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Hybrid Threats in the South China Sea: A Neoclassical Realist Comparative Response Analysis of Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia

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ABSTRACT
This article examines why Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia respond differently to broadly similar hybrid threats from China in the South China Sea. It adopts a qualitative, most-similar-systems design and applies a neoclassical realist framework in which hybrid pressure is treated as a common systemic stimulus filtered through three domestic dimensions: elite perception, institutional capacity and integration, and state-society relations. The analysis shows that the Philippines has shifted toward denial, backed by formal alliance ties and a deliberate strategy of public transparency; Indonesia relies on diversification, combining legal firmness with diplomatic and operational choices that avoid overdependence on any single partner; and Malaysia maintains soft balancing oriented around the protection of offshore economic interests. These divergent outcomes cannot be explained by material asymmetry alone. By applying a neoclassical realist framework to these three cases, this article links hybrid coercion at sea to the domestic filters that turn similar external pressure into distinct policy paths.

KEYWORDS
Hybrid threats, South China Sea, neoclassical realism, comparative security, Indonesia.

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1. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has become one of the main arenas of contemporary strategic competition, yet much of that competition does not take the form of open war. Rivalry now often unfolds through ambiguous, incremental, and deniable measures that remain below the threshold of conventional armed conflict. This matters because the region sits astride major trade and energy routes. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (2024), about 10 billion barrels of petroleum and petroleum products and 6.7 trillion cubic feet of liquefied natural gas transited the South China Sea in 2023, underscoring the strategic and economic weight of these waters. At the broader regional level, military expenditure rose to about $2.9 trillion in 2025, while Asia and Oceania recorded some of the sharpest increases, signalling a security environment that is becoming more contested and more heavily militarised (SIPRI, 2026). This setting has pushed scholars and policymakers to pay closer attention to hybrid threats and grey-zone competition. These concepts refer to coercive practices that combine maritime pressure, information manipulation, economic instruments, cyber tools, and legal narratives in ways designed to shift

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the status quo without provoking a full military response. Hoffman (2007) described hybrid war as the fusion of different modes of conflict within a single strategic campaign, while Mazarr (2015) defined grey-zone competition as coercive action calibrated to remain below the threshold of major war. In the Indo-Pacific, this pattern is especially visible in China's use of coast guard deployments, maritime militia, lawfare, and selective economic statecraft to alter facts at sea (Livermore, 2018).

The South China Sea is the clearest regional setting in which this logic can be observed. Tensions in these waters do not arise only from disputed claims over reefs and shoals. They are also shaped by repeated efforts to normalise presence, reshape legal narratives, and test the response thresholds of weaker states. Recent monitoring by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (2026) found that China's maritime militia reached a daily average of 241 vessels in 2025, the highest level it had recorded in any year. What makes this pressure analytically distinctive is its cumulative character. Each individual incident is deniable and bounded in scope; the aggregate effect over time, however, is the gradual normalisation of Chinese presence and the incremental erosion of effective sovereign control by target states (Fravel, 2011). This salami-slicing logic makes the South China Sea a strong empirical setting for studying how hybrid threats work and why they produce different outcomes across target states.

Indonesia offers a particularly important case. Unlike the Philippines or Vietnam, Indonesia does not present itself as a formal claimant in the South China Sea disputes. Yet the southern edge of China's nine-dash line claim cuts into waters where Indonesia exercises sovereign rights under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This tension is concentrated in the North Natuna Sea, a designation Jakarta adopted in 2017 to reinforce its jurisdictional position. The issue is not marginal. Indonesia-China trade reached about $136.59 billion in 2024, confirming China's place as Indonesia's largest trading partner (RRI, 2025). Indonesia's military expenditure, by contrast, remained around 1 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), pointing to a continuing gap between the scale of the maritime challenge and the resources available to manage it (World Bank, n.d.).

The Natuna case shows why hybrid threats are analytically difficult. China has relied on a mix of fishing vessel incursions, coast guard escort operations, legal narratives, and political signalling rather than overt force. A major episode in late 2019 and early 2020 involved around fifty Chinese fishing vessels, accompanied by coast guard ships and a frigate, operating in waters off Natuna Besar (Tiola & Dinarto, 2020). More recent incidents in 2024 showed that pressure had moved into areas with direct implications for survey activity, offshore resources, and maritime jurisdiction (AMTI, 2024). Yet Indonesia's response has remained calibrated. Chinese vessels are challenged and expelled, but official discourse often avoids treating these incidents as part of a broader sovereignty dispute. This combination of firmness and restraint raises a wider question: why do some states facing similar Chinese pressure move toward more explicit denial of coercion, while others respond through diversification of their options or softer forms of balancing?

Existing scholarship does not answer that question well enough. A large body of work on hybrid warfare and grey-zone conflict has identified the instruments of coercion with considerable precision, but much of it remains descriptive. It catalogues tactics more effectively than it explains variation in state response. A second limitation is analytical. Many studies still treat target states as unitary actors whose behaviour can be inferred solely from material capabilities or external alignment patterns. That assumption sits uneasily with the empirical record in the Indo-Pacific, where states exposed to broadly similar Chinese pressure have responded in sharply different ways. A third gap is theoretical. Structural realism captures the role of asymmetry and systemic pressure, but it offers limited leverage for explaining why

comparable external stimuli produce denial in one case, diversification in another, and soft balancing in a third.

The research gap, then, is not simply the absence of another case study on the South China Sea. The deeper gap lies in the lack of systematically applied neoclassical realist analyses that connect the systemic logic of hybrid coercion with the domestic mechanisms that shape how targeted states interpret, absorb, and respond to that pressure. Existing studies often explain pressure without adequately explaining response, or they describe response without specifying the intervening causal process. That gap matters because hybrid threats exploit domestic vulnerabilities precisely. Maritime grey-zone actions test institutional coordination. Economic pressure works through dependence structures. Information operations target public cohesion, while legal warfare exploits ambiguity in elite framing and policy response. Without explicitly tracing these domestic filters, explanations of hybrid coercion remain incomplete, especially when they stay at the level of tactics or material asymmetry alone.

