**The Domestic Politics and Indonesia’s Tension with Malaysia on the Ambalat Case**

**Abstract**

This article examines the so-called inter-state tension between Indonesia and Malaysia on the issue of Ambalat between the years 2005-2009. This issue is pivotal since the Ambalat disputes had yielded tensions between the two brotherhood nations. Making things worse was the involvement of military and the provocations of mass media which arguably somewhat excessive. Previous literature merely focuses on the foreign policy tension and neglecting domestic factors which was critical and correlated at that time. Using qualitative analysis, this article found that President Yudhoyono used this issue in advancing certain political interests by redirecting the public’s attention from mounting costs of petroleum and from the president’s declining image. This also occurs against the backdrop of the presidential election of 2009; hence, the Ambalat maneuver. Nevertheless, this maneuver, which was meant for the domestic audience, in turn, affected the Indonesia-Malaysia’s relations. Its impact was the rising tension during those two periods. This article is expected to posit a different conceptual perspective on the issue of Ambalat which is often framed from mainly if solely from a security perspective. Seldom does the mainstream rationale captures Ambalat as an internal political maneuver deployed by President Yudhoyono while antagonizing Indonesia’s relations with his neighbor. The analysis from the findings of this article offers these critical yet crucial lenses to reduce empirical as well as conceptual blind-spots in international relations discourse.

**Keywords:**

Ambalat; domestic politics; Yudhoyono; Indonesia; Malaysia

**Introduction**

The issue of Ambalat is important to highlight in the discussion of Indonesia-Malaysia relations, especially in contemporary era. The Suharto years were a period of friendly relations between the leadership of the two nations. This has influenced the two-way relations specifically in issues of national borders. This reality has arguably taken a different trajectory in post-Suharto era. The Ambalat issue is a case exemplifying the rift in this relation by border problems which has not been fully resolved by both nations. Yet, what is telling is that the rise of the Ambalat issue being exploited for the interests of elites, especially in Jakarta. The involvement of the military either in the year 2005 or 2009 at the Indonesian-Malaysian borders is disconcerting. The situation becomes more critical when it is further exacerbated by media provocation, which angers large segments of people of both nations. For that reason, the Ambalat issue necessitates further deliberation vis-à-vis the factors underlying the tension between the two nations.

This article found three research gaps. First, previous literature argued that Indonesia’s tension with Malaysia mainly influenced by the transformation of international politics from Cold War to post-Cold War era (Anwar, 1994; Maksum & Bustami, 2014; Md. Khalid & Yacob, 2012). Second, previous literature also mentioned that the rise of the tension between the two brotherhood nations mostly impacted by the higher nationalism sentiment among Indonesians (Abang & Bala, 2022; Poulgrain, 2014; Setiawati, 2012). Thirds, to the authors’ acknowledge, there was no specific paper which comprehensively scrutinizing Indonesia-Malaysia relations based on the domestic factors specifically in the Ambalat cases using rational actor model (Allison, 1969; Allison & Zelikow, 1999). We identified some factors potentially influenced the rise of the tension such as elites, local politicians, military as well as the media which fuelling the public anger. Therefore the issue of Ambalat which has ignited international tension should be examined more extensively, whether it has shaken the two-way relations as a state-to state or merely people-to-people. The question of whether it is an issue manipulated by elites, specifically in Indonesia who seek to gain political mileage with the provocation from the media, should also be considered. With this, the subsequent paragraphs will discuss the theoretical framework as the foundation of the analysis of Ambalat issue.

**Theoretical framework**

This article adopts **an** international relations approach particularly the realism theory and places the state as the main actor (Mastanduno, Lake, & Ikenberry, 1989; Yazid, 2000). Nevertheless, in principle, realism theory does not reject internal factors, especially political elites, media, and public opinions in influencing the process of foreign relations of individual countries (Sterling-Folker, 1997). However, it is contingent of international context of the moment whether the situational pressure is high or low (Cardenas, 2004; He, 2008; Rose, 1998). The international phenomena especially post Cold World witnesses an increasingly lower pressure as well as an increasing popularity of issues regarding identity, human rights and democratization (Cingranelli & Richards, 1999; Farouk, 2011; Schlesinger Jr., 1992). In essence, the domestic or internal political element including media is becoming more and more difficult to control as in the case of Indonesia (Maksum, Surwandono, & Azizah, 2019; Schneier, 2009).

The rational policy model developed by Graham T. Alisson is extensively utilized in this paper (Allison, 1969; Allison & Zelikow, 1999). Because both domestic and international external political forces have a significant impact on policy itself. Allison's research of foreign policy was deemed groundbreaking because it questioned the logic of a foreign policy based on economic principles and realism is also more or less adopted when describing a nation's foreign policy. The actions of a state are analyzed under the assumption of rationalism, which assumes that the state considers all options and acts rationally to maximize profits. Foreign policy is viewed as the result of rational actors' actions. Allison introduced three foreign policy analysis models in general: (i) the rational actor model, (ii) the organizational process model, and (iii) the bureaucratic politics model. According to the rational actor model, the decision made was one that was founded on rational or intellectual considerations and the calculation of profit and loss, leading to what is thought to be a mature, accurate, and judicious choice. The state is a mechanical process that moves through phases, processes, and organizational mechanisms as standard operating procedures are used, according to the organizational process model, which describes the state as a substantial foreign decision-making organization. Being a part of a huge organization makes it impossible for the units under a very significant leadership role to defy decisions made by the central authority. The bureaucratic political model emphasizes that different actors, groups, and interested parties construct a decision-making process through a process of negotiation, compromise, and mutual influence between pertinent stakeholders (Ateş, 2022; Welch, 1992). The decision is the end result of a political process that involves extensive and difficult consideration (Allison & Zelikow, 1999).

