

## SOLDIERS AND DIPLOMATS: INDONESIAN NAVAL DIPLOMACY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Muhammad Samy

Department of International Relations  
Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Airlangga  
Surabaya, Indonesia  
muhammad.samy-2019@fisip.unair.ac.id

### INFO ARTIKEL

#### Article History

#### Received

10 February 2023

#### Revised

23 February 2023

#### Accepted

25 February 2023

### Abstrak

Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk memahami mengapa Angkatan Laut Indonesia digunakan sebagai instrumen diplomasi alih-alih sebagai instrumen peperangan di Laut Cina Selatan. Sengketa di perairan tersebut menciptakan ancaman terhadap kedaulatan dan keutuhan teritorial Indonesia. Secara historis ancaman demikian umumnya direspon dengan kekuatan militer oleh Indonesia, namun isu Laut Cina Selatan merupakan pengecualian. Metode kualitatif digunakan dalam penelitian ini untuk memahami data yang diperoleh dari sumber sekunder. Adapun kerangka teori yang digunakan yaitu tingkat analisis atribut nasional dan sistem internasional yang menggariskan bahwa kondisi nasional dan internasional menciptakan batasan terhadap opsi kebijakan luar negeri. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa terdapat beberapa kondisi yang menciptakan hambatan bagi opsi-opsi kebijakan Indonesia di Laut Cina Selatan dan menyimpulkan bahwa hambatan tersebut mendorong Indonesia untuk menggunakan angkatan lautnya untuk diplomasi dan bukan untuk perang.

### Kata kunci:

diplomasi angkatan laut; Indonesia; Laut Cina Selatan; Tiongkok; tentara angkatan laut Indonesia

### Keywords:

naval diplomacy; Indonesia; South China Sea; China; Indonesian navy.

### Abstract

This paper seeks to understand why the Indonesian Navy is utilized as an instrument of diplomacy rather than as a warfighter in the South China Sea. The disputes create a threat to Indonesia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Historically Indonesia has responded with the use of force in similar situations, however, this is not the case in the South China Sea Disputes. The qualitative method is used in this research in understanding and analyze the data which is gathered from secondary sources. The theoretical framework used for this research is the national attribute and international system levels of analysis which posits that domestic and international conditions create constraints that affect foreign policy. The research finds that several conditions constrain Indonesia's response options in the South China Sea disputes and concludes that these constraints cause Indonesia to utilize her navy for diplomacy rather than battle.

## INTRODUCTION

The political constellation in the Asia-Pacific region has recently shown a tendency to escalate from relations that tend to be peaceful to relations that tend to be conflictual. Borrowing Johan Galtung's (1969) term, the regional situation has shifted from positive to negative peace. One of the hot spots in the region is the South China Sea (SCS), an area in the Asia-Pacific that has strategic significance and common interests for countries in the region. Disputes in the SCS have become crucial topics of policy discourse and academic inquiry, particularly in fields ranging from the Asia-Pacific region and maritime security studies to diplomatic and geopolitical studies. The SCS dispute involves several countries, including China, and several Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia. The root of the SCS dispute is overlapping claims between China and Southeast Asian countries that have maritime boundaries with China over marine areas in the SCS (Hayton, 2014).

According to the United States Energy Information Administration, the SCS has a massive potential reserve of gas and oil (CSIS, 2018). The United States Energy Information Administration claims that the

SCS contains a natural gas reserve of around 190 trillion cubic feet and around 11 billion barrels of oil. The United States Energy Information Administration also claims that there are around 160 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 12 billion barrels of oil that are yet to be discovered in the SCS (CSIS, 2018). The abundance of natural resources in the SCS has become one of the drivers for disputing states to act more assertively, and to some extent even aggressively, to protect and enforce the legitimacy of their sovereignty over parts of the SCS. The claims of disputing the disputing states are backed by several justifications which range from historical factors, legal documents, and geostrategic considerations, to economic interests (Dutton, 2011; Samuels, 2013).

States tend to take caution when acting upon the developments of the SCS disputes issue. For states involved, particularly Southeast Asian states, the dispute is somewhat volatile, meaning that situations tend to be dynamic and can easily escalate. In the event of an escalation, the ensuing conflict may cause destabilization in the region of Southeast Asia. The inability to secure peace and stability in the region may cause the Association of Southeast Asian

Nations (ASEAN) and the member states to lose credibility as the central actors of regional peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific (Yates, 2017). Apart from the need to retain credibility as a regional diplomatic power, Southeast Asian states disputing the SCS are also in an awkward position when it comes to relations with China. China, a state with major military power and a perceived threat to several Southeast Asian states including Indonesia, is also regarded as a major economic partner. This fact further complicates the issue of the SCS dispute. As one the major actors involved in the dispute as well as an influential member of ASEAN, Indonesia has an important role in the dispute, potentially playing a constructive role in the resolution of the dispute or at least contributing to ensuring regional stability (Rezasyah, 2022). One such way Indonesia has responded to the dynamics of the SCS disputes is through naval diplomacy, and the utilization of their navy as "floating diplomats". This is a unique approach to a military threat, at least by Indonesian standards, as the Indonesian Navy has historically been used in battle in the face of military threats, even when confronted with more powerful navies such as the Dutch navy. Some of the Indonesian Navy or Tentara Angkatan Laut's (TNI AL)

remarkable naval operations include the Battle of the Java Sea and the Battle of the Aru Sea (TNI AL Personnel Service, 2020).

