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Comparison of Indonesia's and the Philippines' Foreign Policies Regarding the South China Sea Dispute (2016–2022)

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ABSTRACT

The South China Sea constitutes a strategically vital region marked by significant economic potential and intense geopolitical contestation, serving as a focal point of complex international disputes. Its vast reserves of oil, natural gas, and rich biological resources have rendered it a highly contested maritime domain among various claimant states. Central to the dispute is China's assertion of sovereignty through its so-called Nine-Dash Line, a claim that encompasses nearly the entirety of the South China Sea and stands in direct conflict with the maritime entitlements of other littoral states, including the Philippines and Indonesia, as delineated by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

This article focuses on a comparative analysis of the foreign policy approaches adopted by the Philippines and Indonesia in response to the South China Sea dispute during the leadership of President Rodrigo Duterte and President Joko Widodo (2016–2022). The study employs David Easton's Political System Theory, which conceptualizes

the political system as a dynamic process involving the transformation of inputs—such as demands and support—into policy outputs through systemic conversion mechanisms. Using a descriptive qualitative methodology, the research aims to elucidate the divergences in the foreign policy strategies pursued by the two administrations. The findings indicate that President Duterte's stance toward China was notably conciliatory, prioritizing economic and diplomatic engagement, whereas President Joko Widodo adopted a more assertive and defensive posture in safeguarding Indonesia's maritime interests in the South China Sea.

Keyword: *Philippines, Indonesia, South China Sea, Joko Widodo, Rodrigo Duterte, foreign policy.*

ABSTRAK

Laut Cina Selatan merupakan kawasan strategis yang penuh dengan kepentingan ekonomi dan geopolitik, serta menjadi sumber sengketa internasional yang kompleks. Potensi besar yang dimiliki oleh wilayah ini, termasuk cadangan minyak, gas bumi, dan sumber daya hayati, membuatnya menjadi wilayah yang diperebutkan banyak negara. Klaim Nine-Dash Line yang diajukan oleh Cina mencakup hampir seluruh wilayah Laut Cina Selatan dan berkonflik dengan klaim negara-negara pesisir lain, termasuk Filipina dan Indonesia, yang berdasarkan pada Konvensi Perserikatan Bangsa-Bangsa tentang Hukum Laut (UNCLOS). Disini fokus penulis pada artikel ini adalah perbandingan kebijakan dari dua negara yakni Filipina dan Indonesia yaitu Presiden Joko Widodo dan Presiden Rodrigo Duterte (2016-2022).

Penelitian ini menggunakan Teori Analisis Sistem Politik oleh David Easton. Dimana teori ini memperkenalkan teori sistem politik yang menjelaskan bagaimana suatu sistem berfungsi melalui interaksi antara input (tuntutan dan dukungan), proses konversi, dan output (kebijakan). Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui apa saja perbedaan kebijakan yang diambil kedua presiden tersebut dalam menangani konflik Laut Cina Selatan. Dengan menggunakan penelitian Kualitatif Deskriptif. Kesimpulan dari hasil penelitian ini adalah Pada masa pemerintahan Rodrigo Duterte, politik luar negerinya terhadap Cina terkait Laut Cina Selatan sendiri lebih lembut dari pada masa pemerintahan Presiden Joko Widodo yang cenderung bersifat defensif terhadap Cina di wilayah Laut Cina Selatan.

Kata kunci: *Filipina, Indonesia, Laut Cina Selatan, Joko Widodo, Rodrigo Duterte, politik luar negeri.*

INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea is a strategic region marked by significant economic and geopolitical interests, serving as a central locus of complex international disputes. Its immense potential—comprising oil reserves, natural gas, and rich biological resources—has rendered it a contested maritime zone among numerous states. China's Nine-Dash

Line claim, which encompasses nearly the entire South China Sea, directly conflicts with the maritime claims of other littoral states, including the Philippines and Indonesia, whose positions are grounded in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Ramadani & Trisni, 2019). Although Indonesia does not claim sovereignty over the Spratly Islands, it faces distinct challenges in protecting its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around the Natuna Islands from increasing Chinese maritime activity. In response, the administration of President Joko Widodo (2016–2019) adopted a firm foreign policy stance, strengthening military patrols, enhancing defense cooperation with Japan, and increasing maritime security along the Natuna border (Hartati, 2016).

