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# A Nonbalancing Act: Explaining Indonesia's Failure to Balance Against the Chinese Threat

Emirza Adi Syailendra 

## ABSTRACT

Indonesia faces an increasing maritime threat from China. Incursions of China's maritime law enforcement forces protecting Chinese ships fishing illegally in Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone pose a threat to President Joko Widodo's goal of transforming Indonesia into a Global Maritime Fulcrum. China's actions generate the prediction that Indonesia should balance against China, but this has not occurred. Instead, bureaucratic politics and President Jokowi's interest in securing Chinese financial support for his ambitious infrastructure projects have prevented the adoption of a more assertive balancing policy. Using Schweller's argument that threats go unanswered when there is disagreement among key domestic actors, this article argues that a lack of elite consensus in Indonesia is impeding the adoption of a balancing policy. Instead, Indonesia is continuing its traditional policy of *nonbalancing*.

## Introduction

Indonesia's policy toward China has undergone sharp shifts over time, driven not only by the patterns of great power competition but also by domestic political factors. Sino-Indonesia relations date back to 1950, when China was the first communist country that sought diplomatic relations with Indonesia after it became independent from the Dutch. A common commitment to non-alignment and advocating the interests of the developing world led to closer ties in the 1950s. The two countries relations were, however, complicated by Indonesian fears of communism and questions regarding the loyalty of the Indonesian Chinese population. As President Sukarno (1945–1965) tied his political fortunes more closely to the Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia* – PKI) at home, he formed a tight relationship with China in the early 1960s. The alleged complicity of China in the coup and counter-coup of 1965 that led to Sukarno's downfall and brought General Suharto (1965–1998) to power led him to cut ties with in China 1967. Throughout the Suharto era, China was viewed as Indonesia's key external threat.<sup>1</sup>

Indonesia's dramatic swings in its relationship with China were mirrored in equally dramatic shifts in Jakarta's ties with the United States. Sukarno's staunch anti-Western nationalism and close ties with the PKI, the Soviet Union, and China meant that Indonesian relations with the United States were almost at a breaking point at the end of the Sukarno era.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, a common commitment to anti-communism led Suharto's Indonesia to develop close military, economic, and political ties with the United States. The end of the Cold War led Suharto's Indonesia to re-establish diplomatic relations with China in 1990, but Jakarta remained suspicious of Beijing. At the same time Indonesia began to engage China, its close ties with Washington began to unravel, as the United States increasingly pressured Jakarta to democratize and condemned its violation of human rights, particularly in East Timor. US–Indonesian ties frayed during the Asian Financial Crisis (AFC), when the US demands for economic restructuring deepened and prolonged the economic crisis. In the years following Suharto's downfall in 1998, the United States

cut military ties with Indonesia in response to the violence following East Timor's vote for independence. This action, combined with US wars in the Middle East and Washington's designation of Southeast Asia as the Second Front in the War on Terror, raised significant tensions in US–Indonesian relations. Only with the election of President Yudhoyono in 2004, by which time Indonesia had recovered economically and made a transition to democracy, did Indonesian ties with both the United States and China improve, as domestic stability enabled the Yudhoyono administration to focus on foreign policy.

As Southeast Asia's largest state, Indonesia has traditionally defined its interests broadly, to include not only its national security, prosperity, and social cohesion but also an autonomous regional order free from the great power intervention that forced local states to choose sides during the Cold War. To promote this regional order, Indonesia helped create the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 and historically has taken a key leadership role in the organization. For many decades, Indonesia viewed its primary security threats as internal ones and perceived its regional strategic environment as fairly benign. As a result, it relied primarily on soft-power, multilateral mechanisms such as the regional architecture built on ASEAN to engage great powers, rather than invest in hard power hedging.<sup>3</sup> Today, China's use of military force to assert its controversial claims in the South China Sea threaten Indonesia's security, and rising Sino-American tensions threaten the autonomous order Jakarta has worked hard to secure. More critically, China's claims to parts of Indonesia's Natuna Island Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and a series of recent clashes in which China has forcefully intervened in Indonesian waters threaten Indonesian national interests.

Balance of power theory would predict that Indonesia would adopt a balancing policy toward China in the face of such an evident threat to its national interests.<sup>4</sup> This is particularly the case since President Joko Widodo (Jokowi)'s signature foreign policy doctrine is to transform Indonesia into a Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) and one of the key pillars of this is ensuring the sovereignty of Indonesia's maritime borders.<sup>5</sup> To date, Indonesia has not balanced against China. Why does Indonesia's policy run contrary to the core prediction of structural realist theory that states will balance against threats from rising powers?

This article argues that disagreement among key Indonesian actors over the nature of the threat posed by China and the proper response to it has prevented the adoption of a stronger policy toward China. Bureaucratic politics among key Indonesian ministers, combined with President Jokowi's desire for Chinese investment in his infrastructure projects, has led to competing interests and views over China policy. This argument is consistent with Randall Schweller's work on unanswered threats. Schweller argues that when elites cannot agree on a hierarchy of threats or the appropriate response to them, the resultant lack of political consensus means threats go unanswered. In such cases, he argues that states engage in a "non-balancing strategy," which is "the status quo policy prior to the emergence of a dangerous threat."<sup>6</sup>

To support the argument that domestic political contestation over China policy has prevented the adoption of balancing policy, this article will proceed as follows. First, it will briefly discuss the range of theories available to states like Indonesia facing rising powers and present Schweller's argument regarding unanswered threats. Second, it briefly reviews Indonesia's key national and maritime interests and the nature of the threat China poses to them. Third, using Schweller's framework, this article analyzes the disparate interests of critical Indonesian actors toward China, and the policies each proposes to adopt toward Beijing. The article concludes that in the absence of a major escalation by China that forces Indonesia's hand, it is difficult to imagine Indonesian actors overcoming their disagreements on the nature of China's threat and adopting a more coherent strategy toward it. Indonesia, therefore, is likely to continue its non-balancing policy.

## **Rising powers, policy options, and domestic politics: Indonesia in theoretical perspective**

International relations scholars contend that states facing rising powers may choose to adopt a series of policy options. These include balancing, bandwagoning, engagement, and hedging, among others.