Keeping in mind that the SCS dispute is an issue of maritime security, the Indonesian Navy or Tentara Nasional Indonesia Angkatan Laut (TNI AL) has become an important instrument of foreign policy for Indonesia. Ken Booth (2014) argues that the navy possesses characteristics that make it an important tool of foreign policy. Furthermore, James Cable (2016) explains that the flexibility, speed, as well as sheer spectacle of naval warships, make them an ideal instrument of foreign policy, projecting a state's presence and virtually acting as "floating ambassadors" for said state. With that being said, it is only fair to say that the TNI AL has a significant role to play for Indonesia regarding the conditions in the SCS. Indonesia itself tends to use the TNI AL more as a tool of diplomacy rather than as an instrument of war in the context of the SCS disputes (Laksmana, Regional order by other means? Examining the rise of defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia., 2012).

Departing from the previously mentioned ideas, this article seeks to explore why Indonesia opts to deploy the TNI AL as "floating diplomats" rather than as an

instrument to engage in naval battles regarding the SCS disputes. To give a comprehensive explanation, this article analyzes Indonesia's national attributes as well as the international system context surrounding Indonesia. With this approach, an in-depth analysis is done and the article finds that the reason for the use of the TNI AL as diplomats rather than as instruments of war are caused by Indonesia's national attributes as well as external restrictions such as the presence of ASEAN and the asymmetric power relations between Indonesia and China. To elaborate on this argument, the article is divided into four parts. The first part discusses the theoretical approach used to analyze the issue, which is the national attributes and international system levels of analysis in foreign policy analysis. The second part discusses the TNI AL's diplomatic efforts. The third part discusses the national attributes of Indonesia. The fourth part of the article discusses the international system surrounding Indonesia as a context that restricts Indonesia's foreign policy options regarding the SCS issue.

Several studies have been done in regards to naval diplomacy. For instance, Parker (2021) has studied how maritime

states, in this case the United Kingdom, uses naval diplomacy as an extension of statecraft in order to advance national interests. A similar study has been conducted by Larsson and Widen (2022) towards the European Union's naval diplomacy efforts to strengthen their identity as a global facilitator of security and good order. Some research has also shown how the navy is used short of combat as tools of foreign policy by harnessing navies' soft power, such as the case of China (in some cases) and Japan (Zanardi, 2019; Patalano, *Beyond gunboats: Rethinking naval diplomacy and humanitarian assistance disaster relief in East Asia*, 2015). While the literature mentioned is by no means exhaustive, there is an extensive literature of naval diplomacy that shows that the idea of naval presence helps convey a state's intentions and advance their national interests in the international realm and that the topic has been deeply discussed in the study of International Relations (Patalano, 2017; Widen, 2011; Davidson, 2009).

Following suit, there is ample study of naval diplomacy conducted by Indonesia. For instance, there are studies of Indonesia's effort to project an image of a peacekeeping maritime power through the conduct of naval

diplomacy in Lebanon (Sirmareza, 2017; Sirmareza, 2018). A study of Indonesia's naval diplomacy by Paramasatya & Poespojoedho (2019) points out that Indonesia conducts naval diplomacy in the South China Sea as a means to diffuse tensions in the region and maintain peace. This idea has also been echoed by the research of Inkiriwang (2021), which stated that Indonesia is using naval diplomacy as a means of confidence-building as well as to ease tensions in the South China Sea.

Despite the numerous amounts of inquiries towards naval diplomacy in general, and Indonesian naval diplomacy in particular, not much research has been conducted to understand *why* some states choose to use naval diplomacy instead of gunboat diplomacy. Most of the effort spent in understanding naval diplomacy has been focused on how it is used and what its ends are. Therefore, the primacy of this paper in the field of International Relations and the subject of naval diplomacy lies in the idea that it enriches the existing study of naval diplomacy by deepening the understanding of *why* states, in this case Indonesia, choose to conduct naval diplomacy instead of only analysing naval diplomacy as a means to an end.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **National Attributes and International System Level of Analysis**

National attributes and international systems are two interrelated aspects in the analysis of foreign policy through levels of analysis. The two acts as restrictions in the formulation of states' foreign policy. When decision-makers formulate foreign policy, the external realm (i.e., the international system) is perceived through the lens of their national attributes. Analyzing foreign policy by taking into account both national attributes and the context of the international system gives a more accurate reading into the decision-making process. This is because analysis based on national attributes or international system conditions alone may give an unbalanced analysis (Taliaferro, Lobell, & Ripsman, 2014; Wohlforth, 2016). The national attributes level of analysis itself encompasses several aspects. Before further elaborating on the aspects of national attributes, it is important to understand what national attributes are. Attributes can be understood as a state's capabilities regarding several aspects. As mentioned before, states' national attributes act as a restraint or constraint in the policy-making process, meaning that states take into account their abilities and disabilities when enacting their

foreign policy. By understanding the constraints that states' face, an inquiry can be made into why states act the way they do and why states formulate certain policies (Lebovic, 1985).

There are several aspects taken into account when analyzing states' national attributes regarding their foreign policy. As such, there are several opinions on what are the significant attributes to pay attention to when analyzing foreign policy. Generally, the attributes to look at when analyzing foreign policy boils down to size, geographical location, and social and political conditions as well as the culture of a state. The size of a state can be further broken down to the size of the population, territory, length of the border, size of the economy, to military strength (East, 1973). As for the location of a state, characteristics to consider in foreign policy analysis can include the proximity of a state to a perceived issue, the proximity of a state to other states that is the target of foreign policy, and even ideological proximity (Henrikson, 2002). Finally, the social, political, and cultural characteristics of a state encompass the conditions of a state's citizens and government (Lebovic, 1985). Each of these aspects creates a range

of tendencies in states' foreign policy. For example, small states tend to steer away from the use of violence in international relations and opt for institutional approaches. Another example is weaker states tend to have problems (or not consider it a problem at all) when dealing with issues far away from their borders.

