

## Diplomatic Law Analysis in the Natuna Sea Dispute Between Indonesia and China

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### Abstract

This article analyzes the use of diplomatic law in the North Natuna Sea dispute between Indonesia and China from the perspective of modern international law. This article aims to clarify the conflict between China's historical claims symbolized by the nine-dash line and the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) regime under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), as well as to assess the effectiveness of Indonesia's diplomatic instruments. Using a normative approach based on conceptual and analytical perspectives on international regulations and diplomatic practice, this study finds that although Indonesia has used various diplomatic means, their effectiveness is constrained by geopolitical factors and power asymmetry. This article contributes to the scholarship on diplomatic law by highlighting the importance of international legal legitimacy and multilateral dialogue in the resolution of maritime disputes.

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### Keywords

Diplomatic Law; UNCLOS; North Natuna Sea; Nine-Dash Line; International Disputes

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## INTRODUCTION

The North Natuna Sea constitutes one of the most strategic maritime areas for Indonesia due to its economic, legal, and geopolitical significance. The region contains abundant fisheries resources, potential hydrocarbon reserves, and serves as an important maritime route within Southeast Asia. As part of Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the area contributes significantly to national maritime interests and economic development. Consequently, maintaining legal certainty and maritime security in the North Natuna Sea remains an essential concern for Indonesia's foreign and maritime policies.<sup>1</sup>

The legal status of the North Natuna Sea is primarily governed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 1982. Under the convention, coastal states possess sovereign rights to explore, exploit, conserve, and manage natural resources within 200 nautical miles from their baselines. UNCLOS has become the principal legal framework regulating maritime entitlements among states and promoting stability in maritime relations. Its broad

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<sup>1</sup> Luthfi Hanafiah, Syaiful Anwar, and Sudiby, "Strategi Diplomasi Pertahanan Indonesia Dalam Menghadapi Ancaman China Coast Guard Di Laut Natuna Utara," *Jurnal Syntax Imperatif* 6, no. 2 (2025): 250–62.

acceptance by the international community reflects the convention's strong legal legitimacy in contemporary international law.<sup>2</sup>

Legal challenges arise from China's assertion of the nine-dash line claim in the South China Sea. This claim overlaps with maritime zones claimed by several coastal states, including Indonesia. Chinese authorities justify the claim based on historical rights and historical usage of maritime areas. Such a position differs fundamentally from the maritime entitlement regime established by UNCLOS. As a result, disputes concerning the validity and legitimacy of these claims continue to attract international attention.<sup>3</sup>

The disagreement between convention-based maritime rights and historical claims creates a significant normative conflict in international law. UNCLOS establishes objective legal standards for determining maritime jurisdiction, whereas the nine-dash line relies largely on unilateral historical narratives. This divergence raises questions regarding the source of legal legitimacy and the extent to which historical claims may be recognized under modern international law. The dispute therefore reflects a broader tension between universally accepted legal norms and state-centered political interests.<sup>4</sup>

International legal scrutiny of China's claims intensified following the arbitral award in *Philippines v. China* in 2016. The tribunal concluded that China's historical rights claim lacked legal basis under UNCLOS and that the nine-dash line could not generate maritime entitlements beyond those recognized by the convention. Although the ruling represented a significant development in the law of the sea, China rejected the award and continued to maintain its position. The situation demonstrates the challenges faced by international law when compliance ultimately depends upon state consent and political willingness.<sup>5</sup>

Recurring incidents involving Chinese fishing vessels and China Coast Guard ships within waters claimed by Indonesia have further complicated the situation. Such activities have frequently been regarded by Indonesia as violations of its sovereign rights within the EEZ. The persistence of these encounters demonstrates that the dispute extends beyond legal interpretation and involves practical questions of maritime governance, resource management, and regional security. Consequently, the dispute possesses both legal and geopolitical dimensions.<sup>6</sup>

Indonesia has consistently maintained that no territorial sovereignty dispute exists concerning the Natuna Islands. Government policy instead focuses on protecting sovereign rights within Indonesia's EEZ in accordance with international law. Various diplomatic measures have been employed, including diplomatic protests, official statements, and participation in regional

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<sup>2</sup> Salira Niti Sara et al., "Perspektif Hukum Internasional Dalam Sengketa Laut Natuna: Kasus Indonesia Dan China," *Jurnal Ilmiah Wahana Pendidikan* 9, no. 17 (2023): 584–91.