Each state is shown as a logical actor that consistently pursues his own interests. The most fundamental of all is to uphold national interests and sovereignty. This model shows how decision makers can implement several types of policies to get the best outcomes. In order to optimize the achievement of their objectives based on rational calculations in the international political sphere, governments might be viewed as actors, according to the fundamental premise of the rational actor model approach. According to the rational actor model, the state is shown as an individual actor who is perfectly aware of the situation and who seeks to maximize values and goals in light of it. With the supposition that nations weigh all of their options and act logically to maximize profits, various national behaviors are examined. The government must decide between a number of options during the policy-making process, and each decision has implications. The state, acting rationally, will select different policies that will have the most positive effects on achieving the desired outcomes (goals and objectives) (Ateş, 2022; Hudson, 2005). Rosenau also underlined that a nation's response to pressure or encouragement from both home and international politics, or its creation of a foreign policy, is the result of both internal (domestic) pressure or demands and external pressures/demands against the nation (Rosenau, 1974).

In this paper, the author uses rational choice theory in order to examine the interplay between domestic and international relations on Indonesia’s tension with Malaysia during the Ambalat cases. In this context, some factors contributed to the tension such as domestic political issues ranging from oil prices, issues related to national elections, and political rivalries among elites to media companies. At the same time, the role of the national leadership is perceived as a strong determinant of the rise of Ambalat tension with Malaysia, especially President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. It is expected that this paper would contribute to the new perspective on Indonesian foreign policy understanding specifically on Ambalat cases which are highly determined by domestic factors. Nevertheless, this paper believes that the openness of international politics in the post-Cold War indirectly gave the two countries' behavior became more flexible which is slightly different compared to the previous era which was fully constrained by an ideological clash and major power rivalries.

**Methods**

This is qualitative analysis utilise secondary data whether gained from nooks, journals, government documents or online resource. All data gathered were analysed using content analysis to interpret the data related to Indonesian foreign policy on Ambalat and the relations with domestic politics especially during President Yudhoyono administration (2005-2009). In addition, this research also enriched by non-structured interview with stakeholders of Indonesian government. Content analysis is useful to reach conclusion and meaning from the text. Content analysis also allows the researcher to have a better understanding of the event's new meaning and context. In essence, this strategy allows researchers to interpret (analytical or critical) text and turn it into an academically approved narrative (Krippendorff, 2019). Using realism theory of international relations, the authors would analyse two main Ambalat cases that occurred repeatedly during Yudhoyono administration. The first case of Ambalat (Ambalat case I ) occurred in 2005 and the second Ambalat case (Ambalat II) erupted in 2009. Direct quotes, graphs, and tables are used to show all of the information gathered. Therefore, the subsequent paragraphs would highlight the background of Indonesia-Malaysia border disputes, the main discussion consist of the two cases namely Ambalat I and Ambalat II, and conclusion.

**Literature Review**

* + 1. *Background of Indonesia-Malaysia Border Problems*

Since obtaining independence on **31August 1957**, Malaysia has already **been** entangled by border problems with Indonesia (Salleh, 2008). Nevertheless, numerous problems have been successfully resolved by the two nations either unilaterally or multilaterally (Salleh, 2008, 147). Problems between Malaysia and Indonesia **emerged** after the publication of the New Map by Malaysian government in the year 1980. The opposition to the New Map did not come merely from Indonesia, but also by some other neighbouring countries (Butcher, 2013). In the early stage, problems between Malaysia and Indonesia had been overcome before the publication of the New Map through the negotiation of *Continental Shelf Boundaries (CSB)* on the **27 October 1969** (Salleh, 2008, 148). Since the year 1969, both countries have agreed to “ignore” the overlapping border issues until the year 1991 (Liow, 2005). According to Liow, based on multiple sources, the arrangement is agreed upon to avoid tension occurring between the two sides (Liow, 2005, 144). This fact was also affirmed by the former Foreign Minister of Indonesia, Hassan Wirajuda who stated that the interest of regional stability was a priority of both nations (H. Wirajuda, 2002).

After the Cold War, specifically in the year 1991, the relations between the two states began to shaken in relation to the Sipadan-Ligitan Island dispute. The Indonesian authority, for instance, **had** discovered that Malaysia **had** built a resort at Sipadan making it a status quo situation. From the Indonesian perspective, this represents a breach of agreement which **had** been negotiated in 1969. Indeed many issues subsequently occur such as the detention of Malaysian fishermen using the MV Pulau Banggi ship on the **11 July 1991**. In this case, Indonesia captured a ship with thirteen (13) crew members near Sipadan Island and eventually being brought to the Indonesian naval base in Kalimantan. Within the same month, a group of Indonesian security force being charged for disembarking on Sipadan Island. Consequently, both countries **had** carried-out meetings and negotiations for three times in 1992, 1993 and 1994. Among the outcomes of the negotiations **was** the establishment of new committee replacing GBC, which **was** Joint Working Group (JWG) with a specific objective of handling the Sipadan-Ligitan Island (Butcher, 2013; Salleh, 2008).

Even with the various negotiations that were carried-out, both countries still met an impasse. Nevertheless, in the year 1996, President Suharto finally agreed to bring the case of Sipadan-Ligitan Island dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the Netherlands. On the **2 November 1998**, both countries began to submit the case to ICJ which was initiated by the joint-signing ceremony on the 31st of May 1997 in Kuala Lumpur (Salleh, 2008, 157). After a series of court hearings, in the month of December 2002, ICJ **had** concluded that Malaysia **was** is the rightful owner of Sipadan-Ligitan Island. In general, the Indonesian side accepted the decision of ICJ, even though many regretted due to the estimated loss of Rp 16 million (H. Wirajuda, 2002). Therefore, this diplomatic maturity of Indonesia can be emulated by countries which seek to resolve territorial conflicts without military engagement (Franck, 2002).

