

Maritime Diplomacy as Indonesia's Strategic Pillar in Addressing South China Sea Threats through a Contemporary Approach

Baqi Zaenulhaq Alfarizi¹, Arry Bainus¹, Arfin Sudirman¹

¹Department of International Relations, Padjajaran University, Indonesia

Email: baqi22001@mail.unpad.ac.id

Abstract. *The South China Sea is a strategic region filled with complex geopolitical and geostrategic interests, particularly for Indonesia, which faces sovereignty violations in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the North Natuna Sea. In addressing these threats, Indonesia has positioned maritime diplomacy as a strategic pillar that integrates foreign policy instruments, defense, and international law supremacy. This study aims to analyze Indonesia's maritime diplomacy role in responding to threats in the South China Sea using a qualitative-descriptive approach based on literature studies and document analysis. The findings indicate that Indonesia's maritime diplomacy is carried out through bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, naval diplomacy, coast guard diplomacy, and the enforcement of international law based on UNCLOS 1982. Despite facing various internal and external challenges, Indonesia's maritime diplomacy has proven effective in maintaining regional stability, strengthening Indonesia's legal position internationally, and managing conflict dynamics peacefully. This study recommends strengthening national maritime capacity, optimizing inter-agency coordination, and enhancing multilateral diplomacy to address future complex threats.*

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INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea constitutes a strategically vital region, holding significant importance in both regional and global geopolitical and geoeconomic affairs. This area serves as a major global maritime corridor, a reservoir of natural-resources potential, and a marketplace for competing interests among powerful nations. For Indonesia, the South China Sea represents a sensitive issue, particularly concerning the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around North Natuna, which is frequently encroached upon by foreign vessels most notably those of the People's Republic of China, which asserts historical claims through the "Nine-Dash Line" doctrine.

From 2019 to 2024, tensions in the South China Sea escalated, driven by increased military maneuvers, violations of international maritime law, and intensifying rivalry among major powers such as the United States, China, and their respective allies. Within this dynamic, Indonesia faces the dual challenge of safeguarding its sovereignty and preserving regional stability while navigating complex diplomatic relations with the involved states (Solehudin, 2023; Haryudi et al., 2025; Zubaidi et al., 2024; Madu & Kusumo, 2023).

In this context, maritime diplomacy has assumed an increasingly central role as Indonesia's strategic instrument in addressing such challenges. This form of diplomacy extends beyond

bilateral and multilateral engagements to include defense diplomacy, the application of international legal frameworks, and the bolstering of physical maritime presence through coast guard and naval operations (Islam & Hossen, 2025; Espeña, 2026; Niazi, 2024). Accordingly, maritime diplomacy has transformed into a strategic pillar of Indonesia's foreign policy, aligned with the Global Maritime Fulcrum vision and the nation's defense posture as an archipelagic state (Rahman, 2024).

Despite a range of initiatives already undertaken, the effectiveness of Indonesia's maritime diplomacy remains constrained by both internal and external limitations. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the role of Indonesia's maritime diplomacy as a strategic pillar in confronting threats in the South China Sea, employing a contemporary framework that accounts for the evolving geopolitical dynamics of the region. Through this analysis, it is expected that the study will contribute to the academic discourse on maritime diplomacy as an integral component of Indonesia's grand national security strategy, while also offering strategic recommendations to reinforce Indonesia's stance amid the complexities of future South China Sea conflicts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Maritime Diplomacy

Maritime diplomacy constitutes a central instrument of foreign policy through which states utilize maritime capabilities to pursue national interests beyond purely military objectives. Rather than being limited to naval warfare or deterrence, maritime diplomacy encompasses a spectrum of activities including naval deployments, joint exercises, port visits, humanitarian missions, coast guard operations, and legal advocacy that serve diplomatic, strategic, and reputational purposes. As argued by Geoffrey Till (2009), maritime power in the contemporary era operates not only as a coercive tool but also as a political instrument designed to build confidence, prevent conflict, signal resolve, and strengthen a state's bargaining position in international affairs.

In the context of globalization and increasing maritime interdependence, oceans function simultaneously as strategic highways, economic lifelines, and contested geopolitical spaces. Maritime diplomacy therefore operates at the intersection of hard power and soft power, enabling states to project presence without necessarily escalating to open confrontation. Particularly in semi-enclosed seas such as the South China Sea, where sovereignty disputes overlap with major power rivalry, maritime diplomacy allows states to assert rights while preserving diplomatic maneuverability.

For Indonesia an archipelagic state recognized under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 1982) maritime diplomacy assumes structural importance. Indonesia's geographic configuration, consisting of thousands of islands connected by strategic sea lanes, makes maritime stability essential to national security and economic resilience. Maritime diplomacy thus serves multiple functions: preserving sovereign rights within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), reinforcing adherence to international maritime law, and projecting Indonesia's identity as a responsible maritime actor. In this sense, maritime diplomacy is not merely reactive to incidents in the North Natuna Sea but constitutes a long-term statecraft instrument embedded within Indonesia's broader maritime orientation (Hanafiah et al., 2025; Darwis & Putra, 2022; Putra, 2023).

Grand Strategy in Foreign Policy

Grand strategy refers to the highest level of strategic planning through which a state aligns its political objectives with the coordinated use of military, economic, diplomatic, and informational instruments (Lykke, 1989; Posen, 2003). Unlike short-term policy decisions, grand strategy provides long-term direction by integrating national capabilities toward coherent strategic ends. It addresses fundamental questions: What are the state's core interests? What threats must be managed? And how should available resources be organized to secure long-term stability and influence?