Many argue that states will balance against direct threats or hedge against the uncertainty produced by rising powers. In contrast, others contend that states will bandwagon, which can be defined as a calibration towards a dominant power.<sup>7</sup> Bandwagoning can be driven by different motivations. Focusing on the threats that rising powers can pose to secondary states, Stephen Walt explained that bandwagoning involves subordination or asymmetrical concessions to the dominant power.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Randall Schweller argued that there are many variations of bandwagoning and that states may bandwagon not out of a perception of threat but out of a desire for profit. In these cases, secondary states align with the rising power to secure a share in the spoils of victory or in response to economic incentives.<sup>9</sup> In the Indonesia case, as will be discussed in the following, the fact that some policymakers view China as a threat while others view it as a source of economic support is the key reason that Indonesia has not adopted a coherent strategy toward China.

Applying such concepts to Southeast Asia is not straight forward.<sup>10</sup> There is consensus among scholars that Southeast Asian countries are not balancing or bandwagoning behavior in a straightforward manner.<sup>11</sup> Instead, most scholars have described Indonesia's strategy amid greater regional competition as hedging because it has sought to engage China to profit from its rise while taking other steps to offset risks.<sup>12</sup> Hedging has been defined as "a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side at the obvious expense of another."<sup>13</sup> In the face of rising great power rivalry between the United States and China, the basic idea that Southeast Asian states attempt to preserve a position that avoids them having to choose one side at the obvious expense of another is fully consistent with Indonesia's longstanding commitment to non-alignment, which is the core of its *politik luar negeri bebas aktif*, or Free and Active foreign policy. As Indonesia's Foreign Minister Muhammad Hatta explained when promulgating the doctrine, "Have the Indonesian people fighting for their freedom no other course of action open to them than to choose between [de facto Great Powers?] ... [Indonesia] should be an active agent entitled to decide its own standpoint."<sup>14</sup>

Hedging is a broad category of options that involves a country seeking benefits from many partners while offsetting risk by diversifying partnerships and multilateralizing ties.<sup>15</sup> In the Indonesian case, it involves seeking to maintain regional stability by engaging great powers such as the United States, China, Japan, and other countries through ASEAN-based institutions to ensure that they abide by ASEAN norms of peaceful resolution of disputes and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states. Hedging focuses on the desire of smaller states to preserve their autonomy and profit from multiple partners.<sup>16</sup> Hedging is also an under-theorized term. It is beyond the scope of this article to engage in a debate over how to conceptualize hedging. The important point for purposes of this analysis is that Indonesia's seemingly contradictory policies of seeking to benefit from China's rise while making contingency plans to protect itself is fully consistent with the broader theoretical literature.

The contribution of this article is its focus on the domestic political factors that influence foreign policy choices. It will adopt the neoclassical realism paradigm as its framework of analysis. According to one authority, neoclassical realist scholars argue that "...states assess and adapt to changes in their external environment partly as a result of their peculiar domestic structures and political situations."<sup>17</sup> Many scholars have noted the importance of domestic politics towards Indonesian foreign policy.<sup>18</sup> In particular, this article employs Schweller's work on unanswered threats and focuses on the importance of elite consensus for the adoption of balancing policies. Since balancing is a costly policy, it is unlikely it will be adopted unless there is a consensus on the nature of the threat a country is facing and the proper response to adopt in the fact of that threat. As Schweller argues,

[w]hen elites are fragmented, it is highly unlikely that the state will be able to construct a coherent and effective balancing strategy. Some elites will want to balance against one threat, whereas others will want to balance against another; some will want to invest resources to defend interests in the core, yet others will want to protect interests in the periphery.<sup>19</sup>

Schweller argues that in the absence of elite cohesion, a state like Indonesia will simply continue its status quo policy. If agreement on the nature and response of a threat is a prerequisite for the adoption of a balancing policy, then the rest of this article will illustrate that there is neither an agreement on the nature of the threat posed by China nor an agreement on the proper response. As a result, Indonesia's decision not to balance against the threat posed by China is a function of domestic politics.

### **Indonesia's key maritime interests and China's challenge to them**

Indonesia is an archipelagic state of over 17,000 islands, and maintaining the sovereign integrity of the Indonesian state has always been difficult due to its porous borders. For Indonesia, therefore, maritime security is national security. Indonesia's keen interest in maritime security led it to play an active role in negotiations over the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS), where it pushed for the archipelagic principle that holds that the sovereignty of island nations like Indonesia extends not only to the territory covered in its islands but also the waters that connect them. Indonesia gained sovereignty over its waters when UNCLOS came into effect in 1994. Indonesia, therefore, has a vital national interest in ensuring that major powers abide by UNCLOS.

Indonesia, as discussed previously, has traditionally viewed its key security threats as internal ones, and viewed China as a threat to its support for the PKI. Indonesia also harbored suspicions over China's irredentist claims in the South China Sea, particularly after Beijing's issuance of its 1992 Law on Territorial Seas and its takeover of Mischief Reef from the Philippines a few years later. China does not claim any Indonesian islands, so there are no territorial disputes over land of the type that ASEAN countries such as Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Brunei have with China. Since UNCLOS rights to water are derived from land and China has no islands close to the Natunas, Indonesia has always stated that it has no territorial dispute with China. Instead, Indonesia feared that China would claim waters around the Natuna islands and its EEZ, home to rich oil and gas deposits.

Indonesia has pursued a number of strategies toward China's maritime ambitions over the years. Since 1992, the Indonesian military has stepped up air and naval patrols around Natuna. Over the years, the Indonesian military has hosted large-scale military exercises in the area of the Natuna Islands. In 1996, it hosted what was at the time deemed as the largest combined naval, air, and land exercises ever undertaken by Indonesia, involving more than 19,000 troops, 40 aircraft, and 50 warships. To give outside actors an interest in helping to deter China and side with Indonesia in the event of a dispute, Indonesia has a longstanding policy of involving foreign companies in the exploration for oil and gas in Natuna. For example, in 1995, Pertamina signed a contract with US oil giant Exxon and Japanese investors to develop the Natuna gas field.<sup>20</sup> Indonesia has also repeatedly requested clarification from Beijing that China's claims did not intrude into its EEZ, but China has refused to do so.

