

# Indonesia's South China Sea Policy under Joko Widodo: Building Credibility in Indo-Pacific Geostrategic Circuit

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## Abstrak

Penelitian ini membahas bagaimana ekspansi kebijakan keamanan suatu negara berkontribusi terhadap kredibilitas ancaman (*credibility of threat*) negara tersebut dalam konteks hubungan internasional. Konteks penelitian ini diwakili oleh kasus ekspansi kebijakan Indonesia terkait Laut Tiongkok Selatan di bawah administrasi Joko Widodo, yang menjadi lebih asertif. Studi sebelumnya menggambarkan keterlibatan Indonesia di Laut Tiongkok Selatan dari kacamata hubungan Indonesia dengan Tiongkok dan sebagai usaha Indonesia membangun stabilitas kawasan. Makalah ini bertujuan untuk menganalisa kebijakan Indonesia terkait Laut Tiongkok Selatan dalam konteks geostrategis Indo-Pasifik yang lebih luas. Untuk mencapainya, penelitian ini menggunakan konsep kredibilitas dalam hubungan internasional sebagai kerangka analisis. Penelitian ini berargumen bahwa kebijakan keamanan Indonesia yang lebih tegas dan terinstitutionalisasi di Laut Tiongkok Selatan bertujuan untuk membangun kredibilitas ancaman di Indo-Pasifik. Kredibilitas ancaman yang lebih kuat diharapkan meningkatkan posisi strategis Indonesia sebagai aktor yang memiliki kredibilitas untuk membalas intrusi Tiongkok. Dengan itu, Indonesia akan dipandang lebih bisa diandalkan untuk menjaga stabilitas maritim dan membuat mitra-mitra strategis Indonesia lebih berkomitmen dalam bekerjasama dengan Indonesia, selaku poros penghubung Samudera Hindia dan Samudera Pasifik.

Kata kunci : kredibilitas, Indonesia, Laut Tiongkok Selatan, Indo-Pasifik, keamanan maritim.

## Abstract

This article interrogates how the expansion of state security policy contributes to the credibility of threat in international relations. As a case in point, it examines Indonesia's South China Sea policy expansion under the Joko Widodo administration which is being perceived as assertive. Most current literature pictures Indonesia's South China Sea engagement as an effort to build regional stability. However, this study aims to situate Indonesia's South China Sea policy in a broader context of the Indo-Pacific geostrategic landscape. The credibility concept in international relations was employed as an analytical framework. This research argues that Indonesia's bolder and more institutionalized security policy in navigating the South China Sea territorial dispute builds its credibility of threat in the Indo-Pacific circuit. Documents review was carried out in order to support the assumption being put forward in this article. Results of the review suggest that Indonesia expects its strategic positioning to increase credibility of threat to deter China's intrusion. By achieving that, Indonesia has been viewed as a reliable state in maintaining maritime stability and a catalyst in leading strategic partners to be more committed with Indonesia as the linchpin connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Keywords: credibility, Indonesia, South China Sea, Indo-Pacific, maritime security.

## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has expanded its security policy under the Joko Widodo administration to be more inward-looking and assertive in protecting its territorial integrity. This change is also reflected in the broader context of Indonesia's foreign policy. Under President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's administration, Indonesia tended to be outward-looking emphasizing diplomatic channels and not focusing on geostrategic policy. However, during Joko

Widodo's presidency, Indonesia has been seen to have a bolder stance to protect its national interest and employed specific geostrategy to maximize its maritime potential. While Yudhoyono presidency's trademark was the Bali Democracy Forum, Joko Widodo is famous for its Global Maritime Fulcrum (*Poros Maritim Dunia*) (Caroline, 2021) and Indonesia's leadership in initiating the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). These distinct features between the two administrations are also

reflected in Indonesia's South China Sea policy.

In the Yudhoyono era, Indonesia framed itself as a non-claimant, honest broker, and confidence-builder aiming to peacefully manage the dispute (Laksmana, 2018). Laksmana (2018) further stated that these maneuvers by Yudhoyono were relatively not-new compared to his predecessors since no developed strategic dynamics forced Indonesia to reformulate its stance. Under the Joko Widodo administration, Indonesia's South China Policy has become more assertive by protecting its territorial sovereignty without antagonizing China (Connelly A. L., 2016; Arif, 2021). Indonesia's bolder usage of military instruments and presence in the North Natuna Islands are also caused by new strategic dynamics where China's fishing vessels, accompanied by Chinese Coast Guard vessels, are seen to intercept Indonesia's waters.

