

**“THE MARITIME FULCRUM OF THE INDO-PACIFIC: INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA
RESPOND TO CHINA’S CREEPING EXPANSION IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA”**
Red Book No. 17

Scott Bentley. Newport, Rhode Island: Naval War College Press, 2023. 118 Pages, ISBN 978-1-935352-80 China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI), U.S. Naval War College.

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The southern part of the South China Sea – from Indonesia’s Natuna Islands to the South Luconia Shoals – holds greater significance than the more widely discussed Spratly or Paracel Island groups that lie further to the North. The critical importance of this area emanates from the dense International Shipping Lanes that pass through it, linking the Pacific Ocean with the Indian Ocean, thus making it crucial for international maritime trade. As two important littoral countries of the South China Sea, Indonesia and Malaysia are faced with China’s growing assertiveness in this region.

Scott Bentley tries to deliver an intricate and insightful analysis of Malaysia and Indonesia’s strategic responses to China’s growing influence in the region. He offers readers an understanding of the complexities and challenges faced by Southeast Asian nations. One of the most compelling aspects of Bentley’s work is his exploration of the nuanced approaches adopted by Malaysia and Indonesia in dealing with China’s assertiveness. He delves into the leadership styles and historical contexts that shape these nations’ responses. For instance, he highlights Prime Minister Mahathir’s blend of assertiveness and diplomacy, rooted in a commitment to safeguarding Malaysia’s sovereignty while avoiding unnecessary confrontation. Similarly, he illuminates President Joko Widodo’s symbolic gestures and strategic shifts in Indonesia’s approach, demonstrating a careful balance between assertive actions and diplomatic manoeuvres.

Throughout the report, Bentley navigates the intricate geopolitical landscape of the South China Sea, emphasising its multifaceted significance. He elucidates the economic importance of the region for international trade and navigation, while also shedding light on its development into a geopolitical flashpoint. His analysis of China’s expansionist ambitions and their implications for regional stability provides readers with valuable insights into the broader strategic implications of China’s actions. A particularly intriguing facet relates to Malaysia and Indonesia’s efforts to modernise their maritime capabilities in response to China’s growing presence. He details the acquisitions of submarines, corvettes, and maritime patrol aircraft, illustrating the concerted efforts of both nations to enhance their defence capabilities. Additionally, the author explores the construction of naval facilities and maritime law enforcement centres, underscoring Malaysia and Indonesia’s determination to protect their respective interests in the South China Sea.

The initial part of the report covers Indonesia’s strategic outlook, its concerns with China’s influence, and its efforts to strengthen its maritime defence posture in response to regional geopolitical dynamics. While Indonesia’s actions are portrayed as defensive responses to China’s expanding influence, a closer inspection reveals complexities and potential pitfalls in its approach. It highlights the concerns of Indonesian officials, including senior military and government figures, regarding China’s expansionist actions and its potential threat to Indonesia’s regional leadership.

Central to the narrative are Indonesia's resolute actions to safeguard its sovereignty and assert its claims in the face of China's maritime expansion. The author illustrates Indonesia's determination by highlighting instances of interception of Chinese fishing vessels operating within Indonesia's claimed Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and the "nine-dash line", successfully arresting Chinese fishermen and detaining their vessels for operating in disputed areas. Indonesia's interception of Chinese fishing vessels within its claimed Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) was justified under international law. However, the repeated use of low-level military force, including firing upon Chinese fishing vessels, raises concerns about the escalation of tensions in the region. The author posits that such confrontations risk triggering larger conflicts and undermining efforts towards a peaceful resolution of maritime disputes. For example, the massive operational deployment of navy and coast guard ships in January 2020, ostensibly to challenge China's presence in the South China Sea, carried inherent risks. While demonstrating Indonesia's resolve, such displays of military power could have inadvertently escalated tensions and provoked countermeasures from China.

The report claims that Indonesia's reliance on diplomatic protests to challenge China's claims, while a legitimate avenue, may lack teeth without broader international support. China's dismissive attitude towards such protests sheds light on the limitations of diplomatic channels in resolving complex territorial disputes. China's retaliatory actions, including interference with Indonesian maritime law enforcement efforts, have resulted in numerous incidents at sea, exacerbating tensions in the region. The author opines that while Indonesia's efforts to protect its sovereignty and assert its claims in the South China Sea are understandable, given China's assertiveness, a more cautious and nuanced approach may be warranted. Balancing assertiveness with diplomacy and engagement could help mitigate risks and foster regional stability.

The subsequent half of the report provides an insightful exploration of Malaysia's diplomatic and military strategies in response to China's escalating presence and assertiveness in the South China Sea. It offers a comprehensive overview of Malaysia's historical and contemporary responses, focusing on Prime Minister Mahathir's leadership and the country's strategic approach to maritime defence. One of the document's strengths lies in its examination of Prime Minister Mahathir's concerns about China's influence and behaviour in the region, as it highlights his staunch opposition to colonialism, which shapes his worldview and influences Malaysia's response to China's actions. Through a blend of quiet diplomacy and firm assertion, Malaysia seeks to safeguard its interests while maintaining regional stability.

The report adeptly outlines Malaysia's shift towards a more assertive approach, particularly through hydrocarbon exploration in the disputed areas of the South China Sea. It emphasises the subtle yet discernible shift in Malaysia's stance, driven by growing concerns over China's long-term intentions and threat perceptions. This nuanced portrayal adds much-needed depth to the understanding of Malaysia's evolving response to China's assertiveness.

By highlighting Prime Minister Mahathir's leadership, historical context, and strategic imperatives, the author underscores Malaysia's commitment to maintaining regional stability while addressing the complexities of maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, his exploration of Malaysia's maritime modernisation efforts and emphasis on self-reliance in defence capabilities offers important considerations for policymakers and defence planners navigating the evolving geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia.

However, while Bentley's work offers valuable insights into Malaysia and Indonesia's assertive actions, it could have benefitted from a more critical examination of the potential risks and consequences of escalation. A deeper exploration of the broader geopolitical context and the regional implications of Malaysia and Indonesia's responses would have provided readers with a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play in the South China Sea.

This notwithstanding, "The Maritime Fulcrum of the Indo-Pacific" is a captivating and informative read for

scholars, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to understand the evolving dynamics of maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region. Readers are treated to a comprehensive analysis of Malaysia and Indonesia's strategic responses to China's expanding influence in the South China Sea. The author navigates the complex geopolitical landscape of the region with finesse, offering valuable insights into the historical, economic, and geopolitical factors shaping these nations' approaches. Bentley's thorough analysis and nuanced perspectives make this report an invaluable resource for anyone interested in the geopolitics of Southeast Asia and China's growing influence in the region.

About the Author:

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