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**INDONESIA'S IMAGE FROM CHINA'S PERSPECTIVE ON  
SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE  
(A PRELIMINARY STUDY ON CHINA'S PERCEPTION ON INDONESIA)**

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**Abstrak**

*Tulisan ini membahas mengenai citra Indonesia di mata Cina dalam isu sengketa Laut Cina Selatan (LCS). Sejak pertama kali Cina merilis klaim nine dash line pada tahun 1993 hingga insiden di perairan Natuna pada tahun 2016, Cina berperilaku ambigu terhadap Indonesia, di mana Cina bersikeras menyebut kedua negara memiliki tumpang tindih kepentingan di perairan Natuna. Namun di sisi lain Cina selalu berhati-hati dalam merespon Indonesia terkait sengketa ini dan menyatakan mengakui kedaulatan Indonesia atas kepulauan Natuna. Terkait hal ini, meski sudah banyak penelitian mengenai kebijakan Cina terhadap Indonesia, namun hanya sedikit kajian yang menulis secara spesifik mengenai persepsi Cina terhadap Indonesia dalam sengketa LCS. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan teori image, tulisan ini berusaha mencari tahu tentang bagaimana citra Indonesia di mata Cina, yang kemudian membentuk persepsi Cina atas Indonesia dalam isu sengketa LCS. Argumen utama dalam tulisan ini yaitu image atau stereotip yang ditangkap Cina dari Indonesia, adalah ally image, dimana Indonesia dipandang sebagai aktor yang dapat bekerja sama, serta memiliki kapabilitas dan dimensi kultural yang setara.*

**Kata kunci:**

*Laut Cina Selatan, Indonesia, Natuna, Teori Image*

**Abstract**

*This paper discusses the image of Indonesia in the eyes of China on the South China Sea (SCS) dispute. China circulated the map of Nine-dotted lines in 1993 and since then China has behaved ambiguously toward Indonesia as the dotted lines encompasses some part of Indonesia's North Natuna waters. China insists two countries have overlapping interests over some of Indonesia's Natuna Exclusive Economic Zone which China claims as its traditional fishing ground. China, however recognizes Indonesia's sovereignty over the Natuna Islands and has been cautious when dealing with Indonesia on the Natuna issue. This behavior continues until the last three incidents occurred in Natuna waters in 2016. Although there are many studies on the South China Sea dispute and China's policy toward Indonesia, few if any of them discuss specifically on China's perspective toward Indonesia. Adopting image theory as an analytical framework, this paper figures Indonesia's image on the eyes of China, which then shaped China's perception toward Indonesia on SCS dispute. The main argument in this paper is China captures Indonesia's image as an ally image. In this image, Indonesia is seen as an actor who can work together, has similar capabilities and cultural dimensions with China.*

**Keyword:**

*South China Sea, Indonesia, Natuna, Image theory*

**INTRODUCTION**

The water around Natuna, located in the southwestern part of Kalimantan, has often become a hotspot in Indonesia-China relations. In 2016, tension between the two countries heightened due to three incidents which involved Indonesia's authority with China-flagged fishing vessels (Kusumadewi, 2016). All three incidents were perpetrated by violations of border and illegal fishing by Chinese fishing vessels in the water around Natuna, which China's claim of nine-dash line encapsulates.

Nine-dash line was first revealed to the Indonesian officials in 1993, when 'Workshop on Managing Potential Conflicts in the South China Sea' was commenced. For Indonesia, Chinese claim on nine-dash line did not affect its sovereignty over any of its islands, but it does violate its maritime sovereignty (Lumbanrau and Kusumadewi, 2016). Ali Alatas, Indonesia's then Foreign Minister, scrutinized the claim. Yet, clarification on Chinese claim was only released in 1995, when China's Foreign Minister at that moment, Qian Qichen, stated that China did not claim any of the islands in Natuna. A similar statement was made by Wang Yi, China's current Foreign Minister, to Indonesia's Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi on June 3, 2016 in Paris (Agusman, 2017).

Notwithstanding its statement of not having any claim on the islands in Natuna, Hua Chunying, the Spokesperson of Chinese Foreign Ministry, later stated in his protest on the incidents in Natuna that both China and Indonesia had overlapping claims on maritime rights and interests in South China Sea. The letter contained China's first statement on both countries' overlapping interest in the water of Natuna (Sinaga, 2017). The letter represented China's changing claim, in which China's initial claim did not problematized Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around Natuna's water.

