

## **Indonesian And Malaysia Sea Defense Strategies In Responding The South China Sea's Threats**

**Reghina Rizqy Syifaranie<sup>1)</sup>, Buddy Suseto<sup>2)</sup>, Ikhwan Syahtaria<sup>3)</sup>**

<sup>1,2,3)</sup>Sea Defense Strategy, Faculty of Defense Strategy, Republic Indonesia Defense University, Jakarta

\*Corresponding Author

Email: [rsyifaranie@gmail.com](mailto:rsyifaranie@gmail.com)

---

### ***Abstract***

*The South China Sea is a source of conflict between China and Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia because China claims the nine-dash lines that pass through the Indonesian Exclusive Economic Zone and the Malaysian territory. This area has high fishery potential and is the main route for global trade, so the maritime defense strategies of the countries concerned are very crucial. This research method uses qualitative data sources using literature studies. The results of the analysis and discussion show that there are differences between Indonesia's and Malaysia's maritime defense strategies, which are influenced by factors such as the fact that Malaysia is one of the ASEAN countries that claims the South China Sea area. However, Indonesia and Malaysia have similarities by using soft power diplomacy and track-3 multi-track diplomacy in dealing with these threats, one of which is due to the economic cooperation of the both countries with China.*

**Keywords:** *Indonesia, Malaysia, Sea Defense Strategy, South China Sea*

---

## **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past two decades, the South China Sea (SCS) has witnessed an alarming escalation in both the frequency and intensity of threats, presenting a complex challenge to regional stability. Despite concerted efforts by relevant nations to mitigate tensions, the persistently contentious nature of the situation remains a cause for concern. The root of this prolonged discord lies in maritime claims that have entangled China (including Taiwan) with the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia, forming a multifaceted web of geopolitical disputes.

The South China Sea's strategic importance becomes evident when considering its vast expanse of 3.5 million square kilometers, strategically nestled amidst Southeast Asian nations. This geographical location renders the region pivotal for international trade, maritime connectivity, and geopolitical influence. The sea is hemmed in by nations with diverse interests, leading to a complex interplay of economic, political, and security considerations. Adding to the strategic significance are the abundant marine resources within the South China Sea. The region boasts a rich ecosystem, making it a vital source for fisheries and contributing significantly to the global seafood market. Additionally, beneath the seabed lies the promising potential for oil and natural gas reservoirs, attracting attention for energy exploration and extraction.

The findings by Gao, Z., & Jia, B. (2013) underscore the multifaceted nature of the South China Sea, where geopolitical dynamics, territorial claims, and resource exploitation converge. The confluence of these factors intensifies the competition among nations, contributing to the protracted nature of the conflicts. In summary, the South China Sea emerges as a geopolitical hotspot marked by the intersection of strategic interests, territorial disputes, and resource competition. The persistent challenges underscore the need for diplomatic initiatives and international cooperation to address the root causes and foster a stable and collaborative environment in this crucial maritime expanse.

China's claims in this region date back to 1947 when the Chinese government established the eleven-dash line in the South China Sea based on historical aspects. However, in 1953, two dash lines were removed, resulting in the current nine-dash line, which remains a contentious issue to this day, despite conflicting with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) of 1982. Anticipating the ratification of UNCLOS, China announced its Law on Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone on February 25, 1992, regulating China's mainland territory, including four island groups in the South China Sea, and other islands. On June 7, 1996, while depositing the instrument of ratification for UNCLOS, China declared that the "People's Republic of China reaffirms its sovereignty over all the islands and their surrounding waters as stipulated in the Law of the People's Republic of China on the territorial sea and the contiguous zone, promulgated on February 25, 1992." On May 15, 1996, China announced the baseline points for measuring its territorial sea, including the Xisha Islands or Paracel Islands (Gao, Z., & Jia, B., 2013).

Several resistance movements against China's unilateral claims have been undertaken by ASEAN countries. For instance, the Philippines bases its sovereignty claim on the geographical proximity to the Spratly Islands. Brunei Darussalam, while not claiming these islands, regards the South China Sea claimed by China as its exclusive economic zone. Malaysia published the Continental Shelf Map in 1979, including a portion of the Spratly Islands (Junef, 2018).