In contrast, under the leadership of President Rodrigo Duterte (2016–2022), the Philippines pursued a markedly different approach following its legal victory against China in the Permanent Court of Arbitration. Despite the international legal support gained through the ruling, Duterte adopted a pragmatic strategy by fostering closer economic and diplomatic ties with China, while still asserting the Philippines' sovereign claims over the Spratly Islands (Damping & Windiani, 2020).

These divergent foreign policy approaches raise critical questions: How do Indonesia and the Philippines differ in their diplomatic strategies, alliance-building efforts, and defense postures in addressing the South China Sea dispute during the administrations of President Joko Widodo and President Rodrigo Duterte? Moreover, how have these policy choices affected regional stability, bilateral relations with China, and the pursuit of each country's national interests?

This study aims to analyze and compare the foreign policy responses of Indonesia and the Philippines to the South China Sea conflict during the aforementioned leadership periods. It also seeks to identify the internal and external actors that have shaped their respective approaches. Through this analysis, the research intends to provide a nuanced understanding of how both nations navigate the evolving geopolitical landscape in Southeast Asia and assess the broader implications of their policies for regional stability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following reviewed literature offers broader insights into the foreign policy approaches of Indonesia and the Philippines concerning the South China Sea dispute. The first journal is a study by Jennifer Beatrice (2020), titled *"The Philippines' Foreign Policy on the South China Sea under the Rodrigo Duterte Administration."* Both Jennifer's study and the present research share a common focus on the South China Sea dispute, particularly examining the Philippines' policy toward China. Both highlight that under President Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines adopted a cooperative stance toward China. However, unlike Jennifer's work, this study provides a comparative analysis, juxtaposing Duterte's conciliatory approach with President Joko Widodo's more defensive strategy, which emphasizes military reinforcement and legal diplomacy in the Natuna Sea.

The second journal is a study by Nuans et al. (2022), entitled *"Indonesia's Response to China's Threats in the North Natuna Sea During President Joko Widodo's Administration."* Similar to the present research, Nuans and colleagues focus on policy

responses to maritime territorial disputes involving China. Both studies underscore Indonesia's defensive foreign policy under President Joko Widodo in the North Natuna Sea, a central theme in both works. Additionally, both employ qualitative methodologies with data collection grounded in literature review, and reference the 1982 UNCLOS as the legal foundation for rejecting China's claims. However, there are significant distinctions. While this study takes a comparative approach, examining the foreign policies of both Indonesia and the Philippines, Nuans' research limits its focus to Indonesia's response under Joko Widodo, specifically in the North Natuna Sea. Moreover, this study employs David Easton's Political System Analysis Theory to examine the divergence in policy outcomes between the two countries, whereas Nuans' work places greater emphasis on Indonesia's practical responses—such as defense diplomacy, military enhancement, and international arbitration strategies.

The third journal is a study by Wahyu Tyas (2020), titled *“Geopolitical Implication on Contested Waters: A Comparison Between Indonesia and the Philippines' Strategy in Overlapping South China Sea Waters.”* Both Tyas's study and the present research compare the diplomatic and defense strategies of Indonesia and the Philippines in the South China Sea dispute. However, Tyas adopts a broader analytical lens, incorporating global geopolitical dimensions. In contrast, the present study focuses specifically on the foreign policy decisions made during the administrations of President Joko Widodo and President Rodrigo Duterte. It also applies Easton's Political System Theory to explain how inputs and outputs within political systems have shaped the distinct foreign policy trajectories of both countries.

This study offers several contributions to the academic discourse. It provides a deeper understanding by systematically comparing Indonesia's and the Philippines' foreign policies in the South China Sea dispute through the analytical framework of David Easton's Political System Theory. This approach enables a structured analysis of how domestic and international pressures (inputs) influence the resulting foreign policy decisions (outputs) of both states. Furthermore, the study's temporal focus—specifically the period between 2016 and 2022—offers a contextually grounded and policy-relevant analysis of the foreign policy dynamics under President Joko Widodo and President Rodrigo Duterte. By highlighting the contrast between Duterte's pragmatic and conciliatory approach toward China and Widodo's more assertive, sovereignty-focused strategy, this research provides valuable insights into how differing diplomatic and defense strategies reflect broader national interests. It also offers a critical assessment of the implications of these policies for regional stability and bilateral relations with China, rendering this study highly relevant to both academic discussions and policy debates in Southeast Asia.

