Vol. 6, No. 11, November 2025
E-ISSN:2723 – 6692
P-ISSN:2723– 6595
http://jiss.publikasiindonesia.id/

The Geopolitics of the Natuna Sea and Indonesia's Defense Challenges

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KEYWORDS
Natuna Sea, geopolitics, Indonesian defense, maritime sovereignty, maritime security

ABSTRACT
The Natuna Sea represents a critical geopolitical and security focal point for Indonesia, situated adjacent to the contested South China Sea and serving as a vital international shipping corridor. This research examines the complex geopolitical dynamics and multifaceted defense challenges in the region, utilizing a descriptive qualitative approach through document analysis, secondary data review, and expert interviews. Findings reveal escalating maritime threats, including a 15% annual increase in unauthorized foreign vessel entries, illegal fishing causing estimated economic losses of USD 120–140 million, and growing piracy incidents. The study identifies significant capacity gaps in Indonesia's naval patrol coverage and surveillance systems, with less than 40% of the Natuna EEZ effectively monitored. The research concludes that addressing these challenges requires an integrated strategy combining naval modernization, advanced surveillance technology implementation, proactive maritime diplomacy, and local community engagement. These findings provide crucial policy recommendations for enhancing maritime sovereignty and regional stability, contributing to both theoretical security frameworks and practical defense planning in alignment with Indonesia's strategic vision.

INTRODUCTION

The Natuna Sea is a strategic area of Indonesian waters located in the northern part of the Riau Islands and directly adjacent to the South China Sea. Its highly important geographical position makes Natuna a critical point in the context of regional geopolitics and national defense. As an international shipping lane connecting the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, these waters serve as a transit route for more than 60% of global trade ships, including vessels transporting energy and strategic commodities, making it one of the busiest sea regions in Southeast Asia (Bakamla RI, 2022; Jakarta Post, 2022). This condition renders the Natuna Sea not only economically important but also vulnerable to various maritime threats, ranging from violations of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), piracy, and illegal fishing to the potential for cross-border conflicts that can cause diplomatic tensions (Emmers, 2016).

Geopolitically, the Natuna Sea possesses significance that extends beyond national boundaries. The activities of neighboring countries, especially those related to claims in the South China Sea, pose challenges for Indonesia. Although Indonesia is not a direct claimant, the overlapping claims at the border of the North Natuna EEZ result in frequent incursions by foreign vessels, particularly from China (Zhang, 2019). Data from the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries shows that illegal fishing activities in Natuna reach tens of thousands of tons per year, which not only harms the national economy but also damages the marine ecosystem. Economic losses due to these illegal activities are estimated to reach hundreds of millions of dollars annually, while local fish stocks have declined significantly, threatening food

security and the livelihoods of fishermen (Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries of the Republic of Indonesia, 2021; Nugroho & Prasetyo, 2022).

From a defense perspective, the Natuna Sea is a primary focus of the national security strategy. Hybrid threats, including foreign vessel infiltration and illegal fishing, demand early detection, rapid response, and integrated defense strategies. Research by the Indonesian Defense Review reveals that, until 2020, Indonesia's maritime surveillance fleet remains limited, and the capacity of radar and patrol boats is insufficient to monitor the Natuna EEZ, which spans hundreds of thousands of square kilometers (Indonesian Defense Review, 2020; Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Indonesia, 2021). This creates a gap between defense needs and available capabilities, necessitating the development of a more modern and effective surveillance system, including the integration of AI and multi-sensor technology (Putra & Handayani, 2022; Rahman, Aziz, & Chua, 2021).

In addition to defense, the Natuna Sea holds enormous economic and ecological value. The region is rich in fishery resources, natural gas, and petroleum. Offshore gas reserves in Natuna are estimated to reach billions of barrels of oil equivalent, while the capture fisheries potential can reach hundreds of thousands of tons per year, representing a significant contribution to national food security (BP Statistical Review, 2022; Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries of the Republic of Indonesia, 2021). Threats to these resources—from illegal fishing to unauthorized foreign activities—can directly impact economic and social resilience. Therefore, managing the Natuna Sea requires a holistic approach that includes maritime defense, regional diplomacy, and high-tech surveillance such as satellites, advanced radars, and surveillance drones (Lim & Tan, 2021; Wijaya, Setiawan, & Nugroho, 2021).

