

Leveraging Defense Diplomacy through Humanitarian Assistance: Indonesia's HADR Engagement with Fiji

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Abstract

Indonesia and Fiji share similar climate situations and both are prone to disasters. As natural disasters affect human security in Fiji, Indonesia's defense diplomacy through Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) towards Fiji is crucial as Indonesia is no stranger in providing HADR to affected countries and to play an important role in bringing dialogue between Indonesia and Fiji. The research problem is about how Indonesia can enhance defense cooperation with Fiji by the means of defense diplomacy through the implementation HADR. The purpose of this research is to analyze Indonesian defense diplomacy in the implementation of HADR towards Fiji. This research employs qualitative method with descriptive analysis. The research data were obtained from literature studies and informants, which were then analyzed using qualitative analysis technique and SWOT analysis. The results demonstrate that Indonesia's defense diplomacy through the implementation of HADR have goals and efforts such as CBMs, capacity building, defense industry, security sector reform, international reputation, and foreign policy support that can enhance Indonesia and Fiji defense cooperation. As the conclusion, Indonesia has contributed HADR to Fiji as a defense diplomacy activity that has been well realized.

Keywords: Indonesia, Fiji, defense diplomacy, HADR, defense cooperation

INTRODUCTION

Natural disasters, whether caused by weather, climate, or geological phenomena, pose significant threats to human life, infrastructure, and environmental stability. Increasingly, these disasters have been intensified by climate change, resulting in more frequent and unpredictable events such as tropical storms, floods, droughts, and wildfires. The Indonesian Defense White Paper classifies natural disasters as a factual and ongoing threat that challenges national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and public safety (Indonesian Ministry of Defense, 2015). As a non-traditional security issue, disasters intersect with human security and can escalate into broader crises involving poverty, food scarcity, disease, and conflict.

Climate-related disasters are growing more severe, often with cascading effects that challenge state response capacities and regional stability. With both geological and climate-related risks intensifying, the need for comprehensive, collaborative disaster management strategies is urgent.

Indonesia, situated at the convergence of three tectonic plates within the Pacific Ring of Fire, is one of the world's most disaster-prone countries. Its archipelagic geography, with over 17,000 islands, exacerbates vulnerability to earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, floods, and other climate-induced events. To Indonesia's east, the Pacific Islands Countries (PICs), particularly Fiji, face similar vulnerabilities. Both countries are archipelagic, disaster-prone located near the Pacific Ring of Fire with tropical climates and histories of natural disasters.

These shared vulnerabilities have fostered a mutual understanding of climate threats and a growing recognition of the need for cooperation. Subsequently, Indonesia's president, Prabowo, explained that, "Indonesia and Fiji have the same challenges in facing climate challenges and rising sea levels" (INP, 2025). Moreover, cyclones are a major weather hazard for Fiji since they tend to occur in the Fiji waters, and it accounted for 65% of Fiji's disasters (EM-DAT, 2025). Thus far, severe events such as Cyclone Winston in 2016 and Cyclone Harold

in 2020 demonstrated the scale of devastation. These shared vulnerabilities have fostered a mutual understanding of climate threats and growing recognition of the need for cooperation.

Diplomatic history between Indonesia and Fiji has been established since 1974 with the purpose of increasing economic prosperity and supporting political cooperation between the South Pacific and Southeast Asia. While at the time Indonesia still focuses their foreign policy towards great powers and Southeast Asian region, Indonesia welcomes the relations with South Pacific (Precillia, 2018).

Given the rise of non-traditional security threats like climate-induced disasters, defense diplomacy offers a strategic platform to address shared vulnerabilities. Through Military Operations other than War (MOOTW), Indonesia has actively participated in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) missions abroad. These efforts reflect Indonesia's broader commitment to global humanitarian values and its constitutional mandate to contribute to world peace and security. This is in line with defense diplomacy new concept of military cooperative use that involves peacetime as a tool of foreign and security policy (Cotter & Forster, 2004). Additionally, defense diplomacy activity can be implemented through assistance with logistics in crisis and humanitarian activities induced by natural occurrences and disasters among other things (Drab, 2018).

