

Indonesia's Archipelagic Defense: Posture, Modernization, and Cooperative Hedging in the South China Sea

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How to Cite: Djuyandi, Y., Herdiansah, A. G., Mustofa, M. U., & Sidhu, J. S. (2026). Indonesia's archipelagic defense: Posture, modernization, and cooperative hedging in the South China Sea. *Journal of ASEAN Studies*, 14(1), 69-94. <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v14i1.12322>

Abstract

The escalating geopolitical volatility in the South China Sea and the widening military asymmetry in the Indo-Pacific have compelled Indonesia to reassess its national security posture fundamentally. This research examines the formulation and implementation of the Nusantara Defense Strategy (Strategi Pertahanan Nusantara-SPN) as a comprehensive framework to safeguard territorial integrity and maintain regional stability. Using a qualitative methodology, the research applied thematic and content analysis to triangulate semi-structured interviews with military elites and experts, systematic evaluation of official policy documents, and defense procurement data. The results indicate that the SPN operates as a strategic synthesis of deterrence and hedging. By integrating maritime, land, and aerial domains, Indonesia pursues a deterrence-by-denial posture particularly in the North Natuna Sea, while simultaneously employing a hedging strategy to preserve its free and active foreign policy. This dual-track approach enables the state to modernize its military capabilities, such as the acquisition of advanced fighter jets and missile systems, without succumbing to the pressures of Great Power polarization. The research concludes that while the SPN significantly enhances Indonesia's strategic autonomy and credibility as a middle power, its long-term success remains contingent upon overcoming internal budgetary constraints and institutional overlaps.

Keywords: deterrence, hedging, middle power, Nusantara Defense Strategy, South China Sea

Introduction

It is difficult to overlook the crucial significance of the South China Sea (SCS) in the global geopolitical constellation. As a waterway connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans and anchored by the Strait of Malacca, one of the world's busiest trade arteries, the SCS annually carries more than half of the world's merchant fleet tonnage and one-third of global maritime traffic (Kipgen, 2018). So, it is unsurprising that the geographic features within it have become the subject of overlapping sovereignty claims that remain unresolved through judicial mechanisms, arbitration, or formal negotiation. At least six states compete for jurisdictional claims over territorial waters and maritime resources in this region: the People's Republic of China (hereafter China), Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam. China, in particular, as the sole state asserting historical rights through a nine-dash line that unilaterally disregards international legal conventions, has continued to augment its economic and military standing to assert ever-greater dominance over strategic spaces in the SCS (Bentley, 2023). Since 2010, locations that previously had no regular official maritime presence, extending even beyond 700 nautical miles from Hainan Island, have seen their Chinese presence so substantially increased that the center of China's maritime activity now lies closer to the Southeast Asian coastline than to the Chinese mainland (Emmers, 2010).

The strategic responses of small and middle powers to China's growing assertiveness in the SCS have generated a rich scholarly debate on whether these powers balance against threats or use more complex hedging strategies. One prominent stream of thought argues that these powers consistently reject the binary choice of balancing or bandwagoning in favor of a third strategic choice that maximizes autonomy (Banlaoi, 2021; Tan, 2020). Scholars further refine this hedging consensus by identifying specific variations, such as the "light-hedging" practiced by Malaysia to avoid side-taking while cultivating fallback positions (Lai & Kuik, 2021), and the "three nos" policy utilized by Vietnam to soft-bind Chinese actions through institutional omni-enmeshment (Cooreman, 2020; De Gurung, 2018). Another analytical stream focuses on the functional bifurcation of these strategies, where states like the Philippines and Vietnam attempt to optimize their position by deepening economic ties with China while simultaneously upgrading defense capabilities and aligning with extra-regional powers like the United States (Fan, 2024; Han et al., 2023; McEwen-Fial & Brand, 2016). Conversely, Haacke (2019) argue that these behaviors are inconsistent across the region, noting that Singapore's explicit military posture may lean more toward traditional balancing. Jones and Jenne (2022) further caution against rigidly applying neorealist labels, proposing that these actions are better viewed as fluid, pragmatic diplomatic practices.

Indonesia provides a critical starting point for this debate. It occupies a position where its official non-claimant status is complicated by the practical overlap between China's nine-dash line and Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the North Natuna Sea. Situated in the northern part of the Karimata Strait, which connects the Java Sea and the SCS, the North Natuna Sea is an international shipping lane rich in natural resources, giving it dual strategic significance as both a national economic asset and a security flashpoint (Suryadinata & Izzuddin, 2017). The resulting friction, characterized by frequent physical confrontations

between Chinese coast guard vessels and Indonesian naval patrols, has historically compelled Jakarta to do more than issue diplomatic protests. From the authoritarian era of the 1990s to the present democratic period, Indonesia has consistently implemented its 'free and active' doctrine by using a mix of diplomatic, military, and economic tools to challenge China's claims without provoking open conflict (Bentley, 2023; McRae, 2019).

Nevertheless, Indonesia's approach to navigating friction in the SCS entered a new chapter with the introduction of the SPN in late 2023. Proposed by the Former Commander of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI), Yudo Margono, the doctrine provides concrete, operational measures to complement the foundational framework of the Archipelagic Outlook (Wawasan Nusantara). It is a framework that defines Indonesia as a maritime fulcrum and mandates an integrative view of its land, sea, and air territories (Sebastian et al., 2015). The SPN is premised on the understanding that Indonesia's geographic character as an archipelagic state at the intersection of the SCS and the Indo-Pacific demands a distinctive security approach. The strategy is designed to overcome inter-service sectoral rivalries by synchronizing the Indonesian Army's (TNI-AD) large island defense strategy, the Indonesian Navy's (TNI-AL) Nusantara maritime defense strategy, and the Indonesian Air Force's (TNI-AU) Nusantara air strategy into a single cohesive whole. This doctrinal renewal is especially urgent given the relocation of the Indonesia's center of gravity to the planned national capital named Ibu Kota Nusantara (IKN). Located adjacent such as critical maritime corridors like the Indonesian Archipelagic Sea Lane (Alur Laut Kepulauan Indonesia - ALKI) II, IKN requires the TNI to adopt a more adaptive posture to protect the seat of government.

Despite its considerable strategic value, the academic literature and policy analyses on the SPN are extremely limited, partly due to the novelty of the doctrine. Meanwhile, existing studies tend to exhibit a strong sectoral bias toward the maritime dimension, as though the Nusantara Maritime Defense Strategy are representative of the archipelagic defense posture as a whole (Alfarizi et al., 2026; Raharjo et al., 2024; Samy, 2023). This conceptual narrowing obscures the integrated character of the SPN. By focusing too heavily on the TNI-AL, existing studies fail to account for the synchronized roles of the TNI-AD and TNI-AU in the modern multi-domain conflict environment. As a result, there is a critical knowledge gap regarding how Indonesia as a middle power integrates its various military branches into a unified deterrence posture. This is particularly pertinent to Indonesia's strategic interests in the SCS, where the escalation of geopolitical friction in the region, especially in the North Natuna Sea, has necessitated a paradigm shift in Jakarta's approach to territorial integrity. Despite the region being characterized by overlapping maritime claims and an intensifying US-China rivalry, Indonesia's response has historically tended to be viewed through a fragmented lens.