The international system, a concomitant level of analysis to the national attribute level, can be defined as the surrounding international environment of a state. It provides a context as to why states use their abilities the way they do. This idea is strengthened by Lebovic (1985) that explains that states employ their resources with the consideration of the surrounding international environment. There are several points to inspect when analyzing the international system vis-à-vis states' foreign policy. The first point to understand is the interdependence between one state and another. The interdependence between states can be asymmetric which results in an asymmetric power relation. This gives an understanding of the context of a foreign policy by way of showing the policy restrictions that a more powerful state imposes on a less powerful one (Breuning,

2007). The second point to understand is the policies employed by other states in the international system. In the foreign policy formulation process, the actions of other states within the international system are taken into consideration. A state will tend to opt for foreign policies in which the other states in the international system create a more favourable outcome (Wohlforth, 2016). Lastly, the presence of international institutions within the international system is to be taken into account. International institutions can be understood as the "rules of the game" in which some actions are more desirable than others. The existence of these rules also acts as a constraint to the policy options available to states as some policies are more desirable than others in the international system (Keohane, 2009).

### **Naval Diplomacy and The TNI AL**

Most navies in the world serve three military functions, diplomacy, and constabulary. The diplomatic role of navies can be understood as the use of the navy to support a state's international objectives or foreign policy by the use of partial force (Booth, 2014). With this in mind, a naval diplomacy is a distinct form of diplomacy from gunboat diplomacy. The difference between the two lies in the intention of the

use of naval power. While gunboat diplomacy is used to coerce other states to submission, naval diplomacy is a preoccupation aimed at co-opting other states. The rather peaceful tendency of naval diplomacy is its defining feature from gunboat diplomacy. Naval diplomacy encompasses activities such as joint exercises, port calls and reception of port calls, disaster relief operations, and naval officers' involvement in international forums (le Miere, 2014; Rowlands, 2018).

As is the case for navies in general, the TNI AL also serves a diplomatic role. Naval diplomacy conducted by the TNI AL is done through multiple methods to achieve multiple objectives. TNI AL's naval diplomacy is conducted through activities encompassing joint exercises, port visits, and other working visits, and the involvement of TNI AL's personnel in international forums. Several examples of TNI AL's naval diplomacy include Multilateral Navy Exercise Komodo (MNEK), several passing exercises (PASSEX), to the involvement of TNI AL officers in forums such as ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and ASEAN Navy Chief's Meeting (ANCM). The objectives of these diplomatic engagements range from capacity building to confidence building. Capacity building can be

understood as efforts to increase the TNI AL's operational ability and readiness. Confidence-building can be understood as efforts to build trust, harmonize views on international issues, and conduct dialogues on international issues. One such issue that is a focal point of the TNI AL's diplomatic efforts is the SCS disputes (Lubis, 2018; Octavian, 2019). Confidence-building and capacity-building efforts by the TNI AL are generally conducted with regional partners such as other ASEAN states and major powers such as the United States and China (Inkiriwang, 2020).

## RESEARCH METHOD

The data used in this research is acquired from secondary sources which are books, journal articles, news articles, and working papers. Other sources of data used in this research include official publications made by government institutions, such as the TNI AL and the Indonesian Parliament. In proving the arguments made in this research as well as addressing the research problem, the qualitative analysis technique is utilized. This technique or approach emphasizes the interpretation of the data that has been collected in this research. The theoretical

framework that has been elaborated in the previous section is utilized as an instrument for interpreting the data in this research.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Indonesia's National Attributes and TNI AL's Capabilities

Henrikson (2002) contends that the geographical conditions of a state can become constraints or limitations to the foreign policy options available at said nations' disposal, this is relevant in the case of Indonesia in the SCS. Indonesia is a vast archipelagic state with most of its territory being maritime territories, around three-quarters to be exact. Because of this, most of Indonesia's borders with neighboring states are maritime borders. Indonesia's location is also considered to be of high strategic value, often considered important for international maritime traffic. These geographical characteristics have implications for many aspects of Indonesia's governance, including in the defense and security sector. Such conditions create an advantage while simultaneously presenting threats to Indonesia's security. Despite seeming that defense efforts should be focused on the periphery of Indonesia, her maritime borders,



in reality, the island of Java is the focus of defense efforts due to it being the center of Indonesia's business and economic activities (Laksmana, 2011).

Arif and Kurniawan (2018) argue that the geographic conditions of Indonesia have impacted the state's strategic culture, including the utilization of the TNI AL. The emphasis on the importance of Java as the focus of security has created an emphasis on the importance of defense on land and hence the importance of the Tentara Nasional Indonesia Angkatan Darat (TNI AD) or Indonesian Army (Laksmana, 2019). This hinders efforts to secure territories outside of Java, including Indonesia's maritime borders which are seeming of lesser priority in comparison to the island of Java. The combination of such conditions and the political conditions within the Indonesian Armed forces, which tends to be dominated by the TNI AD, has caused the TNI AL to receive a smaller budget and thus become less developed.