Taking off from the above-mentioned background, this article aims to explain why building credibility of threat amidst regional great power competition and geostrategic landscape expansion becomes a priority in middle powers' security policy. Indonesia's South China Sea policy is significant in representing the context. In amplifying its Global Maritime Fulcrum vision, Indonesia has projected a bolder stance and actions toward the South China Sea dispute for its maritime sovereignty. Politically, in 2017, Indonesia named its maritime domain closest to the South China Sea, surrounding the Natuna Islands, as the North Natuna Sea. After announcing the renaming in 2017, Indonesia officially released Presidential Decree No. 41 of 2022 on the zonation of the North Natuna Sea (Ministry of State Secretariat of Republic of Indonesia, 2022). One of the main content of the decree regulates Indonesia's security and defense strategy in the North Natuna Sea. Indonesia has been increasing its military presence in the Natuna Islands and intensifying security cooperation with like-minded countries. Indonesian Army Commander Yudo Margono in late 2022 stated that Indonesia would add more troops to the Natuna Islands and continue his predecessor's progress to conduct joint drills with the United States and its allies in the South China Sea (CNN Indonesia, 2022; Maulia & Damayanti, 2022).

The great power competition in the Indo-Pacific area is the overarching framework for this article, seeking to provide more explanation for Indonesia's South China Sea policy. The study, which this article is based from, utilized a qualitative case method informed by the credibility concept in international relations as its analytical framework to accomplish the objective. It claims that Indonesia's newfound confidence in its ability to identify and respond to security threats in the Indo-Pacific circuit drives a more assertive and institutionalized security policy to mitigate the South China Sea territorial dispute. Increasing the credibility of the threat is expected to escalate Indonesia's strategic positioning by discouraging China's intrusion. As a result, Indonesia's strategic partners are more likely to be willing to work with Indonesia to maintain maritime stability between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

This article is divided into three parts. First, it maps out the extent to which Indonesia's South China Sea policy has expanded and evolved under the Joko Widodo administration. Second, it elaborates on Indonesia's context and unique position in the Indo-Pacific circuit. Finally, it analyzes how Indonesia's South China Sea policy could build its credibility against threats in the Indo-Pacific arena. The value of this article lies in the fact that the issue being examined is timely and relevant given the ongoing tension in the South China Sea in recent years. Additionally, this paper joins in the conversation and bridges a research gap by analyzing the Indonesia's South China Sea policy in the expanded geostrategic context in Indo-Pacific. Summarily, this article exposes the overlooked perspective of Indonesia's South China Sea policy under the Joko Widodo administration. The established literature contributes to the analysis of Indonesia's South China Sea maneuvers from the domestic and regional levels. Seeing the dynamic in the broader Indo-Pacific context, this article analyzed what Indonesia tries to champion in the Indo-Pacific circuit through its South China Sea policy.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers have explained Indonesia's South China Sea policy in a broader historical context and under the Joko Widodo administration. On a systemic level, several researchers unveiled that Indonesia's

attitude toward the South China Sea territorial dispute has been influenced by its relationship with China. As stated by Kusumasomantri (2015), Gindarsah (2018), and Sari (2021), Indonesia has applied a hedging strategy that combines the balancing and non-balancing acts in managing its relationship with China in the South China Sea. As Wicaksana (2019), Anton, Agus, and Achluddin (2021) asserted, Indonesia plays a mediating role and aims for a rule-building contribution in the South China Sea. At the domestic level, Arif (2021) mentioned that Indonesia's South China Sea policy is influenced by Joko Widodo's personality and his administration's domestic agendas. These researches comprehensively depict Indonesia's South China Sea attitude from regional and domestic perspectives. However, further analysis placing Indonesia's South China Sea policy in the expanded geostrategic context in Indo-Pacific should be addressed.

Currently, the geostrategic horizon in Asia-Pacific has been expanded to Indo-Pacific. Many great powers have enlarged their geostrategy from Asia-Pacific oriented to the Indian Ocean and its surrounding lands, such as South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Japan and the United States, with their allies, have introduced the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), while China, under Xi Jinping, has reignited the ancient Silk Road through its Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), connecting China with Asia, Europe, and Africa. This geostrategic circuit expansion boosts the strategic value of Southeast Asia as the linchpin linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans. To successfully realize their Indo-Pacific vision, many want to initiate and strengthen strategic cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. To be a trustworthy partner, the credibility of threat is crucial for Indonesia as one of the major players in Southeast Asia and the ASEAN.