Within Indonesia's foreign policy framework, grand strategy is reflected in its aspiration to consolidate its status as a Global Maritime Fulcrum. This vision integrates maritime defense modernization, economic connectivity, maritime infrastructure development, legal advocacy, and diplomatic engagement. Rather than isolating maritime issues as sectoral concerns, the grand strategy approach situates maritime diplomacy within a comprehensive national project aimed at strengthening Indonesia's autonomy and regional leadership.

In the context of the South China Sea, grand strategy enables Indonesia to transcend ad hoc crisis management. By embedding maritime diplomacy within a broader strategic architecture, Indonesia seeks to harmonize normative commitments to international law, pragmatic engagement with major powers, and regional institutional leadership through ASEAN. Consequently, maritime diplomacy functions as an operational expression of grand strategy translating long-term national objectives into concrete diplomatic and security practices.

Defense Diplomacy and Preventive Diplomacy

Defense diplomacy refers to non-confrontational military engagement conducted within cooperative frameworks to build mutual trust, enhance transparency, and reduce misperceptions among states (Cottey & Forster, 2004). It involves activities such as joint military exercises, high-level defense dialogues, professional exchanges, naval port visits, and capacity-building initiatives. Unlike traditional alliance-building, defense diplomacy does not necessarily imply formal security commitments. Instead, it emphasizes confidence-building measures and strategic communication (Sunadi & Achyar, 2025).

For Indonesia, defense diplomacy in the maritime domain serves dual purposes. First, it enhances operational interoperability and maritime domain awareness, strengthening deterrent credibility without provoking escalation. Second, it signals Indonesia's willingness to engage constructively with multiple partners, including major powers, while maintaining strategic autonomy. In an environment marked by increasing gray-zone activities and maritime coercion, defense diplomacy functions as a calibrated instrument projecting presence without formal alignment.

Preventive diplomacy, meanwhile, focuses on conflict avoidance through dialogue, mediation, and multilateral institutional mechanisms. Rather than reacting after escalation occurs, preventive diplomacy aims to address tensions at early stages through confidence-building and negotiated frameworks. Indonesia's active participation in ASEAN-led platforms, particularly the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and negotiations toward a Code of Conduct (CoC) in the South China Sea, exemplifies this approach (Buszynski & Sazlan, 2007). Through these mechanisms, Indonesia seeks to institutionalize dispute management within a rules-based order, thereby reducing the likelihood of unilateral escalation.

Together, defense diplomacy and preventive diplomacy form complementary instruments. While defense diplomacy reinforces deterrent signaling and operational readiness, preventive diplomacy strengthens normative legitimacy and institutional restraint. Their combined application reflects Indonesia's preference for stability-oriented engagement rather than confrontation.

Hedging Strategy

The concept of hedging captures the strategic behavior of states navigating uncertainty in a fluid international system. According to Kuik (2008), hedging represents a strategy that blends elements of balancing and engagement, allowing states to avoid overdependence on any single power while minimizing risks associated with great-power rivalry. Rather than choosing between alignment and opposition, hedging involves diversification, ambiguity, and risk management.

In the South China Sea context, where the strategic competition between China and the United States shapes regional security dynamics, hedging provides middle powers with strategic flexibility. For Indonesia, hedging manifests in maintaining constructive economic and diplomatic

relations with China while simultaneously strengthening maritime security cooperation with other regional actors. This dual-track approach allows Indonesia to safeguard its sovereign interests without being drawn into polarized bloc politics.

Hedging also aligns with Indonesia's longstanding "independent and active" foreign policy doctrine. By combining legal advocacy under UNCLOS, defense cooperation with multiple partners, coast guard enforcement, and ASEAN-centered multilateralism, Indonesia distributes strategic risk across various instruments. This layered strategy reduces vulnerability to coercion while preserving diplomatic maneuverability.

Importantly, hedging does not imply indecision. Rather, it reflects deliberate strategic calculation in managing structural asymmetries and geopolitical uncertainty. In the South China Sea, hedging enables Indonesia to defend sovereign rights in the North Natuna Sea while sustaining regional stability and avoiding direct entrapment in major-power confrontation.

Conceptual Framework

Following the literature review, this study analyzes Indonesia's maritime diplomacy against South China Sea threats by synthesizing four principal approaches: 1) Maritime Diplomacy: serving as the principal mechanism for reinforcing Indonesia's position; 2) Grand Strategy: providing the overarching policy framework; 3) Defense Diplomacy & Preventive Diplomacy: operationalizing maritime diplomacy through practical instruments; 4) Hedging Strategy: governing external engagements amid great-power competition.

Anchored by this conceptual framework, the research seeks to assess the role, effectiveness, and limitations of Indonesia's maritime diplomacy in a comprehensive manner, in response to emerging threats in the South China Sea.

METHODS

Type of Research

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method. The qualitative approach is chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of Indonesia's maritime diplomacy dynamics in addressing threats in the South China Sea, encompassing foreign policy dimensions, defense strategies, and the broader context of international relations. The descriptive-analytical method is utilized to illustrate the phenomena based on available data while analyzing them within a pre-established conceptual framework.