This research addresses the aforementioned gap by positioning the SPN as a critical case study within the debate over middle-power agency under systemic pressure. Specifically, it explores the question of how a non-aligned state operationalizes hard power without compromising its strategic autonomy through a dual-track approach of material deterrence and institutional cooperation. By examining the implementation of the SPN across all service branches, this study demonstrates how Indonesia has adapted its defense posture to reconcile the structural necessity of deterrence with the internal constraints of its "free and active"

foreign policy doctrine. The findings suggest that the SPN represents a sophisticated evolution of Indonesia's defense posture to move beyond maritime isolation toward integrated multi-domain deterrence. By unifying the land, sea, and air branches under a single operational umbrella, the SPN enables Indonesia to project hard power in the North Natuna Sea while preserving the soft power diplomatic flexibility that a non-aligned middle power requires. Accordingly, the research argues that the SPN functions as a dual-purpose instrument. It constructs a robust deterrence-by-denial posture while simultaneously facilitating a strategy of hedging, allowing Jakarta to enhance its military capabilities without the necessity of formal external alliances.

The primary contribution of this research lies in its theoretical refinement of the hedging-versus-balancing debate by providing an empirical model of how a middle power utilizes doctrinal integration to solve the "deterrence-autonomy" dilemma. Unlike existing literature that often views defense modernization as a shift toward traditional balancing, this study demonstrates that integrated military posture can serve as a prerequisite for robust hedging in a contested maritime environment. To substantiate these claims, the research follows a structured progression. Following the analytical framework and research methodology, the first substantive section elaborates the core strategic logic of the SPN as a response to the shifting regional balance of power. The next section details the state's material posture and its pursuit of deterrence by denial through military modernization. Following this, the subsequent section analyzes the diplomatic dimension and the operationalization of hedging through strategic partnerships. The next section then examines doctrinal synthesis, exploring how inter-service integration translates strategic concepts into operational reality. The research concludes by assessing the SPN's overall contribution to Indonesia's strategic autonomy as a middle power and by identifying the budgetary and institutional constraints that will shape its long-term trajectory.

Analytical Framework

Indonesia's defense posture in the SCS cannot be adequately understood without first appreciating the geographic and legal foundation upon which it rests. As an archipelagic state under Part IV, Article 46 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Indonesia is not merely a collection of islands scattered across the equator but a unified geographic, economic, and political entity, in which landmass and interconnecting waters are constitutionally inseparable (Suryadinata & Izzuddin, 2017). This legal status was secured through the 1957 Djuanda Declaration and was fought for over decades until its global recognition at Montego Bay in 1982. The recognition granted Indonesia the right to draw straight archipelagic baselines connecting its outermost points, which brought all internal waters under full national sovereignty (Butcher & Elson, 2014). More profoundly, this recognition transformed the philosophical relationship between the nation and the sea. The paradigm shifted from viewing water as a divider between islands to understanding it as the connective tissue of a singular national space. Moreover, this reorientation produced a

distinctive strategic logic. The country must treat land, sea, and air as a single, indivisible defense space rather than three separate theaters.

The defense strategy acquires its meaning within this spatial logic. Strategy is not reducible to an inventory of weapons or a headcount of personnel. It is the systematic alignment of political ends, strategic ways, and military means, the conceptual bridge that connects national ambition to concrete capability (Grieco, 2018; Tagarev, 2025). For a state of Indonesia's geographic complexity, an effective defense strategy must be capable of explaining why a particular force configuration, whether the reinforcement of border radar networks or the procurement of submarines, can produce a desired deterrent effect against a defined spectrum of threats. This spectrum includes conventional military invasion, cyber interference, and maritime blockades that use economic coercion to target vital shipping lanes. Beyond deterrence, strategy also serves as a signaling mechanism for middle powers, communicating to external actors exactly where the state draws its red lines and demonstrating how far the nation will extend its capacity and political will to defend them (Nedić, 2022).

Existing literature on Indonesia's behavior in the SCS reveals a state caught between internal doctrinal traditions and external systemic pressures. Historically, Jakarta has favored persuasive diplomacy, such as proposing joint ASEAN patrols, while simultaneously defending its sovereignty in the North Natuna Sea where its EEZ overlaps with China's nine-dash line (Budiana et al., 2019). This diplomatic focus often aligns with what Sulaiman (2019) terms "underbalancing," a condition in which a strategic culture prioritizing internal stability and economic pragmatism leaves the state institutionally unprepared for maritime contingencies. Furthermore, the legacy of an army-centric "defense in depth" doctrine, which focuses on internal security, has historically hindered Indonesia's ability to project blue-water power. Recent scholarship, however, identifies a corrective turn: the state is now militarizing the Natuna Islands, pursuing closer security cooperation with the United States, Australia, and Japan, and adopting an assertive posture to protect maritime resources (Zou, 2023). Despite this shift toward aerial and naval warfare as the primary axes of archipelagic defense (Sudirman et al., 2019), critics argue that Indonesia's defense diplomacy between 2016 and 2021 remained relatively weak compared to the scale of the Chinese challenge, suggesting a persistent gap between strategic ambition and institutional performance (Simorangkir et al., 2023).

To bridge this gap, the SPN serves not merely as a military blueprint but as a political statement about the kind of power Indonesia intends to become. This research systematically analyzes the SPN using a dual analytical framework that examines the interaction between deterrence and hedging theories. Each framework illuminates a different dimension of Indonesia's strategic calculus; together, they explain the apparent paradox of a state that simultaneously modernizes its military while refusing to choose sides. Deterrence theory rests on the premise that a state can prevent aggression when an adversary calculates that the costs of action will outweigh any potential gains (Freedman, 2004). This theory relies on three interdependent pillars: capability, credibility, and communication (Morgan, 2017). Capability requires the state to maintain adequate military assets; credibility ensures the adversary

believes the state possesses the means and the political will to deploy them; and communication conveys red lines and territorial limits clearly enough to shape the adversary's expectations.

In the specific context of the SCS, deterrence theory has proven analytically productive across a range of cases. Nathan (2023) demonstrates how this theory explains the national interests of both claimant states and external powers, while Magcamit and Tan (2016) show how power asymmetry compels smaller states to focus on relative rather than absolute gains. This neorealist dynamic directly affects Indonesia's position vis-à-vis China. The asymmetry remains stark: China, acting as a superpower, holds overwhelming military force in reserve while deploying law enforcement and paramilitary units to enforce its claims in the "gray zone" (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2017; Zhang, 2017). This strategy repeatedly undermines the deterrent efforts of weaker regional actors, including Indonesia (Arif et al., 2024). To counter this structural disadvantage, a deterrence-by-denial logic has taken shape in the North Natuna Sea. Rather than attempting to match Chinese power projection, Indonesia focuses on raising the cost and difficulty of a successful incursion through a credible, integrated military presence across all three domains. This approach requires more than just adequate hardware. Indonesia must demonstrate a clear willingness to use it, thereby closing credibility gap the SPN specifically seeks to close.