This article aims to put Indonesia's unique position into the context of Indo-Pacific great power competition. It argues that Indonesia seeks to solidify its reputation and credibility of threat in the Indo-Pacific through its South China Sea policy. Indonesia's credibility in managing favorable relations while protecting its territory against China is a valuable currency in Indo-Pacific. To address this gap, this article utilized the concept of credibility in international relations.

## **ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: CREDIBILITY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

This research employed a neorealist paradigm in international relations. In the neorealist perspective, state behavior is viewed as the outcome of the anarchic structure of the system (Waltz, 1979). Waltz (1979) elaborated that the distribution of capabilities arranges the mentioned structure. In other words, the state seeks to improve its position in the international structure by having more capabilities relative to other states. This paradigm fits the research context as it examined a state's efforts to solidify its position and credibility in expanding the regional system.

As a general definition, credibility refers to the idea that someone is trustworthy. In international relations, it means a leader or state's ability to make and deal with threats or act in accordance with its promises (Jervis, Yarhi-Milo, & Casler, 2021). In a more specific context, a credible threat can be defined as a believed and rational menace to be carried out including the punishment to an aggressor (Kilgour & Zagare, 1991). Credibility is closely linked to a reputation for resolve since a state's credibility is formed by its past behavior, such as foreign policy, shaping others' perceptions of the state's future tendencies. It also comprises resolve, as credibility is reflected by the state's commitment to endure hardships and deal with challenges.

Credibility encompasses three key components: (1) capability, (2) interest, and (3) reputation for resolve. Specifically, Tang (2005) stated that  $\text{credibility} = \text{capability} \times \text{interest} \times \text{reputation (for resolve)}$ . Perception of capability portrays how others view a state's power in dealing with challenges. Interest refers to what is at stake for that state, reflecting how significant it is for a state to take a certain action. Meanwhile, reputation signifies the past track record shaping how others perceive that particular state or leader. Jervis, Yarhi-Milo, & Casler (2021) specified that the reputation for resolve comes from past actions and statements. Jervis, Yarho-Milo & Casler (2021), referring to Harvey & Mitton (2016), asserted that past actions are defined by the similarity between the state's reaction to past and current events. Jervis, Yarho-Milo & Casler (2021), citing the work of McManus (2017), elaborated that statement is viewed by state leaders' ability to act following statements they made earlier.

Therefore, having the desired credibility and national reputation is significant for states. It enables them to initiate and build stronger cooperation with other countries, as they can appear as trustworthy partners. Distinguished reputation and status also trigger other countries to think that one country will be reliable enough to overcome adversaries (Dafoe, Renshon, & Huth, 2014). For example, Brands, Edelman, and Mahken (2018) mentioned that if the United States' credibility is strong, it will be able to deter adversaries, its allies will be assured, and geopolitical stability will be relatively maintained. It demonstrates that in the era of increasing interdependence and interconnection between states, having solid credibility is vital to accomplish states' interests.

This framework explains how Indonesia's South China Sea policy fits the components of building credibility in creating threats and retaliating against them. It is then contextualized with Indonesia's role as the middle power amidst the great power competition in the Indo-Pacific circuit. The framework analyzes that Indonesia's South China Sea policy does not stop providing territorial sovereignty and hedging China. However, it also appears to be a strategic incentive for Indonesia's credibility in a larger geostrategic context.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research aims to understand Indonesia's perspective on the South China Sea dispute through its security policy expansion under the Joko Widodo administration. To achieve the research objective, a qualitative research method was employed. This method fits the research purpose since qualitative research aims to explore and understand the perspective of an individual or a group toward a social or human problem (Creswell, 2009). There are three ways of collecting data in qualitative research: (1) in-person interview, (2) observation, and (3) written documents (Patton, 2001). For this article, however, documents review was done using written documents—secondary data from reliable literature and relevant stakeholders' official statements cited from online platforms. The data were then analyzed using the established conceptual framework of credibility in international relations.

## RESULT AND ANALYSIS

### INDONESIA'S SOUTH CHINA SEA POLICY EXPANSION UNDER THE JOKO WIDODO ADMINISTRATION

On one dimension, Indonesia's behavior toward the South China Sea remains consistent from administration to administration. It sticks to rule-based order and aims to mediate the conflicting parties, especially the claimants, for a non-violent resolution. Its focus on regional stability remains unchanged. Indonesia also consistently aspires to be strategically independent, neutral, and impartial as the manifestation of its "free and active" (*bebas dan aktif*) foreign policy tenet. Under Yudhoyono's reign from 2004 to 2014, Indonesia developed an accommodative approach to avoid conflict at all costs (Fitriani, 2015). Indonesia's foreign policy foundation of norm-setting and regional leadership built under Yudhoyono has been continued and inherited by the Joko Widodo administration as well (Arif, 2021). Indonesia also keeps itself to be non-claimant.

