

CHAPTER 3

Negotiating Redlines: Indonesia's Approach to Managing China's Assertiveness in the South China Sea

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Abstract

This article examines Indonesia's strategic approach to managing its complex relationship with China in the South China Sea, particularly around the Natuna Islands, where Chinese incursions have risen since 2012. It argues that Jakarta pursues a pragmatic strategy by negotiating two key redlines: one shaping public narratives and the other preventing tactical maritime interactions from escalating. Redlines, defined here as limits of acceptable hostility, help Indonesia balance security imperatives with economic interests. The article contributes to the threat perception literature by showing how a regional power moderates its view of a rising power through two mechanisms. First, negotiating redlines compels leaders to distinguish between core and peripheral interests. Second, these redlines foster predictability by establishing informal yet consistent rules of engagement. The findings highlight Indonesia's calculated pragmatism in managing China—firmly opposing intolerable actions (e.g., violations of economic sovereignty) while managing negotiable risks (e.g., China Coast Guard (CCG) incursions) to prevent escalation, reflecting a clear prioritisation of national interests.

Introduction

Three key trends in Indonesia-China interactions in the South China Sea are observable since 2016.

First, disputes coexist with cooperation: both China and Indonesia recognise that frequent low-intensity disputes, such as shadowing interactions between maritime security agencies in the disputed area, need not hinder progress in other areas.¹ China's nine dash line intersect with Indonesia's EEZ in the Natunas, and low intensity disputes have consistently occurred and attracted media attention more regularly since 2016. High-profile media reports on China Coast Guard (CCG) incursions in the Natunas occurred in 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021, and most recently in 2024, just before the inauguration of President Prabowo Subianto.² However, this constant frequency of incursions did not hinder improvement in their economic cooperation. China is Indonesia's largest trading partner, with

¹ Evan A. Laksmana, "China making inroads with grey zone tactics against Indonesia," *The Strait Times*, 25 July, 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/china-making-inroads-with-grey-zone-tactics-against-indonesia>.

² Dian Septiari, "Now and then: China's incursions in Natuna," *The Jakarta Post*, 16 January 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/01/16/now-and-then-china-s-incursions-natuna.html>; Fadli and Yvette Tanamal, "China-Indonesia ties tested following North Natuna stand-off," *ibid.*, 25 October 2024.

bilateral trade reaching US\$149.09 billion in 2022, a 19.8% increase from the previous year.³ Chinese enterprises have invested in a wide range of sectors in Indonesia, including agriculture, mining, electricity, real estate, manufacturing, industrial parks, the digital economy, and financial insurance.⁴ These dual circumstances—persistent conflict alongside improving economic relations—challenge the conventional view that conflict and cooperation are mutually exclusive in international relations.⁵ Instead, it aligns with the growing argument about the dualistic nature of Southeast Asian states' relations with China, where economic cooperation coexists alongside disagreements.⁶ Additionally, it highlights the capacity of both Indonesia and China to tolerate displays of assertiveness as part of their ruling regimes' efforts to achieve performance legitimacy.⁷

The ability to separate disputes from cooperation suggests the presence of a variable that allows Beijing and Jakarta to continue deepening economic ties despite their increasingly conflictual relationship in the South China Sea. Interviews conducted in Jakarta in 2022 indicated the existence of a tactical redline at sea between the two countries—characterised by a presidential instruction to avoid provocation—which has been instrumental in managing tensions and preventing outright conflict.⁸ This demonstrates the second key trend, where both countries have become increasingly sensitive to each other's interests. Despite the growing frequency of CCG incursions in the Natuna Sea, both countries maintain a restrained posture: Jakarta allows Beijing to maintain a temporary presence within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), while China refrains from disrupting Indonesia's economic activities in the Natunas. Tactical redlines refer to the boundaries of permissible assertiveness demonstrated by the maritime security agencies of individual countries to advance their claims at sea.

Under President Prabowo Subianto's administration in 2024, Indonesia initially took a more assertive

³ However, there was a slight decline in 2023, with bilateral trade amounting to US\$139.42 billion, down 5.9% year-on-year. Despite this decline, China maintains its position as Indonesia's top trading partner. See further, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/idn>.

⁴ Qian Zhou, "China-Indonesia closer economic ties: Trade and investment opportunities," *China Briefing*, 11 November 2024, <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-indonesia-trade-and-investment-profile-opportunities/>.

⁵ Some scholars argue that limited conflict can generate new ideas, improve social interactions, and foster mutually beneficial solutions to shared problems. Additionally, it suggests that conflict can create opportunities for social change and development that benefit all parties involved. In Southeast Asia, such dynamics are particularly significant for sustaining performance legitimacy. Christopher Darnton, "Public diplomacy and international conflict resolution: A cautionary case from cold war South America," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 16, no. 1 (2020); Yi Seong-Woo, "The Nature of Cooperation and Conflict Events: Are they mutually exclusive?," *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 6, no. 1 (2008). For discussion on the importance of performance legitimacy, see Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Elite legitimization and the agency of the host country," in *Global perspectives on China's belt and road initiative: Asserting agency through regional connectivity*, ed. Florian Schneider (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

⁶ Some scholars have noted these dualistic trends, where Southeast Asian states can quarrel with China in the South China Sea without disrupting economic cooperation. Rosemary Foot and Evelyn Goh, "The international relations of East Asia: A new research prospectus," *International Studies Review* 21, no. 3 (September 2019); Alvin Camba and Janica Magat, "How do investors respond to territorial disputes? Evidence from the South China Sea and implications on Philippines economic strategy," *The Singapore Economic Review* 66, no. 01 (2021).

