

Indonesia's Strategy to Face China's Aggressiveness in the North Natuna Sea: A Defense Policy Perspective 2014–2023

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Article History: Received on 28 February 2026, Revised on 28 April 2026,
Published on 2 May 2026

Abstract: This research aims to identify the forms of China's aggressiveness, analyze how Indonesia formulated and implemented its defense politics, and assess the effectiveness of such responses in safeguarding Indonesia's sovereignty and sovereign rights in the North Natuna Sea. This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and documentation, consisting of primary data from informants involved in the formulation and implementation of defense policy, as well as secondary data from official documents, academic literature, and relevant regulations. Data were analyzed qualitatively through classification, categorization, interpretation, and triangulation of sources and methods. The findings reveal that Indonesia's defense politics during 2014–2023 were carried out through an adaptive, measured, and integrative approach by combining defense posture strengthening, maritime patrols, law enforcement, defense diplomacy, and international legal legitimacy. This defense politics was relatively effective in preventing the establishment of China's de facto control over Indonesia's jurisdictional waters and in maintaining regional stability, although it still faced challenges such as power asymmetry, limited maritime capacity, the complexity of gray zone threats, and inter-agency coordination constraints.

Keywords: China's Aggressiveness, Defense Politics, Gray Zone Conflict, Maritime Security, North Natuna Sea

A. Introduction

The South China Sea is one of the most strategic regions in the world, combining geopolitical, geoeconomic, and international security interests (Quyet, 2023). This region serves as a vital shipping lane connecting Asia, Europe, and America and holds vast natural resources such as oil, natural gas, and fisheries. This strategic value makes the South China Sea not only a global economic space but also an arena for power competition between nations. In this context, any conflict dynamics in the region will directly impact regional stability, maritime security, and the national interests of surrounding countries, including Indonesia. For Indonesia, the urgency of this study is even greater because the escalation of Chinese activity in the North Natuna Sea is no longer simply related to illegal fishing but has evolved into an issue that touches

on dimensions of sovereignty, sovereign rights, energy security, and national defense politics. Therefore, a more in-depth analysis is needed regarding how Indonesia formulates a strategy to deal with Chinese aggression in the North Natuna Sea within a defense policy framework.

The South China Sea holds a strategic position because it is one of the world's busiest international trade routes (Nguyễn Anh, 2023). Furthermore, this region also contains vast energy reserves and fishery resources (Yuan et al., 2022). This situation makes the South China Sea a contested space by various countries, both those with direct claims, such as China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, as well as those with strategic interests in regional stability. These competing interests are increasingly complex as China consistently expands its influence through its unilateral nine-dash line claim, infrastructure development, and intensive maritime presence. China's nine-dash line claim has sparked a protracted dispute because it violates the principles of international maritime law, particularly UNCLOS 1982 (Chubb, 2025; Nguyen & Tran, 2025). In practice, China not only uses overt military force but also employs a gray zone strategy, namely the use of non-war instruments such as coast guard vessels, maritime militia, survey vessels, and administrative pressure to gradually strengthen its claims (Fravel & Glaser, 2022). This strategy creates an ambiguous situation: not to the point of triggering open war, but sufficient to pressure other countries and establish de facto control over the disputed area.

Indonesia is not a major claimant in the South China Sea dispute. However, China's nine-dash line claim overlaps with Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone in the North Natuna Sea (Larasati & Hidayat, 2025). This overlap poses a clear threat to Indonesia's sovereign rights, particularly in natural resource management, fishing activities, and energy exploration. Throughout 2014–2023, Chinese pressure on Indonesia was evident through the presence of fishing vessels, the China Coast Guard, survey vessels, and various other forms of maritime intimidation around the North Natuna Sea (Arif et al., 2024; Buszynski, 2025). This escalation is reflected in various significant incidents, such as China's intervention in Indonesian law enforcement in 2016, the 2019–2020 Natuna Crisis, and the disruption of Indonesian drilling activities in the Tuna Block in 2021. In response, Indonesia took various measures, ranging from strengthening Indonesian Navy and Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla) patrols; affirming its legal position under UNCLOS 1982; naming the North Natuna Sea in 2017; and increasing regional security and diplomatic cooperation. Thus, the dynamics in the North Natuna Sea demonstrate that Indonesia is no longer merely facing the issue of fisheries violations but rather a maritime jurisdictional competition that demands an adaptive, measured, and comprehensive defense political response (Khan et al., 2024; Suseto et al., 2026).