However, deterrence alone cannot serve as Indonesia's organizing principle. As a middle power navigating the rivalry between the United States and China, an exclusively deterrence-oriented posture risks drawing Indonesia into a military alignment that the nation has historically and constitutionally refused. This necessity makes hedging theory indispensable. Kuik (2023) conceptualizes hedging as a risk management strategy that blends elements of balancing and engagement, allowing a state to avoid excessive dependence on any single power while minimizing exposure to the hazards of great power competition. Rather than choosing between alignment and opposition, the state diversifies its interests, maintains deliberate ambiguity, and preserves strategic optionality. In practical terms, this strategy manifests along two tracks: hard hedging, where the state builds domestic military capacity to reduce external vulnerability, and soft hedging, where it relies on diplomatic engagement, multilateral institution-building, and adherence to international legal norms.

Scholars have well established the relevance of deterrence within the SCS context, though Indonesia's specific application reveals important nuances. The fundamental power asymmetry between China and the smaller claimant states significantly shapes the strategic calculus, as deterrence operates differently when one party commands overwhelming conventional superiority. In response, Malaysia has pursued light hedging by strengthening security ties with the United States while cultivating economic relations with China (Lai & Kuik, 2021). Vietnam has operationalized its "three nos" policy as a framework to soft-bind Chinese behavior while simultaneously drawing closer to extra-regional balancers (De Gurung, 2018). Under Duterte, the Philippines pursued a more transactional variant, pivoting toward China without fully abandoning its alliance with Washington (Banlaoi, 2021). These cases reveal a consistent pattern: ASEAN states prefer the flexibility of hedging over the high

commitment costs of formal alignment. This preference reflects what Tan (2020) identifies as a persistent regional commitment to strategic non-alignment amid great-power rivalry.

The synthesis of these two frameworks builds the analytical architecture for evaluating the SPN. Based on the lens of deterrence, the SPN's military dimensions, including force modernization, domain integration, and asset positioning in the North Natuna Sea, allow analysts to assess whether the state generates the capability, credibility, and communication necessary to shift an adversary's calculations. Then, through the lens of hedging, the SPN's diplomatic architecture, including its refusal of bloc alignment, its cultivation of security partnerships with multiple powers, and its invocation of UNCLOS, reveals whether Indonesia preserves the strategic autonomy that its free and active foreign policy demands. Rather than creating tension, these two frameworks complement one another. The SPN achieves coherence as a strategic document and effectiveness as a security instrument precisely because it pursues resolute deterrence and flexible hedging simultaneously. It defends sovereign territory without foreclosing diplomatic space and signals firmness without inviting escalation. The present research, accordingly, examines this dual-track logic across the military, diplomatic, and institutional dimensions of Indonesian defense policy in the SCS.

Research Method

This research applies a qualitative method because its primary objective is not to measure the magnitude of a phenomenon but to gain a deep understanding of how the SPN is formulated, interpreted, and implemented in practice. Primary data is collected through in-depth interviews with informants who possess direct knowledge or analytical authority over the subject. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on their institutional positions, policy experience, and strategic expertise. This research interviewed six informants: two senior military officials, namely the Commander of the Indonesian National Armed Forces during 2022–2023 period and a senior staff officer at the TNI General Headquarters; two senior strategic educators, namely the Governor of the National Resilience Institute (Lemhannas) and the Rector of the Indonesia Defense University; and two civilian defense experts from universities and think tanks specializing in Indonesian defense policy. This composition is intentionally chosen to ensure that the research captures not only internal-state perspectives but also external readings, allowing for a comparison between official doctrinal narratives and critical academic evaluations.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in September 2023 and were designed to explore four main domains: strategic doctrine and concepts, implementation mechanisms, resource allocation and procurement priorities, and challenges in inter-agency coordination. All interviews were carried out with the prior consent of the informants, either face-to-face or via secure video calls, depending on individual availability and preference. During each session, the researcher noted key points, identified recurring themes, and contextualized the information provided in relation to the informant's institutional role. Consequently, the interviews serve not only as a data source but also as a means to assess how the SPN is understood across the levels of policy formulation, strategic education, and policy critique.

Secondary data is organized as a selectively curated documentary corpus, rather than a disorganized collection of media sources without analytical hierarchy. This corpus consists of three types of sources: legal and strategic documents, including defense white papers, defense laws, and official regulations published between 2015 and 2023; budget and procurement data drawn from the financial reports of the Ministry of Defense and the TNI; and strategic commentaries and academic analyses, including peer-reviewed journal articles and opinion pieces, which are used as interpretative rather than authoritative sources. Each document was recorded by its publication date, issuing institution, and the context of its emergence to allow for a proportional assessment of its evidential weight. This approach is vital because official documents, budgetary data, and academic writings do not hold the same epistemic status: official documents reveal the state's formal position, budget data reflects material priorities, and academic analysis helps interpret the meaning and implications of those policies. Thus, all secondary sources were used complementarily rather than interchangeably.

Data analysis is conducted through a combination of thematic reading and qualitative content analysis. The process begins with open coding of interview transcripts and selected documents to identify central themes such as SPN formulation, deterrence by denial, and institutional coordination constraints. These codes are then systematically categorized to find correlations between doctrine and strategic objectives, which are subsequently interpreted through the frameworks of deterrence theory and hedging strategy to explain the SPN's mechanisms within the context of Great Power rivalry in the SCS. To maintain reliability and methodological accountability, source and method triangulation are applied by comparing the perspectives of military elites, civilian experts, official documents, and budgetary data to verify narratives against material evidence. This entire process is supported by a detailed audit trail and critical interpretation that carefully distinguished between factual statements, normative assessments, and strategic claims, ensuring the resulting analysis is not only descriptively rich but also possesses strong evidential authority.

Analysis and Discussion

With a population of more than 280 million and a land area of 1.9 million square kilometers, Indonesia stands as a massive geographic power in Southeast Asia. Its status as the world's largest archipelagic state with more than 18,000 islands, combined with a strategic position commanding a substantial portion of the Strait of Malacca's coastline, endows Indonesia with extraordinary power modalities alongside security challenges of no lesser complexity. On one hand, this wealth of material resources and geopolitical positioning constitutes a potent diplomatic asset for advancing national interests (Gindarsah, 2014). On the other hand, however, the vast territory and large population can become a liability if not managed through a capable surveillance system. The absence of effective control mechanisms renders Indonesia's border regions vulnerable to a wide range of threats, from natural disasters to military infiltration and transnational crimes such as arms smuggling, narcotics trafficking, and human trafficking (Gindarsah & Priamarizki, 2015).