Data Collection Techniques

The data used in this study are secondary data obtained through the following sources: a) Literature review of academic books, scholarly journals, and previous research findings; b) Official documents issued by the Indonesian government, such as laws, presidential regulations, and formal statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, and the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla); c) Reports from international and regional organizations, including ASEAN, UNCLOS, and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF); d) Credible news sources reporting on developments in the South China Sea from 2019 to 2024.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis is conducted using a content analysis approach, which involves the systematic examination of documents relevant to the research topic. Additionally, foreign policy analysis is employed to evaluate Indonesia's policy options in the context of maritime diplomacy.

The analysis consists of the following stages: 1) Data reduction, by selecting data relevant to the research focus; 2) Data presentation, by categorizing information into thematic areas of analysis; 3) Drawing conclusions, by linking empirical findings to theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

Research Limitations

This research is limited to the period between 2019 and 2024, in line with the escalation of issues in the South China Sea and Indonesia’s maritime diplomacy strategies during that timeframe. The study does not explore the technical aspects of military operations but instead emphasizes diplomatic efforts and foreign policy strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and analyzes the empirical findings derived from systematic qualitative content analysis of secondary data collected between 2019 and 2024. The analysis integrates official Indonesian government documents, regional institutional reports, academic literature, and credible media sources. Following the methodological framework, the findings were generated through three analytical stages: data reduction, thematic categorization, and conclusion drawing. The results reveal that Indonesia’s maritime diplomacy operates through four structured pillars legal diplomacy, defense diplomacy, coast guard diplomacy, and multilateral preventive diplomacy embedded within a broader hedging-oriented grand strategy.

Table 1. Synthesis of Academic and Documentary Sources

No	Category	Author(s)	Title	Method	Main Findings
1	Academic Literature	Kuik (2008)	The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore’s Response to a Rising China	Conceptual / Qualitative	Defines hedging as risk diversification strategy under uncertainty.
		Cottey & Forster (2004)	Reshaping Defence Diplomacy	Conceptual	Defense diplomacy as non-coercive military engagement tool.
		Lykke (1989)	Toward an Understanding of Military Strategy	Conceptual	Grand strategy framework: ends, ways, means alignment.
		Posen (2003)	Command of the Commons	Theoretical	Military capability underpins strategic credibility.
		Till (2009)	Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century	Conceptual	Modern seapower includes constabulary and diplomatic roles.
		Emmers (2010)	The Prospects for Managing the South China Sea Disputes	Qualitative Analysis	ASEAN as conflict-management mechanism.
		Buszynski & Sazlan (2007)	Maritime Claims and Energy Cooperation in the South China Sea	Qualitative	Legal ambiguity shapes regional maritime disputes.
		Suryadinata (2021)	Indonesia’s Foreign Policy under President Joko Widodo	Policy Analysis	Continuity of Indonesia’s independent and active foreign policy.

A synthesis of academic literature demonstrates that this research is grounded in established theoretical frameworks in international relations and maritime security studies. Kuik’s (2008) hedging concept serves as a key analytical foundation in understanding middle-class states’ responses to structural uncertainty. Lykke’s (1989) and Posen’s (2003) grand

strategy framework strengthens the analysis of the link between strategic objectives and capabilities. Meanwhile, Till (2009) and Cottey & Forster (2004) provide a conceptual basis for understanding defense diplomacy and the non-traditional functions of sea power. The literature on ASEAN and the dynamics of the South China Sea from Emmers (2010) and Buszynski & Sazlan (2007) enriches the regional context. Overall, this literature serves as a conceptual foundation that frames the empirical analysis in this study.

Table 2. Secondary Data Sources Used in the Study (2019–2024)

No	Data Category	Specific Documents / Sources Analyzed	Time Frame	Analytical Purpose
2	Indonesian Diplomatic Notes	Nota Diplomati Indonesia kepada PBB (2019, 2020)	2019–2020	Legal stance toward China’s nine-dash line claim
3	Ministry of Foreign Affairs Statements	Official press releases on Natuna incidents; public statements in ASEAN & ARF meetings	2019–2024	Framing of maritime sovereignty and UNCLOS position
4	Ministry of Defense Documents	Buku Putih Pertahanan Indonesia (2021); strategic defense publications	2021–2024	Threat perception and maritime defense posture
5	National Legislation	Law No. 32 of 2014 on Marine Affairs; related maritime regulations	Structural	Institutional basis for maritime governance
6	Bakamla Reports	Laporan Tahunan Pelanggaran Keamanan Laut (2021–2023)	2021–2023	Maritime violations, IUU fishing data, enforcement trends
7	ASEAN Documents	ASEAN statements on South China Sea; Code of Conduct (CoC) negotiation updates	2019–2024	Regional diplomacy analysis
8	ARF & EAS Reports	ASEAN Regional Forum Chairman’s Statements	2019–2024	Preventive diplomacy evaluation
9	UNCLOS Legal Framework	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 1982)	Normative	Legal basis for EEZ claims
10	International Security Reports	International Crisis Group (2021)	2021	Regional escalation assessment
11	Credible News Sources	BBC Indonesia (2020); The Diplomat (2021); major regional outlets	2019–2024	Incident verification and timeline reconstruction

Analytical Processing and Thematic Categorization

During the data reduction stage, documents were filtered to retain only materials directly addressing Indonesia’s maritime sovereignty, Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) enforcement, diplomatic engagement in the South China Sea, and defense cooperation related to maritime security. Sources included diplomatic notes submitted to the United Nations (2019–2020), Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements (2019–2024), the 2021 Defense White Paper, Bakamla annual maritime security reports (2021–2023), ASEAN statements, Code of Conduct (CoC) updates, and regional security assessments.

