

Competition for Natural Resources in the South China Sea: Geopolitical Analysis and Security in the Southeast Asian Region

Azzahra Valentina Putri Hermayanthi¹, Eunike Grace Monika Sitanggang²

¹ International Relations Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jawa Timur

² International Relations Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jawa Timur

*Corresponding Author valentaniaph@gmail.com stgnike826@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The South China Sea conflict is a geopolitical issue involving China and Southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam. In addition to being a strategically located region for trade routes, the South China Sea also possesses significant natural resources, including oil, fisheries, and natural gas, which have led to territorial disputes and rivalries among several countries in the region. This study aims to analyze how these natural resources can influence the geopolitical situation and regional stability, particularly in Southeast Asian countries. This study uses descriptive analysis and a qualitative approach, with data collection techniques through literature review. The competition in the South China Sea can be analyzed through realism theory, with a security dilemma approach. According to (Morgenthau, 1949), realism is based on the assumption that the drive for power is a fundamental characteristic of inter-state relations, stemming from human nature itself. In the context of the South China Sea, territorial disputes not only reflect economic interests such as the exploitation of natural resources, but also strategic ambitions to maintain sovereignty and regional influence. The concept of the security dilemma, as proposed by (Ken Booth, 2008), explains that uncertainty about the intentions of one country can trigger a military response from another country. China's assertive actions heighten mistrust, creating a security paradox where efforts to increase security lead to greater instability. This study focuses on analyzing the geopolitical stability and security of the Southeast Asian region, as well as understanding the role of diplomacy and multilateral cooperation in the region.

Keywords: Geopolitics, South China Sea, Realism, Security Dilemma

INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea is one of the world's strategic regions with a vital role in both geopolitics and geoconomics. About one-third of global maritime trade passes through this region, while its hydrocarbon reserves and fishery potential make it highly valuable to Southeast Asian coastal countries and global energy stability. The existence of small islands, rocks, and coral reefs, such as in the Paracel and Spratly Islands, strengthens the sovereignty claims of various countries in the region. In reality, the South China Sea has become an arena for complex disputes. China's unilateral claim through the nine-dash line overlaps with the claims of Southeast Asian countries, resulting in competition not only in the diplomatic sphere, but also in the military and the use of non-traditional instruments such as fishermen (RAND Corporation, 2020). Conversely, the ideal condition (das Sollen) requires the South China Sea to be managed as a space for collaboration for economic cooperation, peacekeeping, and sustainable resource management.

Within the framework of realism theory, this dynamic can be explained through the concept of the security dilemma. Each country seeks to strengthen its position through claims and activities in the disputed area, but these steps are interpreted as threats by other countries, which then respond in a similar manner. This pattern of action and reaction exacerbates tensions and results in regional instability. This confirms that natural resources in the South China Sea are not merely an economic factor, but also a major trigger for regional security crises. Previous studies have discussed the energy dimension (Haong, 2017), ASEAN mechanisms for mitigating maritime disputes (Basir, 2022), and fisheries security as a non-traditional issue (Cuong, 2021). but these studies are still fragmented and have not comprehensively linked all aspects of resources to the emergence of the security dilemma. Therefore, this article contributes by placing natural resources as the main variable that explains the emergence of the race for power, the crisis of trust, and geopolitical instability in Southeast Asia.

METHODS

This article uses a qualitative approach with descriptive analysis methods to analyze in depth the dynamics occurring in the South China Sea region and their implications for geopolitical stability in Southeast Asia. This study uses secondary data obtained from books, articles, scientific journals, and news from mass media relevant to the topic of the article. Data collection techniques were carried out through literature studies, namely by examining various official literature and publications related to geopolitical issues, regional security, and disputes occurring in the South China Sea region.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The South China Sea is a region that is the geopolitical and geoeconomic heart of the surrounding countries. This region is strategically located and has enormous potential for the countries surrounding it. The South China Sea region has abundant natural resources, ranging from fisheries and oil to tourism. In addition to its natural resource potential, the South China Sea region is also known as the Sea Line of Trade (SLOT) and Sea Line of Communication (SLOC), which provide great influence and benefits. This

potential and strategic value has made the region a conflict zone involving the surrounding countries.