METHOD

This study employs a comparative qualitative method, which entails the analysis of data through the comparison and synthesis of causal evidence at both within-case and cross-case levels. However, the emphasis lies predominantly on within-case evidence, with the aim of establishing a dialogical interaction between the cases to produce valid analytical outcomes (Rutten, 2024). The research focuses on comparing the foreign

policy responses of Indonesia and the Philippines to the South China Sea dispute, examining various factors that influence their respective approaches.

According to Corbetta, data collection techniques in qualitative research can be categorized into three groups: direct observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. This study adopts the third category—document analysis—by examining social situations through pre-existing materials produced by relevant institutions and actors. Primary sources include official state documents such as reports issued by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of both countries. These are supplemented by secondary sources including peer-reviewed journal articles and relevant literature to provide supporting context.

For data analysis, the researcher utilizes content analysis to identify and extract key themes from official documents, policy reports, and scholarly literature relevant to the research objectives. Content analysis is a research technique aimed at generating replicable and valid inferences from texts within their contextual framework. As defined by Klaus Krippendorff (1993), content analysis facilitates the systematic examination of both written and printed information, allowing the researcher to identify the specific policy approaches of the two countries under the leadership of President Joko Widodo and President Rodrigo Duterte. It also helps assess the extent to which public participation is integrated into the foreign policy-making process regarding the South China Sea dispute.

The comparative method is further employed to analyze two or more research objects across various dimensions. Specifically, this study adopts a synchronous comparative approach, which involves comparing different objects within the same time frame (Santosa, 2015). Using this method, the research explores the factors that distinguish the political systems of Indonesia and the Philippines during the respective administrations of Joko Widodo and Rodrigo Duterte in responding to China's growing influence in the South China Sea. Although both leaders addressed similar geopolitical pressures, their policies and implementations differ significantly, shaped by their respective historical contexts and political systems. The data collection spans a common period—the five-year presidential terms from 2016 to 2022.

Drawing on the theoretical framework of David Easton's Political System Analysis (1957), the study considers how centralized decision-making authority affects foreign policy outcomes. In Indonesia, political power is relatively decentralized, with foreign policy decisions shaped by multiple actors including relevant ministries, the military, and the legislature (DPR). This structure fosters a participatory process but often results in slower policy formulation due to the need for coordination and consensus. This approach is evident in Indonesia's active diplomacy, including its engagement in multilateral forums such as ASEAN and its efforts to strengthen bilateral cooperation with countries like Japan and Australia.

In contrast, the Philippines under President Rodrigo Duterte adopted a more centralized model of foreign policy decision-making, whereby the president exercised dominant authority with limited involvement from the legislature or public consultation. This centralization enabled the Philippine government to respond more swiftly in deepening bilateral ties with China, though it often provoked domestic controversy. This was particularly evident in Duterte's decision not to capitalize on the Philippines' legal

victory in the Permanent Court of Arbitration concerning the South China Sea, instead opting for a pragmatic strategy focused on economic cooperation with China (Damping & Windiani, 2020).

The two countries also diverge in terms of public participation. Indonesia tends to incorporate input from civil society and academic circles into foreign policy discussions, reflecting a more democratic and inclusive policy-making process. Conversely, the Philippines has shown a stronger orientation toward elite decision-making, with policy outcomes largely influenced by presidential discretion. This comparison illustrates how differing political structures shape the effectiveness, efficiency, and public acceptance of foreign policy responses in both countries amid the geopolitical challenges of the South China Sea dispute (Nuans Asa Septari B. et al., 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Diplomatic Efforts by Indonesia and the Philippines Concerning the South China Sea Dispute

Indonesia has emphasized active diplomacy aimed at strengthening alliances with countries such as Japan, Australia, and the United States to safeguard its sovereignty. Through participation in multilateral forums and joint military exercises, Indonesia seeks to enhance its defense capabilities while maintaining a non-aligned stance (Lemhannas RI, 2024). In contrast, under President Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines adopted a more cooperative approach toward China, despite maintaining its alliance commitments with the United States. Duterte's policy prioritized economic engagement with China while attempting to de-escalate tensions in the South China Sea (Ramadani & Trisni, 2019). Moreover, Indonesia and the Philippines diverge in their approaches to expanding international alliances in pursuit of sovereign protection. Indonesia's strategic partnerships focus on deepening ties with Japan, Australia, and the United States. These collaborations include joint military exercises and defense technology exchanges. For example, Indonesia has participated in trilateral military exercises with Australia and Japan to enhance operational capacity and regional threat response (Angkara, 2024). Furthermore, Indonesia engages actively in multilateral diplomacy, particularly through ASEAN, to strengthen its bargaining power on the international stage. Through such efforts, Indonesia aims to ensure regional stability and protect its maritime sovereignty from Chinese assertiveness. In terms of defense cooperation, Indonesia has also pursued bilateral agreements with the Philippines encompassing logistics and the defense industry, demonstrating its commitment to regional security through collaborative means (Ministry of Defense, Republic of Indonesia, 2022).