In addition, the incidents in Natuna Sea, which had inflicted escalating tensions in both countries' relations, also represented the dynamic character of Indonesia-China relations, specifically China's foreign policy on Indonesia. Although both countries have incorporated South China Sea dispute in their bilateral relations since the release of the 1993-version of "nine-dash line" map, I am not able to find a sufficient amount of studies which specifically scrutinize on China's perception on Indonesia within the context of the dispute. Past studies on South China Sea mostly encompass a general view of China's behavior and perspective, but none shows a specific analysis on how China enacts its policies on South China Sea to Indonesia. It is shown by my review of previous literatures on China's policies to Indonesia, which are based upon four

perspectives: (1) foreign policy analysis; (2) security; (3) political economy; (4) public diplomacy.

Literatures on China's foreign policy to Indonesia can be divided into three periodical-based categories. The first category is comprised of literatures on policies during post-World War II, specifically after G30/S<sup>1</sup> occurred in Indonesia, to 1967 (Mozingo, 2017; Zhou, 2015). During this period, China's foreign policies to Indonesia were not deemed as complete failures. Yet, both states were perceived to maintain a rather ambivalent relationship toward each other, in which several discords between the two were to be blamed. The second category encompasses studies during Indonesia's cancellation of its diplomatic relations with China (Bert, 1985; Visscher, 1993). This period saw China's attempt to reform itself toward an open society after Mao Zedong's death, which resulted to attempts to thaw its relations with Indonesia and Myanmar. China also began to offer initiatives to normalize its diplomatic relations with Indonesia and its willingness to wait until Indonesia was ready to accept the offer. The third period occur after both countries normalized their relations (Daojiong, 2000; Suryadinata and Izzudin, 2017). This period witnessed China's public pressure on Indonesia post-May 1998 riots, in which many Indonesians of Chinese descent suffered as victims. Yet, China was also very cautious in displaying rather contentious remarks in order to not harm its relations with Indonesia. Such caution was portrayed in China's responses to Indonesia's policies on the islands of Natuna by not making any official mention on 'nine-dash line' in any of its official statement regarding Indonesia.

The next group of literatures cover those viewed from the perspective of strategic studies, which unravel several conditions affecting China's policies and behavior in South China Sea and, consequentially, toward ASEAN member states. Security dilemma was perceived to push ASEAN member states to pursue hedging strategy against China as a response to China's rising power (Haitao, 2017), despite China's defense diplomacy strategy in Southeast Asia to counter influences from great powers, most notably from the United States (Storey, 2012). However, China's rather assertive military strategy in South China Sea was understood to reflect China's priority in upholding its national interest, namely territorial sovereignty and energy security (Ginting, 2018). Then, from the perspective of political economy, Chinese policies in Indonesia was understood as 'developmental realpolitics' (Wu and Chong, 2018) and as economic diplomacy (Safitri, 2014; Amalia, 2018). Economic instrument was also perceived as a form of China's soft power strategy to Indonesia. Lastly, a literature from

the perspective of public diplomacy views China's adoption of "panda diplomacy" as an attempt to maintain its bilateral relations and strategic cooperation with Indonesia, especially after incidents around the Natuna Sea (Kumalaningtyas, 2019).

The author noted that there has never been a study which specifically examines China's perception on Indonesia within the context of South China Sea dispute. In this case, this research is intended to understand Indonesia's image from China's perspective to understand how China perceives Indonesia, due to China's rather ambiguous attitude on its adamant view on Indonesia and China's overlapping claims over the waters in Natuna. Yet, at the same time, China was always cautious on its responses to Indonesia with regards to the dispute and in its statement on acknowledging Indonesia's sovereignty on the islands of Natuna.

The significance of understanding China's perception on Indonesia lays upon the important role of perception and image in the process of decision-making of a specific state. Robert Jervis argued that it is impossible to explain how decisions or policies are made without any reference from the decision makers themselves (Jervis, 1976 in Misik, 2013). Image of the targeted state is considered as an important factor to decisions made by statesmen. Therefore, their policy choices reflect descriptions of the situation from the eye of the decision makers, which are not a neutral, non-opinionated description of the situation (Misik, 2013). In this case, perception of the said actor on what it considers as a reality only becomes real when the targeted state accepts such perception. The perception resulted in an image which represents the actor's understanding of the reality. Alexander, et. al. (2005) similarly noted that image or stereotype of a state is shaped by interstate relations and what justifies the state's attitude or responses toward other states.