Indonesia has also rejected China's unilateral maritime claims, stating that these claims lack a clear basis in international law for their territorial claims, which contradict the UNCLOS of 1982. In July 2010, Indonesia entered the debate by submitting its own note verbale to the United Nations. However, despite being a non-claimant state, Indonesia remains attentive to substantive issues related to disputes in the South China Sea. On the other hand, China mentions overlapping maritime territory issues with Indonesia, yet its factual claim in this area is based on the nine-dash lines. If recommended, this would cut through Indonesia's agreed continental shelf boundaries with Vietnam and Malaysia, as well as intersect Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claims. China consistently engages in provocative activities, deploying state vessels to escort fishing vessels, extending southward and entering Indonesia's EEZ (Junef, 2018).



Figure 1 South China Sea Claim

Source: nationsonline.org, 2022

There are three factors that make the South China Sea a disputed maritime region. First, the South China Sea is rich in natural resources, especially oil, with several clusters of islands in its vicinity. Second, its geographical location lies along the international shipping routes connecting Europe-Asia and America-Asia, prompting countries like the United States, despite being geographically distant from the South China Sea, to have interests in maintaining stability and security in the region. Third, the rapid economic growth in Asia has led many countries to seek control over this strategic and dynamic sea.

The strategic significance of the South China Sea is further underscored by the intricate geopolitical and territorial complexities that have emerged over time. The abundance of natural resources, particularly oil, surrounding clusters of islands in the region, constitutes a critical factor contributing to the disputes. The competition for control over these resources has fueled tensions among the nations bordering the South China Sea, creating a challenging environment for diplomatic resolutions.

Additionally, the South China Sea's pivotal location along major international shipping routes, connecting the continents of Europe, Asia, and America, adds another layer of complexity to the disputes. This strategic positioning has attracted the attention of global powers like the United States, prompting them to assert their interests in preserving the stability and security of these crucial maritime passageways. The intricate web of economic and geopolitical interests converging in the South China Sea underscores its status as a focal point for international attention and emphasizes the multifaceted nature of the disputes.

The rapid economic growth in Asia, as the third factor, has intensified the competition among nations seeking control over the South China Sea. The pursuit of strategic and dynamic maritime territories has become intertwined with economic ambitions, leading to heightened tensions. As countries vie for dominance and control over the sea, the South China Sea has become a microcosm of the broader geopolitical landscape, where economic prosperity, resource security, and geopolitical influence converge in a complex interplay of interests and disputes.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative research method where the author serves as the instrument in the study. Qualitative research is a research process that does not involve statistical steps (Strauss & Corbin in Salim & Syahrul, 2012). In this study, the researcher organizes the obtained theories and conducts ground research, which involves discovering theories based on the acquired data (Prakoso, 2020). The research utilizes literature review, including theoretical studies, references, and scholarly literature related to the values of the object under investigation (Sugiyono, 2012). The data sources for this research are secondary data, such as scientific journals, books, newspapers, official ministry websites, and mass media. The researcher utilizes information on maritime defense strategies and maritime defense diplomacy to facilitate the analysis of the maritime defense strategies implemented by Indonesia and Malaysia in facing threats in the South China Sea.

In employing a qualitative research method, the researcher takes on an active role as the primary instrument, emphasizing a deep understanding of the nuances and complexities involved in maritime defense strategies. Qualitative research, as chosen for this study, allows for a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter beyond statistical measurements, providing a nuanced and context-rich understanding of the strategies adopted by Indonesia and Malaysia in the South China Sea.

