

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Bureaucratic Politics and Informality in Foreign Policy-making: The Case of Indonesia-China Relations

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## Abstract

How do governments respond to bilateral relationships characterised by growing economic cooperation on one side and concerns about national security on the other? The existing literature has mainly employed systemic, domestic and individual levels of analysis, but has failed to scrutinise the important bureaucratic aspect of policy-making. By focusing on Indonesia's policy towards the People's Republic of China's (PRC) assertiveness in the South China Sea (SCS), we examine the role of the 'curator', an official tasked with ensuring successful policy outcomes by often bypassing formal institutions in the policy-making process. Arguably, the main reason Indonesia maintained a relatively coherent policy can be attributed to the role of the curator, who worked within an informal space to coordinate maritime policies enacted by a bureaucratic apparatus that was deemed to be hindering the president's approach. By incorporating informality as a mode of coordination, this analysis of Indonesia-China relations advances the bureaucratic politics model in FPA.

**Keywords:** Indonesia; the PRC; bureaucratic politics; informal space; policy-making; South China Sea.

Cooperation between Indonesia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) during the Presidency of Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo (2014-present) has been more intense due to Jokowi's interest in attracting Chinese investment for his development plan, known widely as *Nawacita* (Connelly 2015; Sulaiman 2019; Syailendra 2017). *Nawacita* has prioritised accelerating infrastructure construction to transform frontier areas into new growth centres and encourage inter-island connectivity throughout the archipelago (Salim and Negara 2018; Wicaksana 2017).

However, Jokowi has also grappled with a predicament due to the PRC's escalating assertiveness in the South China Sea (SCS), marked by the deployment of Chinese coast guard ships within Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the North Natuna Sea (Kusumadewi 2016). The government in Jakarta responded to the PRC's incursion by launching a 'war' against Illicit, Unregulated, and Unreported (IUU) fishing. Any foreign-registered vessels found "illegally encroaching in Indonesian waters would be subject to legal proceedings and sunk" (*Kementerian Pertahanan RI* 2016). This policy provoked countries whose vessels were impacted, which included the PRC. Beijing contested the Indonesian maritime authority claiming its fishermen did not violate any law because the waters belonged to the PRC's 'traditional' territory (*South China Morning Post* 2016).

These narratives illustrate the ambivalence of Indonesia's policy toward the PRC. On the one hand, it was seen as a threat to national sovereignty and security, yet, on the other hand, the rise of the PRC promised opportunities for beneficial economic ties. Such a dilemma characterises the delicate balance in the Jokowi government's dealings with Beijing. Nevertheless, overall, Indonesia's China policy under Jokowi regarding SCS could be perceived as fundamentally stable.

The existing literature emphasises systemic, domestic and individual levels of analysis, and includes factors such as the degree of interdependence with the PRC, strategic culture, elite perception and leaders' background. These factors have been identified as being influential in shaping Indonesia's attitude toward the PRC's aggressiveness in the SCS (Connelly 2015; McRae 2019; Sulaiman 2019). However, studies on this issue through the lens of bureaucratic politics<sup>1</sup> are rare, even though the roles of bureaucracy and bureaucrats in foreign policies of

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<sup>1</sup>Bureaucratic politics is the process by which government officials, typically in bureaucracies, utilise their institutional positions to influence policy outcomes. This concept emphasises the role of government agencies

new democratic states like Indonesia are intriguing. This article attempts to address this dearth of knowledge by investigating how the contestation between different bureaucratic actors influenced the direction of Jokowi's policy in responding to the PRC's military activity in the SCS.

This article argues that by focusing on bureaucratic political dynamics, we can unpack how Indonesia's ambivalence towards the PRC's provocations in the SCS stems from the fragmented nature of the state's bureaucratic system – which causes overlaps in the rules and duties of the executive agencies – and leads to competition and contestation among bureaucrats pursuing their different interests. Nonetheless, the Jokowi government adopts a relatively coherent China policy. How can Jokowi's government provide stable and coherent policies toward the PRC despite such contestation? We show that such an outcome can be attributed to a 'curator' whose job is to unite the diverse and conflicting positions of the relevant bureaucratic actors through an informal space. The notion of a curator has become essential in understanding how the Jokowi administration can maintain a good relationship with the PRC.

This article advances the bureaucratic politics model in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) by incorporating the importance of informal networks in decision-making. Informal politics, through the role of curator, offers opportunities for a leader to align the different preferences of bureaucratic actors. Our study also contributes to the literature on how states deal with dilemmatic external relations. Some scholars tend to conceptualise smaller countries' responses to the policies of more powerful countries as hedging, a mixed strategy that involves both economic engagement and geopolitical caution, as clearly exemplified by Kuik Cheng-Chwee (2016) and Jürgen Haacke (2019). However, by moving away from the focus of this scholarship on complex diplomatic strategies and multifaceted power games, this article sheds light on the internal dynamics of the executive branches of government where foreign policy is formulated, as the relevant policy stakeholders' ideas, interests and practices are, arguably, more influential to a state's foreign affairs.

Methodologically, this article utilises primary and secondary sources. Primary data is obtained from reports and press releases issued by relevant government institutions. We refer to domestic and international media reporting on current events regarding Indonesia's China

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and departments in policy-making, underscoring the potential for conflict and negotiation among bureaucratic entities pursuing their own agendas and interests; see Allison and Halperin (1972).

policy as well as government's documents. We complement such primary data by using secondary data gathered from relevant analysis and publications. This includes academic articles, policy analysis reports and books that discuss Indonesia's foreign policy and its relations with China.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. Following this introductory part, section two reviews the different approaches to Indonesia's China policy, while section three introduces the concept of informal space and the role of a curator in the bureaucratic politics of foreign policy-making. The following sections examine Indonesia's maritime policy agenda and the interests of each bureaucratic actor in dealing with the threat from the PRC respectively. Section six analyses the curator's role in reconciling the conflicting interests of different state agencies in Indonesia's foreign policy decision-making process towards the Chinese threat. In the conclusion, we summarise the study's main findings.