The TNI AL's less-than-optimal posture becomes an issue for Indonesia, especially when considering that most of Indonesia's borders are maritime borders. On paper, this creates disharmony between defense needs and defense capabilities. The TNI AL, with limited resources, is tasked

with the defense and security of the vast Indonesian waters. The TNI AL faces problems in optimally functioning in such a geographically challenging condition or in other words having difficulties in effectively covering every part of Indonesian waters (Morris & Paoli, 2018; Scott, 2019)

In this case, Indonesia's geographical condition, and to a certain extent social-political characteristics related to the geographical condition, creates a constraint on Indonesia's defense policy. With a vast territory and limited defense resources, as well as a focus on the Javanese island as an object of security, a military confrontation at maritime borders becomes something unfavorable for Indonesia. These conditions limit the policy options that Indonesia has in responding to the presence and agitation of China in the SCS. Confrontation, up until this point, is an option that Indonesia avoids. Because of this underlying condition, the best option that Indonesia and the TNI AL has is to commit to naval diplomacy in which, with limited resources, at least can uphold the current status quo while simultaneously not provoking and aggravating China's incursions in the SCS.

The size and strength of the military of a state can also be used as an indicator of the capability of a state in several issues. Thus,

understanding the size and strength of a state's military is useful in mapping the constraints that a state faces in foreign policymaking, particularly in issues related to the defense and security of said state (East, 1973). The size or strength of the TNI AL becomes a rather significant issue for Indonesia in the SCS disputes, particularly when considering that the dispute involves the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy. A comparison between the two navies shows that the TNI AL is significantly smaller than the PLA Navy (Chairil, Wicaksono, & Nurbaitty, 2022). There are several indicators for this, among them the number and availability of warships, the functionality and condition of existing weaponry systems, and the annual budget of the TNI AL. Beginning with the number of warships, as of 2020 the TNI AL has four submarines, eleven frigates, and twenty corvettes. In total, the TNI AL operates 35 combat vessels that operate in three different theaters namely the Western Armada, the Central Armada, and the Eastern Armada. Operations in the SCS are conducted within the Western Fleet's theatre of operation. Throughout the year, operations within the Western Armada's theatre of operations are

conducted by five ships. Those five ships are also tasked with multiple operations, which include but are not limited to, operations relating to the defense of the SCS (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020).

Further limitations are found upon taking a closer look at the conditions of the TNI AL's weapon systems. A significant amount of the TNI AL's weapons systems are outdated (Arif & Kurniawan, 2018). Many of the TNI AL's combat vessels were procured during the Cold War era, having been in service since the 1960s. These vessels were mostly acquired either from the Netherlands or the Soviet Union (Scott, 2019). Up until this point, the TNI AL is still attempting to update its aging weapon systems as it is deemed important in stepping up defences capabilities in a changing and increasingly modern strategic environment. Despite this, the inadequate budget of the TNI AL has hindered attempts to modernize their weapon systems (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2015; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2016; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2017; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2018; International Institute for Strategic

Studies, 2019; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020).

A view into the strength and conditions of the TNI AL's combat vessels as well as their budget reveals the constraints that Indonesia faces in responding to the conditions in the SCS, particularly in the use of the TNI AL. The strength of the TNI AL, in conjunction with the vastness of the Indonesian maritime territories, limits the ability of force projection in the SCS by the TNI AL. Due to this limitation, confrontation with the Chinese Navy in the SCS becomes something avoided by the TNI AL and Indonesia as it is more harmful than beneficial. As confrontation is something undesirable, this policy option is ruled out.

The domestic political conditions of a state act as another constraint or corridor for foreign policy making (Lebovic, 1985), something that can also be said in the foreign policy-making of Indonesia regarding the conditions in the SCS. The Indonesian civil government and the TNI AL seem to have reached a consensus regarding the conditions in the SCS. The common sentiment towards the conditions in the SCS is that Indonesia is the rightful sovereign of the North Natuna Sea, the parts of the SCS that are in the Indonesian territory, and that sovereignty over those waters must be asserted (Fitriani,

2018). The SCS is deemed to have strategic importance to Indonesia because of the natural resources within the waters. Other than natural resources, asserting sovereignty over the Indonesian territories in the SCS is also related to the interest to maintain the Indonesian values of territorial unity which is found in the Indonesian constitution (Santoso, 2020). Yudo Margono, during his tenure as the TNI AL' Chief of Staff in 2021 stated that the TNI AL will not back down from defending the SCS because according to him "The sovereignty of Indonesia is not negotiable" (Saputro & Nashrullah, 2021).

The Indonesian public's interest in defending Indonesia's sovereignty over the SCS is mirrored by sentiments of the members of the Indonesian Parliament, the Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Republik Indonesia (DPR RI), particularly members of Commission I which oversees matters of defense and security. Fadli Zon, a member of the Commission I of the DPR RI stated that assertive action is needed to respond to China's coerciveness in the SCS (Sumarwoto, 2021). The same sentiment is found in Zon's colleague, Fachrul Razi, who stated that "the state's sovereignty is above everything" when asked about the conditions in the SCS (Saputro & Nashrullah, 2021). This statement is echoed by Dave Akbarshah Fikarno, also a

member of the Commission I of the DPRI RI, who posits that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Indonesia is of utmost priority in the SCS issue (Komisi I Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Republik Indonesia, 2020). All three members of Commission I of the DPR RI also stated in the efforts to defend the Indonesian part of the SCS, the TNI AL's naval diplomacy is a vital tool. The statements of the members of Commission I of the DPR RI also reflect the sentiment of the Indonesian people and government on the SCS issue.

The political conditions of Indonesia as well as the political discourse related to the issues of the SCS shows that politicians and stakeholders on the issue are aware of the importance of sovereignty as something that cannot be negotiated. However, the Indonesian people and government also understand that cooperation, particularly in the economic sector, is something that is also needed by Indonesia. The state of political discourse regarding the SCS disputes as well as Sino-Indonesian relations meant that confrontation is something avoided by Indonesia. This political condition thus creates a constraint from opting to confront China on the issue of the SCS.