Beyond the bilateral engagement, Indonesia's belief that it is not a party to the conflict led it to view itself as an honest broker between its ASEAN partners and China on this issue. Consistent with Indonesia's perception of regional entitlement and leader of ASEAN, Indonesia sought to bridge the divide between China and ASEAN states. In 2002, China and ASEAN signed a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties to the South China Sea dispute (DOC), which calls upon claimants to avoid taking steps that might escalate the disputes, such as fortifying existing islands, occupying islands, and enhancing military patrols. These measures were not steps to resolve the dispute but to manage it. China's position has always been that it wants to resolve the disputes bilaterally, without outside actors, so as to leverage its power on Southeast Asia's smaller states. The DOC is non-binding, and since its promulgation, ASEAN and China have been engaged in a series of discussions to codify a legally binding Code of Conduction (COC), but after 15 years of negotiations, agreement on this has yet to be reached due to opposition from China.

In addition to the official Track I initiatives, Indonesia began a Track II initiative called the South China Sea Informal Workshop, which has been on-going since the early 1990s. This workshop is an informal forum to manage potential escalation of conflict and find practical, implementable solutions with regard to the South China Sea disputes.<sup>21</sup> China began attending these workshops in 1991. Since then, China has attempted to shape the focus of the workshop into development and collaboration, and avoid discussion regarding political and security issues.<sup>22</sup> Hereinafter, the prime focus of the workshop was directed into a field of technical cooperation.<sup>23</sup>

China's promulgation of its nine-dash line map in 2009 heightened tension throughout Southeast Asia, as China outlined the vast scope of its claims to the South China Sea for the first time. The map appeared to intrude into Indonesia's Natuna Island EEZ, once again leading Indonesia to request precise coordinates from China regarding the map, or reassurance regarding the lack of conflict. When China refused to provide these, Indonesia filed an official protest against China's claim to UNCLOS. On July 8, 2010, in its diplomatic note to the UN secretary-general, Indonesia clearly stated that it does not acknowledge China's nine-dash line because it has no basis in international law.<sup>24</sup>

China's assertive actions, particularly against Vietnam and the Philippines, have led those countries to seek the support of their ASEAN partners in their disputes with China. At the same time, China has sought to use its political and economic leverage on mainland Southeast Asian states with no stake in the South China Sea issue to prevent this. At the 2012 ASEAN meeting chaired by Cambodia, ASEAN states had drafted language for their final communique that included references to Chinese maritime assertiveness. Under Chinese pressure, however, Cambodia refused to release the statement, and as a result, ASEAN ended the meeting without a joint communique for the first time in its history. Calling this unprecedented move a disaster, then-Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa embarked on a shuttle diplomacy effort – traveling to Vietnam, the Philippines, and Cambodia within 72 hours – which ultimately produced a consensus of “six-point principles,” on the South China Sea issue that was eventually released by the Chairman in place of the final communique.<sup>25</sup> Natalegawa's role illustrated both Indonesia's traditional role as an “honest broker” and, more importantly, Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN and its opposition to interference by China in the organization.

### **Indonesia's hedge against regional uncertainty: ASEAN and the pursuit of equilibrium**

Beyond the South China Sea issue, China's rise has created broader uncertainty. Indonesia, as noted previously, has a longstanding goal of promoting regional stability in Southeast Asia as a means to ensure the region's autonomy from great power hegemony. Indonesia, therefore, has long sought to ensure that great powers adopted policies toward Southeast Asia that would reinforce, not undermine, regional stability. This aim is embodied in former President Yudhoyono's concept of “dynamic equilibrium,” according to which Indonesia sought to shape the ongoing power transition in the region by convincing the great powers that they had an interest in a stable Southeast Asia.<sup>26</sup> Indonesia employs a variety of policies to help achieve this goal, including engagement with regional powers bilaterally as well as multilateral engagement with China through ASEAN. These efforts, it should be noted, were designed not to confront China directly but were an attempt to shape its perceptions of interests.

Enhancing and diversifying its partnerships with other countries is a strategy that Indonesia pursues in order to expand its room to maneuver and hedge. During Yudhoyono's presidency (2005–2014), Indonesia signed strategic partnerships and other comprehensive agreements with many countries, including the United States, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, Brazil, India, Vietnam, the European Union, the UK, France, Russia, South Africa, and Turkey.<sup>27</sup> Indonesia also sought to include the middle and regional powers in the ASEAN Defense Minister's Meeting Plus (ADMM+) and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF).<sup>28</sup> Indonesia's attempts to ensure that emerging regional architecture such as the creation of the East Asia Summit (EAS) took place on

a pan-Pacific basis that includes countries like the United States, Australia, and Russia go against China's desire for pan-Asian institutions that exclude the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Indonesia supports pan-Pacific institutions because it fears that China would use Asian organizations as a vehicle for Chinese leadership.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, Indonesia wants to use these institutions as multilateral hedging mechanisms, and the inclusion of powerful outside actors dilutes China's leverage.

Indonesia, however, faces a dilemma in its hedging efforts. Indonesia's goal is the preservation of equilibrium, which requires the participation of countries like the United States, which had sufficient power to offset China's influence. At the same time, however, Indonesia fears that rising Sino-American tensions will upset the equilibrium it seeks. For example, when the United States announced that it would rotate troops through Australia's Darwin base as part of its rebalance strategy, then Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa, claimed that this would generate a "vicious circle of tension and mistrust," since it would aggravate Beijing.<sup>30</sup> Indonesia therefore, has been anxious about unilateral US moves because it intensifies great power rivalry that could entrap Southeast Asian states.

### ***President Jokowi's global maritime fulcrum and divergent interests toward China***

During his 2014 campaign, Indonesian President Jokowi's campaign manifesto included a goal to transform Indonesia into a "global maritime fulcrum" (GMF), playing up Indonesia's status as an archipelago stretching over 3,000 miles across some of the world's most strategic sea lanes of communication. Upon attaining the presidency, Jokowi articulated the GMF more fully, outlining five pillars of his maritime fulcrum strategy. First, a cultural pillar, designed to revive Indonesia's maritime identity and culture, which he claims has been lost as Indonesia focused on agriculture and manufacturing development. Second, an economic pillar, designed to manage sea resources with a focus on establishing sovereignty over food products, particularly fisheries. Third, a development pillar focused on improving infrastructure and maritime connectivity to reduce transaction costs which are currently very high in order to make Indonesia more economically competitive. Fourth, a diplomatic pillar to promote efforts to end conflicts at sea. Fifth, a maritime defense pillar in recognition of Indonesia's geostrategic states as a country that bridges two oceans and whose islands are vulnerable for foreign incursions.

