



## **Indonesia's Security Dilemma in the Tension Between the United States and China in the South China Sea Conflict**

Siti Sarah<sup>1</sup>, Widodo<sup>2</sup>, Yusnaldi<sup>3</sup>, Pujo Widodo<sup>4</sup>,  
Helina Juni Risma Saragih<sup>5</sup>

<sup>12345</sup> Faculty of National Security, Universitas Pertahanan Republik Indonesia, Bogor  
\*Corresponding author, e-mail: [sitisarah0201@gmail.com](mailto:sitisarah0201@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

*The South China Sea is known as the second busiest sea lane in the world after the Suez Canal in Egypt, this area also has an abundance of living creatures and has large oil and natural gas reserves. Because of its potential, the area is still a contest for claims between several countries. Currently, it is known that the United States and China are the largest hegemonic countries in the economic field that are fighting for power in the South China Sea region. Some experts even discussed the possibility of competition that will end with war or military conflict in the 21st century. As a result of this tension, other countries in Southeast Asia which are generally not superpowers have put themselves in a situation that is called a security dilemma. Indonesia is not a claimant country in the South China Sea area but has sovereignty near the area which is Natuna Island. If there is a conflict between the United State and China in the South China Sea area, it will have direct implications for the sovereignty of the Indonesian state in Natuna. To deal with this scenario, Indonesia must prepare its defense forces. In this security dilemma situation, Indonesia is strengthening its military and making alliances with other countries that also do not want conflict or war, Indonesia also trying to balance its power with China and the United States with the balance of power strategy. The aim of this article is to describe whether the balance of power strategy that has been carried out by Indonesia is successful as a deterrence strategy.*

**Keywords:** Security Dilemma; Conflict; South China Sea

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### **Introduction**

The South China Sea is a very strategic sea lane for the economy, especially as a trade route or international shipping. Apart from being the second busiest sea route in the world, this sea area also has an abundance of living creatures and has large reserves of oil and natural gas. It is estimated that there are 11 billion barrels of untapped oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves in these waters. Because of its potential, the South China Sea area is still a contest for claims between several countries in Southeast Asia which have marine zones adjacent to the area. Taiwan, Vietnam, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, and Filipina is a claimant countries in the South China Sea conflict. In addition to countries in Southeast Asia, the United States is also one of the countries that contributed to the escalating tensions in the South China Sea region.

Currently, it is known that the United States and China are the largest hegemonic countries in the economic field that are fighting for power in the South China Sea region. Some experts even discuss the possibility of competition that will end with war or military conflict in the 21st century (Saragih, 2018). The United States shifted their foreign policy focus from focusing on the Middle East region to the Asia Pacific region. Experts in defense field predict this rebalancing strategy will pose risks to relations, whether cooperation or agreements between countries in Asia-Pacific, one of which is the emergence of perceived threats from other

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countries. There are pro and contra responses between claimant country in the South China Sea conflict following the determination of the US rebalancing strategy, because the possibilities that arise are only two options, either to benefit or harm countries in the Asia-Pacific Region. In addition, it will give rise to various speculations regarding the bilateral relationship between the US and China. In some developing documents and news, China is specifically considered a hindrance to the success of the strategy pursued by the US. Several parties concluded that the US arrival in the Asia-Pacific Region was triggered by the increasing capability of China, which has become a major power in the Asian region, both in the economic, diplomatic, and military fields. China is currently rising to become a new power in the Asia Pacific region. In addition, China has shown its hegemonic characteristics in the South China Sea dispute. The characteristics of hegemony that always try to increase its power to pressure other countries are shown by continuously increasing the military budget, modernizing military equipment, especially the navy, China also do the reclamation, including to make airstrips and construction of suspected military installations on controlled islands, both in the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands (SIPRI, 2015).

As a result of this tension, other countries in Southeast Asia which are generally not superpowers ended up in security dilemma situation, and have placed themselves in several options. The first is to allied with China so as not to become enemies. The second is to allied with America to get help against China in claiming territory in the South China Sea. The last option is to increase their country's power by making a common bond or alliance to balance power between China and the United States. Apart from the several options above, it is clear that currently there is tension in the security and defense aspects in the South China Sea area because fear of conflict between the two major countries. The problem is the impact of these choices, because every choice they make will affect the country internally and externally. Internally it will affect the military and defense fields in the border areas and externally will affect cooperation in the economic, political, and socio-cultural fields.