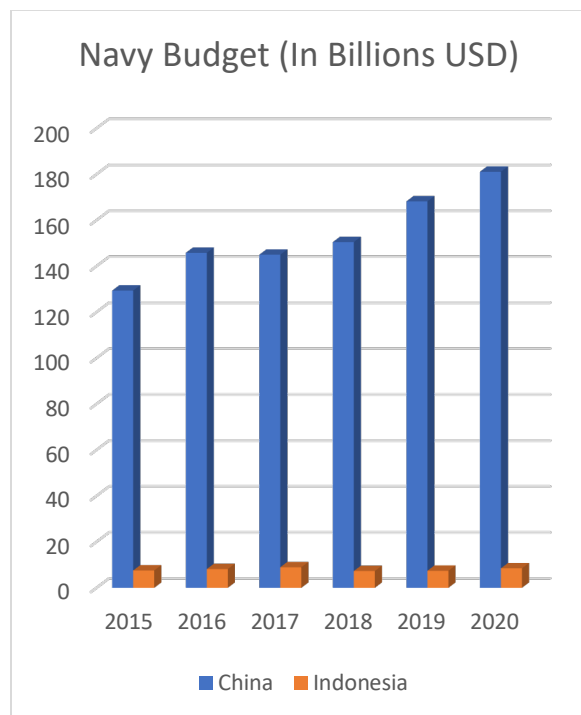
### **The International System Surrounding Indonesia concerning the SCS**

The PLA Navy agitates disputing states in the SCS, including Indonesia, through the implementation of the grey zone strategy. The grey zone strategy of the PLA Navy can be understood as ambiguous actions, not necessarily aggressive and explicitly threatening yet still intrusive and borderline illegal. This can be seen in the use of fishing ships with military personnel and sea patrol conducted by the coast guard or naval ships within the Indonesian border. These actions show the intention of China to provoke Indonesia, signal China's strength and ability of force projection, as well as display China's ability to govern and become the sovereign authority of the SCS. These actions as well as the intentions are enough to be considered a threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Indonesia, particularly in the SCS (Anugerah, 2021).

The goal of the PLA Navy's grey zone strategy itself is to coerce without conducting actual aggression. This creates a difficult and complex dilemma for states such as Indonesia to respond to China's actions in a maritime border dispute. Difficulties emerge

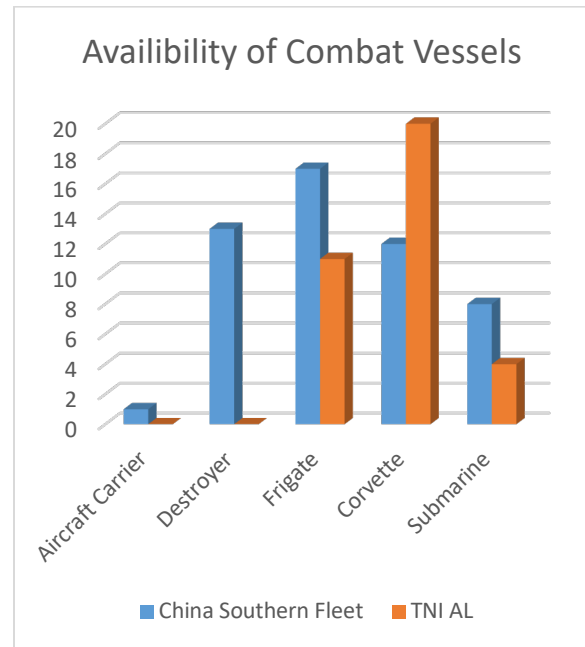
from the idea that a response overly aggressive towards China can be a precedent for China to retaliate. On the contrary, responses too lenient can cause the PLA Navy to be undeterred and continue incursions in Indonesian waters and even escalate presence in the area. The circumstances created by the Chinese grey zone strategy demand that Indonesian policymakers and the TNI AL take a scrupulous approach in responding to the conditions in the SCS.

**Figure 1. Budget Comparison of PLA Navy and TNI AL**



(Source: IISS, 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020).

**Figure 2. A Comparison of the power of the PLA Navy Southern Fleet and the TNI AL**



(Source: IISS, 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020).

Figure 1 and figure 2 shows a comparison of the budget of the PLA Navy and the TNI AL and the combat vessel availability of both navies in the South China Sea. Throughout 2015-2020, the TNI AL's budget averages at 7.9 billion USD and has fluctuated annually. As for the PLA Navy, the average annual budget during the same term is 153.3 billion USD and constantly increasing each year. The Chinese PLA Navy also has an edge over the TNI AL in the amount of combat vessels available for deployment in the South China Sea. The

Chinese PLA Navy Southern Fleet has a total of 51 combat vessels which consists of 1 aircraft carrier, 13 destroyers, 17 frigates, 12 corvettes, and 8 submarines. In comparison, the whole TNI AL has 35 combat vessels that consists of 11 frigates, 20 corvettes, and 4 submarines. This causes escalation of tensions in the SCS to be something Indonesia has to avoid due to the consideration that there is a significant disparity of military power, especially at sea, between the two states (Sulaiman, 2019). The military strength of China in the South China Sea is significantly more powerful than Indonesia, also with a larger budget for maintenance, modernization, and operationalization of the navy (Djelantik, 2021).