The two nations maintain a bilateral forum known as the Joint Defense and Security Cooperation Committee (JDSCC), which addresses shared security challenges and updates defense collaboration. This forum encompasses joint military exercises, coordinated border patrols, and intelligence sharing. Furthermore, military cooperation under the Philindo MC framework includes education and training programs, as well as visits by high-ranking military officials from both countries (Ministry of Defense, Republic of Indonesia, 2020).

In the case of the Philippines, under the leadership of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., there has been a renewed alignment with the United States following a period of strained relations during Duterte's presidency. The Philippines now increasingly relies on the U.S. as a strategic security guarantor against Chinese threats, including through defense agreements that permit a U.S. military presence at key strategic locations within the country. Additionally, the Philippines actively participates in joint military exercises with the U.S., Japan, and Australia to enhance its defense capabilities. These exercises aim to improve coordination and preparedness in the event of conflict in the South China Sea (VOA, 2024).

Under President Marcos Jr., the Philippines has also adopted a firmer diplomatic stance toward China, especially in response to escalating tensions in the South China Sea. The Philippine government has openly condemned China's aggressive actions—such as hazardous maneuvers against Philippine civilian aircraft and fishing vessels—labeling them as “aggressive, unprofessional, and illegal.” In efforts to ease tensions and manage disputes, the Philippines has also advocated for the acceleration of the South China Sea Code of Conduct negotiations within ASEAN, aiming to establish a more coherent framework for regional maritime engagement. In parallel, the Philippines continues to rely on its defense treaty with the United States, which includes a commitment to mutual defense in the event of Chinese aggression. Domestically, the Philippine Congress has passed resolutions condemning China's unlawful activities in the West Philippine Sea, invoking the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling that affirmed the Philippines' claims.

Defense Strategies of Indonesia and the Philippines in the South China Sea Dispute

Indonesia plays a strategic role in maintaining regional stability in the South China Sea. As a maritime nation, it adopts a defense diplomacy approach, engaging in multilateral cooperation, multi-track diplomacy, and international military exercises. Since 2003, Indonesia has championed regional stability through initiatives such as the ASEAN Security Community, underpinned by the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which strengthens security collaboration between ASEAN members and external partners like the United States and China. Indonesia also pursues Track II diplomacy, exemplified by its participation in the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS)—a platform that facilitates informal dialogue and trust-building. Additionally, the Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo (MNEK) reinforces naval cooperation with 38 countries, including China and Russia. These inclusive and regionally integrated efforts position Indonesia as a neutral mediator in promoting peace in the South China Sea (Nugraha, 2021).

In terms of defense build-up, Indonesia and the Philippines have adopted distinct strategies. Indonesia emphasizes the development of domestic defense capabilities, particularly in the Natuna Sea, by deploying more troops and expanding its combat fleet. One of the key initiatives is the Minimum Essential Force (MEF) program, which aims to enhance the Indonesian Armed Forces' primary weapons systems (Alutsista). Additionally, Indonesia prioritizes border management as a manifestation of national sovereignty, encompassing territorial demarcation and resource utilization (Ruyat, 2020).

On the other hand, the Philippines has taken a more pragmatic approach, particularly following its legal victory at the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA). The Philippines has sought to leverage the ruling to assert its claims and garner international support, particularly from the United States. Defense cooperation with the U.S.—including joint patrols and arms procurement—forms a key component of Manila’s strategy to counter China’s assertiveness. This reflects the Philippines’ greater reliance on external support in securing its position in the region (Ruyat, 2020).

These differing defense approaches illustrate the strategic divergence between the two nations. Indonesia prioritizes domestic military strengthening and preventive diplomacy to maintain regional stability, whereas the Philippines adopts a pragmatic, externally supported strategy following the arbitration ruling. Each country calibrates its strategy according to its unique geopolitical context and national interests.