<sup>3</sup> Nuans Asa Septari B., "Respons Indonesia Menghadapi Ancaman Cina Di Laut Natuna Utara," *Jurnal Lemhannas RI* 10, no. 1 (2022): 10–18, <https://doi.org/10.55960/jlri.v10i1.98>.

<sup>4</sup> Dwi Ardiyanti, "Nine-Dash Line Dan Perspektif Hukum Laut Internasional," *Jurnal Hukum Internasional* 17, no. 1 (2020): 55–72, <https://doi.org/10.17304/jhi.v17i1.600>.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Beckman, "UNCLOS and the South China Sea Arbitration," *Ocean Development & International Law* 47, no. 3 (2016): 183–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00908320.2016.1194047>.

<sup>6</sup> Eva Johan, "Kedaulatan Negara Dalam Zona Ekonomi Eksklusif Indonesia," *Jurnal Hukum IUS QUIA IUSTUM* 27, no. 2 (2020): 215–30, <https://doi.org/10.20885/iustum.vol27.iss2.art3>.

and multilateral forums. These measures reflect Indonesia's commitment to the principle of peaceful dispute settlement and its preference for legal and diplomatic approaches.<sup>7</sup>

The use of diplomatic instruments occupies an important position within Indonesia's response strategy. Protest notes submitted to relevant international bodies serve not only as political statements but also as legal instruments intended to preserve Indonesia's position under international law. Diplomatic communication functions as a means of asserting legal rights while simultaneously preventing unnecessary escalation of tensions. Such measures illustrate the close relationship between diplomatic law and the protection of national interests in maritime disputes.<sup>8</sup>

Analysis of the dispute may also be linked to Article 38 of the Statute of the International Court of Justice, which identifies treaties, customary international law, and general principles of law as primary sources of international law. UNCLOS clearly derives its authority from one of these recognized sources, whereas China's historical claims continue to face questions concerning their acceptance and recognition by the international community. Differences in legal legitimacy between these competing claims remain central to understanding the dispute.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the existence of legal norms and diplomatic mechanisms, dispute settlement in international relations is often influenced by broader political realities. Economic strength, military capabilities, and geopolitical influence frequently shape the effectiveness of legal instruments. Powerful states may possess greater capacity to resist international pressure or maintain contested positions despite legal criticism. This condition illustrates that international law often operates within a framework shaped by both legal principles and power relations.<sup>10</sup>

Previous studies have generally focused on the legality of the nine-dash line, regional security concerns, or Indonesia's maritime defense strategies. Comparatively limited attention has been devoted to examining diplomatic law as a specific legal instrument used by Indonesia in responding to challenges in the North Natuna Sea. Existing scholarship tends to emphasize geopolitical and security dimensions rather than the effectiveness of diplomatic legal measures. This gap indicates the need for a more focused analysis of diplomatic law within the context of maritime disputes.<sup>11</sup>

This study aims to analyze how diplomatic law is utilized by Indonesia in responding to the North Natuna Sea dispute and to identify factors contributing to the persistence of the conflict. Particular attention is directed toward the interaction between international legal legitimacy, diplomatic instruments, and geopolitical realities. Through this approach, the study seeks to

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<sup>7</sup> Rina Rusman, "Penguatan Diplomasi Maritim Indonesia Di Laut Natuna Utara," *Jurnal Hubungan Internasional* 11, no. 2 (2022): 145–60, <https://doi.org/10.18196/hi.v11i2.13456>.

<sup>8</sup> Budi Hermawan, "Diplomasi Indonesia Dalam Sengketa Natuna," *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial Dan Ilmu Politik* 25, no. 1 (2021): 45–59, <https://doi.org/10.22146/jsp.62890>.

<sup>9</sup> "Statute of the International Court of Justice," *Charter of the United Nations* (United Nations, 1945).