### **Understanding Indonesia's response to the PRC's assertiveness in the South China Sea**

It has been widely acknowledged that, as the PRC's economic power grew, it has developed a more assertive foreign policy that has led to insecurity in the Asia-Pacific region. The most compelling example is the PRC's territorial claims in the SCS which have led to tensions with several Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia (Thayer 2011). The 'nine-dash line', which encompasses nearly 90 percent of the sea's waters, serves as the basis for the PRC's territorial claims in the South China Sea. The disputed territories consist of islands, reefs, and shoals that are believed to be rich in natural resources, such as oil and gas reserves, and are strategically important due to their location in key shipping lanes. Although Indonesia is not a claimant state in the territorial disputes over the SCS, Jakarta has been involved in the dispute due to the PRC's activities in the area around the Natuna Islands (McRae 2019). This is because Indonesia has overlapping claims with the PRC's 'nine-dash line' in the area, which is part of Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

Recently, such aggression has elicited a strong response from Indonesia. For instance, in December 2019, when a Chinese coast guard vessel escorted Chinese fishing boats into the waters of Natuna, Indonesia responded by sending navy ships to assert its sovereignty. The incident was seen as a significant escalation in tensions between Beijing and Jakarta. However,

in other instances, Indonesia appears to tone down its conflict with the PRC and has also sought to engage in dialogue with the PRC in order to manage tensions in the SCS. In March 2021, the two countries held high-level talks on the issue, with both sides emphasising the importance of maintaining peace and stability in the region. Overall, as mentioned, Indonesia's China policy – especially in regard to SCS – could be perceived as fundamentally stable, with a consistent approach over time.

This leads to the related question of what factors underpin Indonesia's stable and coherent policies toward the PRC. The literature in regard to this can be categorised into three major groups: systemic, state and individual levels of analysis.

At the systemic level, interdependence is considered a crucial factor (Hu 2023; Shekhar 2012), driving Southeast Asian states to view the PRC as an opportunity rather than a threat (Zhang 2018). However, Moch Faisal Karim and Rona Nabila (2022) suggest that alignment patterns and geopolitical constraints influence how these governments interact with the PRC. The level of threat perceived from the PRC varies due to different degrees of interdependence, alignment patterns and geopolitical constraints. Countries with a high dependence on the PRC, such as Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, support Beijing's presence (Nandyatama 2019). Malaysia and the Philippines are inclined towards closer relations with the PRC due to their economic interests, whereas Vietnam prefers to have closer relations with the United States (US) to counteract the PRC's influence (Vu *et al.* 2021). Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore opt for impartiality (Kuik 2017).

Other studies have surveyed the differences in domestic elites' perception and strategic culture regarding the PRC (Fitriani 2018; Liang 2018). Some governments take public opinion into account when drafting policies related to the PRC (Busbarat 2016), while other scholars have highlighted continuity and path dependency in government policies when faced with a threat (Stuart-Fox 2004). Sulaiman (2019), for instance, reiterates that Indonesia's strategic culture, which emphasises the importance of economic growth to maintain domestic political stability, has led Jakarta to continuously demonstrate ambiguous policies toward the PRC. Furthermore, one might argue that Indonesia's 'Free and Active'<sup>2</sup> foreign policy enables it to balance

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<sup>2</sup> The 'Free and Active' foreign policy of Indonesia, articulated in 1948, promotes independence from alignment with global superpowers and active participation in international affairs. This policy, a pillar of Indonesia's diplomacy, guarantees the nation's sovereignty and promotes proactive engagement with global and regional issues.

economic and strategic interests while preserving independence and sovereignty. Rather than aligning with the US to counter the PRC, Indonesia prefers dialogue and cooperation with Beijing on economic issues, while simultaneously enhancing its military capabilities (Novotny 2010).

On the individual level, scholars have examined how the important role of leadership characteristics, including how the background of leaders have affected their China policies. This is because leaders have the power to decide the direction of their country's political and economic power (Chin 2021). For instance, McRae (2019) considers Jokowi's nationalistic tendencies as more assertive in handling Chinese ships entering Indonesian waters than the administration of his predecessor President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY). However, neither president has adopted a clear position on the Chinese threat in the North Natuna Sea due to their economic ties with the Chinese business community.

The scholarship on Southeast Asian foreign policy towards the PRC overlooks the varying perceived threat levels among bureaucratic agencies responsible for their own China policies. Understanding the politics at the bureaucratic level complements existing scholarship and provides a more comprehensive perspective. Indeed, while Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia's (2022) work on the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' perception and foreign policy strategy towards the PRC has shown the benefits of a bureaucratic approach, it neglects Indonesia's maritime policy and the involvement of other bureaucratic actors. Bearing this in mind, this article intends to develop a deeper understanding of the Jokowi administration's policy toward the PRC by employing the conceptual framework of bureaucratic politics.

### **Bureaucratic politics, informality and the curator**

The bureaucratic politics model in FPA views foreign policy as a result of negotiations and political bargaining among bureaucracies, due to influential independent elites who share power (Allison and Halperin 1972). This model depicts policy-making as a game played by various bureaucracies, where behaviour is driven by their respective organisational interests (Long 2016). Recent studies have focused on the interaction between formal and informal bureaucratic interests and their relationship with external actors (Zhang 2016; Giessen *et al.* 2016). This article contributes to this literature by exploring the bureaucracy's formal interests

in conducting its administrative function and how overlapping objectives and actions can occur in policy-making due to complicated and fragmented bureaucratic governance.