Indonesia is not a claimant country in the South China Sea, but Indonesia also has interests in the region. One of them is economic interest, especially in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the Natuna Sea. If there is a conflict between the United States and China in the South China Sea area, it will have direct implications for Indonesia's sovereignty. To deal with this scenario, Indonesia must have the readiness of forces in the defense sector to anticipate conflicts that may occur. So far, Indonesia is known as a country that avoids conflict, so Indonesia does not take sides with any country in this tension. Indonesia declared itself as a non-claimant state during a dispute in the South China Sea. Indonesia also did not follow other countries which began to develop nuclear power at the time of this dispute, because it was not in accordance with the principles of humanity. Due to the security dilemma situation in this tension, Indonesia strengthened the defense strategy by conducting military cooperation with other countries that also did not want conflict or war and also trying to balance its power with China and the United States. This article will discuss the tensions between the United States and China in the South China Sea area, Indonesia in the vortex of the South China Sea conflict, and how Indonesia's strategy, both military and non-military, in anticipating possible conflicts. The results of this study are useful for the Indonesian government, to see whether the balance of power strategy used so far is successful or not.

## **Literature Review**

### **Security Dilemma**

The theory that will be used in this research is the security dilemma. The concept of security dilemma was first put forward by John Herz in the Journal of World Politics. Herz argues that a country that lives in an anarchic system must pay attention to its security issues, both from attacks or domination by other countries. Therefore, the country will try to increase its strength in order to avoid the threat of other countries' powers. This will cause other countries to be insecure and assume the worst. Because no one can feel completely safe in this competitive world, a vicious circle of security has emerged and efforts to increase strength as much as

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possible have emerged. Vicious circle of security is a picture of a situation where countries are trapped in a concern about security issues. Countries always feel threatened by the increase in the power of other countries and always respond with an increase in strength as well (Satris, 2015).

A security dilemma is a situation in which an action taken by a state to enhance its own security elicits a reaction from other states, leading to a decrease rather than an increase in the security of the state. Several international relations researchers have found that the Security Dilemma is the most important source of conflict international relations. They argue that in the international world there are no institutions that are above the state and as a consequence each state must maintain its own security and survival. For this reason the main goal of states is to maximize their own security. Even if states only focus on this goal and have no intention of harming others, many actions taken by states to increase their own security will reduce the security of others (Snyder, 2002).

From the two definitions above, it can be concluded that a security dilemma is a situation of increasing the security of a country caused by uncomfortable conditions because other countries that are close to their territory or have bad relations with their country increase their security with military or other defense. In this paper, it is Indonesia's discomfort with China strengthening their military defense in Paracel and the Spratly Islands that are close to Indonesia's sovereign territory. The Paracel and Spratly Islands are the claimant area by six countries in South China Sea, which are China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Brunei. Countries filed their claims against the Spratlys based on history, discovery, temporary or repeated occupation, and maintenance of relations with one of the islands since centuries ago. Based on history, it can be seen that since the 20th century, the control of the Spratly islands has shifted from one country to another. Starting from 1933-1939 it was occupied by France, in 1939-1945 controlled by Japan, and in 1945-1951 controlled by the Allies until the San Francisco Peace Treaty was reached. But this agreement does not mention the ownership status of the islands in the Spratly archipelago. This caused in the early 1970s several coastal states involved in the dispute began to strengthen their demands with more concrete actions, by occupying and constructing buildings on the island, issuing historical documents related to the basis of the claim, granting oil concessions to foreign oil companies, and deployment of military forces in the region

### **Conflict**

Conflict comes from the Latin "conflictus" which means conflict or fight. In fulfilling the interests and goals of the state where the interaction between countries can encourage conflict. According to Max Weber, a social relationship is said to be a conflict if as long as the action is aimed at carrying out the will of one party against another. Conflict can be said to be a social relationship which is interpreted as a desire to impose its will on other parties. Many things can be behind the occurrence of conflicts, for example differences in interests between groups. Louis Kriesberg states that conflict is a situation in which two or more actors pursue incompatible goals regarding a particular object (Bakry, 2017).

In international relations, conflict is a long-discussed study. This is because the historical perspective that has been passed by mankind will be repeated. Graham Evans and Jeffrey Newnham state that conflict is a condition in which two or more actors pursue the same and conflicting goals (Bakry, 2017). From the two statements above, it can be seen that two actors who are pursuing the same goal are the United States and China. The conflict itself can start from a dispute to the occurrence of war.

