

The Strategic Posture of the Indonesian Navy in Responding to BRICS Maritime Geopolitics Across Indonesia's Trouble Spot Waters

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ABSTRACT

The strategic dynamics of Indonesia's maritime security are increasingly shaped by three contested areas: the North Natuna Sea, the Ambalat block, and the waters surrounding West Papua. In parallel, the rise of BRICS as a multipolar maritime actor introduces new challenges and opportunities for Indonesia's naval strategy. This study analyzes how the Indonesian Navy adapts its strategic posture to respond to BRICS-related maritime geopolitics in these trouble spots. Using a qualitative approach, it draws on official doctrinal documents, defence and maritime security policies, and relevant academic literature, analyzed thematically. The findings indicate evolving patterns of maritime pressure linked to BRICS actors, gaps between doctrinal aspirations and operational deployment, and the need for more agile and diplomatically integrated naval strategies. This research affirms that strengthening Indonesia's maritime strategy in response to BRICS is crucial for protecting sovereign rights and securing sea lines of communication in an increasingly multipolar Indo-Pacific

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's maritime security is fundamentally shaped by three strategic sea areas that have long been recognized as national "trouble spots": the North Natuna Sea, the Ambalat block in the Sulawesi Sea, and the waters surrounding West Papua, all of which lie astride vital archipelagic sea lanes and regional sea lines of communication. These maritime zones occupy a pivotal position within Indonesia's archipelagic framework, intersecting with the main Archipelagic Sea Lanes (ALKI) that connect the Indian and Pacific Oceans and channel international shipping through narrow chokepoints such as the Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar Straits, thereby elevating both their economic value and strategic vulnerability. In this context, the configuration of Indonesia's archipelagic routes and chokepoints does not merely serve national connectivity, but also anchors regional stability and global trade, making any disturbance in these waters a direct challenge to Indonesia's sovereignty and broader Indo Pacific security.

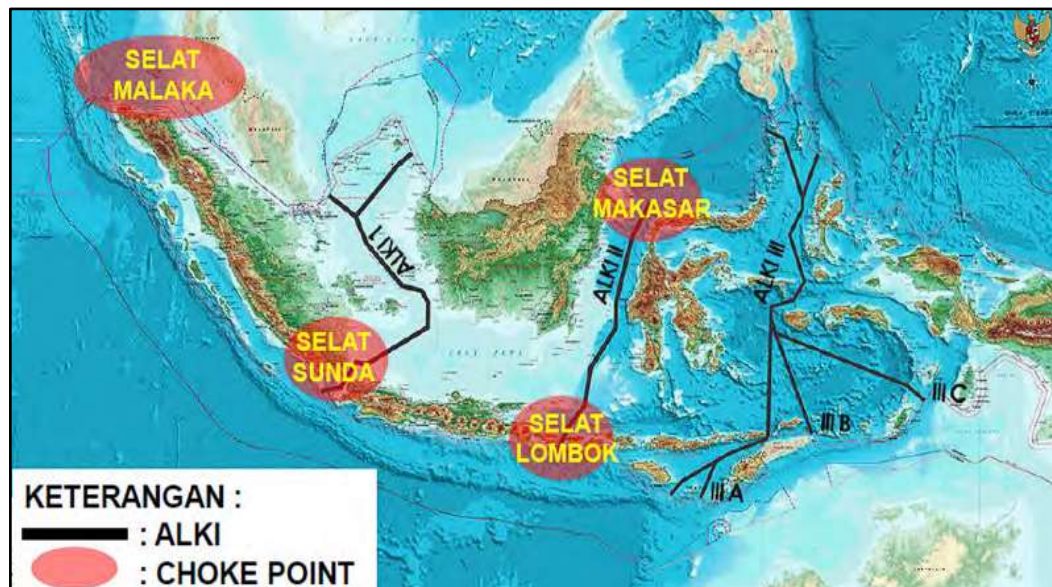


Figure 1. Archipelagic Sea Lanes (ALKI) and Main chokepoints of Indonesia.