This article argues that the existing neoclassical realism framework provides a stronger way to address that gap. Rose (1998) argued that systemic pressures do not translate directly into foreign policy outcomes but are filtered through domestic intervening variables, especially leaders' perceptions and state structure. Ripsman et al. (2016) later developed that insight into a broader theory of international politics. For the study of hybrid threats, this perspective is particularly useful because it moves the analysis beyond simple capability comparisons and toward the domestic conditions that shape strategic resilience or vulnerability. It also helps explain why similar pressure from the same coercing actor can generate different outcomes across states facing comparable structural constraints.

Building on this approach, the article applies a neoclassical realist explanation centred on three domestic intervening variables: elite perception, state–society relations, and institutional capacity and integration, and adapts them to the South China Sea context. Together, these variables shape how external pressure is interpreted, how domestic audiences react, and how coherently relevant agencies can operate in practice. Hybrid threats are not effective simply because the coercing actor is materially stronger. Their effects depend on whether systemic pressure encounters a domestic configuration that either amplifies or absorbs it. This is why material asymmetry alone cannot explain the difference between Philippine denial, Indonesia's diversification, and Malaysia's soft balancing in response to similar Chinese hybrid pressure.

This article therefore asks a straightforward question: how and why do Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia respond differently to broadly similar hybrid threats from China in the South China Sea? The article makes three contributions. First, it offers a conceptual synthesis of the hybrid-threats literature, interpreted through an explicitly neoclassical realist lens rather than through descriptive catalogues of tactics. Second, it organises existing neoclassical realist variables into a comparative matrix that maps how hybrid pressure interacts with domestic factors across the cycle of strategic competition in the South China Sea. Third, it uses this matrix to analyse Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia, showing how their different domestic configurations help explain their divergent responses around the North Natuna Sea and other contested areas. The broader argument is that hybrid threats in the Indo-Pacific should be understood as a strategic process whose outcomes depend on how target states perceive, organise, and absorb pressure.

2. Analytical Framework

Strategic competition in the South China Sea increasingly unfolds below the threshold of open armed conflict. Coercion remains central, but it is often incremental, ambiguous, and difficult to classify within conventional categories of war. In this setting, hybrid threats are a useful term for

sustained coercive practices that combine several instruments of influence without triggering full-scale escalation. Regional studies point to a recurring pattern that includes coast guard deployments, maritime militia activity, legal and diplomatic contestation, and selective economic or political signalling (Noor, 2021; Song-Pehamberger & Klein, 2026). In this article, the term is used in a narrow operational sense to capture the type of external pressure faced by Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia in the South China Sea, rather than to reopen broader definitional debates.

This common stimulus, however, does not explain why the three states respond differently. Structural realism helps clarify the wider strategic setting created by China's rise and regional power asymmetries, but it is less effective when the question concerns variation in state responses under broadly similar external conditions. As Rose (1998) notes, systemic incentives set the outer limits of foreign policy but do not determine specific policy choices. The Southeast Asian record clearly reflects this. States exposed to comparable forms of maritime pressure have adopted different combinations of alignment, signalling, and policy instruments. A framework is therefore needed that keeps systemic pressure in view while explaining variation at the unit level; neoclassical realism already provides such a framework but has barely been applied systematically to hybrid threats in the South China Sea.

Neoclassical realism provides that framework. Rose (1998) defines it as an approach in which foreign policy is shaped by systemic pressures but filtered through domestic intervening variables. Lobell et al. (2009) extend this point by showing that state behaviour cannot be inferred directly from the international distribution of capabilities. In their later book, Ripsman et al. (2016) formalise the sequence more clearly: systemic stimuli are the independent variable, domestic factors are the intervening variables, and foreign policy behaviour is the outcome. This article adapts and specifies the causal structure for the context of hybrid threats in the South China Sea. The key issue is therefore not simply whether external pressure exists, but how it is interpreted, prioritised, and translated into policy through domestic filters.

The analysis follows that logic in a focused way. Hybrid threats in the South China Sea are treated as the systemic stimulus. Differences in response are explained through domestic political and strategic culture, used here as a shorthand for the domestic filters that shape how external pressure is read and managed. The term is not presented as an independent grand theory. It serves instead as a practical label for several unit-level variables within a neoclassical realist architecture, especially elite threat perception, institutional capacity, and the relationship between state and society (Ripsman et al., 2016; Rose, 1998).

Within this established framework, the empirical analysis is organised around three dimensions. The first is elite perception. This dimension concerns how governing elites define the nature and urgency of Chinese pressure and how they position the state in relation to external security support. Under hybrid conditions, ambiguity within each incident allows room for different interpretations. A single maritime encounter may be treated as routine law enforcement friction, as a legal dispute, or as part of a broader coercive strategy. Those choices matter because they narrow or widen the range of responses that become politically acceptable. Alliance orientation matters for the same reason. Governments that place greater weight on external security partnerships usually have more room for visible signalling and stronger deterrent postures than governments that prefer strategic distance or hedging (Lobell et al., 2009; Rose, 1998).

The second dimension is institutional capacity and integration. Here, maritime capability is treated as a sector-specific expression of state power within a neoclassical realist framework. As Lobell et al. (2009) argue, aggregate resources do not automatically translate into usable capacity. What matters is the ability to organise, coordinate, and deploy those resources for

strategic purposes. In the South China Sea, this issue is concrete. An effective response depends on sustained maritime presence, surveillance, inter-agency coordination, clear command arrangements, and the capacity to sustain operations over time. Recent work on gray-zone conflict and Indonesia's maritime security shows that the core challenge lies less in material inferiority itself than in the difficulty of adapting maritime governance and operational coordination to ambiguous pressure (Arif et al., 2024). For that reason, maritime capability is used here in a narrow sense: the capacity to translate strategic intent into sustained, coordinated maritime action, rather than fleet size or budget figures alone.

The third dimension is state-society relations. Hybrid pressure often seeks to constrain political space in the target state as much as it seeks to alter legal or territorial positions. Public messaging, elite cohesion, and domestic sensitivity therefore shape how visible and how sustained a response can be. Noor (2021) shows that Southeast Asian responses to South China Sea pressures differ not only in formal policy content but also in public style and diplomatic exposure. Some governments use publicity and international signalling as part of their response, whereas others keep the issue relatively quiet to preserve diplomatic space and reduce escalation risk. This dimension helps explain why responses to broadly similar pressures can look very different in both domestic and international political arenas, even when they emerge under the same systemic conditions.

