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## NAVIGATING GLOBAL COMPETITION: PRABOWO SUBIANTO'S DEFENSE DIPLOMACY IN THE CONTEXT OF INDO-PACIFIC

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### ABSTRACT

Prabowo Subianto's defence diplomacy has been key to modernizing Indonesia's defence amid rising Indo-Pacific tensions. This qualitative study of policy documents highlights advancements in maritime, air, and cyber capabilities through strategic partnerships. Major procurements such as Rafale jets, Black Hawk helicopters, and a Type 209 submarine, reflect cooperation with France, the US, and South Korea, emphasizing supplier diversification and improved readiness. Despite progress, challenges remain in strengthening the domestic defence industry and achieving strategic autonomy. Prabowo's leadership has accelerated technology transfers and contributed to regional stability.

Keywords: defence, diplomacy, military, modernization, strategic

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### ABSTRAK

Diplomasi pertahanan Prabowo Subianto berperan penting dalam modernisasi pertahanan Indonesia di tengah meningkatnya ketegangan di kawasan Indo-Pasifik. Studi kualitatif terhadap dokumen kebijakan ini menunjukkan kemajuan di bidang maritim, udara, dan siber melalui kemitraan strategis. Pengadaan utama seperti jet Rafale, helikopter Black Hawk, dan kapal selam Type 209 mencerminkan kerja sama dengan Prancis, AS, dan Korea Selatan, serta diversifikasi pemasok untuk meningkatkan kesiapan militer. Meski ada kemajuan, tantangan tetap ada dalam memperkuat industri pertahanan dalam negeri dan mencapai kemandirian strategis. Kepemimpinan Prabowo mempercepat alih teknologi dan mendukung stabilitas kawasan.

Kata Kunci: pertahanan, diplomasi, militer, modernisasi, strategis

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## BACKGROUND

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a focal point of global geopolitics, driven by rapid economic growth, strategic rivalries, and shifting security dynamics. For Indonesia, the largest archipelagic state in the region, maintaining sovereignty and security in its vast maritime territory has become increasingly significant. This geopolitical urgency is magnified by escalating tensions in the South China Sea, the rise of China as a global power, and the evolving military presence of other actors such as the United States, Japan, and Australia. In this context, Prabowo Subianto's defense diplomacy offers a critical lens to analyze Indonesia's efforts to strengthen its defense capabilities and address its strategic vulnerabilities.

Indonesia's defense policy operates within the framework of its strategic doctrine of "Bela Negara" (state defense), emphasizing sovereignty, territorial integrity, and active participation in regional security cooperation. However, the rapid advancements in defense technologies and the growing militarization of the Indo-Pacific demand significant modernization of Indonesia's defense equipment. Recent years have witnessed a surge in global competition over military capabilities, with an emphasis on autonomous systems, cyber defense, and maritime surveillance. As Indonesia's Defense Minister since 2019, Prabowo Subianto has prioritized the revitalization of Indonesia's military hardware, underscoring the role of defense diplomacy in fostering partnerships and acquiring advanced technologies.

This study investigates Prabowo's initiatives to modernize Indonesia's defense equipment and enhance its military readiness. By exploring the intersection of defense diplomacy and global competition in the Indo-Pacific, the research aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of Indonesia's strategic positioning in a complex international system. The importance of this research lies in its potential to provide insights into Indonesia's strategic adaptation in a rapidly evolving regional security environment. Understanding how Indonesia balances its defense modernization efforts with its non-aligned foreign policy stance can offer valuable lessons for other middle powers navigating similar challenges.

The main research problem addressed in this study is Indonesia's struggle to modernize its defense equipment to meet the demands of a highly contested Indo-Pacific. Despite its strategic geographic position, Indonesia faces significant challenges in maintaining credible deterrence capabilities. The lack of advanced military technology, logistical inefficiencies, and an over-reliance on aging equipment limit its ability to respond to emerging threats, including territorial disputes and non-traditional security challenges like piracy and cyberattacks.

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Previous research has proposed several general solutions to address these challenges. First, enhancing defense diplomacy through multilateral and bilateral partnerships has been identified as a key strategy. Scholars like Rizal Sukma (2019) argue that Indonesia's engagement with ASEAN-centered mechanisms can facilitate collective security arrangements. Similarly, bilateral agreements with major powers have been highlighted as avenues for technology transfer and capacity building.

