



The Potential Threat of U.S. Intervention in Indonesia as a Consequence of the South China Sea Conflict: A Case Study of Indonesia's Maritime Security

¹Pratondo Ario Seno Sudiro*, ²Ahmad Syairofi Attabiq

^{1,2} Independen Defence and Security Researcher

*) E-mail: arioseno170891@gmail.com

Abstract: *The South China Sea conflict implies the return of the Cold War era with the upheaval between two major powers, there are the United States (US) and China. Unlike the Cold War, which was driven by ideological battles, the South China Sea Conflict is driven by geopolitical and economic battles. China is experiencing rapid economic growth with its ability to control trade routes in the South China Sea. This disturbed the US as an old power in the Asia Pacific region. Then, the conflict escalated with the construction of military bases along the South China Sea region to Indonesia. China itself has dared to submit the Nine Dash Line claim over 90% of the South China Sea area followed by the construction of military bases, two of them in Subi Reef and Fiery Cross Reef. The impact is the US feels threatened because international shipping lanes in the South China Sea will be fully controlled by China. This article aims to discuss US retention of China's increasing power in the South China Sea which has the potential to become a trigger for US intervention in Indonesia as an effort to counteract the pace of development of China's power. In preparing this article, a descriptive qualitative method based on literature studies was used. The data used in the preparation of this article is literature data derived from three kinds of sources, there are scientific articles, textbooks, and news articles or mass media. This study identifies indications and potential pathways of US strategic penetration which in the future has the potential to invite Chinese resistance so as to make Indonesia a new conflict field between the US and China.*

Keywords: *The South China Sea conflict, the Cold War, the US intervention.*

Abstrak: *Konflik Laut China Selatan menyiratkan akan kembalinya era Perang Dingin dengan adanya pergolakan antara dua kekuatan besar yakni Amerika Serikat (AS) dan China. Berbeda dengan Perang Dingin yang dimotori oleh pertarungan ideologi, Konflik Laut China Selatan dimotori oleh pertarungan geopolitik dan pertarungan ekonomi. China mengalami pertumbuhan ekonomi yang sangat pesat dengan kemampuannya menguasai jalur perdagangan di Laut China Selatan. Hal itu mengusik AS sebagai*

kekuatan lama di kawasan Asia Pasifik. Akibatnya konflik meningkat dengan pembangunan pangkalan-pangkalan militer di sepanjang kawasan Laut China Selatan hingga mengarah ke wilayah Indonesia. China sendiri telah berani mengajukan klaim Nine Dash Line atas 90% wilayah Laut China Selatan yang diikuti dengan pembangunan pangkalan militer di Subi Reef dan Fiery Cross Reef. Akibatnya AS merasa terancam karena jalur pelayaran internasional di Laut China Selatan dapat dikuasai China sepenuhnya. Adapun artikel ini bertujuan membahas retensi AS terhadap peningkatan kekuatan China di Laut China Selatan yang berpotensi menjadi trigger bagi intervensi AS di Indonesia sebagai upaya menangkal laju perkembangan kekuatan China. Dalam penyusunan artikel ini digunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif yang berbasis studi literatur. Data yang digunakan dalam penyusunan artikel ini merupakan data literatur yang berasal dari tiga macam sumber yakni artikel ilmiah, buku teks, dan artikel berita atau media massa. Kemudian dilakukan koding dari data-data yang telah dikumpulkan dan disimpan, hingga diperoleh hasil bahwa terdapat ancaman intervensi AS di Indonesia yang dikemudian hari berpotensi mengundang resistensi China sehingga menjadikan Indonesia sebagai medan konflik baru antara AS dengan China.

Kata Kunci: *Konflik Laut China Selatan, Perang Dingin, intervensi AS.*

INTRODUCTION

Observing the development of the conflict in the South China Sea reveals notable similarities with the conflicts that occurred during the Cold War era (1947–1991). The Cold War can be understood as an arena of ideological confrontation between Western liberalism, led by the United States, and Eastern communism, led by the Soviet Union. This rivalry stimulated various technological innovations aimed at shaping and controlling public opinion (Saputra et al., 2025). Among the most visible innovations were the advancement of military weaponry and the space race, both of which were intended to demonstrate the superiority of each respective bloc. Despite being termed a “war,” the two blocs never engaged in direct military confrontation. Instead, they participated indirectly by supporting opposing sides in several regional conflicts, such as the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949), the Vietnam War (1954–1975), and the Afghan War (1979–1989). This indirect mode of confrontation later became widely known as proxy war.

