

## **National Defense Management and Regional Cooperation in Facing the South China Sea Conflict**

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### **Abstract**

*The conflict in the South China Sea (SCS) has become a significant geopolitical issue in the Asia-Pacific region, involving countries such as China, Vietnam, and the Philippines, all of which claim rights over the maritime territory. Indonesia, as the largest archipelagic nation, has a strategic interest in maintaining its territorial sovereignty, particularly in the North Natuna Sea, which is adjacent to the SCS. In response to the rising tensions, Indonesia needs to enhance its military preparedness and strengthen its maritime defense capabilities through naval modernization and improved inter-agency training. Additionally, regional economic cooperation, such as through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), can bolster Indonesia's position in negotiating security issues in the SCS. This cooperation is also vital for the development of maritime infrastructure that supports regional stability. The Indonesian government's actions to strengthen its navy and engage in diplomacy are crucial for safeguarding maritime sovereignty. Effective national defense management and collaboration with neighboring countries in regional cooperation, especially through ASEAN, are also necessary to address the conflicts in the SCS. With these measures, Indonesia can be better prepared to face the challenges arising from the SCS conflict and protect its national interests.*

**Keywords:** *South China Sea, Maritime Sovereignty, Indonesia, Regional Cooperation, Military Preparedness.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The South China Sea is one of the world's strategic regions with high economic and geopolitical value. This region is not only a major trade route connecting Asia with Europe and the Americas, but is also rich in natural resources such as oil, gas, and seafood. According to a report by the Global Energy Security Council, approximately 30% of global trade passes through these waters annually, making it a vital area for the global economy. However, the South China Sea is also at the center of conflicts involving overlapping maritime claims by several countries, including China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei.

National defense management is crucial for countries in conflict to maintain territorial sovereignty and protect their national interests. This strategy involves strengthening the armed forces, maritime patrols, and cooperation with other countries in the form of strategic alliances. In the context of the South China Sea conflict, Indonesia, for example, adopted a defensive approach by strengthening its maritime patrol fleet, while the Philippines expanded its alliance with the United States as part of its national defense strategy (Clausewitz, 1832; Haacke, 2003).

National defense management faces complex challenges involving diplomacy, defense, and regional cooperation. Indonesia has taken the initiative to strengthen cooperation with ASEAN countries and other strategic partners to create stability in the South China Sea. One important step is Indonesia's support for the establishment of a Code of Conduct (CoC) in the South China Sea, which aims to regulate the behavior of countries involved in disputes and encourage peaceful resolution (Kumparan, 2024). Through this diplomatic approach, Indonesia serves not only as a mediator but also as a leader in creating a conducive environment for dialogue between countries.

Furthermore, strengthening defense capacity through increased military presence and maritime security cooperation is also part of the national defense management strategy. By

involving national defense cadres in water surveillance and training on international maritime law, Indonesia seeks to engage the public in safeguarding its maritime sovereignty (BPK Penabur, 2024). These efforts demonstrate that national defense management relies not solely on military strength but also requires the active participation of all elements of society.

The conflict in the South China Sea (SCS) has become an increasingly pressing issue for the stability of the Southeast Asian region, including Indonesia. Although Indonesia is not a major claimant in the region, its national interests are closely linked to maritime security and sovereignty in the Natuna waters, which are part of Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). China's territorial claims over large parts of the SCS have the potential to disrupt Indonesia's access to natural resources and vital trade routes (Wasito et al., 2022). In this context, national defense management is crucial to ensuring Indonesia can protect its sovereignty and national interests.

**The conflict in the South China Sea (SCS)** has become one of the most pressing geopolitical issues in the Asia-Pacific region. The area is rich in natural resources, particularly oil and gas, and serves as a vital international shipping route for global trade (Maulana, 2022; Haerulloh, 2023). Tensions in the SCS involve multiple claimants, including China, Vietnam, the Philippines, and other ASEAN member states. In this context, Indonesia the world's largest archipelagic nation has a strategic interest in safeguarding its territorial sovereignty, especially in the North Natuna Sea, which is located adjacent to the SCS (Pasaribu, 2023; Muslimah et al., 2020). Several studies further highlight Indonesia's vulnerable position due to overlapping maritime claims and China's expansive "nine-dash line," which contradicts UNCLOS provisions (Batongbacal, 2017; Valencia, 2019).