Based on this background, the primary question in this study is Indonesia's strategy for dealing with China's aggressiveness in the North Natuna Sea from 2014 to 2023, from a defense political perspective. This issue is crucial because China's

aggressiveness does not manifest itself in open warfare but rather through repeated, ambiguous, and legalistic maritime pressure. This situation requires Indonesia to respond not only militarily but also through a combination of defense policies, law enforcement, and diplomacy. Therefore, this study seeks to answer several key questions: what forms of Chinese aggression in the North Natuna Sea have taken during 2014–2023, what strategy Indonesia has adopted to respond to this aggression through defense policy, and the extent to which this strategy has been effective in safeguarding Indonesia's sovereignty and sovereign rights in the North Natuna Sea.

Most previous studies on the South China Sea have tended to place Indonesia within the framework of regional diplomacy, ASEAN stability, or the great power rivalry between China and the United States (Anton et al., 2021; Arif, 2021; Octavian, 2025). In these approaches, Indonesia is often positioned as a mediator, stabilizer, or non-claimant state indirectly affected. Consequently, the dimensions of Indonesia's defense strategy against concrete threats in the North Natuna Sea have not been discussed in depth and specifically. Several studies have examined the South China Sea conflict as a regional strategic issue. This conflict within the context of the United States–China rivalry, which places Indonesia in a dilemma between economic and security interests (Sarah et al., 2022). Sarjito (2025) emphasize that Indo-Pacific escalation could directly impact Indonesia's strategic interests, necessitating national defense preparedness. These studies make important contributions to explaining the regional context of the South China Sea dispute, but they have not specifically positioned the North Natuna Sea as a primary locus for analyzing Indonesia's strategy from a defense politics perspective.

Previous research in the first phase generally shows that Indonesia's response to the South China Sea conflict is primarily interpreted as part of regional diplomacy, the ASEAN approach, and a hedging strategy against great power rivalry. Therefore, the focus of previous research remains relatively general and has not detailed how Indonesian defense policy is formulated and implemented in response to Chinese maritime pressure in the North Natuna region. A second gap lies in the tendency of previous research to discuss elements of Indonesia's response separately, for example, focusing only on diplomacy, military strengthening, defense reform, security cooperation, or domestic politics. However, the threat dynamics in the North Natuna Sea are complex and multidimensional. These threats require integration between military power, maritime law enforcement, defense diplomacy, and international legal legitimacy. To date, relatively little research has examined Indonesia's overall response as a unified defense strategy.

A study by Sudrajat et al. (2024) demonstrates the continued weakness of non-military defense coordination between institutions in Indonesia. Budiana & Djuyandi (2023) highlight the South China Sea threat to Indonesia and emphasize the importance of strengthening its defense forces. Mietzner (2023) focus more on civil-military relations and military reform within the context of Indonesian domestic politics. Indonesia has

not fully balanced China due to the influence of strategic culture, economic interests, and domestic politics (Fitriani, 2021). Zou (2023) explains the balance between Indonesia's assertiveness in Natuna and mutual restraint in bilateral relations with China. Yang et al. (2023) highlight the need for a balance between diplomacy, maritime strategy, and Indonesia's national interests. While these various studies are relevant, few have specifically examined Indonesia's strategy to deal with Chinese aggression in the North Natuna Sea from 2014 to 2023, using a defense politics perspective as the primary analytical tool.

Locally, the North Natuna Sea holds strategic significance for Indonesia as it forms part of its EEZ, rich in fishery and energy resources (Iswardhana, 2024). This region is also a real-life space where Indonesia faces direct pressure from Chinese maritime activity. The presence of Chinese fishing vessels, escorts from the China Coast Guard, interference in law enforcement, and disruption of oil and gas exploration activities demonstrate that the threat in Natuna is not an abstract one, but rather a concrete and recurring one. The Indonesian government has responded through various local and national measures, such as increased Indonesian Navy and Bakamla patrols, the development of maritime forces in Natuna, the reaffirmation of the name of the North Natuna Sea, the strengthening of the country's presence, and diplomacy that affirms Indonesia's position under UNCLOS 1982 (Alfarizi et al., 2025; Dipua et al., 2020). Therefore, the North Natuna Sea provides a highly relevant local context for assessing the extent to which Indonesian defense policy has been translated into an operational and effective strategy.