However, there is a fundamental difference between the two administrations in a broader political context and international political orientation. Yudhoyono demonstrated a keen interest in improving Indonesia's image in regional and international circuits through diplomacy. With his "thousand friends, zero enemies" jargon, Yudhoyono was seen to be outward-looking by focusing on maximizing international summits and diplomatic forums. The famous Bali Democracy Forum was one of the significant legacies of his administration in the diplomatic aspect. However, his administration was highly criticized for stalling domestic economic projects. Joko Widodo, in reverse, has little interest in international politics. Seen to be inward-looking, one of the most tangible foreign policy orientations is solidifying domestic demands instead of building an international image *per se*. With rigorous infrastructure and domestic economic projects, he utilizes diplomatic channels to increase investment flows to accelerate the mentioned domestic projects.

These differences are boldly reflected by the Joko Widodo administration in Indonesia's behavior toward the South China Sea. Indonesia's role expands from what it inherited from the previous administration. As

Laksmiana (2018) stated, during the Yudhoyono administration, Indonesia appeared as an honest broker and confidence-builder that helped peacefully manage the territorial dispute in the South China Sea. However, under the Joko Widodo administration, the role expands beyond maintaining a strategically independent role to act as a mediator. Indonesia, under Joko Widodo, has also made a more proactive attempt to stabilize the region and protect its territorial sovereignty, as illustrated by putting more military in Natuna waters to strengthen maritime and fishery security (Rahmat, 2020). From a political and legal aspect, Indonesia renamed the maritime domain around the Natuna Islands as the North Natuna Sea and issued a presidential decree as the legal basis to formulate security and defense policies (Jibiki, 2022). These only occur under the Joko Widodo administration.

Indonesia's changing maneuver was caused by altering strategic dynamics. Its shifting approach to the South China Sea was caused by increasing Chinese vessel intrusion in Natuna waters and Joko Widodo's lack of interest in the major diplomatic role (Connelly A. L., 2016). Joko Widodo has employed many militaristic and strategic defense initiatives in mitigating the standoffs in the South China Sea, especially in North Natuna Island. The issue of the South China Sea has been the focus of Indonesia's security for decades, as well as other Southeast Asian maritime nations. However, many bold and institutionalized security and defense measures occurred during the Joko Widodo administration.

Domestically, in catching up with the changing situation, Joko Widodo has boldly increased Indonesia's military presence in the Natuna Islands by adding more troops and armaments to protect it. Politically, he named the maritime domain surrounding the Natuna Islands as "North Natuna Sea" in 2017 to solidify the territorial sovereignty, not to mention his several official visits to the Natuna Islands. Under Joko Widodo's leadership, Indonesia has been sending bolder messages about its commitment to territorial sovereignty, reflected by more assertive policies and statements. During the first cabinet meeting in 2020, the president stated to his ministers that there was "no compromise regarding territorial integrity" in the Natuna Islands (Maulia, 2020).

However, Connelly (2017) asserted that Indonesia under Joko Widodo does not seek stronger diplomatic leadership in the South China Sea dispute but rather to protect its sovereignty due to Indonesia's need for China's investments.

Internationally, Joko Widodo intensifies international security cooperation to deal with increasing and expanding tension in the South China Sea, coming closer to Indonesia's maritime domain. Beyond high-level summits and dialogues like ASEAN Regional Forum, Indonesia under Joko Widodo also engages with security and defense cooperation with like-minded countries, especially in the maritime aspect. One of the most tangible moves is Indonesia's willingness to facilitate the United States' presence in Southeast Asia, such as holding joint military exercises (Sari, 2021). Despite its stance on neutrality, the changing security environment pushed Joko Widodo to cooperate further with the United States. In 2016, Indonesia received security assistance from the United States under the U.S. Maritime Security Initiative for capacity building (Sambhi, 2017). General Andika Perkasa, the Commander of the Indonesian Army in 2021-2022, also stated that Indonesia and the United States had discussed the plans for holding Garuda Shield Joint Exercise in 2023 (Maulia & Nugroho, 2022). Maulia and Nugroho (2022) also reported that General Andika wanted Indonesia to have wider joint drills with Indo-Pacific countries to face China's assertiveness.