Further understanding the international system as a constraint to a state's policy options provides a context to why foreign policies are formulated the way they are. The international system as a context can be viewed in several ways, including the bilateral relations between states (Breuning, 2007) which in this case is the relations between Indonesia and China. China, while a threat to Indonesian security in the SCS, is simultaneously a vital partner for Indonesia's

economy. Economic relations between Indonesia and China comprise cooperation in trade and investment as well as development assistance from China to Indonesia. The importance of economic relations with China causes an open confrontation with China in the SCS to be something counterproductive to Indonesia's economic interests toward China (Anwar, 2019). Indonesia's economic interdependence with China is rather asymmetric, a relation in which Indonesia needs China more rather than the other way around. This creates a power relation that tends to benefit China as China gains a better bargaining position in relations with Indonesia. The economic relations between the two countries further exacerbate the complexity of the SCS disputes for Indonesia as Indonesia will need to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity from a militarily superior China while simultaneously maintaining good terms in economic relations (Capie, 2020).

The economic ties between Indonesia and China as well as the PLA Navy's superiority in comparison to the TNI AL create a power relation that limits Indonesia's policy options in the SCS disputes. In this case, an overly aggressive reaction towards

China's activity not only creates a risk of a more severe retaliation by China but also the loss of an important economic partner. With consideration of the state of Sino-Indonesian relations, diplomatic efforts become the most feasible option for Indonesia. One such diplomatic approach is the utilization of the TNI AL as an instrument of diplomacy in the SCS.

Herman and Hagan (1998) argue that the existence of international norms and regimes acts as a constraint to a state's foreign policy options. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a regional intergovernmental organization in the Southeast Asia region that was created to, among others, create and maintain regional peace and stability. With this aim, ASEAN member states tend to be averse towards interstate conflicts and war (Putri, 2018). The commitment of ASEAN to achieve the aim of creating and maintaining peace and stability in the region is apparent in the establishment of the ASEAN Politics and Security Community (APSC). The diplomatic forums created within the APSC regional framework have been used to tackle some regional security issues, one of which being the SCS disputes. Some of the ASEAN forums that have been attended by TNI AL representatives include the ASEAN Defense

Minister Meeting (ADMM) and the ASEAN Navy Chiefs' Meeting (ANCM). During these forums, the representatives of the TNI AL raise the issue of the SCS disputes as well as promote the peaceful resolution to the disputes and the role of the navies of respective states, including China. The centrality of ASEAN as a regional diplomatic power is not only apparent in Southeast Asia but also the Asia-Pacific. ASEAN often involves regional powers such as China in regional forums such as the ASEAN Plus Three forum and the ASEAN Regional Forum. Other than that, ASEAN also takes part in the diplomatic forums of other regions such as the East Asian Summit (Gindarsih, 2015a; Gindarsih, 2015b; Dipua, Prakoso, & Nurdiansyah, 2021; Li, 2018).

The existing regime and inherent values in ASEAN member states act as a further international constraint for the utilization of the TNI AL by Indonesia to confront the Chinese PLA Navy in the SCS disputes. Confronting the Chinese can mean that Indonesia will violate the existing social-political norms in the region and may harm the already volatile conditions of regional maritime security conditions relating to the SCS disputes. Simultaneously, Indonesia and the TNI AL also use ASEAN as a diplomatic platform to resolve the issue of the SCS

disputes, taking advantage of the influence of ASEAN in Asia-Pacific affairs.

## CONCLUSION

The existence of internal and external constraints has influenced Indonesian policymaker's decision to utilize the TNI AL more as diplomats rather than as soldiers in the issue of the SCS disputes. These constraints lead up to the condition in which naval diplomacy by the TNI AL becomes a feasible and beneficial policy option for Indonesia. The constraints themselves are internal and external. Internally these constraints include Indonesia's geographic characteristics, the size and strength of the TNI AL, and the domestic political conditions in Indonesia relating to the SCS disputes. These constraints limit Indonesia and the TNI AL's policy options regarding the conditions in the SCS in a way in which confrontation with China is disadvantageous. The vast Indonesian waters and the TNI AL's limited resources have caused the TNI AL to be stretched thin and not in an optimal posture to confront China toe to toe in the SCS. The Indonesian people and government, while understanding the

importance of China to the economy of Indonesia, are also aware of the need to assert sovereignty over the Indonesian parts of the SCS to secure Indonesia's territorial integrity.

As for the international system context surrounding Indonesia, it can be inferred that there are external constraints that compel Indonesia to utilize the TNI AL as diplomats rather than warfighters in the SCS. These constraints comprise the Sino-Indonesian relations, the strength and strategy utilized by the PLA Navy in the SCS disputes, and the existence of ASEAN and its norms in Southeast Asia. The Indonesian relationship with China can be understood as a relation of asymmetric interdependence in which China is the stronger of the two and thus has stronger leverage and a better bargaining position. As for the strength and strategy of the PLA Navy, it creates a condition that demands careful statecraft by Indonesia and the TNI AL. Lastly, the existence of ASEAN and its values also restricts Indonesia from responding aggressively toward Chinese incursions in the Indonesian part of the SCS.

These findings support the argument that there are systemic factors, both internal and external, that influence Indonesia's rather lenient approach to such an important



security issue, that is sovereignty over the SCS. The findings are valuable to deepen the understanding of naval diplomacy, that is, not only understanding how states, such as Indonesia, conduct naval diplomacy and the end goals of it, but also to understand underlying factors behind the policy decision itself. The inquiry has been fruitful and therefore further research on how constraining factors determine how states utilize their navies is a promising venture. Other than enriching the understanding of naval diplomacy, the findings can also inform policymakers on the use of naval diplomacy itself. As this paper has demonstrated, there are limitations to a state's policy options. In this case, it is Indonesia's policy options in the South China Sea Disputes. Therefore, practically, as long as Indonesia is unable to match the Chinese PLA Navy's prowess in the South China Sea, naval diplomacy will still be Indonesia's best policy option in dealing with the disputes.