The research methodology involves not only a literature review but also ground research, reflecting a holistic approach to understanding maritime defense strategies. The combination of

theoretical studies, references, and scholarly literature contributes to a thorough examination of the values and principles shaping the maritime defense policies of Indonesia and Malaysia. By incorporating diverse sources of information, the research aims to unravel the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by both nations in the South China Sea and shed light on the effectiveness of their maritime defense strategies. The utilization of secondary data, including scientific journals, books, and official ministry websites, ensures a robust analysis grounded in credible and varied sources, enhancing the depth and reliability of the research findings.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The maritime defense strategy aims to prevent parties intending to disturb the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country, as well as those with intentions to harm national interests, through naval diplomacy and maritime presence, especially in border areas that could become sources of conflict in the future. Additionally, it involves neutralizing and eliminating external threats by deploying joint air and naval forces in defense buffer zones, main defense areas, and resistance areas, engaging the Navy along with all maritime components. Layered defense strategy is implemented during wartime in the form of naval force operations, with a forward defense nature, focusing on the concept of shifting the battlefield to ensure the utilization of the sea for one's own forces and preventing the opponent's use of the sea (Hermawan and Sutanto, 2022).

The maritime defense strategy, as outlined, reflects a proactive and comprehensive approach to safeguarding national interests in the maritime domain. It emphasizes the prevention of potential threats to sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national interests through the strategic deployment of naval diplomacy and maritime presence. By concentrating efforts, particularly in border areas prone to future conflicts, the goal is to establish a visible and influential maritime stance that serves as a deterrent against any disruptive activities.

Furthermore, the strategy involves a multifaceted response to external threats, incorporating joint air and naval forces across defense buffer zones, main defense areas, and resistance areas. This approach not only enhances the overall defense capabilities but also ensures a coordinated effort across all maritime components. The emphasis on a layered defense strategy signifies a forward-thinking approach, acknowledging the dynamic nature of maritime threats and the need for adaptive responses.

During times of conflict, the implementation of the layered defense strategy transforms into naval force operations, characterized by a forward defense nature. This strategy prioritizes the concept of shifting the battlefield to gain a strategic advantage, ensuring the sea's effective utilization for one's own forces while preventing the opponent's access to maritime routes. The forward-looking and adaptable nature of this maritime defense strategy aligns with the evolving challenges in the maritime domain, emphasizing the importance of staying ahead in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

### **Soft Power Maritime Defense Diplomacy**

Maritime Defense Diplomacy strategy comprises efforts or measures for the achievement of maritime defense goals, ranging from security and safety at sea to conflict stability and tension in disputed regions. This is accomplished through the integration and optimization of various diplomatic, legal, and military instruments, both in times of peace, crisis, or war. The concept of maritime defense diplomacy is primarily directed towards formulating an ideal framework for how a government should conduct maritime defense diplomacy. However, in the maritime context of Indonesia, diplomatic instruments are no longer narrowly defined as activities solely undertaken by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs diplomats. On the contrary, the maritime defense

diplomacy concept suggests that diplomatic activities aimed at strengthening maritime defense should involve other state actors, especially those from the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, the Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla), the Indonesian Navy (TNI AL), and other strategic assets (CSIS, 2016).

According to Joseph Nye in 2008, soft power diplomacy is the ability to obtain what one wants through attraction rather than through military or economic means. As a theoretical concept, soft power entails enhancing interests and relevance. Many countries have recognized the importance of employing soft tools and resources to engage in competitive politics of attraction, legitimacy, and credibility. This is because alignment with the values and interests of other nations can be as crucial as the implementation of hard power to achieve the desired goals of a nation (Lee, 2011).

In the context of maritime defense diplomacy, the incorporation of soft power strategies becomes particularly relevant. Soft power encompasses cultural influence, diplomatic initiatives, and collaborative endeavors that aim to shape positive perceptions and build cooperative relationships. Maritime nations often leverage soft power by promoting their cultural heritage, engaging in joint research and educational programs, and participating in international forums. The emphasis on soft power in maritime defense diplomacy recognizes that winning the hearts and minds of neighboring nations is instrumental in fostering regional stability and cooperation. Furthermore, the application of soft power in maritime defense diplomacy extends beyond traditional state actors to include non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, and civil society. Collaborative efforts in environmental conservation, marine research, and sustainable fisheries management can enhance a nation's soft power influence. By actively participating in regional initiatives that address common maritime challenges, countries can establish themselves as responsible stewards of the marine environment, thereby gaining credibility and support on the international stage. In essence, a holistic approach to maritime defense diplomacy acknowledges the multifaceted nature of security, combining both hard and soft power elements to promote enduring stability and mutual understanding in maritime regions.