According to (Roza, 2013) conflict can be viewed from various perspectives, by looking at the background, actors involved and their interests, as well as the intensity and extent of the conflict area. From the background, the South China Sea conflict can be seen from the historical claims of territorial control in the past by traditional rulers which led to claims of ownership by the next ruler of the same kingdom or country. Meanwhile, from the actors involved and the interests that accompany them, several countries in the region, both ASEAN members and non-ASEAN members, as well as countries outside the region are stakeholders. Meanwhile,

judging from its intensity, the South China Sea conflict so far can be categorized as a low-scale conflict. However, in future developments, if it cannot be managed and did not find an effective solution, the conflict can be more open and develop into an armed conflict between countries in the region or can be called a regional conflict.

### Balance of Power Strategy

John P. Lovell states that strategy is a series of pre-designed steps or decisions in a competitive situation where the end result is not solely profit. Strategy is a method used to achieve a goal or interest by using power including military power. Strategy according to Colin S. Gray can be defined as "a theory of the practice of using and or threats of the use of organized force for political purposes". The study of strategy itself can involve politics, economics, psychology, sociology, geography and technology (Burhanuddin, 2017).

The theory of balance of power is a theory coined by Stephen M. Walt explaining that alliances are generally seen as a state response to a threat. The response caused by the state raises two possible alliance formations that will be chosen by the state, namely balancing or bandwagoning (Claritha, 2014). Balance of power is a theory of international relations that emphasizes the effectiveness of control over the power of a country by the power of other countries. The control that occurs is in the form of the distribution of the power of rival countries or alliances. Balance of power has the basic assumption that when a dominant country increases its power more aggressively, small countries that feel threatened will respond by allying with large countries to maintain their country's security from threats that may be posed by the dominant country.

Balance of power is intended with the aim of creating order in the international structure. This order can be realized due to a security dilemma that makes countries more focused on increasing their military power so that they do not have the opportunity to attack other countries and in the end what happens is a balance of power. For example, in this paper, there is tension or can be called a cold war between the United States and China as a major hegemonic country in the South China Sea conflict. Because of this tension, other countries in Asia Pacific must balance their strengths by increasing military capabilities and also forming alliances with other countries in order to balance the power of the two big countries, the United States and China.

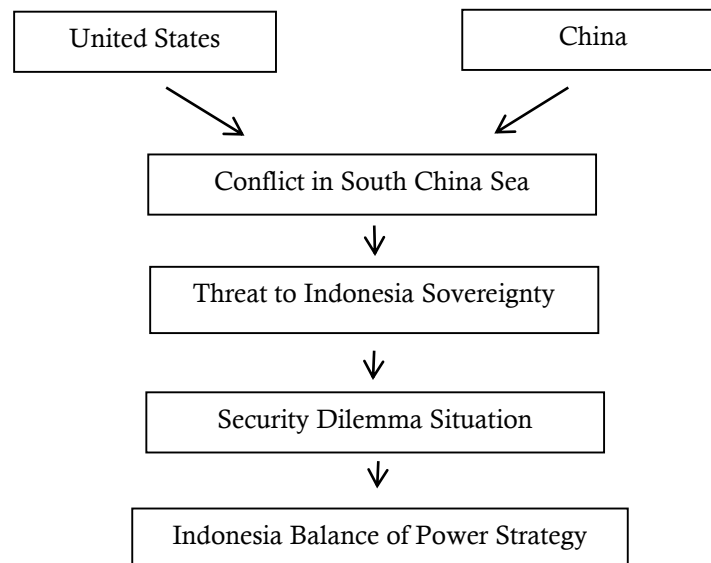


Figure 1. Thinking Framework

## Method

This research is a qualitative research using a library research approach. Library method is a type of research conducted by reading books or magazines and other data sources to collect data from various literatures, both libraries and in other places (Mahmud, 2011). From the definition above, it can be understood that the source of data is not always obtained from field observations. Sources of data can be obtained from libraries or other documents in written form such as journals, books, or other literature.

The literature study in this study was conducted by searching and studying various literatures related to security dilemmas, balance of power, and South China Sea disputes between South America and China. Sources of data in this study are books, journals, website pages and other references that are considered relevant to the theme in this study. The author uses data analysis techniques with qualitative descriptive analysis strategies. The technique in this study provides an overview of how a phenomenon is and how the solutions are carried out in dealing with the phenomenon.

