

Optimizing the Northern Fortress as a Strategic Support for Indonesia's New Import Gateway

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Abstract

This study examines the optimization of military defense in North Sulawesi as a supporting pillar for Indonesia's new import gateway. Positioned strategically on the Pacific rim, North Sulawesi is expected to become a hub for imported goods to support national economic equalization. However, this import route shift also brings security challenges, including military and non-military threats such as smuggling, maritime crimes, and potential infiltration by terrorist groups. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method based on literature study, focusing on the analysis of naval and air defense strategies, modernization of main weapon systems (alutsista), and the enhancement of human resources within the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI). The results indicate that strengthening defense infrastructure, including the addition of warships, patrol vessels, and modern fighter aircraft, is urgently needed to maintain regional stability. Furthermore, the application of the smart defense concept, integrating advanced technology with local community empowerment, can sustainably enhance maritime resilience. Investment in the defense sector has been shown to create a conducive climate for international trade, boost investor confidence, and strengthen Indonesia's economic connectivity with the Asia-Pacific region. This study recommends synergy between the Ministry of Defense, TNI, and the national defense industry to accelerate the modernization and maintenance of alutsista, while ensuring the security of trade routes in North Sulawesi. With these measures, North Sulawesi can function optimally as a strategic import gateway that supports national economic growth and reinforces state defense.

Keywords: Defense optimization, North Sulawesi, import gateway, naval defense, weapon systems, smart defense, maritime security

INTRODUCTION

Named the largest maritime country in the world, it has more than 17,000 islands spread between two large oceans, namely the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. With about 70% of its total area in the form of oceans, Indonesia is not only rich in natural resources and marine biodiversity, but also has a strategic position that makes it a vital international trade route. The existence of this vast sea provides great potential for economic development, marine tourism, and sustainable management of marine resources. In this context, Indonesia is committed to developing its identity as a strong and competitive maritime country in the global arena. With this, Indonesia also faces various maritime challenges, including illegal fishing, smuggling, and marine pollution.

In this case, the TNI is one of the front lines as well as the last bastion of unitary sovereignty owned by the state as a national defense system (TNI Admiral Yudo Margono, 2023). In a country, the armed forces formed by the government to protect the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and safety of the nation are known as the military. In this case, the military plays a very important defense instrument in maintaining national stability and security. The Indonesian National Army (TNI) represents the military in Indonesia, with duties and obligations regulated by Law Number 34 of 2004. The most common thing we know is that the military functions as an antidote to threats from abroad and at home. The TNI, for example, is tasked with protecting the entire nation and all of Indonesia's bloodshed from various forms of threats, both military and non-military. The TNI was founded on October 5, 1945 with the initial name of the People's Security Army (TKR). After several name changes, including the Army of the Republic of Indonesia (TRI) and the Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia (ABRI), the institution

was finally known as the Indonesian National Army (TNI) since the separation between the military and police in 2000. The TNI consists of three dimensions: Army, Navy, and Air Force (*Wikipedia*).

The Indonesian Army is one of the main components of the Indonesian National Army which is tasked with maintaining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI). Founded on December 15, 1945, the Indonesian Army has a long history and is rooted in the struggle for Indonesian independence, which involved various elements of society and armed fighters (*Wikipedia*). In its development, the TNI AD not only served in conventional military operations but was also involved in various humanitarian missions and natural disaster management. This shows the flexibility and adaptability of the TNI AD in facing changing challenges. One of the important aspects of the TNI AD is the development and modernization of the main tools of the weapon system (*alutsista*) to increase combat power. The procurement of modern and effective defense equipment is the key to maintaining state sovereignty in the midst of increasingly complex geopolitical dynamics. According to Law Number 3 of 2002 concerning State Defense, the TNI's responsibility includes efforts to defend state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national safety from all forms of threats.