Second, policy recommendations have emphasized increasing defense budgets to prioritize military modernization. Works such as *Military Spending in Southeast Asia* by Alex Tan (2021) suggest that middle powers like Indonesia must allocate greater resources to develop indigenous defense industries and reduce dependency on external suppliers.

While existing literature identifies defense diplomacy and increased spending as viable solutions, it often overlooks the practical challenges of implementation. For instance, bilateral defense agreements with major powers can create dependency and limit strategic autonomy, as highlighted by Leonard Sebastian (2022). Additionally, while multilateral engagements provide diplomatic leverage, they are often slow to translate into tangible military outcomes due to bureaucratic inertia and competing national interests within ASEAN. Another critical gap in the literature is the limited analysis of the role of leadership in shaping defense diplomacy. Prabowo Subianto's tenure as Defense Minister marks a significant shift in Indonesia's approach, with greater emphasis on strategic partnerships, arms procurement, and joint exercises. However, there is a paucity of research examining the specific policies and initiatives undertaken during his leadership.

This research seeks to address these gaps by providing a comprehensive analysis of Prabowo's defense diplomacy, focusing on the modernization of Indonesia's defense equipment. By integrating insights from global defense diplomacy literature and Indonesia-specific studies, the research aims to bridge the divide between theoretical propositions and practical realities. The primary objective of this study is to analyze Prabowo Subianto's defense diplomacy as a mechanism for strengthening Indonesia's defense equipment in the context of global competition in the Indo-Pacific. Specifically, the research aims to examine the policies and initiatives undertaken by Prabowo to modernize Indonesia's military capabilities. It also to evaluate the effectiveness of bilateral and multilateral defense partnerships in achieving Indonesia's strategic objectives. Lastly, to identify the challenges and limitations of defense diplomacy in addressing Indonesia's defense modernization needs.

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The novelty of this research lies in its focus on Prabowo's leadership as a defining variable in Indonesia's defense diplomacy. Unlike previous studies that treat Indonesia's defense modernization as part of broader regional dynamics, this research provides a detailed case study of how individual leadership influences policy outcomes. By situating Indonesia's defense diplomacy within the broader context of global competition in the Indo-Pacific, the study also contributes to the growing literature on middle power strategies in an era of strategic rivalry.

The scope of this research includes a critical review of Indonesia's defense policies from 2019 to 2024, with a focus on Prabowo's tenure as Defense Minister. The study examines bilateral and multilateral defense agreements, arms procurement programs, and capacity-building initiatives. It also assesses the domestic factors influencing defense modernization, such as budgetary priorities and institutional challenges.

In an era of intensifying global competition, understanding Indonesia's defense diplomacy is essential for assessing its strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific. By focusing on Prabowo Subianto's efforts to modernize Indonesia's defense equipment, this research addresses a critical gap in the literature and offers practical insights into the challenges and opportunities of middle power diplomacy. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to scholarly debates on defense modernization and inform policymakers navigating Indonesia's complex security landscape.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Indonesia's defense diplomacy constitutes a comprehensive strategy that utilizes cultural, military, and diplomatic instruments to tackle regional security issues and promote international collaboration. This approach holds particular significance due to Indonesia's strategic location and the intricate geopolitical dynamics present in Southeast Asia. The nation's defense diplomacy initiatives focus on asserting sovereignty, fostering confidence with adjacent states, and addressing external threats, particularly those arising from China's actions in the South China Sea. This document examines critical elements of Indonesia's defense diplomacy strategy.

Indonesia utilizes cultural diplomacy as a strategic instrument to reinforce its maritime sovereignty, especially in the North Natuna Sea. The incorporation of cultural elements, exemplified by the Gunung Padang Site, into maritime defense diplomacy bolsters Indonesia's claims and advances its national interests within the region (Prakoso et al., 2024). Cultural diplomacy is supported by compliance with international maritime laws and the enhancement of communication infrastructure to strengthen Indonesia's maritime defense capabilities (Sarjito, 2024).

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Indonesia's defense diplomacy in Asia emphasizes confidence-building measures to strengthen regional defense cooperation. This approach is essential for addressing regional tensions, including those stemming from the South China Sea disputes (Hermawan & Hertina, 2024). Bilateral defense diplomacy initiatives, exemplified by engagements with the United Arab Emirates, underscore the peaceful application of military forces to foster trust and enhance regional stability (Gusfi et al., 2023).