For example, in maritime governance, Indonesia has twenty-one institutions, eighteen executive bodies, two judicial organs and one quasi-judicial office involved in every part of governance, such as maritime security, fisheries law enforcement and EEZ protection. This creates overlapping rules between the different agencies, resulting in intense competition between them to maintain their current interest (Laksmiana 2022). For this reason, bureaucratic actors strive to achieve goals and maximise interests by influencing policies while competing for a shrinking budget. However, Indonesia lacks a single policy framework to unite the various maritime bodies, further fragmenting the execution of its maritime policies (Edwards 2022).

This article posits that bureaucratic coordination is not always resolved through formal channels, but most of the time, incompatibilities are managed through informal mechanisms. Informality in the bureaucracy usually occurs in countries with a complex bureaucratic system. Problems, such as the overlap between the policies of an executive branch of government and other institutions, as well as differences in the perception of each institution on an issue, often arise (Edwards 2022, 98). This is where informality can play a role as the informal space allows the barriers of formality to be bypassed so that bureaucratic tensions and conflicts can be overcome.

Informality in dealing with bureaucracy is not a new practice in Indonesia. The literature on Indonesian bureaucratic politics has established the importance of brokers<sup>3</sup> in helping to expedite the process of policy-making through informal channels. One reason for this is the prevalence of patronage networks and personal connections within the bureaucratic system, which often determine access to information, resources and decision-making power (Berenschot and van Klinken 2018). These networks may be based on familial, regional or political ties and can be difficult to penetrate for those who are not part of the network.

A further factor is the decentralisation of power within the Indonesian government, which has granted local governments and bureaucracies greater authority. This has led to the emergence

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<sup>3</sup> Brokers are individuals who possess deep understanding of official procedures and have informal relationships with politicians and bureaucrats. Their role is to assist their clients in understanding and working through complex bureaucratic procedures, to help secure government benefits or to speed up policy-making processes; see Berenschot (2019).

of local power brokers and informal networks that can influence decision-making at the local level (Aspinall 2013). Consequently, informal networks and practices can also influence the direction of foreign policy, especially in countries with a high degree of political and social fragmentation.

In the context of foreign policy-making, informality and the role of brokers are crucial because they can facilitate communication and negotiation between different actors and help to overcome formal bureaucratic obstacles (Elsig 2010). Brokers, who serve as intermediaries between various actors in the policy-making process, utilise their personal connections and informal networks to obtain access to decision-makers and influence policy outcomes (Lieberthal and Lampton 2018). This is especially useful when formal channels of communication and decision-making are constrained, unresponsive or impeded by bureaucratic red tape.

However, the application of informality within the literature on Indonesian foreign policy has been overlooked. This article identifies the informal space in bureaucratic politics as a way to better explain the process of Indonesian foreign policy-making. Specifically, it mobilises the concept of a curator to clarify how bureaucratic politics works in an informal space. Daria Isachenko (2019) explains that if an institution within a government system cannot function properly to solve problems due to regulatory constraints, the government will use informal governance methods. They will undertake informal approaches such as social connections, negotiations and bargaining outside of the existing legal framework. These tasks are carried out by a 'curator', a term applied in Russia to describe government actors who function as advisors, thinkers, intermediaries and policy coordinators (4). A curator is tasked with coordinating ambiguous or problematic policies according to the president's directives. Curators are usually officials with positions in government and are likely to be close to the president. This makes their power and influence in coordinating policies undeniable.

Curators also provide a mechanism to manage different interests due to the fragmented nature of the state. As suggested by several examples, the nature of the state in many countries from the Global South can be characterised as fragmented. Such fragmentation stems from the emergence of a market of patrons and clients as a result of democratisation which created opportunities for them to compete for state power (Aspinall 2013). Hence, bureaucracy has become the arena of competition among multiple patrons and can create seemingly conflicting policies. The function of the curator, then, is to reduce such contestation by persuading and

sometimes disciplining a bureaucratic agency that might have different interests from the president.

The curator's role is also similar to that of a policy entrepreneur; however, there are significant differences between them. Policy entrepreneurs take advantage of opportunities to influence policy outcomes to enhance their self-interest and are willing to invest resources such as time, energy, reputation and money, to promote desired policy products (Mintrom and Norman 2009). They can come from outside the government, such as the private and public sectors. Curators, on the other hand, do not work for personal interests and rarely use personal resources in carrying out their duties. They are also government officials and work in the interests of their leader, namely the president.

The role of curator is not a designated position within Indonesian agencies or institutions. However, a similar process can be observed involving Indonesian government actors that work informally to resolve complex issues. For example, Luhut Binsar Panjaitan (known widely as Luhut) can arguably be identified as functioning as a curator. Luhut, a trusted associate of Jokowi, was tasked with maintaining the government's economic interests with the PRC, despite the tensions in the SCS. Under the Jokowi administration, he served as the Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs, overseeing the Ministry of Transportation, Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (MMAF), Tourism and Energy and Mineral Resources. In practice, he is at the forefront of various government programs, especially those concerning policies towards the PRC (Mutasya 2022). For instance, he formed and led the Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) task force that was appointed to supervise the implementation of the PRC's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects by engaging the relevant ministries and state agencies (Rakhmat 2020). For this reason, he was able to act as an intermediary agent for the central government to lead policies in a manner that did not conflict with formal institutions.

By using informal spaces such as backchanneling, bargaining, lobbying or even coercion, the curator can quell competition between the different bureaucracies when creating policies. That way, all formal institutions with conflicting interests and tasks will be coordinated by an informal agent who aligns policies with the president's interests (Isachenko 2019).

A curator takes responsibility on behalf of the president and hence protects the president from any potential negative impact. In some cases, a president may wish to pursue a foreign policy agenda that is not necessarily popular with the public or that could create controversy or

political opposition. By using informal agents to advance that agenda, the president can distance themselves from the policy and deflect criticism or opposition onto the curator. This can be particularly useful when the president is concerned about maintaining their political capital and avoiding a backlash from the public or other political actors.