This way of thinking about domestic filters is consistent with work that highlights the diversity of Southeast Asian responses to rising Chinese power. Lampton et al. (2020), for instance, show that regional states have combined elements of denial, diversification, and soft balancing as they seek to manage China's growing influence without being locked into either pure balancing or bandwagoning. Building on this insight, the article treats denial, diversification, and soft balancing as three ideal-type patterns of response that emerge when similar hybrid pressures are filtered through different constellations of elite perception, institutional capacity and integration, and state-society relations.

These three dimensions provide the analytical structure for the rest of the article. The adapted neoclassical realist framework provides the dimensions along which the three cases are examined and compared. Hybrid threats in the South China Sea are treated as a shared external stimulus. Neoclassical realism supplies the causal structure linking that stimulus to policy outcomes. Within that structure, domestic political and strategic culture is operationalised through elite perception, institutional capacity and integration, and state-society relations to explain why similar pressures produce different responses (Lobell et al., 2009; Ripsman et al., 2016; Rose, 1998). Among these dimensions, institutional capacity and integration are expected to carry particular empirical weight because they connect strategic preferences to the ability to act consistently at sea (Arif et al., 2024; Noor, 2021).

In summary, the adapted neoclassical realist framework links a common systemic stimulus to divergent policy outcomes through three domestic filters. Hybrid threats from China in the South China Sea are first processed through elite perceptions, then move through decision-making shaped by institutional capacity, integration and state-society relations, before producing distinct responses: denial in the Philippines, diversification in Indonesia, and soft balancing in Malaysia. Figure 1 visualises this sequence and shows how these domestic dimensions structure the empirical analysis in the following sections.

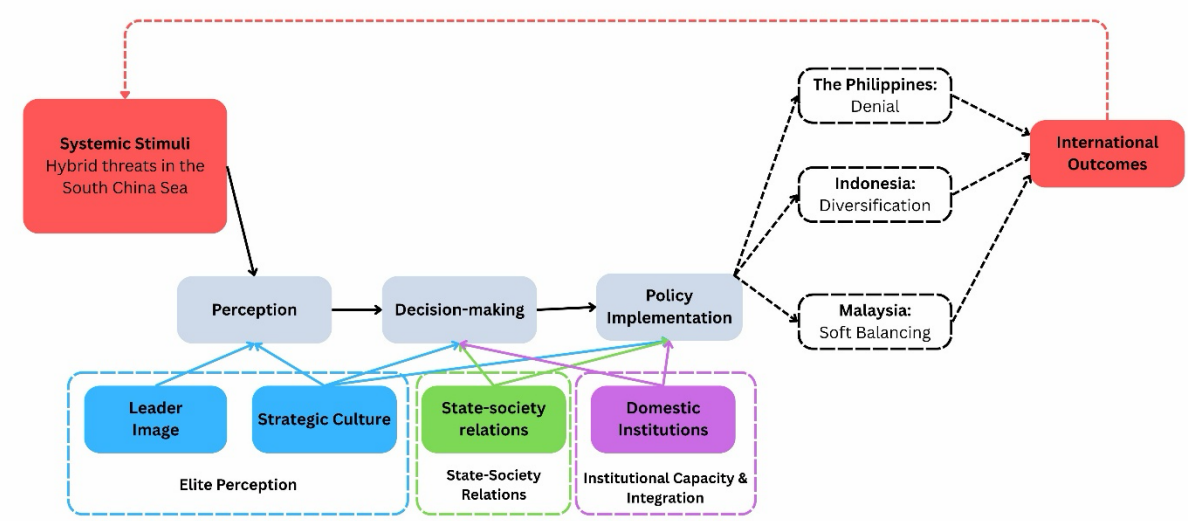

Figure 1. Adapted Neoclassical Realist Framework for Hybrid Threads in the South China Sea
Source: Authors' framework adapted from Rose (1998), Lobell et al. (2009), and Ripsman et al. (2016)

3. Research Method

This study uses a qualitative comparative case study design to explain why Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia respond differently to broadly similar hybrid threats from China in the South China Sea. A qualitative design is appropriate because the article seeks to explain variation in state responses rather than to measure statistical relationships. In line with neoclassical realism, the analysis focuses on how external pressure is filtered through domestic factors before it is translated into policy (Lobell et al., 2009; Rose, 1998).

The comparison follows the logic of a most similar systems design. As Anckar (2008) notes, this approach is appropriate when cases share an important external setting but differ in the outcome under examination. Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines were selected because they face comparable forms of Chinese hybrid pressure in the South China Sea but produce divergent policy responses, ranging from denial and diversification to soft balancing. This makes them well suited for a comparison centred on domestic intervening variables (Noor, 2021). The adapted neoclassical realist framework provides the dimensions along which each case is examined, ensuring that the comparative logic is anchored in theory rather than post hoc description.

The study relies on documentary research. The main sources consist of official documents and policy statements, scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and policy reports from established research institutes. These materials are selected based on their relevance to the research question, the three cases, and the article's analytical framework. Priority is given to sources that link external pressure to domestic dynamics through elite perception, institutional capacity and integration, and state-society relations. This selection strategy ensures that the empirical material speaks directly to the intervening variables identified in the analytical framework (Lobell et al., 2009; Noor, 2021; Rose, 1998).

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, the study identifies the broad pattern of hybrid pressure that Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia face in order to establish a common strategic setting. Second, each case is examined through three domestic dimensions. Third, the cases are compared to account for why similar pressures produce different responses. This sequence keeps the design aligned with the article's central aim of explaining policy variation through domestic political and strategic factors rather than systemic pressure alone (Noor, 2021; Rose, 1998).

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Hybrid Threats as Systemic Stimuli in the South China Sea

Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea has produced a sustained pattern of pressure that usually remains below the threshold of open armed conflict. In practical terms, this pressure takes the form of coast guard deployment, maritime militia activity, legal contestation, and selective diplomatic signalling. Noor (2021) shows that these practices have become a recurring feature of the regional security environment rather than isolated incidents. Song-Pehamberger and Klein (2026) reach a similar conclusion and emphasise the role of lawfare and civilian entities in extending Chinese leverage at sea without relying on overt naval escalation.