Indonesia engages in defense diplomacy with major powers, including France, characterized by military partnerships and the procurement of advanced military technology, such as Rafale jets. This improves Indonesia's defense capabilities and promotes stronger bilateral cooperation (Hijria et al., 2023, Sari, 2023). Indonesia utilizes a blend of soft and smart power diplomacy to address China's gray zone tactics in the South China Sea. This strategy combines military capabilities with diplomatic initiatives to address regional challenges effectively (Wahid et al., 2024).

Indonesia's defense diplomacy encompasses non-traditional security threats, including the COVID-19 pandemic. The partnership with China during the pandemic underscores the significance of defense diplomacy in facilitating public health initiatives and fostering international collaboration (Suryanti et al., 2023).

Indonesia's participation in international forums, including the United Nations, illustrates its dedication to global peace and security, particularly evident in its diplomatic efforts regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict (Asakir & Almubaroq, 2024). Indonesia's defense diplomacy has demonstrated effectiveness in various domains; however, challenges persist. The government's political will and that of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) are essential for enhancing defense diplomacy initiatives, especially given regional tensions and the necessity for military modernization (Hermawan & Hertina, 2024) (Sari, 2023). The integration of cultural diplomacy and compliance with international laws is crucial for preserving Indonesia's maritime sovereignty and ensuring regional stability (Prakoso et al., 2024) (Sarjito, 2024).

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study utilizes a qualitative research approach to examine Prabowo Subianto's defense diplomacy in the modernization of Indonesia's defense apparatus amid global competitiveness in the Indo-Pacific. The qualitative technique is adept in analyzing intricate social and political phenomena, facilitating a comprehensive

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investigation of defense policies and diplomatic strategies (Creswell, 2018). The study use an exploratory case study methodology to examine the particular acts and policies enacted during Prabowo's term as Indonesia's Defense Minister. Case studies are especially adept at analyzing the interaction of leadership, policy frameworks, and external factors in influencing defense diplomacy (Yin, 2014). The report highlights contextual analysis, examining the evolution of defense accords and military modernization efforts within the Indo-Pacific's fluid geopolitical landscape.

Data were gathered from several sources to ensure triangulation and improve the study's reliability and validity (Denzin, 2012). Primary data include policy documents, military ministry reports, and public addresses by Prabowo Subianto. Secondary data consist of academic studies, books, and credible news outlets discussing Indonesia's defense policies. A systematic evaluation of materials was performed utilizing thematic coding to discern repeating patterns and topics, as advised by Braun and Clarke (2006).

## DISCUSSION

Prabowo Subianto's defense diplomacy during his position as defence ministry has successfully advanced Indonesia's defense modernization, strategically positioning the nation to navigate the intensifying global competition in the Indo-Pacific region. This research uncovers how leadership, diplomatic engagements, and strategic partnerships have transformed Indonesia's defense landscape, addressing long-standing challenges and highlighting new opportunities. While significant progress has been made, systemic inefficiencies and reliance on foreign technology continue to pose challenges.

One of the defining outcomes of Prabowo Subianto's defense diplomacy has been the modernization of Indonesia's defense equipment. Between 2019 and 2023, Indonesia's defense budget increased by 25%, from approximately USD 7.8 billion to USD 9.8 billion (Ministry of Defense, 2023). This increase has facilitated the acquisition of advanced military hardware, including Rafale fighter jets from France, Black Hawk helicopters from the United States, and a variant of the Type 209 submarine, from South Korea. These acquisitions align with Indonesia's strategic goal of enhancing deterrence and ensuring territorial sovereignty in the Indo-Pacific.

The modernization initiatives prioritize three critical areas: maritime security, air defense capabilities, and cyber resilience. Maritime security remains a priority given Indonesia's strategic location along major global shipping lanes. Investments in patrol vessels and submarines are designed to address non-traditional threats, such as illegal fishing and piracy, while providing a credible deterrent against incursions into Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

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The incorporation of advanced air defense systems, including multirole fighter aircraft, addresses the limitations of Indonesia's aging fleet, which predominantly consists of Russian-made Sukhoi jets that face maintenance challenges due to geopolitical constraints (SIPRI, 2023). Additionally, efforts to enhance cyber defense capacities reflect the growing importance of protecting critical infrastructure and countering threats in the digital domain.

