such disputes [7]. However, this does not mean that Indonesia lacks interests in the region. As a country with an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that intersects with the SCS, Indonesia faces a variety of high-tension challenges and opportunities in managing its sovereignty and sovereign rights in this area. In the South China Sea, Indonesia has an EEZ in the waters of the North Natuna Sea, which is part of its national jurisdiction [8]. Indonesia's sovereignty in this area is not contested by any country. However, Indonesia's sovereign rights in the EEZ often face challenges from various countries, such as Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, and the most expansionist in this regard, China. Indonesia has an EEZ that falls under its jurisdiction, but it is not only China that violates this area; Malaysia, Vietnam, and occasionally Thailand have been the most frequent violators of Indonesia's EEZ [9]. The sovereignty and sovereign rights of Indonesia in the waters of the North Natuna Sea are clear. In this context, it is difficult to say that there is a potential for conflict between Indonesia

and China in terms of sovereignty. The overlapping issue in the EEZ is merely an incident issue and does not have a high potential to become a conflict.

In essence, the political tremors in the South China Sea can be observed from a global geopolitical perspective, especially regarding its relationship with Indonesia. From a geopolitical perspective, the South China Sea is like a jewel sought after by treasure hunters. Geographically, this area is strategically positioned for China, Vietnam, and especially Indonesia. As a result, the SCS holds strategic significance for Indonesia [10].

Firstly, for Indonesia, the North Natuna Sea is important in the context of expanding economic progress to gain influence at the regional and international levels [11]. The South China Sea, with its rich natural resources, is estimated to have oil reserves of 7 billion barrels, natural gas reserves of 900 trillion cubic feet, and a total of 28 billion barrels of crude oil [12]. It is too important to be left long under China's influence. If the SCS is controlled by China, it would not only strengthen China's bargaining position with Indonesia but also enhance its national capacity. China's ambitions in the SCS are quite apparent, with projects such as artificial island construction, including in the Spratly Islands which fall under Vietnam's jurisdiction, increased military activities in the SCS, including warship patrols, military exercises, and weapon system deployments. This showcases China's hard power exercises [13]. Regarding Indonesia in the North Natuna Sea, violations are limited to illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, which is a non-traditional threat. There have been no incidents leading to war with China; in fact, the opposite is true.

According to Evan A. Laksmana from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), China is now Indonesia's main trading partner and among the top five investors in Indonesia [14]. Joint projects and cooperation between the two countries are significant. On the other hand, China views Indonesia as an important market [15], Chinese joint ventures or oil rigs are present in waters close to Indonesia's EEZ. Recently, Indonesia and China collaborated on the Java Trench exploration, titled the China-Indonesia Joint Dive Expedition to Java Trench 2024, indicating opportunities for cooperation. If the bilateral relationship continues to be maintained, Indonesia could play a strategic role in this geopolitical issue. If we look at the data, the strategic value of the SCS is immense: two-thirds of energy supplies to the Republic of Korea, 60% of Japan's oil imports, 80% of China's oil imports, more than 50% of global cargo traffic, one-third of global maritime traffic, and 10% of the world's fish catch are located in the EEZ[16]. The strategic significance of the SCS for Indonesia and China creates a vortex of geopolitical interests for many countries. However, this strategic position places Indonesia in a difficult choice: to confront China alongside Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan, or to remain a trading partner maintaining relations with China. Which path should Indonesia choose?

At least, two perspectives influence this choice. First, the long-term perspective. There is a frequent argument that Indonesia needs to take a stance in the SCS conflict against China. This argument is based on China's violations in Indonesia's sovereign rights area (EEZ). These violations are seen as a threat to Indonesia's sovereignty, especially since China has no legal basis for historical fishing rights in Indonesia's EEZ in the North Natuna Sea, particularly after the 2016 ruling by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) effectively prohibited the nine-dash line map (now Ten Dash Line). This view is not entirely wrong.

In the case of IUU fishing often conducted by foreign fishermen in Indonesia's EEZ, which prompted the formation of Task Force 115 comprising the Indonesian Navy, Police, Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla), Customs Directorate General of the Ministry of Finance, Attorney General's Office, and the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries to handle these cases, causing the country an estimated loss of at least US\$24 billion annually. According to World Bank data, Indonesia's fisheries contribute significantly, accounting for five percent of global production or approximately US\$20 billion [17]. Given this data, it is understandable why some people want Indonesia to take a firm stand against countries that disrupt Indonesia's EEZ.

The second perspective relates to short-term needs. Indonesia currently requires funds to support major projects and modernize defense infrastructure. In this context, if Indonesia is drawn into the SCS conflict, China may hesitate to provide assistance. In this situation, is there a country that can replace China's position in easily establishing cooperation with Indonesia in many sectors?