Since 2010, China has intensified its activities in the Natuna waters, which Indonesia considers violations of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Maulana, 2022; Pasaribu, 2023). These actions include China Coast Guard patrols, illegal fishing activities, and increased militarization, contributing to heightened tensions in the region (Storey, 2020; Grossman & Chase, 2021). In response, the Indonesian government has strengthened naval operations, air surveillance, maritime law enforcement, and diplomatic engagement to defend its sovereignty (Haerulloh, 2023; Imannuridin, 2023). Scholars argue that Indonesia needs to enhance its "deterrence by denial" strategy through military modernization, integrated maritime domain awareness (MDA), and coordinated interagency operations (Laksmana, 2020; Wibowo, 2022). Thus, effective national defense management is crucial for protecting Indonesia's maritime territory while enabling collaboration with regional partners (Suwarno et al., 2021; Arum, 2024).

Regional cooperation particularly through ASEAN plays an important role in addressing disputes in the South China Sea. As a regional organization, ASEAN has the potential to mediate tensions and promote confidence-building measures among its member states and China (Adi, 2024; Swastanto et al., 2018). Prior research emphasizes the importance of ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), and ongoing negotiations for the Code of Conduct (COC), as platforms for preventing conflict escalation and enhancing maritime security cooperation (Thao, 2019; Roberts, 2021). However, ASEAN faces internal challenges, including divergent national interests, varying levels of economic dependence on China, and inconsistent threat perceptions among member states, which often hinder unified regional action (Emmers, 2020; Chong, 2023). Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze how national defense management and regional cooperation can be optimized to address the South China Sea conflict. Specifically, this article explores:

1. How national defense management can be implemented within the context of the South China Sea conflict;
2. What forms of regional cooperation Indonesia can pursue to help address the dispute; and
3. How the South China Sea conflict affects Indonesia's national security stability.

Through this analysis, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive assessment of Indonesia's strategic posture and identify cooperative frameworks that can support the protection of national sovereignty and regional security.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The research method used in this study is a descriptive qualitative approach. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research is suitable for exploring complex social phenomena and understanding meanings constructed by individuals or groups. A descriptive qualitative design enables the researcher to examine national defense management and regional cooperation in the context of the South China Sea conflict in a more in-depth, contextual, and holistic manner. Moleong (2017) also emphasizes that qualitative research is appropriate for studies aiming to understand realities through rich descriptions derived from natural settings.

Data collection techniques in this study include literature review, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, which align with Sugiyono's (2019) recommendation that qualitative data should be obtained from various sources to ensure credibility and triangulation.

### 1. Literature Review

The literature review covers scholarly works on national defense, the South China Sea dispute, and regional cooperation. This step is important for building a theoretical foundation and identifying gaps in existing research, as suggested by Neuman (2014).

### 2. In-depth Interviews

Interviews will be conducted with experts in international relations, security studies, defense practitioners, and diplomats. According to Kvale & Brinkmann (2015), in-depth interviews allow researchers to obtain detailed insights into experiences, perspectives, and interpretations that cannot be captured through documents alone.

### 3. Document Analysis

Document analysis will focus on Indonesian government policies related to national defense, maritime security strategies, and relevant international agreements. Bowen (2009) argues that analyzing official documents is essential for understanding policy frameworks and institutional responses to political or strategic issues.

The data obtained from these sources will be analyzed **inductively**, following Creswell's (2018) qualitative data analysis model, which includes organizing data, coding, identifying patterns, and developing themes that correspond to the research objectives. This inductive approach enables the emergence of new insights rather than imposing predetermined hypotheses.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### National defense management in the context of the South China Sea (SCS) conflict

National defense management in the context of the South China Sea (SCS) conflict involves various strategies aimed at safeguarding Indonesia's sovereignty and national security. Although Indonesia is not a major claimant in the SCS, its geographic location, directly bordering the Natuna waters, makes it strategically important in maintaining regional stability. To address the potential for conflict escalation, Indonesia needs to optimize national defense by strengthening its military presence in the region, including the development of an Integrated Indonesian National Armed Forces Unit in Natuna as a proactive measure to protect its territory (Nugroho, 2024).