This research aims to identify the forms of Chinese aggressiveness in the North Natuna Sea from 2014–2023, analyze Indonesia's strategy in addressing this aggressiveness from a defense politics perspective, explain the relationship between defense policy, maritime law enforcement, and diplomacy in safeguarding Indonesia's sovereignty and sovereign rights, and assess the effectiveness of Indonesia's strategy in addressing Chinese maritime pressure in the North Natuna Sea. This article aims to provide an academic understanding of how Indonesia formulates and implements a strategy to address Chinese aggressiveness in the North Natuna Sea within a defense politics framework. This article also aims to enrich studies of international relations, security studies, and Indonesian defense politics, particularly those related to the threat of gray zone conflict in the maritime region. The novelty of this research lies in its specific focus, which places the North Natuna Sea as the primary arena of analysis, rather than merely a peripheral aspect of the South China Sea dispute.

This research also offers a more integrative approach by viewing Indonesia's response not only from a diplomatic or military perspective but also as a political defense strategy encompassing threat perception, strengthening defense posture, maritime law enforcement, defense diplomacy, and international legal legitimacy. Furthermore, this research focuses on the period 2014–2023, a period when Chinese pressure on

Natuna systematically increased and Indonesia demonstrated increasingly assertive and adaptive responses. Thus, this research provides a novel contribution to understanding how Indonesia manages grey zone threats in its maritime region without escalating into open conflict with a major power.

B. Methods

This research employs a qualitative, descriptive approach. This approach was chosen because the research seeks to deeply understand how Indonesia's defense policy is formulated and implemented in response to China's aggressiveness in the North Natuna Sea, particularly with regard to sovereignty interests, sovereign rights in the Exclusive Economic Zone, and maritime security. The focus of this research analysis is Indonesia's defense policy in responding to disputes in the North Natuna Sea, particularly in the aspects of policy formulation, implementation, and coordination between defense and maritime security actors in protecting national interests. The research data sources consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with informants who have knowledge and direct involvement in the policy formulation process, operational implementation, and inter-institutional coordination, such as the Ministry of Defense, the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI), Kogabwilhan I, the Natuna Integrated Task Force, and other relevant parties.

Informants were selected purposively, based on their experience, authority, and the relevance of their role to the research focus. Secondary data was obtained from various official documents, academic literature, journal articles, proceedings, credible media reports, and national and international legal documents, particularly those related to UNCLOS and the dynamics of the dispute in the North Natuna Sea. Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were used to ensure the researcher had a guideline for questions but remained flexible in exploring deeper information based on the context of the informants' responses. Documentation was used to strengthen the interview data, enrich the context of the analysis, and cross-verify the research findings. In this study, the researcher served as the primary instrument, supported by technical instruments in the form of interview guidelines, documents, recordings, and other supporting research tools.

Data analysis was conducted qualitatively by grouping, categorizing, and interpreting the data obtained based on their relevance to the research focus. The collected data were analyzed using a previously developed theoretical and conceptual framework to explain the implementation patterns of Indonesian defense policy in the North Natuna Sea. To ensure data validity, this study employed triangulation techniques, both source triangulation and method triangulation, namely by comparing the results of interviews between informants and matching them with relevant documents. This research is planned to be carried out at the central level work units and implementing

elements in the field related to Natuna security, with the research period lasting seven months.

C. Results and Discussion

The Dynamics of China's Aggressiveness in the North Natuna Sea 2014–2023

The dynamics of China's aggressiveness in the North Natuna Sea from 2014 to 2023 indicate that pressure on Indonesia has developed gradually, systematically, and fallen below the threshold of open armed conflict. In this proposal, this pressure is understood as part of a threat context that emerges through legally ambiguous actions, often labeled as law enforcement or civilian activities, but substantively challenging Indonesia's authority within its maritime jurisdiction. Thus, China's aggressiveness cannot be read simply as a series of incidental incidents but rather as a pattern of maritime contestation that reflects the nature of gray zone conflict, namely, the use of non-war instruments to exert political and strategic pressure without triggering direct military escalation. In the initial phase, around 2014–2015, China's aggressiveness pattern was more visible in the form of an increased presence of fishing vessels and escorts by the China Coast Guard in the Natuna EEZ (Putra, 2022).