The cumulative character of this pressure deserves particular attention. Fravel (2011) argues that Chinese strategy in maritime disputes often follows a salami-slicing logic in which each individual action is small, deniable, and calibrated to avoid triggering a decisive response, but the aggregate effect over time is the normalisation of Chinese presence and the erosion of the target state's practical control. This pattern is central to understanding why hybrid threats are so analytically difficult to manage. A single coast guard encounter or fishing vessel incursion is manageable in isolation; a sustained pattern of such encounters, reinforced by legal narratives and selective economic signals, produces a qualitatively different strategic challenge. No individual incident justifies a major escalatory response, yet institutionalised inaction allows incremental erosion of sovereign rights to proceed.

In this article, these practices are treated as hybrid threats that function as a common systemic stimulus. The term is used operationally to capture sustained, coercive, layered, and politically managed external pressure, even when individual incidents appear limited in scope. The legal dimension is central to this pattern. McLaughlin (2022) argues that the People's Republic of China (PRC) grey-zone operations in the South China Sea often exploit ambiguity in the law of the sea while using non-naval actors to alter facts on the water. This combination makes it difficult to answer through conventional deterrence alone, thereby increasing the importance of domestic filters in shaping how states interpret and respond to it.

Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia all face this broader pattern, even though the precise location and intensity of pressure differ across cases. For Indonesia, the key area is the North Natuna Sea. Laksmana (2021) notes that Chinese vessels have repeatedly operated in waters that Jakarta considers part of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), forcing Indonesia to respond with a mix of legal, diplomatic, and maritime measures. Arif et al. (2024) add that the central challenge lies not only in material imbalance but also in the difficulty of adapting maritime security governance to a form of pressure that is ambiguous, persistent, and carefully calibrated.

The same broader logic appears in the Philippine case, but in a more visible and confrontational setting. Vergara (2021) describes how Chinese coast guard and maritime militia activity around features such as Scarborough Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal has produced repeated episodes of blocking, swarming, and interference with resupply missions. Because these incidents occur in areas that Manila considers part of its EEZ, they have elicited a more visible, openly resistant response than in the other two cases.

Malaysia faces comparable pressure in waters linked to offshore energy activity and maritime zones off Sarawak and Sabah. Permal (2021) shows that Chinese coast guard and survey vessels have maintained a regular presence near Malaysian-licensed blocks and features such as Luconia Shoals. Here too, the structure of pressure is similar, even if the response has generally been less visible in public terms than in the Philippine case.

These cases do not face identical episodes, but they do face a comparable structure of coercion. Chinese pressure is persistent rather than episodic, calibrated rather than openly escalatory, and often carried out through actors that occupy a space between civilian and military

roles. Presence at sea is reinforced by legal and diplomatic signalling, which gives the pressure political depth beyond any single incident (Noor, 2021; Song-Pehamberger & Klein, 2026). The argument here is not that pressure is identical across cases. It is that they share a sufficiently similar pattern of hybrid pressure to justify a comparative design focused on variation in domestic response.

Table 1 summarises the main features of Chinese hybrid coercion across the three cases. It does not attempt to catalogue every incident. Instead, it provides a compact baseline of the main maritime areas affected and the dominant forms of pressure that frame the case-specific discussions in the following sections.

Table 1. Main Features of Chinese Hybrid Coercion Faced by Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia

Country	Main maritime areas affected	Dominant instruments of coercion	Illustrative features
Indonesia	North Natuna Sea	Coast guard presence, fishing or maritime militia activity, legal contestation over EEZ rights, interference with fisheries enforcement and offshore survey activity	Recurrent incursions by Chinese vessels into waters claimed by Indonesia as part of its EEZ; pressure linked to fisheries enforcement and maritime resource activity
Philippines	Scarborough Shoal, Second Thomas Shoal, parts of the Philippine EEZ in the Spratly area	Coast guard blockades, maritime militia swarming, coercive maritime signalling, legal and diplomatic pressure	Repeated obstruction of access and resupply activity, and sustained pressure around disputed maritime features
Malaysia	Waters off Sarawak and Sabah, including areas linked to offshore energy activity	Sustained coast guard and survey-ship presence, pressure around offshore operations, legal contestation	Continued Chinese presence near Malaysian maritime zones and offshore energy areas, often without high public escalation

Source: Authors' compilation based on Laksmana (2021), Arif et al. (2024), Vergara (2021), Noor (2021), and Permal (2021)

4.2. Indonesia: Diversification

Indonesia's response to Chinese pressure in the North Natuna Sea is best understood as a form of diversification. Jakarta has not treated the issue as a basis for open balancing against China, but neither has it accepted Chinese activities as normal. Instead, the response has combined legal firmness, selective maritime enforcement, limited military signalling, and continued diplomatic restraint. Laksmana (2021) captures this pattern well in describing Indonesia's South China Sea posture as one that seeks to defend sovereign rights without turning Natuna into a platform for overt strategic alignment. This helps explain why Indonesia often appears firmer in operational terms than in public rhetoric.

The first element behind this posture lies in elite perception. Indonesian policymakers have generally treated Chinese actions in the North Natuna Sea as a serious challenge to sovereign rights within the EEZ, but not as a territorial dispute in the same sense as faced by formal claimants in the Spratlys. That distinction matters because it allows Jakarta to reject the nine-dash line firmly while still maintaining that Indonesia is not a claimant in the wider South China Sea disputes. Darmawan and Afriansyah (2020) show that this position became more explicit after the 2016 arbitral ruling, particularly in Indonesia's diplomatic notes and legal language. The

result is a response that is assertive in defending EEZ rights but still avoids recasting the issue as a broader strategic confrontation with China.