The Indonesian Navy was formed on **September 10, 1945**, which was initially known as **the Marine People's Security Agency (BKR Laut)**, (*Wikipedia*). This establishment is part of the Indonesian government's efforts to maintain the sovereignty and security of the territorial waters after the proclamation of independence. Since its inception, the Indonesian Navy has been instrumental in defending Indonesia's maritime interests, which consist of more than 17,000 islands and have a very long coastline. In the current geopolitical context, the Indonesian Navy faces various challenges, including cyber threats, transnational crime, and potential conflicts in strategic waters. Therefore, the modernization of defense equipment (the main tool of the weapon system) is a top priority to improve maritime defense capabilities. The addition of modern warships and advanced technology is needed to ensure that the Indonesian Navy can carry out its duties properly in maintaining the country's sovereignty. Overall, the Indonesian Navy is an important pillar in Indonesia's national defense system. With a rich history and a strategic role in maintaining maritime sovereignty, the Indonesian Navy continues to be committed to improving the capacity and professionalism of its members in order to better face future challenges. The role of the Indonesian Navy is also very important in supporting national economic activities, considering that most of Indonesia's trade is carried out by sea. By securing trade routes and natural resources at sea, the Indonesian Navy contributes directly to the country's economic stability and growth.

The Indonesian Air Force was established on **August 22, 1945** as part of the People's Security Agency (BKR) and later developed into the People's Security Army (TKR) before officially becoming known as the Air Force of the Republic of Indonesia on **April 9, 1946**, (*Wikipedia*). Today, the date is commemorated as the birthday of the Indonesian Air Force. In the context of increasingly complex regional and global security, the Indonesian Air Force faces new challenges, including cyber threats and terrorism. Therefore, the modernization of defense equipment is a top priority to ensure that the Indonesian Air Force remains able to carry out its functions effectively. The *Minimum Essential Force (MEF) strategic plan* launched by the government aims to increase the operational capacity of the Indonesian Air Force through the procurement of new fighter aircraft and other advanced technologies. The strengthening of the capabilities of the Indonesian Air Force is also in line with Indonesia's vision to become a formidable maritime power in the Southeast Asia and Pacific region. With its strategic geographical position, Indonesia needs to ensure that its airspace is safe from various threats, both conventional and non-conventional. Overall, the Indonesian Air Force plays a crucial role in maintaining the country's sovereignty.

North Sulawesi (North Sulawesi) has an increasingly important strategic position for Indonesia, especially with plans to make it a new gateway for imports and international trade. North Sulawesi's geographical location on the Pacific lip provides a comparative and competitive advantage compared to other regions in Indonesia, especially in the context of economic relations with Asia-Pacific countries. This vision is in line with the ideals of Sam Ratulangi, the national hero and first governor of the province, who had predicted the shift of the world's economic center from the Atlantic to the Pacific region. The central government also supports the development of North Sulawesi as a new economic gateway. This can be seen from various infrastructure development efforts, such as the expansion of Sam Ratulangi Airport, the development of Bitung Port.

The opening of direct flight routes from Japan, China, and Korea to North Sulawesi, along with maritime trade routes from Bitung to China, has strengthened the province's strategic role as an economic gateway in eastern Indonesia. North Sulawesi increasingly serves as an important logistics and trade hub, particularly through the movement of imported commodities such as textile products, electronics, footwear, garments, ceramics, and cosmetic products. The relocation of import ports to eastern Indonesia, promoted by the Ministry of Industry, reflects Indonesia's broader strategy to reduce logistical disparities and stimulate regional economic development.

Several previous studies support the strategic significance of eastern Indonesia and Bitung in particular. Chairullah et al. (2021) found that maritime logistics and port efficiency significantly influence economic development in eastern Indonesian archipelagic regions, where connectivity and logistics performance determine regional competitiveness. Likewise, Salim et al. (2014) argued that Bitung possesses strong geographical and economic feasibility to function as an international hub port, particularly when supported by improved maritime connectivity and industrial infrastructure. Furthermore, Supartono et al. (2021) emphasized that the Bitung Port area has geostrategic importance within the Indo-Pacific region and therefore requires integrated maritime security and defense policies to support national security objectives.

However, the increasing role of North Sulawesi as an economic gateway also creates security challenges that require anticipation. North Sulawesi is geographically close to international borders and situated within a geopolitically strategic region, making it vulnerable to both traditional and non-traditional threats. These threats may include territorial violations, smuggling, illegal fishing, transnational crimes, and other cross-border disturbances. Facing these potential threats, the optimization of military defense in North Sulawesi becomes increasingly crucial. Strengthening defense capabilities not only protects national economic interests but also guarantees the regional stability required to attract investment and facilitate international trade. From an air defense perspective, the relocation of economic activities to North Sulawesi places strategic assets closer to neighboring countries' Flight Information Regions (FIR) and potentially within the operational radius of advanced weapons systems, including intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and hypersonic missiles.

