

## THE OPTIMIZATION STRATEGY OF DEFENSE DIPLOMACY IN THE STRATEGIC DIALOGUE FORUM: INDONESIA'S PARTICIPATION IN THE SHANGRI-LA DIALOGUE

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### Abstract

This study discusses Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy optimization strategy in the Shangri-La Dialogue forum. It also deciphers the role of the Indonesian Minister of Defense in achieving national interests in the strategic forum. The findings show that the formulation of Indonesia's national interest in defense diplomacy refer to the Preamble to the 1945 Constitution, the application of free and active foreign policy, and the vision of the President. The role of Defense Minister is very vital in articulating Indonesia's national interests through effective speeches in the strategic dialogue forums. This article shows that despite the challenges due to dynamics in the scope of global and regional geopolitics, the involvement of the Indonesian Defense Minister in strategic forums has succeeded in strengthening Indonesia's diplomacy to the international arena and provides positive contributions to regional stability. This study recommends the need to develop more structured defense diplomacy strategy and long-term vision to face growing global challenges.

**Keywords:** Defense Diplomacy, Shangri-La Dialogue, National Interests, Prabowo Subianto

### INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical dynamics of the global arena, particularly the Indo-Pacific region, have been undergoing significant transformations. This region has emerged as a primary focus in international political calculations due to its strategic location, abundant natural resources, and vital role in global trade routes (Hendrajit, 2017).

The region confronts multiple security challenges. These include non-traditional threats like terrorism and cyber security, as well as escalating tensions in the South China Sea, conflicts on the Korean Peninsula, and great power competition between the United States and China. This complex situation necessitates effective defense diplomacy strategies to maintain peace and security (Fawaid, 2022).

Geographically positioned at the "heart" of the Indo-Pacific, Indonesia plays a pivotal role in safeguarding regional stability and security. With its geographic and economic potential, Indonesia is expected to serve as a bridge between major powers and actively contribute to collective security in the Indo-Pacific. This can be achieved by optimizing the role of defense diplomacy.

Cottey and Foster (2004) define defense diplomacy as peaceful cooperation utilizing armed forces and other institutions as tools in defense and foreign policy. In the evolving global landscape, defense diplomacy has become a strategic instrument for attaining national defense objectives, such as maintaining regional peace and security and preventing conflict (Gindarsah, 2016).

One instrument of defense diplomacy is participation in international forums. At the regional level, the Shangri-La Dialogue is the premier forum in the Asia-Pacific region for discussing security and defense issues (Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023).

The Shangri-La Dialogue is an annual "Track One" intergovernmental security conference held in Singapore. It was initiated in response to the heightened global security concerns following the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York (Yang, 2024) and was first convened in 2002 by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, with the Shangri-La Hotel serving as its permanent venue (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024).

The Shangri-La Dialogue aims to strengthen regional dialogue and cooperation on security, diplomacy, and defense strategy (Ministry of Defense of Singapore, 2024). Moreover, the Ministry of Defense of Singapore (2024) elaborated that the dialogue covers a wide range of issues, from strategies for preventing and countering terrorism and extremism to the impact of climate change and energy security on regional stability, as well as the evolving geopolitical landscape in the Asia Pacific and its implications for regional stability.

As a key member of ASEAN with a significant role in regional security dynamics, Indonesia consistently participates and contributes to building multilateral cooperation to promote peace and stability. Indonesia's participation in the Shangri-La Dialogue not only reflects its commitment to

defense and security diplomacy but also embodies its proactive foreign policy strategy (Kristiadi, 2016). This has the potential to enhance Indonesia's influence and profile on the international stage, as strategic dialogue forums serve as primary platforms for countries to share views on regional and global security, making it essential for Indonesia to leverage this effectively.

Nevertheless, Indonesia faces various challenges in maximizing its defense diplomacy at the Shangri-La Dialogue, given resource constraints and complex international political dynamics. Considering these factors, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of Indonesia's role in regional and global defense diplomacy, with a particular focus on the role of Indonesian defense diplomacy in strategic dialogue forums, using the Shangri-La Dialogue as a case study. This research not only expands academic knowledge but can also serve as a policy reference for optimizing Indonesia's defense diplomacy strategy in the future.