Moreover, as this research focuses on defense diplomacy activity through HADR towards Fiji, there are also some previous research relevant to this research. Multiple relevant research include "*Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy through Humanitarian Assistance to Fiji*" by A. A. Banyu Perwita, M. Arkan, Yasintha Selly R., and Annisa Dipa Pertiwi (2022), "*Disaster Relief as Indonesia Soft Power Diplomacy Case of Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu*" by V. O. Wati, Deffi A. P. Sari, and Sobar Sutisna (2018), and "*Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief in the Perspective of Indonesia Defense Policy*" by Eko G. Samudro, I Dewa Ketut Kerta Widana, Adi Subiyanto, and Ersha Mayori (2022).

Thus, with this research focused on Indonesia and Fiji's bilateral relations, this research explores how Indonesia's defense diplomacy through the implementation of HADR can strengthen bilateral ties with Fiji and address the rising threat of climate-related disasters. With shared experiences and mutual interests, enhancing cooperation between the two nations is not only strategic but necessary in security regional stability and protecting human lives

RESEARCH METHODS

The research method used in this research is qualitative method with descriptive analysis, where the data to be obtained is interpreted to understand the context more broadly. Qualitative method as Creswell defines is an understanding inquiry process utilizing different methodological traditions of inquiry that investigates a societal or humanitarian problem (Creswell, 2014). Moreover, this research also employs SWOT analysis where the external and internal factors such as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the research problem will be analyzed further. Thus, this research tried to explore the defense diplomacy of Indonesia through the implementation of HADR to leverage engagement with Fiji. The researchers analyzed the collected data through qualitative method, with literature review, analyzed through descriptive information and SWOT analysis, where the external and internal factors such as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats will be analyzed further

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Implementation of Indonesia's HADR Activities in Fiji

Natural disaster is one of Fiji's main concerns. This is why Fiji government in forums and meetings always raises the issue. As a result, Fiji needed help when hit by major disasters Cyclone Winston in 2016 and Cyclone Winston in 2020. Indonesia helped Fiji in the form of defense diplomacy. Defense diplomacy was introduced as a new concept that involved peacetime cooperative use and related infrastructure (Cotter & Forster, 2004) where they employ military powers to assist in the creation of trusting environment and a convergence of interests (Charillon, Balzacq, & Ramel, 2020). In its development, defense diplomacy is very important as a forum for defense actors to meet global challenges in a peaceful environment.

This can also be associated with the role of military personnel where they play a role in operations other than war which is called Military Operations Other than War. This HADR agenda is also mentioned in the types of MOOTW stated in Law No. 34 of 2004 on the Indonesian Military that explains that the Indonesian military works in assisting in coping with the consequences of natural disasters, displacement, and providing humanitarian assistance. It is undeniable that in the emergency response phase of disasters, both the Indonesian Army, Air Force, and Navy play quite an important role. However, in implementing HADR, there needs to be cooperation with actors other than the military. This agenda also requires other government officials such as the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Indonesian Military and the National Agency for Disaster Countermeasure (NADC).

In Indonesia's assistance to Fiji during Cyclone Winston and Cyclone Harold, the assistance was a form of emergency response post-disaster. Disaster management in a state of emergency disaster must be carried out quickly and precisely, which requires quick and precise decision-making to prevent or reduce loss of life and the spread of the disaster's impact (BNPB, 2011). Because Indonesia's assistance is an emergency response, Indonesia needs to consider several factors.

Cooperation between ministries for HADR is very much needed because they will be involved and form a joint command unit for disaster relief operations. In addition to the assignment of tasks in HADR operations, it is important to consider the funds to be provided. The researcher found that the cost of money given directly to the affected country and other funding is determined by two budgets, namely the *Dana Siap Pakai* (DSP) and the one charged to the State Revenue and Expenditure Budget. *Dana Siap Pakai* are funds that are always available and reserved by the Government to be used in emergency disaster status.

From the factors that need to be considered, such as the roles of the actors involved, the implementation of operational activities and the determination of the budget used or given, Indonesia's process in mobilizing aid to Fiji through the emergency decision-making process concept is in three stages (IFRC, 2025), which are: 1) Assessing the situation and needs. The Indonesian government needs to see the condition of Fiji after the disaster and what is needed by the affected people. But because this assistance is overseas assistance, there is no team that can come directly to assess the situation. This is an obstacle that needs to be considered because of connectivity and limited resources. 2) Determining goals and identifying forms of assistance. After observing the conditions and needs of Fiji post Cyclone Winston and Cyclone Harold, Indonesia deployed humanitarian assistance and logistics based on the determination. 3) Implementing the response plan. The implementation of the plan is HADR. Humanitarian assistance in the form of Indonesian military personnel capabilities in doing reconstructive buildings, and logistics such as cash, foods, blankets, tents, and many more.