Despite these achievements, Indonesia faces persistent challenges in modernizing its defense sector. A significant portion of its naval fleet, approximately 40%, is over 30 years old, limiting operational readiness (SIPRI, 2023). Furthermore, the domestic defense industry, represented by state-owned enterprises like PT Pindad and PT PAL, has struggled to meet production timelines and technological standards. For instance, delays in the development of domestically produced armored vehicles and ships highlight structural inefficiencies and a lack of technological expertise.

The reliance on foreign suppliers for advanced weaponry—estimated at 80% of Indonesia's total procurement—exacerbates vulnerabilities in supply chain resilience (Ministry of Defense, 2023). This dependency has also raised concerns about the country's strategic autonomy, particularly in the face of shifting geopolitical alignments and export restrictions imposed by supplier nations.

Indonesia's defense modernization occurs within the broader context of intensifying competition in the Indo-Pacific. Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) show that regional military expenditures grew by an average of 5% annually between 2015 and 2023. Countries like China, India, and Australia have significantly increased their investments in naval capabilities, autonomous systems, and missile technology, reflecting the region's strategic importance.

In comparison, Indonesia's defense spending, which constitutes only 0.8% of its GDP, lags behind regional powers like Singapore (3.2%) and Vietnam (2.3%) (SIPRI, 2023). This disparity underscores the need for Indonesia to adopt a targeted approach to resource allocation, prioritizing capabilities that address its unique strategic vulnerabilities.

This study advances the literature by emphasizing the role of leadership in defense modernization, a variable often overlooked in previous analyses. While earlier studies, such as those by Acharya (2022) and Sebastian (2022), primarily focused on institutional frameworks and ASEAN-centric multilateralism, this research highlights Prabowo Subianto's direct engagement with foreign governments and defense

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contractors as a catalyst for accelerated acquisitions and favorable terms. For instance, the Indonesia-France agreement on Rafale jets represents a shift from passive procurement to proactive negotiation, securing technology transfer and maintenance support. Furthermore, the integration of quantitative data and regional benchmarks enhances the analytical rigor of this research. By juxtaposing Indonesia's defense capabilities with those of regional actors, this study provides a clearer understanding of the gaps in Indonesia's military readiness and their implications for regional security dynamics.

The findings of this research carry significant implications for both Indonesia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. First, the emphasis on diversifying defense partnerships mitigates the risks associated with overdependence on a single supplier. Indonesia's engagements with South Korea, Turkey, and France not only broaden its supplier base but also facilitate knowledge transfer and capacity building, contributing to the long-term development of its domestic defense industry. Second, the focus on maritime security aligns with Indonesia's strategic position as an archipelagic state. Investments in submarines and patrol vessels enhance its ability to monitor and protect its vast maritime territory, supporting regional stability by deterring illegal activities and safeguarding critical shipping lanes. Finally, the prioritization of cyber defense capabilities reflects a forward-looking approach to addressing emerging threats. By integrating cybersecurity into its defense strategy, Indonesia positions itself to counter non-traditional threats, such as cyberattacks on critical infrastructure and disinformation campaigns.

The research objectives were largely achieved, providing a comprehensive analysis of Prabowo Subianto's defense diplomacy and its impact on Indonesia's defense modernization. The findings validate the hypothesis that leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping defense policies and outcomes, offering new insights into the dynamics of defense diplomacy.

However, some exceptions warrant further exploration. For instance, while bilateral agreements have accelerated acquisitions, their long-term implications for Indonesia's strategic autonomy remain unclear. Additionally, the uneven performance of domestic defense industries, despite policy support and financial incentives, highlights the need for systemic reforms to address bureaucratic and managerial inefficiencies.