Based on the aforementioned background, the research questions for this study are formulated as follows: (1) How does Indonesia formulate national interests related to defense diplomacy in strategic dialogue forums such as the Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD)?; (2) What is the role of the Indonesian Minister of Defense in the SLD to achieve these interests?, and; (3) How can the effectiveness of Indonesian defense diplomacy in the SLD be evaluated during the 2019-2024 government period.

### **Research Method**

In this study, a qualitative research method will be employed. Bogdan and Taylor (as cited in Lexy J. Moleong, 2011) describe qualitative research as a process that generates descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from individuals and observable behaviors, particularly related to the subjects' ideas, perceptions, opinions, or beliefs. Therefore, the researcher will optimize interviews and the analysis of available documents.

Data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection, using an inductive data analysis approach. The process began with observing and identifying data and ended with interpreting the meaning of the collected data,

which was then analyzed using a verification strategy in qualitative data analysis (Bungin, 2010).

According to Miles and Huberman (2014, as cited in Sugiyono, 2015), data analysis in qualitative research is conducted throughout the data collection process and also for a certain period afterward. This process involves: (1) Data reduction into reports directly related to the research objectives; (2) Data display in tables, graphs, or other formats to facilitate understanding and further analysis, and; (3) Conclusion drawing/verification in the form of clearer descriptions or portrayals of an object, and may involve causal or interactive relationships between the variables being studied.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### ***Defense Diplomacy***

Defense diplomacy is an integral part of a nation's national security strategy. Sarjito and Perwita (2024), in their book "Safeguarding the Nations: Targets and Strategies of Defense Diplomacy," found that defense diplomacy has evolved from simple military alliances into a complex framework of interaction and engagement in interstate relations to address evolving security challenges.

Specifically, G. R. Berridge & Alan James (2003) explain that defense diplomacy supports the prevention and resolution of conflicts that threaten a state, involving military personnel. This concept is broadly aimed at maintaining regional peace and stability, emphasizing diplomatic efforts to promote security and defense policies at the international level to foster peacetime security cooperation. This can be achieved through negotiation, information exchange, joint military exercises, visits by military personnel and defense officials, and participation in international forums.

Sarjito and Perwita (2024) outline several objectives of defense diplomacy. They emphasize the role of defense diplomacy in fostering trust and interoperability among nations, contributes to regional stability and creates a conducive environment for international relations, and positions states as responsible global actors committed to international peace and security. By actively participating in international forums and partnerships,

nations can enhance their international image as peaceful and responsible members of the global community.

Those objectives can be achieved through employing several instruments of defense diplomacy, such as negotiation to reach agreements with other nations on various security issues, military-to-military cooperation, and information exchange through security meetings and conferences. Lastly, the instrument that will be highlighted in this research is the participation in international forums, that Kurniawan (2023) describe will enhance a nation's visibility and influence on regional and global security matters, which often laying the groundwork for defense and security cooperation on particular issues.

Given the continuously evolving strategic landscape in the Asia-Pacific region, defense diplomacy has become a crucial instrument for countries to achieve their national and regional security objectives. Qazi and Bashir (2022) highlights the benefits of defense diplomacy, that include political and strategic gains, reduced hostilities, and conflict prevention. By leveraging the defense diplomacy instruments, countries in the Asia-Pacific can bolster their defense capabilities, forge strong international partnerships, and achieve their national security objectives.

### ***Idiosyncratic***

Idiosyncratic factors are understood as those that influence an individual in making and determining policies. In the context of international policy, according to Bojang (2018), a state's behavior towards another state is a product of individual-level political decisions. Thus, when combined, as explained by Rosenau (1976), idiosyncratic factors are one of the determining factors in a state's foreign policy position. Considering this, idiosyncratic factors can be understood as all aspects possessed by a policymaker that differentiate foreign policy behavior.