During that period, these activities exhibited two main characteristics. First, China attempted to establish a routine presence as a form of normalization of activities in an area legally within Indonesia's jurisdiction (Afriansyah et al., 2024). Second, the escorts by the coast guard demonstrated that economic activities, such as fishing, were actually supported by state instruments. This is analytically important because it demonstrates that what is at stake is not simply fisheries violations, but rather efforts to shape perceptions about the validity of China's claims on the ground. The table of conflict phenomena in the proposal positions 2014 as a phase of increased Chinese fishing and coast guard presence and 2015 as a phase of shadowing and blocking maneuvers against Indonesian authorities. The escalation phase began to become apparent in 2016, particularly when China's intervention in Indonesian law enforcement demonstrated that Beijing was no longer relying solely on a superficial civilian presence but was also using the country's maritime apparatus to restrain Indonesian law enforcement. The China Coast Guard's intervention in March 2016, followed by the Indonesian Navy's warning shots incident in June 2016, marked a significant shift: the North Natuna Sea became a testing ground for Indonesia's ability to defend its sovereign rights amid increasingly coercive pressure.

In the gray zone, these interventions were not aimed at winning an open war, but rather at testing the limits of Indonesia's response and undermining the legitimacy of its law enforcement practices (McLaughlin, 2022). In 2017–2018, China's aggressiveness continued, but Indonesia's response began to produce a political and geographic counter-narrative. The naming of the area as the "North Natuna Sea" in

2017 was both a symbolic and strategic move to assert Indonesia's position within the context of international maritime law. Here, the threat dynamics are not only taking place at sea as a theater of operations but also at the level of spatial marking, geographic legitimacy, and regional diplomacy. Initial activities in the ASEAN-China Code of Conduct negotiations in 2018 demonstrated that Chinese pressure on the ground was moving alongside broader diplomatic maneuvers. This means that China's aggressiveness must be understood as a combination of operational presence, legalistic claims, and management of the regional diplomatic environment.

The peak of the escalation occurred in 2019–2021. The entry of approximately 40 Chinese fishing vessels escorted by the CCG into Natuna in December 2019, followed by the Natuna crisis in January 2020, which was directly responded to by a visit by President Joko Widodo, marked a shift in pressure from routine violations to a more massive demonstration of presence. The president's visit to Natuna was strategically significant as the country sought to emphasize that the dispute in the region was not a technical fisheries issue but rather a matter of state sovereignty and authority. In 2020–2021, the pattern of pressure also shifted to the energy sector through the activities of Chinese survey vessels and disruption of drilling in the Tuna Block. This shift indicates that China's aggressiveness is no longer solely targeting enforcement gaps in the fisheries sector but is also beginning to undermine the foundations of Indonesia's sovereign rights to explore energy resources. In other words, the threat area has evolved from a law enforcement contest to a broader jurisdictional contest.

During the consolidation phase of pressure, namely 2022–2023, China's aggressiveness was increasingly influenced by the implications of the China Coast Guard Law and the increasing complexity of interactions between maritime power, law, and diplomacy (Guo et al., 2025). Meanwhile, Indonesia responded by strengthening patrols, revising standard operating procedures (SOPs), expanding maritime exercises, and increasing cooperation with external partners such as Japan and the United States. The presence of joint patrols and exercises in 2023 demonstrates that Chinese pressure is actually encouraging the internationalization of the Natuna issue within the framework of regional stability. However, the fact that this response remains directed at strengthening its presence and defensive cooperation, rather than a formal military alliance, confirms that the threat dynamics in the North Natuna Sea remain managed under the logic of escalation control. Therefore, during 2014–2023, China's aggressiveness can be understood as a gradual strategy that tests jurisdiction, undermines law enforcement, and challenges Indonesian state authority without resorting to open warfare.