A. Economic Potential and Strategic Value of the South China Sea

The South China Sea region is a highly strategic area with various potentials that can benefit the countries surrounding it. There are several factors that make the South China Sea a strategic region. First, a country's control over the region will determine its territorial boundaries. Thus, if a country can control the LCS region, its territorial waters (EEZ) will become more extensive, especially for island nations. Second, the South China Sea region is an important route for trade and military activities. The South China Sea is the widest waterway after the Mediterranean and the main gateway for trade from East Asia, which is estimated to account for 25% of sea cargo transit (Sudira, 2015). The South China Sea region is also known as the Sea Line of Trade (SLOT) and Sea Line of Communication (SLOC), which further makes this region strategic for countries to conduct international trade and communication. Finally, the South China Sea has abundant potential resources, both in terms of fisheries, petroleum, and hydrocarbons. The South China Sea ranks high in global fisheries production, accounting for more than 12%, and is an area with high biodiversity. (Auliah Ambarwati, 2023)

B. The Potential of the South China Sea as a Trigger for Conflict

As an area with abundant potential and natural resources, the South China Sea has become a disputed region involving the countries surrounding it. This dispute involves the rivalry over territorial claims and natural resources in the waters around the LCS. Basically, the SCS is a no man's island region, due to the fact that this area is not controlled by any party. However, conflicts that weaken the opposing party and gain advantage from the conflict are still occurring in the SCS region, so that this conflict is not truly resolved. The location of the SCS region is very important because of its strategic, economic and geopolitical significance. Factors such as abundant natural resources, its role in international trade and communication, its strategic location, and its geopolitical implications make it a very important region for neighboring countries. This dispute has been going on for a long time, involving not only Southeast Asian countries, but also China and the United States, with each country maintaining its maritime power and relations. Overall, this conflict has implications for the Asia-Pacific region, where the power of major countries further intensifies the conflict. As countries compete for influence over this region, the LCS has become the focal point of geopolitical maneuvering, which has implications for the international order. (Agus Rohmat Hidayat, 2024)

C. Impact on Regional Security

Many countries reject China's unilateral claims in the South China Sea, mainly because these claims are considered to have no strong legal basis, as decided by the PCA in 2016, which rejected the validity of the nine-dash line with reference to UNCLOS 1982. However, despite the rejection of its claims under international law, China continues to engage in economic activities, artificial island construction, Coast Guard patrols, and military intimidation to strengthen its dominance in the region. Within the framework

of realism, the actions of countries in the region reflect efforts to ensure their survival by maintaining their claims and territorial sovereignty, even though they recognize their limitations in directly confronting China's power (Zhang, 2022). This phenomenon illustrates the security dilemma in the region, where China's defensive actions are perceived as a threat, thereby increasing insecurity for neighboring countries. The responses of Southeast Asian countries vary. The Philippines, for example, under the leadership of Marcos Jr., has changed the direction of its foreign policy by strengthening defense cooperation with the United States as a balancing strategy to avoid excessive dependence on China (CASTRO, 2023).

Vietnam has also pursued a strategy of omnidirectional diplomacy or bamboo diplomacy by strengthening strategic alliances with the US and Japan to maintain regional power (Bách Hiếu Trần, 2024). Meanwhile, Malaysia has chosen a low-profile approach by emphasizing the centrality of ASEAN as a mechanism for peaceful resolution, which also provides leverage through the strategic position of the Malacca Strait (Ryan, 2023). Indonesia itself has implemented a middle power diplomacy strategy, namely upholding sovereignty in Natuna by strengthening maritime defense, while maintaining economic relations with China through infrastructure. In addition, Cambodia's dependence on Chinese aid makes the country more pro-China, making it difficult for Phnom Penh to remain neutral in regional conflicts. This condition has the potential to reduce the possibility of reaching an ASEAN consensus in handling disputes involving China (Southgate, 2025). Thus, it can be concluded that Southeast Asian countries do not only rely on military strength to deal with China's expansion, but also develop balancing strategies through external alliances, strengthening ASEAN, and adaptive diplomacy. This shows that despite the military imbalance, countries in the region are trying to maintain their sovereignty by utilizing a combination of realism and collective diplomacy instruments. (Poling, 2025)

CONCLUSION

The South China Sea is in the spotlight due to its strategic position and rich natural resources, which have great potential for regional economic growth. This study shows that competing territorial claims and the scramble for resources have actually worsened regional stability. Thus, resources have proven to be one of the main triggers of instability in the region. Although the frameworks of realism and the security dilemma are able to explain the dynamics of the ongoing conflict, this approach still has limitations because it does not highlight the possibility of regional cooperation or the involvement of non-state actors. Therefore, further research is needed by integrating the perspectives of constructivism or non-traditional security in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities that arise in the South China Sea.

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