These challenges are further compounded by contemporary geopolitical uncertainty, marked by a global rise in military and paramilitary conflicts. The trend of interstate confrontation, from the Russia-Ukraine war, representing a clash of interests between the Western and Eastern blocs, to chronic tensions on the Korean Peninsula, in the Taiwan Strait, and along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, demonstrates that the display of military force has once again become the primary instrument in international relations (Sukin, 2025). At the regional level, escalation in the SCS remains an unresolved flashpoint. The presence of strategic partnerships such as Australia, United Kingdom, and United States (AUKUS) involving the United States and the United Kingdom, the reinforcement of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) framework, and the intensifying activity of the Quad alongside Japan and India have further sharpened security polarization. For Indonesia, this uncertainty exposes structural weaknesses in its defense posture, where the TNI's strike forces remain heavily concentrated on the island of Java. The strategic challenge is now how to build an agile mobilization mechanism to shift those military forces toward trouble spots on the periphery of the archipelago.

In response to these dynamics, the government has sought to accelerate defense capabilities through technological modernization and the strengthening of inter-agency coordination. Synergy among the TNI, the National Police (Polri), and the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency or Coast Guard (Bakamla) has been intensified to create more integrated maritime surveillance (Saputra et al., 2025). Yet these strengthening efforts continue to face substantial obstacles in terms of implementation and force distribution. Internal evaluations by TNI leadership reveal that the growth of Indonesia's military strength has been slow, and its distribution across strategic territories remains uneven. Assessments from Lemhannas affirm that Indonesia's current Minimum Essential Force (MEF) posture is not designed to confront open conflict with another state's armed forces, but rather to meet basic defense requirements. Far from being able to address broader regional challenges, current maritime capacity is considered inadequate even for handling domestic issues, owing to the still-fragmented structure of maritime governance (Laksmana & Supriyanto, 2018). Limited funding and human resources at civilian maritime law enforcement agencies, compounded by economic pressures, mean that surveillance within the EEZ is frequently compromised (Irawan & Carnegie, 2026).

Responding to this situation and building upon the more general Wawasan Nusantara doctrine, former TNI Commander Yudo Margono launched the SPN at the 78th anniversary of the TNI in 2023. This strategy operationalizes the archipelagic identity enshrined in UNCLOS by treating the entire national territory, land, sea, and air, as a single integrated defense space. By moving beyond a collection of discrete domains managed by separate branches, the SPN shifts Indonesia's paradigm to weave its maritime character directly into its foreign policy and defense apparatus. Consequently, maritime diplomacy now defines the state's external security posture rather than merely supplementing it. This shift carries concrete doctrinal implications, requiring the TNI to conduct multi-domain operations where the TNI-AD, TNI-AL, and TNI-AU function as complementary components of a unified strategic architecture rather than as parallel bureaucratic entities competing for budget

allocation and institutional prestige. The SPN, in this sense, is as much an organizational reform as it is a strategic one.

Structurally, the SPN is an integration of three main pillars: the Big Island Defense Strategy (Strategi Pertahanan Pulau-Pulau Besar - SPPB) of the TNI-AD, the Nusantara Maritime Defense Strategy (Strategi Pertahanan Laut Nusantara - SPLN) of the TNI-AL, and the Nusantara Archipelago Air Strategy (Strategi Udara Kepulauan Nusantara - SUKN) of the TNI-AU. This unification aims to end the fragmentation of forces that has long operated in silos. In other words, the critical point of the SPN lies in the synchronization of land, sea, and air strike forces, initially concentrated on several major islands, now unified under an agile joint command ready to be deployed to any trouble spot. Like its predecessor Wawasan Nusantara, this approach is *semesta* (total) in the sense that it involves the mobilization of all citizens, territories, and national resources within a unified framework of thinking to protect sovereignty. This universal character demands synergy between military and non-military defense to confront an increasingly diverse spectrum of threats.

However, unlike Wawasan Nusantara with its emphasis on inward-looking orientation, the SPN's operational framework is built more holistically by combining inward-looking and outward-looking logics. The inward-looking dimension focuses on empowering domestic potential to address internal threats that are often intertwined with foreign interests. Meanwhile, the outward-looking dimension demands the application of forward defense so that adversaries have no opportunity to enter the national jurisdiction. This outward-looking strategy is particularly crucial in the context of deterrence. It aims to reduce adversarial intent by building credible force and strengthening regional cooperation. Through the leveraging of technology, among other means, Indonesia seeks to neutralize adversarial capabilities at a safe distance before such threats approach territorial boundaries. This technological integration serves to signal to external parties that the tactical cost of aggression far outweighs any gains they might achieve.

The tactical implementation of the SPN is divided into three operational zones based on urgency level and maneuver orientation. The first layer is the Mandala Luar (Outer Mandala), encompassing the space beyond the EEZ and the airspace above it. Here, the TNI is required to possess power projection capabilities to destroy threats before they enter the EEZ, utilizing the outermost islands as forward operating bases. The second layer is the Mandala Utama (Main Mandala), extending from the EEZ to the territorial sea. This zone constitutes the primary battlespace, applying an anti-access area denial strategy to obstruct the entry of adversarial forces through capable long-range detection and weapons systems. Finally, the Mandala Dalam (Inner Mandala) constitutes the last line of defense, from the 12-nautical-mile boundary to the entire landmass, where *semesta* forces are deployed in prolonged warfare and guerrilla scenarios to ensure that adversaries cannot consolidate control over any territory they enter.

To address persistent maritime challenges, interview findings indicate that the SPN advances three foundational elements: shaping the security environment, responding to crises, and preparing future defense. The state pursues the capacity to shape the security

environment by promoting regional stability and preventing aggression through a persistent yet calibrated military presence. At the operational level, the military realizes this goal by adopting modern technology that enhances weapons lethality and accuracy at extended ranges. The TNI prioritizes improving information system connectivity and the autonomy of alutsista (primary weapons systems) so it can operate independently under difficult conditions. Naturally, the effectiveness of this entire posture depends heavily on sustained budgetary support as an investment in protecting Indonesia's increasingly expansive national interests. By integrating strike forces across open maritime border regions, the SPN reinforces Indonesia's strategic autonomy. This integration ensures the nation avoids entrapment in the binary of great power alliances and stands firm on the principles of a free and active foreign policy.

This doctrinal evolution serves as the necessary bridge between Jakarta's traditional commitment to non-alignment and the emerging requirements of modern archipelagic defense. Specifically, we argue that the SPN functions as the operational vehicle for a dual-track strategy: it provides the material foundation for a credible deterrence-by-denial posture while simultaneously maintaining the diplomatic flexibility required for sophisticated strategic hedging. This dual-track approach requires a closer look at how the SPN's architecture combines the hard power of deterrence with the nuanced diplomacy of hedging, beginning in the next section with the substantial modernization of military hardware intended to change the cost-benefit calculations of any potential maritime incursion.