### **Indonesia's maritime defense strategy in facing threats in the South China Sea**

In efforts to strengthen maritime resilience and defense, the government refers to the 'Strategic Plan of the Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs and Investment 2020-2024.' This is executed through two approaches: a hard effort approach and a soft effort approach. The hard effort approach involves building Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and developing sea power to safeguard maritime security. On the other hand, the soft approach entails various maritime diplomacy efforts with other countries, both bilaterally and through organizations such as ASEAN and IORA (The Indian Ocean Rim Association).

Indonesia currently plays a crucial role in resolving disputes in the South China Sea, a strategic role it has undertaken for several years. In 1990, Indonesia initiated a workshop titled "Workshop on Management of Potential Conflict in the South China Sea." Then, in 2002, in Cambodia, Indonesia took the lead in forming the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. To date, the Indonesian government actively encourages disputing nations to agree on a code of conduct (Toruan, L, 2020).

Additionally, according to Angkasa Dipua et al. in 2020, the Indonesian government has undertaken five efforts in responding to the conflict, including (1) a domestic approach to strengthen bases near conflict areas, (2) military exercises conducted by the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) around conflict locations, (3) renaming the area as the North Natuna Sea, (4) defending flashpoint bases with a Minimum Essential Force for the Indonesian armed forces by allocating personnel to the South China Sea region, and (5) government supervision of Indonesian fishermen operating in the South China Sea.

However, Indonesia's stance and policies in addressing threats in the South China Sea, particularly China's encroachment into the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around the Natuna Islands, have become more cautious. This contrasts with the assertive patrols in 2016 that targeted and decisively sunk illegal Chinese fishing vessels. The calculated shift towards a more controlled policy is transactional and reflects broader changes in Indonesia's perspective toward China. Transactional elements include investment, trade, and close cooperation in providing COVID-19 vaccines, serving as pragmatic factors that have restrained the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Navy, prompting them to soften their stance against Chinese aggression.

### **Malaysia's maritime defense strategy to face threats in the South China Sea**

In general, according to Storey, I. (2020), in facing disputes in the South China Sea, the Malaysian government has three main strategies:

1. Upholding and defending the sovereignty and sovereign rights of the country: Malaysia has deployed military personnel and the Malaysian Royal Air Force, the Royal Malaysian Navy, and the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA, Coast Guard) conducting routine patrols in the area.
2. Malaysia's preference, along with China, is to address the disputes through quiet and behind-the-scenes diplomacy to protect the country's economic relations with China from disputes.
3. Malaysia supports the conflict management process between ASEAN and China, particularly the 2002 Declaration on the Code of Conduct (CoC), which is still in the process as of now.

Malaysia's approach as a claimant state in the South China Sea dispute is markedly different from other claimant states such as the Philippines and Vietnam. The Philippines has taken a confrontational stance on the South China Sea dispute, while Malaysia's policy and strategy remain largely consistent with minimal changes to account for shifts in the geopolitical environment. Malaysia has refrained from arousing nationalist sentiments that rhetorically reject China's firmness and has expressed support for the U.S. military presence.

Malaysia's policy stance, strategy, and actions have remained consistent over the past few decades. Positioning itself as a maritime nation, Malaysia has carefully maintained control over the majority of its occupied territories and claimed features in the South China Sea, adhering to the principles of UNCLOS. Malaysia has successfully pursued its specific unilateral goals while relying on ASEAN diplomacy in responding to China's ambitions and actions in the South China Sea to assert the legal basis of its claims and to safeguard its interests by adopting a dual strategy with China while quietly engaging in diplomacy with the United States and its allies (Saravanamuttu, 2021).