## Results and Discussion

### Escalating Tensions Between China and US in South China Sea

Tensions in the South China Sea now escalated again after in 2012 America changed its domestic policy from focusing on the Middle East region to the Asia Pacific region. The current tension began when the US arbitrarily sent ships and sophisticated military aircraft to the South China Sea. On July 12, 2021, without permission from the Chinese government, the US guided missile destroyer USS Benfold illegally trespassed into China's territorial waters. Dai Bing, the charge d'affaires of China's permanent mission to the United Nations during the security council's open debate on maritime security, August 9, 2021, argued "they do not join the UN convention on the Law of the Sea, but consider themselves to be judges of the Convention, accusing other countries and interfering arbitrarily. They have no credibility in maritime matters". Bing said that China and ASEAN members are jointly maintaining public safety in the South China Sea and ensuring all freedom of navigation and overflight complies with international law.

While the US Navy gave a statement "Under international law as reflected in the Convention on the Law of the Sea, all state ships including their warships are entitled to enjoy the freedom to traverse peacefully in the territorial sea. By traversing the waters peacefully without giving notice or seeking permission, the U.S. defies sailing restrictions or restrictions imposed by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam in these free waters." The entry of US warships in the South China Sea area coincides with the fifth anniversary of the Philippines' victory over its lawsuit over territorial claims in the waters of the South China Sea. This action also confirms that the US does not approve of the South China Sea and Paracel Islands as China's ownership and that China's claims to these waters are not in accordance with international law. When viewed from the statement of the US Navy, they actually want freedom of navigation in international seas and consider the actions taken by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam to violate freedom of navigation in free waters. If viewed from the positive side, the US helps voice the opinions of countries that also do not agree with the new policies made by China. But looking at the negative side, behind the US intervention in Southeast Asia is to control the economy in the region so that no country in Asia dominates the marine economy because a much marine potential of Asian sea.

Talking about the rebalancing of the United States and the rise of China's power in the Asia Pacific region, the security dilemma would be appropriate to describe the concerns of other countries in Southeast Asia that are close to the South China Sea area. Several countries like Taiwan, Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Brunei strengthened their militaries and began to form alliances with other countries. Defensive actions taken by countries in Southeast

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Asia due to disputes in the South China Sea are threatening. In addition, the United States and China are the largest hegemonic countries compared with other Southeast Asian countries. Both countries are super power countries when compared to other countries in Southeast Asia. The South China Sea is proof of the battle arena between the US and China in fighting for its power.

### **The Impact of South China Sea Conflict to Indonesia**

Actually, Indonesia is not a disputing country in the South China Sea area, but is faced with a big game and a challenge in defending the sovereignty of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia which borders the South China Sea (Khanisa, 2018). The conflict in the South China Sea is unavoidable, Indonesia, which has a maritime border area with the South China Sea, is forced to follow the vortex of the conflict and requires Indonesia to defend the sovereignty of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia against foreign invasions because it is estimated that there will be several threats, including :

- a. The aggressiveness of foreign fishermen's attacks
- b. Control of the disputed
- c. Artificial island construction

The aggressiveness of the actions of foreign fishermen entering Indonesian waters is not without reason. These illegal actions or what can be called attacks by foreign fishermen can be interpreted as a form of the threat of a hybrid war that is developing in the South China Sea area. The definition of hybrid war is a military strategy theory that was first proposed by Frank Hoffman, a Member of the Advisory Board at the United States Institute for Foreign Policy Research. The concept of hybrid warfare combines political warfare, conventional warfare, irregular warfare and cyber warfare in the form of nuclear attacks, biological and chemical weapons, and information warfare. The threat of a hybrid war with the aggressive strategy of foreign fishermen needs to be given special attention by the state considering that they can enter and exit the waters freely. Government policies in terms of eradicating violations of foreign fishermen need to be clarified and emphasized. The weakening of the penalties that deter fishing violators can also be interpreted as a weakening of Indonesia's marine defenses. Such as the execution of the ship sinking penalty carried out by the Indonesian Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (KKP). This punishment is considered effective because it can reduce the number of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing violations in Indonesian waters (N, 2015). However, this policy has been discontinued in line with the change of the Indonesian government cabinet. In addition, the construction of a TNI base in the Natuna area which was inaugurated on December 18, 2019 can serve as a deterrence effect or prevention of possible violations. The addition of military forces for national security in the Natuna sea also has a positive impact, the result is reducing illegal actions or aggressive attacks by foreign fishermen.