Jokowi proclaimed the GMF as the country's core national priority, but the concept was crafted without substantial deliberation with relevant ministries and announced without clear guidelines and definition.<sup>31</sup> As a result, each ministry has taken its own approach to translating the GMC concept into concrete actions, which has in turn created bureaucratic competition. For example, the GMF is interpreted by the Ministry of Marine Resources and Fisheries as strictly an issue of protecting marine resources, particularly the need to curb illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing practices within Indonesia's sovereign water territories. In contrast, the Navy's key interest is to protect the sovereign integrity of the country's territory, which includes its territorial waters and its EEZ. Indonesia's maritime governance structure is complex, involving numerous different agencies with overlapping and conflicting jurisdictions and duties, which increases competition. Moreover, some agencies, such as the Navy, have an interest in highlighting the Chinese threat in order to secure greater budgetary resources for strengthening the Navy, while others, such as the more politically powerful Army, have the opposite interest. In what follows, the key institutional actors involved in crafting Indonesia's China policy, their interests, and how these interests conflict with one another are discussed to illustrate why there is a competition over Indonesian policy toward China, rather than a consensus on how to respond.

### ***President Jokowi's economic interest***

President Jokowi's focus is on the infrastructure pillar of the GMF. Jokowi came to power determined to revamp Indonesia's dire infrastructure, particularly maritime connectivity. As a former businessman, Jokowi fully understands that high transportation costs negatively impact Indonesia's business climate. Moreover, Indonesia's outer islands are much poorer than the main islands and enhancing connectivity would help alleviate poverty. Indonesia requires a substantial amount of

investment to realize this project, and China has emerged one of the most important partners. It is estimated that Indonesia needs around US\$450 billion to realize its infrastructure development plan, consisting of building roads, railways, ports, and power plants, and is relying on investors and state-owned companies to fund 70 percent of its infrastructure needs.<sup>32</sup>

From its perspective, China views Indonesia as an important partner in its efforts to implement the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative.<sup>33</sup> Having seen opportunities to connect the MSR and GMF, both countries declared their interest to deepen the relationship, especially in the field of infrastructure connectivity and maritime sector.<sup>34</sup> During the 60th Asian–Africa conference commemoration, President Xi Jinping declared China’s commitment to participate in massive infrastructure development projects in Indonesia. For Indonesia’s part, Jokowi has also openly endorsed the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), while criticizing Western financial institutions.<sup>35</sup> Indonesia aims to finance a third of the US\$5.6 billion estimated cost of developing its ports and maritime highways through loans from the AIIB, which has been established with the equity of US\$100 billion to fund the MSR.<sup>36</sup> This signifies the importance of the AIIB in terms of funding the GMF project. In summary, Jokowi’s main goal with respect to China is to secure investment.

Jokowi’s interest in securing Chinese investment carries risk. As Chinese investment in the country has increased, so have criticisms of corruption, shoddy construction, and complaints over China’s practice of importing Chinese workers. In January 2016, it was reported by *Tempo* magazine that the Indonesian State Electricity Company (PLN) had set up a tender that was suspected to have been written to favor Chinese companies. The PLN tender included certain conditions that could only be fulfilled by Chinese companies, such as the amount of cash collateral, a performance bond estimated at 615 trillion IDR (or approximately 47.5 billion USD), and a very short deadline. According to the *Tempo* investigation, these excessively stringent conditions were designated to eliminate competition in favor of the Independent Power Producers (IPPs) from China.<sup>37</sup> In response, three consortia led by Japanese companies dropped out, and the Chinese companies remained dominant. As a result, out of a 35,000 MW electricity project, Chinese investors ultimately signed an agreement to carry out 17,000 MW of the power generation project. Many commenters have warned that Indonesia should ensure that the project not be dominated by technology coming from just one or two countries, but the PLN CEO Sofyan Basir dismissed such criticism, stating that Chinese companies are worthy investors.<sup>38</sup> These projects were by far the largest in their respective sectors and the manner in which the awards were made has attracted significant attention and criticism.

Public reactions to Jokowi’s growing economic ties with China are mixed. One of the strongest opponents was former president Yudoyono, who warned Jokowi that too great a dependence on China could compromise Indonesia’s strategic autonomy and its image amongst ASEAN neighbors.<sup>39</sup> There is also strong opposition in Indonesia to accepting China’s investments since traditionally only a small proportion, approximately 7%, of Chinese-pledged investment becomes realized.<sup>40</sup> There are also negative reports about earlier Chinese infrastructure projects in Indonesia. For example, about 90 percent of the 10,000 MW electricity projects built during the Yudoyono administration by Chinese contractors have received complaints about the low quality of Chinese equipment, unqualified Chinese contractors, poor service with regards to maintenance, and delayed completion.<sup>41</sup>

Jokowi seems willing to overlook anti-China sentiments in order to secure the investment and complete projects early, which he believes will help boost his election chances in 2019. During Jokowi’s September 2016 visit to Hangzhou, China, which was his fifth meeting in two years with Chinese President Xi Jinping, the two leaders reiterated their strong commitment to cooperate in manufacturing and infrastructure. Jokowi also expanded cooperation in the tourism sector that aims at attracting ten million Chinese tourists to Indonesia, which is half of his overall target for 2019.<sup>42</sup> Attracting tourists who, in turn, stimulate the economy is another way that Jokowi views the importance of cooperation with Beijing for re-election chances.