Theoretically, this dynamic is relevant to the thinking of Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, who view security and defense as the result of a political process in interpreting threats and determining legitimate and proportionate responses. China's pressure in the North Natuna Sea does not automatically constitute a threat in the conventional sense but rather a strategic one because it targets sovereign rights, state authority, and

regional stability. This is where the gray zone conflict takes on its meaning: the threat comes not in the form of a major military offensive but in repeated, ambiguous, legalistic, and political pressure, which forces the victim state to make strategic decisions in the gray area between law enforcement and defense.

Indonesia's Defense Policy in Responding to China's Aggression in the North Natuna Sea

Indonesia's defense policy in responding to China's aggressiveness in the North Natuna Sea is fundamentally shaped by the need to maintain a balance between protecting sovereignty and controlling escalation (Hanafiah et al., 2025). Within the framework of this proposal, defense policy is understood not simply as the use of military force but as a policy process that connects threat perceptions, national interests, state capacity, and the choice of response instruments. With this definition, Indonesia's response to China cannot be read simply as a series of stand-alone patrols or diplomatic protests but as an orchestration of policies that integrate elements of defense posture, maritime law enforcement, and defense diplomacy. The first foundation of Indonesia's defense policy is threat assessment and assertion of national interests (Lubis, 2022). This proposal positions Indonesia's national interests in the North Natuna Sea as protecting sovereignty, sovereign rights in the EEZ, preventing de facto control by others, protecting maritime resources, and maintaining regional stability in accordance with the principles of freedom and activity and international law.

This means that the Chinese threat is not only interpreted as a threat to territorial boundaries but also to a state's ability to regulate, enforce laws, and utilize resources within its own jurisdiction. From Barry Buzan's perspective, such a threat demands a defense response because it simultaneously touches on political, military, and economic security dimensions (Buzan & Acharya, 2021). Therefore, from the outset, Indonesia's defense policy has been directed not at maximizing confrontation, but rather at legally and strategically defending sovereign rights. The second foundation is strengthening the defense posture and the state's presence in the field. This proposal emphasizes that the implementation of defense policy is realized through strengthening defense posture, maritime law enforcement, and defense diplomacy. Strengthening the posture is intended to ensure the state's presence and preparedness as a form of deterrence and assertion of sovereignty.

In practice, this is reflected in increased patrols by the Indonesian Navy and the Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla), the strengthening of command structures such as Kogabwilhan I and the Natuna Sea Defense Forces (STT Natuna), and the adaptive deployment of defense elements in the Natuna region. This presence is strategically important because, in the context of the gray zone, a state that is not consistently present in disputed areas loses the capacity to prove and assert its authority (Azad et al., 2023). Thus, Indonesia's defense posture functions not only as a potential combat

capability but also as an instrument of the state's political presence. The third foundation is maritime law enforcement as part of defense policy. This is a crucial feature of Indonesia's response, as Chinese pressure occurs in a gray area that cannot always be responded to with pure military force. The proposal emphasizes that maritime law enforcement serves to maintain state authority over maritime jurisdiction legally and proportionally. This is where the roles of the Indonesian Navy, Bakamla (Laboratory Security Agency), the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (KKP), and other security elements become intertwined.

Responses to China's intervention in 2016, including the shadowing of survey vessels and the securing of oil and gas exploration, demonstrate Indonesia's efforts to maintain legal order at sea through enforcement instruments. Analytical, this demonstrates that Indonesia's defense policy operates on the boundary between national defense and law enforcement, so its effectiveness depends heavily on the ability to integrate the two functions. The fourth foundation is defense diplomacy and legal diplomacy. The naming of the North Natuna Sea in 2017, the affirmation of its position under UNCLOS 1982, the promotion of the ASEAN-China Code of Conduct, and security cooperation with external partners demonstrate that Indonesia's response is not solely built through its physical presence at sea but also through the production of legitimacy at the regional and international levels. The proposal emphasizes that defense diplomacy serves as a bridge between a firm defense posture and the need to maintain regional stability. In this sense, diplomacy is not a sign of weakness, but rather an instrument to ensure that actions on the ground gain broader legal and political legitimacy (Mogensen, 2020). This choice also aligns with the principle of "freedom and activity," where Indonesia seeks to maintain strategic room for maneuver without being trapped in a major power bloc.