It has been mentioned earlier that Indonesia hedges China. That means Indonesia also approaches and accommodates some of China's aspirations regardless of Indonesia's bold South China Sea stance. In 2015, President Joko Widodo and President Xi Jinping made a joint statement in which key points included how Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) vision and China's BRI are "highly complementary to each other" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2015). Some of Joko Widodo's key ministers are seen to downplay the issue, especially those with serious concerns about Chinese investment and seen as "Beijing-friendly," such as Coordinating Minister of Maritime and Investment Affairs Luhut Binsar

Pandjaitan (Maulia, 2020). In his second term, beginning in 2019, Joko Widodo was criticized for replacing Susi Pudjiastuti, a former Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries who was popular for her aggressive hunt for illegal fishers in Indonesia's waters. Replacing Susi has led to an increasing number of Chinese fishing vessel intrusions guarded by the Chinese Coast Guard while Indonesian Government is seen backing away from confronting China (Beech & Suhartono, 2020). Despite Susi's popularity among the public, her method was considered too confrontational. As a consequence she was replaced by another minister who was more conciliatory with China (Beech & Suhartono, 2020). It reflects that despite the stronger domestic political dynamics leading to Susi's replacement, it still contributes to Indonesia's hedging approach against China.

All of the groundbreaking actions reflect the foundation of Indonesia's inward-looking foreign policy vision under Joko Widodo. To protect its domestic assets, Indonesia should leave its comfort zone to assert its sovereignty despite the risk of heightened tension against China. At the same time, Indonesia is willing to face domestic criticism by approaching Beijing in the economic channel to attract and maintain investment, regardless of its South China Sea stance. In other words, despite looking contradictory, Indonesia's foreign policy puts domestic priority at the top.

### INDONESIA IN THE INDO-PACIFIC CONTEXT

Indonesia seeks to draw significant strategic impact in broader regional and international contexts through its maneuver in the South China Sea dispute. Hence, despite Indonesia's inward-looking foreign and security policy under Joko Widodo, it does not necessarily mean that Indonesia is not seeking to build certain credibility in the international and regional circuits. To begin, this article pictures Indonesia's strategic context in Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific to understand that.

In the status quo, the main proponents of the FOIP often dominate the discourse in establishing the mentioned regional architecture. The four main proponents, known as the QUAD, consist of the United States, Japan, India, and Australia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022). The

importance of the United States, Japan, India, and Australia as "democratic security diamonds," as well as the QUAD members, in the Indo-Pacific is increasing due to the rise of China in mainland Asia. Aside from the QUAD, the ASEAN is highlighted as the bridge connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Despite the noble purpose of the FOIP to create an inclusive economic sphere from which anyone can benefit, political interest is still contingent upon the multilateral framework. The FOIP initiated and developed by the QUAD is often viewed as the political vehicle of the United States and its allies to counter China's BRI. It tells the global community that China is the antagonist destabilizing a safe and prosperous region.

The United States' tendency to frame the FOIP as a counterbalance against China complicates the initial great powers balancing Asia-Pacific. Many other countries are not interested in being part of this rivalry but in enjoying harmonious relationships and stability in the Indo-Pacific. Southeast Asian countries, which firmly uphold neutrality and impartiality under ASEAN, are one of them. ASEAN member states then formulated their trajectory and vision of the Indo-Pacific in response to this risk. Aiming to support the noble vision of the FOIP while maintaining ASEAN neutrality, the AOIP was then established (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2019). The QUAD affirmed their "unwavering support" for the AOIP in their 2022 Joint Statement (United States Embassy & Consulates in Japan, 2022).

Aside from the power of the mentioned states and regional organizations, it is essential to note that establishing the FOIP requires intact participation from many countries across the region. The assertion arises since many coastal countries are located across the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Full support from and favorable relations with these coastal countries are vital since they have access to the maritime lane and domains across the Indo-Pacific area. Furthermore, since the leading FOIP spirit is to amplify maritime security, close and active cooperation with those countries is crucial.

Indonesia is a maritime country in the middle of the Indo-Pacific. Strategically located connecting the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, Indonesia's role in

assuring the connectivity between the two seas cannot be overlooked. In addition to its geopolitical value, Indonesia possesses a reputable political track record in Southeast Asian affairs and with ASEAN.

Geographically, Indonesia is the linchpin of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Location-wise, Indonesia has the Indian Ocean in the west and the South China Sea in the north connecting to the Pacific Ocean. Indonesia is also an archipelago with strategic ports connecting the sea lanes of communication and global trade routes as it has four of 16 global strategic seaborne: Lombok, Ombai-water, Sunda, and Malacca (Dang & Yeo, 2017). As a major country in Southeast Asia, Indonesia's geographical advantage will benefit others, especially the FOIP campaigners. Accordingly, Indonesia should maintain its surrounding maritime domain's stability.