### ***KEMLU's legalist stance: There is no conflict with China***

KEMLU, as the organization charged with maintaining Indonesia's broad diplomatic ties with all countries and organizations, has a much broader interest with respect to China than the other bureaucratic institutions discussed here. China is a critical actor in global institutions such as the United Nations, the G-20, and in regional institutions, particularly those based on ASEAN. KEMLU, therefore, has a key interest in ensuring that Indonesia continues its engagement with Beijing.<sup>43</sup> Two aspects of the GMF fall within KEMLU's institutional responsibility. First, the diplomatic pillar that calls for ending maritime disputes is a codification of KEMLU's longstanding efforts to reduce tensions and find ways to manage the South China Sea disputes through diplomatic means.<sup>44</sup> KEMLU therefore has an interest in downplaying China's maritime threat toward Indonesia because if Indonesia becomes formally involved in the South China Sea dispute, then its position as a neutral party that is able to play a role as an *honest broker* will be jeopardized.<sup>45</sup> Second, KEMLU views the GMF as a way to advance Indonesia's regional leadership in Indo-Pacific region, particularly through the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).<sup>46</sup> As Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi stated, "If we identify our foreign policy priorities for the next 5 years and connect them to Indian Ocean Rim Association's (IORA) interests, the 'maritime axis' is a perfect fit."<sup>47</sup> During Indonesia's chairmanship of IORA in 2015, Indonesia attempted to strengthen the Indian Ocean regional architecture by calling for an IORA Concord.<sup>48</sup>

Beyond the desire to preserve its honest broker role, KEMLU argues that admitting that there is a dispute only serves to justify China's claims, something that Indonesia clearly does not want to do because they view China's claim as illegitimate under UNCLOS, and any recognition of it adds legitimacy. Second, once a maritime conflict is recognized, then it must be resolved through bargaining, which inevitably requires compromise, something that Indonesia is unwilling to do. As a result, KEMLU's policy is based on legalist principle, as well as bureaucratic interests.

KEMLU's stance that Indonesia has no maritime conflict with China has come under attack.<sup>49</sup> After Indonesia's then-Foreign Minister Natalegawa reaffirmed that Indonesia did not have any territorial disputes in the South China Sea in April 2014, the Indonesian military Commander General Moeldoko wrote a commentary in *The Wall Street Journal* revealing a tougher stance on the South China Sea. Moeldoko claimed that China had a "dismaying" claim to Indonesian waters. This directly contradicted KEMLU's efforts to downplay the China threat, and from KEMLU's legalistic perspective, it gave credence to China's claim.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, in November 2015, Minister Luhut, in a reference to the Philippine decision to file a claim against China in the UNCLOS arbitral tribunal, stated that Indonesia would bring China to International Court if the dispute with China could not be resolved through dialogue.<sup>51</sup> Once again, the foreign ministry spokesperson refuted this statement by stressing KEMLU's longstanding position – that there is no territorial dispute between Indonesia and China.<sup>52</sup>

Some KEMLU critics argue that despite much diplomatic activity, there has been little success. High ranking KEMLU officials argue that Indonesian diplomatic efforts are not designed to resolve the conflict but to manage it. In Indonesia's perspective, a solution for the South China Sea conflict is nearly impossible or at least will not be achieved in the near future. As such, Indonesia is concentrating on preventing the conflict from escalating and trying to manage it peacefully.<sup>53</sup> Advocates of a more forceful approach to China argue that Chinese actions illustrate that China has little intention of managing the conflict peacefully.

### ***The Navy vs. the Army: Protecting Indonesian sovereignty***

The GMF calls for the protection of Indonesian sovereignty at seas, which is undertaken by the Indonesian Navy. The Navy would like to use the GMF as a means to enhance naval capacity, a priority that has thus far been eclipsed within the GMF by infrastructure building.<sup>54</sup> The GMF is a way for the Navy to start pushing for bigger investment in sea power and reverse the preeminence of the Army. Since the Army has traditionally absorbed the majority of the military budget, the Navy's ability to modernize its military platforms and operational readiness has been constrained.<sup>55</sup> The Army comprises 300,400 personnel or over 75 percent of all three military services combined and

also consumes 70 percent of the total defense budget.<sup>56</sup> In 2016, daily management and operation of the Army exhausted almost Rp. 34 billion (around 2.5 million USD), which is bigger than the whole budget of the Navy and the Air Force combined.<sup>57</sup>

The military as a whole does not want to prioritize maritime-oriented defense, particularly the army, since this would divert Indonesia's focus from internal security.<sup>58</sup> Indonesia's 2015 Defense White Paper illustrates how the Indonesian military, pushed by a conservative section within the army, is highlighting the need to preserve its land-oriented defense. For example, the GMF agenda was only mentioned around 17 times in the White Paper, which devoted significantly more attention to the *Sistem Pertahanan Semesta* or Total Defence System. This doctrine replicates the one that was developed by the Indonesian Army during the guerrilla war period against the Dutch and calls for the Army to maintain its dominance. Many strategic thinkers, particularly civilians, have voiced the need to change Indonesia's strategic orientation into an outward-looking maritime policy, but the Indonesian army has no desire to rethink its strategic doctrine since doing so would limit its power.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to the competition between the army and navy, Indonesia has a fragmented maritime governance structure that also generates competition and impedes effective governance. Indonesia has 12 different institutions in the country's maritime sector. The Navy has pushed for more authority over governance at sea, and wants to ensure that other agencies do not supersede its authority. Indonesia has established the Maritime Coordinating Agency (BAKAMLA) in an attempt to resolve coordination issues, but to date it has not been successful. BAKAMLA's creation was negatively perceived by other agencies, who have been unwilling to relinquish their authority to BAKAMLA in an effort to streamline maritime security governance.<sup>60</sup> In part to address the convoluted maritime security governance structure, on October 19, 2015, President Jokowi formally established the Presidential Task Force to Combat Illegal Fishing and named Fisheries Minister Susi Pudjiastuti as the Task Force leader.<sup>61</sup> The Navy, however, has opposed suggestions that the entire naval force would be subordinated to the task force head. Some members of parliament and others are also concerned about the overwhelming authority that Jokowi has given to Fisheries Minister Pudjiastuti.<sup>62</sup>

### **Ministry of fisheries**

The Ministry of Marine Resources and Fisheries (Fisheries) has not traditionally been major player in Indonesian foreign policy. Jokowi's decision during the election campaign to highlight the plight of Indonesian fisherman, many of whom have seen their catch fall in recent years, raised the political salience of the fisheries issue. Jokowi claims that Indonesia loses billions of dollars annually to IUU fishing, making it imperative to protect Indonesia's fisherman through a defense of the country's sovereignty and its exclusive right to exploit resources in its vast EEZ. Jokowi's promulgation of the GMF and appointment of Susi Pudjiastuti, a tough-minded businesswoman, as Minister of Fisheries who has adopted a high profile "sink the ships" policy, has raised the profile of the Fisheries Ministry. Since Indonesia lacks the capacity to patrol its waters, Minister Pudjiastuti has adopted her "sink the ships" policy that blows up boats captured fishing illegally as a deterrent to foreign fisherman. This made the Fisheries Minister a player in policy toward China.