## REFERENCES

- Anugerah, B. (2021). Penguatan strategi penangkalan dalam merespons aksi koersif Cina di Laut Cina Selatan. *Dinamika Global: Jurnal Ilmu Hubungan Internasional*, 6(2), 286-307.
- Anwar, D. F. (2019). Indonesia-China relations: Coming full circle? *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 5(1), 145-162.
- Arif, M., & Kurniawan, Y. (2018). Strategic culture and Indoensian maritime security. *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, 5(1), 77-89.
- Booth, K. (2014). *Navies and Foreign Policy*. London: Routledge.
- Breuning, M. (2007). *Foreign Policy Analysis: A Comparative Introduction*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Cable, J. (2016). *Gunboat Diplomacy, 1919-79- Political Applications of Limited Naval Force*. New York: Springer Publishing.
- Capie, D. (2020). The power of partnerships: US defence ties with Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam. *International Politics*, 57(1), 242-258.
- Chairil, T., Wicaksono, G. A., & Nurbaitty, M. A. (2022). Establishing maritime power competitiveness index: Benchmarking Indonesian Navy's aspiration to become world-class sea power. *Intermestic: Journal of International Studies*, 7(1), 343-364.
- CSIS. (2018). *A Blueprint for Cooperation on Oil and Gas Production in the South China Sea*. Retrieved from CSIS: <https://amti.csis.org/a-blueprint-for-cooperation-on-oil-and-gas-production-in-the-south-china-sea/>
- Davidson, B. (2009). Modern naval diplomacy - A practitioner's view. *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, 11(1-2), 1-47.

- Dipua, A., Prakoso, L. Y., & Nurdiansyah, D. R. (2021). Analysis of Defense Strategy Policies in dealing with the potential negative impacts of the South China Sea conflict. *Jurnal Pertahanan*, 7(1), 89-99.
- Djelantik, S. (2021). Kekuatan nasional Tiongkok dalam sengketa Laut Tiongkok Selatan. *Indonesian Journal of International Relations*, 5(2), 293-319.
- Dutton, P. (2011). Three disputes and three objectives: China and the South China Sea. *Naval War College Review*, 64(4), 42-67.
- East, M. A. (1973). Size and foreign policy behavior: A test of two models. *World Politics*, 25(4), 556-576.
- Fitriani, E. (2018). Indonesian perceptions on the rise of China: Dare you, dare you not. *The Pacific Review*, 31(3), 391-405.
- Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 167-191.
- Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), 167-191.
- Gindarsih, I. (2015a). Indonesia's defence diplomacy: Harnessing the Hedging Strategy. *RSIS Working Paper(293)*.
- Gindarsih, I. (2015b). Indonesia and the South China Sea: A two-fold strategy. *RSIS Commentary(158)*.
- Hayton, B. (2014). *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Henrikson, A. K. (2002). Distance and foreign policy: A political geography approach. *International Political Science Review*, 23(4), 437-466.
- Hermann, M. G., & Hagan, J. D. (1998). International decision making: Leadership matters. *Foreign Policy*, Spring(110), 124-137.
- Inkiriwang, F. W. (2020). 'Garuda Shield' vs 'Sharp Knife': Operationalising Indonesia's defence diplomacy. *The Pacific Review*, 34(6), 871-900.
- Inkiriwang, F. W. (2021). Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo: Enhancing Indonesia's multilateral defence diplomacy? *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 40(3), 418-435.
- International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2015). *The Military Balance: Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics 2015*. Washington: International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2016). *The Military Balance: Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics 2016*. Washington: International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2017). *The Military Balance: Annual Assessment of Global Military*

- Capabilities and Defence Economics 2017*. Washington: International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2018). *The Military Balance: Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics 2018*. Washington: International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2019). *The Military Balance: Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics 2019*. Washington: International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2019). *The Military Balance: Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics 2019*. Washington: International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2020). *The Military Balance: Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics 2020*. Washington: International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2020). *The Military Balance: Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics 2020*. Washington: International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2020). *The Military Balance: Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics 2020*. Washington: International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- Keohane, R. O. (2009). *International Institutions: Two Approaches*. London: Routledge.
- Komisi I Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Republik Indonesia. (2020, January 20). *Hindari konflik Natuna, pemerintah diminta perkuat langkah diplomasi*. Retrieved from Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Republik Indonesia: <https://www.dpr.go.id/berita/detail/id/27265/t/Hindari+Konflik+Natuna%2C+Pemerintah+Diminta+Perkuat+Langkah+Diplomasi>
- Laksmana, E. A. (2011). The enduring strategic trinity: Explaining Indonesia's geopolitical architecture. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 7(1), 95-115.
- Laksmana, E. A. (2012). Regional order by other means? Examining the rise of defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia. *Asian Security*, 8(3), 251-270.
- Laksmana, E. A. (2019). Reshuffling the deck? Military corporatism, promotional logjams and post-authoritarian civil-military relations in Indonesia. *Contemporary Asia*, 49(5), 806-836.
- Larsson, O. L., & Widen, J. (2022). The European Union as a maritime security provider - The naval diplomacy perspective. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2058863>
- le Miere, C. (2014). *Maritime Diplomacy in the 21st Century: Drivers and Challenges*. London: Routledge.