Aside from the geographical location, Indonesia's significance is also reflected by its democracy and economy. Indonesia is the largest democracy in Southeast Asia, with the biggest Muslim population worldwide. Such combination enables Indonesia to engage with the west through the common ground in democracy while being connected with the Muslim world. Its democratic values have led to an open economy, making Indonesia's GDP the highest in Southeast Asia. Since shared values in democracy and economic potential are the spirit to achieve an open and prosperous Indo-Pacific region, Indonesia possesses things to offer.

In the diplomatic and regional political sectors, Indonesia has natural leadership in Southeast Asia and active involvement in the Indo-Pacific geostrategic dynamic. Indonesia led ASEAN states to initiate the AOIP which many major players in Indo-Pacific such as Japan and the United States welcomed. Indonesia intensively lobbied ASEAN states for 18 months before its proposed AOIP was officially adopted by ASEAN leaders at the 2019 Bangkok Summit (Anwar, 2020). Indonesia's leadership in forming the AOIP made ASEAN stays relevant to the Indo-Pacific strategic development yet maintain ASEAN's nature of strategic independence and neutrality. Indonesia also stimulated Indo-Pacific strategic discourse through its "Indo-Pacific Treaty" concept in 2013-2014, Joko Widodo's GMF in

2014 onwards, and the "Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept" introduced in 2018 (Scott, 2019). These all reflect that Indonesia is aware of its comparative advantages and potential to be a significant player in the Indo-Pacific circuit.

## **INDONESIA'S SOUTH CHINA SEA POLICY: BUILDING CREDIBILITY IN INDO-PACIFIC Showing capability**

Capability is often also referred to as potential power. Capability is not necessarily reflected by what the state possesses but by how useful these resources are in changing other states' behavior (Baldwin, 2013). In other words, a capability is a state's ability to strategically utilize and allocate resources to pursue its interests, including protecting its territorial integrity. Referring to Baldwin (2013), improving and showcasing capability is essential in the neorealist world, as the state's position is defined by its capability.

Capability creates one of the core elements of the credibility of the threats. Many countries can share similar strategic visions, values, and concerns, but to what extent they are willing to rely on each other is another story. Two countries can aim for the same thing that they can mutually share, but it requires further assessment to initiate specific cooperation to get there. One of the crucial metrics is how the capability of the other shapes their reliability for cooperation. Otherwise, imbalance burden sharing can help disbenefit one party. Thus, to increase the assurance of other countries to cooperate, one must make its capability significantly visible.

Indonesia's efforts to militarily develop the Natuna Islands and its waters aim to improve deterrence against threats and show of force. Commander of the Indonesian Army (2018-2021), Hadi Tjahjanto, views the Natuna security and defense development as part of Indonesia's broader efforts to increase deterrence against national threats, including territorial sovereignty and integrity (Parameswaran, 2019). Aside from the infrastructural and organizational development, Indonesia has also intensified its military activities near the South China Sea. In early October 2016, Indonesia staged a show of force by conducting a large-scale warplane exercise, which

Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi stated a “routine” exercise, near the South China Sea with 70 fighter jets maneuvering, involving dog fights and dropping bombs (Danubrata, 2016). In July 2020, Indonesia’s navy conducted a four-day exercise in the South China Sea with 24 warships, seen as a major show of force against China’s moves in the maritime domain (Jibiki, 2020).

The South China Sea is indeed the right stage for Indonesia to showcase its capability due to the international spotlight on the South China Sea issues. Location-wise, it is vital for global shipping lanes, making it relevant and crucial to many countries’ interests, even those not claiming or having territorial issues in the South China Sea. Politically, the South China Sea is another circuit for the United States–China rivalry, gaining global attention. Many great powers’ geostrategies also rely on the stability of the South China Sea, such as Japan and the United States’ FOIP. Therefore, Indonesia’s capability to protect its sovereignty in the South China Sea will build its credibility due to the high global spotlight. Added by Indonesia’s leadership as an AOIP initiator as an ASEAN version of the Indo-Pacific vision, it becomes more crucial for Indonesia to be credible to sustain its geostrategic leadership in ASEAN and the larger Indo-Pacific area.