For the article's logic, this posture is important because it shows how selective threat recognition can narrow escalation without implying complacency. In the Indonesian case, the absence of a formal claimant identity reduces the perceived urgency to behave like a claimant state. As a result, the issue is filtered less through hard territorial contestation and more through elite perception, legal caution, and strategic autonomy. Under these conditions, Chinese pressure is recognised as serious, but it is not interpreted as requiring the claimant state to escalate or adopt a broader balancing posture. That combination helps explain why Indonesia continues to defend its rights while avoiding a sharper strategic confrontation.

This aspect of elite perception is closely tied to alliance orientation. Unlike the Philippines, Indonesia does not rely on a formal alliance structure and has long preferred strategic autonomy in regional security affairs rooted in its bebas aktif (free and active) foreign policy doctrine (Quran et. al, 2024). That preference narrows the range of politically acceptable response options. Publicly aligning Natuna policy with a broader anti-China balancing strategy would run counter to long-standing foreign policy principles. As Arif et al. (2024) note, this creates a clear structural constraint in a grey-zone setting. Pressure may be recognised as serious, yet the response is still shaped by reluctance to move toward overt external balancing. Indonesia, therefore, tends to respond to Chinese pressure with measured firmness rather than open confrontation.

The second element is institutional capacity and integration. The state has taken repeated steps to signal its presence in the North Natuna Sea through naval patrols, maritime security operations, fisheries enforcement, and high-profile visits by senior officials. The 2016 confrontations involving Chinese fishing vessels and coast guard interference, followed by the 2019-2020 Natuna standoff, pushed the government to strengthen patrols and raise political attention to the area. Yet Arif et al. (2024) argue that the central problem is not simply a shortage of assets. The deeper issue lies in maritime security governance, especially coordination gaps among agencies and uneven integration between law enforcement and defence functions. This helps explain a pattern that Syailendra (2017) describes as under-balancing, in which domestic bureaucratic politics and executive-level economic calculations discourage a coherent strategic response, not because the threat is unrecognised, but because the institutional and political conditions required to mobilise it are not in place. This is a more precise diagnosis than a simple capability deficit because Indonesia's legal authority under UNCLOS supports effective EEZ delimitation in practice, as evidenced by the 2022 agreement with Vietnam. The difficulty lies in translating that authority into consistent presence at sea.

Irsadanar (2023) finds that Indonesia's South China Sea policy under Joko Widodo became more credible and more institutionalised, particularly through stronger deterrent signalling. Even so, this did not amount to a wholesale strategic shift. Indonesia increased patrols, issued diplomatic protests, renamed the waters the North Natuna Sea, and reinforced legal arguments grounded in UNCLOS. At the same time, the government avoided a dramatic escalation, refrained from framing China as a formal adversary, and kept bilateral channels open. Taken together, these steps are better understood as diversification rather than as outright balancing.

The third element concerns state-society relations. Indonesia has used public messaging selectively rather than continuously. At certain times, visibility has been raised intentionally. President Joko Widodo's visit to Natuna in January 2020 is the clearest example, as it sent both domestic and external signals that the issue touched on national authority and maritime rights. Yet this visibility has not been sustained through constant public mobilisation. The broader pattern remains one of controlled communication, in which the government avoided turning Natuna into a source of prolonged nationalist escalation or a broader anti-China campaign.

Laksmana (2021) suggests that this reflects Indonesia's wider interest in preserving diplomatic flexibility while still signalling resolve where needed.

Early signals from the Prabowo administration suggest continuity in these core preferences, even as the diplomatic style changes. Official statements in 2025 and 2026 repeatedly reaffirm bebas aktif and a "good neighbour" approach toward surrounding states, including in relation to Natuna (ANTARA News, 2026; Setneg, 2026). At the same time, the November 2024 China-Indonesia joint statement, particularly its reference to "overlapping claims," drew criticism for appearing to soften Indonesia's long-standing legal position in the North Natuna Sea (Strangio, 2024). Kartini et al. (2025) identify an unresolved tension between legal consistency, diplomatic pragmatism, and a more personalised foreign policy style under Prabowo. At this stage, the evidence points less to a policy break than to a deepening of the same fundamental tension that has characterised Indonesian maritime policy for years.

Indonesia's response is therefore best understood as diversification shaped by selective threat recognition, constrained alliance choices, uneven maritime coordination, and controlled public messaging. The state has defended its legal position, increased its maritime presence, and resisted incursions into what it regards as its EEZ, but it has stopped short of alliance-backed counter-coercion or sustained public confrontation. Within this pattern, maritime institutional capacity and integration carry particular weight because the translation of political resolve into effective action depends less on declaratory policy than on whether maritime governance can sustain a coherent response at sea. Developments under Prabowo do not overturn that pattern, but they do make the balance between legal firmness and diplomatic accommodation more contested than before (Arif et al., 2024; Laksmana, 2021).

4.3. Philippines: Denial

The Philippine response to Chinese pressure in the South China Sea is best understood as a denial-based response. Manila has moved beyond quiet protest and limited hedging toward a posture that combines legal assertion, alliance-backed deterrence, more regular operational pushback at sea, and deliberate public exposure of coercive incidents. Vergara (2021) had already noted that the Philippines faced direct and repeated pressure across disputed maritime features and zones that Manila regards as part of its EEZ. Under Ferdinand Marcos Jr., what changed most clearly was the style and intensity of the response. The state adopted a more overt and sustained posture designed to deny the normalisation of Chinese control while raising diplomatic and reputational costs for Beijing.

The first element behind this posture lies in elite perception. In the Philippine case, Chinese actions are framed as a direct challenge to sovereign rights and national security rather than as manageable friction or a peripheral maritime issue. This framing has sharpened because Chinese pressure has been highly visible and difficult to downplay, especially around Scarborough Shoal, Second Thomas Shoal, and other areas within the Philippine EEZ. Vergara (2021) shows that Chinese activities had already narrowed Manila's room for accommodation even before the Marcos Jr. administration. The escalation of water-cannon incidents, obstruction of resupply missions, and repeated coast guard and maritime militia presence have pushed the issue to the centre of Philippine security policy, making restraint politically harder to sustain than resistance.

