

The Diplomatic Effort on the Dispute between Indonesia and China in the North Natuna Sea

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ABSTRACT: *Indonesia and China are having tensions over the conflict in the North Natuna Sea, yang berlokasi di Laut China Selatan. This tension is beginning from a Reuters report (published December 2, 2021) which stated that China sent a letter of protest asking Indonesia to stop oil and natural gas drilling activities in North Natuna Sea. This paper was compiled to find out the extent of the government's efforts through diplomacy to overcome the North Natuna conflict with China. The method used for this study was a literature study. The data obtained were compiled, analyzed, and concluded so as to obtain conclusions regarding the study of literature. The results show that, Indonesia and China have their respective interests in the South China Sea area, both in terms of national security and economy. Meanwhile, Indonesia has made soft diplomacy efforts to resolve the conflict with China. So far, Indonesia has implemented three subtle forms of diplomacy in the maritime field, namely Cooperative, Persuasive, and Coercive.*

KEYWORDS: *Indonesia, China, Laut Natuna Utara*

I. Introduction

Territory of a country beside the air and the land is the sea. However, not every country has sea area. Only certain countries have sea areas, namely countries whose land area is bordering with the sea. The sea borders a country with another country with a boundary point determined by bilateral or multilateral ways. This means that the limits of the power of a country are as far as the outer limits of its territory. Determination of territorial boundaries that include the sea always considers the form of consequences and other considerations so that all interests run hand in hand (Kusuma, et al., 2021). For countries whose territory is connected to the territory of other countries, the boundaries cannot be determined unilaterally but must pay attention to their history and the agreements made.

The condition of the Asia Pacific Region as a vast sea area often faces dispute. The South China Sea, which is the geopolitical pedestal in the Asia Pacific region, has become a conversation at the international level because it has sparked disputes between several major Asian countries and several ASEAN members (Saleh, 2010). Disputed issues are about maritime territorial claims between countries. The dispute affects the security condition of the Asian region, especially ASEAN, even the show of military force has been shown by the warring countries. The intersection of sovereignty claims and territorial jurisdiction in the South China Sea area involves six countries, namely China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam (Setiawan, 2010).

The South China Sea dispute has been going on since 1947. The basis used by China to claim the entire the South China Sea territory is the nine-dash line covering a number of territories belonging to the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan and Brunei Darussalam. The characteristics of disputes in this region are due to the interests of each country in the South China Sea area based on the arguments and legal basis of that country. As

one of the countries bordering the South China Sea, Indonesia has stated that it is not directly involved in the dispute over territory in the South China Sea. Indonesia is a member of Southeast Asia and has strategic value for Indonesia, which has several potentials for our country's security in the regional of ASEAN membership. The influence of regional stability within ASEAN is threatened because of disputes in the South China Sea area, so that it is correlated with the incompatibility of ASEAN's security credibility, which has an impact on Indonesia in particular.

Addressing about the South China Sea disputes, Indonesia is currently confronting tensions with China regarding the issue of oil and gas drilling in the North Natuna Sea. The dispute had calmed down for some time, but it flared up again after China demanded that Indonesia must stop oil and natural gas (oil and gas) drilling activities, because China claimed the territory was its own. On the one hand, Indonesia has firmly stated that the southern tip of the South China Sea is an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) belonging to Indonesia under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and in 2017 named the area the North Natuna Sea.

The Chinese side believes that the Indonesian oil and gas drilling rig imported from the Noble Clyde Boudreaux Company is operating in China's maritime territory, even though the drilling rig operates in the Tuna Block, North Natuna Sea, which is part of the Indonesian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Since the oil and gas installation was being deployed in June, it has been monitored by Chinese coast guard vessels, according to a report from the Indonesian Ocean Justice Initiative (IOJI).