Therefore, this study is mainly intended to understand how perception affects state's attitude and policies toward other states while facing territorial dispute. This study is also conducted in order to enrich studies on South China Sea dispute, especially those which are concerned with Indonesia. Then, this study will also contribute to Indonesia's foreign policy making in South China Sea.

### ***ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK***

Image theory is used to identify what would justify certain international image or stereotype and foreign policy choices. The theory suggests that structural features play important roles in determining certain image from the perspective of one country to

another. Image, or stereotype, of a certain state is shaped by interstate relations with the other state, which would further justify its attitude or reactions toward the other state (Alexander, et. al., 2005).

Image, as a concept in international relations, was first developed during the Cold War. Kenneth Boulding's analysis of international system became the first study to utilize the concept. Boulding (1959) defined 'image' as "... the total cognitive, affective, and evaluative structure of the behavioral unit, or its internal view of itself and its universe". He (Boulding, 1959) added that "the images which are important in international systems are those which a nation has of itself and of those other bodies in the system which constitute its international environment". Acceptance of enmity or amity and acceptance of strengths and weaknesses of a certain unit is a central feature to the impression in which certain actor is subjected to. Conceptualization of image was also elaborated in an article on foreign policy by Richard Cottam in his book titled *Foreign Policy Motivation: A General Theory and a Case Study*. Cottam's (1978 in Jervis, 1978) main object of discussion was perception based on five ideal types of image on other actors: enemy, allied, imperial, colonial and complex.

The Cold War period witnessed a significant increase in studies utilizing 'enemy image' concept to examine interactions among states. In this case, such concept was mostly employed to comprehend the nature of U.S. – USSR relations. The concept assumed that the targeted actor was 'evil' in nature and considered as powerful. 'Enemy image' also labelled the targeted actor as rather egoistic, by putting forward its own interest, and immoral. The targeted actor was also described as a "paper tiger", meaning that the actor carried intentions to intimidate other actors by making full use of its power, which would consequentially mask its weak position (Alexander, et. al., 1999).

As the Cold War ended, in which the international system experienced a shifting polarity, studies on image theory experienced a growing variety of conceptualizations. Hermann and Fischerkeller (1995) argued that enemy image alone was no longer eligible to be used as a framework to understand multiple perceptions and actions among different states. Both stated that a certain state, involved in multiple conflicts with different actors, tend to have different perceptions toward all conflicting parties. Such tendency was showcased by U.S. policies on USSR during Cold War and against Iraq after its attack to Kuwait in 1991. In this case, in spite of both USSR and Iraq being perceived as enemies, the U.S. showcased different responses to such hostilities, in which the U.S. chose to attack Iraq and not to directly attack USSR. Considering such

instances, Hermann and Fischerkeller stated that formulating another image type was needed to fully grasp important aspects in different strategic situations with different alternative scenarios.

Hermann and Fischerkeller (1995) contributed to Cottam's conceptualization of perception by adding 'degenerate image' into his four types of image. Therefore, it is fair to conclude that there are five ideal types of image which will be considered in this study, namely: (1) enemy image; (2) degenerate image; (3) colony image; (4) ally image; (5) imperialist image. Enemy image implies perceiving targeted state as a threat, which is determined by its material capabilities and culture. Degenerate image is defined as perceiving targeted state as an actor possessing possible capabilities to be exploited. Such targeted state tends to be similar in terms of capabilities, yet less so with regards to its culture. Then, colony image represents a perception of targeted actor as a weak and inferior counterpart, both in terms of capabilities and culture, hence its image as an exploitable actor. Ally image implies perceiving the targeted state as an equal counterpart, resulting in an understanding that the targeted state is a figure with whom the subject can cooperate with, due to their rather equal capabilities and similarities in cultural dimension. Lastly, imperialist image views the targeted state as a stronger and threatening counterpart. However, the targeted state is seen as less superior with regards its culture.