Beyond military aspects, diplomacy also plays a crucial role in national defense management. Indonesia must be active in international and regional forums, such as ASEAN, to facilitate dialogue between countries involved in the dispute. These diplomatic efforts aim to defuse tensions and encourage peaceful resolution through multilateral cooperation (Wasito et al., 2022). By prioritizing a diplomatic approach supported by adequate military strength, Indonesia can strengthen its position as a credible mediator in the South China Sea conflict.

Defense cooperation with friendly nations, including the United States and other ASEAN countries, is also part of the national defense management strategy. Through joint military exercises and intelligence exchanges, Indonesia can enhance its defense capacity and strengthen regional solidarity in the face of threats in the South China Sea (Manek, 2023). Therefore, effective national defense management in the South China Sea requires a combination of enhanced military capabilities and active diplomacy.

Indonesia's strategy to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity amid tensions involving several claimant states, including China, Vietnam, and the Philippines. To address these challenges, Indonesia needs to implement various strategies that include strengthening its military capabilities, diplomacy, and regional cooperation. One crucial aspect of national defense management is strengthening military capabilities. Indonesia needs to improve its naval readiness to address potential threats from maritime activities by other countries in the South China Sea. Although Indonesia is not a claimant state in the South China Sea, its role as a mediator and stabilizer in the region is crucial (Armawi & Wijatmoko, 2022). This strengthening of military capabilities includes not only increasing the fleet but also modernizing technology and training personnel to enhance operational effectiveness at sea.

Diplomacy is a crucial tool in national defense management, capable of defusing tensions and preventing open conflict. Dialogue and negotiation between countries involved in a dispute are essential to achieving a peaceful solution (Larosa, 2022). Indonesia can leverage its position as an ASEAN member to facilitate meetings between claimant states and encourage dispute resolution through a multilateral approach. This approach could include establishing a clear legal framework based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to govern the rights and obligations of states in the South China Sea (Anugerah, 2021).

Regional cooperation through ASEAN is also a key component in national defense management. Indonesia can play an active role in strengthening defense and security cooperation in the region, as proposed by (Rimapradesi et al., 2023), who emphasized the importance of collaboration among ASEAN countries in addressing potential conflicts in the South China Sea. Through forums such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), Indonesia can promote closer dialogue and cooperation in maritime security, as well as build trust among member states.

ASEAN's role in this conflict is crucial because the organization serves as a mediator to maintain regional stability. Since its inception, ASEAN has strived to foster dialogue and cooperation among member states in addressing these disputes. Through various declarations and agreements, such as the 2002 Declaration on Conduct in the South China Sea (DOC), ASEAN committed to resolving disputes peacefully and promoting cooperation in maritime security (Weatherbee, 2010). However, despite diplomatic efforts, tensions in the South China Sea persist due to conflicting national interests.

### **Forms of Regional Cooperation That Indonesia Can Undertake to Address the South China Sea Conflict**

Indonesia can take various steps within regional cooperation to address the conflict in the South China Sea. One form of cooperation that can be undertaken is through multilateral diplomacy. Indonesia, as a member of ASEAN, plays a crucial role in facilitating dialogue between countries involved in the dispute. Through ASEAN forums, Indonesia can promote

peaceful resolution based on international law and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Kumparan, 2024).

Furthermore, cooperation between coast guards is crucial. Indonesia has established close ties with countries like Vietnam to enhance collaboration in maritime security. A memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla) and the Vietnamese Coast Guard aims to strengthen cooperation in delimiting the two countries' exclusive economic zones (EEZs) (IP Defense Forum, 2022). Similar forums are also planned with other countries, such as Malaysia and the Philippines, to share experiences and strategies in addressing challenges in the South China Sea.