Policy Implications for Indonesia and the Philippines

A nation’s foreign policy is invariably shaped by its national interests. The respective foreign policies of Indonesia and the Philippines under President Joko Widodo and President Rodrigo Duterte in response to the South China Sea dispute reflect this principle. These distinct approaches have yielded differing implications for both regional stability and national economic conditions.

Under President Joko Widodo, Indonesia pursued peaceful and neutral diplomacy, positioning itself as a non-claimant state while promoting win-win solutions for disputing parties (Sesa, 2021). In contrast, the Philippines under Duterte adopted a pragmatic posture, engaging in cooperative policies that included joint management proposals for disputed areas (Ramadani & Trisni, 2019).

Indonesia’s stance, however, has been critiqued as ineffective in some respects, particularly due to its perceived lack of firmness. For instance, in 2019, Chinese vessels re-entered Indonesia’s Natuna waters despite prior diplomatic engagements, continuing to assert claims based on the Nine-Dash Line (Umar & Naya, 2020). Available data from that year indicated the presence of approximately 1,000 foreign vessels entering the Natuna area daily, a situation that posed significant challenges to Indonesia’s sovereignty enforcement.

Month	April	May	June	July
Number of Vessels	1.647 Vessels	810 Vessels	580 Vessels	768 Vessels

During the same period, several foreign vessels were also detected operating in the Natuna waters under *dark vessel* conditions—meaning they had either deactivated or failed to activate their Automatic Identification System (AIS). The detailed breakdown is as follows (CNN Indonesia, 2022):

Month	April	May	June	July
Number of Vessels	1.533 Vessels	767 Vessels	505 Vessels	680 Vessels

Indonesia and the Philippines' Diplomatic Approaches to the South China Sea Dispute

Indonesia's unilateral decision to rename its maritime territory further exacerbated tensions in the South China Sea (Simanjuntak et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the dispute has not significantly disrupted Indonesia's diplomatic relations with China. Bilateral ties between Indonesia and China extend across multiple sectors, particularly economics and trade. This is evident in both nations' initiative to align China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum vision (Manyanua et al., 2023).

In contrast, the Philippines under President Rodrigo Duterte adopted a pragmatic approach toward China, which had significant implications for regional stability and the Philippine economy. One notable consequence was increased insecurity in areas such as Thitu Island and the Spratly Islands (International Crisis Group, 2021). Nevertheless, this policy direction was driven by national interests aimed at revitalizing the domestic economy. As one of the Philippines' major trading partners, China holds substantial potential for supporting economic growth and infrastructure development (Beatrice, 2020).

As part of this pragmatic engagement, the Philippines was also willing to scale back or even distance itself from its traditional alliance with the United States in order to reduce American influence in the country. This realignment was underscored by the signing of 13 bilateral agreements between the Philippines and China during Duterte's administration.

Despite facing domestic and international criticism, Duterte's foreign policy yielded tangible economic benefits. The Philippines received significant financial aid and loan packages from China, which were directed toward national infrastructure projects. Chinese investment in the country also surged. Moreover, the Philippines' fishing communities benefited from this shift, as access to the South China Sea—previously restricted by Chinese authorities—was partially restored. The Philippine government also embarked on resource exploration initiatives, such as offshore drilling in disputed waters, leveraging advancements in both technology and economic cooperation (Astria, 2018).

A Comparative Analysis of the Philippines' and Indonesia's Political Systems in South China Sea Policy Toward China: Easton's Systems Theory

Political scientist David Easton introduced the political systems theory, which conceptualizes the functioning of a political system through the interaction between inputs (demands and support), conversion processes, and outputs (policies) (Easton, 1957). This theoretical framework is especially pertinent in analyzing the differing approaches of the Philippines and Indonesia in shaping their South China Sea policies vis-à-vis China.

Despite both being democracies, the two nations differ significantly in the structure of their political systems. Indonesia's political system is influenced by internal pressures from civil society and diverse political elites. The Philippines, on the other hand, exhibits a more centralized structure, where decision-making is more concentrated within the executive branch, supported by more organized state institutions.

When addressing the South China Sea issue, both countries face distinct domestic and external challenges—particularly from China. According to Easton, inputs into the political system consist of societal demands and support entering the system (Mas'ood & MacAndrews, 1987). In the Philippines, public demands have often centered on the protection of territorial sovereignty, especially after the 2016 international arbitral tribunal ruling in favor of the Philippines over China. However, support for the government's policies has remained fragmented, with segments of the political elite advocating closer ties with China for economic benefits.