Out of all the images mentioned above, there are three dimensions which would affect subjected actor's perception against the targeted actor. In this case, Alexander, et. al. (2005) and Hermann and Fischerkeller (1995) utilized different terminologies. Alexander, et. al. (2005) described the three dimensions as 'structural features', which encompass 'goal compatibility', 'power relation', and 'cultural status/sophistication'. All three features determine the subject's perception on the targeted actor whilst considering whether the targeted actor possesses opportunity or threat, resulting in a specific cognitive scheme or perception on image as the basis of the subject's attitude on the target. On the other hand, Hermann and Fischerkeller (1995) provided a more elaborated explanation on each dimension. Both argued that the subject's understanding on possible threat and opportunity from the targeted actor becomes a central factor in determining what they would view as the image of the target. Therefore, Hermann and Fischerkeller's thought resembles that of neorealists and neoliberalists, in which perception on threat, exploitation, and cooperation opportunities are mainly affected by materialistic considerations. In addition, understanding on threat perception is similar

with the logic of relative gains, while understanding on exploitation opportunities is similar with absolute gains on behalf of the targeted actor. Meanwhile, understanding on cooperation opportunities implies existing possibility to reach absolute gain for both the subject and targeted actors.

The second dimension, power relation, determines what options are possible as an implication of certain strategies which the subject opts for. Perceiving the targeted actor as a weaker counterpart will lead to direct actions. However, if the targeted actor is deemed to possess similar amount of power, containment strategy will be the most probable option. Lastly, if the targeted actor is seen as the stronger counterpart, adopting some form of fortress protection or appeasement strategy will be the most likely option to be taken. The next dimension is culture, in which Hermann and Fischerkeller (1995) stated that consideration on the targeted actor's culture and the norms it upholds is needed. The subject's perception on the targeted actor, in this case, is showcased by how leaders of the subject utilizes verbal language. Scrutinizing the subject's leader statements will reflect what type of image best represents the subject's view on the targeted actor. Both Hermann and Fischerkeller explained their hypothesis on possible strategies that the subject might adapt in response to its perception toward the targeted actor, as described in Table 1.

Table 1. Hypotheses on Relations between Ideal Types of Image and Strategic Choices

<b>Image</b>	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Main goals of the chosen strategy</b>
Enemy	Containment	Deterrence; protection and salvation; forming alliance system; protecting global assets from targeted actor; defending credibility as a major power or benevolent ally.
Ally	Institutional cooperation	Strengthening cooperation to increase collective capability and trust; improving contribution from a third party to pursue collective interest; minimizing threats from a third party which disrupt targeted actor's capability; lessening the amounts of instruments of power and increasing resources which contribute positively to both parties.



Degenerate	Revisionism	Pursuing deterrence and pressure; creating a big alliance system; protecting geopolitical assets and attracting new allies.
Imperialist	Independent fortress	Lessening targeted actor's ability to control; deterrence effect toward or defeating the targeted actor; gaining support to attack the targeted actor; minimizing the targeted actor's role in the region and limiting their access to resources.
Colony	Intervention	Ensuring the existence of cooperative regime to maintain occupation on the targeted actor.

Sources: Hermann and Fischerkeller, 1995 in Özkeçeci, 2012

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

In order to understand China's perception toward Indonesia on South China Sea dispute, this research will employ qualitative approach. Alan Bryman (2004) stated that qualitative studies tend to put much emphasis on words in comparison to numbers, in which the research is inductive, interpretive, and constructivist in character. This research deems qualitative approach to be in line with the analytical framework which has been put forward in the previous section. Verbal languages utilized by the leaders of subjected actors will be considered to unravel the perception of the subjected actor on the targeted actor.

Furthermore, Neuman (2014) explained that qualitative research uses secondary data, such as photographs, words, sentences and symbols, which consequentially would include how Chinese' leaders make use of verbal languages to communicate their perceptions on Indonesia. Such data will also be sourced from multiple journal articles and online news articles, as well as official government websites. The focus of my data gathering process will be set upon statements of Chinese leaders on Indonesia-China relations within the context of South China Sea dispute. This research will explore collections of data released in between the year of 1990 to 2019, as 1990 marked the beginning of Indonesia's initiative to commence informal workshop on conflict management in South China Sea.