- Lebovic, J. H. (1985). Capabilities in context: National attributes and foreign policy in the Middle East. *Journal of Peace Research*, 22(1), 37-67.
- Li, L. (2018). *China's Policy Towards the South China Sea: When Geopolitics Meets the Law of the Sea*. London: Routledge.
- Lubis, R. R. (2018). Sekuritisasi isu keamanan maritim dalam mendukung diplomasi pertahanan Indonesia di ADMM Plus on Maritime Security. *Jurnal Pertahanan & Bela Negara*, 8(1), 27-43.
- Morris, L. J., & Paoli, G. P. (2018). *A Preliminary Assessment of Indonesia's Maritime Security Threats and Capabilities*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.
- Octavian, A. (2019). *Indonesian Navy, Global Maritime Fulcrum, and ASEAN*. Jakarta: SESKOAL Press.
- Paramasatya, S., & Poespojoedho, W. W. (2019). Naval diplomacy: Upaya defenseif Indonesia dalam konflik Laut Tiongkok Selatan di era Joko Widodo. *Jurnal Hubungan Internasional*, 12(2), 245-264.
- Parker, W. (2021). Winning without fighting in the Indo-Pacific: A naval diplomacy matter. *The RUSI Journal*, 166(6-7), 106-113.
- Patalano, A. (2015). Beyond gunboats: Rethinking naval diplomacy and humanitarian assistance disaster relief in East Asia. *The RUSI Journal*, 160(2), 32-39.
- Patalano, A. (2017). "Commitment by presence": Naval diplomacy and Japanese defense engagement in Southeast Asia. In J. D. Brown, & J. Kingston (Eds.), *Japan's Foreign Relations in Asia* (pp. 97-110). London: Taylor and Francis.
- Putri, S. A. (2018). Peran ASEAN Security Community dalam persengketaan Laut China Selatan (Studi dari tahun 1930 hingga 2016). *Indonesian Journal of International Relations*, 2(2), 30-37.
- Rezasyah, T. (2022). The practices of Indonesian preventive diplomacy on the South China Sea dispute: Balancing nonalignment and national resilience, 2009-2019. In Y. Guo, & J. Miao (Eds.), *Preventive Diplomacy, Peacebuilding, and Security in the Asia-Pacific: Evolving Norms, Agenda, and Practices* (pp. 179-194). Singapore: World Scientific Publishing.
- Rowlands, K. (2018). *Naval Diplomacy in the 21st Century: A Model for the Post-Cold War Global Order*. London: Routledge.
- Samuels, M. S. (2013). *Contest for the South China Sea*. London: Routledge.
- Santoso, T. I. (2020). Aksi agresivitas Cina pada Zona Ekonomi Eksklusif Indonesia Laut Cina Selatan: Perspektif Tugas Pokok TNI. *Jurnal Kajian Lemhannas*, 41(1), 35-46.

- Saputro, F. A., & Nashrullah, N. (2021, December 9). *Dukung KSAL soal Natuna, DPD: Kedaulatan negara di atas segalanya*. Retrieved from Republika News: <https://www.republika.co.id/berita/r3umd9320/dukung-ksal-soal-natuna-dpd-kedaulatan-negara-di-atas-segalanya>
- Scott, D. (2019). Indonesia grapples with the Indo-Pacific: Outreach, strategic discourse, and diplomacy. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 38(2), 194-217.
- Sirmareza, T. (2017). Naval diplomacy dalam pengiriman Satuan Tugas Maritim Tentara Nasional Indonesia di United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. *Jurnal Diplomasi Pertahanan*, 3(1), 51-72.
- Sirmareza, T. (2018). Aplikasi soft system methodology dalam analisis diplomasi angkatan laut Indonesia melalui pengiriman Satgas Maritim TNI pada misi UNIFIL MTF. *Global: Jurnal Politik Internasional*, 19(1), 58-76.
- Sulaiman, Y. (2019). What threat? Leadership, strategic culture, and Indonesian foreign policy in the South China Sea. *Asian Politics and Policy*, 11(4), 606-622.
- Sumarwoto. (2021, September 21). *Aanggota DPR: Indonesia harus lebih keras pertahankan ZEE di Natuna*. Retrieved from Antara News: <https://www.antaraneews.com/berita/2406257/anggota-dpr-indonesia-harus-lebih-keras-pertahankan-zee-di-natuna>
- Taliaferro, J. W., Lobell, S. E., & Ripsman, N. M. (2014). Introduction: Neoclassical realism, the state, and foreign policy. In C. Elman, & M. Jensen (Eds.), *Realism Reader* (pp. 253-258). London: Routledge.
- TNI AL Personnel Service. (2020). *Tradisi TNI Angkatan Laut: Pewarisan Nilai-Nilai Luhur dalam Membangun Semangat Juang dan Karakter Prajurit Laut*. Jakarta: TNI AL Personnel Service.
- Widen, J. J. (2011). Naval diplomacy - A theoretical approach. *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 22(4), 715-733.
- Wohlforth, W. C. (2016). Realism and foreign policy. In S. Smith, A. Hadfield, & T. Dunne (Eds.), *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases* (pp. 35-53). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Yates, R. (2017). ASEAN as the 'regional conductor': Understanding ASEAN's role in Asia-Pacific Order. *The Pacific Review*, 30(4), 443-461.
- Zanardi, C. (2019). China's soft power with Chinese characteristics: The case of Confucius institutes and Chinese Naval diplomacy. In M. Chatin, & G. Gallaroti, *Emerging Powers in International Politics: The BRICS and Soft Power* (pp. 92-109). London: Taylor and Francis.