Indonesia's Strategy through HADR towards Fiji

In the implementation of Indonesia's HADR towards Fiji, there are also internal and external factors of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) that needs to be considered to play an active and effective role.

Table 1. Internal and External Factors

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
A strong capability of Indonesian military	Geographical distance and logistical challenges
Multilateral experience in regional framework and international missions (ASEAN, UN peacekeeping)	Resource and funding constraints for sustained international HADR
Have a long-standing diplomatic and a formal Defense Cooperation Agreement with Fiji	Limited strategic focus on the Pacific region
Structured coordination between institutions (NADC, MoD, MoFA, Indonesian military)	Language and cultural barriers in international deployments
A well-established civil-military coordination systems	Potential bureaucratic delays across multiple institutions
HADR presents a diplomatic image that is culturally neutral and non-threatening	Reliance on ad-hoc missions, lacking institutionalized or long-term HADR commitments
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
Enhancing regional influence and soft power through humanitarian efforts	Increased frequency and scale of disasters may exceed response capacity
Expand joint training exercises, education, and capacity building	Geopolitical competition in the region may limit Indonesia's influence
Defense industry market or collaboration	Natural disaster overlap at home may divert focus from external assistance
Act as a bridge between ASEAN and Pacific Islands nations	Risk of aid politicization or misinterpretation as strategic maneuvering
Promote ASEAN-Pacific disaster diplomacy	Domestic political shift in Fiji may disrupt coordination
Participation and engage in regional security forums (PIDF)	Coordination breakdowns in high-pressure disaster situations

Source: Processed by the Researcher, 2025

The implementation of Indonesia's HADR is one of Indonesia's strategies to further enhance Indonesia and Fiji defense cooperation. Through the calculation of SWOT analysis done by the researcher, it finds that Indonesia's HADR is in the Quadrant 1, in the position of strengths and opportunities, which means the applied strategy should be SO strategy. The SO strategy utilizes all strengths to seize and take advantage of opportunities to the greatest extent possible. This strategy is also viewed as the aggressive strategy as it has favorable situation where both factors are positive factors. What this means is, Indonesia's HADR has sufficient strengths that can take advantage of existing opportunities to further develop suitable strategies to improve Indonesia's defense sector and enhance defense cooperation between Indonesia and Fiji.

In accordance with what has been calculated, the SO strategy that has been formed is to promote Indonesia as a regional HADR hub by leveraging Indonesian military capability and multilateral experience, initiate ASEAN-Pacific joint disaster response training, highlight Indonesia's civil-military coordination model, use diplomatic ties with Fiji to initiate ASEAN-

Pacific capacity building, and enhance soft power via culturally neutral disaster diplomacy in the South Pacific.

Promote Indonesia as a regional HADR hub by leveraging Indonesian military capability and multilateral experience means positioning Indonesia's role as the leading country for a rapid and reliable HADR. It is proven that the military has experience in conducting large-scale logistics and operational mechanisms from frequent domestic disasters, plus, Indonesia is also a participant in multilateral frameworks such as ASEAN and UN-led missions. What this can give to Indonesia is it enhances Indonesia's strategic visibility, trust, and influence in the Pacific while keeping its engagement framed in purely humanitarian, neutral, and non-threatening terms.

Initiate ASEAN-Pacific joint disaster response training, highlighting Indonesia's civil-military coordination model is also one of the main points of this Indonesia's strategy. NADC has a program called "*Siap Siaga*" which is a collaboration between Indonesia and Australia in the humanitarian field to strengthen disaster management capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region. The program focuses on increasing the country's readiness to face disasters, including prevention, preparation, response, and recovery. Although this program is a partnership program between Indonesia and Australia, countries in the Indo-Pacific region can participate in its workshops. However, in reality, joint training exercises have never been carried out between ASEAN and Pacific countries, including Indonesia and Fiji. So this needs to be emphasized again in order to strengthen capacity and build trust between ASEAN and the Pacific.