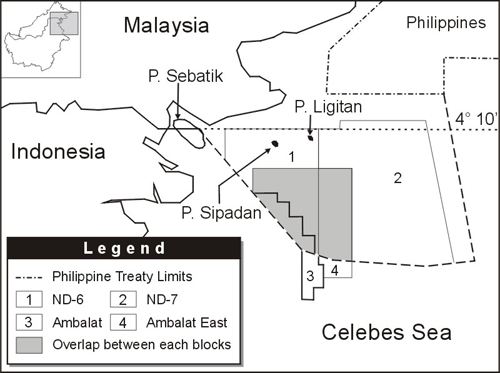
This negotiated outcome of legal ownership of Malaysia over Sipadan-Ligitan Island has led to many other problems of overlapping claims. Thus, the ensuing oil concessions have given rise to tension in the Ambalat case. This is a case that has recurred three times during the administration of President Yudhoyono, specifically in the years 2005, 2008 and 2009. However, only in two case 2005 and 2009 that Ambalat has destabilised the Indonesia-Malaysia relations. In these two years, 2005 and 2009, the Ambalat case has stirred all kinds of public reaction in Indonesia. In the year 2008, the Ambalat case became an issue rather swiftly and hardly heated to the levels of 2005 and 2009. Up until now, negotiations on overlapping claims in the Ambalat Block are still ongoing (Agusman & Nurbintoro, 2018; Supancana, 2015).

* + 1. *Indonesia’s Foreign Policy toward Malaysia vis-à-vis Ambalat*

In the case of Ambalat, there is misunderstanding among certain segments of Indonesian public in relation to the actual picture of the Ambalat Block. In many of the coverage on Ambalat, oftentimes it is reported as ”Ambalat Island” by news agencies. For instance in a piece entitled ”Indonesia will submit official protest against Malaysia on the issue of Ambalat”, it was stated that ”Ambalat Island is situated at the border between Northern Kalimantan [Indonesia] and a part of Sabah [a state in Malaysia] which is located precisely at Straits of Makassar, Sulawesi seas (Surya, 2015). **Yet**, Ambalat is but a block in the ocean floor located next to Borneo/Kalimantan Island. This is further strengthened by the argument of Indonesian Foreign Ministry who stated that :

”Ambalat is an ocean floor at the depth of 2,5 km within the waters of Sulawesi Ocean which is located at 80 sea mile (120km) from the shore of Eastern Kalimantan, outside of 12 sea mile from the island lines of Indonesia” (Staff of Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia in Penang, 2014).

Geographically, the position of Ambalat Block is between longitude 118°15’21” - 118°51’15” East and latitude 2°34’7” - 3°47’50” North (Kusumadewi, 2015). Besides that, Ambalat Block situated at curvature Tarakan in Eastern Kalimantan is suspected to contain large potentials of oil and gas reserves (Druce & Baikoeni, 2016). The region contested by both countries is an area known as ND6 and ND7. The picture of Ambalat Block can be seen in the **Figure 1** below.



**Figure 1.** Ambalat Map

Source: Schofield & Storey (2005)

Indonesia and Malaysia are members of United Nations Convention on the law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and both have ratified the laws under the convention. In fact Indonesia was the earlier signatory in 1985 followed by Malaysia in **14 October 1996** (Arsana, 2014). However, UNCLOS officially took effect on the **16 November 1994** even though the agreement was initiated in 1982 in Montego Bay, Jamaica. Before the inception of UNCLOS in 1982, the rights of nation over the sea floor **were** was based on Geneva Convention 1958. The Convention stated that the rights of the coastal countries extend as deep as 200 meters into the surface of the sea. In other words, the such rights depend very much on each country’s capability to exploit the natural resources (oil, gas and creatures) in the designated are of the sea. The more advance the technology of a country, the wider the sea floor over which it has the rights (Arsana, 2014).

* + 1. *The Rising Tension on Ambalat 2005-2009*

The Ambalat Case #1 (2005)

The Amabalat Case #1 **began** with the capturing of seventeen (17) Indonesian workers on the **21 February 2005** by the Malaysian Royal Navy (TLDM) using the Royal Ship KD Sri Melaka in the area known as Karang Unarang waters of Ambalat. Besides that, a few Indonesian fishing boats were allegedly driven away by the Malaysian security forces to move out of Malaysian territories (Hadi, 2014; Pabyantara, Wiyatmoko, & Dharmaputra, 2012). In return, Indonesia also alleged that Malaysian security forces had encroached into the Indonesian territories around the month of March 2005. Meanwhile the Malaysian side accused Indonesian security team trespassed into Malaysian territories. Nevertheless, the tension merely began with the incidence of dispute between war ships of both countries.

The dispute occurred between the ship KD Renchong (Malaysia) which came into very close proximity with Indonesian’s ship Tedong Naga. As a result, both ships had minor damages. Subsequently, Indonesia sent four fighter jets F-16 to patrol the Ambalat territories (Hassan, Omar, & Abdullah, 2017; Schofield & Storey, 2005). This led to further show of force by both parties in this Amabalat area. Among the ships involved are KD Sri Johor, KD Baung, KD Kota Baharu (owned by Malaysia) which was faced against a few Indonesian’s war ships such as KRI K. S. Tubun, KRI Wiratno dan KRI Tongkol (Lugito, Febriana, Arifin, & Wibisono, 2005).

In deliberating on the tension in this border zone, a few parties in Indonesia also had their internal disagreements. According to Indonesia’s Navy, the tension originated from the encroachment of Malaysia’s war ship in the month of February 2005. At the position of 04.06'30" Latitude North-118.03'06" Longitude East and at the distance of two mile Indonesia’s Navy detected two Malaysia’s war ships; namely, KD Pau-3507 and KD Baung-3509. At almost the same time, Indonesia’s KRI Wiratno-879 was stationary while servicing the ship Kapal Motor (KM) Dewa Ruci Akbar-I at coordinates of 03.48'06" Latitude North -118.09'30" Longitude. At that moment, KRI Wiratno-879 detected a Malaysia Land base Maritime Aircraft , flying with an airplane model Beach Craft B 200 T Super King. The plane flew close to KRI Wiratno – 879 and most probably with the intention of observing and documenting the ship in close proximity. Indonesian navy believed that the said plane Super King has trespassed Indonesia’s air space by about six nautical miles (Tempo, 2005).