⁷ At least from the Indonesian perspective, my interviewees often attribute one of the key reasons for China's assertiveness to domestic politics, where Xi Jinping sought to bolster his regime's legitimacy.

⁸ This series of interviews was conducted in Jakarta between February and June 2022 and involved officials from the Indonesian Navy, Maritime Security Agencies, Defence Ministry, and Foreign Ministry.

stance by chasing and attempting to expel Chinese vessels.⁹ However, this approach softened after his visit to Beijing in November 2024, reflecting continued restraint toward China. This softened approach reflects the third trend, which I refer to as the normalisation of conflictual relationships: Indonesia and China have shifted from denial to implicit acceptance of recurring skirmishes and disputes.¹⁰ This acceptance enables them to acknowledge overlapping claims without seeking resolution while focusing on broader aspects of the relationship. Although this shift began in 2017, it was further evidenced by a 2024 joint statement during President Prabowo Subianto's visit to Beijing, which formally acknowledged the existence of overlapping claims.¹¹ However, this acceptance and its merits are not uniformly shared among domestic actors or institutions in Indonesia. While the Foreign Ministry (KEMLU) continues to harbour the desire to deny overlapping claims with China, senior leadership adopts a more pragmatic approach in dealing with Beijing: If acknowledging disputes with China proves more beneficial, they are willing to do so.¹²

I argue that the aforementioned trends are underpinned by negotiated redlines, embedded in Indonesia-China mutual understandings. Redlines here is defined as limits of acceptable hostility. These negotiated redlines play a crucial role in conflict de-escalation by promoting predictability. This predictability reduces the uncertainty that underpins the security dilemma. Redlines are not merely imposed warnings from one side but are negotiated, instrumental tools for actors to establish mutual awareness of limits and outline acceptable ways to manage disputes while keeping tensions under control.¹³ This assertion challenges conventional neorealist views, which assert that smaller states either balance against or bandwagon with more threatening powers.¹⁴ Instead, smaller states like Indonesia may negotiate implied concords with powerful states—such as China—to promote coexistence. The theory of hedging, as outlined by scholars like Cheng-Chwee Kuik, observes that Southeast Asian states selectively perceive and respond to both threats and opportunities.¹⁵ I argue that further examining the role of redlines extends this observation by revealing the mechanisms that

⁹ As reported by Tria Dianti, "Indonesia's gutsy response to Chinese incursion shows ex-general Prabowo's assertiveness, analysts say," *Benar news* (Jakarta), 29 October 2024.

¹⁰ I also discussed this in Emirza Adi Syailendra, "Understanding Prabowo's Natunas gambit with China," *Lowy Interpreter* (Canberra), 27 November 2024.

¹¹ Joint statement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Indonesia on advancing the comprehensive strategic partnership and the China-Indonesia community with a shared future," news release, 10 November, 2024, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202411/10/content_WS67301550c6d0868f4e8ecca9.html.

¹² Based on a personal conversation I had with an Indonesian official in December 2024, this is consistent with their public statements and their broader tendency to deny the existence of maritime disputes with China, rather than acknowledging them. For a study on KEMLU's perspective on China, see Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia, "Indonesian diplomats' and foreign policy scholars' perceptions and their implications on Indonesian foreign ministry bureaucratic responses to a rising China," *The Pacific Review* 35, no. 3 (2022)

¹³ One of the most notable examples of redlines is President Obama's declaration of a redline against Syria's use of chemical weapons. This statement, made in 2012, signified that crossing this boundary would prompt military intervention, although subsequent events revealed the complexities of enforcing such commitments. Luis Da Vinha, "A tale of two red lines: Managing foreign policy crises in the Obama and Trump administrations," *Comparative Strategy* 40, no. 1 (2021)

¹⁴ There are variations among neorealist scholars' arguments, but typically, they argue that the absence of central authority fosters a competitive environment where states strive to maximise their power and security. For example, Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance formation and the balance of world power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985)

¹⁵ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Shades of grey: Riskification and hedging in the Indo-Pacific," *The Pacific Review* (2022)

reassure Southeast Asian states to tolerate Beijing's assertiveness—not due to a lack of alternatives to deter it, but because of the existence of implied limits.

I observe that for Southeast Asian states, such as Jakarta, negotiating redlines with China is a more practical strategy than challenging or submitting to the rising power. Negotiation here should be understood not merely as meetings between state representatives, but also as iterative interactions that shape certain practices underpinned by mutual understanding between the two countries. Redlines can be communicated to an adversary through private or public statements or through “repeated actions,” eventually forming a “pattern” that shapes future negotiations.¹⁶ While initial interactions between disputing parties may be ad hoc, they can evolve into established habits and preferences over time.¹⁷ This approach is especially relevant in Southeast Asia, where states seek to benefit from China's economic rise while managing security risks, particularly in the South China Sea.

This article explores how negotiating redlines shapes Indonesia-China dynamics and the broader Southeast Asia-China relationship, offering insights into how smaller states can reconcile their interests and security imperatives with China.

Unpacking and Positioning Redlines in the Threat Perception Literature

Negotiating redlines reframes threat perceptions into risks and moderates three key aspects of relations between Southeast Asian states and China:

- (1) what Southeast Asian states perceive or consider threatening;
- (2) how trade-offs in key areas of interest between Southeast Asia and China are managed; and
- (3) how both Southeast Asian states and China maintain relationships by allowing contestation to occur within set limits.