During the Cold War period, Indonesia also experienced significant political turmoil as a result of the struggle for influence between liberalism and communism (Putra, 2022). This rivalry generated deep mutual suspicion among political groups, which was reflected in the ideological orientation of political parties at the time. Parties aligned with communism tended to perceive their opponents as agents of liberalism, while liberal-oriented groups similarly viewed communist parties with distrust. This tension culminated in external support from both blocs for several insurgency movements, such as the Permesta Rebellion (1957–1961), which received arms support from the United States, and the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) uprising in 1948, which sought to establish a communist-oriented Soviet Republic of Indonesia. The culmination of these political upheavals was the September 30th Movement (G30S), in which indications of involvement from both blocs were identified, although each side subsequently denied responsibility.

In the contemporary period, the escalating tensions in the South China Sea suggest a re-emergence of Cold War–like dynamics. However, unlike the ideological rivalry of the past, the current competition is primarily driven by economic interests between the United States and China. As widely acknowledged, the South China Sea constitutes one of the world’s busiest international maritime routes. Moreover, through its One Belt One Road policy, China has significantly increased its trade volume, even surpassing global trade growth trends (Foo et al., 2020).



Figure 1. China’s Trade Share Exceeding the Global Trade Share in the South China Sea
Source: (Foo et al., 2020)

This development has generated concern in the United States, which perceives its trade interests in the South China Sea as being threatened by China through its One Belt One Road policy. The United States continues to view itself as an established power in the Asia-Pacific region and thus seeks to maintain its role as the principal strategic actor. In contrast, China, emerging as a rising power, has increasingly projected its influence across the Asia-Pacific. The resulting dynamics have contributed to an arms buildup and the expansion of military bases, both of which serve not only strategic purposes but also as instruments for shaping public perceptions regarding relative power and dominance.



Figure 2. United States and Chinese Military Bases
Source: (Parama & Citra, 2023)

China has taken an even more assertive step by claiming approximately 90 percent of the South China Sea through the so-called Nine-Dash Line, grounded in historical and geographical arguments (Dwiguna & Syaroni, 2019). Over time, however, this claim has evolved into an effort to legitimize China's military presence in the region, particularly through the establishment of two military bases in the South China Sea: Zhubi Jiao (Subi Reef), located at 10°55'25" N and 114°05'05" E, and Yongshu Jiao (Fiery Cross Reef), located at 9°32'45" N and 112°53'15" E. Both installations are part of the Spratly Islands archipelago. China appears to have invested significantly in developing these facilities. Subi Reef is equipped with a naval base and a naval air station, reinforced by Y-9 transport aircraft, KJ-500 airborne early warning and control aircraft, and Z-8 transport helicopters (Puspaningrum, 2021). Meanwhile, Fiery Cross Reef is fortified with HQ-9B surface-to-air missile systems and YJ-12B anti-ship missiles, as well as an airbase featuring a 3,000-meter runway. This runway is suitable for a wide range of combat aircraft, including fighter jets and H-6 strategic bombers (Adjie, 2020).



Figure 3. Satellite Images of Subi Reef (top) and Fiery Cross Reef (bottom)
 Source: (Puspaningrum, 2021; Adjie, 2020)

This article does not aim to examine the development of China's military capabilities in the South China Sea or the direction of its expansion. Instead, it focuses on the potential resistance of the United States to China's growing power in the region. As an established power with a wide network of military bases across the Asia-Pacific, the United States is likely to perceive China's rapid rise—now approaching parity with U.S. capabilities—as a strategic challenge. Although U.S. concerns are primarily driven by economic considerations, particularly the fear that major sea lanes in the South China Sea could fall entirely under Chinese control, the United States would not hesitate to project military power to generate a deterrence effect against China.