The Material Posture: Achieving Deterrence by Denial through Modernization

Geographically, the SPN assigns particular strategic weight to Indonesia's outer islands and maritime frontier zones, with the Natuna Islands occupying a position of exceptional salience. Situated at the southernmost reach of the SCS, the Natuna archipelago lies within Indonesia's EEZ as defined under UNCLOS but intersects with China's expansive and legally contested nine-dash line claim. China does not formally dispute Indonesian's sovereignty over the islands but asserts "traditional fishing rights" in the surrounding waters, a position Indonesia categorically rejects as lacking any basis in international law (Zou, 2023). The legal asymmetry has contributed to a recurring pattern of incursion, with Chinese fishing vessels, often escorted by coast guard ships, repeatedly entering Indonesian waters in the North Natuna Sea. These incidents have triggered diplomatic protests and, on several occasions, prompted the deployment of TNI naval and aerial assets. The SPN's deterrence architecture is primarily directed at this specific threat pattern, characterized by gray-zone activities, legal ambiguity, and actions calibrated to remain below the threshold of open armed conflict.

Rather than threatening an adversary with devastating retaliation, deterrence-by-denial raises operational costs until they exceed any plausible benefit. This modality suits a middle power confronting a superpower in a geographically complex maritime environment because the state does not need to match the adversary's offensive capacity. It only needs to make incursions prohibitively expensive (Morgan, 2017). To achieve this, the SPN drives a deliberate transition from the legacy Minimum Essential Force (MEF) paradigm toward the more ambitious Ideal Essential Force (IEF) framework for the 2024–2039 period. The shift

represents more than a quantitative expansion of the defense budget; it marks a qualitative reorientation toward high-end, asymmetric assets. By procuring submarines, long-range missiles, advanced fighter aircraft, and integrated surveillance networks, Indonesia intends to impose prohibitive operational costs on any potential aggressor across the maritime, aerial, and coastal domains of the North Natuna Sea. This material buildup provides the necessary weight to the SPN's broader architecture, which balances these hard-power capabilities with the diplomatic nuances of strategic hedging.

The naval dimension of this modernization program carries the greatest strategic weight because the primary threat vector in the North Natuna Sea remains maritime. Within the SPN framework, Indonesia's submarine capability represents the single most consequential deterrence investment. Although the TNI-AL has operated submarines since the 1980s, the government-to-government procurement of Chang Bogo-class submarines from South Korea marks a qualitative leap in area-denial capability (Manafe et al., 2020). Submarines impose a different deterrence logic from that of surface vessels. Their stealth renders them nearly impossible to locate or neutralize without substantial anti-submarine warfare investment, and their mere presence forces an adversary to divert significant resources to fleet protection. Furthermore, because these vessels can threaten the coast guard and paramilitary escort ships that China deploys in gray-zone operations, they introduce credible costs into an otherwise low-risk provocation strategy. Chinese vessels operating in the North Natuna Sea must now account for a subsurface threat that is invisible, unpredictable, and lethal, which is the exact operational uncertainty that denial deterrence intends to generate.

Surface fleet modernization complements this subsurface capability. The Diponegoro-class frigates, built in cooperation with the Netherlands' Damen Schelde Naval Shipbuilding and commissioned between 2007 and 2009, equipped the TNI-AL with Evolved Sea Sparrow surface-to-air missiles and Exocet anti-ship missiles that substantially raise the cost of any adversary surface engagement (Schreer, 2013). Indonesia has since pursued additional frigate procurement while simultaneously investing in PT PAL Indonesia's domestic shipbuilding capacity, reflecting a dual ambition: to enhance immediate combat capability while reducing long-term dependence on foreign suppliers. This industrial dimension is analytically inseparable from the deterrence logic. A posture that depends entirely on imported systems remains vulnerable to supply disruptions and political conditionality; conversely, a defense industry that maintains and produces its own platforms signals a qualitatively more durable deterrence commitment (Sukin, 2025). The domestic construction of KRI Alugoro, the first submarine built in Indonesia, demonstrates that this industrial ambition has moved from a policy aspiration to an operational fact.

Alongside platform procurement, Indonesia has deployed an asymmetric missile arsenal that extends the effective deterrence envelope well beyond what its surface fleet alone could sustain. Indonesia contracted Roketsan for the Khan missile system, making it the first country outside Turkey to operate this technology, which delivers precision strikes at ranges of up to 280 kilometers (Joesoef, 2022). This long-range precision capability allows the TNI to hold targets deep within an adversary's operational approach and expands the strategic deterrence space without requiring a large, expensive surface presence. The Khan system

operates alongside a layered missile arsenal that includes the Yakhont P-800, a supersonic anti-ship missile with a 300-kilometer range that poses extreme difficulties for interceptors. The arsenal also features the AGM-65 K2, KH-59ME, and Exocet MM40 Block 3, each of which serves a distinct strike role across the engagement spectrum (Djoyonegoro, 2023). Overall, this missile architecture enables Indonesia to project lethal force at range without continuous fleet deployment, establishing the operational signature of cost-effective denial.

The reinforcement of permanent military infrastructure on the Natuna Islands transforms Indonesia's arsenal into a credible, geographically anchored deterrence posture. Jakarta has significantly upgraded the Ranai Naval Base and expanded the Raden Sadjad Air Force Base on Natuna Besar, converting an underequipped frontier outpost into a forward operating base capable of sustaining extended patrols (Laksmana, 2019). This forward-basing strategy reduces response times and increases the operational risk for any unauthorized vessel entering Indonesia's EEZ. Under the SPPB, the military designates key frontier landmasses as static platforms that support naval and aerial operations through coastal missile batteries and air defense systems. In a departure from the old defense-in-depth doctrine, TNI AD land forces now enable maritime deterrence by managing the logistics and command facilities that sustain a persistent military presence. By positioning anti-ship missiles ashore to keep adversary vessels at risk, Indonesia projects power seaward without the high cost of continuous warship deployments. This arrangement effectively leverages geography as a force multiplier, fulfilling the core requirements of the archipelagic defense concept.

The 2019–2020 incursion brought the political dimension of this physical presence into sharp relief. When dozens of Chinese fishing vessels and coast guard escorts entered the North Natuna Sea, Indonesia responded by deploying six warships and fighter jets while formally summoning the Chinese ambassador. Former Indonesian President, Joko Widodo, then flew to Natuna to chair a cabinet meeting aboard a naval vessel, a deliberate act of political theater that signaled a territorial commitment from the highest levels of civilian government (Yulisman, 2020). This event clearly illustrates Morgan's (2017) credibility pillar, which holds that effective deterrence requires an adversary to believe in the defender's political will to use its military capability. Furthermore, Widodo's visit transformed an abstract commitment into a visible, embodied signal. Indonesia has since reinforced this signal through consistent enforcement. It remains the only Southeast Asian nation to apprehend and detain Chinese fishing vessels in contested waters aggressively (Bentley, 2023). Even after Chinese ships rammed their own vessel to prevent its seizure in March 2016, Indonesia successfully detained other crews and ships just months later (Zou, 2023). These enforcement actions constitute the behavioral expression of Indonesia's deterrence posture. By consistently employing low-level force to uphold maritime law, Indonesia demonstrates that its political resolve fully matches its denial capability.

