

Indonesia and Prabowo's Stand In The South China Sea

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The South China Sea dispute has always been important to Indonesia. With the start of new leadership in October 2024 under President Prabowo Subianto, the world is closely monitoring Indonesia's stand in the South China Sea. Will Indonesia be firmer towards China? Would the President (Ret.) General Prabowo Subianto provoke war in the sea? What is the overall Indonesia's forthcoming approach to regional security?

During the presidential candidate debate, Prabowo underscored the imperative of bolstering maritime defense capabilities in

the North Natuna Sea.¹ Prabowo highlighted his intent to keep Indonesia's stand independent of Beijing and Washington.² China's gesture to invite Prabowo prior to his confirmation by the

¹ East Asia Forum. February 13, 2024. Assessing Indonesia's potential presidents' South China Sea strategies. See <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/02/13/assessing-indonesiaspotential-presidents-south-china-sea-strategies/>

² Benarnews.org. May 13, 2024. Prabowo terapkan "Asian Way" dalam kebijakan luar negeri. <https://www.benarnews.org/indonesian/berita/asian-way-prabowo05132024121958.html>

Constitutional Court as Indonesia's elected president, showcased China's determination to start early and seal a deal, most likely to ensure that Indonesia is cooperative to China.³ One thing for sure, though, Indonesia would underline the narrative of "protecting territorial integrity".

Looking at the context, we know that the situation in the South China Sea did not escalate overnight. Careful action is key for Indonesia. Indonesia values regional stability, the promotion of active cooperation as opposed to confrontation, and to refrain from the threat or use of force in time of any disputes. Indonesia takes note of territorial violations committed by foreign fishing vessels (IUU fishing) and the Chinese Coast Guard in the Indonesian Exclusive Economic Zone. Indonesia called the diplomatic authorities from China and the violating neighboring countries to stop the violation.⁴

Indonesia also initiated forums and meetings in Southeast Asia and beyond to discuss ways to tame IUU fishing. In

facing the military power contest between the US and China, Indonesia pushed ASEAN to issue the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019. But knowing that military presence is also important, President Jokowi intervened multiple times by attending war exercises in the waters of Natuna in 2017.⁵ Diplomatic protests have also been sent, and by 2020, the Natuna Sea area was on Combat Alert. President Jokowi stated that there would be no compromise in defending Indonesia's sovereignty regarding China's claims over the Natuna waters.⁶ Indonesia conducted naval exercises by deploying three warships and dispatching transport aircraft for training in the North Natuna Sea. These exercises took place on April 24-26, 2024, aimed at enhancing military capacity and readiness to address various maritime situations and to activate combat mode. Indonesia also reviewed the readiness of defense and military forces stationed on Laut Island and Sekatung Island, which directly border the waters of the 9-dash line claimed by China, spanning Malaysia, Brunei

³ Kompas.com. April 4, 2024. Pengamat: China undang Prabowo karena ingin curi "start".
<https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2024/04/04/17084641/pengamat-china-undangprabowo-karena-ingin-curi-start?page=all>

⁴ Liputan6.com. August 31, 2019. Tak terima Natuna dimasuki kapal asing, Kemlu panggil Dubes China untuk protes.
<https://www.liputan6.com/global/read/4145293/tak-terimanatuna-dimasuki-kapal-asing-kemlu-panggil-dubes-china-untuk-protes>

⁵ Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia. May 19, 2017. Ke Natuna, Presiden Jokowi Saksikan Latihan Perang TNI. 2017. See <https://setkab.go.id/ke-natuna-presiden-jokowi-saksikan-latihan-perang-tni/>

⁶ Kompas. January 6, 2020. Jokowi soal Natuna: Tak Ada Tawar-menawar mengenai Kedaulatan Kita. See <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/01/06/14213021/jokowi-soalnatuna-tak-ada-tawar-menawar-mengenai-kedaulatan-kita>

Darussalam, and Vietnam.⁷ This year, Indonesia has also reactivated regional cooperation by hosting joint military exercises with Indo-Pacific countries in Super Garuda Shield, attended by representatives from 18 friendly nations including Indonesia as the host, the United States, Australia, Japan, India, Canada, Korea, Australia, Germany, France, Britain, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Singapore, Malaysia, Timor-Leste, Vietnam, and Thailand. These exercises have been ongoing for a long time and have become Indonesia's annual agenda.⁸ Most likely President Prabowo would continue such a reaction - a careful but active stand in the South China Sea.