In addressing the conflict in the South China Sea (SCS), Indonesia can engage in various forms of strategic regional cooperation to safeguard regional sovereignty and stability. Here are some forms of cooperation that could be implemented:

#### 1. Defense and Security Cooperation

Indonesia can strengthen defense cooperation with ASEAN countries through forums such as ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM). This cooperation could include joint military exercises, intelligence exchange, and defense capacity building to enhance preparedness to face potential threats in the South China Sea (Gaddafi, 2023). In addition, initiatives such as "Our Eyes" which is intelligence cooperation in ASEAN can be used to increase security stability in the region (Khadaifi, 2023).

#### 2. Multilateral Diplomacy

Through multilateral diplomacy, Indonesia can act as a mediator in the South China Sea conflict. By utilizing the ASEAN platform, Indonesia can encourage dialogue between claimant states and China to reach a peaceful agreement (Rimapradesi et al., 2023). This approach could also include the development of a *Code of Conduct* (CoC) to regulate the behavior of countries in the SCS, thereby reducing the potential for conflict (Prayuda & Angeli, 2020).

#### 3. Economic Cooperation

Regional economic cooperation, such as through *Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership* (RCEP) can be a means to strengthen relations between countries and create positive economic interdependence. By increasing economic cooperation, Indonesia can strengthen its position in negotiations on security issues in the South China Sea (Sidabutar, 2020). This cooperation can also include the development of maritime infrastructure that supports regional security and stability.

#### 4. Maritime Cooperation

Indonesia can establish maritime cooperation with neighboring countries to address security issues in its waters, such as illegal fishing and marine pollution. This cooperation could include joint patrols and information exchange to enhance surveillance in disputed waters (Fricila, 2022). Furthermore, cooperation in marine resource management could help reduce tensions in the South China Sea.

#### 5. Environmental and Sustainability Initiatives

To address environmental challenges in the South China Sea, Indonesia can promote cooperation in sustainable natural resource management. This initiative could include protecting marine ecosystems and addressing climate change, which could impact regional stability (Safitry, 2024). Environmental cooperation can serve as a bridge to build trust between claimant states.

### **The Impact of the South China Sea Conflict on Indonesia's National Security Stability**

The impact of the conflict in the South China Sea (SCS) on Indonesia's national security stability is significant and multifaceted. First, Indonesia's territorial sovereignty is threatened by aggressive claims from countries like China, particularly regarding the Natuna Islands. China's illegal fishing and military deployment in areas claimed as Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) are creating tensions that could trigger armed conflict (Kumparan, 2024). These threats



not only impact sovereignty but also disrupt maritime security, which is vital to Indonesia's economy, given its heavy reliance on trade routes in the SCS.

Furthermore, this conflict also has the potential to cause economic uncertainty. Prolonged tensions could disrupt trade and investment activities in the region, as well as affect market stability and the national economy (Yovindra Satria Maulana & Bedriati Ibrahim, 2023). Furthermore, the increased defense budget in response to threats in the South China Sea indicates that Indonesia must allocate more resources to security, which could reduce the budget for other sectors that are also crucial for national development.

On the other hand, domestic political stability can also be disrupted by external pressures and constantly changing geopolitical dynamics. Regional tensions can trigger an arms race and increase the risk of armed conflict, which in turn will affect Indonesia's diplomatic relations with other countries in the region (Wasito et al., 2022). Thus, the impact of the conflict in the South China Sea is not limited to the military but also extends to the economic and political spheres, demanding serious attention from the Indonesian government in formulating national security policies.

The conflict in the South China Sea (SCS) has had a significant impact on Indonesia's national security stability. As an archipelagic nation strategically located in Southeast Asia, Indonesia faces various challenges arising from tensions involving claimant states, particularly China and the United States. The following are some of the main impacts of this conflict on Indonesia's national security:

#### 1. Threats to Territorial Sovereignty

One of the most direct impacts of the South China Sea conflict is the threat to Indonesia's territorial sovereignty, particularly in the North Natuna Sea. Activities by Chinese vessels in waters claimed as Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) have fueled tensions and increased the risk of armed conflict (Adiwilaga, 2023; Hidayat, 2024). This requires Indonesia to increase its military presence and surveillance in the region, which could divert resources from other sectors critical to national security.