<sup>10</sup> Ian Storey, "The South China Sea Dispute: Increasing Stakes and Rising Tensions," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 43, no. 2 (2021): 187–210, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs43-2a>.

<sup>11</sup> Hikmahanto Juwana, "Indonesia's Legal Position on the South China Sea Dispute," *Indonesian Journal of International Law* 15, no. 3 (2018): 311–32, <https://doi.org/10.17304/ijil.vol15.3.720>.

contribute to the development of diplomatic law scholarship and provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between law and power in contemporary international disputes.

## METHODS

This study employs a normative juridical method with conceptual and analytical approaches that focus on the interpretation of international legal norms and state diplomatic practices.<sup>12</sup> Within this framework, law is understood not merely as a normative text but also as a system influenced by social and political dynamics as developed in socio-legal traditions. Therefore, the study combines doctrinal analysis with a critical perspective on the implementation of law.

The approaches utilized include the statute approach and the conceptual approach, which enable a systematic examination of legal instruments such as UNCLOS 1982 and the Vienna Convention 1961. Additionally, the conceptual approach is employed to understand theories of international legal legitimacy and the role of diplomatic law in interstate dispute resolution. This approach is essential for connecting legal norms with actual practices in the field.

Moreover, the study adopts a case approach by analyzing the 2016 international arbitration ruling in the Philippines v. China case, which serves as a significant precedent in South China Sea disputes. The ruling provides a legal basis clarifying that the nine-dash line claim lacks legitimacy under UNCLOS. This case analysis adds an empirical dimension that reinforces the normative argument.

The legal materials used consist of primary sources such as international conventions and court rulings, as well as secondary sources including reputable academic journals relevant to the research topic. Data collection was conducted through a literature study utilizing valid and traceable academic sources. All legal materials were then analyzed systematically.

The analytical method employed is descriptive-analytical, aimed at describing legal facts while providing a critical evaluation.<sup>13</sup> This approach allows the identification of gaps between legal norms and diplomatic practices occurring in the field. Thus, the analysis is not only descriptive but also evaluative.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. International Legal Basis for the Status of the North Natuna Sea and Its Conflict with China's Nine-Dash Line Claim

The North Natuna Sea occupies a significant position in Indonesia's maritime domain because it forms part of the country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Recognition of maritime rights within this area is primarily governed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 1982, which serves as the principal legal framework regulating maritime jurisdiction among states. Indonesia ratified UNCLOS through Law Number 17 of 1985, thereby

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<sup>12</sup> Sanne Taekema, "Conceptual Analysis in Legal Research," *Law and Method*, no. 1 (2023): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.5553/REM/.000081>.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Van Hoecke, "Methodology of Comparative Legal Research," *Law and Method*, no. 1 (2021): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.5553/REM/.000062>.

accepting the rights and obligations established by the convention.<sup>14</sup> Legal certainty provided by UNCLOS has become an essential element in maintaining order and stability in maritime relations among states.

UNCLOS establishes a comprehensive regime governing maritime zones and the rights attached to them. Article 56 of the Convention grants coastal states sovereign rights for the purpose of exploring, exploiting, conserving, and managing natural resources located within their EEZ. These sovereign rights extend to both living and non-living resources found in the waters, seabed, and subsoil.<sup>15</sup> Coastal states are also entitled to regulate economic activities occurring within the zone. Such provisions provide a clear legal basis for Indonesia's authority in the North Natuna Sea.

Article 57 of UNCLOS further determines that an EEZ may extend up to 200 nautical miles from a state's baselines. This provision introduces an objective method for determining maritime entitlements and reduces uncertainty regarding maritime jurisdiction. Recognition of maritime rights therefore depends upon measurable legal criteria rather than unilateral assertions. Indonesia's claim over the North Natuna Sea derives directly from this internationally recognized legal framework. Consequently, Indonesia's position is supported by rules accepted by the overwhelming majority of states.<sup>16</sup>

A distinction must be made between sovereignty and sovereign rights when discussing the legal status of the North Natuna Sea. Sovereignty applies fully within territorial waters, whereas sovereign rights in the EEZ are limited to economic activities and resource management. Despite this distinction, interference with lawful economic activities within the EEZ may still constitute a violation of rights protected by international law.<sup>17</sup> Understanding this difference is essential because disputes concerning the North Natuna Sea primarily involve sovereign rights rather than territorial sovereignty.