Surely, we must be on guard for what's in store in the South China Sea. On May 13, 2024, the Philippines deployed its vessels to the disputed area to monitor illegal activities by China. Sabina Shoal, also known as Escoda Shoal, has been the site of China's island reclamation activities since mid-April 2024.⁹ Article 60 (8)

⁷ Antara. May 13, 2024. April 28, 2024. Three navy vessels join combat preparedness drill in North Natuna Sea. See <https://en.antaranews.com/news/312000/three-navy-vessels-joincombat-preparedness-drill-in-north-natuna-sea>

⁸ Official Website of the Indonesian National Army. January 29, 2024. Jelang Latihan Super Garuda Shield 2024, Ini Yang Disiapkan TNI. See <https://tni.mil.id/view-236492-jelanglatihan-sup-er-garuda-shield-2024-ini-yang-disiapkan-tni.html>

⁹ CNBC Indonesia. May 13, 2024. Panas! Pulau Buatan China Tiba-Tiba Muncul di Dekat

UNCLOS 1982 stated: Artificial islands, installations and structures do not possess the status of islands. They have no territorial sea of their own, and their presence does not affect the delimitation of the territorial sea, the exclusive economic zone or the continental shelf.¹⁰ Although international law has not significantly prohibited reclamation activities, the Philippines has a series of national laws prohibiting island reclamation within its territory.¹¹

As the world's largest archipelago, Indonesia reiterated its strong commitment to advocate the implementation of UNCLOS.¹² Indonesia would employ a diplomatic approach, and it will never declare itself as a claimant state in the South China Sea, as questioned by several countries. This stance is grounded in Indonesia's status as the rightful owner of

RI. see <https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/news/20240513141549-4-537630/panas-pulaubuatan-china-tiba-tiba-muncul-di-dekat-ri>

¹⁰ UN Official site. UNCLOS. see https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/part5.html

¹¹ Philippine Law Site. April 05, 2022. CENTRAL BAY RECLAMATION AND DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION, PETITIONER, VS. COMMISSION ON AUDIT AND THE PHILIPPINE RECLAMATION AUTHORITY, RESPONDENTS. see https://lawphil.net/judjuris/juri2022/apr2022/gr_252940_2022.html

¹² Kementerian Luar Negeri RI. December 11, 2019. Indonesia reaffirmed its commitment to UNCLOS. See <https://kemlu.go.id/newyork-un/en/news/3674/indonesia-reaffirmed-itscommitment-to-unclos>

its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) under the UNCLOS, a treaty also signed by China, thereby acknowledging Indonesia's sovereignty.¹³ While Indonesia is committed to defending its territory, it will actively avoid the use of force to prevent further escalation of conflict, recognizing that these waters are not only vital for Indonesia but also for its neighboring countries and the ASEAN region as a whole. Furthermore, Prabowo recognizes China as Indonesia's primary defense partner and is committed to enhancing defense industry cooperation. The world need not harbor concerns about Indonesia's stand in foreign affairs.¹⁴

Highlights

- Prabowo's decision to visit China underscores the close partnership built over the past decade under Jokowi's leadership, during which China became Indonesia's primary trading partner, supplying natural resources such as nickel and coal. He discussed the possibility of strengthening cooperation in

various fields such as economy, trade, maritime security, and poverty alleviation.¹⁵

- Chinese media coverage differs from that of Indonesia, as Indonesia perceives Prabowo's departure as that of the Minister of Defense, while Chinese media depicts it as a visit by the elected president.
- Apart from visiting China, Prabowo also made trips to Japan and Malaysia. Thus, the objective of these visits pertains to Indonesia's approach towards strategic economic partnerships. Given that Japan is Indonesia's key economic ally and Malaysia will become Chair of ASEAN in 2025.¹⁶

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¹⁴ The Diplomat. April 02, 2024. Indonesia's Prabowo Meets China's Xi on First Visit Since Election. See <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/indonesias-prabowo-meets-chinas-xi-onfirst-visit-since-election/>

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¹⁶ The Jakarta Post. April 5, 2024. Prabowo extends Asia tour with Malaysia stopover. See <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2024/04/05/prabowo-extends-asia-tour-withmalaysia-stopover.html>

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