

## SECURING BORDERS IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC: INDONESIA'S STRATEGY TO COUNTER CHINESE CLAIMS IN NATUNA

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**Abstract-** China's claim to the South China Sea has a direct impact on China's relations with countries in the ASEAN region, including Indonesia. Indonesia is one of China's essential partners in the trade sector. However, the incidents of violations of Indonesian sea territories carried out by the Coast Guard and Chinese fishers in early January 2020 in the Natuna Waters invited a strong reaction from the Indonesian government. The Indonesian Foreign Minister summoned the Chinese ambassador to ask for an explanation as well as a form of protest. Previously, Indonesian President Joko Widodo also criticized the map of China that included Natuna Waters as part of its territory. The Indonesian President even specifically made a working visit to the Natuna island with an escort of the fleet of war as a form of commitment to protecting Indonesian territory. Furthermore, when COVID-19 hit the world, including Indonesia, one of the strategies chosen by the Indonesian government was to make Natuna a place for quarantine of patients brought home from Wuhan. This research itself seeks to investigate issues related to Natuna's historical background, how the Indonesian government's strategy in counteracting Chinese claims against Natuna, as well as exploring Indonesian government's decision in making Natuna a place for quarantine of COVID-19 patients brought home from China.

**Keywords:** sea territories, Natuna, patients

### I. INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea is one of the areas in the world that is currently attracting the attention of world leaders. It is due to the contested claims between the Chinese government and Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Taiwan. China, on the one hand, claims that the islands connected in the nine-dash line have been China's territory since the dynastic era, while countries that most of them are ASEAN members consider China's claims to be contrary to modern international law. When the disputing parties have not found common ground, recently there has been a tendency to use a military approach to defend territory.

Indonesia, as an ASEAN country, does not have a territorial dispute with China. However, the activities of Chinese fishers and the manoeuvres of Chinese Coast Guards that several times crossed Indonesia's sea territory are considered severe violations by Indonesia. Therefore, to prevent claims from other countries that have previously occurred, Indonesian President Joko Widodo specifically made direct visits to Natuna Island in 2016 and 2020. President Jokowi's special visit was accompanied by a show of strength from the Indonesian National Army (TNI) (Presiden RI, 2020).

Furthermore, in February 2020, when the COVID 19 pandemic was at its peak, 238 Indonesian citizens were flown from Wuhan-China to Natuna for quarantine. Indonesia's choice to place Indonesian citizens from Wuhan to be quarantined in Natuna can be seen from both practical and strategic aspects. This article is intended to examine how the Indonesian government responds to the dynamics in the South China Sea? Then, why did the Indonesian government choose Natuna as a place of quarantine compared to other islands in Indonesia, such as Batam?

Previous research related to Natuna discusses violations committed by China (Humphrey Wangke, 2020), Indonesia's efforts to secure the area by updating maps (Riyadi & Sari, 2019), as well as research conducted by Kartikasari (2019) which focuses more on China's perception of Indonesia is in the midst of a dynamic situation in the South China Sea and especially Natuna. However, none of the previous researches discussed the steps of the Indonesian government in choosing Natuna as a place of isolation for its citizens affected by the pandemic.

### II. METHODS

In order to understand the Indonesian government policy in Natuna, the researcher used a qualitative approach with the document analysis method. As stated by Bowen (2009), document analysis is aimed at

comprehending documents comprehensively with measurable procedures for both print and electronic sources. This method was chosen to help the researcher identify existing documents, especially from government sources as well as documents released by international researchers related to the South China Sea issue in general and the Natuna issue at a more specific level. In examining the Natuna issue, the researcher did an interview with former director of directorate general for maritime affairs Ministry of Maritime, collected official documents and speeches from the President of the Republic of Indonesia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Maritime Security Agency, and the House of Representatives especially Commission I which have direct links to international issues.

### III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The escalation of tensions in the South China Sea has become the topic of discussion by researchers in the past two decades. Indonesia's attitude in responding to regional dynamics is also primarily determined by the incumbent President. Hasyim Djalal as a former Indonesian diplomat at the United Nations who was also involved in the drafting of the 1982 United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) emphasized Indonesia's position on the South China Sea in his article explaining that Indonesia's position has no other motive than to create peace, stability, and cooperation for the realization of development in the region (Djalal, 2000).