Subsequently, thematic coding was conducted by identifying recurrent terminology, legal framing patterns, and strategic narratives. The coding process generated four dominant thematic clusters summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Thematic Coding of Indonesia's Maritime Diplomacy (2019–2024)

Thematic Cluster	Recurrent Terminology Identified	Primary Sources	Strategic Interpretation
Legal Diplomacy	"sovereign rights", "EEZ", "no legal basis", "UNCLOS 1982", "international law"	Diplomatic Notes (2019–2020), MFA Statements	Normative sovereignty assertion and legal legitimization
Defense Diplomacy	"joint exercises", "maritime domain awareness", "deterrence", "interoperability", "naval presence"	Defense White Paper (2021), military cooperation releases	Calibrated deterrence without alliance alignment
Coast Guard Diplomacy	"maritime law enforcement", "integrated patrols", "IUU fishing", "civilian authority"	Bakamla Reports (2021–2023)	Non-militarized enforcement of sovereign rights
Multilateral Preventive Diplomacy	"Code of Conduct", "ASEAN centrality", "peaceful resolution", "dialogue mechanisms"	ASEAN Statements, ARF Reports	Institutional conflict management

Source: Author's content analysis of secondary documents (2019–2024).

The repetition of these thematic groups in diplomatic notes, defence reports, maritime security reports, and regional institutional statements suggest a policy orientation-based approach, as opposed to ad hoc or reactionary approach. The fact that the legal terminology used in most of the institutional outputs includes such terms as sovereign rights, Exclusive Economic Zone, and mentions of the UNCLOS 1982 is indicative of the discursively organized Indonesian maritime diplomacy. This repetition has not been accidental; it portrays a conscious construction of story aimed at establishing a place of Indonesia in a rules-based order of maritime relations.

Further, the inter-secting of the legal, defence, and multilateral discourses of various bureaucratic actors, that is, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, and Bakamla, show the alignment of various institutions in terms of strategic discourse. Had Indonesia been episodic or crisis-oriented, one would anticipate that framing between agencies would be diverse, or that framing would change over time. Rather, it is the case that the data show thematic consistency in 2019-2024. The continuity of this type helps to infer that maritime diplomacy is an institutionalised policy framework as opposed to a situational response to a particular event.

This logical consistency, in a strategic perspective, supports the thesis that the maritime diplomacy of Indonesia is not devoid of a larger grand strategy. An alignment between strategic objectives and policy instruments is expressed in the integration of normative legal defence, calibrated deterrence, civilian maritime enforcement, and multilateralism centred on ASEAN. Their repetition, accordingly, must not be interpreted as a repetition, but as one of thematic clusters, which are indicative of organized strategic purpose in line with hedging behaviour and long-term policy formulation.

Legal Diplomacy as Normative Anchoring

The empirical evidence shows that the Indonesian legal diplomacy is not only a rhetorical tool of defense, but also a normative anchoring approach, which is deeply rooted in the overall maritime statecraft. Analysis of diplomatic notes provided in 2019 and 2020 indicates that they make recurring references to the sovereign rights, Exclusive Economic Zone, and direct reference to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 1982). This repetition does not just indicate legal formalism, but is an attempt to place the claims of Indonesia in the context of the generally accepted principles of international law. Indonesia can not reposition its stand at UNCLOS since it has always positioned itself at the level of a bilateral territorial dispute but rather it has promoted the issue to be included under the category of the legal obligation to adhere to

the established maritime law. Therefore, this legal anchoring policy brings international legitimacy into the limelight and rebranding of maritime incidents as norm-breaking but not power-related contestations.

Most importantly, this legalist position of critical importance is that it leads to a change of the field of contention to a normative one as opposed to material confrontation. Normative positioning is a strategic equalizer in a geopolitical environment of asymmetric competence, especially where the states are facing a great power like China. Through the application of UNCLOS, Indonesia targets a multilateral order of law that is supported by a large segment of the international community, and thus it raises reputational costs to those who violate it. This corresponds not only to the concept of maritime diplomacy which emphasizes the importance of legal instruments in conjunction with diplomatic signaling (Tilli, 2009), but also to the bigger picture of the rule-based conflict management theory as advanced by Bateman (2011). However, it should be noted that normative anchoring does not remove the existence of coercive realities; that legal argumentation reinforces legitimacy but does not necessarily bring more powerful states to comply. Indonesia, therefore, cannot be said to depend on legal diplomacy as a means of constraint and reputational power as opposed to enforceability.

In addition, the similarity of legal framing in various governmental institutions suggests the internalization of normative strategy within the institution. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, defense publications, and agencies tasked with enforcing the law at sea all use similar legal terminology, which is an indication of bureaucratic consistency and not divided speech. This cross-institutional fit supports the explanation that the idea of legal diplomacy is integrated into the Indonesia design of grand strategy as developed by Lykke (1989) and Posen (2003) meaning the political goals are harmonized with instruments that are available. However, it is also necessary to critically assess the possibility that continued reliance on the law may lead to overreliance on normative processes in a strategic environment that is becoming increasingly defined by gray-zone coercion. Although legal diplomacy positively affects the legitimacy and the international support, its success is mainly reliant on the supplementary tool of maritime presence and multilateral coalition-building. So, legal diplomacy can be viewed not as an independent solution, but as a pillar of a more comprehensive approach to maritime policy on a sophisticated and balanced scale.