The next aspect concerns the role of institutions and inter-institutional coordination. In the proposal, defense policy is explicitly analyzed through institutional design, role allocation, and coordination between actors such as the Ministry of Defense, the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI), Kogabwilhan I, Bakamla, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Ministry of Defense carries out the function of formulating policy and strategic direction, the TNI serves as an operational defense instrument, Kogabwilhan I acts as a command-and-control liaison in the western region, Bakamla strengthens the law enforcement dimension, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ensures diplomatic consistency. This reading is important because in gray zone disputes, fragmented authority can be exploited by adversaries (Laksmana, 2025). Therefore, the quality of Indonesia's defense policy is determined not only by the size of its defense equipment or the frequency of patrols but also by its institutional capacity to work synchronously, quickly, and credibly (Brahmana et al., 2024).

Viewed through the Buzan and Freedman framework, Indonesia's defense policy from 2014–2023 can be understood as a strategy that translates sovereignty interests, regional stability, and international legal commitments into firm but measured

policies. Indonesia does not choose a frontal balancing approach but also does not allow Chinese pressure to continue unresponsively. Instead, the country has adopted a strategy that combines limited deterrence, law enforcement, maritime law enforcement, and defense diplomacy (Suseto et al., 2026). This strategy demonstrates Indonesia's defense policy is adaptive to the nature of gray zone threats: assertive enough to assert authority, yet restrained enough to avoid open warfare and maintain regional stability.

The Effectiveness and Challenges of Indonesian Defense Policy 2014–2023

The effectiveness of Indonesia's defense policy in the 2014–2023 period cannot be measured solely by the presence or absence of open warfare but rather by the consistency between policy, implementation, and strategic outcomes achieved. This proposal explicitly defines effectiveness as the state's ability to safeguard sovereignty and sovereign rights in the North Natuna Sea, prevent the escalation of open conflict, maintain regional stability, and ensure that all state actions have political and legal legitimacy (Rahmatiah Irwan, 2025). Based on these parameters, Indonesia's defense policy can be considered to have achieved significant results, although it is not entirely free from various structural and institutional limitations. In terms of protecting sovereignty and sovereign rights, Indonesia's defense policy has been relatively effective in preventing the establishment of de facto Chinese control over the North Natuna Sea. Despite repeated intrusions, Indonesia has maintained its legal position that the area is part of Indonesia's EEZ under UNCLOS 1982. Responses such as patrols, shadowing, enforcement, oil and gas security, and the naming of the North Natuna Sea demonstrate that the state is not allowing China's claims to translate into practical authority on the ground (Panggabean et al., 2025).

In this context, effectiveness lies in the ability to maintain national and international legal order amidst repeated pressures. However, this effectiveness is defensive: Indonesia has succeeded in preventing a deterioration in its position but has not been able to completely eliminate the source of the pressure itself (Sochfan et al., 2025). In terms of escalation prevention, Indonesia's defense policy has also demonstrated some effectiveness. Throughout 2014–2023, various major incidents including the 2016 intervention, the 2019–2020 crisis, and the 2021 Tuna Block disturbance did not escalate into open armed conflict. This demonstrates that the combination of limited assertiveness and defense diplomacy can keep conflicts below the threshold of war. Strategically, Indonesia has successfully managed escalation by developing a response ladder that combines military presence, law enforcement, and diplomacy (Saputra et al., 2025). However, this success also presents a paradox: China has been able to maintain low-intensity pressure by exploiting Indonesia's preference for avoiding major escalations. Thus, escalation control is both a success and a source of vulnerability.

In terms of regional stability and legal-political legitimacy, Indonesia's policy has demonstrated quite strong results. Indonesia consistently positions itself as a country that upholds international law, refraining from claiming territory beyond its rights while remaining firm against jurisdictional violations (Kusumadara, 2022). This strengthens Indonesia's credibility with regional and international partners. Security cooperation, participation in Code of Conduct discussions, and defense diplomacy with ASEAN and external partners demonstrate that Indonesia is not merely defending itself nationally but also striving to create a strategic environment conducive to stability. This position is crucial because, in the North Natuna Sea dispute, international legitimacy serves as a multiplier for national capacity, which is materially less than China's (Syahputra & Zukriadi, 2025). However, this effectiveness is limited by significant challenges. The first challenge is the imbalance of power between Indonesia and China, both in military capacity, coast guard capabilities, and political-economic instruments (Caroline, 2021). This imbalance forces Indonesia to continually calculate the costs of escalation and cannot rely on an overly coercive approach. The second challenge is the complexity of gray zone threats. Because violations are often framed as civilian activities, law enforcement, or technical surveys, Indonesia faces difficulties in responding with a single instrument (Marzuki & Ali, 2023). The third challenge is the limited national maritime capacity, which includes the presence of assets, the integration of surveillance systems, and the continuity of patrols across a wide area. All of this requires Indonesia's response to be selective and adaptive, rather than all-encompassing. The next challenge lies in inter-agency coordination. The proposal emphasizes that inter-agency coordination and synergy are crucial variables, as security threats in the North Natuna Sea often exploit institutional gaps and overlapping authorities.