Unlike Hasyim Djalal, Patrik Kristhope Meyer (2019) in his research saw a change in Indonesia's attitude regarding the South China Sea. Indonesia, previously in a neutral position, chose to take a firm stance against China by arguing that Natuna was a non-negotiable sovereignty issue. Indonesia is considered to be using the securitization approach in Natuna, especially between 2014 and 2016.

#### **3.1 China-ASEAN Relations: Economic and Security Dilemma**

The relationship between Indonesia and China have indeed experienced significant developments, especially during the Joko Widodo administration. It can be seen from a large amount of Chinese investment in infrastructure. The construction of a high-speed train project between Jakarta and Bandung which costs 600 trillion rupiahs, for example, is a form of China's investment commitment in Indonesia. The fast train project was originally a project that was predicted to be managed by Japan because Japan has worked on many infrastructure projects in Indonesia (Skolastika Lilienasih Kurniawati, 2018). China's aggressiveness in investing its capital in many countries is a derivative of China's foreign policy under the One Belt One Road (OBOR) scheme or recently known as the Belt Road Initiative (BRI).

China's move to invest in Indonesia in large numbers can be seen from China's efforts to take over Japan's position. The 2019 data released by the Investment Coordinating Board (BKPM) showed that China was in second place with an investment value of US \$ 4.7 billion, which was able to displace Japan with an investment value of US \$ 4.3 billion. The country that tops the list as the largest investor in Indonesia is Singapore, which has an investment value of US \$ 6.5 billion (BKPM, 2020).

The development of the South China Sea in the last ten years can be seen from China's reaction when the Philippines filed a lawsuit in 2013 against the international arbitration tribunal in The Hague to refute China's claims to the islands in the South China Sea. In 2016 international arbitration at The Hague granted the Philippines' application. The Chinese maneuvers in SCS received a response from the Philippines. The Philippines considers China to have violated international norms, thus bringing the dispute case to international arbitration. The court ruling stated that the Philippines had the right to the islands which had been under their territory. The decision of the arbitration court is considered as the legitimacy of the disputing countries to reject China's claim (Jaques deLisle, 2017).

#### **3.2 Indonesia-China Relations: Between Investment and Sovereignty**

Although Indonesia is not directly involved in a dispute involving China with most ASEAN member countries, China's manoeuvres that build military installations on the Spratly Islands have the potential to make China claim the islands adjacent to Spratly Island, including Natuna. This argument is corroborated by the high activity of Chinese marine and fishers around Natuna waters. Indonesia chose to take a firm stand against China regarding the Natuna waters issue. Since the era of President Joko Widodo, Indonesia has experienced a paradigm shift in managing the region. Joko Widodo has a maritime state doctrine so that he gives all his attention to sectors that are directly related to maritime issues. The fact that thirty per cent of Indonesia's territory is a sea that has the potential to generate foreign exchange for the country makes this policy very relevant for the Indonesian government. In the first period of Jokowi's administration, there was a firm policy against any acts of violation of Indonesia's territorial borders. The Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries under Minister Susi Pujiastuti issued a sinking policy for every

foreign fishing boat that has been legally proven to have committed violations. The blasting of foreign fishing boats followed by sinking is an image attached to the Jokowi administration (Presiden RI, 2020).

Besides, the increased patrol activities of the Indonesian maritime authority under the coordination of the Indonesian Coast Guard (BAKAMLA) in border areas, in its development have come into contact with foreign fishers and patrols of the coast guard of regional countries. In March 2016, for example, Chinese marine guard forces committed an offence by entering Natuna waters which were then followed by a protest by the Indonesian Foreign Minister to China (Kementrian Luar Negeri, 2019). The same year in May, the Indonesian Navy made arrests of Chinese fishermen which were followed by protests from the Chinese government because they considered their fishermen's actions legal (Bakamla, 2020). Moreover, Indonesia has, on several occasions, tried to counteract any Chinese claims related to the SCS by summoning the Chinese ambassador in Jakarta as a form of protest and showing Indonesia's unchanging position on Natuna.