The negotiated aspect of redlines is crucial in this article, as redlines can often be perceived as unilateral impositions. The negotiated element, however, suggests a more mutual and dynamic interaction between the two sides, fostering confidence that both parties will adhere to the agreed consensus. Before examining how redlines reframe Southeast Asian states' threat perception of China into manageable risks, it is worth briefly highlighting the evolution of threat perception literature in International Relations and identifying where the perspective of negotiating redlines contributes.

Threat perception is the process through which actors evaluate the surrounding environment to

¹⁶ Bruno Tertrais, “Drawing red lines right,” *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2014/07/03 2014): 7.

¹⁷ Thomas C. Schelling, “Bargaining, Communication, and Limited War,” *Conflict Resolution* 1, no. 1 (1957): 28.

assess potential dangers to their security, interests, or values.¹⁸ The basis of this threat perception is information processing, which can be hindered by uncertainty about another party's intentions, often leading to a security dilemma.¹⁹ The literature on threat perception can be divided into three streams:²⁰ Non-psychological (rationalist) approaches suggest that actors assess the credibility of others' intentions based on available information, with uncertainty leading to a security dilemma;²¹ psychological (individual), which suggests that actors process information through pre-existing cognitive frameworks, influenced by biases and heuristics;²² and psychological (collective), which suggests that group dynamics shape information processing, where prior beliefs are updated based on new information, but biases constrain these updates, making threat perceptions resistant to change.²³ The negotiation of redlines is situated within the latter—psychological (collective).

The psychological (individual) stream often views interests as fixed (e.g., security, economic).²⁴ However, Southeast Asian states perceive their interests as dynamic and hierarchical, allowing them to adjust concerns based on context rather than adhering to a zero-sum mindset. In contrast, the psychological (collective) perspective is more dynamic, suggesting that actors continuously update prior beliefs based on new information. Although these updates are constrained by existing biases, making threat perceptions resistant to change, in critical junctures, such as structural or order transitions, actors may alter the way they evaluate threats. In the Southeast Asia context, Ian Storey and Herbert Yee's edited volume *The China Threat: Perceptions, Myths, and Reality* (2004) is the most comprehensive compilation of studies detailing how Southeast Asian states changed their behaviour towards China as the regional order transitioned from the Cold War to the Post-Cold War

¹⁸ Raymond Cohen, "Threat perception in international crisis," *Political Science Quarterly* 93, no. 1 (1978)

¹⁹ In general, Southeast Asian states are anxious about being drawn into a cycle of conflict. I explored the limitations of conventional understandings of security dilemma theory, particularly by examining the Malaysia-China case. See Emirza Adi Syailendra, "Malaysia's strategic approach: Unpacking the 'action-reaction spiral' logic in the South China Sea," *Asian Politics & Policy* (2024)

²⁰ While the categorisation is mine, Janice Gross Stein also reviews this literature in her review article. See Janice Gross Stein, "Threat perception in international relations," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (2nd edn), ed. David O. Sears Leonie Huddy, Jack S. Levy, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²¹ Classical and structural realists argue that power asymmetry influences threat perception in international relations. For example, Stephen Walt's Threat Perception Theory (TPT) highlights four key factors influencing threat perception: aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive power, and offensive intentions. Walt, "Alliance formation and the balance of world power." See also Chang-Ching Tu, Han-Ping Tien, and Ji-Jen Hwang, "Untangling threat perception in international relations: an empirical analysis of threats posed by China and their implications for security discourse," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 11, no. 1 (2024).

²² Cognitive perspectives in IR introduce "enemy images" to explain threat perception, acting as schemas to interpret potential threats. Scholars find that emotion, combined with cognition, influences policy choices based on these images. See Richard K Herrmann et al., "Images in international relations: An experimental test of cognitive schemata," *International studies quarterly* 41, no. 3 (1997). One example is Yuen Foong Khong's work, which examines the influence of analogy and schema in decision-making. Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton University Press, 1992); Yuen Foong Khong, "Power as prestige in world politics," *International Affairs* 95, no. 1 (2019).

²³ This aligns with prospect theory, which suggests that perception, including threat, is reference-point dependent: actors' choices are shaped by how they perceive their current situation relative to a reference point. If leaders perceive their position as below this point, they may escalate to restore their status. Jack S. Levy, "Daniel Kahneman: Judgment, Decision, and Rationality," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 35, no. 2 (2002); Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk," *Econometrica* 47, no. 2 (1979).

²⁴ Khong, for instance, would argue that analogy is persistent and almost impossible to change. Yuen Foong Khong, "How not to learn from history," *International Affairs* 98, no. 5 (2022)

period.²⁵ Key to the various works in this volume is how Southeast Asian states were able to shift their perception of China from a threat to a risk, enabling them to integrate China into the emerging post-Cold War regional order and architecture. I suggest that negotiating redlines were key mediating factors that allowed Southeast Asian states to downplay their predisposition to see China as a threat.

The reframing of threats as risks also stems from recognising that conflict is often an inherent part of relationships and that expressions of assertiveness are sometimes necessary for maintaining domestic legitimacy. Redlines, in this context, are integral to the fabric of mutual understandings between Southeast Asian states and China. These redlines, often implicit, serve as the limits of tolerable hostility. By examining redlines, scholars can identify the intervening variables that influence how Southeast Asian states perceive gains and losses in their relations with China, as they reorganise their priorities between core and peripheral interests.

If we consider redlines as limits, I suggest that they can be understood in two ways:

1. Limits as thresholds of intolerable loss: These are the boundaries at which losses become unbearable, where significant actions have crossed warnings and demand a response.
2. Limits as tools for policing boundaries: Here, redlines are not strictly about internal priorities but are used to shape the behaviour of others, setting expectations for acceptable portrayals of identity and conduct.