Therefore, the defense strategy required should integrate both conventional military power (hard defense) and non-military approaches (soft defense). This aligns with the concept of smart defense, which combines technological advancement in defense systems with local wisdom and societal resilience. Considering North Sulawesi's geographical characteristics as an archipelagic region, strengthening maritime and air defense remains essential to secure trade routes and prevent external infiltration. Consequently, optimizing military defense in North Sulawesi is aimed not only at territorial protection but also at supporting and securing the province's strategic role as Indonesia's emerging import gateway. In the long term, such efforts are expected to contribute to national economic growth and reinforce Indonesia's position within the geopolitical dynamics of the Asia-Pacific region.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research methods are part of a small tool in a large scientific context, so when a person uses a method, he should study the context in which the research method is located (Bungin, 2017). Qualitative descriptive research methods are types of research that utilize qualitative data and are described descriptively. This study aims to analyze social phenomena, events, or circumstances without manipulating the variables studied. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is an approach to understanding and explaining the meanings constructed by individuals or groups in their social contexts. The goal is to dig into the participants' perspectives and understand how they interact with their environment. This research often begins with open-ended questions that allow researchers to explore complex issues.

Research Design

According to Nazir, research design is the entire process needed in planning the implementation of a research. The purpose of this method is to provide an overview of the research subject and draw conclusions in general (Sugiyono, 2012). According to Sugiyono, the qualitative descriptive method is a research method based on the philosophy of postpositivism. This method is used to examine the natural conditions of objects, of which the researcher serves as the main instrument. The data collection technique is done triangulated, and the data analysis is inductive, focusing on meaning rather than generalization. This research aims to describe and explain the problem in detail by studying a specific individual, group, or event. Qualitative descriptive research aims to provide a clear and in-depth picture of a phenomenon or social condition. It includes exploration and clarification of how a state of affairs occurs, as well as the relationships between the phenomena being investigated. A feature of descriptive analysis is that data collection and research need to be conducted to decipher phenomena, sometimes also to test hypotheses, collect data, and provide initial predictions, as well as implications of the problem being studied

Data Collection Techniques

According to Cresswell, data collection techniques are efforts made to limit a research, collect information by conducting well-structured interviews, observations, documentation, various visual materials, and other efforts carried out by designing protocols through recording procedures and also recording information (Cresswell J. W., 2016). Primary data sources come from observations, interviews, questionnaires and documentation or a combination of all three (triangulation); and, (b) Secondary data sources, which are data sources that are not directly provided to data collectors but through other people or certain documents. Secondary data sources come from field studies, literature/literature, scientific journals, previous research, written documents from related agencies, national journals, international journals, electronic media, the internet, and print media (Sugiyono).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

This study identifies several key findings demonstrating that the optimization of the Northern Fortress has a significant impact on improving Indonesia's national logistics performance and maritime resilience. First, the optimization of the Northern Fortress enhances the efficiency of import goods distribution through the development of hub ports integrated with the national logistics system. The implementation of the hub and spoke model has been shown

to reduce logistics costs and accelerate distribution time, thereby improving national economic competitiveness.

Second, strengthening port infrastructure in the northern region has the potential to reduce dependence on major ports in western Indonesia, such as Tanjung Priok and Tanjung Perak. Diversifying import gateways will create a more balanced distribution of logistics loads and reduce bottleneck risks within the national trade system.

Third, from a security perspective, optimizing the Northern Fortress contributes to improved monitoring of strategic trade routes and the prevention of maritime security threats. The implementation of international security standards such as the ISPS Code is a key factor in increasing global trust in Indonesian ports.

Fourth, geostrategically, the Northern Fortress functions as an instrument to strengthen Indonesia's position within Indo-Pacific dynamics. By leveraging its strategic geographic location, Indonesia can enhance its role as a global maritime axis while maintaining regional stability.

Fifth, the optimization of the Northern Fortress also promotes regional economic growth through the development of port-based industries and special economic zones. This aligns with the concept of ports as new economic growth centers integrated with their hinterlands.

Sixth, Modernization and maintenance of the Navy's defense equipment is needed to be ready to face various threats, both military and non-military. Collaboration with the domestic defense industry such as PT Dirgantara Indonesia (PTDI) for the maintenance and procurement of spare parts can increase the operational readiness of defense equipment, and also the increase in the number of warships and patrol ships to maintain the security of North Sulawesi waters is very important.

