

## Research article

# The Indo-Pacific: A New Geography of Conflict

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**ORCID****Abstract.**

This article analyzes the Indo-Pacific as a new area of conflict between actors in maintaining strategic access – both marine resources and sea route access – for commercial and military transportation purposes. The results of this study explain that conflicts of interest describe differences in attitudes, especially between the United States (US), its allies, and several countries that also have security problems with China. On the other hand, various Chinese military steps are considered to be worrying for global interests in the Indo-Pacific, namely freedom of navigation that ensures the security of maritime transportation routes, as well as the ownership of marine resources.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, conflict, geostrategy

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## 1. Introduction

This paper aims to analyze the strategic value of the Indo-Pacific as a new area of conflict between actors in maintaining strategic access, in the form of resources, both marine resources and sea route access for commercial and military transportation purposes.

An article by Klare[1] entitled *Resource Wars* explains that, through the adoption of an econocentric approach, the expansion of a country is driven by economic interests. This is based on the linkage between economic and security policies as a top priority for the state in maintaining the supply of vital resources.

The confrontational attitude between actors (state) is also discussed by Nashir, Komeini, and Rosdiana[2], in an article entitled *Strategic Environment, Strategist, and Strategy*. The authors emphasize the importance for a country in identifying the development of the strategic environment that is affected by the increase in the strategic value of the sea as access to economic and security interests.

Geostrategic issues are the main theme in the conflict in the South China Sea (SCS). Claims of territorial ownership in the SCS emphasize the abundant marine resources in

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the SCS and navigational access for sea transportation routes. Moreover, the interests of freedom of navigation are the main reason for the US to involve itself in dealing with China's offensive stance in the South China Sea. Almost all countries are involved, using military force to protect their economic interests, in the form of resources and access to the sea.

In practice, the policies of several large countries, such as the United States (US), China, Japan, Russia, and several other countries, security policies play a small role in economic interests, but have a strategic and major role, namely the protection of resources that are the needs and interests of state strategy. It then explains the transformation of security policy by placing economic interests as a priority[1].

Other conflicts caused by resources also involve 5 countries that surround the Caspian Sea, namely Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkmenistan. Haghayeghi [3] in his writing entitled *The Coming of Conflict to the Caspian Sea*, explains that the increasing political tension is caused by the division and regulation of the existing resources in the sea.

With this situation, the issue of marine resources containing oil and natural gas has become a benchmark for the response of each country in deploying military force to safeguard large-scale economic interests in the Caspian Sea. The steps of each country are a response to threats to protect economic interests.

Other literature that discusses the struggle for access and control of strategic areas for economic and security interests is also discussed by Kofman, Radin, and Migacheva[4] in their writing entitled *Lesson from Russia's Operation in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*. Although the article emphasizes the security factor, regional strategic issues still emphasize the factor of access to resources for military purposes, especially in maintaining strategic areas in Russia's backyard.

With the geographical conditions of Crimea, the bay has become a strategic transit area for Russia's naval power base to reach the sea area as well as being a vulnerable area for Russia if the enemy is able to control the rear area[4]

## 1.1. Conflict of Interest and Geographical Resource Conflict

Conflicts over resources and the use of power and economic benefits explain interconnectivity which is the main factor in describing the development of conflict between actors. In the past, the conflict was more influenced by ideological factors, especially in the issue of the cold war between the United States (US) and the Soviet Union, which

involved Vietnam and Korea, but now it is more influenced by the issue of the struggle for resources that determines the actor's and global economy.

Therefore, economic policies that are exploratory in nature do not have the authority to secure these resources. A variable that is able to protect resources is needed, namely security. The problem is that conflicts of interest over resources are the most frequent interactions[1].

This is due to several factors that influence and determine the behavior of the state in fulfilling economic and industrial interests, namely the Contested Source of Supply[1]

The struggle for the supply of resources emphasizes the limited resources, increasing population and increasing community needs, as well as various risks if national needs are not met, then the risk of conflict becomes a big agenda in interactions between countries. In this way, the existence of both managed and unmanaged resources tends to trigger conflict between the two neighboring countries. Claiming each other is the most common thing. The struggle for supply and access also often occurs between countries with global powers, and even tends to involve themselves in conflicts in other regions to increase power influence and maintain secure access to strategic values.