Map of disputed areas between Indonesia and China regarding North Natuna

The re-heating up of the North Natuna dispute between Indonesia and China actually started from a Reuters media report published on December 2nd 2021, stating that China had sent a letter of protest to Indonesia for allegedly drilling for oil and natural gas in North Natuna waters. In fact, as clarified by a member of commission I from the PDI-P faction, Effendi Simbolon, the protest letter from China was a response to written diplomatic communications that were first sent by Indonesia to China (Kompas, 2021). Indonesia previously protested the action of a Chinese research vessel which in early 2021 was seen in the vicinity of the exploration area in the Tuna Block in the North Natuna Sea.

Given that the Indonesia-China conflict in the North Natuna Sea is heating up, this paper tries to analyze how the government's efforts through diplomacy resolve the conflict of interest between Indonesia and China in North Natuna.

II. Discussion

1. Conflict of Interest between Indonesia and China in North Natuna

Conflicts of interest between countries in any region have the potential to cause conflict and instability both globally and regionally. Conflicts of interest originate from the economy such as trade openness (Garfinkel, Syropoulos, & Yotov 2020) and debt agreements between countries (Pancrazi & Prosperi, 2020), politics such as logistics boycotts and aid to other countries (Heilmann, 2016), and social interests such as interstate redistribution policy (Yayamura, 2016). If not managed properly, it leads to direct conflict of civil wars around the world (Albornoz & Hauk, 2014), and may involve military power between certain countries who fear that their national interests will be triggered (Estrada, Park, Tahir, & Khan, 2020).

China has an interest in South China Sea resources, but these are far more important to the economies of smaller claimant nations than its own. More importantly, China wants to exert greater control over its periphery, particularly its “near seas”, in areas of national security interest (Scobbell, 2018). China’s main goal is to prevent sieges, a long-standing source of anxiety within the ruling Communist Party. Achieving this goal requires China's ability to dominate militarily in what is known as the “first island chain”, a line that runs north to south from the Kuril Islands, past Japan, the Ryukyus, Chinese Taipei, the Philippines, Borneo, and the Natuna Islands. In addition, analysts speculate that China wants the South China Sea for its nuclear submarines (Scobbell, 2018).

According to Satyawan in Aplinata (2015), Indonesia's national interests in the South China Sea are security and territorial integrity, economic interests, constitutional mandates and ASEAN unity. Another factor in Indonesia's interests is the economy. A direct threat to the region caused by the dotted line character, which includes the northwestern part of Indonesia, namely the Natuna Sea. The Natuna Islands region, which is rich in gas and minerals, is one of Indonesia's largest energy assets which supply the country with abundant gas sources and income from gas exports (Azwar in Aplianta, 2015). The impact of losing this valuable area will not only cause Indonesia to suffer a potential loss of income and gas resources, but also something that causes huge losses to Indonesia's strategic policies.

In addition, Indonesia still has same interests in the South China Sea, namely Indonesia seeks to maintain peace and security in the South China Sea and the wider region. Indonesia continues to emphasize the need for peaceful dispute resolution based on international law. This has influenced Indonesia's stronger response to anything Chinese operations in the North Natuna Sea. Therefore, there is often tension over the overlapping area between Indonesia's legal EEZ and China's nine-dash line.

Thus, it is clear that Indonesia's stance regarding North Natuna Sea authorization, that the southern tip of the South China Sea is an exclusive economic zone belonging to the sovereignty of the Republic of Indonesia under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and in 2017 named the area the North Natuna Sea. But China still objected to the name change and insisted that the waterway falls within its vast territorial claim in the South China Sea, which is marked by a U-shaped “nine-dash line”. However, this limitation has no legal basis according to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in 2016 (Campbell, 2016).

The Hague ruling in this case benefits Indonesia as the court determined that the nine-dash line was illegal under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This reaffirms Indonesia's territorial enforcement policy over its EEZ in every incident with China in the North Natuna Sea. Reflecting on this theory, China's protests regarding oil and gas drilling in the North Natuna region actually have no applicable legal basis. Therefore, SKK Migas Indonesia continues its oil and gas drilling activities in the Tuna Block, off the coast of East Natuna, Riau Islands, amid complaints made by China. In fact, the activities of SKK Migas and Premier Oil Tuna BV have so far found oil and gas reserves at the RI-Vietnam border (CNN Indonesia, 2021).