The following discussion suggests two mechanisms through which negotiating redlines moderates threat perception. First mechanism: Negotiating redlines compels actors to introspectively distinguish between core and peripheral interests. Second mechanism: Negotiated redlines reduce threat perception by fostering predictability.

First mechanism: Negotiating redlines compels actors to introspectively distinguish between core and peripheral interests

The negotiation of redlines or limits in maritime disputes, whether through direct diplomatic engagement between leaders or indirect, iterative interactions between maritime security agencies, requires actors to refrain from viewing the pie and concept of interests as fixed and zero-sum.²⁶ Assuming China's assertiveness is confined to challenging secondary or tertiary interests while leaving primary interests untouched, Southeast Asian states may find accommodation more palatable. If such accommodation yields tangible benefits in other domains—such as economic cooperation—leaders may perceive it as

²⁵ Herbert Yee and Ian Storey, eds., *The China threat: Perceptions, myths and reality* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002).

²⁶ Emirza Adi Syailendra, "The sense and sensibility of Malaysia's approach to its maritime boundary disputes," *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative* (Washington D.C.), 21 November 2022, <https://amti.csis.org/the-sense-and-sensibility-of-malaysias-approach-to-its-maritime-boundary-disputes/>.

a strategic trade-off rather than a concession.²⁷ In such cases, negotiating redlines is not simply about defining territorial boundaries but about prioritising interests hierarchically—distinguishing between non-negotiable concerns and those subject to managed contestation.

In the South China Sea, interactions between Southeast Asian states and China are shaped by a discourse that frames security issues alongside economic cooperation.²⁸ This interplay is not merely a pragmatic choice but a recurring feature of official narratives. A key example is Indonesia's response to heightened tensions with China in 2016. Although confrontations occurred at sea, the government, led by President Joko Widodo, ultimately prioritised economic stability over military escalation.²⁹ Widodo's decision to hold a high-profile cabinet meeting aboard a warship in Natuna waters in June 2016 signalled resolve, yet the broader policy outcome focused on safeguarding economic interests—such as offshore energy projects and broader bilateral cooperation with China—rather than escalating the dispute.³⁰

The domestic discussion inherently reshapes the distinction between core and peripheral interests, with sovereignty being a core interest, alongside Indonesia's ability to exploit oil and other resources. However, increasing cooperation with China is also viewed as a core interest, particularly given the importance of infrastructure investment to Indonesia's leadership. On the other hand, sovereign rights are significant but considered secondary to these other core interests. Therefore, as long as Indonesia can ensure that the legitimacy of its claims in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) remains protected through various strategies—ranging from maintaining a continued civilian and military presence, engaging in economic activities, and negotiating boundaries with other countries—Jakarta is willing to tolerate the presence of the CCG.³¹ This tolerance, however, has limits: such a presence must not escalate to the use of force (a topic further explored in the next section).

Furthermore, distinguishing between core and peripheral interests moderated threat perception by linking security concerns with economic interests and bilateral cooperation with China. This evaluation occurred in tandem: when Indonesia's economic interests in the Natunas were protected—especially as China refrained from challenging Indonesia's sovereignty, in line with Beijing's redline—and as

²⁷ For example, in one of my articles, I examined how Malaysia prioritised economic over security imperatives, tolerating CCG incursions in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) within limits, provided they did not interfere with its offshore oil exploitation. Syailendra, "Malaysia's strategic approach: Unpacking the 'action-reaction spiral' logic in the South China Sea."

²⁸ Evelyn Goh, "The Asia-Pacific's 'Age of Uncertainty': Great Power Competition, Globalisation and the Economic-Security Nexus," *RSIS Working Paper* (2022); Evi Fitriani, "Linking the impacts of perception, domestic politics, economic engagements, and the international environment on bilateral relations between Indonesia and China in the onset of the 21st century," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 10, no. 2 (2021)

²⁹ Evi Fitriani, "Indonesian perceptions of the rise of China: Dare you, dare you not," *The Pacific Review* 31, no. 3 (2018)

³⁰ On 23 June 2016, President Widodo held a Cabinet meeting aboard the KRI Imam Bonjol near the Natuna Islands, signaling Indonesia's sovereignty to China. Jefferson Ng, "The Natuna Sea incident: How Indonesia is managing its bilateral relationship with China," *The Diplomat*, 20 January 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/the-natuna-sea-incident-how-indonesia-is-managing-its-bilateral-relationship-with-china/>.

³¹ I Made Andie Arsana and Clive Schofield, "Indonesia's 'Invisible' Border with China," ed. Bruce A. Elleman, Stephen Kotkin, and Clive Schofield, *Beijing's Power and China's Borders: Twenty Neighbours in Asia* (London: Routledge, 2013).

economic cooperation improved, the growing presence of the CCG in Indonesia's EEZ was seen as something Indonesia could tolerate. Indeed, maritime security concerns are frequently negotiated alongside economic imperatives, ensuring that tensions do not derail bilateral cooperation. While different state agencies weigh these priorities differently, under both Widodo and Prabowo Subianto, economic considerations have often taken precedence.³² For example, in 2017, negotiations over Indonesia's redlines were conducted through direct communication between Coordinating Minister Luhut Panjaitan and his Chinese counterpart, where discussions of South China Sea tensions were integrated with investment talks. In 2019, when Chinese fishing vessels entered Indonesia's exclusive economic zone, Defence Minister Prabowo referred to China as a 'friendly nation,' reinforcing adherence to the diplomatic agreement.³³ This sentiment was reaffirmed during a 2021 leader-to-leader call between President Jokowi and President Xi Jinping, where both leaders highlighted their close ties, strengthened by Indonesia's reliance on Chinese COVID-19 vaccines.³⁴ Likewise, during Prabowo's visit, the Joint Statement issued by both governments linked maritime security concerns with economic collaboration. This pattern of diplomatic engagement underscores a tendency to link economic and security considerations, reflecting how both domains are increasingly intertwined in shaping foreign policy decisions and strategic priorities.