Since 2014, Indonesia has stepped up efforts to fight illegal fishing as well as limit the rights of others to fish in Indonesian waters. Minister Pudjiastuti cancelled a Memorandum of Understanding between Indonesia and China that was signed two weeks before the Jokowi administration assumed office and permitted 1,000 Chinese *Super Purse Seine* ships to fish in Indonesian waters. Despite criticism from various quarters about the possibility of upsetting diplomatic relations with China, Minister Pudjiastuti supported her decision by stating that the ships were not environmentally friendly and in opposition with principles that her ministry set in place.<sup>63</sup> Her sink the ships policy has led to the destruction of about 236 boats. Indonesia, however, has only sunk one Chinese fishing vessel compared to 98 from Vietnam, 58 from the Philippines, and 39 from Malaysia.<sup>64</sup> In addition to the sink the ships policy, Minister Pudjiastuti has adopted other tough policies such as a

compliance audit of 1,132 foreign vessels, a ban on transshipment at sea, and the establishment of the one roof enforcement system.<sup>65</sup> These policies have garnered Minister Pudjiastuti strong public support.<sup>66</sup> They have also triggered opposition from bureaucratic rivals.

### ***Summary: Managing divergent interests in a competitive political system***

This discussion of the GMF highlights the large number of Indonesian state actors that have specific institutional interests with regard to China. Reconciling these competing interests behind a coherent policy can be difficult. Indonesia, like other Southeast Asian countries, is attempting to secure benefits from China's rise while protecting its interests. As a result, Indonesia has adopted a broad policy of engagement of China, despite its traditional distrust of Beijing that has been rising in recent years.

The difficulty of reconciling these competing interests is increasing difficult because Indonesian foreign policy making today takes place with much greater public scrutiny than in the past. During the Suharto era, foreign policy was made by a small group of actors in the executive branch, including the president, KEMLU, the military, and the economic technocrats. Since Indonesia's transition to democracy, there has been an opening up of the policy-making process to include parliament, political parties, businessmen, and public opinion more broadly.<sup>67</sup> Policy toward China continues to be made largely by the president, KEMLU the military, and executive branch actors like the Ministry of Fisheries, but it now takes place in a more open, competitive environment where opponents of the president can use his decisions against him. Therefore, the need to consider public opinion when making policy is an important new factor in policy making. As Indonesia responds to China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, therefore, its policy is influenced not only by competition between different institutional interests but also the need to court public opinion. This backdrop is crucial to understanding Indonesia's decision not to balance against China.

### ***China's recent assertiveness and Indonesia's incoherent response***

Two incursions by China in 2016 have illustrated both Beijing's capacity and intent to threaten Indonesian interests. These incidents come on the heels of a few similar incursions during the Yudhoyono administration that it sought to keep out of the press and insulate from public opinion. They also come in the wake of assertive moves by China against other ASEAN countries. In 2012, China seized physical control of Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines, leading Manila to file a protest with the UNCLOS arbitral tribunal on a range of Chinese maritime claims. The tribunal ruled overwhelmingly in favor of the Philippines, a decision China refused to respect. In 2014, China placed an oil drilling rig in disputed waters in Vietnam's (VN) EEZ and used paramilitary vessels against Vietnamese boats protesting this incursion. China has been reclaiming land and building fortified aircraft hangers, and other military installations on them, part of what many believe is an effort to enable China to implement an anti-area access denial strategy and declare an Air Identification Defense Zone. These actions produced tensions in China's relations with the affected states. They also raised tensions within ASEAN, as members disagreed on how strongly the organization should respond to China. China's actions also raised broader regional tensions, particularly with United States, since China's actions threaten the US interest in freedom of navigation. It is against this background of assertive Chinese actions and rising tensions that Indonesia found itself having to respond to incursions of Chinese ships into its Natuna Island waters.

### ***Chinese incursions***

On March 19, 2016, the Indonesian fisheries authorities captured the Chinese fishing boat "Kway Fey" as it entered the Natuna Island EEZ. It was captured by the Indonesian fisheries authorities, but when the boat was being pulled in towards the Natuna Islands, a Chinese maritime law enforcement vessel physically intervened to free the arrested Chinese fishing boat. The Chinese boat was taken

back to China but eight Chinese crew members were detained by the Indonesian authorities. China's foreign ministry's spokesperson protested Indonesia's detention of these fishermen. Beijing claimed that the boat had been "in Chinese traditional fishing grounds" doing "regular activities," and demanded the release of the crew members. Indonesia refused and insisted that there is no concept of traditional fishing grounds under UNCLOS.<sup>68</sup> China's actions and promulgation of a concept of traditional fishing grounds was not only a violation of Indonesian sovereignty but also an attempt to weaken UNCLOS, the maintenance of which is a key Indonesian interest.

On June 17, 2016, the Indonesian Navy ship *KRI Imam Bonjol-383* was in another standoff with the Chinese coastguard after capturing an illegal Chinese fishing trawler, the *Han Tan Cou 19038*, together with its seven crew members. The Chinese coastguard demanded that the Indonesian Navy release the detained vessel and its crew. This demand was rejected by the Indonesian Navy.<sup>69</sup> China responded by filing a diplomatic note protesting Indonesia's action.<sup>70</sup> Indonesia did not reply to China's protest through formal channels.

### *Jokowi's muscle flexing response*

Minister Pudjiastuti promptly expressed disapproval of China's action in interfering with Indonesian policing efforts and demanded that China to return the boat that it had snatched from the Indonesian guard so that it could be sunk in Indonesia.<sup>71</sup> She also summoned the Chinese ambassador for clarification, something which generated outrage from KEMLU since it is the foreign ministry's prerogative to summon foreign officials.