As illustrated in Figure 2 above, Indonesia—located to the south of the South China Sea—has become a convergence point for the escalating rivalry between the United States and China. Consequently, Indonesia faces the potential risk of becoming a target of U.S. intervention aimed at counterbalancing China's expanding influence, similar to the actions undertaken by U.S. intelligence agencies in Indonesia during the 1960s to contain the spread of communism in Southeast Asia (Weiner, 2008). What must be carefully anticipated is that Indonesia has, on multiple occasions, suffered adverse consequences from U.S. intervention (Kuswara, 2019). Several U.S. interventions in Indonesia, although justified at the time as efforts to curb the influence of communism, ultimately resulted in internal conflict and bloodshed. Therefore, the discussion of potential U.S. resistance in this article seeks to offer preventive insights to ensure that any form of U.S. intervention does not lead to political instability or disruption of Indonesia's national life, particularly concerning Indonesia's maritime security.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive–analytical approach employing a threat analysis framework to assess the potential for United States intervention in Indonesia's maritime security within the context of escalating tensions in the South China Sea. This approach is selected because the research focuses on identifying and evaluating patterns of state behavior based on indicators of capability and intent, rather than testing quantitative causal relationships. The unit of analysis in

this study is the strategic actions of the United States that are relevant to maritime security intervention affecting Indonesia. The units of observation analyzed and coded include:

- (1) official United States policy statements related to the Indo-Pacific and the South China Sea;
- (2) maritime security assistance programs and cooperation initiatives;
- (3) institutional arrangements and legal instruments, such as memoranda of understanding and support for institutional restructuring; and
- (4) regional military posture, including the presence of military bases and joint military exercises.

Data were collected through a structured literature review encompassing peer-reviewed academic sources, official policy documents, and verified mainstream media reports. To ensure validity and mitigate bias, the study employs source triangulation. Data analysis was conducted through thematic coding of the units of observation based on four analytical categories: resources, knowledge, intentions, and expectations. The empirical findings were then mapped onto the components of threat assessment to evaluate whether the prerequisites for a strategic threat to Indonesia’s maritime security are present.

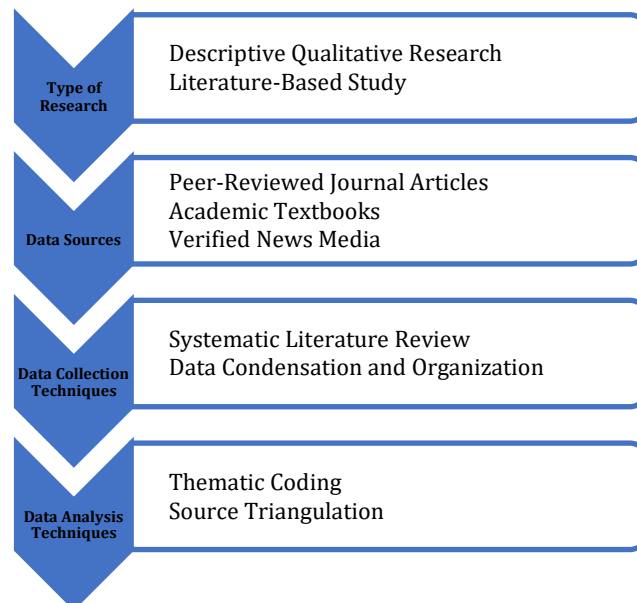


Figure 4. Research Methodological Framework
Source: Processed by the author(s)

The methodological diagram above functions as an analytical inference model that illustrates the logical relationship between empirical data and threat-related conclusions. Rather than merely depicting the research workflow, the diagram maps the inferential process through which units of observation are translated into a structured threat assessment. The inferential flow begins with units of observation in the form of United States strategic actions, including policy statements, security assistance, institutional arrangements, and military posture. These units are coded into components of capability (resources and knowledge) and intent (desires and expectations) based on the Prunckun framework. The relationships among these components are subsequently analyzed to assess whether the prerequisites for a strategic threat to Indonesia's maritime security are fulfilled.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings indicate that United States actions in the Asia-Pacific region—particularly those related to maritime security cooperation with Indonesia—can be analyzed as strategic responses to China's growing capabilities in the South China Sea. These patterns of action reflect a combination of geopolitical and economic interests that are characteristic of great power competition. The analysis does not seek to assess the normative motives or ideological preferences of the United States, but rather to identify the objective implications of such actions for Indonesia's maritime security. In this context, cooperation, assistance, and intensified military interaction are understood as foreign policy instruments that may generate either stabilizing effects or strategic risks, depending on the responses of other involved actors.

The United States possesses an intelligence agency known as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which was established in 1947. Since its inception, the agency has played an active role in containing the spread of communism promoted by the Eastern Bloc. Indonesia became one of the key targets of CIA operations. Two major events can be identified as triggers for CIA involvement in Indonesia: the Asian–African Conference in 1955 and the achievement of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) as one of the top four vote-getters in the same year (Weiner, 2008). These developments generated concern within the Western bloc, particularly

the United States, regarding Indonesia's growing influence and its perceived ideological alignment with communism, which was viewed as sharing common objectives of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism.