## ***DISCUSSION***

In the last three decades, South China Sea has become a territorial dispute hotspot between China, Taiwan, and four ASEAN member states, namely Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam. Their overlapping claims over South China Sea can be traced back to World War II era. However, the claimant states made their claims public in the 1960s (Agusman, 2017). China claimed all islands placed within the South China Sea as theirs, as described by an official map depicting the nine-dash line, which encompassed almost all parts of the sea. Beijing backed their claim with a historical justification, arguing that the sea was a traditional fishing area. In this case, China stated that they were the very first nation to find the islands in the South China Sea, as the finding occurred when the Xia Dynasty was in power (Shen, 2002).

Meanwhile, Indonesia has repeatedly stood firm for its claim as a non-claimant state. From the very beginning, Indonesia rejected China's nine-dash line proposal, which they deemed to be not in line with international maritime law under UNCLOS (Oegroseno, 2014). However, Indonesia has constantly promoted peace, stability and cooperation within the disputed area. True to the values they uphold, in 1990, Indonesia initiated a workshop on conflict management in South China Sea (Djalal, 2001).

In addition to hosting such informal workshops commenced since 1990, Indonesia is also actively promoting the importance of consolidating both ASEAN member states and China's views on proper conducts in South China Sea. Such initiative lead to the success of reaching consensus on The Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DoC) between ASEAN and China in 2002, which elaborated on standards of conduct for all signatories in order to maintain peace and stability in the disputed areas, in which the spirit of cooperation and mutual confidence stood at its basis (Kemlu, 2013). All signatories are also engaged in attempts to further develop DoC, resulting in another success to reach collective consensus on the Code of Conduct Framework in South China Sea in 2017 (Setnas ASEAN, 2017).

The framework, then, was further developed with ASEAN and China's success to reach agreement on the draft of Code of Conduct (CoC) in 2018 (Yong, 2018). The draft, containing ethical standards of conduct in the disputed area, is set to be finished in 2021 (Setnas ASEAN, 2018). Responding to said progress, Wang Yi, China's Minister of Foreign Affairs, described such attempts in creating the CoC as a collective effort to 'build a house together'. In his interview with Strait Times (Yong, 2018), Wang stated,

*It is like China and ASEAN countries building a house together. In the past, there were 11 designs from the 11 countries on how this house would look like. Now, we have laid in place good groundwork for a single design of this house, and we have also put in place the fundamentals, like the supporting pillars of this house.*

Wang also spoke about his belief that without external interference, negotiation on CoC will proceed smoothly in a short period of time.

Notwithstanding its diplomatic efforts with ASEAN on the South China Sea, the last three decades have witnessed several incidents, causing rifts between Indonesia and China on Beijing's claim over nine-dash line, three of which occurred in 2016. Out of those incidents, this study scrutinizes statements from Chinese officials as responses toward clashes with and protests from the Indonesian side. In this case, China is positioned as the subject actor, while Indonesia is positioned as the targeted actor.

As a response to China's nine-dash line map, firstly distributed in the conflict management workshop in 1993, Indonesia demanded clarification from the Chinese side. Yet, at that moment, Chinese delegation told Indonesia to "interpret (the map) as you wish" (Lumbanrau dan Kusumadewi, 2016). Only after two years did China put out its clarification through a spokesperson from its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chen Jian. Chen stated that China did not have any claim over the islands in Natuna, as well as ensuring China's willingness to engage in dialogues with Indonesia on maritime border. Ali Alatas, Indonesia's then Foreign Affairs Minister, responded by reaffirming that Indonesia and China did not have any maritime border dispute and Indonesia did not have any direct border with China, who is positioned far up the north (Johnson, 1997). From then on, it took quite a while until another official statement from China to Indonesia with regards to South China Sea dispute. Not even any statement was released after Indonesia's rejection of China's note verbale to the United Nations which reaffirmed its claim of the nine-dash line (The Permanent Mission of Republic of Indonesia to UN, 2010).

Up until 2015, Chinese government remained with their stance on not having any conflicting view with Indonesia's sovereignty over the islands of Natuna. Such statement was delivered by Chinese MoFA's spokesperson, Hong Lei, as a response to the Coordinating Minister of Maritime Affairs, Luhut Binsar Panjaitan, who spoke about the possibility of Indonesia suing China to the International Court of Arbitration over disputed claims in the waters of Natuna (Zhu, 2015). Hong also added that China

was committed to a peaceful conflict resolution, whilst wishing to maintain Indonesia-China strong, strategic partnership.