Source: Marsetio, *Sea Power Indonesia di Era Indo Pasifik*, 2014

At the same time, the North Natuna Sea has become a focal point where unilateral maritime claims intersect with Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone, creating friction between legally recognized boundaries under UNCLOS 1982 and expansive interpretations of historic rights in the South China Sea. Similar patterns of overlapping claims and contestation are visible in Ambalat and the waters off West Papua, where external interests in energy resources, fisheries, and strategic sea lanes intensify the complexity of Indonesia's maritime environment and test the effectiveness of deterrence, law enforcement, and crisis management at sea. Previous studies indicate that these overlapping claims and recurring incidents generate negative perceptions among local maritime communities who experience operational disruptions, while, on the other hand,

they also trigger efforts by the Indonesian state to strengthen presence, patrols, and cooperative mechanisms with regional partners.



Figure 2. Overlapping Claims in the South China Sea and Adjacent Waters.
Source: Marsetio, *Sea Power Indonesia di Era Indo Pasifik*, 2014

The emergence of BRICS as a consolidated multipolar actor with growing maritime projection further amplifies the strategic weight of these Indonesian waters, as naval deployments, exercises, and defence cooperation associated with BRICS actors increasingly intersect with Indonesia's national interests and legal maritime zones. The Indonesian Navy is thus required to continuously adapt its strategic posture to manage both the risks and opportunities arising from BRICS related maritime geopolitics in these trouble spots, including by recalibrating force deployment, enhancing maritime domain awareness, and strengthening defence diplomacy. This adaptive process is not limited to the physical dimension of fleet development, but also extends to doctrinal refinement and the integration of comprehensive maritime security concepts that combine hard power, law enforcement, and cooperative security measures.

Through a calibrated and participatory approach involving the Navy, other state institutions, and international partners, Indonesia is encouraged to assume a more proactive role in shaping the governance of these contested maritime spaces while upholding its free and active foreign policy. Naval strategy in this regard encompasses not only the protection of sovereignty and sovereign rights, but also the promotion of stability, confidence building, and rules based order in key sea lanes that are indispensable for regional prosperity. By placing the strategic potential and vulnerability of the North Natuna Sea, Ambalat, and the waters surrounding West Papua at the centre of its maritime policy, Indonesia seeks to transform these areas from arenas of dispute into secure and well governed maritime spaces, reflecting a broader aspiration to build an inclusive and sustainable maritime security architecture in the Indo Pacific.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of Indonesia's maritime strategy is rooted in classical and contemporary perspectives on sea power, maritime security, and geopolitical dynamics. Classical theory emphasizes that control over sea lanes and chokepoints determines national strength and strategic influence. This foundational view remains relevant in explaining Indonesia's focus on safeguarding its archipelagic sea lanes and maritime trouble spots.

Contemporary maritime security frameworks expand this perspective into a multidimensional concept. Christian Bueger (2015) conceptualizes maritime security as encompassing military, legal, economic, and environmental dimensions, while Christian Le Mière (2014) highlights the importance of maritime diplomacy and cooperative mechanisms in mitigating tensions. These approaches are particularly relevant for Indonesia, which must balance sovereignty enforcement with regional cooperation in contested waters.

Empirical studies demonstrate that Indonesia faces persistent maritime security challenges. Chapsos and Malcolm (2017) argue that Indonesia requires a comprehensive and integrated maritime security agenda, combining defense, law enforcement, and governance. Marliani (2024) identifies ongoing issues in the North Natuna Sea, including illegal fishing, overlapping claims, and external pressures. Legal analysis by Jaya et al. (2023) reinforces Indonesia's sovereign rights under UNCLOS 1982, providing a strong legal basis for maritime enforcement and strategic positioning.

The geopolitical dimension has intensified with the emergence of multipolar dynamics, particularly the rise of BRICS. Vrej (2017) introduces the concept of "Blue BRICS," highlighting its growing maritime influence, while Triharyono et al. (2025) and Bay (2025) examine the implications of Indonesia's engagement with BRICS for national defense strategy. These studies suggest that BRICS presents both opportunities for cooperation and challenges related to strategic competition and alignment.