Less than a week after the incident on June 23, 2016, Jokowi responded with a dramatic gesture. He visited Natuna with several ministers and held a limited cabinet meeting aboard the naval ship *KRI Imam Bonjol-383* in the disputed maritime area. This action garnered whopping domestic attention, commending Jokowi for such a bold gesture against China.<sup>72</sup> These maneuvers appeared to have worked in boosting public confidence in Jokowi's maritime sovereignty agenda. According to a September 2016 national survey conducted by Center of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Indonesia, 73.6 percent of the population believes that the Jokowi administration has a strong will to strengthen Indonesia's maritime defense, and 69 percent of the population perceives Jokowi's commitment to bolster Indonesia's role in the region as maritime power.<sup>73</sup> After the June meeting in Natuna, Jokowi has also gained increasing popularity, according to a 2016 survey conducted by the Jakarta-based Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (SMRC). The SMRC survey reported a 5 percent increase in public satisfaction with the Jokowi administration, which saw his approval ratings rise from 63 percent in January to 67 percent in July.<sup>74</sup>

Jokowi's muscle-flexing, however, was accompanied by a series of conciliatory statements meant to ensure that the conflict did not escalate. Jokowi himself stated that Indonesia was still hoping to build a strong diplomatic relationship. Minister Luhut also issued a statement, assuring Beijing that there were no hostile intentions against China.<sup>75</sup> In short, Jokowi took a strong action to demonstrate resolve to a domestic audience and to deter Beijing, while also attempting to ensure that his response did not jeopardize diplomatic and economic ties with China, which are important to his domestic agenda.

The Indonesian military responded with plans to reinforce military deployments on the Natuna islands to defend its sovereignty.<sup>76</sup> On October 3, 2016, Indonesia's air force held a large military exercise over the gas-rich area of Natuna.<sup>77</sup> Like Jokowi's muscle flexing, however, this show of force was offset by conciliatory gestures from other actors with an interest in preserving Indonesia's status quo policy. Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi issued a statement that this military exercise was a regular training exercise by the Air Force and Indonesia had no intention to confront China. Similarly, with regards to military buildup in Natuna, Retno also explained that this was not a reaction toward Beijing. This statements were reaffirmed by the Commander of the Indonesian Military that all efforts to strengthen defense in Natuna were not a direct reaction to Beijing, since similar actions were taken in area throughout Indonesia such as Biak, Morotai, Saumlaki, and Marauke.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, even Coordinating Minister General Wiranto made series of clarification

denying that it was a “show of force” aimed at confronting a “perceived threat from a particular country.”<sup>79</sup>

The consistent pattern of clarifications illustrates that Indonesia’s military build-up and flexing muscle policy was not designed to confront China and therefore does not qualify as a balancing move. Indonesia, in short, was sending mixed signals of determination to protect its waters but at the same time indicating a desire not to confront China, given the large power disparities that favor China. It was also an explicit attempt to distinguish between promoting regional stability and not balancing against China.<sup>80</sup>

The Indonesian Army has long been the dominant military force in Indonesia due to the country’s traditional perception of threats as internal ones and the political role that the Army has played in domestic politics.<sup>81</sup> In contrast, the Navy has traditionally been relegated to a subordinate position, despite the country’s status as an archipelago. The increasing external threat from China and the need to protect maritime security would call for a re-allocation of resources within the military from the Army toward the Navy and Air Force, but this is something that the top Army brass oppose.

### Lack of elite cohesion: Divergent perceptions of the “Threat from the North”

To illustrate the divergent interests of different Indonesian actors that results in a lack of elite cohesion over policy toward China, this article will use the key variables proposed by Schweller, which are: agreement on the existence of threat, nature and extent of external threat, most effective and appropriate policy remedy, and domestic political risks and costs of action.<sup>82</sup> The application of this framework is captured in the [Table 1](#).

[Table 1](#) reveals that there is a general consensus that China poses some kind of threat to Indonesia, but elites are in disagreement about the nature of risk posed by China. There are at least four facets of China’s threat: first, China poses an “imagined” threat to Indonesia’s sovereignty. According to Schweller, a threat is “imagined” when “the threat is real to the perceiver but not supported by an objective reading of the available evidence.”<sup>84</sup> Some sections of the Indonesian Army still harbor suspicions over the threat of China’s communist ideology to Indonesia. The recent surge of “red scare” stories is evidence of the underlying anxiety in Indonesia towards communist ideology that has no basis in fact.<sup>85</sup> In the maritime front, China’s nine-dash line map apparently

**Table 1.** Indonesian elite perceptions of China.<sup>83</sup>

Actors	Key Interest in China	Threat Perception of China Maritime Assertiveness	Policy Remedy	Domestic Political Risk and Cost
Jokowi	Investment in infrastructure projects	Public domestic backlash will force strong policy, threatening economic interest	Muscle flexing against China	Must defend sovereignty to maintain domestic support without risking Chinese investment.
Marine Resources and Fisheries Ministry	Preventing Chinese vessels from fishing in Indonesia’s territory	China is major source of illegal fishing	Increase efforts to protect marine resources	Indonesia’s failure to strongly respond to China will contradict its effort to establish credible deterrence
The Indonesian Navy	“China as a threat” is way to secure budgetary resources	China’s claims violate Indonesian sovereign interests	To increase sea power	Failure to capture this momentum will risk the Navy’s chances to be more prominent
The Indonesian Army	Preventing China from intervening in Indonesian domestic affairs	China’s “imagined” threat comes from its communist ideology	To strengthen Indonesia’s internal security	Overt reaction to China will divert Indonesia from the Army’s key internal threat
KEMLU	China’s diplomatic support in ASEAN and beyond	Indonesia has no sovereignty dispute with China	Engagements with China	Increasing military response in Natuna will negatively impact Indonesian diplomatic efforts

overlaps with the Natuna EEZ, producing apprehension about a sovereignty dispute between Indonesia and China.<sup>86</sup>