Later in 2016, amidst three incidents of illegal fishing involving Chinese vessels which consequentially violated Indonesia's territorial sovereignty over the waters of Natuna, Chinese MoFA objected Indonesia's responses and declared that its vessels were operating within China's traditional fishing area. In its press statement (China Embassy, 2016), China maintained its ground on the absence of disputed claims between Indonesia and China, while also adding a new narrative by stating that both countries have overlapping maritime rights and interests in parts of South China Sea.

*We have stated our position over the weekend on Indonesian navy vessels harassing and shooting Chinese fishing boats and fishermen. This took place in waters which are Chinese fishermen's traditional fishing grounds and where China and Indonesia have overlapping claims for maritime rights and interests. The Indonesian vessels that harassed and shot Chinese fishing boats with a willful resort to force put the life and property of Chinese fishermen in danger and violated international laws including UNCLOS and the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). China strongly protests and condemns the abuse of force. China urges the Indonesian side to stop taking actions that complicate, exacerbate the dispute and undermine regional peace and stability, and handle the fishery issue at sea in a constructive way. China has no territorial sovereignty dispute with Indonesia. Yet the two countries have overlapping claims for maritime rights and interests over some part of the South China Sea. The two sides have normal communication channels, and it is hoped that they will step up communication in a friendly and constructive way and properly settle relevant issue.*

A year after, Indonesia's Coordinating Ministry of Maritime Affairs released its decision to name the waters at the northern side within the islands of Natuna, which share direct border with the South China Sea, as the North Natuna Sea. The ministry's then First Deputy, Arif Havas Oegroseno, stated that the chosen name had been commonly used among oil and gas corporations operating within the area (BBC Indonesia, 2017). China responded with a demand to cancel the policy, as stated in its protest note on August 25, 2017. Chinese MoFA explained that Indonesia's decision could potentially rise complexity and hostility in the South China Sea, which would then affect attempts to ensure peace and stability. The note also noted that,

*The China-Indonesian relationship is developing in a healthy and stable way, and the South China Sea dispute is progressing well...Indonesia's unilateral name-changing actions are not conducive to maintaining this excellent situation.*

Chinese MoFA also reaffirmed its belief of Indonesia and China's overlapping maritime claim in the southwestern part of the South China Sea, stating that the name change would not change such fact (Ismail, 2017). In response to protest from Beijing, Panjaitan, acting as Indonesia's Coordinating Minister of Maritime Affairs, confirmed that the changed name only applied to the area along Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) which did not reach any part of the South China Sea (Sheany, 2017). The next section will discuss statements from the Chinese side, viewed from the three dimensions of the image theory, which will showcase China's perception on Indonesia.

### **Goal Compatibility**

In accordance with Hermann and Fischerkeller's conceptualization on image theory, Chinese government's official statements to Indonesia showcased China's understanding of an existing goal compatibility with Indonesia. Such finding can be inferred from a statement put out by Hong Lei as Chinese MoFA's spokesperson, confirming Beijing's commitment to a peaceful conflict resolution and close bilateral relations with Indonesia, due to their strategic partnership. China's protest note on Natuna's changed name also showcased China's perception of having a good relation with Indonesia.

In addition, the Chinese side's statements on illegal fishing and territorial border violations in the waters of Natuna did not include any remark on nine-dash line. China opted to naming its claim as "traditional fishing ground" in its responses to Indonesia in such cases. It is fair to reckon that China attempted to avoid putting blames on Indonesia in order to minimize risks of causing rifts among both countries, which would potentially harm China's security and economic interests. Such interests are related to Chinese proposal of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's Maritime Silk Road as a part of its Belt Road Initiative (BRI) which would require close cooperation with Indonesia (Suryadinata, 2017). Furthermore, after the first clash occurred in 2016, Xi Jinping ordered the Head of International Relations Committee of Chinese Communist Party to meet Joko Widodo in Jakarta. After the meeting, Pramono Anung, then the Secretary of Indonesia's cabinet, released a press statement which clarified that the incidents in the

waters of Natuna were merely cases of misunderstanding from the both sides and both had agreed to deem the incidents as resolved (Suryadinata, 2016). Therefore, it is concluded that China viewed Indonesia as having compatible goals, in which economic interests stood at its basis.