The view of Indonesian navy was rejected by Indonesian Airforce who reaffirmed that Malaysia’s aircraft was detected in Indonesian territory, yet it still flew again in the area known as Flight Information Region (FIR). The is so because in the international laws, there are two terms juridical zone and FIR zone. In juridical zone, foreign aircrafts are prohibited from entering without prior permission. Meanwhile, FIR zone is a freer area or is considered as an international zone. According to Indonesian Airforce, Malaysia’s aircraft did not encroach Indonesia’s air space because it was still flying in the FIR zone. Therefore, Indonesian air force advised Indonesian navy and the general public to avoid jumping into a state of tension too quickly and be cautious in assessing and responding to this issue (Tempo 2005). Nevertheless, Indonesian army demonstrated propensity to support the views of Indonesian navy and to voice readiness to face all possibilities, including deployment of ground forces in Ambalat (Dollah, Hassan, & Bee, 2007).

When the situation heated up at the borders of both nations, provocative news coverage by national media in Indonesia further raised the temperature and public anger. As a result, large-scale protests erupted in many locations including among political elites in Indonesia. These protests became more acute to a point where anti-Malaysia sentiments began to appear. Argubly, the public sentiment peaked into the so called revival of “Ganyang Malaysia” war cry and the burning of Malaysia’s flag as well as the spread of recruitment of combat volunteers in various major cities in Indonesia (Tempo, 2005; Yaakub, 2013). The **Table 1** is a sample of organizations involved in this “protest movement” against Ambalat I:

**Table 1.** Organizations involved in the Ambalat I Protest

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **No.** | Name of Organisation | Location | Remarks |
| **1.** | Barisan Ganyang Malaysia | Makassar, Sulawesi Selatan | Claimed of successfully gathered 4,000 volunteers |
| **2.** | Front Bela Indonesia (FBI) | Palu, Sulawesi Tengah | 7 registered volunteers |
| **3.** | Front Pembela Merah Putih (FPMP) | Kupang, Nusa Tenggara Timur | Supported by former Militia combatants of Timor-Timur, Eurico Guiteres and ready to send 500,000 volunteers to Ambalat |
| **4.** | Gempur Malaysia | Kediri, East Java | 30 university students and 150 members of public |
| **5.** | Posko “Gasak Malaysia”, Gerakan Masyarakat Anti-Arogansi Surakarta (GEMARS), Komando Bela RI (KBRI), dan Angkatan Muda Parti Golkar (AMPG) | Solo, Central Java | Successfully gathered more than 250 youth |
| **6.** | Forum Aksi Mahasiswa Merah Putih (FAMERPA) | Ambon, Maluku | 100 members |

Source: Dollah et al. (2007)

The establishment of various organizations with seemingly anti-Malaysia tendencies needs to be re-examined. The emergence of these groups **was** due to the provocation especially by the media and the statements of the political elites in Indonesia. Yet their establishments did not get the overwhelming support of the Indonesian people. To be sure, certain segments of the society **did** support, but others oppose them. It is undeniable that some of these volunteers who registered harboured a kind of personal grudge or resentment towards Malaysia. Some volunteers from Front Bela Indonesia (FBI) in Palu, Central Sulawesi, for instance, admitted that there are volunteers among them who were ill-treated by Malaysian Royal Police Force (PDRM) (Darlis, 2005). Likewise in Makassar, some of the volunteers were migrant workers in Malaysia (Irmawati, 2005). The director of Centre for Peace and Security Research, Universitas Gajah Mada, Yogyakarta, Lambang Tiyono expressed regrets on the establishment of these volunteers posts or centres. These actions do not solve problems; but complicates the tension (Amin, 2005).

The Ambalat Case #2 (2009)

After the case of Ambalat I in 2005, the Indonesian authorities continued to improve its control over Ambalat territory. At least 130 marine troops who are members of the Task Force (Satgas) AMBALAT IX **had** been deployed in the Ambalat territory. Indonesia claimed that Malaysia’s ships and combat aircrafts **trespassed on** Indonesian territory at least 13 times throughout 2009 (Kusumadewi, 2015). In May 2009 for example, KRI Untung Surapati-872 of the Indonesian Navy (TNI-AL) detected the presence of KD Baung-3509 in Indonesian territory in the Ambalat waters. According to the TNI-AL, they tried to communicate through the radio but failed due to the TLDM extinguished its communication, which was a violation of the international shipping law (Soejarwoko, 2009). KRI Untung Surapati-872 claimed that KD Baung-3509 had entered Indonesian territory as far as 7.3 miles. Therefore, KRI Untung Surapati-872 tried to block KD Baung-3509 as it was trying to approach a lighthouse in Karang Unarang in Ambalat block. Inevitably, chasing action took place between KRI Untung Surapati-872 and KD Baung-3509 for about one and a half hours before finally KD Baung-3509 successfully driven out of the Indonesian border (Vivanews, 2009).

As of the case of Ambalat I, the incident continued to cause great repercussion in Indonesia. The organization of Pembela Kesatuan Tanah Air Indonesia Bersatu (Pekat-Indonesia Bersatu) for example, continues to rally in front of the Malaysian Embassy in Jakarta. In the rally, the chair of Pekat, Iqbal Daud Hutapea, urged that "Malaysia to respect the Ambalat waters " and "if these demands are not heeded, we are ready to be at the frontline of war" (Ferdianto, 2009). In fact, Pekat also threatened to take Malaysian citizens in Jakarta if within 7x24 hours, the Malaysian government ignored the demands to apologize for Indonesian people (JPNN, 2009). Furthermore, during the case of Ambalat II, issue of family conflicts and abuse arose involving Indonesian citizens in Malaysia. The case involving the artist Manohara Odelia Pinot with the Tengku Temenggong of the Kelantan Kingdom, Tengku Muhammad Fakhry Petra, which made the situation worse (Al-Yamani, 2009). Manohara family who received widespread attention from Indonesian people following the issue of the persecutions seemed to have taken advantage of the tension of Ambalat II issue. Therefore, Manohara then joined the rally held in front of the Malaysian Embassy with Laskar Merah Putih (Malaysia Kini, 2009). Meanwhile, an organization Forum Betawi Rempug (FBR) who also held a rally at the Malaysian Embassy claimed to have prepared around 200 volunteers to be sent to Ambalat (M. Wirajuda, 2014).