The geopolitics of the Natuna Sea compel Indonesia to strike a balance between military capabilities and regional diplomacy. ASEAN provides a framework for maritime cooperation, but pressure from foreign vessel activities at sea borders remains a significant challenge (Thayaparan, 2020). Indonesia needs an adaptive strategy combining military strength, surveillance technology, and maritime diplomacy to maintain regional stability. Previous studies highlight a gap between surveillance capacity and regional security needs. Integrating multi-sensor and AI- or satellite-based detection systems has proven to increase patrol effectiveness and early detection of illegal activities, yet the application of such technologies remains limited in some remote maritime areas (Putra & Handayani, 2022; Rahman, Aziz, & Chua, 2021).

The novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive analysis of the geopolitics of the Natuna Sea, focusing on Indonesia's defense challenges across military, economic, and diplomatic dimensions. This study not only describes current conditions but also evaluates Indonesia's readiness to face hybrid threats and provides strategic recommendations to strengthen maritime sovereignty. The research objectives include understanding the geopolitical dynamics of Natuna, identifying threats, evaluating existing defense strategies, and drafting policy recommendations to maintain the sovereignty and security of these waters. This research is expected to be valuable for academics, policymakers, and defense institutions in formulating effective and sustainable maritime security strategies (Emmers, 2016; Thayaparan, 2020; Zhang, 2019).

Based on this description, this study formulates several core questions. First, what are the geopolitical dynamics of the Natuna Sea and their implications for Indonesia's national defense? Second, what threats does Indonesia face in Natuna, including piracy, illegal fishing, and foreign vessel infiltration? Third, what is Indonesia's current defense strategy in responding to geopolitical challenges and maritime threats? Fourth, what strategic measures can be implemented to strengthen the sovereignty and security of the Natuna Sea in the future? The formulation of these questions provides a foundation for a comprehensive analysis combining perspectives on geopolitics, defense, and maritime surveillance technology.

This study analyzes the geopolitical dynamics of the Natuna Sea and Indonesia's defense challenges, aiming to identify complex maritime threats such as EEZ violations, illegal fishing, piracy, and foreign vessel infiltration, and to evaluate the readiness of national defense strategies amid regional geopolitical pressures. The research contributes theoretically to maritime security studies and offers practical insights for policymakers formulating integrated defense strategies, which include enhancing patrol capacity, integrating cutting-edge surveillance technologies, advancing maritime diplomacy, and empowering local communities to safeguard sovereignty, security, and the sustainability of resources in this strategic area.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the geopolitical dynamics of the Natuna Sea and Indonesia's defense challenges. The qualitative method was chosen to gain a deep understanding of complex and multidimensional strategic contexts, defense policies, and maritime threats (Emmers, 2016; Thayaparan, 2020). Data were collected through document analysis, including academic literature, government reports, media publications, and interviews with defense and maritime experts. The documents included official data from the Indonesian Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Bakamla reports, and international publications related to South China Sea geopolitics and maritime security (Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Indonesia, 2021; Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries of the Republic of Indonesia, 2021; Bakamla RI, 2022).

To enhance validity, data source triangulation was employed. Interviews with defense experts, geopolitical analysts, and academics were conducted to verify secondary information and provide contextual perspectives on Indonesia's defense challenges in the Natuna Sea (Putra & Handayani, 2022; Rahman, Aziz, & Chua, 2021). Thematic analysis identified patterns and relationships among variables such as illegal fishing, foreign vessel infiltration, and national defense readiness.

The study also incorporated secondary quantitative data, including volumes of foreign vessels passing through Natuna waters, illegal fishing catches, and marine surveillance fleet capacity. This quantitative data was descriptively analyzed to support qualitative interpretations and provide an overview of prevailing conditions (Nugroho & Prasetyo, 2022; Lim & Tan, 2021). This comprehensive approach allowed a holistic understanding of the geopolitical dynamics, threat identification, defense strategy evaluation, and policy recommendation formulation relevant to Indonesia's maritime security context.

This methodology aligns with other recent research studies emphasizing qualitative-descriptive designs supported by triangulation and thematic analysis to address maritime security challenges in the Natuna Sea region.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study found that the Natuna Sea has high geopolitical and security complexity, with various real and potential threats. Secondary data shows that the volume of ships crossing Natuna waters has increased significantly over the past five years. According to Chong (2021), about 62% of East Asian and Pacific merchant ships use the Natuna route as the main transit route, making this region one of the busiest trading points in Southeast Asia. These activities reinforce the importance of Natuna as a strategic route, while increasing maritime security risks.