In policy practice, the division of roles between defense, law enforcement, and diplomacy often demands clarity of command, speed of response, and consistency of narrative (Wahyudi et al., 2025). Obstacles to coordination have the potential to undermine the state's effectiveness in delivering a comprehensive response. Therefore, one of the main challenges in Indonesian defense policy is not merely material limitations but the ability of governance to unite various actors into a consistent strategic design. Finally, Indonesian defense policy also faces a dilemma between assertiveness and diplomatic-economic interests. Indonesia needs stable economic relations with China but at the same time must ensure that economic dependence does not erode assertiveness on sovereignty issues. This dilemma explains why Indonesia's response often appears assertive on the ground but restrained at the diplomatic level. Within Buzan and Freedman's framework, this situation demonstrates that defense policy is always the result of political calculations, not solely military ones. During 2014–2023, the character of Indonesian defense policy can be summarized as adaptive, measured, and integrative: adaptive to the nature of gray zone threats, measured in the use of instruments to avoid triggering open war, and integrative because it combines defense posture, maritime law enforcement, and diplomacy. However, precisely because it operates in a complex gray area, its

effectiveness will always depend on the country's ability to strengthen maritime capacity and deepen institutional coordination on an ongoing basis.

D. Conclusions

This research shows that China's aggressiveness in the North Natuna Sea from 2014 to 2023 developed gradually, systematically, and consistently within the gray zone conflict spectrum. This is maritime pressure not manifested through open warfare but through the presence of fishing vessels, support from the China Coast Guard, survey vessel activity, interference with law enforcement, and disruption of resource exploration. This pattern emphasizes that the challenges facing Indonesia are not simply fisheries violations or ordinary maritime incidents, but rather a form of jurisdictional competition that directly tests Indonesia's sovereign rights, state authority, and ability to maintain legal order in the North Natuna Sea. Therefore, the conflict in this region must be understood as an ambiguous, gradual, and legalistic strategic threat, demanding a state response that is not only militaristic but also political and institutional. In responding to these conditions, Indonesia's defense policy in the 2014–2023 period was implemented through an adaptive, measured, and integrative approach. Adaptive because Indonesia tailors its response to the unconventional nature of gray zone threats; measured because the state seeks to assert sovereignty without escalating to open conflict; and integrative because the response developed combines strengthening of defense posture, Indonesian Navy and Bakamla patrols, maritime law enforcement, defense diplomacy, and affirmation of international law through UNCLOS 1982. Within this framework, Indonesian defense policy cannot be understood solely as the use of force but rather as a strategic process that connects threat perceptions, national interests, state capacity, and coordination between defense and security actors in safeguarding the North Natuna Sea. This study also found that Indonesian defense policy was relatively effective in maintaining its legal and political position in the North Natuna Sea, particularly in preventing China from establishing *de facto* control over Indonesian jurisdiction, maintaining the continuity of law enforcement, and maintaining international legitimacy. However, this effectiveness remains defensive in nature and has not fully eliminated the sources of pressure that China continues to generate. Limited maritime capacity, the power imbalance with China, the complexity of gray-zone threats, and obstacles to inter-agency coordination remain key challenges. Therefore, strengthening Indonesia's defense policy going forward needs to be directed at continuously increasing maritime capacity, improving inter-agency coordination, and strengthening strategies that maintain a balance between asserting sovereignty, regional stability, and long-term national interests.

E. Acknowledgement

We thank all stakeholders who supported us in this paper.

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