The aerial domain reinforces Indonesia's defense posture through both platform modernization and surveillance architecture. While Joko Widodo prioritized platform diversification and fighter mobility from 2014 to 2024, his successor, President Prabowo Subianto, has markedly accelerated the pace and ambition of this modernization. The 2022 procurement of 42 French Rafale multirole fighters, the largest defense contract in Indonesian

history, equips the TNI-AU with AESA radar, METEOR beyond-visual-range missiles, and SCALP standoff cruise missiles (Hummel & Widiyanto, 2022). These capabilities substantially raise the cost for any adversary conducting aerial or surface operations in the North Natuna Sea. Additionally, the state plans to integrate 48 Turkish KAAN fifth-generation fighter jets into the local defense industry (Pramudya et al., 2026). In November 2025, the arrival of the Airbus A400M Atlas, strategic transport aircraft, further extended Indonesia's aerial mobility and logistical reach. By targeting an ideal fleet of 600 fighter aircraft, with 30 to 40 percent consisting of high-end units, the IEF framework confirms that Indonesia views modernization as a systematic effort to deliver strategic effects rather than a simple replacement of aging hardware.

Integrated radar and surveillance architectures enable these platform investments by performing the communication function that Morgan (2017) identifies as the third pillar of deterrence. The Ground Master 400 Alpha long-range air surveillance radar serves as the centerpiece of this system, providing an integrated aerial picture that detects everything from fighter jets and ballistic missiles to UAVs and low-flying helicopters (Amrin et al., 2025). This network serves a dual strategic purpose by allowing Indonesian authorities to detect incursions early, deploy appropriate assets, and document adversary behavior in legally actionable terms. Consequently, these capabilities enhance the operational effectiveness of a denial posture while generating the evidentiary record necessary to sustain Indonesia's legal and diplomatic claims under UNCLOS. In a gray-zone context, persistent surveillance functions as an active instrument of deterrence rather than a passive capability. It systematically undermines the ambiguity that adversaries use to hide the provocative nature of their actions.

Notwithstanding these genuine advances, the SPN's material posture remains incomplete in ways that carry real operational consequences, and intellectual honesty demands that these limitations be acknowledged directly. The fleet procurement target of 274 vessels by 2024 has not been met, with only approximately 160 vessels operational by 2025, the majority of them aging assets (Saputra et al., 2025). The defense budget, which hovers at approximately 0.8 percent of GDP, places the TNI-AL in a structurally difficult position where routine maintenance absorbs the bulk of available funds rather than modernization or high-intensity combat exercises. As a practical workaround, Indonesia leans into asymmetric acquisition by prioritizing submarines, fast attack craft, and mine warfare systems that offer high destructive potential relative to their cost. However, this approach has clear limits (Sebastian et al., 2015). The aerial dimension faces analogous structural problems. Despite pursuing the MEF since 2010, the TNI-AU had achieved only 51 percent of its target by 2024, the lowest among the three service branches. Furthermore, the air force maintains only approximately 42 percent of its total aircraft in a deployment-ready state, with many platforms ranging from 25 to 40 years old (Joesoef, 2022).

These constraints force Indonesia to adopt a necessarily selective denial posture. The military concentrates its resources on the North Natuna Sea as the most urgent and politically visible flashpoint rather than distributing them uniformly across the nation's vast maritime frontier. This prioritization is a strategic judgment that credible deterrence in a specific, high-

salience location generates more deterrent value than diluted deterrence across a larger but less contested space, and the SPN's architecture consistently reflects this. Whether current resource allocations are sufficient to sustain the adversary cost calculations required by denial deterrence, particularly as China modernizes its forces beyond Indonesia's capacity match, remain unresolved. The evidence confirms that the strategic logic of the SPN's material posture is sound, its ambition is genuine, and its implementation, despite fiscal and institutional constraints, has meaningfully shifted Indonesia's deterrence credibility in the North Natuna Sea from aspirational to operational. The following sections explore how this material foundation enables the broader SPN architecture to balance the hard power of deterrence with the diplomatic nuances of hedging.

The Diplomatic Dimension: Operationalizing Hedging through Strategic Partnerships

The military power imbalance in the SCS, which increasingly favors China, has become an undeniable geopolitical reality. Beijing possesses a significant military advantage that continues to grow exponentially compared to Southeast Asian claimants, including its impact on Indonesia as a non-claimant state. Theoretically, countries in the region have two primary paths to manage this risk: building independent naval and air capacities to enforce national interests, or pursuing negotiation through either bilateral channels or regional arrangements. Although Indonesia has attempted the former through defense modernization, it and other Southeast Asian nations cannot rely solely on traditional balance of power politics. The widening military gap renders unilateral balancing strategies ineffective in constraining China's assertiveness (Emmers, 2010; Simon, 2012). Consequently, rather than getting trapped in a dead-end arms race, Indonesia has chosen to manage the lopsided distribution of power in the SCS through a series of cooperative defense diplomacy strategies as the logic of hedging.

The foundational commitment that makes this balancing act possible is Indonesia's constitutionally rooted free and active foreign policy which prescribes non-alignment with any military bloc while mandating active participation in the management of regional and global order. This principle is not merely a diplomatic slogan. It has genuine strategic content in the SCS context. It provides Indonesia with the normative justification for cultivating security relationships with multiple external powers simultaneously without those relationships hardening into alliances, and it supplies the domestic political legitimacy for a defense posture that would otherwise appear contradictory, strengthening military ties with Washington while maintaining economic engagement with Beijing.

The roots of this defense cooperation can be traced back to the 1960s. Amidst internal political turmoil at the time, Indonesia laid the foundation for its neutrality policy and non-aligned principles, which permanently shaped its national defense approach. Despite adhering to non-alignment, Indonesia maintained pragmatic relations with Great Powers like the United States and the Soviet Union to secure military assistance. Entering the 1970s, the strategic focus shifted toward regional security with the establishment of ASEAN. Notwithstanding the skepticism of many experts regarding ASEAN's potential to become a defense community like NATO, Indonesia remained optimistic that a community-based approach was the best way to dampen tensions in Southeast Asia. Through this multilateral

forum, Indonesia encouraged defense industry collaboration, peacekeeping center networks, and logistic support frameworks for non-traditional security missions (Gindarsah & Priamarizki, 2015; Lubis, 2022; Pedrason, 2024). This momentum culminated in September 2023 under Indonesia's leadership, when the joint military exercise ASEAN Solidarity Exercise Natuna 2023 (ASEX-01 N) was held as a symbol of collective regional commitment in facing contemporary maritime security challenges (Manullang, 2024).