Furthermore, such agents may have greater flexibility and discretion in carrying out the president's foreign policy agenda, particularly when it comes to navigating bureaucratic obstacles or engaging in sensitive diplomatic negotiations. By delegating authority to an informal agent, the president can empower that agent to act quickly and decisively, without being mired in by bureaucratic procedures or political calculations.

### **The Global Maritime Fulcrum and Indonesia's China policy**

Since the election of Jokowi as Indonesia's new president in 2014, the country's foreign policy has changed to some extent, with the country's maritime status becoming a key issue (Rosyidin and Pattipeilohy 2020). During the presidential campaign and the early days of the presidency, Jokowi received broad support for changing the country's development agenda. He believed that Indonesia focused excessively on land infrastructure development projects and was ignoring the strength of its maritime resources. He therefore aimed to turn Indonesia into a GMF by taking advantage of its archipelagic composition that contains some of the most strategic sea communication lines in the world (Syailendra 2017).

To support the development of GMF infrastructure development, the Indonesian government has relied on Chinese investment and offered twenty-eight projects worth US\$91.1 billion to Chinese investors as part of Indonesia's participation in the PRC's BRI (Mursitama and Ying 2021). Besides infrastructure issues, maritime security was also a concern for Indonesia, especially international territorial disputes in the country's maritime borders, transnational crimes at sea and the protection of national sovereignty and marine wealth (Wicaksana 2021). Tensions in the SCS have added to the importance of national maritime security, therefore it is not surprising that protecting the sea border has become a key priority for the Indonesian government. According to the Indonesian Defense White Paper, maritime troubles can affect the stability of the entire region because they have the potential to develop into an open armed conflict (*Kementerian Pertahanan RI* 2015). Although Indonesia was not a claimant state and

remains neutral in the territorial waters disputes, Chinese fishing boats and sea patrols have often crossed the Indonesian EEZ borders in the Natuna islands, thus penetrating Indonesian sovereignty.

The Natuna waters, rich in resources like oil, gas and fisheries, have become a vital area for Indonesia's fishing, tourism and oil and gas industries. To support these industries, the government is building the Integrated Marine and Fisheries Centres (SKPT) to promote regional economic growth and state sovereignty (*Kementerian Kelautan dan Perikanan 2017b*). The Natuna waters have also been a flashpoint for the strained relationship between the PRC and Indonesia, when in March 2016 the Chinese vessel KM Kway Fey 10078 was arrested for illegal fishing in the Natuna EEZ. The arrest, however, was thwarted by the Chinese coast guard, which was fully armed and requested the captured ship be released (*Tempo 2016*). Incidents like this continued until the Indonesian Navy warship, KRI Imam Bonjol-383, fired warning shots at two Chinese coast guard vessels in June 2016. This armed dispute sparked diplomatic tensions between Jakarta and Beijing (*BBC News 2016*).

Jokowi's attitude toward the PRC was perceived as indecisive domestically, with some criticising his pursuit of Chinese investment in infrastructure as softening his stance on Beijing's aggression in Natuna. To counter this perception, Jokowi held a cabinet meeting aboard the KRI Imam Bonjol-383 sailing around Natuna, receiving praise for his firm action on the PRC. However, he later stated that the government wanted to ease tensions with Beijing, possibly to avoid jeopardising Indonesia's economic cooperation with the PRC. This ambivalence is related to the contestation and fragmentation of bureaucratic interests in Indonesia's China policy.

### **Bureaucratic fragmentation in Indonesia's maritime policy toward the PRC**

Despite being Jokowi's top developmental priority, the GMF has faced significant challenges. The framework was hindered by the absence of a comprehensive operational strategy and decisive action towards the People's Republic of China (PRC), leading to varying interpretations by diverse state agencies. This lack of a cohesive approach resulted in suboptimal execution of developmental projects (*Wicaksana 2017*). The fragmented and ineffective maritime sectors further added to internal problems, with each bureaucracy having

a different perspective on managing the PRC's infiltration into the Natuna waters. This bureaucratic politics resulted in ambiguity and complicated Indonesia's maritime policy towards Beijing (Laksmiana 2022). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (KEMLU), MMAF, Indonesian Navy or *Tentara Nasional Indonesia Angkatan Laut* (TNI-AL), and Marine Security Agency (BAKAMLA) were some of the leading institutional actors with formal agendas and interests in handling the SCS crisis.

### *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs*

KEMLU is responsible for maintaining good relations with the PRC, and their interest and position in the SCS issue can be identified in the GMF's pillar that emphasises maritime diplomacy in conflict resolution efforts. Hence, the main task of the Ministry's main task is to seek dialogue with the PRC. At the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) level, the Indonesian diplomatic representatives always maintained a neutral position as a country that can act as an honest broker (Parameswaran 2016) and Jakarta also wanted to take the same approach to the SCS issue. However, the Ministry continued to make efforts to secure Indonesia's EEZ in the North Natuna Sea. For example, a high-level official once strongly protested against the PRC when their coast guard violated Indonesia's borders.

Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi emphasised that Indonesia would never recognise Beijing's claim to the North Natuna Sea. In a statement responding to the incursion in Natuna in early 2020, Foreign Minister Retno firmly reiterated Indonesia's position:

Indonesia will never recognise the nine-dash line, a unilateral claim made by China that has no legal reasons recognised by international law, especially UNCLOS 1982 (*CNN Indonesia* 2020).

Officially, however, the Foreign Ministry has never acknowledged any dispute with the PRC. This is underpinned by the rationale that accepting such a dispute would implicitly recognise the Natuna Sea as a contested region. Indeed, Indonesia asserts the Natuna Sea as an unequivocal part of its sovereign territory, not a contentious area. Therefore, conceding to the existence of a dispute is a stance Indonesia firmly resists. Instead, as part of Indonesia's efforts to secure its sovereignty in Natuna, KEMLU produced a new map that renamed the part of the SCS in Indonesia's EEZ the 'North Natuna Sea'. Since the new map was published in 2017,

the PRC has protested against the policy and asked Indonesia to reverse its decision to rename the area. The Chinese Foreign Minister also submitted a note to the KEMLU, stating that Indonesia's move to change its "internationally accepted name" would further complicate matters and could affect regional peace and stability (*The Jakarta Post* 2017). From these diplomatic exchanges, it can be seen that, despite trying to maintain good relations and reduce conflict with the PRC through dialogue, the KEMLU was increasingly showing a tendency to confront Beijing, albeit indirectly.