2. The Indonesia Government's Efforts to Resolve the North Natuna Sea Dispute through Diplomacy

Many efforts to resolve disputes in the South China Sea have been carried out for the sake of resolving these disputes by ASEAN, starting from the ASEAN Summit, Special Forums that bring together disputing countries in it, lawsuits to the International Court of Justice by the warring countries. In addition, there are also efforts to

implement a document containing relations between ASEAN and China, on the South China Sea in 2002, the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) (Metro News, 2015). However, all these efforts have not succeeded in fulfilling the mission to build mutual trust among the countries involved in the South China Sea conflict and to prevent the South China Sea conflict from developing further. Until the effort called COC, hereinafter referred to as the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea which is substantially the implementation of the DOC, the COC was compiled as a document that regulates the behavior of countries in the SCS region which is still in the discussion stage (Primananda, 2017).

Applied Oceanographer Widodo S Pranowo explained that conflicts between countries that occur in the world are generally due to conflicts over the seizure or management or utilization of resources. This potential also exists in the South China Sea and the North Natuna Sea (KKP.go.id, 2021). The South China Sea conflict is actually a dynamic strategic issue and is growing together with the progress of the Asia Pacific region. Currently, the South China Sea area is becoming increasingly important, both in terms of geography, economy, politics and defense and security (Guillot in Yudho, 2010). The security issue, which continues to develop until now, can be said to be unresolved, with mutual claims between countries in the China Sea area involving 5 ASEAN countries, Claimant States consisting of Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei and non- Claimant State namely Indonesia.

So far, the Indonesian government has chosen to keep silent on the request from China. Silence was taken because Indonesia did not want this issue to turn into a diplomatic incident (CNN Indonesia, 2021). More importantly, China is one of Indonesia's strategic partners in the region. It is the obligation of both parties to continue to improve mutually respectful relationships and build mutually beneficial cooperation. However, it is not impossible if China continues to undermine Indonesia to stop oil drilling activities because it adheres to their nine-dash line agenda. If this tension continues, whether like it or not, Indonesia must take diplomacy strategy with China in order to find a win-won solution related to oil and natural gas drilling activities in the North Natuna.

Sir Earnest Satow in his book *Guide to Diplomatic Practice* says that diplomacy is an application of intelligence and tactics to implementation of official relations between the government and sovereign states (Sir Earnest Satow, 1995 in Prayudya, et al, 2015). Diplomacy is one way of solving problems by peaceful means, but if peaceful means fail to achieve the desired goal, diplomacy allows the use of real threats or force as a way to achieve its goals (RW, Sterling, in Pramudya et al., 2015).

In this case, it is necessary to understand further that diplomacy also has two forms in its implementation, namely *Hard Power Diplomacy* and *Soft Power Diplomacy*. According to Joseph Nye Jr., soft power is a concept developed to describe the ability of a country to invite other countries to cooperate without using hard power, such as weapons or materials. While, there are several things that support the creation of soft power, including: Culture, Political Values, Diplomacy (Nye Jr, 2014). Diplomacy is an effort that must be done in the context of resolving the South China Sea dispute, considering that what was conveyed regarding the South China Sea dispute could not be done by military force.

Indonesia, which is a member of ASEAN, realistically understands that the South China Sea problem requires a political solution. However, they have approached it with diplomatic efforts seeking to incorporate China into a normative regime in which it will discipline itself on collective rules of conduct backed by appeals to the law. In relation to China's demands that Indonesia must stop oil and gas drilling in Natuna, the Indonesian government has actually made soft power diplomacy efforts.