Analysis of illegal fishing reveals that foreign vessels, especially from China and Vietnam, often enter the North Natuna EEZ illegally. Based on data from Hendarto & Suryadi (2022), the total illegal catch is estimated to reach 48,000–52,000 tons per year, causing economic losses of around USD 120–140 million per year for local fishermen and the Indonesian government. The ecological impact is also significant; These illegal activities

disrupt local fish stocks and damage coral reefs, thereby reducing long-term fisheries productivity (Tan, 2020).

Regarding maritime security, the study found a capacity gap between the need for patrols and the availability of surveillance fleets. Lim, Goh, & Tan (2022) reported that Indonesia's patrol fleet is still limited, with less than 40% of vessels capable of conducting routine patrols across the Natuna EEZ. This has caused difficulties in detecting foreign vessels crossing unauthorized areas, especially in the vast North Natuna region and directly bordering the South China Sea.

In addition, the results of the study show that geopolitical tensions are increasing due to overlapping claims in the waters of the South China Sea. A study by Sato (2021) confirms that the activities of foreign military vessels, including Chinese patrols, pose complex diplomatic and security pressures for Indonesia. Although Indonesia asserts that Natuna is in the national EEZ, the frequency of violations continues to increase, signaling the need for a more adaptive and responsive defense strategy.

From the technological aspect, this study found that the application of satellite-based surveillance systems and multi-sensor radar can increase the effectiveness of early detection of illegal activities. Chandra & Putri (2022) show that the integration of satellite data, radar, and AI enables real-time mapping of illegal vessels and predictions of movement paths, thereby supporting more informed patrol decision-making. The implementation of this technology is still limited to several strategic zones, so there is a need for broader capacity development.

In addition to the threat of illegal fishing and geopolitical tensions, piracy in the Natuna Sea is also a concern. Rahman & Aziz (2021) reported that piracy cases increased by 15% over the past three years, mainly against small fishing boats and energy transport vessels. This piracy activity adds to the complexity of security, as it has the potential to disrupt economic stability and international trade routes.

The results of the study also show that maritime diplomacy strategies are an important element for risk mitigation. Cooperation with ASEAN and other regional forums helps strengthen coordination of surveillance and patrols. Lee (2020) emphasized the importance of preventive diplomacy through information exchange, joint exercises, and patrol protocol agreements, which can minimize conflicts between countries in the Natuna region.

In addition, the study found that the involvement of local communities in the surveillance and reporting of illegal activities makes a significant contribution to maritime security. Local fishermen who are trained to monitor foreign vessels and report suspicious activity increase patrol effectiveness, as shown in the study of Yuliana & Prasetyo (2021).

Overall, the results show that the Natuna Sea faces complex hybrid threats, including illegal fishing, foreign ship infiltration, piracy, and geopolitical tensions. These threats demand integration between national defense strategies, high-tech surveillance, maritime diplomacy, and public participation. These findings form the basis for the development of adaptive and proactive defense policies to safeguard the sovereignty and security of the Natuna Sea.

Discussion

The discussion of this research emphasizes the impact of geopolitics, maritime threats, and Indonesia's defense strategy in the Natuna Sea, by integrating empirical findings and theoretical perspectives. The Natuna Sea has a significant strategic position for Indonesia, not only because it is an international shipping lane connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans, but also because it is rich in natural resources such as natural gas, offshore oil, and large fisheries stocks (Hadi, 2021). This strategic value makes Natuna the main focus of maritime defense policy, but it also faces the complex challenges of both traditional and hybrid threats.

One of the main findings is the increase in the activity of foreign vessels entering the North Natuna EEZ without permission, especially from China. Data from Indonesia's Ministry

of Defense shows that more than 200 foreign vessels were detected crossing Natuna waters illegally during 2022, an increase of about 15% compared to the previous year (Wardhana, 2022). This activity reflects geopolitical pressures in the South China Sea region, where Indonesia has to face the challenge of overlapping claims and diplomatic pressure despite not directly claiming the disputed territory (Harris & Lee, 2020). These findings reinforce Indonesia's need to strengthen maritime defense through technology integration, surveillance, and routine patrols.

The threat of illegal fishing remains a significant problem. A statistical analysis of the MPA shows that illegal fish catches in Natuna reach 50,000 tons per year, with economic losses estimated at around USD 130 million per year (Putra, 2021). Illegal fishing not only harms the economy, but also threatens marine ecosystems. Illegal fishing activities damage marine habitats and reduce the productivity of fish stocks, which in turn impacts food security and the livelihoods of local fishermen (Chong, 2022). This shows that defense strategies and resource management must be holistic, integrating security, economic, and conservation aspects.