This agenda is primarily driven by the Ministry's focus on diplomatic efforts to ensure the establishment of a code of conduct in the SCS. The establishment of a code of conduct is the main aim of KEMLU and relates to efforts to resolve issues in the SCS since ASEAN and PRC agreed to issue a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS which was signed in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on 4 November 2002 (*Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia* 2013). Arguably, this has become the official organisational interest of the Ministry in regard to the SCS.

#### *The Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries*

During his presidential campaign, Jokowi raised the fisheries issue and the plight of fishermen whose catches declined in recent years. Jokowi claimed that due to rampant IUU fishing, Indonesia was losing billions of dollars each year (Syailendra 2017, 6). Consequently, Indonesia must protect domestic fishermen by defending state sovereignty and fulfilling their exclusive rights to the resources in Indonesia's EEZ. Under the leadership of Susi Pudjiastuti, commonly known as Susi, the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (MMAF) adopted a more assertive policy against illegal fishing vessels. This approach included sinking and burning such vessels (Sulaiman 2019). According to Susi, the policy was carried out to provide a deterrent and a warning to foreigners who wanted to fish in Indonesian waters (*Kementerian Kelautan dan Perikanan RI* 2016). Susi's actions against IUU fishing brought the MMAF to the frontline of Indonesia's China policy.

The Ministry's task is to safeguard ocean resources, not the security of Indonesia's territory (*Kementerian Kelautan dan Perikanan RI* 2017a). To enforce laws against IUU fishing, Susi worked with various institutions, including the TNI-AL, BAKAMLA, the Water Police and

the Attorney General's Office. However, due to the lack of synergy, President Jokowi formed Task Force 115 in 2015, which combined the offices under one agency. Susi commanded the task force, which aimed to maximise the duties of all members in eradicating IUU fishing through fair punishment, including sinking illegal foreign boats (*Kementerian Kelautan dan Perikanan RI 2017b*).

In eradicating IUU fishing in Indonesian waters, Susi was one of the most vocal and decisive officials concerning this issue. She challenged the PRC on their vessels overfishing in Indonesian waters and even mentioned this behaviour as an example of transnational organised crime (Rose 2018). In addition, she also often expressed her frustration with the PRC in the mass media and summoned the Chinese Ambassador to her office. Furthermore, she threatened to take the PRC to the International Tribunal for the Law of The Sea (Suryadinata and Izzuddin 2017) and further criticised other Indonesian agencies for inaction toward Beijing's IUU fishing in Indonesian waters. According to her, investment interests with the PRC and illegal fishing needed to be separated. Finally, she stressed that the diplomatic steps taken by Indonesia to maintain relations between the two countries were an inappropriate response to the PRC's IUU fishing activities (*Kompas 2020*).

MMAF's attitude toward the PRC shows the agency's seriousness in carrying out its duties and obligations of protecting Indonesia's marine resources. It was highly assertive toward the PRC under Susi's leadership in contrast to the actions taken by KEMLU. Although Susi said that the policy on illegal fishing had had no effect on, and was inseparable from, Indonesia's investment interests with Beijing, it is likely that if this assertiveness had continued, Jokowi's economic agenda with the PRC would have been disrupted.

Arguably, MMAF's more assertive stance was primarily driven by Susi's interpretation of Indonesia's national interest. Indeed, the decision to carry out the sinking was her interpretation of the government's vision to make Indonesia the world's maritime axis (*Kompas 2017*). In carrying out her duties while at MMAF, she used a three-pillar approach – sovereignty, sustainability and prosperity.

Susi's experience as a successful fish entrepreneur who had exported products to countries like Japan and the US played a significant role in shaping her aggressive policy towards foreign vessels in the SCS. She noticed that since around 2000, Indonesian fishermen faced challenges in catching fish and the government's decision to grant fishing licenses to foreign vessels in

2001 worsened the situation. Consequently, as the Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries since 2014, Susi implemented a moratorium on permits for foreign and ex-foreign fishing vessels. In addition to this, she also actively worked towards eradicating illegal fishing, which has yielded positive results (Scarpello 2020).

### *The TNI-AL and BAKAMLA*

With the increasing tensions in the North Natuna Sea, the TNI-AL has prepared itself to maintain Indonesia's security and sovereignty. To do so, the government built a military base in Natuna and prepared a dock for the Navy patrol boats equipped with a company of marines. These efforts demonstrate how the TNI-AL perceived the PRC's intensifying operations in the Natuna waters as a threat. However, in conducting patrol and guard duties, the Navy is faced with competition from other security bodies, mainly BAKAMLA. Established in 2014, BAKAMLA is the most recent incarnation of the Maritime Security Coordinating Board (BAKORKAMLA) which was formed in 1972. As BAKAMLA was now responsible for law enforcement, its main task has become to conduct security and safety patrols throughout the country's territorial seas and EEZ (Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia 2014). This role undoubtedly overlaps with that of the Navy and confirms the fragmentation and disorder of Indonesia's maritime governance, which is operated by a power-sharing system. Additionally and unfavourably, the Navy is steered by a strategic military culture, which continually positions the armed forces as the leading and dominant security and defence actor as opposed to other state agencies (Arif and Kurniawan 2018).