Challenges to Indonesia's legal position emerged through China's assertion of the nine-dash line claim. The claim encompasses a vast maritime area covering much of the South China Sea and overlaps with maritime zones claimed by several coastal states. Chinese authorities maintain that the claim originates from historical usage and historical rights dating back centuries. Such arguments differ significantly from the maritime entitlement system established under UNCLOS. Legal debates concerning the validity of these claims have consequently become one of the most contentious issues in contemporary law of the sea scholarship.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Beckman, "The South China Sea Arbitration and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea," *Ocean Development & International Law* 48, no. 3–4 (2017): 265–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00908320.2017.1379558>.

<sup>15</sup> Yann-Huei Song, "The Application of UNCLOS in the South China Sea Disputes," *Ocean Development & International Law* 48, no. 3–4 (2017): 213–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00908320.2017.1379550>.

<sup>16</sup> Malcolm N Shaw, *International Law*, 9th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108774802>.

<sup>17</sup> Clive Schofield and Ian Storey, "The South China Sea Dispute: Increasing Stakes and Rising Tensions," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 43, no. 2 (2021): 187–210, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs43-2a>.

<sup>18</sup> Leszek Buszynski, "The South China Sea: Oil, Maritime Claims, and U.S.–China Strategic Rivalry," *The Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (2020): 139–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1850503>.

Historical claims occupy a recognized but limited position within international law. Acceptance of such claims generally requires consistent state practice accompanied by recognition from other states. Unilateral assertions unsupported by widespread international acceptance encounter significant difficulties in obtaining legal legitimacy. Several scholars argue that China's nine-dash line lacks the degree of international recognition necessary to establish a valid legal entitlement under modern international law. Questions regarding its legal foundation therefore remain highly contested.<sup>19</sup>

Analysis of the nine-dash line must also consider the hierarchy of legal sources recognized by the international community. Article 38 of the Statute of the International Court of Justice identifies treaties, customary international law, and general principles of law as primary sources of international law. UNCLOS clearly derives authority from one of these recognized sources because it constitutes a multilateral treaty accepted by a substantial number of states.<sup>20</sup> The legal status of China's historical claim is less certain because its acceptance remains disputed internationally.

The tension between UNCLOS and the nine-dash line illustrates a broader conflict between treaty-based legal certainty and unilateral historical narratives. UNCLOS seeks to create uniform standards applicable to all states regardless of size, military capability, or political influence.<sup>21</sup> Historical claims based primarily on unilateral interpretation may undermine predictability and consistency within the international legal order. Such concerns explain why many states continue to emphasize the importance of UNCLOS as the principal framework governing maritime disputes.

Legal scrutiny of China's claims intensified following the arbitral proceedings initiated by the Philippines under Annex VII of UNCLOS. The proceedings culminated in the 2016 arbitral award, which examined the legal validity of China's historical rights claim. The tribunal concluded that claims exceeding maritime entitlements recognized under UNCLOS lacked legal basis. The award also clarified that historical rights could not automatically override provisions established by the Convention.<sup>22</sup> The decision consequently became a significant reference point in discussions concerning the South China Sea dispute.

The significance of the arbitral award extends beyond the Philippines and China. Legal reasoning developed by the tribunal provides guidance regarding the interpretation of maritime entitlements under UNCLOS. Several scholars consider the decision an important contribution to the development of international maritime law because it reinforces the convention-based approach to determining maritime rights. The award therefore carries persuasive value for other disputes involving overlapping maritime claims.

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<sup>19</sup> Yusuf Adiwiwono, "Klaim Historis Dalam Hukum Internasional," *Jurnal IUS* 8, no. 2 (2020): 199–213, <https://doi.org/10.29303/ius.v8i2.782>.

<sup>20</sup> Keyuan Zou, "Historic Rights in International Law and in China's Practice," *Ocean Development & International Law* 51, no. 2 (2020): 109–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00908320.2020.1728661>.