More specifically in defense diplomacy, idiosyncratic factors refer to the unique elements or characteristics that influence a state's defense policies and actions, often linked to specific individuals. In this case, national leaders and high-ranking officials such as the Minister of Defense have a significant

influence in determining the direction of Indonesia's diplomatic policy and defense strategy.

According to Bojang (2018) in his article "The Study of Foreign Policy in International Relations," it is explained that the personality and character of a leader play a significant role in the formulation of foreign policy, as decisions are made by individuals, not by states. In this case, factors such as a leader's views on the international arena, analytical abilities, background, and emotional disposition influence the planning and implementation of foreign policy.

However, the relevance of a leader's personality to foreign policy also depends on the international system and domestic political structure. Corbett & Veenendaal (2017) argue that a strong relationship between a leader and their constituents limits the role of personalization, especially in debates about ideology and policy programs. This indicates that the personal influence of a leader is still constrained by the rules and internal and external dynamics of a state.

### ***Shangri-La Dialogue***

The Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) is an annual regional security summit held in Singapore since 2002 by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Dupont (2013) explains that the SLD provides a platform for discussing strategic issues in the fields of security and defense, facilitating the exchange of views and policy discussions among countries. In addition to serving as a platform for strategic dialogue and supporting defense diplomacy, Medcalf (2014) states that the SLD also functions as a forum for observing and analyzing the latest developments in global security dynamics, with a particular focus on the Asia-Pacific region.

The role of the SLD is crucial in enhancing dialogue and cooperation, transparency, building consensus, and managing crises (Huisken, 2003). However, the SLD also faces challenges such as differing interests, mistrust, limited authority, and limited participation (Smith, 2019; Jones, 2020; Williams, 2018; Lee, 2017).

Indonesia has been an active participant in the SLD since its inception. Indonesia's participation aims to enhance regional security cooperation,

advance national interests, and increase its international profile (Thayer, 2013). Indonesia's contributions include policy initiatives, participation in discussion sessions, and joint military exercises. However, Indonesia still needs to enhance its defense diplomacy capacity and be more proactive in proposing regional security initiatives (Valencia, 2015; Simon, 2008).

Opportunities for Indonesia within the SLD include enhancing cooperation with regional and global network countries, promoting the domestic defense industry, and utilizing the SLD as a platform to strengthen its influence in shaping regional security policy (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

## **DISCUSSION**

The Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) is a prestigious intergovernmental security conference held in Singapore since 2002 at the initiative of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), a Bahrain-based think-tank (Yang, 2024). The forum brings together defense ministers, top military officials and security experts from countries in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond to discuss regional strategic and security issues (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024). Until now, the Shangrilla Dialogue has been an important platform for Indonesia and the world in strengthening its defense diplomacy position, as well as a form of proactive foreign strategy, especially in the midst of increasing turbulent Indo-Pacific geopolitical dynamics (Kristiadi, 2016).

Indonesia has consistently attended and contributed to discussions in the SLD that address security and defense issues in the Asia-Pacific region. In addition, Indonesia's involvement in SLD can also enhance regional security cooperation, as a tool to promote its national interests at the global level (Thayer, 2013). In this regard, the Indonesian Minister of Defense from year to year plays a vital role by effectively conveying Indonesia's interests in this forum, especially in important sessions such as plenary and bilateral forums. This active diplomacy approach supports Indonesia's efforts to maintain collective security and demonstrate its commitment to the principle

of free-active foreign policy amidst competition between major powers in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Idiosyncratic Influence in Defense Diplomacy Policy**

Idiosyncratic, or the uniqueness of a leader's individual character, plays an important role in the direction of Indonesia's defense diplomacy policy. Idiosyncratic can be used in analyzing a country's foreign policy when the influence produced by an individual in policy making is total (Bojang, 2018). Rosenau (1976) explained that idiosyncratic is one of the determining factors in foreign policy positions. Several Indonesian Defense Ministers from the 2019-2024 period played a central role in conveying and defending Indonesia's national interests in the SLD forum. According to Colonel Muhammad Achyar (Interview July 2024), the Minister of Defense not only acts as a messenger but also as an opinion shaper in international forums. This approach reflects idiosyncratic theory, which suggests that individuals with unique characteristics, such as leadership style and personal preferences, influence how policies are delivered and defended.