#### 2. Regional Instability

Conflict in the South China Sea has the potential to cause broader regional instability. Tensions between China and the United States in the region could trigger an arms race and increase the risk of large-scale conflict (Armawi & Wijatmoko, 2022; Shafitri, 2024). Indonesia, as a country committed to regional stability, must play an active role in regional diplomacy and cooperation to prevent conflict escalation that could directly impact its national security (Utami, 2022; Laksmi et al., 2022).

#### 3. Economic Impact

Tensions in the South China Sea could also negatively impact the Indonesian economy, particularly those related to the fisheries sector and natural resource exploration. The uncertainty caused by the conflict could disrupt economic activity in resource-rich waters, thus affecting fishermen's incomes and investment in the maritime sector (Adiwilaga, 2023; Hidayat, 2024). Furthermore, disruptions to international trade routes crossing the South China Sea could impact the Indonesian economy as a whole.

#### 4. Challenges in Diplomacy

This conflict also challenges Indonesia's diplomatic position. As a country that upholds the principle of non-alignment, Indonesia must navigate the complex relationship between China and the United States while maintaining its national interests (Rimapradesi et al., 2023; Adhistry, 2023). Effective diplomacy is needed to ensure Indonesia can act as a mediator in this conflict and to strengthen cooperation with ASEAN countries in addressing common challenges (Rafaldhanis, 2023; Rusfiana, 2018).

## 5. Increasing Military Readiness

In response to the threats posed by the South China Sea conflict, Indonesia needs to enhance its military preparedness and strengthen its maritime defense capacity. This includes naval modernization and enhanced training and coordination between relevant agencies (Wakino & Siregar, 2021; Arif et al., 2020). Improved preparedness will help Indonesia protect its territorial sovereignty and respond more effectively to potential threats.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that managing national defense in the context of the South China Sea (SCS) conflict requires a multidimensional, adaptive, and integrated strategy. Indonesia's national defense management must not only strengthen military capabilities but also cultivate diplomatic leverage, enhance maritime governance, and consolidate regional cooperation mechanisms. A defense strategy that relies solely on military force is insufficient given the complexity of the SCS dispute, which intersects geopolitical rivalry, economic competition, and legal contestation.

First, national defense management must prioritize the modernization of Indonesia's maritime defense posture through enhanced naval readiness, expanded maritime domain awareness (MDA), and improved inter-agency coordination. Strengthening defense capabilities particularly in the Natuna Sea is essential to establish credible deterrence, protect Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and respond to China's persistent incursions. At the same time, diplomatic instruments must operate in parallel with military initiatives, enabling Indonesia to maintain strategic autonomy while reducing the risk of escalation.

Second, regional cooperation serves as a strategic multiplier that reinforces Indonesia's national defense objectives. ASEAN-led mechanisms such as ADMM, ADMM-Plus, ARF, and negotiations toward the Code of Conduct (COC) play critical roles in building confidence, facilitating dialogue, and promoting conflict prevention. Beyond defense cooperation, Indonesia must strengthen maritime cooperation, intelligence sharing, joint patrols, and economic collaboration through RCEP and other regional frameworks. These efforts help enhance regional resilience, mitigate miscalculation risks, and balance China's growing influence.

Third, the impact of the South China Sea conflict on Indonesia's national security stability is expansive. The conflict threatens territorial sovereignty in the North Natuna Sea, disrupts regional strategic stability, and imposes economic vulnerabilities, particularly in fisheries, maritime trade, and resource exploration. Additionally, geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States places Indonesia in a delicate diplomatic position, requiring careful navigation to maintain non-alignment while protecting national interests. Increased defense spending, heightened maritime tensions, and the potential for regional escalation further underscore the urgency for a coherent and integrated national defense policy.

In conclusion, Indonesia's ability to navigate the South China Sea conflict depends on its capacity to synchronize military preparedness, diplomatic engagement, and regional cooperation. A balanced strategy that strengthens deterrence, promotes multilateralism, and ensures maritime security is crucial for protecting national sovereignty and sustaining regional stability. Future research should explore operational challenges in implementing Indonesia's defense policies at local and inter-agency levels, as well as examine the evolving role of regional and international institutions in mitigating conflicts in contested maritime spaces.

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