<sup>21</sup> Nong Hong, "The South China Sea Arbitration Award and Its Impact on Regional Order," *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 121 (2020): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2019.1621537>.

<sup>22</sup> Hua Zhang, "China's Historical Rights Claims and UNCLOS," *Marine Policy* 99 (2019): 249–55, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2018.10.041>.

China nevertheless rejected both the jurisdiction of the tribunal and the substance of the award. This rejection highlights one of the recurring challenges faced by international law, namely the absence of a centralized enforcement mechanism capable of compelling compliance by sovereign states. International adjudication often depends upon voluntary acceptance and political willingness. Compliance issues become even more complex when disputes involve states possessing substantial economic and military capabilities.

Indonesia has consistently maintained that the North Natuna Sea forms part of its EEZ under UNCLOS and has rejected any implication that the nine-dash line creates valid rights within Indonesian maritime zones. Official statements and diplomatic communications repeatedly emphasize that Indonesia's position derives from internationally recognized legal norms rather than unilateral historical narratives. Such consistency strengthens Indonesia's legal standing in international forums and reinforces its commitment to the rule-based international order.

Assessment of competing claims indicates a significant difference in their respective levels of legitimacy. UNCLOS enjoys broad international acceptance and functions as the principal legal framework governing maritime affairs. China's historical claim, by contrast, continues to face objections from numerous states and legal scholars. Recognition and acceptance remain important indicators when evaluating the strength of competing legal arguments.<sup>23</sup> The disparity in legitimacy indicates that Indonesia's legal position possesses substantially stronger international recognition than China's historical claim. Acceptance of UNCLOS by the international community provides a more convincing legal foundation than claims derived primarily from unilateral historical interpretation. Consequently, Indonesia's assertion of sovereign rights in the North Natuna Sea enjoys a higher degree of legal certainty under contemporary international law.

Power politics nevertheless continues to influence the operation of international law. States possessing greater military and economic capabilities often enjoy wider opportunities to maintain disputed positions despite legal criticism. Maritime disputes in the South China Sea frequently demonstrate how legal norms interact with strategic interests. The effectiveness of legal arguments may therefore depend not only on their normative strength but also on broader geopolitical circumstances.

Based on the foregoing analysis, Indonesia possesses a strong legal basis for asserting its rights in the North Natuna Sea. UNCLOS provides a clear and internationally recognized framework supporting Indonesia's EEZ claims, while the legal validity of the nine-dash line remains highly contested. Continued disagreement between convention-based maritime law and historical claims explains why legal debates surrounding the dispute remain unresolved. Examination of the legal dimension therefore provides an essential foundation for understanding the broader factors contributing to the persistence of the dispute.

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<sup>23</sup> J Ashley Roach, "China's Nine-Dash Line and Maritime Claims," *American Journal of International Law Unbound* 111 (2017): 83–87, <https://doi.org/10.1017/aju.2017.19>.

## **B. Factors Contributing to the Prolonged North Natuna Sea Dispute**

The persistence of the North Natuna Sea dispute cannot be separated from the strategic value of the area. Maritime zones surrounding the Natuna Islands contain abundant fisheries resources and significant energy potential, making them economically attractive to various parties. Access to these resources has become increasingly important amid growing regional demand for food security and energy supplies. Competition over resource utilization consequently contributes to overlapping interests among states operating in the South China Sea.

Fisheries resources constitute one of the most contested aspects of the dispute. Waters surrounding the North Natuna Sea are recognized as productive fishing grounds that support both local livelihoods and national economic interests. Chinese fishing vessels have repeatedly entered waters claimed by Indonesia, creating tensions regarding the lawful utilization of marine resources.<sup>24</sup> Competition for fisheries resources therefore remains a recurring source of friction between the two countries.

Energy considerations further contribute to the strategic importance of the region. Several studies indicate the presence of oil and natural gas reserves within maritime zones surrounding Natuna. Control over areas believed to contain valuable hydrocarbon resources often increases the intensity of maritime disputes. Economic incentives associated with energy exploration and exploitation consequently strengthen the determination of states to maintain their respective claims.<sup>25</sup>

Geopolitical competition also plays a significant role in sustaining the dispute. The South China Sea occupies an important position within regional and global maritime trade routes. Strategic control over maritime areas may provide political, economic, and security advantages for states seeking to expand their regional influence. Maritime disputes in the region therefore extend beyond resource-related considerations and frequently involve broader geopolitical calculations.