Beyond delineating core and peripheral interests, negotiating redlines also compels Indonesia to refrain from viewing the situation as a fixed zero-sum game. As long as China does not contest Indonesia's sovereignty over the Natuna Islands, maritime jurisdictional disputes are framed as risks to be managed, rather than existential threats. Jakarta's non-zero-sum approach to negotiating redlines and distinguishing core and peripheral interests aligns with broader patterns across Southeast Asia, where economic considerations often temper the rigid enforcement of sovereign rights. As seen in Malaysia's approach to CCG incursions, Indonesia has exhibited tactical flexibility, allowing China limited space for assertiveness—provided that core interests remain protected.³⁵ Through carefully framed discourse, Indonesia maintains a calibrated balance: asserting its claims while preserving avenues for economic engagement.

The aforementioned discussion highlights that as China and Indonesia navigate tactical interactions in the Natunas, Indonesian policymakers have underscored the importance of sectoral trade-offs, in which security imperatives and economic cooperation are not mutually exclusive. The objective is not absolute deterrence but the preservation of core national interests—sovereignty and economic

³² Interview with the Director of Strategy at the Indonesian Defence Ministry in Jakarta on 6 March 2022.

³³ As cited in Lim Min Zhang and Joyce ZK Lim, "What will Prabowo's China policy look like? Analysts expect pragmatism over nationalism," *The Strait Times* (Jakarta), 16 February 2024, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/what-will-prabowo-s-china-policy-look-like-analysts-expect-pragmatism-over-nationalism>.

³⁴ Interview with Director of Defence Strategy at the Indonesian Ministry of Defence.

³⁵ Cheng-Chwee Kuik and Yew Meng Lai, "Deference and defiance in Malaysia's China policy: Determinants of a dualistic diplomacy," *International Journal of Asian Studies* (2023); Syailendra, "Malaysia's strategic approach: Unpacking the "action-reaction spiral" logic in the South China Sea."

stability—while managing secondary concerns within acceptable limits. By framing incursions as violations of sovereign rights rather than sovereignty, Indonesia moderates the perception of the threat posed by China. This redline distinction shifts the focus from territorial integrity, which would warrant a more forceful response, to a more flexible, manageable issue concerning economic interests and navigational freedoms. As a result, the threat is reframed within a legal and diplomatic framework, altering how both China and Indonesia approach the issue. By downplaying the severity of the incursions, Indonesia structures its interests around preserving diplomatic space and regional stability, rather than escalating tensions over what is perceived as a moderate, manageable risk. This strategic reframing allows Indonesia to engage with China within established legal norms while safeguarding its core sovereignty claims, maintaining the flexibility to respond without overcommitting to conflict.

Second mechanism: Negotiated redlines reduce threat perception by fostering predictability

Indonesia and China have negotiated two redlines: one governing public discourse and the other regulating tactical interactions at sea. As noted above, these redlines resulted from both direct negotiations between leaders and tactical interactions at sea, which helped Indonesia and China understand each other's limits when engaging with one another. This section demonstrates how negotiating and understanding redlines or limits of behaviour between actors reduces uncertainty by introducing predictability. As noted in the literature review above, threat perception is primarily regulated through a framework that shapes how an actor interprets the actions of others. Uncertainty about intent can lead to a security dilemma when the primary assumption is that one country cannot be trusted. Therefore, negotiating redlines reduces threat perception by updating this framework: even though China may be assertive, it will adhere to Indonesia's redlines for various reasons. This confidence leads to a willingness to tolerate China's assertiveness, as it is bounded by limits and, in essence, benefits Indonesia in other sectors. Indonesia's confidence in the strength of its legal position also deters it from adopting a purely deterrence-based approach toward China.

In the Indonesia-China case, my 2022 interviews with officials from Indonesia's Ministry of Defence, Foreign Ministry, and maritime security agencies revealed three key reasons why they believed China would respect certain boundaries in the South China Sea:

1. China views Indonesia as an important regional partner.
2. Their economic interests are deeply intertwined, with China's significant foreign direct investment in Indonesia.³⁶

³⁶ Fitriani, "Linking the impacts of perception, domestic politics, economic engagements, and the international environment on bilateral relations between Indonesia and China in the onset of the 21st century."; Dewi Fortuna Anwar, "Indonesia-China Relations: Coming Full Circle?," *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2019, no. 1 (2019); Siwage Dharma Negara and Leo Suryadinata, *Indonesia and China's Belt and Road Initiatives: Perspectives, issues and prospects* (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018).

3. The existence of *perjanjian tidak tertulis* (unwritten agreements) provides a framework for informal commitments to avoid escalation.³⁷

While Indonesian officials did not explicitly use the term 'redlines,' their responses suggested an awareness of limits. In this context, redlines refer to informal yet mutually understood boundaries that, if crossed, would provoke a reaction.