Operational and strategic aspects of Indonesia's maritime defense are also widely discussed. Octavian et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of sea control in strategic straits to support the total defense system. Budiman (2023) highlights the role of maritime domain awareness in strengthening naval effectiveness. Meanwhile, Inkiriwang (2021) and Paramasatya and Poespojoedho (2019) underline the significance of defense diplomacy and naval engagement in managing regional conflicts, particularly in the South China Sea.

Non-traditional threats further complicate maritime security. Milushev and Panev (2018) describe hybrid threats as complex challenges combining conventional and unconventional methods, requiring adaptive and integrated responses. This is reflected in Indonesia's experience with illegal fishing and external intervention, as discussed by Pradana and Syafrinaldi (2018) and Kusumadewi and Adiaستی (2018), which highlight the geopolitical implications of law enforcement in maritime zones.

Energy security and resource competition also play a significant role. Yusgiantoro et al. (2024) emphasize the linkage between energy security and

maritime boundaries, particularly in border areas such as Natuna. These dynamics require policies that integrate economic and security considerations.

From a broader strategic perspective, Indonesia's ambition to become a global maritime fulcrum is widely recognized. Suharyo (2022) and Pratiwi et al. (2021) highlight Indonesia's role as a middle power navigating between major geopolitical initiatives, while Wuwung et al. (2024) stress the importance of balancing economic development with maritime security and environmental sustainability.

Institutional capacity and governance are equally critical. Saragih (2016) emphasizes defense management as a key factor in strengthening national defense strategy, while Ambarwati (2025) highlights the importance of regional cooperation and institutional coordination in addressing maritime tensions. These perspectives underscore the need for strong, adaptive, and integrated governance systems.

Methodologically, qualitative approaches are commonly used in maritime security studies. Kallio et al. (2016) provide a framework for developing semi-structured interviews, ensuring systematic and reliable data collection in strategic research contexts.

Overall, the literature indicates that Indonesia's maritime strategy must integrate legal, military, economic, and diplomatic dimensions while adapting to evolving geopolitical dynamics. However, a gap remains between doctrinal aspirations and operational implementation, particularly in responding to BRICS-related maritime geopolitics. This study addresses this gap by offering an integrated analysis of Indonesia's naval strategic posture in key maritime trouble spots within a multipolar Indo-Pacific environment.

METHODS

The study employs a qualitative approach focusing on three Indonesian maritime trouble spots: the North Natuna Sea, the Ambalat block, and the waters surrounding West Papua, which are characterised by overlapping claims, grey zone activities, and increasing great power naval presence. Data collection combines document analysis of Indonesian Navy doctrine and strategic assessments, national defence and maritime security regulations, operational reports, and academic works on sea power, maritime geopolitics, and BRICS. Semi structured interviews with selected naval officers, defence planners, and maritime security experts complement the documents and are used to refine problem mapping, identify operational constraints, and clarify strategic choices in the three areas, ensuring that the analysis captures both doctrinal intent and practical realities.

One important reference comes from Mahan (1890), which explains how sea power and control of strategic sea lanes shape national strength and naval strategy, while Till (2018) and Gray (2018) underline the contemporary relevance of seapower and maritime geopolitics for navies operating in the Indo Pacific. The conceptual approach also draws on Bueger (2015), who frames maritime security as a comprehensive, multidimensional agenda linking military, legal,

economic, and environmental aspects, and on Le Mière (2014), who emphasises maritime diplomacy and cooperative mechanisms in managing tensions at sea.

This is supported by Hoffman's (2007) notion of hybrid threats and Kondra and Hurst's (2009) concept of strategic readiness, which together highlight the need for institutional capacity, clear division of roles, and cross sector coordination in formulating an effective naval strategy. By combining empirical data and these theoretical perspectives, the method provides an integrative yet concise basis for analysing and recommending Indonesia's naval strategy in BRICS related contested waters.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The development of Indonesia's maritime security posture in the BRICS era cannot be separated from the active role of the Indonesian Navy and the support of broader defence and diplomatic institutions. The three selected areas the North Natuna Sea, the Ambalat block, and the waters surrounding West Papua provide concrete examples of how strategic assessments, operational deployments, and defence diplomacy interact in responding to evolving maritime pressures. Through the analysis of doctrinal documents, policy papers, operational records, and expert interviews, this study identifies patterns of adaptation that aim not only to maintain sovereignty and law enforcement, but also to shape Indonesia's identity as a credible maritime power in a multipolar Indo Pacific. The following sections present the main results and discussion of the study, organised into several key thematic aspects.