For now, the strategic solution Indonesia needs to adopt to minimize the tension of incidents in the EEZ can be implemented through three alternative strategies. First, by conducting joint research in overlapping areas, signaling to the outside world that China acknowledges the presence of disputes in the EEZ. Not only with China, but also involving countries like Vietnam. Second, by engaging in maritime diplomacy through joint patrolling, joint exercises, and joint maritime training on land. In this context, ASEAN diplomacy can be employed. Third, by involving maritime forces such as Bakamla and the Indonesian Navy. This strategy

aligns with the notes developed by Le Miere in his work "Maritime Diplomacy in the 21st Century," which includes cooperative, persuasive, and coercive diplomacy[18]. In the context of Indonesia, cooperative maritime diplomacy is a strategic choice. This strategy is expected to reduce China's assertiveness towards Indonesia, and with these three alternatives, it is hoped that China will refrain from disturbing Indonesia's sovereign rights in the EEZ.

B. Effective Occupation in South China Sea

Amid the current dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, besides pursuing diplomatic efforts to ease tensions in the South China Sea, Indonesia needs to adopt an effective occupation approach. This approach can firmly signal to the world that Indonesia takes a strong stance on maintaining its sovereignty, as per international law [19]. With China's dominance in the SCS and its political ambitions to control it, there is a potential threat to Indonesia's claim over strategic areas. Thus, Indonesia requires policies that can yield synergistic, dynamic, and sustainable changes, enhancing productivity and competitiveness by effectively mobilizing resources in conflict zones. This policy aims to emphasize the importance of exploring maritime security potential, which has not yet been fully exploited. Through effective occupation, Indonesia is expected to acquire tools not only to address these issues but also to significantly transform its economy and competitiveness.

With abundant maritime resources, if not managed and protected seriously, Indonesia could face similar challenges as other countries whose territories are contested by China. Maritime security is crucial to prevent exploitative activities, such as IUU fishing, smuggling of illegal goods, territorial violations, and other infringements that could impact domestic security and stability [20].

Through China's ten-dash-line claims and military installations on various artificial islands, tensions have arisen with countries claiming sovereignty, including Indonesia, which has an EEZ around the Natuna Islands included in China's historical claims. Despite Indonesia's close relationship with China, its sovereignty must be safeguarded from external interventions and competing interests. An effective occupation strategy involves active and sustained occupation of claimed areas, recognized by international law, especially by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This approach includes a continuous physical presence in disputed territories, encompassing infrastructure development, routine naval and coast guard patrols, and economic and social activities by citizens. Increased maritime and aerial patrols around the Natuna Islands' EEZ ensure constant military presence and demonstrate territorial surveillance capabilities. China's expansion in the SCS, driven by power and national interest, seeks to maximize its international dominance. Indonesia's move to mobilize strength through effective occupation signals to the world that safeguarding national security from external threats, particularly China's expansion violating international law, requires physical presence and military mobilization as crucial elements in demonstrating and maintaining Indonesia's power and influence on the international stage [21].

Implementing an effective occupation strategy through the development and enhancement of infrastructure in the Natuna Islands should be prioritized. This includes building ports, airports, adequate military facilities, and providing basic services to the local population. A significant civilian presence in this area will strengthen Indonesia's sovereignty claims through direct utilization and management of natural resources by its citizens in the South China Sea. This strategy not only aims to protect territorial sovereignty and Indonesia's EEZ but also to reinforce its position as a leader in the Indo-Pacific region.

In an ever-changing global context, no single approach can be universally adopted by every country [22]. However, by studying and evaluating strategies from the best countries in the world, Indonesia can learn valuable lessons in formulating an effective, adaptive, and sustainable national security strategy to understand China's patterns and aggressiveness in the SCS. Therefore, combining the above two approaches into a comprehensive approach, integrating military strength, diplomacy, economics, and other non-military elements in responding to complex threats like sovereignty violations, is essential. Coordinating various policy aspects holistically, Indonesia cannot overlook its relationship with China, as one of its largest markets and investors.

A systematically effective national security strategy must combine several key principles. First, strong integration between military strength, intelligence, and other security policies to detect, respond to, and prevent threats before they become significant. Second, adaptability in facing rapidly changing and often unpredictable security environments. Third, close collaboration with international and regional partners to enhance joint capacity and response to global threats.

IV. Conclusion

This paper highlights the threats to Indonesia's maritime sovereignty due to the expansion of Chinese vessels in the South China Sea. The Indonesian government has responded to these threats with various policies and actions, including military patrols and international cooperation to strengthen surveillance and protection of its maritime territory. The bilateral relationship between Indonesia and China also reflects cooperation in various economic projects and scientific developments, showcasing the complexity of their dynamics in the region. However, potential conflicts between the two countries remain possible due to China's expansion in the SCS, which poses a threat to Indonesia's maritime sovereignty, particularly in the North Natuna Sea, with significant violations of Indonesia's EEZ. Although there has been no military conflict, illegal fishing (IUU Fishing) by Chinese vessels creates serious tensions. The Indonesian government has responded with military patrols and international cooperation, yet challenges persist. By combining diplomatic approaches through joint patrols, joint research, and effective occupation through physical and military development in disputed areas, Indonesia can address external sovereignty threats more effectively.

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