In contrast, public and institutional demands in Indonesia have focused more squarely on protecting the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around North Natuna, regarded as a symbol of national sovereignty. Support for Indonesia's foreign policy in this regard tends to be more consolidated, involving a wide spectrum of stakeholders, from the general public to the military.

The conversion process in the Philippines often reflects shifts in presidential leadership. Under Duterte, for example, the approach toward China became more pragmatic, emphasizing economic cooperation despite ongoing sovereignty disputes. This dynamic illustrates the volatility of the Philippine political system, where leadership changes can significantly redirect policy. Conversely, Indonesia's conversion process is more institutionalized and stable, involving key bureaucratic and military actors such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI), and the Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla), all of which ensure policy continuity even amid external pressures.

The policy outputs of the two countries also diverge. The Philippines' foreign policy reflects a balancing act between asserting sovereignty—such as by pursuing legal action in international courts—and fostering economic ties with China. Meanwhile, Indonesia has maintained a more assertive and consistent stance, particularly in defending its EEZ in the Natuna region. This includes intensified maritime patrols and active regional diplomacy through ASEAN as key instruments for safeguarding national interests without provoking overt conflict with China.

Feedback mechanisms within each political system also differ. The Philippines has received broad international support for its sovereignty claims, yet continues to face non-compliance from China, which rejects the arbitral ruling. Indonesia, though not a direct claimant in the broader South China Sea dispute, has garnered regional support for its moderate yet firm approach in confronting violations within its EEZ.

Through the lens of Easton's political systems theory, it can be concluded that the Philippines contends with greater internal fragmentation and external pressures, leading to fluctuating policy outcomes. Indonesia, on the other hand, demonstrates stronger institutional stability in managing political inputs and producing coherent policy outputs. The divergent approaches of the two nations toward China reflect their unique domestic contexts and highlight how political systems mediate foreign policy in the face of regional geopolitical challenges.

CONCLUSION

According to David Easton, within a democratic system, all individuals, organizations, and groups have equal opportunities to express their demands—what he terms *input*. This stands in stark contrast to non-democratic states, where opportunities to articulate demands are typically restricted to a select group. In such contexts, policy

outputs are determined by a limited elite, and the policymaking process often excludes consideration of broader public input, with executive authority—such as the president—serving as the primary decision-maker.

Using Easton's political systems analysis, one can observe how, in the Philippines, decision-making under President Rodrigo Duterte reflected a tendency to disregard public input, particularly criticisms or dissenting opinions regarding foreign policy toward China. Duterte's administration pursued a policy of maritime area-sharing with China, despite opposition from civil society and other national actors. As such, the policy output under Duterte was largely top-down, driven by executive preferences rather than participatory deliberation. Public input played little to no role in the shaping of foreign policy, indicating a narrowed democratic space in policymaking.

In contrast, Indonesia under President Joko Widodo adopted a more defensive foreign policy posture concerning its territorial claims in the South China Sea, particularly the Natuna region. This approach was informed by the inputs of various stakeholders, including coastal fishing communities, civil society actors, and academic scholars advocating for the protection of national sovereignty. Given Indonesia's historical experience of territorial loss, preserving sovereign integrity has become a central policy priority—both in the present and for the foreseeable future. Therefore, in the Indonesian case, policy output was demonstrably shaped by participatory inputs, reflecting a more democratic and consultative decision-making process compared to the Philippines.

In summary, this analysis suggests that the Philippines adopted a pragmatic yet less democratic approach in its dealings with China, opting for a softer stance on territorial claims. Indonesia, by contrast, took a more assertive and sovereignty-oriented policy line, reflecting a more inclusive and democratic response to maritime tensions in the South China Sea.

While Easton's model has been critiqued in this study for being overly theoretical and rooted in Western liberal values—thus posing challenges for practical application—it nonetheless offers a useful framework for understanding and comparing the internal mechanics of political decision-making in different national contexts. The present article acknowledges its own limitations and encourages future researchers to incorporate additional theoretical frameworks or variables—such as history, culture, economic structures, geography, or leadership dynamics—to generate a more comprehensive comparative analysis of Indonesia's and the Philippines' political systems and their approaches to territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

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