This elite perception is closely tied to alliance orientation. Unlike Indonesia, the Philippines has a formal treaty alliance with the United States, and that alliance has become a more visible part of maritime strategy under Marcos Jr. Recent work on Philippine foreign policy points to a clear shift away from the more accommodationist tendencies of the Duterte period and toward stronger alignment with the United States and other security partners. Inayah et al. (2025) show that this shift is reflected in the expansion of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement

(EDCA), more intensive joint exercises, closer intelligence coordination, and a wider effort to strengthen military and maritime capabilities. This does not remove the asymmetry between the Philippines and China, but it changes the political meaning of resistance. Chinese pressure is answered in a setting where external backing is a concrete part of strategic calculation rather than a distant possibility.

The second element is institutional capacity and integration. The Philippines still faces material constraints, but it has used its available maritime assets more openly, coherently, and strategically than before. The Philippine Coast Guard has become a central actor in the state's response. Rather than leaving incidents at sea to quiet bureaucratic handling, Manila has turned coast guard operations into visible instruments of state signalling. Public documentation of shadowing, blocking, and water-cannon incidents has been integrated into operational practice. Reporting in 2024 and 2025 described this approach as "assertive transparency", in which media access, timely public releases, and visual evidence are used to contest Chinese narratives and build international support (SCMP, 2024, 2025). In this setting, transparency is not a separate form of maritime practice but is embedded within it as part of a broader denial posture.

This dynamic explains why the Philippine response cannot be reduced to conventional balancing language alone. Denial in this context does not mean symmetric retaliation. It means using a combination of coast guard presence, legal claims, alliance signalling, media exposure, and diplomatic mobilisation to prevent China from normalising control over disputed waters. Velasco (2026) captures this logic well by showing how the Philippines has sought to resist Chinese pressure without withdrawing from contested space or allowing each confrontation to be reduced to an isolated bilateral incident. The result has been a response that is firmer, more public, and more internationally networked than those adopted by many other Southeast Asian states facing similar pressure.

The third element concerns state-society relations more broadly. In the Philippine case, transparency and public communication are not simply supplementary activities added after policy has been made, but part of how the state manages domestic expectations and international audiences. The Marcos Jr. administration has treated transparency as a source of domestic legitimacy and international support. Publicising maritime incidents serves several functions at once. It keeps Chinese actions visible, reinforces the legal basis of the Philippine position, and reduces the room for quiet diplomatic dilution at home. It also fits domestic political conditions in which passivity on the South China Sea carries real political costs (Ibarra, 2024). The result is a pattern in which state-society relations tend to reward a more visible and vocal stance on the dispute, even when operational actions remain carefully bounded below open conflict.

The Philippine case stands out as a particularly strong form of denial because high threat perception, alliance-backed denial strategy, more visible maritime operations, and state-society dynamics that reward transparency and public exposure now reinforce one another. The Philippines still faces clear material asymmetry and cannot dominate the contested maritime space. Even so, it has made Chinese coercion more difficult to normalise and more costly to sustain politically. In this case, maritime capacity matters, but its effect is amplified by a deliberate strategy of keeping incidents public and internationally visible. That combination gives Philippine policy its distinctly robust character under sustained hybrid pressure (Inayah et al., 2025; Vergara, 2021).

4.4. Malaysia: Soft Balancing

Malaysia presents a different pattern of response to Chinese pressure in the South China Sea. If the Philippines represents a denial-based response and Indonesia reflects diversification, Malaysia is better understood as practising soft balancing in a relatively low-profile form. As

Gerstl (2020) argues, this posture combines direct engagement with limited balancing and limited bandwagoning, allowing Kuala Lumpur to reduce risk without abandoning its claims. The result is a policy that avoids open confrontation while still protecting sovereign rights, sustaining offshore economic activity, and preserving diplomatic space.

The starting point is elite perception. Malaysian leaders have long recognised that Chinese maritime activity affects national interests, especially in waters within the EEZ and offshore energy assets. Yet this recognition has rarely been translated into a highly public security narrative. Storey (2024) notes that under Anwar Ibrahim there is more continuity than rupture in Malaysia's South China Sea policy, even if the tone has occasionally become firmer in specific episodes. Rahman and Rahman (2024) make a similar point in showing that Kuala Lumpur continues to treat Chinese pressure as serious but manageable through steady-state practice rather than public confrontation, consistent with a quiet form of soft balancing.

This separation between the maritime dispute and the broader bilateral relationship is central to Malaysia's soft balancing logic. China remains a major economic partner, and that fact shapes the political limits of policy choice. Gerstl's (2020) argument therefore remains useful beyond the Mahathir period, as the same balancing logic continues to help explain why Malaysia resists moves that could normalise Chinese control in contested waters while avoiding steps that could damage wider trade, investment, or diplomatic ties. Policy tends to move through measured deterrent signals, diplomatic restraint, and selective legal firmness, depending on the intensity of pressure and the surrounding political context.

This strategy is visible in Malaysia's operational behaviour at sea. Malaysian authorities have continued patrols and surveillance in disputed or contested areas, especially where offshore energy infrastructure is involved. In late 2025, for example, Foreign Minister Mohamad Hasan stated that Malaysia had intensified patrols and enforcement in disputed areas of the South China Sea and would not compromise on sovereignty or sovereign rights; in the same statement, the government also stressed caution and diplomacy to avoid unwanted incidents or escalation (The Star, 2025). The significance of that formulation lies in its dual message: operational persistence is maintained, but it is framed within a controlled and non-escalatory diplomatic posture.

Institutionally, this approach depends on relatively functional coordination between diplomatic and maritime agencies. The Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency, the armed forces, and foreign policy institutions each play a role, but their outputs are usually consolidated into a carefully crafted official line. This helps explain why Malaysian responses often appear understated from the outside. As Storey (2024) suggests, quiet persistence often serves Kuala Lumpur better than turning every incident into a public contest. The objective is to deny erosion of Malaysian rights without converting each encounter into a symbolic showdown.

The offshore energy sector gives this policy concrete meaning. For Kuala Lumpur, the South China Sea is tied not only to maritime jurisdiction but also to resource security, commercial operations, and the protection of economic infrastructure. This helps explain why Malaysia can act firmly in operational terms even when its public language remains restrained. Pressure in these waters has immediate material implications for offshore blocks, survey activity, and related facilities. Storey (2024) treats this resource dimension as one of the main drivers of Malaysia's continued maritime vigilance, and The Star (2025) follows the same logic explicitly, linking patrols and surveillance to the protection of economic resources and infrastructure, reinforcing the soft-balancing pattern identified in this article.