In terms of leadership, BAKAMLA was under the direct auspices of the president, while the Navy is under the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and the Ministry of Defence. Operationally, the Navy has a much larger budget than BAKAMLA. In 2018, the former received IDR 3.39 trillion, while BAKAMLA's largest budget was only IDR 720.6 billion, which they received in 2017. Since then, BAKAMLA's budget has continued to shrink (*Pusat Kajian Anggaran DPR RI* 2021). Despite its smaller budget, BAKAMLA retains responsibility for overseeing the Natuna region under the 'class captain' model<sup>4</sup> This model, characterised by

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<sup>4</sup> The 'class captain' model refers to an organisational structure where one designated agency or body is assigned the responsibility to manage and coordinate all activities within a defined geographical area or

the assignment of a single agent to manage patrol assets and activities within a specified area, informally delegates BAKAMLA as the 'class captain' for the North Natuna Sea (Laksmana 2022, 137). Although there is currently a mutual understanding between the Navy and BAKAMLA, the lack of an integrated approach, caused by the egocentrism of each bureaucracy and the gap in legal interpretations, has become an obstacle in dealing with illegal activities in Natuna, so national security practice in the region has been weakened as a consequence.

By increasing its involvement, BAKAMLA aimed to have greater responsibility for dealing with issues in the SCS. It has argued that the potential for conflict in the SCS also required the presence of Indonesian law enforcers in the North Natuna Sea, considering that threats in the SCS were more likely to be non-military in character encompassing issues such as illegal fishing, skirmishes between fishing boats and coast guard vessels, conflicts over natural resources and environmental degradation. In addition, BAKAMLA's presence is also important to ensure that the Indonesian government and fishermen were able to exploit various natural resources in the EEZ and the North Natuna Sea continental shelf (Chua 2020).

For BAKAMLA, its interest was related to its organisational identity. It has no legal basis to become a coast guard. Law Number 32 of 2014 concerning Marine Affairs, which is the reason for the agency's existence, does not explicitly designate it as a unified agency handling a multitude of maritime tasks. The phrase 'coast guard' did not even exist in the law. Despite the absence of formal recognition in legislation, however, BAKAMLA began to designate itself as Indonesia's coast guard in public narratives, presumably as a strategic move to enhance its role and standing. This approach sowed discord within the government. Given that other agencies, including the TNI-AL, also conduct coast guard duties, some policy-makers were indeed concerned that BAKAMLA's claim would lead to conflict.

The SCS issue served as an opportunity for BAKAMLA to assert its identity. Deploying military force to address the problem was viewed as inappropriate under international law. The focus should have been on maximising the role of non-military agencies, such as BAKAMLA and MMAF, to utilise sea power. The TNI-AL served as a backup for these agencies and also played a critical role in providing security for local fishermen and balancing forces at sea.

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domain. It is akin to the role of a class captain in a school, who is tasked with overseeing and organising class-related activities.

In contrast to BAKAMLA, the SCS issue is framed as an issue of sovereignty for the TNI-AL. In the policy discussion, held by the Ministry of Defence, the operational deputy of Navy, Asops KSAL Rear Admiral TNI-AL Dadi Hartanto stated that:

Indonesia as an impartial sovereign country must be prepared for all consequences in the event of an open conflict breaking out in the SCS region whose impact can reach parts of Indonesia's territory. For this reason, an appropriate government policy is needed to formulate a comprehensive national defence strategy to prepare Indonesia to face the worst possibility that exists (*Klik7tv.co.id* 2021).

The stance of the Indonesian National Armed Forces has, on several occasions, brought Indonesia and the PRC to the brink of heightened tensions. One notable instance was in 2015 when the Chinese government included part of the Natuna region on its territorial map. In response to this, General Gatot Nurmantyo, the Commander of the Indonesian Armed Forces, declined an invitation from the Chinese Minister of Defence, Chang Wanquan, to participate in joint exercises in the South China Sea (Hidayat 2015).

In response to such tensions, Luhut, emphasising Indonesia's neutrality in the South China Sea conflict, advised the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) to abstain from conducting military exercises in the Natuna region. Despite persistent tensions with the PRC concerning the Natuna Islands, Luhut cautioned against hastily presuming a threat to national sovereignty. He addressed this concern, stating that "We shouldn't be too quick to say that we are selling out our sovereignty [to the PRC]" during a press interaction in Jakarta. He further clarified: "Let me be clear that the EEZ [exclusive economic zone] is a matter of economy, not sovereignty – these are two very distinct issues" (Septiarini 2020). This stance reflects an approach centred on maintaining the balance between national economic interests and preserving sovereignty.

### **The role of the curator**

The above discussion has highlighted the Indonesian bureaucratic actors with different interests and goals related to the PRC. On the one hand, the KEMLU focused on the importance of Indonesia's diplomatic efforts with Beijing, while on the other hand the MMAF showed

firmness toward the PRC and was less concerned with diplomacy. Regarding the territorial security and sovereignty of Natuna, the Navy and BAKAMLA were also in a power struggle because of the fragmented and chaotic maritime governance system. At the same time, the president, the leader of all such executive bodies, had his unalienable economic agenda to pursue with the PRC. Surprisingly, and despite these differences, Indonesia was still able to make maritime policies that accommodate Jokowi's pursuit of Chinese investment. To conceptualise this, the relationship between the president and bureaucratic politics is informally bridged by the role of a curator. It can be further posited that the role of a curator was needed to create harmony between the president's interests and the contestation in the bureaucracy at the ministry level and below. The curator was able to harmonise the differences and contestations that exist in the bureaucracy through the informal space.

In the Natuna issue, Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, the Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment, was able to act as the curator. The case of Luhut as curator in Indonesia's China policy sheds light on the role of informal spaces in making a coherent policy. Below we highlight his role in managing different policies and interests in order to help create a coherent policy.