Over time, Indonesia's defense cooperation expanded beyond its regional borders, particularly through intensifying collaboration with Australia, the US, and Japan. The relationship with Australia has developed dynamically through joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2018, which deepened security collaboration (Hanggarini & Perwita, 2024). Meanwhile, the relationship with the United States has remained resilient despite past periods of embargo. Indonesian military personnel continue to engage in international professional education and counter-terrorism programs. A key milestone was the hosting of Garuda Shield, the largest inter-army joint exercise, which serves as evidence of the tactical closeness between the two nations (Inkiriwang, 2021). On the other hand, Japan has emerged as a crucial partner in promoting maritime security through the provision of patrol vessels and contributions to the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) to tackle piracy in Asia (Dharmaputri & Syawfi, 2022). Waluyo (2023) notes that Indonesia's defense diplomacy in the SCS is generally conducted under the principle of "win-win cooperation" based on respect and equality.

The most paradoxical element is Indonesia's defense relationship with China. On one hand, Jakarta has historically maintained deep-seated vigilance toward Beijing; at least since 1966, when communism became domestically reviled, most of the Indonesian military elite have viewed China as an assertive threat, with naval officers often worrying about the potential projection of invasion forces from Hainan Island (Bentley, 2023). On the other hand, China is one of the primary suppliers of strategic weaponry systems for the TNI, including anti-ship missiles, surface-to-air missiles, and advanced maritime radar systems (Kipgen, 2021). This cooperation even extends to joint production, such as the development of unmanned aerial vehicles and precision-guided bombs through collaboration between PT Pindad and Chinese industrial partners (Waluyo, 2023). Military interaction between the two countries also includes joint naval exercises and the establishment of a direct communication hotline to mitigate the risk of incidents on the ground (Inkiriwang, 2021). This complexity is further exacerbated by massive economic dependence, where large-scale domestic business lobbies tend to prioritize economic cooperation over the strengthening of threat perceptions (McRae, 2019).

This paradoxical relationship explains why Indonesia's position now appears increasingly ambivalent, even tending to erode long-held diplomatic consistency. President Subianto's visit to Beijing in November 2024 served as a crucial turning point when both countries agreed on maritime economic cooperation in areas with overlapping claims. This agreement raised serious concerns among international law analysts; by agreeing to joint development in such areas, Indonesia risks being perceived as implicitly recognizing China's

nine-dash line claim, a move that contradicts Indonesia's steadfast commitment to UNCLOS (Kartini et al., 2025). This shift, among others, has a tangible impact on local fishermen in Natuna, who must face the presence of larger, more competitive Chinese fishing vessels, often escorted by military assets (Basundoro, 2025).

This balance, albeit inconsistent, reaffirms Indonesia's hedging strategy orientation, meaning the diversification of strategic partnerships without committing to hard balancing, achieved through selective security cooperation and the maintenance of positive relations with China. In the context of the SCS, where strategic competition between China and the United States shapes regional security dynamics, hedging provides strategic flexibility for a middle power like Indonesia. It manifests in efforts to maintain constructive economic and diplomatic ties with China while simultaneously strengthening maritime security cooperation with other regional actors. This dual-track approach allows Indonesia to protect its sovereign interests without being dragged into polarized bloc politics. This aligns with the observations of several scholars that Indonesia's defense diplomacy is neither purely symbolic nor entirely coercive, but rather a measured mix of inducement and restraint aimed at managing uncertainty in an increasingly contested maritime environment (Alfarizi et al., 2026; Manullang, 2024; Inkiriwang, 2021).

Importantly, hedging does not signify an uncertain stance. Rather, it is a deliberate strategic calculation to preserve sovereignty in the North Natuna Sea without being drawn into open confrontation between Great Powers. This challenges the assumption that middle powers respond to Great Power competition with clear strategic balancing. Instead, the Indonesian case reveals that policy responses are often ad-hoc and pragmatic, representing in part what experts call the "ASEAN Way," a set of guidelines and norms intended for compliance by member states (Alfarizi et al., 2026; Majumdar, 2015). This means that in managing SCS issues, Indonesia and other ASEAN members tend to prefer dialogue and minimal institutionalization over direct confrontation. However, it is important to note that Indonesia's policy behavior should not be viewed solely as the result of rational calculations regarding external systemic power structures. As emphasized by neoclassical realism, foreign policy is also a reflection of internal contestation, elite interests, and domestic institutional dynamics (Irawan & Carnegie, 2026; McRae, 2019).

Operationalizing the SPN: Joint Commands, Service Integration, and Defense-Industrial Integration

The material and diplomatic dimensions of the SPN are ultimately only as effective as the institutional architecture that coordinates them. It is at the doctrinal and organizational level that the SPN's most ambitious and most contested claims are located. The strategy's central doctrinal proposition asserts that defending Indonesia's archipelagic territory requires more than capable individual service branches. Instead, it demands an integrated, multi-domain force where the TNI-AD, TNI-AL, and TNI-AU operate as complementary components of a unified strategic system. While this proposition is analytically sound and follows logically from treating land, sea, and air as a single defense space, its translation into institutional practice faces significant obstacles. These include heavy bureaucratic inertia,

inter-service rivalry, and the structural legacy of a military culture that prioritized Army primacy for most of the republic's history.

The doctrinal shift that the SPN demands is perhaps most clearly visible in the changing relationship between the TNI-AL and TNI-AU in the context of North Natuna Sea operations. Effective area denial in the maritime domain requires seamless coordination among surface vessels, submarines, and maritime patrol aircraft. This integration entails more than the parallel deployment of naval and aerial assets in the same geographic space; it requires each domain's capabilities to amplify the others. For example, a submarine operating in the Natuna Sea is more effective when aerial intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets track adversary surface vessels and cue the submarine to their positions. Conversely, aerial strike assets achieve greater precision when submarine-generated intelligence about adversary fleet dispositions informs their targeting data. To achieve this level of integration, the military must establish joint command structures, shared communications architectures, and interoperable data systems. Most fundamentally, the Indonesian Army must foster a doctrinal culture in which inter-service coordination is the norm rather than the exception.

The SPN has made progress toward this objective by establishing joint operational commands (Komando Gabungan Wilayah Pertahanan - Kogabwilhan) designed to provide unified operational authority over military assets across all three service branches within defined geographic areas (Hakim, 2019). The Kogabwilhan structure represents a significant departure from the previous territorial command system, in which the Army's regional military commands (Kodam) effectively served as the primary organizing framework for military operations across the archipelago. This structure institutionally privileged the land domain and made genuinely joint operations difficult to execute. By establishing joint commands with authority over naval and aerial assets alongside ground forces, the SPN creates the organizational prerequisite for multi-domain operations. Whether this structural reform has produced genuine operational integration, or whether it remains a formal reorganization that has not yet transformed the actual conduct of operations, is a question that the available evidence does not fully resolve and that the interview data gathered for this study illuminates with particular clarity.