The Dynamics of BRICS as a Driver of Strategic Maritime Adaptation

Indonesia's maritime defence posture in the BRICS era is increasingly shaped by the interaction between great power competition and national interests in key sea areas such as the North Natuna Sea, the Ambalat block, and the waters surrounding West Papua. In these waters, overlapping maritime claims, grey zone activities, and the growing naval presence of major powers create a complex environment that tests the readiness and flexibility of the Indonesian Navy. The consolidation of BRICS as a multipolar grouping with expanding economic and security agendas in the Indo Pacific acts as a driver that accelerates strategic recalibration, forcing Indonesia to reassess how it balances deterrence, cooperation, and the protection of sea lines of communication.

This adaptive spirit is visible in various strategic initiatives that combine doctrinal refinement, force development, and diplomatic engagement. The strengthening of the Integrated Fleet Weapon System, the emphasis on archipelagic sea lanes and chokepoints, and the intensification of maritime cooperation with multiple partners reflect an effort to position Indonesia as a credible maritime fulcrum rather than a passive object of great power rivalry. Although constraints in capability, technology, and resources remain, the Indonesian Navy increasingly views BRICS dynamics not only as a source of risk, but also as an opportunity to diversify partnerships, access defence technology, and enhance its role in regional security architectures.

From Disputed Waters to Strategic Maritime Space

Transforming the North Natuna Sea, the Ambalat block, and the waters around West Papua from mere zones of dispute into deliberately managed strategic maritime spaces requires both political will and institutional support. An important initial step is the systematic mapping of threats and interests in each area, ranging from traditional military risks and overlapping claims to non traditional challenges such as illegal fishing, smuggling, and grey zone operations. In this context, the Indonesian Navy functions as a key actors in coordinating surveillance, presence operations, and confidence building measures that aim to reduce escalation while asserting Indonesia's sovereign rights.

Strategic discussions among naval planners, defence agencies, and maritime law experts have gradually produced a shared understanding of the direction of Indonesia's maritime strategy vis à vis BRICS. One tangible outcome is the growing attention to the alignment between doctrine, force deployment, and diplomatic initiatives in the three trouble spots. There is increasing recognition that maintaining a purely reactive posture is insufficient; instead, Indonesia must shape the environment through proactive patrol patterns, joint exercises, and calibrated engagement with BRICS members and other partners.

Nevertheless, this transformation cannot be achieved instantly. Moving from a predominantly dispute driven mindset toward a strategic management approach requires stages: improving maritime domain awareness, strengthening inter agency coordination, developing scenario-based planning, and enhancing crisis management mechanisms. Challenges such as limited platforms, gaps in information sharing, and budget constraints demand long term, adaptive planning that integrates defence, diplomacy, and law enforcement perspectives.

Revitalising Maritime Defence Capacity through Strategic and Institutional Innovation

Indonesia's coastal and archipelagic communities, especially around key sea lanes and chokepoints, have long depended on maritime resources and shipping activities for their livelihoods, making local stability an integral part of national maritime security. In parallel, the Indonesian Navy has gradually developed a network of bases, patrol routes, and supporting infrastructure in and around the three trouble spots, forming the backbone of its ability to respond to contingencies. This network, together with small scale economic activities and local governance structures, constitutes an important form of strategic capital in building a resilient maritime security architecture.

Institutional and strategic innovation is increasingly visible through the diversification of defence cooperation, capability upgrades, and the use of new analytical tools in planning processes. Defence diplomacy with BRICS members and other partners, participation in multilateral naval exercises, and the exploration of alternative sources of defence technology illustrate efforts to avoid over dependence on any single supplier while enhancing interoperability. At the same time, the integration of qualitative analytical tools and scenario based

assessments in planning helps the Indonesian Navy to better anticipate future risks and opportunities in the three maritime areas.