On the other hand, marine resources which include the high seas and the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) have also become objects of conflict by prioritizing political and military steps and attitudes. Some areas that also have strategic value, such as access to navigation or transportation for economic activities have also become contested areas to assert power and influence to maintain the security of sea transportation that carries important materials for the country's needs[1].

Because the increase in power determines the interests of the state, the state acts equally and rationally to gain control and hegemony in the form of military or economic capabilities[5]. Directly, these areas can become embryos of conflict interactions between countries fighting for resources, influence and power for economic, industrial and security interests.

#### Interests and Struggles for Resources in the Indo-Pacific

The US government states that a free Indo-Pacific is an Indo-Pacific where all countries can have freedom and exercise their sovereignty without coercion by other countries[6]. This attitude explains US concerns about China which is considered to be endangering maritime security.

Another country, namely Australia also stated through its Defense White Paper The White Paper of Australia which emphasized on two main factors that contributed to the emergence of the concept: first, the emergence of India "as an important strategic,

diplomatic and economic actor, 'looking east', and become more involved in regional frameworks"; and second, "growth in trade, investment and energy flows in the wider region (which) strengthens economic and security interdependence [...with these two factors] increasingly drawing international attention to the Indian Ocean"[7].

The Indo-Pacific is increasingly faced with a more confident and assertive China that is willing to accept friction in pursuing a more expansive set of political, economic, and security interests. As China continues its economic and military power, it seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near term and, ultimately, global preeminence in the long term. China invests in a variety of military weapons and programs, including those designed to increase power projection; modernize its nuclear forces; and perform increasingly complex operations in domains such as cyber, space, and electronic warfare operations. China is also developing a variety of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities or military capabilities emphasizing anti-access/area denial capabilities, which can be used to prevent countries from operating in areas near China's periphery, including maritime and air domains. which is open to use by all countries. The use of China's military presence in an attempt to exercise de facto control over disputed territory is not limited to the South China Sea[6]

With the problems that arise in the SCS, it affects security conditions in the Indo-Pacific considering that the SCS area is a bridge connecting the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Moreover, China's expansionist attitude to expand its influence and power in the Indian Ocean region became a crucial point after the South China Sea.

What's more, the conflict between China and countries in Southeast Asia, so far has not found a common ground. Security instability related to freedom of navigation is still a rarity. Facing China's attitude which is considered a maritime security threat, especially in the control of maritime routes, several large countries that also have strategic interests, build alliance strengths to restrain China's continued expansion of territorial control through militarization.

The US is beginning to realize the inability of countries in the Asia-Pacific to fulfill geopolitical goals in Asia. This is based on the expansion of China's military influence in the Indian Ocean[8]. As such, the Indo-Pacific has been designed by India, the US, Japan and Australia to respond to perceived security threats by strengthening – and incorporating India into – existing alliance partnerships in the region[9].

Referring to the Indo-Pacific, the issue of maritime trade routes, freedom of navigation, and maritime security is a strategic gamble for every country. Moreover, the area almost covers the entire world maritime trade route, which almost certainly all countries depend on the region.

With a great desire to become a hegemonic country, China's choice to expand its military steps to control several regions in the Indo-Pacific is a rational choice that must be taken. Geostrategic policy is an option that cannot be avoided. The same thing will certainly be a balancing step, especially the US and its allies. For this reason, the existence of the US and its allies also does not provide an opportunity for China to gain access to a wider maritime area. Although on the other hand, Southeast Asian countries that are also in conflict with China are also actors who have an important role in international conflicts, such as Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and even countries that are not directly involved in the issue of territorial claims, such as Indonesia.

## 2. Conclusion

Controlling the Indo-Pacific will have a very large influence on the strength and power of a country considering that the dependence of the global economy and security on this route is very large. In other words, the Indo-Pacific has become a huge magnet for every country to fulfill economic interests, especially industrial interests and the fulfillment of resource supply, and foreign trade activities using maritime routes.

The US and several other countries, such as India, Australia, and several countries in Southeast Asia want freedom of navigation as part of their strategic interests, but on the other hand, China's offensive and militarized attitude cannot be considered as something normal. The abundance of strategic values and functions of the Indo-Pacific opens up space for differences in interests that can lead to conflicts of interest with dynamic inter-state relations, as well as the intensity of political and military conflicts that are increasingly open.

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