Malaysia's nuanced stance and strategy are not disconnected from the fact that Malaysia procures ships from China to defend itself against the threat of aggression from the said nation. Malaysia's dependence on China is further grounded in the fact that China has been a major investor in Malaysia since 2016 and has been Malaysia's largest trading partner since 2009, contributing 18.6 percent to the total trade last year (Storey, 2020).

Malaysia does not directly oppose China but resists through UNCLOS submissions and continues oil exploration despite overt intimidation from China. However, there are challenges or issues in Malaysia's efforts to anticipate threats in the South China Sea, such as the fact that the Royal Malaysian Navy is burdened with aging ships. All combat and patrol ships date back to the 1970s and 1980s, with many of these vessels reaching a point of diminishing quality in terms of maintenance. Increasing the quantity and quality of military assets is imperative for the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) to fulfill its duties in the South China Sea (Saravanamuttu, 2021).

### **Utilization of Track 3 in Multi-track Diplomacy in Facing Threats in the South China Sea**

From the description above, the commonality between Indonesia and Malaysia lies in their soft power diplomatic approach, with one of the factors being that China is the largest

trading partner for both nations. Meanwhile, ASEAN has also become the number one trading partner for China. Based on these facts, economic cooperation among the three countries cannot be denied as one of the collaborative strategies among nations that is expected to reduce conflicts.

It can be said that Indonesia and Malaysia share a similarity by utilizing one of the 9 multi-track diplomacy approaches, namely track 3. According to Diamond and McDonald in 1996, track 3 - Business has the potential to build peace through economic opportunities, fostering friendships, and promoting international understanding among nations. As a process of realizing peace between Indonesia, Malaysia, and China through business, it is hoped that it can foster good and conducive relations among these countries. This realization acknowledges that a country cannot stand alone but requires cooperation with other nations to maintain the stability of the economic system.

In addition to the utilization of track 3 in their diplomatic approach, Indonesia and Malaysia's shared emphasis on economic collaboration highlights their recognition of the interconnected nature of modern geopolitics. By placing a considerable focus on track 3 - Business, both countries acknowledge that economic interdependence can be a potent force for fostering collaboration and preventing conflict. This approach aligns with the evolving dynamics of international relations, where economic ties and shared interests have become pivotal factors in shaping diplomatic relationships.

The utilization of economic cooperation as a means to promote peace underscores a pragmatic understanding that a nation's prosperity is intricately linked with its relationships with other countries. In the context of the South China Sea, where geopolitical tensions persist, Indonesia and Malaysia's adoption of track 3 reflects a commitment to building bridges through economic opportunities. This strategy not only aims to enhance economic stability but also to contribute to the overall peace and security of the region, emphasizing the interconnectedness of political, economic, and security dimensions in the contemporary global landscape.

Moreover, the emphasis on fostering friendships and promoting international understanding within track 3 - Business indicates a desire to transcend traditional diplomatic boundaries. By engaging in business collaborations, Indonesia and Malaysia aspire to create lasting connections that extend beyond political differences, fostering a foundation of goodwill and cooperation. This approach recognizes that building trust through economic engagements can lead to a more resilient and harmonious regional environment, offering a pathway for constructive dialogue and shared prosperity in the South China Sea.

## CONCLUSION

Comparison of maritime defense strategies can be observed in the fact that Indonesia is a non-claimant state, while Malaysia, along with the Philippines, Brunei, and Vietnam, is a claimant state. However, despite this difference, Indonesia and Malaysia share similarities in addressing threats in the South China Sea. Both countries employ a soft power maritime defense diplomacy approach as a government effort to resolve ongoing conflicts, where soft power diplomacy is a concept describing a country's ability to engage in cooperation with other nations without resorting to military means. The choice of soft power diplomacy is influenced, among other factors, by the fact that China is a significant trading partner for both countries. Therefore, it can be concluded that Indonesia and Malaysia are implementing track 3 of the multi-track diplomacy advocated by Diamond and McDonald. Through the established business cooperation relationships, there is potential to build peace between these countries.