Public communication provides another point of contrast with the Philippines, but it should not be treated as the organising core of the case. Malaysia has not adopted the kind of assertive transparency strategy seen in Manila. Incidents are often handled with less publicity, and official

statements tend to be sparse and tightly controlled. Rahman and Rahman (2024) observe that Malaysia has generally maintained a non-confrontational approach to incursions and provocations in the South China Sea even as pressure has become more persistent. This does not imply weak resolve. It reflects a judgment that visibility can narrow diplomatic options as much as it can strengthen deterrence.

Seen through this lens, Malaysia's response is best understood as soft balancing. The state recognises the challenge, continues to defend its maritime interests, and maintains an operational presence in contested waters, but it avoids making open confrontation the organising principle of policy. Compared with the Philippines, the response is less public and less alliance-centred; compared with Indonesia, it is somewhat more settled in its diplomatic style and more clearly tied to the protection of offshore economic interests. In Gerstl's (2020) terms, Malaysia continues to manage its wider relationship with China while refusing to yield on sovereign rights and core maritime interests, and Storey (2024) shows that this basic pattern has remained intact under Anwar Ibrahim.

4.5. Comparative Implications: Similar Pressures, Divergent Responses

The three cases show that similar hybrid pressures do not yield uniform policy outcomes. As Noor (2021) notes, China employs a broadly comparable repertoire in the South China Sea, including coast guard pressure, recurring maritime incursions, legal narratives over "historic rights," and calibrated economic exposure. Structural realism helps explain why weaker states face pressure from a much stronger power, but it is less persuasive in explaining why their response diverge under broadly similar external conditions. Neoclassical realism fits the pattern better because it directs attention to how systemic pressure is filtered through domestic intervening variables before it is translated into policy outcomes (Ripsman et al., 2016). Neoclassical realism is the most appropriate framework because it inherently bridges systemic pressure with domestic and individual-level filters, especially elite perceptions and institutional capacity, to explain how international pressure is translated into foreign policy.

The contrast becomes clearer when the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia are placed side by side. Under President Marcos Jr., the Philippines has shifted toward a denial-based response, combining alliance-backed deterrence, more visible operational pushback, and deliberate public exposure of Chinese coercion (Inayah et al., 2025). Indonesia has continued to reject the nine-dash line and to make incursions in the North Natuna Sea. Yet its response remains calibrated rather than openly confrontational, especially because official discourse still frames the issue in terms of sovereign rights and law enforcement rather than a broader sovereignty dispute. As Laksmana (2021) argues, this legal and political framing helps explain why Indonesia resist pressure without recasting the issue as open strategic confrontation. Malaysia, by contrast, has sustained patrols and offshore activities while compartmentalising the South China Sea issue from broader economic and political ties with China. This pattern is consistent with soft balancing expressed through a relatively low-profile public posture (Storey, 2024). These differences are difficult to explain through external pressure alone because all three states face a broadly similar pattern of hybrid pressure from the same actor.

Within the adapted neoclassical realist framework, the divergence can be traced to different domestic configurations. In the Philippines, elite perception is high and relatively consolidated. Chinese actions are framed as direct coercion against sovereign rights, while alliance commitments with the United States widen the political and strategic space for a firmer response. Vergara (2021) had already shown that Chinese actions in the Philippine case narrowed the space for accommodation well before the current period. State-society relations strengthen this posture by making transparency politically useful both domestically and internationally. This

is evident in the regular release of footage and documentation of maritime confrontations (Ibarra, 2024). Civil-military and maritime coordination remains imperfect, but maritime security is high enough on the political agenda to produce a more coherent strategic line than in earlier periods (Inayah et al., 2025).

Indonesia presents a different configuration. Elite perception recognises Chinese pressure as serious but filters it through a legal and political distinction between defending sovereign rights and treating the issue as a broader sovereignty dispute. Darmawan and Afriansyah (2020) make this point clearly in their discussion of Indonesia's post-arbitration legal position. That distinction narrows the range of politically acceptable responses even when Chinese pressure is recognised as serious. Maritime capacity has improved in recent years, as seen in strengthened patrols, basing, and diplomatic signalling around the Natuna Sea. Even so, operational coherence remains uneven because maritime enforcement is spread across multiple institutions with overlapping mandates (Koh, 2024). Public communication is also selective rather than continuous, and symbolic cohesion around Natuna is strong. At the same time, economic interdependence with China and a tendency in official discourse to treat incidents as episodic rather than cumulative limit sustained strategic focus. The result is a calibrated diversification strategy: Indonesia resists pressure and defends its legal position, but it stops short of alliance-backed denial or sustained public confrontation (Arif et al., 2024).

Malaysia again combines these variables differently. Threat perception among elites is sufficiently clear to justify patrols, protests, and continued offshore activity, but it is expressed in restrained language and embedded in a wider strategy of diplomatic caution. Storey (2024) characterises this pattern as one in which maritime resistance is maintained without allowing the dispute to dominate the broader bilateral relationship. State capacity is functional enough to sustain a regular maritime presence, especially where offshore energy interests are involved (The Star, 2025). Public mobilisation remains low-key, and official communication is tightly controlled. This reflects a judgment that visibility can narrow diplomatic room as much as it can strengthen deterrence. This combination channels policy into soft balancing under persistent pressure rather than either a denial-based response or accommodation (Gerstl, 2020).

The three patterns identified here resonate with Kuik's broader argument that Southeast Asian states do not simply choose between balancing and bandwagoning but mix different elements of denial, diversification, and soft balancing in their China policies (Lampton et al., 2020). In this article, those ideal-type patterns are observed in a more specific setting: hybrid coercion at sea. The Philippines' strategy is characterised by denial that seeks to block Chinese attempts to normalise control over contested waters; Indonesia's approach centres on diversification, combining legal firmness with diplomatic and operational choices that avoid overdependence on any single partner; and Malaysia's behaviour illustrates a quiet form of soft balancing that protects core offshore interests while keeping the wider relationship with China stable.