Defense Diplomacy and Calibrated Deterrence

The empirical evidence indicates that Indonesia's defense diplomacy in the South China Sea between 2019 and 2024 reflects a strategy of calibrated deterrence rather than overt balancing. Analysis of the 2021 Defense White Paper, official military press releases, and documentation of joint naval exercises reveals a steady increase in maritime security cooperation with partners such as the United States, Australia, Japan, and several ASEAN member states. However, the framing of these activities is consistently cautious. Public statements emphasize interoperability, maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and search-and-rescue operations rather than strategic containment or counterbalancing of China. This discursive moderation suggests that Indonesia deliberately manages the signaling function of defense cooperation to avoid provoking escalation.

From a theoretical standpoint, this pattern aligns with the concept of defense diplomacy as defined by Cottey and Forster (2004), where military engagement is used as a tool of confidence-building rather than coercive alignment. Indonesia's participation in multilateral exercises such as the Komodo Exercise serves not only to enhance operational readiness but also to project an image of inclusive security cooperation. Unlike formal alliance structures, these engagements do not entail binding commitments or collective defense obligations. Instead, they create flexible networks of cooperation that expand Indonesia's strategic options without locking it into bloc politics. In this sense, defense diplomacy functions as a strategic hedge: it strengthens Indonesia's Menaceous position and maintenance of diplomatic position. The calibrated deterrence concept is especially interesting when one considers the new 2021 Coast Guard Law

of China that provided the Chinese maritime enforcement vessels with more powers to use force (in specific circumstances). Such legal developments were cautioned in regional security assessments, such as by the International Crisis Group (2021), which said such developments would heighten the risk of gray-zone confrontation. The reaction of Indonesia was not based on sudden militarization. Rather, it involved increased patrolling of the North Natuna Sea alongside sustained diplomacy and reassertion of the legal principles in the open. This two-pronged strategy reflects strategic restraint, which indicates that it is willing to protect sovereign rights and at the same time does not want to do anything that can be seen as aggressive aggravation.

More importantly, credibility is the key to calibrated deterrence. The frequency of patrol and the extended joint drills have to be corroborated with adequate material abilities so that signaling is not an empty show. Although Indonesia has made effort to modernize some of its maritime assets and improve the superiority of maritime domains, defence budgetary constraints and the obsolescence of old platforms limit the sustainability of extended deterrence. As explained by Lykke (1989), grand strategy theory focuses on the end, means and ways alignment. The termination of sovereignty protection is obvious in the case of Indonesia, and the method the use of defense diplomacy in conjunction with the presence of patrolling is logical. The question that arises, however, is whether the deterrence is credible to be maintained using the means in the long run.

In addition, the concept of calibrated deterrence works in a thin line. Aggressive military behavior would challenge the self-perception of Indonesia as a non-aligned, independent actor and move the credibility of the Indonesian as a mediator in the ASEAN systems. On the other hand, the lack of enough deterrent signaling is likely to embolden further gray-zone incursions. The defense diplomacy in Indonesia is thus a show of strategic balances in that too much visibility of collaboration and willingness to communicate determination but cautiously packaged so as not to become entrapment in alignment or confrontation.

This balance, together with existing hedging stance of Indonesia, supports the greater hedging stance as envisioned by Kuik (2008). Indonesia also diversifies strategic partnerships without making a commitment to hard balancing by pursuing selective security cooperation and having positive relations with China. Defense diplomacy is therefore part of the strategic architecture in complementing legal and multilateral instruments. It is not entirely symbolic or entirely coercive but it is a measured mixture of encouragement and discouragement that is intended to control uncertainty in a more and more disputed maritime setting.

Coast Guard Diplomacy and Civilian Maritime Governance

The strengthening of Indonesia's coast guard function through the institutional consolidation of Bakamla represents one of the most strategically significant, yet often underexamined, dimensions of Indonesia's maritime diplomacy. Empirical findings from Bakamla's annual maritime security reports (2021–2023) indicate recurring patterns of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, unauthorized foreign vessel presence, and jurisdictional infringements within Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), particularly in the North Natuna Sea. Rather than responding to these incidents primarily through naval deployment, Indonesia increasingly relies on civilian maritime law enforcement vessels. This choice reflects a deliberate policy design aimed at managing sovereignty assertion within a gray-zone environment without triggering militarized escalation.

From a strategic perspective, coast guard diplomacy functions as an intermediate instrument between legal diplomacy and hard naval deterrence. In situations where violations occur below the threshold of armed conflict, deploying naval combat assets risks over-securitizing the encounter and escalating tensions. By contrast, the use of civilian maritime enforcement vessels preserves the legal framing of the issue as law enforcement rather than military confrontation. This distinction is critical in the South China Sea context, where coercive actions often occur through paramilitary or coast guard actors rather than conventional naval

forces. Indonesia's reliance on Bakamla thus mirrors the evolving character of maritime contestation, which increasingly unfolds in ambiguous operational spaces.