The first redline

The first redline in Indonesia-China relations emerged in 2016, amid rising tensions over Beijing's growing presence in the Natuna Sea.³⁸ This triggered a public debate in Indonesia, forcing Jakarta to adopt a firmer stance.³⁹ Jakarta's firmer stance, in turn, triggered Beijing to adjust its approach, as seen in the differing responses from Beijing's officials to the same event that year. Previously, Beijing would downplay such skirmishes by reaffirming Indonesia's sovereignty over the Natunas, thus masking their disagreement regarding the disputes in the area where the nine-dash line intersects Indonesia's EEZ.⁴⁰ However, following a June naval confrontation, China's Foreign Ministry changed its position.⁴¹ They claimed the incident occurred in 'overlapping claims waters' and accused Indonesia of violating international law.⁴² This marked Beijing's first public acknowledgment of a maritime dispute with Indonesia, largely driven by regional dynamics surrounding the 2016 South China Sea Arbitral Award.

Out of this interaction, the need arose for a mechanism that would allow both parties to assert stronger stances against each other while simultaneously downplaying the severity of their disputes. This stronger stance is necessary as both Jakarta and Beijing need to maintain performance legitimacy in the eyes of their political constituents. Furthermore, since 2016, following the arbitral award that nullified the legality of China's historical claims in the South China Sea, Jakarta has witnessed Beijing adopting a more defensive stance—requesting that its Southeast Asian partners refrain from

³⁷ Interview with the Director of Defence Strategy of the Indonesian Ministry of Defence, 16 March 2022. The negotiation of this unwritten agreement and how it relates to Jakarta's broader tacit understanding with Beijing is discussed in Chapter 4. His account aligned with several other interviews I conducted with senior Navy officers on 23 and 26 January 2022.

³⁸ In my PhD work, I discussed the historical antecedents of the Indonesia-China redline and identified another redline negotiated between the two countries' Foreign Ministers, Ali Alatas of Indonesia and Qian Qichen of China, in 1995. While the details of this meeting are beyond the scope of this article, its core element was an implicit agreement on how the two countries would manage their disagreements, particularly regarding whether any disputes existed between them.

³⁹ For debates among the Indonesian elites concerning the South China Sea, see Emirza Adi Syailendra, "Indonesia's elite divided on China," *East Asia Forum*, April 20, 2018, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/04/20/indonesias-elite-divided-on-china/>; Emirza Adi Syailendra, "A nonbalancing act: Explaining Indonesia's failure to balance against the Chinese threat," *Asian Security* 13, no. 3 (2017).

⁴⁰ "Foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying's regular press conference," news release, 23 March, 2016, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cedk/eng/fyrth/t1350212.htm>.

⁴¹ From 1995 to 2016, both sides consistently avoided addressing whether disputes existed, deliberately steering attention away from the issue. Syailendra, "Understanding Prabowo's Natunas gambit with China."

⁴² "Foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying's regular press conference," news release, 20 June, 2016, <http://fm.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/t1373744.htm>.

invoking the award while increasing its aggressive presence to assert claims in the South China Sea. However, a significant portion of policymakers in Indonesia desires to challenge Beijing, such as by fully implementing a policy to rename the contested area from the South China Sea to the North Natuna Sea.⁴³

In response to this need, Indonesian officials negotiated an unwritten agreement in 2017 that established a redline to prevent tensions from disrupting economic cooperation. The first notable action was Indonesia refraining from fully enacting the renaming policy—using the new name domestically but not pursuing formal recognition from the International Hydrographic Organization.⁴⁴ To manage tensions, officials have strategically distinguished between sovereignty and sovereign rights in their public discourse, affirming that sovereignty is non-negotiable while portraying sovereign rights as more flexible.⁴⁵ Interviews with Indonesian officials reveal how this distinction allows them to downplay Chinese incursions in the Natuna Sea. Indonesia asserts sovereignty over the islands and territorial waters, while its sovereign rights extend to the surrounding EEZ, where it can regulate economic activities but cannot restrict freedom of navigation. This distinction is embedded in official rhetoric, with sovereignty framed as absolute and sovereign rights presented as more adaptable. Officials often cite the principle of ‘innocent passage’ to explain Chinese incursions, allowing foreign vessels, including the CCG, to traverse the EEZ without breaching UNCLOS.⁴⁶ By presenting China’s presence as temporary and non-intrusive, Indonesia sought to mitigate the gravity of the situation, reassuring both domestic and international audiences that its economic and strategic interests remained secure. While scholars argue that the CCG’s extended presence challenges this principle, Indonesia uses this interpretation to downplay tensions, framing the issue as a manageable risk rather than a serious violation.

This diplomatic balancing act has evolved over time, reflecting a shift in the redline corresponding to changing approaches in public discourse and strategic interests between the two nations. As China’s insistence on recognising overlapping claims grows, Jakarta has become more willing to accept this

⁴³ Tom Allard and Bernadette Christina Munthe, “Asserting sovereignty, Indonesia renames part of South China Sea,” Online, *Reuters*, 14 July 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-politics-map-idUSKBN19Z0YQ>; Saifulbahri Ismail, “China demands Indonesia rescind decision to rename part of South China Sea,” *ChannelNews Asia* (Singapore), 2 September 2017, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/china-demands-indonesia-rescind-decision-to-rename-part-of-south-9179992>.

⁴⁴ Kurnia Sari Aziza, “Luhut Pastikan Tak Ada Pengubahan Nama Laut China Selatan Menjadi Laut Natuna Utara [Luhut insisted that there will be no renaming of South China Sea to North Natuna Sea],” *Kompas* (Jakarta), 13 September 2017, <https://ekonomi.kompas.com/read/2017/09/13/193437026/luhut-pastikan-tak-ada-pengubahan-nama-laut-china-selatan-menjadi-laut>.