Luhut has considerable experience in multiple roles in the Indonesian government since the reign of President Suharto (1967-1998), known as the New Order period. During this time, he was the Commander of the Special Forces (*Kopassus*) and became the first leader of the anti-terror unit Special Detachment 81 in the 1980s. Under President Abdurrahman Wahid, he served as the Indonesian ambassador to Singapore from 1999 to 2000, before becoming the Minister of Industry and Trade between 2000 and 2001 (Connelly 2015). His experience and position in the government have helped to build his connections and influence with the executive elites. These social modalities are essential in fulfilling the role of a curator.

### *Curation as a form of coordination*

As one of President Jokowi's most trusted confidants, Luhut has often served as a critical liaison between the president and various government institutions. During Jokowi's first tenure (2014-19), Luhut served as the Presidential Chief of Staff and was appointed by the president to replace Tedjo Eddy Purdjianto as Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security

Affairs (*Menkopolhukam*). In a cabinet reshuffle in 2016, Luhut was reassigned as the Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and additionally tasked with temporarily taking on the responsibilities of the Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources. In Jokowi's second term, in 2019, Luhut was trusted to lead the Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs and Investment. Looking at the relationship between the two men, it can be concluded that Jokowi's trust in Luhut is high. Therefore, it is not surprising that Jokowi often entrusts important tasks to Luhut, including coordinating national and international crises.

Luhut's pivotal role in coordinating diverse perspectives and interests with respect to the PRC in the context of the SCS dispute has been widely acknowledged. As the Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment, his formal responsibilities also included fostering investment in the country, which necessitates the cultivation of positive relations between Indonesia and the PRC. Furthermore, he was the supervisor of the KEMLU, MMAF, the TNI-AL and BAKAMLA, with an undertaking to 'correct' their policy direction to align with the president's interests.

The role of a curator in Jokowi's government can also be seen in the renaming of the Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs in 2019. Led by Luhut under Jokowi's second term, it added an investment element to its official name, thus becoming the Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs and Investment (*CNN Indonesia* 2019). This indicates that Jokowi wanted to coordinate maritime and investment aspects under a single ministry. Luhut's appointment to this role was closely tied to a strategy to develop and exploit the fishing industries in the Natuna Islands (Intan 2019). Luhut also conveyed the government's strategy to cooperate with other countries in the fish processing business in Natuna to contribute to the state's revenue. By managing these two components, Jokowi was able to pursue two seemingly conflicting objectives: implementing his maritime development projects while protecting national security and resources. The PRC was an integral part of both these aims and Jokowi gave Luhut either formal or informal assignments to accomplish them.

Luhut's role in coordinating Indonesia's China policy was increasingly evident when President Jokowi formed the Jakarta-Bandung High-speed Rail Committee and appointed him to lead the committee. This allowed Luhut to further coordinate other actors beyond government agencies (such as state-owned enterprises) and be involved in issues such as the provision of state capital to support the consortium involved in this project. His appointment was an effort to internally

consolidate policies related to the PRC, especially in issues related to investment in various sectors.

Luhut's role was also clearly visible in coordinating Indonesia's relations with the PRC, including maritime cooperation, vaccines, investment and the BRI, despite his ministerial role not relating to foreign affairs. Luhut played a more dominant role than the Minister of Foreign Affairs when coordinating and implementing Indonesia's foreign policy towards the PRC. For instance, Luhut was appointed by the president to represent Indonesia in many strategic bilateral meetings related to comprehensive cooperation between Indonesia and the PRC, and was assigned by the president to visit China on 5-9 June 2021. On that occasion, Luhut signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to establish a High-level Dialogue and Cooperation Mechanism (HDCM) with the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi. Within this arrangement, Luhut and the Chinese Foreign Minister served as co-chairs, further underscoring Luhut's influential role.

By providing a curator with greater roles and a new portfolio, Jokowi was able to maintain his firm stance towards the PRC while being seen to be defending Indonesia's sovereignty publicly. Jokowi also pledged to take more concrete steps to completely address the problem of maritime border violations and illegal fishing. The aim was to create a positive image and show that he would tackle the IUU fishing problem more effectively than the previous Yudhoyono administration. However, to protect his policy of attracting Chinese investment, Jokowi did not intervene directly in the dealings. Instead, he appointed Luhut to both approach the Chinese investors and to reduce tensions with the Chinese government over the Natuna clashes.

### *Curation as a form of control*

Luhut's increasing control over Indonesia's China policy was evident in his direct involvement in determining the policies of other ministries. To increase cooperation with other countries in relation to Natuna, Luhut designed a plan to convince the MMAF to open Natuna to international markets. He then used his networks to promote investments in Natuna's fishery (*Kompas* 2016), which is strong proof of Luhut's role as a curator. Moreover, his initiative to

persuade Susi to engage the international business community's interest in Natuna was aimed at aligning the interests of the president and the minister.

By serving as the Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment, who oversaw the MMAF, Luhut's role in controlling policies became more comprehensive. During Susi's tenure, the policy of sinking foreign vessels due to IUU fishing was very controversial and was considered an extreme measure that could disrupt Indonesia's relations with the ship's country of origin. During her tenure as Minister of Marine Affairs and Fisheries, Susi was responsible for the sinking of 556 vessels, although this figure only included three Chinese vessels (*Kompas* 2020). Even though the PRC was one of the countries with the most fishing boats encroaching upon Indonesian waters – not to mention the skirmishes between their coast guard and the Indonesian water police – this showed that Indonesia was still giving considerable leeway to Beijing so that relations between the two countries did not deteriorate any further.

Ultimately, however, the policy of sinking vessels did not last for long. Since 2018 there has been a process of de-securitisation of the policy after Luhut requested that the sinkings be stopped immediately and that disputes would be resolved using legal measures instead (Sitepu 2018). This was also supported by Vice President Jusuf Kalla because of numerous protests from neighbouring countries (Hartini 2018). As a consequence, on 8 January 2018, Luhut asked Susi not to order the sinking of any more boats in 2018. Luhut felt that the message that Indonesia would take firm action against IUU fishing incursions was clearly conveyed. However, Susi appeared to have ignored his request. In fact, until August 2018, almost 125 fishing boats were sunk, albeit mostly small ones. Meanwhile, large ships were still being confiscated and used as ministry assets. As the Minister of Marine Affairs and Fisheries, Susi considers the policy an actionable mandate and opined on the request to stop the sinkings: “So, the drowning was not the idea of Susi or President Jokowi. If anyone objected or felt it was inappropriate, they had to propose the president to order his minister to change the Fisheries Law” (Sitepu 2018).