The strategic value of coast guard diplomacy lies in its flexibility. Civilian enforcement assets enable Indonesia to assert presence, conduct inspections, and maintain patrol visibility while sustaining its narrative commitment to peaceful dispute management. This approach aligns with broader interpretations of contemporary seapower, which emphasize constabulary and governance functions alongside combat roles (Tilli, 2009). In this sense, Bakamla serves not merely as an enforcement body but as a diplomatic signaller demonstrating state capacity and resolve without projecting overt militarization. Participation in regional maritime cooperation forums further reinforces Indonesia's image as a responsible maritime actor committed to cooperative security governance.

However, a critical evaluation reveals structural limitations that may constrain the long-term effectiveness of coast guard diplomacy. Institutional overlap between Bakamla, the Indonesian Navy (TNI AL), the Marine Police, and the Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries has historically generated coordination challenges. While formal legal frameworks attempt to delineate mandates, operational ambiguity persists in certain areas. This fragmentation risks diluting the clarity of command and control in high-pressure situations. In a gray-zone environment characterized by rapid maneuvering and legal ambiguity, delays or inconsistencies in inter-agency coordination could weaken the credibility of Indonesia's enforcement posture.

Moreover, coast guard diplomacy depends heavily on capacity sustainability. Patrol frequency, surveillance technology, and maritime domain awareness systems require continuous investment. Without modernization and adequate funding, the signaling function of civilian maritime enforcement may erode over time. Grand strategy theory underscores the importance of aligning strategic ends with sufficient means (Lykke, 1989). If Indonesia's coast guard capabilities lag behind evolving regional enforcement capabilities, the deterrent dimension of coast guard diplomacy could weaken, reducing its strategic leverage.

Another critical dimension concerns signaling interpretation. While civilian deployment reduces escalation risk, it may also be perceived by adversarial actors as a less forceful response compared to naval presence. The strategic balance, therefore, lies in calibrating coast guard operations so they project firmness without provocation. Indonesia appears to navigate this balance by integrating coast guard operations with periodic naval patrols, thereby maintaining layered deterrence while preserving diplomatic space.

Ultimately, coast guard diplomacy represents a sophisticated adaptation to contemporary maritime competition. It reflects recognition that sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea increasingly occur in legally ambiguous and operationally complex contexts. By privileging civilian maritime governance, Indonesia reinforces its normative narrative, reduces escalation risk, and aligns its enforcement strategy with its broader hedging posture. Nevertheless, the long-term success of this approach will depend on institutional consolidation, sustained modernization, and the continued integration of coast guard functions within Indonesia's comprehensive maritime strategy.

Multilateral Preventive Diplomacy and ASEAN Centrality

The empirical evidence shows that Indonesia is a systematic incorporation of its maritime diplomacy in the multilateral institutional framework, most remarkably via ASEAN and the related dialogue systems. The history of the Code of Conduct (CoC) negotiations, 2019-24, official ASEAN communications, and the records of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) sessions all bear testament to the consistent Indonesian advocacy on the legal and substantive CoC based on the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea. Indonesia also keenly reiterates the role of the centrality of ASEAN, peaceful resolution and a rules-based order, thus indicating that multilateralism is not a support mechanism but rather a core part of its maritime policy.

Strategically speaking, the accessibility of Indonesia to ASEAN-oriented diplomacy may be seen as reflecting the preventative logic. Instead of letting the maritime conflicts escalate into bilateral conflict with China, Indonesia aims at diffusing the conflicts within the wider regional setting. Conceptualised within the contemporary security studies, preventive diplomacy is supposed to control the escalation before reaching the critical thresholds. When put in the context of ASEAN processes, Indonesia shifts diplomatic responsibility among member states and strengthens the norms of institutions that limit unilateral behavior in the South China Sea. The strategy is also consistent with the findings of Emmers (2010) who argues that the power of ASEAN is based on its ability to institutionalise a dialogue and moderate conflict using mechanisms based on consensus.

Nevertheless, a critique explains intrinsic structural constraints in the consensus model of ASEAN. Although ASEAN centrality offers legitimacy and conveys a voice, it also relies on agreement among member states that have widely different perceptions of threats and economic needs. The ASEAN is facing some threat to its bargaining power within the CoC negotiations due to divergent national interests, especially when it concerns states that have extensive economic relationships with China. Therefore, the Indonesian adherence to the centrality of ASEAN is with a limited institutional context. This is because multilateral diplomacy increases normative leverage and not necessarily leads to enforceable results, the duration and incremental quality of CoC negotiations is indicative of this limitation.

The calculus of strategy of Indonesia, thus, seems to balance idealistic desire with a practical understanding of the limits of the institution. Indonesia bolsters its legal-diplomatic discourse by endorsing a legally binding, substantive CoC, but reducing the unilateral escalation threat. At the same time, it does not over-invest its political capital hoping to achieve quick institutional breakthroughs. Such a measured interaction is the hedging rationality outlined by Kuik (2008): Indonesia does not give up on multilateralism and instead uses it solely. Instead, ASEAN is part of a multifaceted approach that also implies legal assertion, defense cooperation, and the enforcement of coast guards.

In addition, the ASEAN centrality has both reputational and diplomatic purposes which do not limit themselves to immediate dispute management. Indonesia would strengthen its reputation as a responsible middle power by establishing itself as an advocate of regional institutionalism, and also solidify its status as a leader in Southeast Asia. Suryadinata (2021) notes that the foreign policy of President Joko Widodo combines the national-interest protection with the regional cohesion in Indonesia. This dual orientation is supported by the empirical evidence; the insistence of Indonesia on ASEAN solidarity enables Indonesia to maintain diplomatic viability while at the same time keeping the major-powers polarities out of its way.