Indonesia has had diplomatic ties with Fiji since 1974. In the South Pacific, Fiji is a respected leader. Indonesia can initiate ASEAN-Pacific capacity building programs using diplomatic ties with Fiji. It means that by leveraging Indonesia's long-standing relations with Fiji can create programs connecting ASEAN disaster management capacity to the Pacific needs. In this case, Fiji could act as a gateway for broader cooperation. To further strengthen Indonesia and emphasize the opportunity to enhance regional influence, from this strategy Indonesia could build local capacity, strengthen diplomatic ties, and strengthen Indonesia's identity as a South-South partner and bridge between ASEAN and the Pacific.

Lastly, it is to enhance soft power via culturally neutral disaster diplomacy in the South Pacific. South Pacific region as previously mentioned is disaster prone. This includes the likes of Fiji's neighboring countries such as Vanuatu, Samoa, Tonga, and Solomon Islands which are also often hit by disasters. For example, Cyclone Harold in 2020 that hit Fiji also hit Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Tonga. This strategy frames Indonesia's HADR as a humanitarian, culturally respectful, and apolitical initiative, aligning with Pacific values. If this was to be an initiative, it positions Indonesia as a trustworthy partner, reducing suspicion or fear of strategic motives.

Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy Objectives through HADR

The concept of defense diplomacy shifts over time, but it is irrefutable that defense diplomacy is characterized by cooperation between countries to reduce any tension that could escalate to conflict, to enhance cooperation, build mutual trust in each other, an increasing defense capacity as a result of cooperation, knowledge exchanges between countries, sustaining peacekeeping operations, and an advanced defense industry. Based on these characteristics, Syawfi summarizes these characteristics as confidence building measures (CBMs), capacity building, and defense industry (Syawfi, 2009). However, in this research discussion, the researcher will only focus on two of defense diplomacy efforts of what Syawfi has characterized, which are CBMs and capacity building, and other four objectives such as sector reform, strategic engagement, foreign policy support, and international reputation.

Indonesia's efforts in implementing HADR as a form of defense diplomacy activity to Fiji are certainly aimed at improving the CBMs of Indonesia and Fiji. CBMs build good relations between countries, reduce tensions and misperceptions, be open and transparent in developing military capabilities so that other parties do not consider it a threat and can foster mutual trust

between countries (Syawfi, 2009). From CBMs indicators, an increasing communication between Indonesia and Fiji, also from agreements, forums, and activities—Fiji put a trust to Indonesia, as this CBMs can be seen as a development of mutual trusts. Especially after Indonesia implemented HADR for Fiji amidst the Cyclone Winston in 2016.

Capacity building that are commonly used by many countries, namely: technology exchange, training exchange, doctrine improvement, and learning through sharing military experiences. The agenda of HADR as defense diplomacy activities itself cannot be separated from capacity building. Thus, from the implementation of Indonesia's HADR as defense diplomacy activity to address natural disaster issue in Fiji, the researcher can see that Indonesia and Fiji will receive capacity building from Indonesia's HADR. From Cyclone Winston 2016 HADR, Indonesia deploy military Engineer Corps to reconstruct QVS. This infrastructure recovery enhances community resilience and adaptive capacity. The military's construction and engineering operations introduced best practices in disaster reconstruction. This is also known as technical knowledge transfer. This improves Fiji's technical capacity and disaster recovery understanding.

Indonesia's use of HADR in Fiji as a core activity of its MOOTW demonstrates a deliberate shift toward non-threatening, humanitarian, and developmental functions. This transformation aligns Indonesia's military with modern, democratic norms, portraying the military not just as a war-fighting institution, but as a proactive actor in humanitarian and disaster response. By operating in Fiji, a foreign, friendly, and non-conflict country, Indonesian military demonstrates its ability to contribute constructively to human security and regional stability.

By implementing HADR, Indonesia transforms this shared vulnerability into a strategic engagement opportunity. This strategic engagement enhances cooperation, making it practical and operational rather than merely symbolic. It positions Indonesia as a key security partner in the South Pacific, a region where Fiji plays a central role, and where Indonesia otherwise has limited direct defense relationships.