The following figure provides a statistical overview of Indonesia's defense spending and military capabilities compared to selected Indo-Pacific countries:



**Table 1. Defence Spending Some Asian Countries**

Country	Defense Spending (USD)	Defense Spending (% of GDP)	Fleet Modernization Status
Indonesia	\$8.8 billion (2023)	0.8%	Ongoing modernization with acquisitions of Rafale jets and Type 214 submarines. Challenges include aging equipment and reliance on foreign technology.  <a href="#">Defense Review Asia</a>
Singapore	\$12.3 billion (2022)	3.2%	Advanced and modernized fleet with continuous investments in cutting-edge technology and equipment.  <a href="#">Army Technology</a>
Vietnam	\$10.2 billion (2029 est.)	2.3%	Active modernization initiatives focusing on enhancing naval and air capabilities to counter regional threats.  <a href="#">Asian Military Review</a>
Australia	\$53 billion (2024)	2.4%	Comprehensive modernization plans, including the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines and advanced missile systems.  <a href="#">Financial Times</a>

Source: Various Sources

The table provides a comparative overview of defense spending, defense expenditure as a percentage of GDP, and fleet modernization status for Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, and Australia. These metrics offer valuable insights into the strategic priorities and challenges faced by these countries in strengthening their defense capabilities amid the dynamic geopolitical environment of the Indo-Pacific region. The table underscores the disparities in military capabilities and highlights the areas where Indonesia needs to focus its modernization efforts. Unexplained results emerged regarding the underperformance of Indonesia's domestic defense industry. Despite increased investments and policy support, key projects, such as the production of indigenous armored vehicles and naval ships, remain delayed. This suggests potential challenges in workforce skills, technological innovation, and supply chain management, which merit further investigation.

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Future research should also explore the impact of geopolitical dynamics on Indonesia's defense partnerships, particularly in the context of growing tensions between China and the United States. Understanding how these dynamics influence Indonesia's procurement decisions and strategic alignments will provide valuable insights into its long-term defense strategy. The findings presented in this study are interconnected, reflecting a coherent narrative that links defense diplomacy, modernization efforts, and regional security dynamics. Prabowo Subianto's leadership emerges as a unifying theme, influencing both the strategic direction and operational outcomes of Indonesia's defense policies. By bridging the gaps in existing literature, this research provides a holistic understanding of Indonesia's response to the challenges of global competition in the Indo-Pacific.

Prabowo Subianto's defense diplomacy represents a critical chapter in Indonesia's efforts to modernize its defense equipment and assert its strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific. The findings underscore the importance of leadership, strategic partnerships, and domestic capacity-building in addressing Indonesia's defense challenges. While significant progress has been made, the study highlights the need for a more integrated approach that balances immediate needs with long-term sustainability. These insights contribute to the growing body of literature on middle power strategies and offer practical recommendations for enhancing Indonesia's defense resilience in a complex geopolitical landscape.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has analyzed Prabowo Subianto's defense diplomacy as a strategic approach to modernizing Indonesia's defense apparatus and tackling the difficulties posed by global competitiveness in the Indo-Pacific region. The findings indicate that under his leadership, Indonesia has significantly advanced its defense capabilities through strategic acquisitions, varied supplier collaborations, and an increasing focus on non-traditional security concerns, including cyber defense. Nonetheless, systemic inefficiencies within the domestic military sector and reliance on foreign technology persist as significant challenges. A significant discovery is the crucial influence of leadership on the outcomes of Indonesia's defense diplomacy. Prabowo's active collaboration with foreign governments and defense contractors has accelerated the acquisition of advanced military assets, including Rafale jets and Type 214 submarines, while also establishing technology transfer agreements that could enhance Indonesia's domestic defense industry. These initiatives correspond with Indonesia's strategic aims of protecting territorial sovereignty and reinforcing its status as a middle power in the Indo-Pacific.

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The research underscores the ramifications of defense modernization on Indonesia's overall strategic stance. By diversifying suppliers and emphasizing maritime and cyber security, Indonesia is more effectively equipped to manage the intricacies of a progressively contested Indo-Pacific area. The research highlights the necessity for structural reforms in domestic defense production to attain long-term self-reliance and sustainability. This research enhances the current knowledge base by incorporating leadership dynamics into the examination of defense diplomacy and offering a thorough framework for comprehending Indonesia's strategic adaptation in the Indo-Pacific. It contests conventional viewpoints that emphasize institutional structures, highlighting the importance of individual agency in influencing security decisions. A future study may investigate the enduring effects of Indonesia's bilateral defense accords on its strategic autonomy and the efficacy of governmental initiatives designed to rejuvenate domestic defense firms. Moreover, analyzing Indonesia's involvement in regional security frameworks, such as ASEAN, would provide additional insights into its developing defense diplomacy. This study confirms the strategic significance of leadership, innovation, and teamwork in tackling Indonesia's defense concerns within a swiftly evolving geopolitical context.

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