These concerns intensified when Indonesia launched Operation Trikora in 1961 and Operation Dwikora in 1964, which further positioned Indonesia closer to the Eastern Bloc and resulted in a substantial influx of Soviet-supplied military equipment. Although President Sukarno consistently emphasized Indonesia's status as a non-aligned state and even initiated the Non-Aligned Movement, the rapid growth of the PKI—combined with Sukarno's endorsement of the Nasakom doctrine (Nationalism–Religion–Communism)—deepened U.S. anxieties. As a consequence, during Sukarno's presidency, the CIA conducted extensive operations in Indonesia, including involvement in the PRRI–Permesta rebellion and the September 30th Movement (G30S), both of which ultimately contributed to Sukarno's removal from power.

In parallel with covert operations, the United States also pursued intervention through military assistance. According to Howard P. Jones, U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia from 1958 to 1965, Washington considered military aid necessary to maintain anti-communist legitimacy and secure Indonesia's political alignment with the United States. This policy was implemented through military assistance programs that supplied equipment—particularly to the Indonesian Army—and through officer training programs conducted in the United States, notably at Fort Leavenworth. Between 1958 and 1965, the United States allocated approximately USD 10–20 million annually for military assistance to Indonesia. Through officer training programs, the United States also established extensive networks with the Indonesian Army (Swastika et al., 2017). Between 1950 and 1965, approximately 2,800 Indonesian Army officers received training in the United States (Roosa, 2008). These efforts proved effective, as many of the trained officers later adopted strong anti-communist positions and became involved in operations against the PKI (Bevins, 2020).

Broadly speaking, three primary factors have historically driven U.S. intervention in Indonesia: ideological, geopolitical, and economic considerations (Swastika et al., 2017). The ideological factor has become largely irrelevant in the

contemporary period, as ideological rivalry no longer constitutes the primary focus of interstate competition. In contrast, geopolitical and economic factors have gained increasing prominence. The geopolitical dimension is illustrated in Figure 2, which shows Indonesia's position as a convergence point in the escalating rivalry between the United States and China. This position incentivizes the United States to prevent Indonesia from falling under China's strategic influence. The economic factor is illustrated in Figure 1, which demonstrates that China's trade volume in the South China Sea has surpassed global trade levels, and by extension, exceeded that of the United States. Figures 2 and 3 further reveal that China is not the only actor developing military bases in the South China Sea. The United States has long maintained a network of military installations surrounding Indonesia. Beyond those shown in Figure 2, these include the U.S. Army Garrison Kwajalein Atoll to the east, Naval Communication Station Harold E. Holt to the south, and Navy Region Center Singapore to the west. All three facilities are equipped with advanced surveillance systems (Nicastro & Tilghman, 2024). The strategic positioning of these bases potentially enables the United States to obtain real-time information on developments within Indonesia and facilitates the deployment of U.S. intelligence assets into Indonesian territory.

In addition to the strategic placement of military bases encircling potential targets, U.S. intervention has also been conducted through military assistance. Such assistance can be understood as part of a reciprocal cycle. On the one hand, U.S. military aid has, in several cases, contributed to instability within recipient states—for example, U.S. military support during the PRRI–Permesta rebellion and U.S. backing of operations following the G30S incident. On the other hand, domestic instability itself has often served as an entry point for U.S. military assistance and intelligence operations. A contemporary example of this dynamic can be observed in U.S. assistance to Somalia.

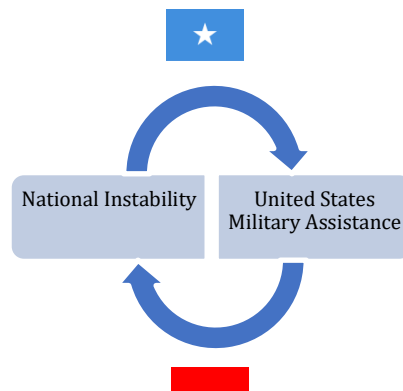


Figure 5. The Reciprocal Cycle of U.S. Assistance
Source: Processed by the author(s)

From a geopolitical perspective, Somalia shares similarities with Indonesia in that both are located along major international shipping lanes. As shown in Figure 1, just as shipping routes in the South China Sea are increasingly dominated by China, maritime routes in East Africa are also under significant Chinese influence. In addition, China maintains a military base in Djibouti, which directly borders northern Somalia. This situation has raised concerns in the United States that key shipping lanes in East Africa could fall entirely under Chinese control. In assisting Somalia, however, the United States has leveraged two critical conditions: Somalia's extreme poverty and its persistent failure to establish political and security stability (Safitri, 2014). These conditions are further compounded by the presence of Somali piracy around the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which has strengthened the justification for U.S. involvement and assistance in Somalia.