In adopting soft power maritime defense diplomacy, Indonesia and Malaysia recognize the importance of fostering collaboration and understanding rather than resorting to confrontation.

The emphasis on economic cooperation and business relationships in this strategy aligns with the idea that interconnected economies can contribute to regional stability. Both nations aim to leverage their economic ties, not only to enhance their own security but also to promote a broader atmosphere of cooperation and peaceful coexistence in the South China Sea.

Furthermore, the implementation of track 3 in multi-track diplomacy suggests that the engagement between Indonesia, Malaysia, and China goes beyond traditional state-level interactions. It involves various non-state actors, particularly those in the business sector, who play a pivotal role in creating mutual understanding and shared interests. By recognizing the potential of economic collaboration to serve as a catalyst for peace, Indonesia and Malaysia are navigating a diplomatic path that prioritizes dialogue, economic interdependence, and shared prosperity as essential components of regional stability in the South China Sea.

## REFERENCES

- Centre for Strategic and International Studies. (2016). *Diplomasi Pertahanan Maritim: Strategi, Tantangan, dan Prospek*. Retrieved from <https://kemlu.go.id/download/L3NpdGVzL3B1c2F0L0RvY3VtZW50cy9LYWppYW4IMjBCUFBLL1AzSyUyME9JLU1VTFRJTEFURVJBTC8xNV9EaXBsb21hc2lfUGVydGFoYW5hbl9NYXJpdGltLnBkZg==>
- Dipua, A. dkk. (2020). An Analysis of South China Sea Conflict: Indonesia's Perspectives, Contexts and Recommendations. *PJAEI*, 17(4)
- Diamond, L & McDonald, J. (1996). *Multi-Track Diplomacy: A Systems Approach to Peace*. Kumarian Press
- Gao, Z., & Jia, B. (2013). The Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea: History, Status, and Implications. *The American Journal of International Law*, 107(1), 99-124
- Hermawan & Sutanto. (2022). Strategi pertahanan laut indonesia dalam analisa ancaman dan kekuatan laut. *Jurnal Education and development Institut Pendidikan Tapanuli Selatan*, 10(2)
- Junef, M. (2018). Sengketa Wilayah Maritim di Laut Tiongkok Selatan. *Jurnal Penelitian Hukum*, 18(2), 219-240
- Lee, SW. (2011). *The Theory and Reality of Soft Power: Practical Approaches in East Asia*. In: Lee, S.J., Melissen, J. (eds) *Public Diplomacy and Soft Power in East Asia*. Palgrave Macmillan Series in Global Public Diplomacy. New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- Nye, J. S. (2008). Public Diplomacy and Soft Power. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), 94–109.
- Prakoso, Y. (2020). *Perumusan Strategi Pertahanan Metode SWOT dan AHP*. Bogor: Universitas Pertahanan.
- Roza, R., Nainggolan, P., & Muhamad, V. (2013). *Konflik Laut China Selatan Dan Implikasinya Terhadap Kawasan*. Jakarta: P3DI Setjen DPR Republik Indonesia dan Azza Grafika.
- Salim & Syahrudin. (2012). *Metodologi Penelitian Kuantitatif*. Bandung: PT Citapustaka Media.
- Saravanamuttu, J. (2021). Malaysia's Policies And Interest In The South China Sea. *RSIS Working Paper*, 336
- Storey, I. (2020). *Malaysia And The South China Sea Dispute: Policy Continuity Amid Domestic Political Change*. Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute.
- Sugiyono. (2012). *Memahami Penelitian Kualitatif*. Bandung: ALFABETA.
- Sulistiyani, Y., Pertiwi, C., & Sari, I. (2021). Respons Indonesia Terhadap Sengketa Laut China Selatan Semasa Pemerintahan Joko Widodo. *Jurnal Politica*, 12(1)
- Toruan, L. (2020). Peran Strategis Indonesia dalam Penyelesaian Konflik Laut China Selatan dalam Perspektif Stabilitas Keamanan Regional. *Jurnal Keamanan Nasional*, 6(1)