Territorial disputes in the South China Sea area are still ongoing. The maneuvers carried out by the state parties are very aggressive and intensive. Starting from carrying out exploration activities, such as drilling for oil and gas and other claims actions to reinforce their sovereign territory. This is also done by Indonesia, that is managing the natural resources in Natuna. Indonesia entrusts the development and exploration of natural resources in Natuna to State-Owned Enterprises (BUMN) and the private sector. The efforts of the disputing countries in the South China Sea and Indonesia show that they have the right to manage natural resources in their territory. According to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), coastal countries are entitled to an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) to manage natural resources. Efforts to manage national resources, whether natural resources or otherwise, carried out in the sovereign territory can be used as a settlement strategy or occupation of the full rights of its own territory so that there is clear evidence of territorial management carried out by the state as the owner.

The struggle for territory and mutual claims of sovereignty have formed a hybrid war that is so complex. Not only that, the development of military defense forces as an effort to deterrence effect or prevention is a strategic area. The development of military defense forces in the region is not only to show the existence of the state, to affirm the territory's sovereignty

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and claims to a territory, but also to increase the defense power over other countries that are in conflict. China, which in the period 2012 to 2018 has succeeded in building artificial islands and functioning as military bases.

The main problem with this island-building activity is that the construction of this artificial island is located in an area with a status quo or a territorial boundary has not been determined. Apart from violating international law, it can also escalate tensions. There are several reasons that can explain China's interest in building the artificial island. First, the recognition of sovereignty over areas in the South China Sea. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has observed and documented all of China's activities in the South China Sea. These observations ranged from the dispute over the island to its construction. CSIS sees that the purpose of building the artificial island is one of China's efforts to declare sovereignty.

### **Indonesia's Balance of Power Strategy to Reduce the Threat of Conflict**

Indonesia is a country that does not like to solve problems with conflict or war. This also applies to disputes in the South China Sea area. Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subiyanto argued in a press release released from the Ministry of Defense's official website in June 2021, "Dialogue and consultation with mutual trust and confidence can solve all problems in the region, including the South China Sea issue. Thus a well-managed South China Sea will strengthen equal, mutually beneficial and indispensable joint partnerships for global peace and stability." However, to defend its territorial sovereignty in a security dilemma situation in the South China Sea conflict, Indonesia has made several efforts. The effort to develop national defense in the Natuna sea is the first form of Indonesian military strategy. The form of this strategy can be in the form of physical and non-physical development. The non-physical form of development is by conducting joint military exercises with other countries in the South China Sea waters. Joint military exercises are a form of international cooperation in the defense sector as a balance of power strategy. There are several actions taken by Indonesia to balance power in the cold war between the United States and China. Indonesia cooperates with other countries to strengthen its sovereignty. These include economic, political and military cooperation. The balance of power strategy carried out by Indonesia is also due to the principle of Indonesia, which loves peace but prefers independence. Indonesia really avoids conflict and war because it is not in accordance with humanity.

Given the potential economic threat from China, Indonesia must take anticipatory action against China's economic attack. China's economic threats are not new. Indonesia's economic dependence has been seen from the last two decades since Indonesia signed the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA) in 2001. Not only Indonesia, the threat of dependence on the Chinese economy is also felt by ASEAN member countries (A, 2010). When compared, Indonesia's economic strength with other countries in the South China Sea is still relatively strong. This is evidenced by the inclusion of Indonesia as a member of the G20 countries. The only state party that can influence it is China. In addition to its membership in the G20, China is also a member of the WTO. China's economic strength is able to provide vulnerability to the US domestic economy. Thus, the Chinese economy will also be able to exert influence on countries in the region, including Indonesia (Woo, 2012).

Indonesia's foreign policy adheres to the principle of free and active which aims to realize and protect the national interest. In order to protect its independence and territorial integrity, Indonesia has made efforts to manage the distribution of authority in Southeast Asia. This strategy serves as a "dynamic balance", and through this strategy Indonesia will seek to shift the burden of its diplomacy between China and the United States in order to maintain a balance between the two countries. Indonesia has long tried to avoid the perception or views of other countries which state that Indonesia has too closely allied itself with the United States or China, therefore Indonesia is still loyal to its political policies. As a result of this step, Indonesia takes an attitude that looks inconsistent in the eyes of other countries plus Indonesia's weak policies on certain issues.