⁴⁵ See further discussion in the next section.

⁴⁶ Innocent passage is outlined in UNCLOS, specifically Articles 17 to 32. It refers to the right of vessels to pass through the territorial sea of a coastal state, provided that such passage is not prejudicial to the peace, good order, or security of that state. However, for passage to be considered “innocent,” it must adhere to certain conditions, such as being continuous and refraining from engaging in any activities that are considered hostile, including conducting surveys. Indonesian scholars and foreign policy analysts do not view China’s activities in the disputed area as innocent passage; rather, the Foreign Minister’s description of them as such was a way to soften and attenuate public concern. An interview with an Expert Staff member (Colonel level) at the Hydro-Oceanographic Centre (Pushidrosal), Indonesian Navy, on 26 January 2022.

narrative, albeit within limits.⁴⁷ For instance, during President Prabowo Subianto's visit to China in November 2024, he acknowledged the existence of 'overlapping claims' while framing this within a conciliatory tone, emphasising growing maritime and economic cooperation.⁴⁸ This recognition marks Prabowo's departure from the previous stance of denying any dispute with China. However, beyond acknowledging the existence of overlapping claims, Indonesia has no intention of recognising the legality of China's nine-dash line under UNCLOS. The recognition should be seen as a signalling manoeuvre by Prabowo to demonstrate his willingness to engage with China, provided Beijing remains a reliable partner. This requires China to exercise continued restraint in the South China Sea and enhance economic cooperation. The acknowledgement also avoided any detailed discussion on the nature of the overlapping claims or the establishment of a dispute resolution mechanism—areas where Indonesia's redline currently lies.

The second redline

The second redline, governing tactical interactions at sea, emerged from repeated maritime encounters between Indonesian and Chinese security agencies. Indonesian officials have generally tolerated CCG activities, including monitoring and surveys, as long as they do not interfere with Indonesia's oil exploitation.⁴⁹ Interviews with Indonesian Naval officers revealed a presidential instruction of 'jangan bikin gaduh'—'do not escalate first.'⁵⁰ By adhering to this principle, both sides have managed to avoid direct confrontation, allowing China to assert its presence without triggering a crisis. While this redline was initially established through negotiations between leaders, repeated maritime interactions, even in the form of skirmishes, have further reinforced it. These encounters serve as mechanisms for solidifying redlines, fostering predictability, and creating routine exchanges.⁵¹ Through these interactions, both sides have opportunities to test, refine, and strengthen mutual expectations, gradually deepening their understanding of each other's limits.⁵² Key actors in these exchanges include China's

⁴⁷ This became more pronounced with a statement on 8 January 2020 by Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang, declaring that China's rights in the relevant waters were an 'objective fact,' irrespective of Indonesia's stance. As quoted in Niniek Karmini, "Indonesia president visits islands also claimed by China," *Associated Press* (Jakarta), 8 January 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/30ecc727451cbcaa0e28a198ef8bcccc>.

⁴⁸ Joint statement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Indonesia on advancing the comprehensive strategic partnership and the China-Indonesia community with a shared future," news release, 10 November, 2024, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202411/10/content_WS67301550c6d0868f4e8ecca9.html.

⁴⁹ A colonel (sea) from the Indonesian Navy lamented that the instruction restricted the Navy's freedom during patrols in response to the continuous presence of CCG vessels. Interview with the former Director of Cooperation at the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency on 28 March 2022 illustrates this as a typical example of a top-down directive for restraint, where leaders discourage hostile rhetoric and policies in the face of China's growing assertiveness.

⁵⁰ Emirza Adi Syailendra, "China, Indonesia, and Malaysia: Waltzing around oil rigs," *The Diplomat*, 18 August 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/china-indonesia-and-malaysia-waltzing-around-oil-rigs/>.

⁵¹ One similar example is James Manicom's work on the modus vivendi between China and Japan in the maritime domain, which emerged from an implicit consensus and iterative interactions at sea. James Manicom, *Bridging troubled waters: China, Japan, and maritime order in the East China Sea* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 60-61.

⁵² This aligns with Ritual Theory in IR, which has gained significant attention in recent years, suggesting that ritualised practices developed through repetitive engagement can help reduce anxiety and manage conflict. Stephane J Baele and Thierry Balzacq, "International rituals: An analytical framework and its theoretical repertoires," *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 1 (2022).