Second, China's increasing use of fishing militias in the South China Sea threatens Indonesia's efforts to protect its marine resources. China has used its irregular forces or maritime militia to protect its claims in the South China Sea.<sup>87</sup> In recent years, these militia units have caused skirmishes in international waters, including the previously mentioned March and June 2016 incidents with Indonesia. This increasing maritime assertiveness is also exacerbated by the fact that China's military equipment is far superior to that of Indonesia. The Chinese Navy has 200,000 personnel and 61 submarines, some of them capable of deploying submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) with nuclear warheads. In contrast, the Indonesian Navy has only 65,000 men and 2 submarines.<sup>88</sup>

Third, China's frequent disregard of international law in the South China Sea has caused rising concern among Indonesian policymakers. The UNCLOS Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruled on July 2016 that "China had violated the Philippines' sovereign rights" and "had caused severe harm to the coral reef environment."<sup>89</sup> Beijing has rejected this decision by claiming "China does not accept any means of third party dispute settlement or any solution imposed on China."<sup>90</sup> China has also asserted that Natuna's EEZ is a part of its "traditional fishing grounds," as asserted by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying on June 19, 2016.<sup>91</sup> KEMLU responded by denying claims made by China on the basis that its "traditional fishing grounds" and the nine-dashed line have no basis under international law.<sup>92</sup> The PCA ruling legitimizes Indonesia's claim, but neither the PCA nor Indonesia have any mechanisms to enforce them.

Fourth, China has also caused division within ASEAN, which undermines the cohesiveness of the regional bloc and Indonesia's leadership position within it. As the security environment in the region is home to many flash points and exacerbated by US-China rivalry, Indonesia is concerned with maintaining ASEAN's strategic autonomy, which Jakarta has long viewed as a prerequisite for regional autonomy. Indonesia worries that ASEAN members will lean toward Washington or Beijing, and prioritize the interests of their great power allies over their ASEAN partners. This is precisely what happened in the disagreement over ASEAN's 2012 Chairman's statement when Cambodia prioritized its relationship with China over its ASEAN partners.<sup>93</sup>

The divergent perceptions of the Chinese threat among Indonesian actors means that there is no agreement on how Indonesia should rank its foreign policy priorities in its multi-faceted relationship with China. There are disagreements on whether Indonesia should focus on immediate threats or long term ones and how to balance economic, security, and political interests. In the political jockeying of bureaucratic politics, as Graham Allison argued in his seminal work, the personalities, bargaining skills, and political capital of key actors can influence policy. For example, Minister Susi Pudjiastuti's strong character and penchant for publicity has played an important role in enhancing the Ministry of Fisheries, which has traditionally been less visible in the eyes of the public.

The pragmatic nature of Jokowi's personality and his economic interests have also influenced Jakarta's attitude towards Beijing. Despite a perception among many in Jokowi's administration that Beijing is becoming a threat, Jokowi has demonstrated his interest in keeping the economic relationship on track by awarding China a number of high profile projects. The most controversial of these is the high-speed rail project in Indonesia. The \$5.5 billion project will connect Jakarta to Bandung. This project is one of 224 top priority projects listed in a presidential decree in January 2016, and a Japanese firm had engaged in an extensive feasibility study on the project and most assumed that the Japanese firm would receive the contract.<sup>94</sup> Instead, the Jokowi administration awarded the project to China, a move that it justified on the basis of the more attractive financing terms that Beijing reportedly offered. Many believe, however, that China won the contract because China claimed it could complete the project before Jokowi's 2019 re-election bid, which would enable him to prove that had made good on his pledge to improve infrastructure.

These disparate domestic interests have led Indonesia to maintain its status quo policy of non-balancing, rather than one which would more directly confront China. One might expect that Indonesia would use multilateral efforts promote its interests or support third-party efforts that

help protect Indonesian interests. This has not been the case. Indonesia did not take advantage of the UNCLOS PCA ruling that repudiated Chinese justification for its nine-dash line map – which of course legitimates Indonesia’s claim.<sup>95</sup> Despite domestic pressure for Jakarta to take the opportunity presented by the ruling and lead ASEAN members to pressure China to abide by them, Jakarta decided not to pursue such action.<sup>96</sup> Similarly, Indonesia’s response to the US Freedom of Navigation Operations has also been also contradictory. Jokowi emphasizes that Indonesia is neutral and supports freedom of navigation, thereby signaling Indonesia’s openness towards external presence to help deter Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea and free ride on US efforts. Jokowi’s remarks, however, were overshadowed by comments made by Defense Minister Ryamizard Ryacudu, who stated, “there’s no need to involve other parties in resolving the dispute,” which was viewed as a call for Washington to step back. Similarly, Minister Luhut also expressed disapproval of what he called US “power projection.”<sup>97</sup> In the two cases, Indonesia’s lack of elite cohesion has led it to send mixed signals and continue its status quo policy of engagement amid distrust.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that the conflicting interests of Indonesian actors and their divergent perceptions of the China threat result in a lack of consensus regarding how to respond to China. The existence of multiple views with regard to the nature of China’s threat has prevented Indonesia from crafting a coherent response toward Beijing. Currently, Indonesian engagement of China is driven strongly by the personal interest of President Jokowi to court short- to medium-term investment from China, in part to enhance his election prospects. While this policy is supported by some segments of society within Indonesia such as business interests, it is also opposed by many who believe that dependence on China will circumscribe Indonesia’s strategic autonomy.

As Schweller argues, in the absence of elite consensus, states continue with the status quo policy. When analyzing which Indonesian actors advocate maintaining the current policy and which ones want to balance, it is important to note that KEMLU and the Army, two institutions long involved in foreign policy, both have an interest in maintaining the status quo policy. In contrast, the Navy and Ministry of Fisheries, which advocate a tougher stance, are both new to foreign policy debates and in much weaker positions. The domestic balance of power, therefore, favors the status quo. As a result, as long as Beijing exercises restraint in Indonesia’s EEZ, refrains from intervening Indonesia’s internal affairs, and otherwise refrains from taking actions that directly threaten Indonesian interests, it is difficult to envision weaker actors such the Navy and Ministry of Fisheries being able to mobilize support for a tougher stance toward China. Indonesia, therefore, will likely maintain its nonbalancing position, leaving the threat from China unanswered.

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