About Indonesia's maritime security, the United States—through the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement—has constructed a Maritime Training Center in Batam, Riau Islands, which was completed in 2024 at a total cost of USD 1.5 million (Hidayat, 2024). This development has been accompanied by a series of joint training programs with the United States, conducted both prior to and following the completion of the facility, and held in Indonesia as well as in the United States. It is documented that the United States has conducted maritime security exercises with Indonesia on multiple occasions since 2016 (Slamet, 2025).

These activities have also coincided with the existence of a Memorandum of Understanding between Indonesia and the United States concerning maritime security cooperation.

Over time, the United States has also supported the idea of establishing a single maritime security agency (single agency model) in Indonesia. Plans for such an institution date back to 2007, initiated by the Maritime Security Coordination Team (Tim Koorkamla) formed under the Coordinating Ministry for Political and Security Affairs (Slamet, 2025). The proposed single-agency model bears similarities to the United States Coast Guard. Nevertheless, Indonesia currently maintains a multi-agency maritime security structure, in which several institutions possess investigative authority and specific legal mandates.

Table 1. Maritime Security Institutions in Indonesia

Institution	Legal Object / Mandate	Affiliated Ministry / Institution	Legal Basis
Customs and Excise	Smuggling of Goods	Ministry of Finance	Law No. 17 of 2006 on Customs
Directorate General of Immigration	Human Trafficking	Ministry of Law	Law No. 6 of 2011 on Immigration
Maritime Police	Transnational Crimes in Maritime Areas	Non-Ministerial Government Agency (Law Enforcement Body)	Law No. 2 of 2002 on the Indonesian National Police
Directorate General of Marine and Fisheries Resources Surveillance (PSDKP)	Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing	Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries	Law No. 45 of 2009 on Fisheries
Sea and Coast Guard Unit (KPLP)	Maritime Safety and Marine Pollution Control	Ministry of Transportation	Law No. 17 of 2008 on Shipping, as amended by Law No. 66 of 2024

Source: (Sudiro & Ponto, 2025)

What the Maritime Security Coordination Team (Tim Korkamla) aimed to achieve in 2007 through the establishment of a single-agency model was the consolidation of the five institutions listed in Table 1 into a unified maritime security body. This proposed institutional design was explicitly modeled on the existing United States Coast Guard, which itself emerged from the merger of several agencies: the Life-Saving Service and the Revenue Cutter Service in 1915, followed by the incorporation of the U.S. Lighthouse Service in 1939 and the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation in 1942 (Timeline 1900s–2000s, n.d.).

Upon closer examination, this proposal exhibits a pattern similar to China's earlier initiative toward Indonesia regarding the establishment of a "Fifth Force" (Angkatan Kelima) during the Old Order era. Following the growing strength of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) after the 1955 general election and the declaration of Dwikora by President Sukarno in 1964, China found an opportunity to propose the formation of the Fifth Force in 1965. This proposal was accompanied by China's willingness to supply 100 long-barreled firearms as support for the newly envisioned force (Sucipto, 2013). The Fifth Force—conceived as an armed entity outside the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Police, composed of armed workers and peasants (Soedarmo & Ginanjar, 2014)—closely resembled the militia component within the Chinese armed forces. Such militia structures were also common in the military organizations of communist states, where mobilized civilians played a supporting role in the doctrine of total war. Through this expression of support, China expected Indonesia to align more closely with Beijing, a strategy that ultimately materialized in 1965 with the formation of the Jakarta–Peking (Beijing) Axis under President Sukarno (Budiman, 2014).

It can therefore be argued that U.S. actions related to maritime security assistance represent an effort to shape Indonesia's strategic orientation in favor of the United States amid the South China Sea conflict, while simultaneously serving as a potential entry point for U.S. intelligence operations in Indonesia. Cooperation programs and security assistance provided by the United States primarily function as long-term strategic investments, given the significant potential and strategic position of the recipient state. Such investments are intended to expand U.S. prosperity and economic opportunities in the future (Manguwesio et al., 2024).