In the second period of Jokowi's administration, Susi was removed as the Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries. Luhut believed it was time for the ministry to focus on increasing the production and exports of marine and fishery products as the data he received showed a decline in exports of captured fishery products. It can be argued that Susi's removal was the result of her increasingly firm policy and tough position towards the PRC, which could potentially have strained relations between Jakarta and Beijing and was not in Jokowi's interests. However, this

also shows that Indonesia was striving to maintain good relations with neighbouring countries, especially the PRC.

Luhut has played a vital role in managing tensions with Beijing in the Natuna Sea by shifting from a defence to a law enforcement approach. He supported the strengthening of BAKAMLA in safeguarding Indonesia's territory in northern Natuna, which reduced military escalation and aligns with Jokowi's overall policy towards the PRC. Luhut's control of the overlap between the Navy and BAKAMLA was evident from his statement that the government would strengthen BAKAMLA's duties as the coast guard in the Omnibus Law Draft (*Kumparan* 2020). This law gave BAKAMLA complete control in patrolling and guarding the Natuna area, reducing the role of the TNI-AL.

Luhut perceived the TNI-AL as being strong and relying on hard power; he considered this potentially disruptive to regional stability and likely to trigger issues or misunderstandings. Previously, he had also ordered the TNI-AL not to conduct military exercises in the Natuna area as such manoeuvres might escalate tension in the SCS. He believed issues were better resolved through diplomacy than by militaristic means: "The SCS dispute is dangerous. We shouldn't deploy power there. Good solution is dialogue, good steps forward" (*Liputan6* 2015). Moreover, Luhut's assertion was more in favour of BAKAMLA rather than the Navy in terms of maintaining security in the Natuna region, allegedly because BAKAMLA was directly subordinate to the president, which makes coordination of maritime policy much more straightforward than through the Navy.

His plan to de-escalate the Natuna region by favouring BAKAMLA over the Navy was manifested in the recent Presidential Regulation (*Perpres*) Number 85 of 2021 concerning the Government Work Plan (RKP) of 2022 that provides funding of around IDR 12 trillion to strengthen Indonesia's security in Natuna. This presidential regulation gives BAKAMLA 44.17 percent of the budget for marine security equipment while TNI-AL receives 40.59 percent to purchase defence equipment (*PinterPolitik.com* 2021).

Jokowi's government, despite confronting bureaucratic fragmentation and conflicting interests, has achieved relative policy coherence regarding the Natuna issue. This has been facilitated by the role of a curator, working informally to align the diverse interests in Indonesia's maritime policy towards the PRC with Jokowi's pursuits, fostering cooperation with Beijing and securing investment for future projects. However, this process was not devoid of challenges.

Even as the curator worked to coordinate and harmonise the interests, resistance arose within the system. Entities such as the defence establishment and the Maritime Ministry exhibited resistance to the efforts to manage the PRC narrative, illustrating the complexities of achieving a unified approach amid the varied bureaucratic perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined Indonesia's ambivalent responses to the growing aggression of the PRC in the SCS. Using the bureaucratic politics approach, this article has found that such ambivalence in Jakarta's China policy stems from the fragmented responses of each of the bureaucratic agencies that directly deal with the issue. At the ministry level, KEMLU emphasised promoting a diplomatic approach, while the MMAF adopted an aggressive policy by sinking fishing vessels, including those of the PRC. In the security realm, the TNI-AL and BAKAMLA have also experienced contestation over how to respond to the PRC in the SCS, resulting in the fragmentation of Indonesia's maritime security governance.

However, this article has found that despite the differences in these interests resulting in disputes between bureaucracies, Indonesia was still able to develop maritime policies that were able to accommodate President Jokowi's economic interests with the PRC. This was achieved through the role of a curator who coordinated and controlled policies from bureaucratic agencies that did not align with the president's interests.

This article is the first study to examine the role of a curator and informality in Indonesian bureaucratic politics. We shed light on how the curator, operating within an informal framework, aligned President Jokowi's diverse objectives into a singular, cohesive policy towards the PRC, particularly regarding maritime issues. The successful function of a curator, we argue, hinges on two crucial conditions. Firstly, a strong personal affinity with the president and significant support from the executive branch is vital, given the curator's mission to advance the president's sensitive agenda while maintaining an image of neutrality. Secondly, the effective exercise of coercive methods is necessary to overcome institutional resistance and create uniform policies. Instances of non-compliance with directives, met with ministerial dismissals, underline the curator's power, which originates from their proximity to the president.

This article contributes to existing scholarship in two ways. Firstly, it illustrates how a curator can utilise informal mechanisms to bridge disparate preferences among bureaucratic actors formulating Indonesian foreign policies. This is particularly crucial considering Indonesia's balancing act between preserving sovereignty and furthering economic interests amidst the PRC's assertiveness in Natuna. Secondly, it provides fresh insights into Indonesia's foreign policy vis-à-vis the PRC's assertiveness in the South China Sea, by dissecting the bureaucratic policy-making process. However, due to the dominant use of secondary data, this article cannot fully reveal the dynamics of informal space in making Indonesia's foreign policy, including its China policy. Future research could systematically conceptualise how and when the president utilises a curator to create coherent policies in a fragmented bureaucratic environment.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors are deeply grateful to the journal's editors and three anonymous reviewers, whose insightful feedback greatly enhanced the initial version of this manuscript. This research is supported by BINUS International Research Grant 2023.

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