However, the sustainability of this multilateral preventive diplomacy in the long-term is based on the ability of ASEAN to remain relevant in the face of escalating Indo-Pacific tensions. In case institutional cohesion within ASEAN is lost or external powers find ways to circumvent ASEAN led processes to an increasing extent, there may be a strategic push back on the Indonesian reliance on ASEAN centrality. Therefore, as much as multilateral preventive diplomacy can increase the legitimacy and decrease the risk of escalation, it can never be a security guarantee in its own right; it will only work as effective as both legal diplomacy and calculated deterrence are reinforced.

Grand Strategy Hedging Strategy

The multivariate production of the empirical results in the fields of legal diplomacy, military alliance, coast guard policing and multilateral interaction demonstrates a logical strategic pattern that can be viewed through the prism of hedging. Indonesia does not conform formally to major powers and does not assume confrontational balancing behavior. Rather it has positive diplomatic and economic ties with China and at the same time developing maritime security partnerships with nations like the United States, Australia as well as Japan. Such a two-track behaviour is strongly related to the conceptualisation of hedging proposed by Kuik (2008)

as a strategy aimed to address strategic uncertainty with the help of diversification, ambiguity and distribution of risks.

Notably, the hedging position of Indonesia is not only reactive but enshrined in the overall grand strategy of the country. Lykke (1989) defines grand strategy theory as having focus on the consistency of ends, ways and means. The strategic end of Indonesia is to have sovereignty and stability in the region but not to be caught up in the rivalry of great powers. The ways include integrating legal affirmation, diplomacy of defense, coast-guard based enforcement, and ASEAN based multilateralism. These means comprise institutional capacity, diplomatic networks and selective military modernization. These dimensions are all coherent enough to indicate that hedging is not a tactical improvisation but an organizing principle that orders up the maritime diplomacy of Indonesia.

More importantly, this concept of hedging works via layered signaling. The idea of legal diplomacy is an indication of normative adherence and adherence to international law based on rules. Defense diplomacy portrays non-commitment of alliances but deterrence. Coast-guard diplomacy is an indication of operation below escalation levels. Multilateral involvement is a sign of assurance to institutional stability. These layers combined are strategic ambiguity which keeps Indonesia autonomous. Instead of making the decision between balancing and bandwagoning, Indonesia develops flexibility, so that not one of the external relationships is structurally dominant.

The hedging is delicate in nature and strategic risks are involved. Its efficiency relies on the need to preserve the credibility with several partners at the same time. Too close to a single dominant force may lead to compromises in the so-called neutrality, whereas too soft manner can provoke coercive examination. Moreover, hedging demands material capability that is enough to maintain diversified partnerships. Failure to modernize its defense or other institutional coordination can lead to Indonesia failing to communicate credible resolve resulting in the undermining of the balance that hedging is supposed to protect.

One more important dimension is related to temporal sustainability. Hedging performs well in the context of a strategic ambiguity, and when geopolitical polarization reaches an extreme level, the space of maneuverability can be reduced. Middle powers, in this case, can be under pressure to ensure that the alignments are clearer. The fact that Indonesia has remained focused on the idea of an active and independent foreign-policy principle is an indication that it is sensitive to this structural tension. According to the empirical results, Indonesia is coping with this pressure through strengthening ASEAN centrality and legal multilateralism, which results into externalizing the pressures of alignment into institutional structure.

Furthermore, the hedging of the grand strategy means long-term planning as opposed to periodic adjustment. The repetition of the regularity of messages used in ministries and agencies between 2019 and 2024 shows that the process is institutionalized and not improvised. The lack of sharp strategic changes, even during such events as the 2019-2020 tensions in Natuna or the 2021 Coast Guard Law, shows the continuity. This consistency adds to the reading that hedging is a consistent strategic doctrine and not a crisis-management instrument.

However, a critical analysis should take note of the fact that hedging does not make a person less vulnerable. Indonesia continues to be vulnerable to the asymmetries in economic and military power. Hedging reduces risk and not counterbalances it. It is robust in maintaining independence and reducing the escalation in the short term; it is weak in relying on restraint and resiliency of external actors and institutional strength. Thus, despite offering strategic flexibility, hedging will only be viable in the long run, as long as Indonesia is able to build domestic maritime potential and maintain the institutional integrity of the region.

Discussion

This research challenges the existing body of literature on the approach to hedging conceptualization in its middle power strategy literature. Indonesia maritime diplomacy should

not be assumed as a form of hedging, although on a more formal and institutionalized way, in comparison to the tactical ambiguity or temporary flexibility between balancing and bandwagoning. According to Kuik (2008), hedging is risk diversification given the uncertainty; but the empirical trends observed in this case are that Indonesia undertakes this diversification in legal, defense as well as multilateral space in tandem. This changes the argument of behavioral oscillation to the idea of strategic layering. Hedging, in this meaning, is not indecisiveness, but active management of exposures, to avoid overdependence on a given great power in any of the arenas of the institution. This kind of structuring problem problematizes deterministic realist beliefs that extended pressures by other actors are bound to create alignment (Kemp, 2022). Rather, Indonesia proves that independence is possible in case bureaucratic coherence and diversified tools support each other.