### **Power Relations**

By scrutinizing power relations dimension, it can be inferred from Hong Lei's statement as China's MoFA spokesperson that China was committed to a peaceful conflict resolution. With regards to incidents around the waters of Natuna in 2016, notwithstanding the rather coercive actions from the Indonesian side, China did not give any ultimatum nor threat to Indonesia. On the other hand, China urged Indonesia to take a constructive approach in resolving illegal fishing cases. Therefore, it can be said that China viewed Indonesia as an equal actor, power wise. Power's definition, in this case, is not limited to military power, as China is significantly stronger than Indonesia. Asia Power Index (Lowy Institute, 2019), found that China's current military capability places Beijing at the second place after the U.S. in Asia, while Indonesia takes the 13<sup>th</sup> place.

State's power is not solely determined by military capability, as it is also important to consider other sources of power, such as geographical area, population size, natural resources, economic power and social stability (Nye, 2004). By taking those elements into account, Indonesia can also be considered as a strong power in the Southeast Asia region in which the South China Sea is located at. According to Indonesia's Geospacial Information Body, Indonesia's geographical area amounts to 8,3 million km<sup>2</sup> in 2019 (Badan Informasi Geospasial, 2019). Then, according to World Population Review (2019), Indonesia's population reached 270 million which accounts to 40% of the total population of ASEAN. In terms of its economic power, Indonesia is a member of G20 forum, which encompasses 20 biggest economic powers. Among all other G20 members, Indonesia's economic growth ranked fourth under India, China, and Turkey, placing them above the U.S. and EU (Katadata, 2018).

An equal economic power relation between Indonesia and China can also be inferred from the improving trends in strategic partnership cooperation between the two states, which was signed by Xi Jinping and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono as Indonesia's then president in Jakarta, 2013 (MoFA of PRC, 2013). In his visit, Xi stated that China perceived Indonesia as a priority in its international affairs with all other neighboring

states. Xi also argued that China and Indonesia were two major developing countries with significant influences in the region and the world as important emerging market economies. According to his statement, Xi understood the development of international and regional development at that time as an important imperative which made the strategic partnership between both countries as an unavoidable alternative and an important focus in the future. China was ready to have an in depth and comprehensive cooperation with Indonesia in order to pursue mutual development which would benefit the people of both countries, as well as to preserve welfare and stability in Asia and to realize unity and cooperation among developing countries. In addition, China also wished to support global development and peace agenda together with Indonesia (MoFA of PRC, 2013).

China's Ambassador for Indonesia, Liu Jianchou, also stated in his interview with People's Daily (2013) that strategic partnership between Indonesia and China was a manifestation of their close bilateral relationship. According to Liu, an improvement from strategic partnership cooperation to comprehensive strategic partnership reflected a long-lasting relationship between the two countries which was based on a strong mutual trust. On the other hand, a former official of Indonesian MoFA disclosed that Chinese MoFA needed a symbol which would represent its strengthening relations with Indonesia, in which the partnership would serve as a symbol to both the people of China and CCP that Indonesia should be considered as a friend (Priyandita, 2019).

Furthermore, Xi Jinping's visit to Indonesia in 2013 was also highly reported by mainstream media in China and Indonesia. China Daily reported that Indonesia's central position as Southeast Asia's biggest power and China's strong relationship with Indonesia would facilitate China's diplomatic strategy in the region, as Indonesia was deemed to occupy a central position as the region's leader. In this case, Indonesia was regarded as a regional power with a strategic significance, not only in terms of economic relations, but also in their political affairs (Lalisang, 2013).

Therefore, it is fair to conclude that China viewed Indonesia as an equal counterpart, both in terms of its economic and political relations. Power relations with Indonesia also went hand in hand with the existing compatibility in terms of both of their goals.

### **Cultural Dimension**

The cultural dimension, comprising perception on norms in the targeted state, reflected China's perception in viewing Indonesia as an equal counterpart. Such view can be inferred from statements by the Chinese government, saying that China and Indonesia had multiple communication channels and wished that both countries would improve their pursuance of constructive and friendly measures of conflict resolution. Indonesia had, since 1990, commenced informal annual workshops on possibilities of conflict management in the South China Sea. Meanwhile, China had become a participant of the workshop since 1991. Therefore, in the span of its 28-year long interaction with Indonesia, China had witnessed Indonesia's capability in pioneering and facilitating conflict management. In addition, as a founding member of ASEAN, Indonesia occupied a significant position in ensuring regional stability in the region.