In subsequent developments, the Indonesian people on the border areas such as in Nunukan, Sebatik Island, East Kalimantan were also provoked by the tensions between the two countries. In fact, following the Ambalat issue, some people in Sebatik Island admitted that they would start a shooting practice with the TNI-AL (Aryanto, Ari, & Riyanto, 2009). In Sebatik Island, a group claimed to be the National Defenders Army was held a training similar to real military, such as wearing military uniforms, crawling and creeping practice and to a guerrilla warfare strategy (Wahyudi, 2017). The indignation of Indonesian people in the border area of the two countries began when some Indonesian fishermen were prohibited from fishing in the Ambalat waters by the Malaysian security forces. The incident began when the issue of four crews aboard the KM Aldi Jaya II who fishing in the Ambalat waters were arrested and taken board to a Malaysian military ship. Then, the four Indonesian fishermen admitted that their catch was seized and then beaten by the Malaysian security forces (Meuko, 2009). In addition to the people of Sebatik Island, Dayak tribe in Palangkaraya, Central Kalimantan, who are members of the Central Kalimantan Dayak Youth Association also claimed to have gathered around 400 traditional troops. According to the chair, Yansen Binti, the troops received basic training and had the ability to do battle traditionally. They **were** always in ready state should the President declare war. Their readiness was not merely a joke, but **would** really be done should it happened (Karana, 2009). This shows that the people of Indonesia on the border are quite affected by the Ambalat II issued. In contrast to the Ambalat I issue, the Indonesian people on the border tend to be less concerned to the issue. The hindrance of their economic activities following the prohibition of fishing of Ambalat waters is a fairly strong reason for the demise of the people on the border.

**Results and Discussion**

1. *The foreign policy of President SBY on Ambalat case*

Meanwhile at the highest level, President Yudhoyono stated that this incident does not reoccur. Furthermore, President Yudhoyono expressed his opinion that in order to avoid conflict between the two nations and to maintain regional stability, it is better that the matter be resolved through negotiations. However, the media **was** seen as playing a crucial role in swaying the perception and political policies of Indonesian government. In fact, it is not an overstatement that the media **was** highly influential in shaping the attitudinal patterns of a large segment of the society in Indonesia in the case of Ambalat. Kompas, for instance, **was** among Indonesia’s media which plays a highly active role in covering the Ambalat case, which reportedly **had** led to misunderstanding with the then Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Najib Rajab (Malaysia Kini, 2005). This resulted in a series of critical meetings subsequent to the Ambalat case. The first meeting conducted behind closed-doors was in Bali on **22 – 23 March 2005** and followed by **25 – 26 2005** July in Yogyakarta and another one on the 27th-28th September 2005 in Johor Baru (Schofield & Storey, 2005). Yet as to the outcomes of these meetings, very limited information was released to the public.

Domestically, some cases call for closer attention as it is highly related to the source of tension in the Ambalat block. The year 2005 was a challenging phase for President Yudhoyono after the 2004 General Election. The increase in oil prices was among the most demanding issues that had to be resolved by President Yudhoyono’s government. The issue of oil crisis began in October 2004 when oil price in the international market increased to 50 dollar/barrel and eventually hit 60-70 dollar/barrel. As a result, the Indonesian government **needed** to cover a subsidy of 14 billion dollars in 2005 or 1/4 of the country's budget. At the same time, the currency exchange rate of Rupiah to dollar was down to Rp 10.000 per dollar (Liddle & Mujani, 2006). This situation **was** increasingly difficult if the country **was** threatened by the flight of large numbers of foreign investments (capital flights) if the economic emergency following the increase in world oil prices **were** not immediately resolved. Consequently, on the 1st of March 2005, the Indonesian government **raised** the oil price or commonly known by its local abbreviation, BBM, from Rp 1,810/Litter to Rp 2,400/litter. In fact, later on 1 October 2005 the Government was forced to revise the fuel price to a new high at that period at almost doubled or 87.5% of the original price from Rp 2,400/litter to Rp 4.500 per litter (Luthfi, Senevirathne, & Kaneko, 2017). Hence in the 2005, the Indonesian government raised the oil prices twice.

Simultaneously, with the high inflation rate at 17.11%, the increase in oil prices took a toll on the public. Moreover, the oil price hike **had** resulted in reduced subsidies that have been borne by the government. Furthermore, it implicates the emergence of what is known as spiral effect to the increase of some goods and services, especially in the household, industrial and transportation sectors (Artami & Hara, 2018). As for the effect of rising oil prices on some of the basic goods prices can be described in the **Table 2** below.

**Table 2.** List of basic goods prices that increased after 2005

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Type of Goods** | **Price Increase (%)** | **Type of Goods** | **Price Increase (%)** |
| **Paddy** | 0.23 | Construction | 2.041 |
| **Vegetables** | 0.26 | Groceries | 1.025 |
| **Livestock** | 0.441 | Restaurant | 0.821 |
| **Seafood** | 0.995 | Hotel | 0.767 |
| **Cooking Oil** | 0.471 | Railway | 2.824 |
| **Rice** | 0.561 | Land Transportation | 4.117 |
| **Sugar** | 0.65 | Water Transportation | 4.21 |
| **Mining** | 0.798 | Air Transportation | 0.097 |
| **Steel** | 0.537 | Communication | 0.481 |
| **Steel Industry** | 0.916 | Financial Services | 0.522 |
| **Electricity** | 0.08 | Others | 0.639 |
| **Gas** | 0.325 |  |  |
| **Clean Water** | 0.477 |  |  |

Source: Ikhsan, Sulistyo, Dartanto, & Usman (2005).