The TNI-AD role in the SPN's doctrinal architecture also reflects a significant adaptation from the continental defense-in-depth tradition. Rather than constituting the primary deterrence instrument, as it did under the old doctrine, the TNI-AD in the SPN framework performs a supporting function for the TNI-AL and TNI-AU's forward deterrence posture. In the North Natuna Sea, the army contributes most effectively through coastal defense, deploying anti-ship missile batteries on the Natuna Islands and providing ground forces to defend key installations against potential amphibious assaults or special operations (Chadhafi, 2021). The deployment of anti-ship missile systems on Natuna Besar particularly strengthens Indonesia's deterrence-by-denial capabilities. These land-based systems offer middle powers a highly cost-effective denial instrument because an aggressor cannot easily suppress them without escalating to a level of force that carries unacceptable political costs. Furthermore, the cost of these missiles represents only a small fraction of the value of the surface vessels and aircraft they threaten. The transformation of the TNI-AD from the

dominant service into a force focused on coastal defense and base security represents a profound doctrinal reorientation—one that demonstrates a strategic realism about the origin of Indonesia's most consequential threats.

The SPN's inter-service integration ambitions extend to defense-industrial cooperation and the development of indigenous capability. The state's effort to build a domestic defense industry aims to supply all three service branches with locally produced systems, ranging from TNI-AD armored vehicles and ammunition to TNI-AL patrol vessels and submarines, as well as TNI-AU trainer aircraft and surveillance drones. This initiative reflects a specific doctrinal judgment: strategic autonomy requires an integrated defense-industrial base that can sustain operations without relying on foreign suppliers, whose reliability remains uncertain during a crisis (Irfan et al., 2023). PT PAL Indonesia's shipbuilding program, PT Pindad's armored vehicle and weapons production, and PT Dirgantara Indonesia's aerospace manufacturing form the three pillars of this industrial ambition. Although their current output does not yet meet the TNI's full requirements, their development trajectory sends a clear credibility signal. This progress proves that Indonesia intends its deterrence commitment to remain durable rather than contingent on continued foreign supply.

Despite these advances, the doctrinal synthesis that the SPN demands remains incomplete, and the gaps are consequential. Inter-service rivalry over budget allocation continues to create friction in joint planning processes, as each branch advocates for procurement and deployment decisions that maximize its operational independence rather than its contribution to integrated multi-domain effectiveness (Joesoef, 2022; Saputra et al., 2025). While the military introduced an innovative Kogabwilhan command structure, it has not yet established the joint training pipelines, shared doctrine manuals, and integrated logistics systems that tactical-level integration requires. Consequently, Indonesia maintains a joint command architecture at the strategic and operational levels but falters at the tactical level, where forces actually execute operations. Additionally, civilian defense oversight institutions sometimes struggle to enforce the SPN's integrative logic against the institutional interests of individual service branches. This struggle reflects a broader pattern where the strategy's ambitions have, in some respects, outpaced the nation's civil-military institutional capacity (Sulaiman, 2019).

The SPN's doctrinal synthesis is therefore best understood not as an accomplished fact but as an ongoing institutional project. This project has made genuine and measurable progress in shifting Indonesia's defense posture from a continental, army-centric model toward a maritime-capable, multi-domain architecture. However, structural, budgetary, and cultural obstacles continue to limit the completeness of that transformation. This characterization does not offer a counsel of pessimism. Rather, it accurately describes a defense reform that remains ambitious because the threat environment demands it. The evidence suggests that the SPN has successfully established the strategic framework and organizational prerequisites for integrated multi-domain deterrence, rendering its material and diplomatic dimensions substantially operational. Indonesia must now undertake the harder, slower work of cultural and institutional transformation. By building a joint

operational culture and a shared doctrinal identity, the state will, over time, make its multi-domain deterrence posture as credible in practice as it is coherent in concept.

Conclusion

Indonesia stands as a rising regional power, playing a key role in collective efforts to balance China's ambitions in the SCS. As a natural leader in Southeast Asia with a long diplomatic track record, Indonesia now possesses the largest navy and coast guard in the region. It is projected to become the world's seventh-largest economy within the coming decade. Jakarta's seriousness in maintaining its territorial integrity is demonstrated not only through significant weapons systems for conventional defense scenarios, but also through more integrated doctrinal renewal via the SPN. Far from being a mere administrative document, this doctrine is a manifestation of the evolution of Indonesia's strategic thinking. Currently, it is more oriented toward the projection of force across open maritime border regions.

Through the SPN, Indonesia explicitly adopts a dual-instrument approach that combines hard and soft power within the frameworks of deterrence and hedging. On the deterrence side, the integration of all three service branches under a single joint command creates a deterrence-by-denial posture designed to convince external actors that any attempt to encroach upon the North Natuna Sea will be met with a synchronized and costly response. On the hedging side, the SPN enables Indonesia to strengthen its military capabilities independently without becoming entrapped in formal military alliances that could compromise the principles of its free and active foreign policy. Indonesia can thereby continue to cultivate security cooperation with the US and other regional partners while maintaining the depth of its economic relationship with China. This strategy represents a sophisticated form of defense diplomacy: Indonesia prepares for the worst-case scenario on the battlefield while keeping the space for dialogue as open as possible at the negotiating table.

However, it is important to underscore that none of these strengthening efforts are aimed at achieving military superiority that directly challenges Chinese dominance. Rather, Indonesia's measures are more defensive in character, oriented toward maintaining the status quo and protecting sovereign rights in its EEZ in accordance with the mandate of UNCLOS. The acquisition of precision strike capabilities, undersea warfare capacity, and the strengthening of Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) networks are part of normal modernization to replace obsolete systems, while also responding to the increase in military activity around Natuna. What is occurring, therefore, is a dynamic of armament, not an arms race. The relative stability that is currently maintained is indeed heavily influenced by the economic interdependence between ASEAN member states and China. Consequently, while incidents around Natuna are predicted to continue to emerge sporadically, open confrontation between Jakarta and Beijing in the short to medium term remains unlikely as long as both parties continue to prioritize the strategic value of their economic partnership.

Looking ahead, the SPN's journey toward full effectiveness still faces several persistent internal challenges. The problem of institutional overlap among the TNI AL, Bakamla, the Marine Police (Polair), and the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries in maritime law enforcement remains an unfinished task. Beyond this, Indonesia's hedging strategy carries significant vulnerability; even a slight imbalance in maintaining equidistance from the major powers risks undermining the credibility of Indonesia's neutrality. Internal stability threats, meanwhile, continue to impose a burden on external power projection. The separatism issue in Papua, still marked by violence and corrupt governance, along with challenges of religious intolerance in various regions, risk pulling the TNI's focus back toward "offensive" domestic security affairs. If national energy continues to be consumed by putting out fires at home, Indonesia's strategic autonomy and defense diplomacy on the regional stage, particularly in the SCS, risks being weakened. Ultimately, therefore, the success of the SPN depends not only on the sophistication of its weapons systems, but on the state's capacity to synergize domestic stability with defense resilience on the front lines of the Nusantara.

Acknowledgement

This manuscript received an article review grant from Universitas Padjadjaran under contract number 2235/UN6.3.1/PT.00/2024.

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