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With the view that diplomacy is an elitist endeavor that is too concerned with abstract concepts, President Jokowi is particularly skeptical of the benefits of summit diplomacy (multilateral diplomacy through summits), which he attributes to Yudhoyono's world-wide style. When he took office, foreign policy became less important because of the new emphasis on economic development (Woo, 2012). President Jokowi seems to be more focused on activities that produce and benefit the community, he instructed the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to focus on grounded diplomacy activities, or can be interpreted as diplomacy that will be "useful for the people", with the main focus on trade and investment cooperation in improving economy in Indonesia.

In the defense sector, Indonesia has collaborated with various countries. Among other things, the exchange of ASEAN-China Young Officers and the ASEAN-China maritime exercise are some of the areas of cooperation that have yielded benefits for confidence-building measures and increasing the capacity and capability of ASEAN and China in the defense sector. Still with its foreign policy, Indonesia is also interested in joining joint war exercise with the United States in the Natuna region. Two exercises were recorded with the US in Batam, which is 480 km from Natuna. These exercises include the use of surveillance and patrol aircraft, such as the use of the P-3 Orion aircraft, which can detect surface ships and submarines. The defense minister said he had spent \$14 (Saragih, 2018). However, the government denied that the joint exercises carried out were one of the anticipations of rising tensions in the South China Sea Region. The government chose to call it a form of "defense diplomacy." between the two countries, this joint training can also be interpreted as a form of deterrence strategy as described in the previous point.

In addition, Indonesia also cooperates with countries outside the South China Sea dispute, Britain and Japan. Through cooperation with Britain, Indonesia brought home advanced warship technology, the arrowhead 140 type frigate. The frigate is a type of light warship with high speed and maneuverability equipped with the latest advanced military technology. The Arrowhead 140 is armed with anti-aircraft missiles, as well as anti-submarine torpedoes, which makes it capable of providing defense against air and sea threats. This ship also has the ability to become a mini-carrier for naval helicopters for both personnel shuttle missions and search and rescue (SAR) rescue missions.

Furthermore, Indonesia and Japan agreed to increase cooperation in the defense sector by signing an agreement on the transfer of defense equipment and technology. This is done in the midst of China's attitude to increase its influence in the waters of the South and East China Seas and expand its economic power. Minister Prabowo said Indonesia invited the Japanese side to participate in modernizing defense capacity. "We are also encouraging joint training between our services, navy and land." he said at a joint press conference in Tokyo. China's continued claim to territory in the East and South China Seas has become a priority issue in China-US relations. This raises significant security concerns for Japan as well as ASEAN countries including Indonesia. Apart from English and Japanese, Indonesia still has a lot of cooperation in the defense sector with other countries. This cooperation aims to strengthen defense and improve the capabilities of the Indonesian military. Balance of power strategy that Indonesia used in this case has succeeded as an effort to deterrence effect or prevention.

## Conclusion

The South China Sea has long been an arena for regional and international political battles. The potential of the South China Sea causes tensions in disputes over territorial sovereignty and maritime jurisdiction. It is evident from the US trying to get involved in the South China Sea area. The rebalancing between the US and China in the South China Sea has made tensions in the region even higher. As a result of this tension, other countries in Southeast Asia, which are generally weak countries, have placed themselves in several options. The first is to allied with China so as not to become enemies. The second is to allied with US to get help against China in claiming its territory in the South China Sea. Or the last one is to strengthen themselves by forming a common bond to balancing China and US power. Regardless of the choice made, some experts argue that competition or territorial struggle that occurs in the South China Sea



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is likely to lead to war or armed conflict in the 21st century. If there is a conflict between the US and China in the South China Sea area, it will certainly have direct implications for the sovereignty of the Indonesian state, so that Indonesia is trapped in a security dilemma situation.

Facing this scenario, Indonesia must prepare their defense forces. To defend its territorial sovereignty, Indonesia has implemented a balance of power strategy. Indonesia cooperates with other countries to strengthen its sovereignty. These include economic, political and military cooperation. The balance of power strategy carried out by Indonesia is also due to the principle of Indonesia, which loves peace but prefers independence. Indonesia really avoids conflict and war because it is not in accordance with humanity. Balance of power strategy that Indonesia used in this case has succeeded as an effort to deterrence effect or prevention.

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