**Table 1.** Incidents between Indonesia-China in Natuna 2016-2020

No	Year	Incident
1	March 21, 2016	The Indonesian Foreign Minister Protested China for Its Coast Guard Ship Entering Natuna
2	May 31, 2016	China Protested the Arrest of Crew/Fishermen in Natuna
3	June 20, 2016	China Protested Shooting of Fishing Boat by Indonesian Navy
4	June 23, 2016	China Protested Fishing Boat Shooting by Indonesian Navy
5	August 17, 2016	Indonesia Sinks 60 Foreign Fishing Vessels
6	January 7, 2020	China Sent 2 Coast Guard Ships to Natuna
7	January 7, 2020	Indonesia Conducted Air Patrol
8	January 8, 2020	President Jokowi Visited Natuna
9	September 8, 2020	Indonesian Foreign Minister Reduced US-China Tensions in the SCS

*Sources: Indonesian Coast Guard (BAKAMLA), compiled*

Based on the data described in table 1, it can be seen that in the last five years, there were at least nine incidents that showed the actions and reactions of the Indonesian and Chinese governments. Responding to China's maneuvers, Indonesia seeks to ensure that ASEAN is solid. Whereas in the SCS dispute, there are direct disputes involving China with member countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Brunei. ASEAN leaders have never imagined this situation. Since ASEAN was founded, the Southeast Asian region is one of the most peaceful regions and is free from armed conflicts. Such conditions are the ideals for establishing ASEAN. However, when looking at China's aggressive maneuvers, because of their strong military power, ASEAN countries have to think about scenarios to avoid confrontation with China (Kementerian Luar Negeri, 2019).

Indonesia has, on several occasions, conveyed its views on the SCS issues by underlining the importance of maintaining regional stability. Regional stability is considered as the key to spurring economic growth in member and partner countries. The amount of Chinese investment in this region is also a factor that is often cited by Indonesia when dealing with China. The issues that took place in the SCS also received reactions from external forces. The United States has always considered ASEAN as a strategic partner that must be maintained.

Furthermore, on February 1, 2020, the Indonesian government sent a team to pick up Indonesian citizens from Wuhan, which consisted of soldiers and doctors. Before the pickup mission was carried out, the Indonesian government held a press conference attended by the Commander of the Indonesian National Armed Forces, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Minister of Health (Kementrian Luar Negeri, 2020). The press conference at Sukarno Hatta International Airport was broadcast live by Indonesian national media because at that time the issue of COVID-19 and the repatriation of Indonesian citizens from Wuhan became an issue that caused debate in the community. Based on the statement by the Commander of the Indonesian National Armed Forces, Marshal Hadi Tjahjanto (Kompas TV, 1 February 2020), the Indonesian government chose the Natuna Islands as a place of isolation for three reasons: strategic, readiness, and safety.

According to Widi Agoes Pratikto, former director for Directorate of Small Islands Ministry of Maritime Affairs Republic of Indonesia mentioned that deploying military groups and ordinary citizen to Natuna as part of Indonesian government effort to create activities in the land, because the existence of Indonesian citizen and their activities will prevent any claim from foreign countries as well as China (Widi Agoes Pratikto, 2020).

The involvement of the Indonesian National Armed Forces in the mission to repatriate Indonesian citizens from Wuhan to Natuna shows how the Indonesian government is managing the crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A press statement attended by three ministries led by the Commander of the Indonesian National Armed Forces indicated that Natuna is an Indonesian territory that had been equipped with essential tools to protect Indonesian territory.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The South China Sea has been one of the areas prone to causing military conflict due to territorial disputes between China and ASEAN countries. Although Indonesia is not directly involved in the dispute with China, the activities of Chinese fishers and coast guards who often enter Indonesia's exclusive economic zone have become severe concerns to the Indonesian government. Therefore, Indonesia's decision to place Indonesian citizens who were repatriated from Wuhan in March 2020 is a form of Indonesian public diplomacy to emphasize Natuna's position as part of Indonesia. The extent of international media coverage regarding the COVID-19 pandemic is Indonesia's momentum to show the world that Natuna is an area that has been inhabited by Indonesian citizens and is well managed under the regional government of Riau Province. The repatriation of Indonesian citizens from Wuhan using military aircraft flying to the Indonesian military base in Natuna also shows the world that the Indonesian military is ready to guard Natuna. In general, based on the analysis to government statement and official documents, we can concluded that the Indonesian government's decision to choose Natuna as a place of isolation for Indonesian citizens who came from Wuhan was due to considerations to increase human activities on the island. In addition, Natuna has been gradually equipped with adequate military equipment to both isolate residents and anticipate territorial violations and enemy attacks.

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