From a defense perspective, the study found significant gaps in fleet capacity and surveillance technology. The vast Natuna Sea requires constant patrols and advanced detection systems to deal with hybrid threats, including foreign ship infiltration and piracy. According to Ramadhan (2021), Indonesia only has around 60% of the surveillance fleet needs for Natuna, so many areas are difficult to reach. This gap demands innovation through the utilization of technologies such as AI, satellites, multi-sensor radar, and surveillance drones to strengthen Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). Research by Haryanto & Lim (2021) shows that the integration of this technology is able to increase patrol effectiveness by up to 40% compared to conventional methods.

Geopolitical tensions also have implications for maritime diplomacy strategies. Regional studies emphasize that ASEAN and multilateral cooperation mechanisms can help reduce the risk of conflict in Natuna (Sukma, 2020). Indonesia needs to combine preventive diplomacy, joint military exercises, and information exchange to deal with illegal activities and foreign pressure. This approach to diplomacy must be balanced with military readiness, because the Natuna Sea is a symbol of national sovereignty that should not be ignored (Hoffman, 2022).

In addition to external threats, piracy in the Natuna Sea shows an increasing trend. Data from local maritime research institutions recorded a 12% increase in piracy cases over the past three years, especially against fishing boats and small energy vessels (Yanto, 2021). This phenomenon shows that maritime security is not only about defending against foreign ships, but also protecting local actors and domestic trade routes. Addressing these threats requires multi-layered strategies, including routine patrols, community engagement, and technology-based detection systems.

The results of the study also emphasized the importance of local community participation in surveillance. Fishermen who are trained to monitor suspicious activity and report illegal vessels have been shown to increase patrol effectiveness by up to 25% (Santoso & Nurhadi, 2022). This approach not only strengthens maritime security, but also fosters collective awareness of the importance of maritime sovereignty. This strategy is in line with the concept of comprehensive security, which integrates military, social, economic, and environmental aspects (Anderson & Chen, 2021).

In the context of technology, the application of AI and satellite data analysis is an important breakthrough. AI is able to process information from various sensors in real-time, predict the movement of illegal vessels, and prioritize the most vulnerable patrol areas (Lee & Tan, 2021). This technology integration is in line with Indonesia's need to overcome the limitations of the physical fleet and strengthen surveillance in the remote zone of North Natuna. Technology also facilitates coordination between institutions, including the Indonesian Navy, Bakamla, and KKP, to create a more responsive and adaptive defense system (Wijayanti, 2021).

Overall, this discussion emphasized that the security challenges of the Natuna Sea are multidimensional, including geopolitical pressure, illegal fishing, piracy, and limited defense capacity. Indonesia's strategy to meet these challenges must be integrated, combining military forces, modern surveillance technologies, maritime diplomacy, and community participation. The findings of the study show that the combination of these strategies can increase the effectiveness of surveillance, reduce illegal activities, and maintain the stability of the Natuna region in a sustainable manner (Sulaiman, 2022).

The study also highlights the need for comprehensive risk mapping, including the identification of areas prone to illegal fishing, piracy routes, and entry points for foreign vessels. With a data-driven approach, Indonesia can formulate patrol priorities, fleet allocation, and more targeted diplomacy policies. This approach is in line with Indonesia's vision to strengthen maritime sovereignty and support the Golden Indonesia 2045 goal, which is to become a sovereign, prosperous, and influential country regionally and globally (Hadi, 2021; Hoffman, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, the Natuna Sea is a strategic maritime region facing complex security challenges such as violations of Indonesia’s Exclusive Economic Zone by foreign vessels, illegal fishing, and piracy, all of which cause significant economic losses and threaten marine ecosystem sustainability and national food security. Despite efforts to strengthen Indonesia’s defense, gaps remain in patrol coverage and surveillance capabilities across this vast area, underscoring the need for a comprehensive, integrated approach. Strengthening sovereignty and security requires modernizing patrol fleets and integrating advanced surveillance technologies like satellites, multi-sensor radar, and artificial intelligence for enhanced early detection and rapid response. Equally important are proactive maritime diplomacy and involving local communities in monitoring efforts. Implementing such a multi-dimensional strategy will better address hybrid threats, support sustainable resource management, and contribute to regional stability aligned with Indonesia’s Golden Indonesia 2045 vision. Future research should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of technology integration in maritime surveillance systems and exploring innovative community-based monitoring models to enhance maritime security resilience in remote areas of the Natuna Sea.

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