Power asymmetry between Indonesia and China represents another factor influencing the continuity of the dispute. China possesses substantially greater economic resources, military capabilities, and diplomatic influence than Indonesia.<sup>26</sup> Such disparities affect the bargaining positions of the parties involved and influence the effectiveness of diplomatic responses. Relations between stronger and weaker states often demonstrate how power can shape the dynamics of international disputes.

Military modernization undertaken by China has further reinforced this asymmetry. Expansion of naval capabilities and the increasing presence of China Coast Guard vessels in disputed waters provide China with greater capacity to project influence throughout the South China Sea. Indonesia, while continuing to strengthen maritime security, faces challenges in

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<sup>24</sup> Stefan Talmon, "The South China Sea Arbitration: Is There a Case to Answer?," *Chinese Journal of International Law* 15, no. 2 (2016): 309–91, <https://doi.org/10.1093/chinesejil/jmw024>.

<sup>25</sup> Donald R Rothwell, "The Law of the Sea and Maritime Security," *International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law* 34, no. 1 (2019): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718085-12341089>.

<sup>26</sup> Ian Storey, "Indonesia's Response to China's Incursions in the North Natuna Sea," *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 18 (2021): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789814951708-005>.

responding to activities conducted by a significantly larger power.<sup>27</sup> Security considerations therefore remain closely connected to legal and diplomatic developments in the dispute.

The persistence of the dispute is also linked to differences in legal interpretation. Indonesia consistently relies upon UNCLOS as the primary legal basis for determining maritime entitlements. China, however, continues to maintain historical claims associated with the nine-dash line. Contrasting interpretations regarding the source of maritime rights have prevented the emergence of a mutually accepted legal framework for resolving disagreements.

China's rejection of the 2016 arbitral award represents another major obstacle to dispute resolution. The tribunal concluded that historical claims exceeding the maritime entitlements recognized under UNCLOS lacked legal foundation. Refusal to recognize the award has limited the practical impact of the decision despite its importance for the development of the law of the sea. The situation demonstrates that legal judgments alone may not be sufficient to resolve disputes when compliance is absent.

Institutional limitations within the international legal system further complicate dispute settlement efforts. International law generally lacks centralized enforcement mechanisms capable of compelling states to comply with unfavorable decisions. Compliance frequently depends upon political willingness and international pressure. Consequently, states may continue to maintain disputed positions even when facing substantial legal criticism.

Regional diplomatic mechanisms have also encountered challenges in addressing the dispute. Negotiations concerning a Code of Conduct (CoC) between ASEAN and China have continued for many years without producing a legally binding instrument. Progress has often been slowed by differing priorities and interests among participating states. The absence of a binding framework reduces the effectiveness of regional efforts to prevent and manage tensions in the South China Sea.

Political and economic interdependence between regional states and China further influences responses to maritime disputes. Many countries maintain extensive trade and investment relations with China, creating incentives to avoid confrontational policies. Economic considerations may therefore affect the willingness of states to pursue stronger collective measures regarding contested maritime claims. Such conditions contribute to the persistence of unresolved issues within the region.<sup>28</sup>

Assessment of these factors demonstrates that the North Natuna Sea dispute is sustained by a combination of legal, economic, political, and strategic considerations. Resource competition, power asymmetry, differing legal interpretations, limitations of international enforcement mechanisms, and the absence of a binding regional framework collectively contribute to the continuation of the dispute. Resolution efforts therefore require more than legal arguments alone and must address the broader structural conditions shaping state behavior in the South China Sea.

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<sup>27</sup> Ralf Emmers, "Geopolitics and Maritime Territorial Disputes in East Asia," *Asian Security* 13, no. 3 (2017): 179–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2017.1286163>.

<sup>28</sup> Teguh Santoso, "Diplomasi Multilateral Indonesia Di Kawasan Asia Tenggara," *Jurnal Politik Internasional* 5, no. 1 (2023): 33–48, <https://doi.org/10.7454/jpi.v5i1.154>.