From the table above, it can be seen that the biggest increase occurred in the land transportation, water transportation, railway, construction and groceries. Other types of goods and services such as rice, sugar, vegetables and air transportation tend to increase by not more than one percent (1%). Nevertheless, the largest oil consumption sector is the agriculture sector, including agricultural services 16.38%, fisheries 15.63% and forestry 10.59%. While oil consumers outside agriculture sector are transportation 18.87%, construction 11.86% and electricity 11.72%; yet indeed the lowest of these is the household with oil consumption level of 2.23% (Oktaviani & Sahara, 2005). Apart from that, the increase in oil prices in 2005 also shifted the poverty figures from 31.1 million to 39.3 million Indonesian residents, and arguably led to the various strikes and protests as well as demands for salary increase (Handoko, 2009; Muthalib, Adam, Rostin, Saenong, & Suriadi, 2018). Throughout 2005, at least 96 cases of strikes and 56,000 job losses had occurred (Handoko, 2009, 162-163). In fact, after the increase of oil prices in 2005, the number of labour workforce who were fired reached a total of tens of thousands or spiked up to 150% compared to prior oil prices (Lazuardi, 2006).

Economically, the reasons for increasing oil prices are rational. However, from a political perspective, the process of increasing oil prices is difficult to be accepted and done. The reason is that the process of decision-making is often exploited by certain political interests. (Ikhsan et al., 2005). Therefore, it is not surprising that various objections and denials continuously appear in the process. This can be seen or explicated by a number of social-political contexts, including the lack of perceived relevance of the increasing oil prices in the midst of injustice, the rampant corruptions, the high salaries of the elites as well as the marginalization of the poor. All these have an impact on the decline of government integrity (Benes, Cheon, Urpelainen, & Yang, 2015; Roberts, 2005). The increase in oil prices in 2005 was seen by many as a "lie" from the President because President Yudhoyono promised in his campaign prior to general election not to increase oil prices by 50%. But the opposite occurred, the government increased the oil price by 107% of its original price (Detik, 2004).

Meanwhile, following the strain of a two-way relationship between Indonesia and Malaysia, on 6 June 2009 President Yudhoyono held a meeting with the committee of Defence and Foreign Affairs Office in parliament to discuss the latest situation on the Ambalat issues and planned on the departure of a special force to Malaysia. As a result, a total of five members of Parliament, namely Yusron Ihza Mahendra, Happy Bone, Andreas Pareira, Shidqy Wahab and Joko Susilo met with the Prime Minister Najib Razak on 10 June 2009 (Khafifah, 2009). To alleviate the tension, some series of negotiations were held. The series of talks were preceded by conversation via telephone call between President Yudhoyono and PM Najib Razak on 9 June 2009 shortly before the arrival of the five Indonesian MPs to Malaysia. According to President Yudhoyono, the Malaysian Prime Minister gave positive response and agreed on the steps to be taken. In addition, President Yudhoyono also urged Malaysia to continue negotiations so the issues can be resolved immediately (Rachmawati, 2018).

In the Ambalat II issue, the provocative statements tend to be done by the elites who were competing in the 2009 presidential election. Thus, it can be said the statements by political elites in Jakarta, including President Yudhoyono, tend to trend to a political campaign ahead of the 2009 presidential election. In a meeting, President Yudhoyono who was a Democratic Party candidate, stated that he had talked with the TNI commander and the TNI-AL commander, which would not allow a single inch of land being violated by Malaysia (Rochmi, 2009). President Yudhoyono also stated that at every meeting with the Malaysian leaders including Najib Razak, he always urged that the negotiation process on the border issue be resolved quickly (Kompas, 2009). In addition, President Yudhoyono also committed to increase the budget on national defence and encourage the national defence industry to reduce reliance on foreign suppliers (RSIS, 2014). However, President Yudhoyono also hopes that the Ambalat case can be resolved through diplomatic channels rather than war (Hanura, 2018).

1. *The military’s responses on the Ambalat case*

As the tension escalated during Ambalat I case, Indonesia’s military proposed to deploy 700 personal or equivalent to a battalion of naval force from Surabaya. This military force was also equipped with six RM-70 rocket launches which is said to have a reach of 20km and an explosive capacity of 2 km. In addition, they are also armed with the artillery of Howitzer-105 and Howitzer-122. Furthermore, as if suddenly in the month of November 2005 Indonesia conducted the largest military exercise involving 40,000 troops as well as 40 war ships of various categories (Dollah et al., 2007). Nevertheless, a few top ranking officers of Indonesia’s military denied that these exercises were aimed at carrying out “Konfrontasi” confrontation against Malaysia (Historically, ‘Konfrontasi’ is a specific term used to describe a period of conflict between Indonesia-Malaysia). Instead TNI-AU argued these activities of patrolling had been conducted and it is not within a context of a provocation.” TNI-AL supported such perspective saying that the deployment and movements of war ships were a routine practise of the ships (Manan, 2005).

Following the tension especially during Ambalat II case, the TNI-AL continued to demonstrate its preparedness. In August 2009, the TNI-AL ruled seven warships **deployed to** the Ambalat waters. The seven warships were KRI Sultan Iskandar Muda, KRI Badik, KRI Kerapu, KRI Kakap, KRI Tulo Rimo, KRI Tedung Selar and KRI Tedung Naga (Wibisono, 2009). According to the Commander of Gugus Tempur Timur of TNI-AL, First Admiral RM Harahap, patrolling was expected to prevent Malaysian ships to violate into the Ambalat block (Wibisono, 2009). However, the issue of violation by Malaysian ships again occurred in October 2009. In this incident, one of the Indonesian warships, namely KRI Layang-805, which was conducting a patrol around Ambalat territory, detected two Malaysian warships, namely KD YU-3508 and KD Ganas-3503, encroach in Ambalat. In response to the issue, the TNI-AL confirmed that the territory that was violated by the ships of both countries was still in dispute (Setianingtyas, 2009).