Seventh, The existence of maritime crime and smuggling can damage North Sulawesi's reputation as a safe import gateway, thus affecting trade relations with other countries. To overcome this problem, strategic steps are needed from the government in strengthening defense infrastructure, increasing maritime surveillance, and involving the community in efforts to maintain regional security. Thus, North Sulawesi can function optimally as a safe and reliable gateway for Indonesian imports.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the Northern Fortress concept should not be understood merely as port infrastructure development but as a comprehensive geostrategic framework integrating economic, maritime, and security dimensions. Indonesia's northern maritime region occupies a strategic position along global sea lanes connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans, making it both an economic opportunity and a security frontier. This interpretation is consistent with Faisal et al. (2025), who argue that Indo-Pacific dynamics and great-power rivalry require Indonesia to strengthen maritime security capacity and strategic trade route management. In this context, the Northern Fortress functions not only as a logistics hub but also as a stabilizing mechanism within regional geopolitical competition. The findings regarding logistics efficiency and gateway diversification support previous studies emphasizing the importance of integrated port systems. Mulyono (2023) highlighted that port integration and service digitalization are essential for improving logistics performance in Indonesia.

Likewise, studies on Bitung Port suggest that developing international hub ports can increase Indonesia's competitiveness and strengthen its role in Indo-Pacific trade networks. The security findings further reinforce the argument that economic resilience and national defense are closely interconnected. The protection of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) is crucial to ensuring uninterrupted flows of imported goods. In this regard, military defense also particularly through the Indonesian Navy and supporting maritime agencies that plays a central role in surveillance, deterrence, and rapid response operations.

Moreover, Harsono (2006) emphasizes that the implementation of international port security frameworks such as the ISPS Code requires strong enforcement and coordinated state capacity. Therefore, military involvement in safeguarding strategic ports, logistics hubs, and critical infrastructure is not solely defensive but also economically enabling. The discussion also highlights that border and frontier development possess strategic defense value. As noted by Sumartono, border regions function not only as administrative territories but also as security buffers contributing to national resilience. This perspective supports the view that the Northern Fortress operates as both an economic gateway and a layered defense system. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that successful implementation of the Northern Fortress depends heavily on effective synergy among government institutions, security agencies, private stakeholders, and local communities. Without integrated governance and policy coordination, the strategic advantages of Indonesia's northern maritime region may not be fully realized.

However, the findings also indicate that the success of optimizing the Northern Fortress is highly dependent on synergy among the government, private sector, and security institutions. Without effective coordination, the strategic potential of the northern region cannot be fully realized. Overall, optimizing the Northern Fortress as a supporting pillar for Indonesia's new import gateway is a strategic step that can enhance logistics efficiency, strengthen maritime resilience, and improve Indonesia's position in the global trade system. However, its successful implementation requires a holistic approach encompassing infrastructure development, security enhancement, and policy integration at the national level.

The optimization of the Northern Fortress as a new import gateway is inherently dependent on the effective role of military defense in securing the economic turnover process of imported goods. Military defense serves as both a protective shield and a strategic enabler, ensuring that economic activities can proceed without disruption. Therefore, a holistic approach that integrates defense strategy with economic and logistics planning is essential for achieving sustainable national resilience and maximizing the strategic value of Indonesia's northern maritime region.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the optimization of the "Northern Fortress" as a strategic support for Indonesia's new import gateway extends beyond infrastructure development and encompasses broader geostrategic, geoeconomic, and security dimensions. North Sulawesi and Indonesia's northern maritime region possess significant strategic value due to their proximity to international shipping routes and their potential role in facilitating import distribution within the Indo-Pacific trade network. This study further highlights that military defense constitutes an essential component in safeguarding the economic turnover process of imported goods. The modernization of naval defense capabilities, enhancement of maritime surveillance, and protection of critical infrastructure are necessary to ensure secure and uninterrupted trade flows. In this regard, the concept of the Northern Fortress should be understood not solely as an economic initiative but also as a layered defense framework integrating maritime security and national resilience.

Ultimately, the successful implementation of the Northern Fortress depends on effective synergy among government institutions, military forces, port authorities, the private sector, and local communities. A holistic policy approach integrating logistics development, defense modernization, and security governance is therefore essential to maximize North Sulawesi's role as a secure and competitive import gateway. Such efforts will not only strengthen Indonesia's national defense posture but also enhance its strategic position within the evolving geopolitical and economic dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region.

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