### **Reflecting interest**

Interest is a crucial fundament of credibility, as it echoes a state’s commitment to deal with a particular issue essential to it. While capability reflects a state’s potential and actual power to overcome challenges, interest depicts the extent and direction a state is willing to utilize its resources. In other words, if a state possesses extensive military power but is unwilling to use it to deal with a certain challenge, the threats will be less credible (Brands, Edelman, & Mahnken, 2018). Two countries might have the same relative capability, but when they have different or often conflicting interests, they are less likely to cooperate sustainably with each other. One is also less likely to initiate cooperation with another, knowing that both do not share the same, or at least intersecting, interest. Therefore, communicating interest is critical to demonstrate a state’s credibility.

Indonesia’s more assertive actions and show of force also reflect its commitment and interest in protecting territorial sovereignty, which is at stake in the Natuna Islands if the country is unable to manage it well. Indonesia’s Cabinet Secretary, Pramono Anung, stated that President Joko Widodo’s visit to the islands signifies Indonesia’s “serious attention” to the issue and that the state’s sovereignty is “inviolable” (The Jakarta Post, 2020). The Natuna Islands are also contingent upon Indonesia’s resources, particularly fishery, being the heart of Indonesia’s interest (Siregar, 2020). Moreover, Indonesia’s Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi officially stated that Indonesia is crystal clear and consistent in its position on the UNCLOS compliance concerning the South China Sea, conveyed through several diplomatic notes to China (Siregar, 2020). It implies that Indonesia is unwilling to negotiate anything with China as Indonesia sees no overlapping claim. In short, Indonesia has a vital interest that China cannot bargain.

Another thing at stake reflecting Indonesia’s commitment to the South China Sea is the abundant resources Indonesia wants to protect from China. Under the Joko Widodo administration, Indonesia plans to build and convert the Natuna Islands into a special economic zone (SEZ) before his term ends in 2024 (Jibiki, 2022). The SEZ is not yet final; however, the successfully established SEZ expects to attract foreign investment to develop the area, such as fishing boats, port facilities, and logistics. Before converting the area into an SEZ, Indonesia initially focused on the defense and security aspects, considering the worsening security environment (Jibiki, 2022). It implies that Indonesia is committed to facing the adversaries of being protested by Beijing to protect its resources and the stability of the maritime lane around the Natuna Islands.

### **Building a reputation for resolve**

A state’s credibility, including the threats’ credibility, is significantly measured and proven by its past success or failure in dealing with challenges. As one of the main reasons, cooperation came up is to resolve a problem jointly, reputation for resolve creates the core element of credibility. A state might have a deep interest and high

capability, but the trust of other states is gained by seeing past actions and behavior. In addition to past policy, the reputation for resolve is seen by how synchronized a state leader's statements with his actions in the past (Jervis, Yarhi-Milo, & Casler, 2021). Therefore, building a reputation for resolve by consistently being accountable is essential for a state's credibility in regional and international affairs.

As mentioned, Indonesia under Joko Widodo has developed extended defense, security, and economic measures to protect the Natuna Islands. In 2020, Indonesia deployed its largest-ever troops, the Indonesian Army, to the Great Natuna Islands with 600 troops and two anti-submarine warships (ASW) corvettes named KRI Teuku Umar and KRI Tjiptadi (Rahmat, 2020). After his appointment in late 2022, Indonesian Army Chief Yudo Margono planned to continue its predecessor approach by conducting naval drills with the United States and its allies in the South China Sea (Maulia & Damayanti, 2022). One of the most recent maneuvers was the signature of a presidential decree in 2022 to divide the Natuna Islands' maritime area into several designations to boost its economy and security (Jibiki, 2022). It includes the designation for fishery, tourism, oil and gas exploration, and defense and security. A senior officer in Indonesia's Palace stated that the decree, encouraging Indonesia to build its military facilities and intensify military activities, reflects its resolve to protect its territorial integrity (Jibiki, 2022).

In the broader South China Sea context, major powers from both sides, such as China and the United States, perceive Indonesia relatively positively. As Kartikasari (2019) asserted, from China's perspective on the South China Sea dispute, Indonesia has an ally image. With similar capabilities and cultural dimensions, China views Indonesia as a partner to work together on the issue. Meanwhile, Antony Blinken, the Secretary of the United States, views Indonesia as a "strong democratic partner" and, along with Indonesia, is jointly committed to protecting freedom of navigation in the South China Sea (Oladipo & Brunnstrom, 2021).

