

Abstract

This thesis examines how the South China Sea dispute shaped Indonesia–China maritime relations between 2000 and 2020 by focusing on Indonesia’s responses to evolving regional tensions. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research applies a neorealist framework, drawing on the work of Kenneth Waltz, to analyze how shifts in relative capabilities, security concerns, and strategic interests influenced Indonesia’s behavior. The study compares two distinct periods—2000–2010, characterized by relative stability, and 2010–2020, marked by intensified confrontation following China’s growing assertiveness in the South China Sea. Findings indicate that Indonesia maintained a strategy of strategic autonomy by balancing economic engagement with China and safeguarding its maritime sovereignty, particularly around the Natuna waters. While Indonesia is not a claimant state, the dispute indirectly shaped bilateral relations by prompting a more cautious and assertive diplomatic and security posture. Overall, the thesis argues that Indonesia’s approach reflects pragmatic balancing within an anarchic international system, where cooperation and competition with China coexist in managing maritime challenges.