Coast Guard, maritime militias, and Indonesia's naval and maritime agencies.⁵³

This redline enables Indonesia to navigate its vulnerabilities by asserting sovereignty through maritime patrols and resource exploitation, while maintaining strategic flexibility in its relationship with China. Rather than responding to perceived threats with excessive force, Indonesia adopts a measured approach to maritime security. Operational practices such as shadowing allow both sides to test escalation thresholds without provoking direct conflict, reinforcing a restrained but firm presence at sea. A key indicator of this dynamic is Indonesia's consistent downplaying of CCG incursions. Indonesia has tolerated CCG monitoring activities and surveys as long as they do not interfere with its oil exploitation. For instance, when Indonesia began drilling in the Tuna Block on 30 June 2021, Chinese law enforcement vessels deployed to the area, maintaining a presence through rotating shifts. Additionally, China sent the survey vessel Haiyang Dizhi 10 to conduct seabed research related to hydrocarbon exploration. These actions mirrored China's practices against Vietnam and Malaysia, reinforcing Beijing's perception of Indonesia as part of the broader South China Sea disputes. Between July and November 2021, the Indonesian Navy conducted routine patrols, shadowing Chinese vessels rather than confronting them. This approach marked a shift from Indonesia's 2016 response, when warning shots were fired at Chinese fishing boats. Similarly, China refrained from disrupting Indonesia's drilling activities or deploying military escorts for CCG and survey ships. Unlike China's aggressive blockades against Vietnam and the Philippines, this restraint suggested an implicit understanding of redlines—violations would provoke warnings or physical confrontation. This dynamic resembled a careful waltz, with Indonesian Navy (TNI-AL) vessels stepping back, prompting CCG vessels to do the same. Indonesia's adherence to negotiated redlines reflects a belief that China is equally committed to respecting Indonesia's interests, reframing Chinese incursions as manageable risks rather than existential threats. For China, these maritime actions assert regional dominance; for Indonesia, they reinforce sovereignty over the Natunas within its Exclusive Economic Zone. By engaging in restrained maritime interactions, Indonesia asserts its national interests while preserving strategic flexibility. These redlines—governing both public discourse and tactical interactions—moderate threat perception by fostering predictability. They enable Indonesia and China to manage their differences, avoid direct conflict, and navigate a complex relationship shaped by regional dynamics, economic cooperation, and strategic competition, thereby ensuring stability and the protection of national interests.

The second redline allows Indonesia to assert sovereignty through maritime patrols and resource exploitation while maintaining strategic flexibility in its relationship with China. Rather than using excessive force, Indonesia takes a measured approach, such as shadowing Chinese vessels to test

⁵³ The CCG plays a central role in asserting Beijing's claims, often supported by maritime militias that engage in harassment and shadowing activities. Initially, Indonesia relied on its Navy to respond, but since 2019, the Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla) has assumed a more prominent role, reflecting a shift towards a multi-agency approach.

escalation thresholds without provoking conflict. Indonesia has tolerated CCG incursions, such as monitoring and surveys, as long as they do not interfere with oil exploitation. For example, when Indonesia began drilling in the Tuna Block (located in the contested area) in June 2021, China maintained a presence with law enforcement and survey vessels.⁵⁴ Between July and November 2021, Indonesia's Navy conducted routine patrols, shadowing Chinese vessels instead of confronting them, marking a shift from its 2016 response.⁵⁵ China, in turn, refrained from disrupting Indonesia's activities, reflecting an implicit understanding of redlines—violations would trigger warnings or confrontation. This restraint mirrors a cautious exchange where both sides test boundaries without escalation.⁵⁶

Indonesia's adherence to these redlines suggests it believes China will respect its interests, framing incursions as manageable risks, not existential threats.⁵⁷ For China, these actions assert regional dominance; for Indonesia, they reinforce sovereignty over the Natunas within its EEZ. Through restrained maritime interactions, Indonesia asserts its national interests and strategic flexibility. These redlines help moderate threat perception by fostering predictability, enabling both countries to manage differences, avoid direct conflict, and maintain stability in a complex, competitive relationship.

Conclusion

My findings on negotiated redlines contribute to threat perception literature by identifying how redlines influence a state's strategic approach to security. Rather than viewing threats as binary—either direct confrontations or manageable risks—redlines offer a framework where states negotiate boundaries of acceptable behaviour. This allows states to manage tensions by setting clear escalation thresholds. Redlines do not eliminate the perception of threat, but shift responses from reactive confrontation to more restrained actions that maintain stability and avoid unnecessary escalation. In this context, redlines help states define provocation and institutionalise predictability in interactions, shaping strategic decisions in response to perceived challenges. This mechanism highlights the role of diplomacy and institutional engagement in moderating conflict and fostering stability.

Three key questions need to be addressed for further research. First, how can we determine that the negotiated redlines are genuinely the result of negotiation, rather than imposed limits serving only China's interests? Second, what incentives does Indonesia have for engaging in the negotiation of

⁵⁴ "Nervous energy: China targets new Indonesian, Malaysian drilling," *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, 12 November, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/nervous-energy-china-targets-new-indonesian-malaysian-drilling/>.

⁵⁵ This approach marked a shift from Indonesia's 2016 response, when it fired warning shots at Chinese fishing boats. Niniek Karmini, "South China Sea: Indonesian Navy Fires Shots, Seizes Chinese Fishing Boat," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 31, 2016, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/south-china-sea-indonesian-navy-fires-shots-seizes-chinese-fishing-boat-20160531-gp7s45.html>. For a brief domestic political discussion on this matter, see Syailendra, "Indonesia's elite divided on China."

⁵⁶ I also discussed this in Syailendra, "China, Indonesia, and Malaysia: Waltzing around oil rigs."

⁵⁷ Ibid.

redlines with China? Finally, further clarification is needed on how to identify redlines and, ultimately, why they matter. Due to word count limitations, these questions remain open for future investigation. However, this research demonstrates that Indonesia's approach to managing its relationship with China in the South China Sea reflects a pragmatic strategy for navigating asymmetrical power dynamics. By negotiating tacit redlines and adopting restrained engagement protocols, Jakarta reduces escalation risks while maintaining strategic autonomy. This approach challenges the view that Southeast Asian nations must choose between resistance and submission to China's influence. Negotiated redlines exemplify Indonesia's nuanced strategy in prioritising critical interests—such as sovereignty—while allowing flexibility on less vital issues. Actions that threaten Indonesia's sovereignty, such as Chinese incursions, are intolerable, whereas other threats may be more negotiable. This illustrates Jakarta's calculated pragmatism in its dealings with Beijing.

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