On the other hand, Indonesia's defense diplomacy through HADR in Fiji is also a tool for foreign policy support. The South Pacific is strategically important for Indonesia; not only because of geographical proximity but also due to diplomatic challenges and economic interests. Through visible and impactful HADR missions, Indonesia builds goodwill with Fiji, who is a respected member of regional forums such as the PIF and PIDF. Indonesia also positions itself as a responsible, constructive actor willing to invest resources in the stability and resilience of its Pacific neighbors, and gains access to diplomatic dialogues and networks in the South Pacific that might otherwise be difficult to enter. By strengthening bilateral cooperation with Fiji, Indonesia indirectly boosts its influence in multilateral settings.

Lastly, defense diplomacy through HADR also serves the goal of improving international reputation. Despite facing its own internal challenges, Indonesia has consistently provided timely assistance to Fiji in times of major natural disasters. This commitment demonstrates Indonesia's willingness to help another countries, projecting an image of a capable and reliable country. From the perspective of Fiji, this creates a narrative of Indonesia as a benevolent and proactive power. Fiji, grateful for this support, is willing to advocate for Indonesia's positive image in regional forums, which amplifies the reputational benefits.

Towards an Enhanced Indonesia-Fiji Defense Cooperation

HADR as one of defense diplomacy activities does enhance Indonesia and Fiji defense cooperation. This is proven by the many continuations in cooperation between Indonesia and Fiji. For example, after Indonesia's HADR mission in Fiji has been carried out, the visit of the Fiji's Minister of Defense and Security to Jakarta in November 4, 2016, reaffirmed the commitment of both parties to strengthen bilateral relations and expand cooperation in the defense sector based on the principles of equality, mutual benefit, respect and trust (Badan Pembinaan Hukum Nasional Kementerian Hukum dan Hak Asasi Manusia, 2020).

Then, on September 29, 2017, the MoD of the Republic of Indonesia Ryamizard Ryacudu and the Minister of Defense and National Security of the Republic of Fiji Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, signed the Agreement between the Republic of Indonesia and the Republic of Fiji on Cooperation in the Field of Defense in Jakarta. Which was ratified in 2023. Moreover, the ratified agreement, Law No. 2 of 2023 on Agreement between the government of the Republic of Indonesia and the government of the Republic of Fiji on Cooperation in the Field of Defense, stated several scopes of cooperation such as exchange of visits between defense agencies and armed forces; regular bilateral dialogue and consultation on strategic defense and military issues of mutual concern; capacity building in the defense and military fields of the parties, including seminars, workshops, training programs, and education; exchange of military intelligence; increased cooperation in the defense industry such as technology transfer, joint research, joint production and marketing; and joint quality assurance; and other areas mutually agreed upon (Indonesia, 2023).

Thus, by centering defense diplomacy on HADR, which is a universally non-threatening and highly relevant agenda, Indonesia effectively uses its diplomatic and military tools to strengthen bilateral defense cooperation, support national strategic objectives, and contribute positively to regional security. Indonesia's defense diplomacy through HADR is also not limited to symbolic aid and assistance. It builds mutual trusts between Indonesia and Fiji, enhances and strengthen Indonesia's military capacity, reinforces defense sector reform by modernizing TNI's role making Indonesia's defense diplomacy approach acceptable and modern, turns shared challenges of disaster risk into strategic engagement, supports foreign policy by opening diplomatic channels in the South Pacific, and strengthen international reputation by building goodwill and lowers barriers to deeper institutional ties.

CONCLUSION

The research shows that HADR functions not only as a humanitarian tool but also as an effective channel for defense diplomacy. The implementation has been well received by Fiji despite numeral factors. So to evaluate and strengthen the approach, the research applied SWOT analysis, revealing Indonesia's position favors the strengths and opportunities. The recommended SO strategies include promoting Indonesia as a regional hub, initiating ASEAN-Pacific joint disaster response training, using diplomatic ties with Fiji to foster ASEAN-Pacific capacity building, and leveraging culturally neutral disaster diplomacy to enhance soft power. Thus, the implementation of HADR by Indonesia toward Fiji demonstrates how defense diplomacy can evolve beyond traditional military cooperation into an instrument for CBMs, capacity building, security sector reform, strategic engagement, foreign policy support, and international reputation. Notably, through the implementation of HADR in addressing natural disaster issues Fiji have led to an enhanced defense cooperation between both countries with concrete outcome of the 2017 Defense Cooperation Agreement which was then ratifies as Law No. 2 of 2023, which formalized bilateral mechanisms for dialogue, training, defense industry collaboration, and intelligence exchange.

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