### **C. Evaluation of Indonesia's Diplomatic Legal Instruments in Responding to China's Violations in the North Natuna Sea EEZ**

Indonesia has actively employed a range of diplomatic legal instruments in response to China's repeated violations in the North Natuna Sea EEZ. These measures include the formal submission of protest notes and diplomatic demarches, as well as active participation and engagement in multilateral forums and international organizations<sup>29</sup>. Such instruments clearly reflect Indonesia's unwavering commitment to resolving disputes through peaceful and legal means, adhering to established international norms and frameworks. However, despite these efforts, the effectiveness of these diplomatic tools has been limited, as violations by China continue to occur with relative impunity, revealing the challenges that Indonesia faces in enforcing its sovereign rights.

Indonesia has prioritized multilateral diplomacy, particularly through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as a strategic platform to bolster its negotiating position and foster collective regional responses to the dispute. ASEAN's role is critical in presenting a united front and facilitating dialogue among claimant states.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, Indonesia's diplomatic efforts within ASEAN have frequently been constrained by differing national interests and priorities among member states. These divergences often dilute ASEAN's ability to adopt strong, cohesive stances, thereby limiting the overall impact of regional diplomacy. Such internal fissures highlight the complexities inherent in multilateral diplomacy and underscore the limitations of relying solely on regional mechanisms.

Furthermore, while the ongoing negotiations for an ASEAN-China Code of Conduct (CoC) in the South China Sea are a positive step toward managing tensions, the CoC alone is insufficient as a comprehensive dispute resolution mechanism. Effective resolution requires more than just formal agreements; it necessitates the creation of meaningful dialogue spaces where all parties can openly and equitably present their interests and concerns. This inclusive and dialogical approach is vital for fostering mutual understanding, building trust, and ultimately achieving sustainable and peaceful solutions.<sup>31</sup> Without such dialogue, the risk remains high that misunderstandings and mistrust will perpetuate the conflict, undermining efforts to maintain regional stability.

Therefore, the overall effectiveness of Indonesia's diplomatic legal instruments is contingent upon a multifaceted strategy that combines adherence to legal norms with broader political and diplomatic efforts. This multidimensional approach acknowledges the complex interplay between law, politics, and power in international relations. It also emphasizes that legal instruments alone cannot guarantee dispute resolution without supportive political will and strategic diplomacy. In light of this, continuous strengthening of Indonesia's diplomatic capacity

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<sup>29</sup> Rizky Alif Alvian, "Efektivitas Diplomasi Indonesia Terhadap Pelanggaran ZEE Natuna," *Jurnal Ilmu Hukum* 10, no. 2 (2022): 201–15, <https://doi.org/10.30652/jih.v10i2.7890>.

<sup>30</sup> Syarif Hidayatullah, "Indonesia's Maritime Diplomacy in the South China Sea," *Jurnal Hubungan Internasional* 11, no. 2 (2022): 145–60, <https://doi.org/10.18196/hi.v11i2.13456>.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Beckman, "The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea," *American Journal of International Law* 107, no. 1 (2017): 142–63, <https://doi.org/10.5305/amerjintelaw.107.1.0142>.

and strategic engagement, both bilaterally and multilaterally, is essential to safeguarding its maritime sovereignty and promoting peaceful coexistence in the region.

## CONCLUSION

Indonesia possesses a strong legal basis for asserting its rights in the North Natuna Sea through the provisions of UNCLOS 1982, particularly those governing the Exclusive Economic Zone regime, whereas China's nine-dash line claim continues to encounter substantial challenges regarding its acceptance under contemporary international law. The continuation of the dispute is driven by a combination of economic interests, geopolitical competition, power asymmetry, and limitations within existing international dispute settlement mechanisms. Although Indonesia has consistently relied upon diplomatic instruments to defend its maritime rights and maintain regional stability, the effectiveness of such measures remains influenced by broader political and strategic considerations. The North Natuna Sea dispute therefore illustrates that the operation of international law is closely connected to power relations, where legal norms and diplomatic efforts frequently encounter obstacles arising from competing national interests.

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