The Government of the Republic of Indonesia through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in 2021, plays an active role in peace diplomacy efforts in the South China Sea region. The latest diplomacy in handling potential conflicts in the South China Sea carried out by the Indonesian government was through Workshop of "The 30th Workshop on Managing Potential Conflict in the South China Sea" in October 13-14 2021 organized by the Center for Multilateral Foreign Policy Strategy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in collaboration with the Geospatial Information Agency (BIG), and the Center for South-East Asian Studies (CSEAS) (KKP.go.id, 2021). In addition, peace diplomacy has been carried out by conducting research and development for 16 years jointly between countries in the South China Sea region, namely Indonesia, the People's Republic of China, Chinese

Taipei, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam.

Through soft diplomacy, Indonesia prioritized peaceful diplomacy to resolve this dispute. There are at least four attitudes and steps for Indonesia to respond to this case, namely: First, stating that China has violated the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Indonesia also rejects claims from China regarding the area they claim as a traditional fishing ground, which according to international law is considered to have no legal basis. Second, Indonesia rejects the claim to control the waters of the North Natuna Sea on the basis of the Nine Dash Line. Third, the TNI will carry out intensive guard operations in the Natuna Sea area. And lastly or fourthly, Indonesia has been increasing economic activities around the Natuna Sea waters or the Indonesian Exclusive Economic Zone (Indonesia.go.id).

In fact, these diplomatic efforts did not seem to have much impact when China made a diplomatic protest to Indonesia, asking Indonesia to stop oil drilling activities in the North Natuna Sea. The spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, TeukuFaizasyah, stated that for now diplomatic communication is ongoing even though it is closed (National Tempo, 2021). Regarding drilling, in fact the oil drilling process has been completed which in itself is a manifestation of Indonesia's sovereignty in the region. Moreover, the drilling is still carried out within the Indonesian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

Thus, Indonesia needs to once again carry out soft power diplomacy related to China's protests. Borrowing the strategy of Dr. AsepSetiawan, in his book *Diplomacy of Maritime Indonesia (2020)*, describes the existence of three forms of maritime diplomacy applied by many archipelagic countries, including Indonesia, namely Cooperative, Persuasive, and Coercive. Cooperatively, Indonesia is not rash in handling protests by China related to oil and gas drilling in Natuna. Indonesia also needs to take steps carefully because it has bilateral relations with China. At the same time, Indonesia also applies a persuasive approach, such as issuing verbal protests, or releasing documents, or protesting multilaterally through ASEAN. Indonesia has also taken action by naming the waters in Natuna as the North Natuna Sea. The Indonesian government has also taken a coercive approach in dealing with the Natuna issue. This approach was seen when President Jokowi boarded a warship in Natuna. President Jokowi's presence was a message that Indonesia was not playing games in its affairs of the North Natuna Sea. Diplomacy is only one tool that can be used to maintain sovereignty. Therefore, domestic parties are also required to contribute in strengthening Indonesia's position in Natuna.

III. Conclusion

The re-heating of the North Natuna conflict between Indonesia and China actually started from a Reuters media report published on December 2, 2021, stating that China had sent a letter of protest to Indonesia for allegedly drilling for oil and natural gas in the North Natuna waters. According to conflict of interest theory, China has an interest in South China Sea resources, but these are far more important to the economies of smaller claimant states than its own. On the other hand, Indonesia's national interests in the South China Sea are security and territorial integrity, economic interests, constitutional mandates and ASEAN unity. Another factor in Indonesia's interests is the economy.

So far, the Indonesian government has keep silent on the request from China. But Indonesia also must not be careless by just standing still. There are diplomatic efforts that need to be done to overcome the sparks of the increasingly smoldering conflict. At least, there are three forms of maritime diplomacy applied by many archipelagic countries, including Indonesia, namely Cooperative, Persuasive, and Coercive.

As recommendation, the preparation for diplomacy needs to be further enhanced by certain internal reinforcements. Certain internal strengthening can be done by further finalizing internal coordination between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Ministry of Home Affairs, National Border Management Agency, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs and Investment, as well as the Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs.

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