Furthermore, China's understanding of its compatible position with Indonesia with regards to the cultural dimension was related to the nuances of defense diplomacy in Asia. According to David Capie (2013), defense diplomacy in Asia has three characteristics: (1) tends to be informal and prioritize dialogue mechanism; (2) preference form bilateral than multilateral cooperation; (3) discussion on security issues tends to be swept under the rug and indirect.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study argues that China tends to ascribe the image of an 'ally' to Indonesia. Such tendency can be conferred from numerous statements from Chinese officials on several incidents surrounding China's claim on nine-dash line within Indonesia's EEZ in the waters of Natuna. Such conclusion is evident in three variables, namely goal compatibility, power relations and cultural dimension. Indonesia is understood to have similar features in all three variables to that of China, which lead to China's strategy on institutional cooperation toward Indonesia through capacity and confidence building measures. In addition, this study also argues that image theory is able to answer inquiries on China's rather ambiguous attitude toward Indonesia on its nine-dash line claim.

This study found that China's perception, which views Indonesia as an ally, emerged from its economic interest, which would lead to China's strategy on institutional cooperation, including its comprehensive strategic partnership in BRI. Both countries have previously conducted trade arrangement under the mechanism of



ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA), which was enacted since January 1 of 2010 (ASEAN, 2015). Several Chinese government's statements to Indonesia showcased China's perception of Indonesia which underlines Beijing's understanding as Indonesia as an important actor within the Southeast Asia region. Therefore, it is not in its best interest to react recklessly on sensitive issues which might potentially lead to conflict with Indonesia. In this case, China also understands Indonesia's role in ASEAN and its importance in maintaining regional stability.

Furthermore, this research argued that due to its image as an ally, Indonesia should be able to maximize its bilateral cooperation with China, considering their comprehensive strategic partnership. Despite Indonesian government's claim on China's interest to invest in nine infrastructure projects under the framework of BRI (CNN Indonesia, 2019), Indonesia still experienced deficit in its trade balance with China (Indonesian Ministry of Trade, 2019). In the beginning of the 2000s decade, Indonesia still experienced surplus in its trade balance with China, a trend which took an opposite turn in 2008 (Booth, 2011). Then, Makmur Keliat, as quoted by Lalisang (2013), stated that Indonesia's export to China is dominated by energy and other natural resources, while China exported manufactured commodities and capital goods. In this case, several studies also noted that the existing inequality in the types of commodity traded between China and ASEAN member states resemble a neocolonial trade policy on the Chinese side, in which China was understood to be practicing colonialist trading pattern with its Southeast Asian counterparts in order to fulfill its raw resource commodities (Booth, 2011).

Therefore, it can be concluded that further studies on China's perception on Indonesia is needed to comprehend whether a shift in its perception on Indonesia's image has occurred within the context of the South China Sea dispute and any other dimension of Indonesia-China bilateral relations.

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## **NOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> G30/S PKI (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*, or the PKI) occurred around midnight of September 30<sup>th</sup> until early morning on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1965. Six senior anti-communist army generals and one officer were killed in this abortive coup. Major General Suharto (later became President Sukarno's successor) launched an effective counterattack on the next day. Before the incident, PKI had a close relation with President Sukarno as it relied heavily upon Sukarno's political support. It also had a close relation with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as well as Sukarno's with the People's Republic of China (PRC). In the early 1965, Beijing encouraged Sukarno to establish the Fifth Force, a militia group comprised armed peasants and workers. It also initiated a military aid program in order to support the pro-Sukarno forces (the PKI and air force) against the right-wing elements in the Indonesian army. Suharto regime accused Beijing involved in this movement and launched a nation-wide anti-communist campaign. During 1965-1966, this campaign cost 200.000-500.000 lives of those who were identified by their association with PKI. In addition, during the anti-communist campaign, estimated 200.000 Chinese left Indonesia and returned to China as a response to pressure put by Indonesian army. In October 1966, the bilateral relations were officially suspended. See Zhou T., 2015; Cribb and Coppel, 2009; Cribb, 2004.