## IMPORTANCE OF CREDIBILITY OF THREATS FOR INDONESIA IN THE INDO-PACIFIC LANDSCAPE

Indonesia can benefit significantly from the rising Indo-Pacific geostrategic vision due to its potential, both geographical and political. Geographically, Indonesia is located between the Indian and Pacific Oceans with several world's key shipping lanes, making Indonesia's ability to maintain those maritime lanes crucial as many global economic players rely on those lanes. Beyond the physical reality, politically, Indonesia is strategically independent, reflected by its free and active foreign policy tenet. It allows Indonesia to build favorable relations with both competing sides in the region, mainly represented by the United States and China. Indonesia's bold actions and ability to manage the South China Sea tension can help it prove that it is a trustworthy and credible partner in achieving a prosperous and safe Indo-Pacific region.

The success of the Indo-Pacific region being connected, free, and open relies on Southeast Asia's stability as the linchpin linking the two development centers. Indonesia has what it takes to bolster Southeast Asia's stability. Yoshimatsu (2022) asserted that Indonesia's position is vital to solidifying ASEAN's prominence and status as the main regional organization amidst the evolving regional politics. Among many of Indonesia's interests in defending the Indo-Pacific is to revive ASEAN centrality (Laksmana, 2021). Should Indonesia be considered reliable enough as a partner, many parties interested in Indo-Pacific will cooperate with and invest in Indonesia to accelerate its stability.

Indonesia needs to strengthen its credibility and reputation due to the challenges it faces and the burdens it bears in the Indo-Pacific context. Despite its success in expanding its presence in the Indo-Pacific region, Indonesia has been less successful in presenting itself as maritime power (Scott, 2019). Scott (2019) further argued that Indonesia's reluctance to challenge China made its Indo-Pacific initiatives vague. As AOIP's leading initiator, Indonesia is also responsible for leading other ASEAN member states to turn the expectations of the AOIP into strategy and policy (Sukma, 2019). Hence,

Sukma (2019) added that Indonesia should develop its maritime defense capability to fulfill its responsibility as a fulcrum connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans to ensure the region's maritime security and freedom of navigation. Indonesia's South China Sea policy can effectively answer those doubts.

The South China Sea is the perfect theater for Indonesia to showcase its credibility. During the rapid geostrategic expansion from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific, the great powers and their partners pay more attention to Southeast Asian waters, especially South China Sea. Aside from the ASEAN member states and global economies relying upon the stability of the South China Sea, many new external institutions' success is contingent upon the South China Sea's freeness and openness. The United States and its like-minded partners possess the FOIP, the QUAD, AUKUS, and other Indo-Pacific-related frameworks. China is investing heavily in its BRI megaproject. If Indonesia can address the maritime challenges in the South China Sea, it will significantly improve its position and credibility due to the high exposure of the issue. This study sees Indonesia's more assertive policy and bolder stances on the South China Sea under Joko Widodo's target to capitalize on this potential exposure.

## CONCLUSION

This article contextualized the Indonesia's South China Sea policy expansion under the Joko Widodo administration into a broader Indo-Pacific context. This objective arose since Indonesia's actions in the South China Sea have been chiefly seen from Southeast Asia's regional perspective. Meanwhile, Indonesia possesses a strategic and exceptional position in the Indo-Pacific context. Therefore, it is crucial to address the connection between Indonesia's South China Sea security maneuvers and its position in the Indo-Pacific circuit.

This article argued that Indonesia's South China Sea policy expansion under Joko Widodo enhances its credibility of threat amidst Indo-Pacific great power competition. Southeast Asia's strategic value escalates in parallel as the Indo-Pacific area's geostrategic value

increases. Many great powers' geostrategic agendas, such as the FOIP and BRI, put Southeast Asia as a crucial part of connecting the two oceans. Hence, favorable relations and solid cooperation with Southeast Asia's key players are vital for their Indo-Pacific ambition success. As the biggest maritime nation with strategic straits in Southeast Asia and a linchpin connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Indonesia intends to build credibility as a reliable partner for strategic cooperation. By demonstrating capabilities, reflecting interest, and solidifying its reputation for resolve in protecting its sovereignty in the Natuna Islands, Indonesia expects to enhance its credibility of the threats to retaliate against the aggressor in maintaining maritime stability, which will attract more strategic partners to cooperate with it.

The analysis of the study, which this paper is based from, is limited to the intention level of a security policy and cannot yet measure the foreign policy outcomes. The available data could be employed to analyze Indonesia's motivation to improve its credibility and to send a more apparent stance on South China Sea issue. However, additional data are required to fully grasp how other countries perceive Indonesia's credibility of the threats. This article recommends that further researches need to look deeper into other parties' perspectives on Indonesia's South China Sea policy under the Joko Widodo administration. It is an opportunity to complement this research by drawing foreign policy outcomes.

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