Apart from that, Ambalat I and II issues were detected as a trigger for the rise in defence budget issue that have received little attention. The Indonesian Military (TNI) who is under spotlight is certainly interested in the Ambalat issue. However, the demands of raising the military budget were approved by the Indonesian government in 2012. According to the Indonesian Cabinet Secretariat, to meet the Minimum Essential Forces (MEF), the 2012 military budget was increased to Rp 72.54 trillion and in 2013 increased to Rp 77 trillion (Sekretariat Kabinet Indonesia, 2012). The total budget was twice larger than the health and education budget combined, which only Rp 30.915 trillion (Aritonang, 2012).

Remarkably, during Ambalat II case, after the Commander of Malaysian Armed Force (ATM), General Abdul Aziz Zainal, visited Jakarta on 12 June 2009, the two countries resumed the negotiation on 30 June 2009 in Jakarta. During this negotiation, Malaysia was represented by Defence Minister Dato' Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and Indonesia was represented by Defence Minister Juwono Sudarsono (Wibisono, 2009). The meeting was on 20 July 2009 in which the two countries had negotiated in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah and agreed to resolve the Ambalat issue through negotiations and would not discuss them in the ICJ (Arsana, 2014).

1. *The parliament’s responses on the Ambalat case*

During Ambalat I case, many leaders including in the parliamentary participate in adding fuel to the fire of existing tension. The member of Commissioner I in Indonesia’s house of parliament or Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat (DPR) in Jakarta, Djoko Susilo, for example, **had** pushed for the shooting Malaysia’s ship which enters Indonesia’s territory. Djoko also believed that the military power of Indonesia’s navy (TNI AL) cannot be defeated by Malaysia’s TLDM. Indeed, Djoko’s assertion **was** also supported by the Speaker of the Parliament, Agung Laksono, who stated that there is a need for military action. This **was** so in order to protect the sovereignty of the Republic of Indonesia. Nevertheless, according to the Chief Justice of the Constitutional Courts, Jimly Asshidiqqie, all parties should practice self-restraint. He stated that as countries of *“serumpun”* (sharing the same identity and heritage), both nations should prioritize dialogues and meetings and arrive at decisions together (Yuliawati, 2005).

The variety of different responses from these elites portray that the Ambalat issue is essentially an elite issue by construction or a projected contestation among the elites. This can also be explained by the fact that the Ambalat issue has budgetary or financial implication, especially in the defence sector, which is said to not receive sufficient attention for some time. From this perspective, the Ambalat issue can be seen as giving ammunition or even as “benefitting” some of those in the Ministry of Defence, especially in beefing up the defence budget. The first military leader who questioned the defence budget is General Endriartono Sutarto. He argued for the pressing need for modernization of TNI in facing future threats and as a deterrence if a conflict occurs (Dollah et al., 2007). The General’s call **had** also been supported by parliamentarians in the DPR (house of representatives). Subsequently, DPR tabled a budget of Rp22 trillion, whereby part the Indonesian Navy (TNI-AL) was allocated Rp12 trillion as proposed by TNI-AL, Rp 3 trillion for TNI-AD, and another Rp 7 trillion for the air force (TNI-AU) (Dollah et al., 2007).

Besides that, a few national figures in Indonesia also made statements which are provocative. The former fourth President of Indonesia and advisor to the Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa, Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) stated that Indonesia’s arm forces should not be afraid because Malaysia’s military **was** fundamentally weak with a small country’s population (Dollah et al., 2007). Likewise, the Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan (PDI-P) issued a specific call for halt of talks stating that “we need not hold talks about this group of islands because the island belongs to us. If needed, it should be defended until the last drop of blood.” Echoing this, the head of Consultative Council of Citizens (Ketua Majelis Permesyuaratan Rakyat, in short MPR) Hidayat Nurwahid who represented Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) advised that “Indonesia should follow the example of Malaysia in bringing the issue to the international stage and urged that President Yudhoyono act more firmly” (Supriyanto, 2005).

Political rivalry between the government, in this case President Yudhoyono and oppositions, was one of the factors that warmed the Ambalat issue. It should also be explained that since the victory of the 2004 general election, President Yudhoyono's power in Parliament was inadequate. This is because of the 550 seats in parliament, the Democratic Party that supported President Yudhoyono only had a 10.4% majority of seats. The biggest majority owned by Golkar 23%, followed by other parties such as PDI-P 19.8%; Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP) 10.6%; PKB 9.5%; Partai Amanat Nasional (PAN) 9.5%; and PKS 8.2 % (Liddle & Mujani, 2006). However, the political situation changed immediately when the coalition of large and small parties immediately supported the President Yudhoyono’ government except for PDI-P. Thus, the comparison of seats between the pro-government alliance which calls itself the "National Coalition" and the opposition alliance or known as the "People's coalition" was 61% to 39% (Schofield & Storey, 2005). Therefore, based on the domestic scenario, the issue of Ambalat I benefits some parties in Indonesia. This is because, as stated by Clive Schofield and Ian Storey, the Ambalat issue can at least be a "justification" of internal political pressure after the oil prices rising in March 2005.

In the meantime, during Ambalat II case, the political power of President Yudhoyono’s political power in parliament was fundamentally stronger than after the 2004 General Election as discussed earlier. However, in order to succeed on the second term of his Presidential run, President Yudhoyono will have to fight even harder than before as it was very different from the general elections for parliament members. In general, the depiction of President Yudhoyono’s power in parliament after the 2009 General Election can be seen in the **Table 3** below.