Table 2 summarises these comparative patterns and maps them onto the domestic filters highlighted in the article's neoclassical realist framework.

Table 2. Comparative Responses to Hybrid Threats and Mapping to the Neoclassical Realist Framework

Case	Dominant response	Domestic configuration	Policy implication
Philippines	Denial	High elite threat perception, alliance-backed capacity, publicly mobilised cohesion, and more coherent strategic coordination under Marcos Jr.	Domestic alignment supports a firmer and more public response despite material asymmetry
Indonesia	Diversification	Selective threat recognition, improving but divided enforcement capacity, strong symbolic cohesion, and incomplete inter-agency coordination	Mixed intervening variables produce resistance without open confrontation or full strategic consolidation
Malaysia	Soft balancing	Restrained threat perception, functional but cautious capacity, low-key public mobilisation, and controlled official coordination	Domestic filtering supports measured hedging rather than open confrontation

Source: Authors' compilation based on Inayah et al. (2025), Ibarra (2024), Darmawan and Afriansyah (2020), Koh (2024), Rahman and Rahman (2024), Gerstl (2020), Storey (2024), Arif et al. (2024), Laksmana (2021), and Velasco (2026)

The table underlines that material asymmetry is only part of the explanation. The Philippines and Malaysia both face pressure from a much stronger power, yet they respond differently because the domestic translation of that pressure is different. In the Philippine case, high threat perception, active public communication, and stronger security alignment widened the space for a denial-based response (Inayah et al., 2025). Malaysia, by contrast, continues to hedge because elites give greater weight to diplomatic and economic costs even while maintaining patrols and protecting core offshore interests. This is consistent with Storey's (2024) reading of Malaysia's broader South China Sea approach.

Indonesia occupies an intermediate but still distinct position. In the North Natuna Sea, Chinese hybrid pressure is met through patrols, expulsions, diplomatic protest, and legal firmness. Even so, the response remains selective rather than fully institutionalised. Laksmana (2021) captures this logic well in showing that Indonesia defends sovereign rights firmly while avoiding a broader escalatory posture. This follows from the combination of partial securitisation, fragmented enforcement, and a domestic consensus that is symbolically strong but less effective in sustaining long-term strategic adjustment. In this respect, Indonesia neither accommodates Chinese pressure nor converts repeated incidents into a fully consolidated deterrent posture, but instead maintains a diversification strategy that remains calibrated rather than openly confrontational (Arif et al., 2024).

These comparisons carry a clear theoretical implication. Rose (1998) argued that systemic pressures shape foreign policy only after being filtered through domestic intervening variables, and the three cases support that claim. Ripsman et al. (2016) develop this point further by showing how different internal configurations can generate divergent policy responses under similar structural constraints. Structural realism remains useful for explaining why China applies hybrid pressure against weaker states in the South China Sea. But neoclassical realism offers stronger leverage for explaining why one state responds with denial while others pursue diversification or soft balancing.

From a policy standpoint, the comparative lesson is straightforward. Hybrid coercion works by exploiting gaps in perception, capacity, cohesion, and coordination, so responses that focus only on platforms, budgets, or diplomatic protest will remain incomplete. What matters just as much is whether political leaders recognise hybrid pressure as cumulative, whether institutions can sustain coherent responses, whether social cohesion can be maintained without over-securitising the issue, and whether maritime and defence agencies can act in concert. This is where the neoclassical realist framework has practical value: it explains why states under similar external pressure still follow very different policy pathways.

4.6. Policy Implication

From a policy standpoint, the comparative lesson is clear. Hybrid coercion works by exploiting gaps in perception, capacity, cohesion, and coordination, so responses that focus only on platforms, budgets, or diplomatic protest will remain incomplete. What matters equally is whether political leaders recognise hybrid pressure as cumulative rather than episodic, whether institutions can sustain coherent responses, and whether maritime and defence agencies can act in concert. Deterrence credibility in this setting is ultimately a political and institutional product grounded in material capability, rather than a function of assets alone. This is where the neoclassical realist framework has direct practical value: it explains why states under similar external pressure still follow very different policy pathways because systemic stimuli are filtered through elite perceptions, institutional capacity and integration, and state-society relations.

5. Conclusion

This article has used neoclassical realism to explain why Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia respond differently to hybrid threats from China in the South China Sea. Material asymmetry helps explain why pressure emerges, but it does not explain why states under similar pressure respond differently. The comparison shows that hybrid coercion is filtered through domestic intervening variables before it is translated into policy. That is why the Philippines moves toward denial, Indonesia toward diversification, and Malaysia toward soft balancing.

The Indonesian case is especially instructive because it highlights both the strengths and the limits of diversification under sustained hybrid pressure. Indonesia has not accepted Chinese pressure in the North Natuna Sea, but it has also avoided turning repeated incidents into a fully consolidated deterrent posture. Its response remains calibrated because legal firmness, operational resistance, diplomatic restraint, and uneven institutional coordination continue to pull policy in different directions. In that sense, Indonesia illustrates the article's broader argument: hybrid coercion does not work through pressure alone, but through the way pressure interacts with domestic political and institutional realities.

The wider implication is that hybrid threats should be understood as a strategic process rather than as a fixed set of tactics. States facing similar pressures may still respond very differently, depending on how elite perceptions, institutional capacity and integration, and state-society relations are organised at home. For Indonesia and other exposed states, this means that resilience depends not only on assets or procurement, but also on clearer strategic framing, stronger institutional coordination, and more coherent state action. For policymakers, the implication is not simply to strengthen maritime platforms, but to improve the domestic mechanisms through which pressure is interpreted, prioritised, and translated into policy.

At the same time, this study has clear limitations. It focuses on three Southeast Asian cases and relies on documentary sources, which means it cannot fully capture the informal bargaining, operational judgment, and elite perceptions that shape responses to hybrid pressure in practice. The domestic variables used here are also adapted to a specific regional and maritime context.

Future research could test and refine this framework by extending it to other Indo-Pacific states, incorporating interviews or process-tracing methods, and examining how domestic coalitions evolve over time under sustained hybrid coercion.

Conflicts of Interest

Authors may declare no conflict of interest.

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