This approach shows that revitalising maritime defence capacity is not merely about adding new platforms or weapons systems. It is also about increasing organisational awareness of innovation, collaboration, and sustainability in the use of limited resources. Local realities such as community dependence on fisheries, port activities, and small scale trade must be taken into account so that security measures reinforce, rather than undermine, economic resilience and social cohesion around the troubled waters.

Strengthening Naval Governance within a Modern Maritime State

Effective management of maritime trouble spots within the framework of a modern maritime state requires adaptive, transparent, and well coordinated institutions. This underscores the importance of strengthening naval governance mechanisms from strategic planning units to operational commands as the spearhead for implementing Indonesia's maritime strategy. While existing structures already provide a basic framework for command and control, continuous mentoring and institutional refinement are needed in areas such as joint planning, intelligence fusion, and inter agency cooperation.

The success of Indonesia's maritime strategy cannot be separated from sound governance practices. Naval institutions must be capable of translating strategic documents into clear rules of engagement, standard operating procedures, and measurable operational priorities. They must also be able to cultivate partnerships with other national agencies, regional organisations, and external partners, particularly in information sharing, capacity building, and maritime law enforcement. Strong and accountable institutions enable the professional management of contested maritime spaces and support Indonesia's credibility as a provider of regional security.

As a state that aspires to be a global maritime fulcrum, Indonesia needs its strategic maritime areas to align with principles of sustainable and inclusive development. Maritime security in the North Natuna Sea, Ambalat, and the waters surrounding West Papua must therefore consider environmental protection, community welfare, and long term economic viability alongside traditional defence requirements. In this perspective, the Indonesian Navy is not only a technical executor of operations at sea but also a strategic actor in national maritime governance and regional order building.

Thus, transforming contested waters into strategic maritime spaces is not limited to deterrence or the projection of naval power. It forms part of Indonesia's broader transition toward a more proactive, just, and empowered maritime future. The strategic "spirit" that drives adaptation in the Indonesian Navy and other institutions must continue to flow into governance practices so that the benefits of maritime development and security are felt not only in political and economic centres, but also along the vulnerable yet vital maritime frontiers.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Indonesia's maritime security environment is increasingly shaped by the intersection of traditional territorial disputes and emerging multipolar dynamics, particularly with the growing influence of BRICS in the Indo-Pacific. The North Natuna Sea, the Ambalat block, and the waters surrounding West Papua remain critical "trouble spots" where overlapping claims, grey-zone activities, and intensified naval presence create persistent strategic challenges. Within this context, the Indonesian Navy plays a central role in safeguarding sovereignty, maintaining sea lines of communication, and supporting regional stability.

The findings demonstrate that Indonesia's naval strategic posture is undergoing gradual adaptation through doctrinal refinement, force development, and the expansion of defence diplomacy. However, a gap persists between doctrinal ambitions and operational capabilities, particularly in terms of platform availability, technological readiness, and inter-agency coordination. These limitations highlight the need for more agile, integrated, and forward-looking strategies.

The study confirms that effective maritime security in a multipolar environment requires a comprehensive approach that integrates military strength, legal enforcement, and diplomatic engagement. Strengthening maritime domain awareness, enhancing institutional coordination, and promoting scenario-based planning are essential steps in improving strategic responsiveness. In addition, the transformation of contested waters into well-managed strategic maritime spaces requires sustained commitment to governance reform, capacity building, and inclusive development.

Furthermore, BRICS-related maritime dynamics should not be viewed solely as a source of risk but also as an opportunity for Indonesia to diversify partnerships, enhance defence cooperation, and strengthen its role in regional security architecture. By adopting a proactive and adaptive naval strategy, Indonesia can better align its national interests with broader Indo-Pacific stability.

In conclusion, reinforcing the Indonesian Navy's strategic posture is essential for ensuring maritime sovereignty and resilience. A balanced approach that combines deterrence, cooperation, and governance innovation will enable Indonesia to effectively navigate the complexities of contemporary maritime geopolitics and advance its vision as a global maritime fulcrum.

FURTHER STUDY

This study still has limitations, so further research on The Strategic Posture of the Indonesian Navy in Responding to BRICS Maritime Geopolitics Across Indonesia's Trouble Spot Waters is needed to refine this study and enhance the insights of readers and the authors.

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