Based on existing historical experience, these initiatives may subsequently be followed by more intensive programs, such as the establishment of U.S. military bases in Indonesia. This trajectory would draw Indonesia further into the U.S.–China rivalry. The next likely consequence would be Chinese resistance toward Indonesia, either through similar strategies—such as assistance provision and base development—or through alternative approaches. Ultimately, Indonesia risks becoming a new arena of competition between the United States and China. Given Indonesia's vast territory and abundant natural resources, such a scenario could evolve into a struggle over territorial control and resource access. To assess the potential threats arising from U.S. intervention in Indonesia's maritime security in the context of the South China Sea conflict, this study applies the equation developed by Prunckun (2010):

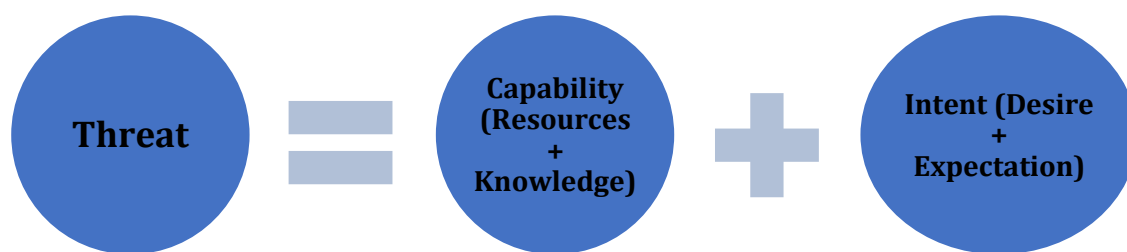


Figure 6. Threat Analysis Equation
Source: Author's compilation based on Prunckun (2010)

The equation presented in Figure 5 demonstrates that, fundamentally, a threat consists of two core components: capability and intent. Capability comprises two subcomponents. The first is resources, defined as the abilities, experience, and material assets required by an actor to implement a planned course of action. The second is knowledge, referring to the possession of information that can be utilized by an actor to achieve its objectives. Similarly, intent also consists of two subcomponents. Desire refers to the actor's level of enthusiasm or motivation to achieve a particular objective, which may often generate harmful consequences. Expectation, by contrast, denotes the actor's belief that its objectives will be successfully attained if the planned actions are executed (Setiyadi & Keliat, 2020). About potential United States intervention in Indonesia's maritime security, the application of Prunckun's analytical equation indicates the presence of all four

subcomponents that constitute the necessary prerequisites for the existence of a threat. These findings are presented in the following table:

Table 2. Threat Analysis of United States Intervention in Indonesia's Maritime Security

Component		Dimension
Threat	Capability	Resources
		Knowledge
	Intent	Desire
		Expectation
		Economic capacity; military weaponry
		Intelligence
		Intervention in Indonesia
		Indonesia becoming a U.S. ally

The analysis presented in Table 2 indicates that the United States already possesses substantial economic capacity, which is subsequently utilized to provide assistance and training to Indonesia. This economic capacity is accompanied by military power, which may be understood in two forms. First, in a direct sense, it refers to military hardware and defense equipment. Second, in an indirect sense, it encompasses government institutions that operate and control such weapon systems.

Drawing upon these resources, the United States is able to deploy intelligence units to acquire knowledge, particularly regarding Indonesia's internal conditions related to maritime security, including the depth of Indonesia–China relations. The mobilization of resources—comprising both economic capacity and military power—thus facilitates the acquisition of information through intelligence activities. Through the exercise of these capabilities, U.S. intent becomes discernible, manifested in the desire to intervene in Indonesia in order to realize the expectation that Indonesia will align itself as a U.S. ally in the South China Sea conflict. Accordingly, all constituent components required for the existence of a threat are fulfilled by the United States within the context of Indonesia's maritime security. In the long term, however, the threat is not limited solely to U.S. intervention. It also encompasses potential Chinese resistance, which may ultimately draw Indonesia into becoming a new arena of competition between the United States and China.

CONCLUSION

This article concludes that, alongside the expansion of China's power in the South China Sea, there exists a potential threat of United States intervention in Indonesia driven by two primary factors: geopolitical and economic considerations. This U.S. resistance toward China is categorized as a threat because it has the potential to disrupt Indonesia's national stability, particularly in relation to Indonesia's maritime security. Furthermore, based on the analytical equation developed by Prunckun, U.S. intervention in Indonesia fulfills the necessary prerequisites of a threat category, as it encompasses capability—comprising resources and knowledge—as well as intent, consisting of desire and expectation.

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