**Table 3.** Results of the major parties in the 2009 General Elections

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Party** | **Percentage (%)** | **Number of seats** | **Changes** |
| **Demokrat Party** | 20.9 | 148 | 13.4/+91 |
| **Golkar Party** | 14.5 | 108 | -7.1/-20 |
| **PDI-P** | 14.0 | 93 | -4.5/-16 |
| **PKS** | 7.9 | 59 | +0.6/+14 |
| **PAN** | 6.0 | 42 | -0.4/-10 |
| **PPP** | 5.3 | 39 | -2.8/-19 |
| **PKB** | 4.9 | 26 | -5.7/-26 |
| **Gerindra** | 4.5 | 30 | +4.5/+30 |
| **Hanura** | 3.8 | 15 | 3.8/+15 |

*Source: Mietzner (2009)*

The table above shows that the Democratic Party with a total of 148 seats **was** stronger if other parties formed a coalition called the “Joint Secretariat”. Almost all the parties joined the “Joint Secretariat,” except for the PDI-P and Gerindra in which they **preferred** to vote against it. The Hanura party was in the middle of the two, not joining the “Joint Secretariat” nor it was in opposition to President Yudhoyono’s government. In this regard, the Hanura party argued that it could agree or oppose against any policies issued by the government. If the government’s policies were in favour of the people, then the Hanura party had the right to support it. But if the policies were at the expense of the people, the Hanura party was obliged to take a position outside the government (Mietzner, 2013). Of the 560 seats in the parliament, the "joint secretariat" that were in favour of President Yudhoyono held about 422 seats, 123 opposition and the neutral, the Hanura party, with 15 seats. The Table above also shows the four successful, they are the Democratic Party, the PKS party, the Gerindra party and the Hanura party. The other parties were disappointed with the results, especially the Golkar Party, which experienced a decline in votes with 7.1% compared to the 2004 General Elections with 21.6%. During Ambalat II case, Indonesian parliamentary members from multiple political parties also involved in the negotiations mostly from Yudhoyono’s backed political personnel. For instance, five MPs claimed to have met with some of the Malaysian elites including the TLDM Commander, General Abdul Aziz Jaafar, who repeatedly apologized for the incidents that occurred in Ambalat and promised that such events would never happen again.

Indeed, the tension between Indonesia and Malaysia during Ambalat cases had led some negative impacts. First, the intensification of pro-war sentiment, protests, and the emergence of "Ganyang Malaysia" voluntarism, all of which are very sensitive to relations between Indonesia and Malaysia. Second, amidst the sentiments of anti-Malaysian nationalism, as many as 60.5% of Indonesian respondents consider Malaysia as a major threat to Indonesia (Benny, 2012). Third, the Indonesian media provocation also **tended** to worsen the people to people relations which led to the rise of Indonesian negative sentiments between Indonesian and Malaysian (Ali Fauzi, 2009). During the 2007-2008 period, for example, one study showed that cyber world had experienced a "cyber-war", which was quite alarming (Soebhan, 2008). The post-Ambalat I cyber war was an unprecedented event and it was also for the first time to happen in the history of Indonesian-Malaysian relations (Madu, 2008). The two trending topics were "I hate Indon" and "Malingsia". It is found that the keyword "Malingsia" (using quotation marks) generated 64,700 pages, while the keyword "Indon" (using quotation marks) generated 121,000 pages (Soebhan, 2008). In addition, the two "groups" had been found guilty of representing Indonesia and Malaysia, they are e-Ganyang (Indonesia) and e-Godam (Malaysia) in the cyber war. At least 24 websites in Malaysia were targeted by e-Ganyang, which include Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), the Public Works Department, Sultan of Perak, Perak State Information Department and several others government websites. While e-Godam targeted at least 32 websites, but only two government websites were hacked, they are the General Election Commissions (KPU) Surabaya and Tulungagung City Government’s website, East Java (Madu, 2008). Thus, the role of domestic is obvious and cannot be ruled out in the Ambalat case.

**Conclusion**

In this discussion it can be concluded that Indonesia's foreign policy towards Malaysia in the Ambalat case is very strict and patriotic. It also shows that Indonesia’s foreign policy towards Malaysia changes dramatically, especially after Suharto’s era. Specifically, in the case of Ambalat I and II, the role of domestic factors is seen to be more dominant. Interestingly, the Ambalat issue had instead been used by the Jakarta’s elites, especially President Yudhoyono, to divert public attention from government policies. The Ambalat I issue, for example, coincided with the Indonesian government's decision to increase oil prices and weak President Yudhoyono’s power in parliament. Meanwhile, the Ambalat II issue coincided with the 2009 General Election. In the Ambalat I and II issues, the media became an important factor in provoking, shaping the opinion and the raising the sentiments of Indonesian nationalism against the Ambalat case. Domestic politics thus plays a vital role in international relations because it has the ability to intervene in overseas issues for political reasons. This was in contrast to the widespread realist view that state behaviour was completely determined by the influence of international structures (Yazid, 2000). Instead, a new realist version known as neoclassical realism, as Sterling-Folker (1997) argues, domestic politics is a significant factor in shaping state behavior since the international situation allows it (Rose, 1998). Internal elements (elites) used the Ambalat case (I and II) to acquire political support in the face of unpopular public policy. The low pressure of international politics following the end of the Cold War led to the rise of domestic actors in Ambalat issues.

The application of Graham Allison's rational actor model further strengthens this analysis. As per their respective political positions, the national political actors in Indonesia are thought to employ the rational actor model. The legislative body and the executive branch both appear to be interested in using the Ambalat case for political gain. Even parts of the security apparatus are attempting to capitalize on the Ambalat issue in order to strengthen the position of their defense budget. But compared to other actors, the involvement of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono seems to be more dominating at all levels, from decision-making to the political exploitation of the Ambalat issue. However, it is interesting to note that in both Ambalat I and II, the actors are all aware of where they stand politically in the controversy surrounding the Ambalat case. Unfortunately, Indonesia has to pay a high price for the Ambalat issue, which is more advantageous for local actors there, by escalating political tensions with Malaysia as a brotherhood country.

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