The ascendancy of the law diplomacy that is based in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea complicates the traditional understanding of the behavior of maritime security even more. The liberal institutionalist thinking often presupposes that the invocation of rules helps to enhance constraint and predictability (Calli, 2026). The evidence however suggests that legal anchoring of disputed maritime zones is a mechanism that is more of a reputational positioning and less of an enforcement. Two scholars, Magasházi & Acheampong (2025) and Rüländ (2011), have observed that states of Southeast Asia extensively depend on normative framing in order to compensate asymmetrical capabilities. This observation is validated by the Indonesian case but shows its limitations. Legal diplomacy increases legitimacy and rallies international support, yet it fails to stop grey-zone incursions (Żakowska & Last, 2025). As a result, international law turns into a strategic narrative resource as opposed to a compliance assurance. This highlights the shifting nature of maritime order is where legal argument discussion accompanies consistent coercive signalling.

The growing use of civilian naval policing, as opposed to military deployment, has other theoretical implications (Blair & Weintraub, 2023; Brooks, 2025). Tilli (2009) points out that the modern seapower is not merely in combat operations but also constabulary as well as diplomatic functions. This change is strengthened by the Indonesian experience. The state balances its sovereign presence by maximizing the point at which escalation sets in due to favoring the coast guard instruments. But this maritime strategy is civilianized and this creates a paradox. Although it will diminish the direct threat of military conflict, it will perhaps regularize recurring low-intensity conflicts. Such a calculated ambiguity is exactly the environment in which gray-zone politics breeds, as the analysis of regional security (International Crisis Group, 2021; Azad et al., 2023) underscores. Indonesia, therefore, has an effective approach of escalation management but not a structural contestation. In this regard, stability is the control of friction but not its removal.

The focus of ASEAN based diplomacy also demands analytical subtlety. According to Emmers (2010), the institution of dialogue is the best conflict-management tool in ASEAN as opposed to coercion. These results support this finding and imply a narrowed understanding of ASEAN centrality. Practically, ASEAN can be characterized as a buffers system, as bilateral tension is subdued in a multilateral arena, but the presence of consensus-based decision-making means that decisive action is necessarily constrained. According to Suryadinata (2021), the foreign policy of Indonesia aims at sustaining the regional unity without polarization. Nevertheless, such cohesion is under increasing pressure posed by the structural environment of increasingly tough U.S.–China rivalry. The polarization is something that ASEAN can postpone, and it cannot put in a complete shield around the member states against systemic competition (Hartono & Cooray, 2024; Jaafar, 2026). This means that ASEAN centrality focuses on the temporal stabilization instead of absolute conflict regulation.

Last but not least, sustainability of hedging posture in Indonesia should be discussed in the framework of grand strategy. According to Lykke (1989), a successful strategy requires that there is an alignment between the objectives, means and methods. Even though the goals of Indonesia and the means to reach them seem to be harmonious, the continuity of the given strategy depends on sufficient material resources and the institutional faculties (Romlah et al.,

2025; Samala et al., 2024; Pangaribuan, 2024). Hedging can only be viable in cases where there is strategic space and underpinning of autonomy. Grand strategy, as Posen (2003) cries out, is eventually based on believable ability. In case the geopolitical rivalry turns into deep-rooted blocs, the ambivalence can lose its tolerance. In this situation, hedging can be faced with increasing pressure of external requirement of alignment. The Indonesian maritime diplomacy should therefore be seen as a dynamic balancing act and not as a fixed equilibrium, depending on the changing structural conditions.

CONCLUSION

Maritime diplomacy has emerged as a strategic pillar for Indonesia in addressing threats in the South China Sea, particularly within the North Natuna Sea's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The implementation of this diplomatic approach reflects an integrated strategy encompassing foreign policy, defense, and the supremacy of international law, forming part of Indonesia's grand strategy as an archipelagic state.

In the context of escalating tensions in the South China Sea driven by major power rivalries and the increasing assertiveness of unilateral claims by the People's Republic of China Indonesia has consistently adhered to a non-confrontational stance through the following measures: 1) Active engagement in bilateral and multilateral diplomacy; 2) Strengthening naval diplomacy and regional defense cooperation; 3) Advancing coast guard diplomacy through the enhanced role of the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla); 4) Upholding international law based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 1982.

Indonesia's maritime diplomacy strategy has, in general, demonstrated effectiveness in preserving national sovereignty, managing disputes through peaceful means, and reinforcing Indonesia's standing in international forums. Nevertheless, internal challenges such as limited maritime resources and inter-agency coordination require urgent attention to ensure optimal policy implementation.

Suggestion

Based on the findings of this study, several strategic recommendations are proposed:

Strengthening National Maritime Capacity

Efforts should be made to modernize naval defense equipment, develop maritime base infrastructure, and enhance human resource capabilities in the maritime sector.

Integrated Cross-Sectoral Coordination

Greater synergy is needed among the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, Indonesian Navy (TNI AL), Bakamla, and other relevant agencies in managing maritime diplomacy.

Optimization of Multilateral Diplomacy

Indonesia must continue to uphold ASEAN centrality, push for the expedited conclusion of the Code of Conduct (CoC), and actively strengthen Indo-Pacific regional cooperation.

Consistency in Upholding International Legal Supremacy

Indonesia must consistently advocate its maritime interests in various international forums, firmly grounding its stance in UNCLOS 1982 as the primary legal framework for dispute resolution.

Enhancing the Role of Academia and National Think Tanks

To enrich the policy-making process, it is crucial to involve academic research, policy studies, and sustained stakeholder dialogues.

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