Meanwhile, the Minister of Defense's good English language skills and deep understanding of international relations are important factors that support the effectiveness of Indonesia's defense diplomacy in strategic forums such as SLD (Colonel Kurniawan Firmuzi, Interview July 2024). Good English language skills and a deep understanding of international relations, possessed by the Minister of Defense also reflect idiosyncratic factors that influence the effectiveness of defense diplomacy. This suggests that strategic leadership links the leader's personal attributes with his or her professional knowledge and experience (Stamevska, 2020).

For example, Indonesian Minister of Defense Ryamizard Ryacudu during SLD 2019, he put forward strategic ideas amid the intensity of global competition between the US and China in the Asia-Pacific region. Ryamizard emphasized the importance of ASEAN to have its own agenda amidst the intense competition between the United States and China in the region (The International Intitute for Strategic Studies, 2019). As for Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto during SLD 2022 and SLD 2024, he brings a leadership



perspective that is heavily influenced by military experience and a deep understanding of defense issues. This is in line with Bojang's (2018) view that idiosyncratic often influences the direction of foreign policy, as political decisions made by leaders can reflect their personal views and character.

Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto used his experience to emphasize the importance of a dialogue approach in maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. This inclusive leadership style is in line with Indonesia's free-active foreign policy principles. According to Fischhoff (1983), a leader's preference for peaceful dialogue can lead to a defensive and dialogic defense policy. This can be seen in Prabowo's role in the SLD forum, which emphasizes the role of active diplomacy to deal with non-traditional threats such as cyber security, terrorism and maritime security.

### **Evaluation of Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy in Shangri-La Dialogue**

Evaluation of the role of Indonesia's defense diplomacy in SLD shows success in building a positive image of Indonesia in the international community. This forum provides space for Indonesia to voice its vision and interests in creating regional stability. However, there are still challenges that hinder the effectiveness of Indonesia's diplomacy. Smith (2019) notes that differences in interests between countries in the SLD forum often cause friction, especially in reaching solid agreements on strategic security issues such as the South China Sea and energy security.

On the other hand, an evaluation of Prabowo Subianto's role during the 2019-2024 period shows Indonesia's ability to be independent without being overly influenced by the interests of major powers. With consistent speeches and interventions, Prabowo has managed to build Indonesia's image as a neutral yet responsive country to regional security issues. The role of Indonesia's Minister of Defense, Prabowo Subianto, in the SLD for the 2019-2024 period is one of the most significant contributions of defense diplomacy. His presence at the prestigious forum was not only as a representative of Indonesia, but also managed to raise the nation's image and pride in the international arena. Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto, with his strong leadership and charisma, became a prominent figure among other

major figures, even his remarks often exceeded the attention received by heads of state and government from other countries.

As a “media darling” in the context of SLD, Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto successfully utilized this international diplomacy platform to convey Indonesia's strategic views in an effective and elegant manner. One of the keys to his success was his fluent English language skills and deep mastery of international relations and regional security issues. This combination not only strengthens Indonesia's defense diplomacy, but also allows Prabowo to engage in more comprehensive and nuanced discussions and negotiations with various world leaders.

### **Challenges and Opportunities for Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy in SLD**

Indonesia faces significant challenges in defense diplomacy in SLD, mainly related to limited resources and international political dynamics. Pramono (2020) argues that the capacity of defense diplomacy must be adjusted to the dynamics of world multi-polarization and the demands of maintaining domestic stability. Pressure from major countries such as the United States and China complicates Indonesia's position, which seeks to maintain neutrality amid this power competition.

In addition to these challenges, SLD also offers opportunities for Indonesia to strengthen the national defense industry. Kurniawan (2023) asserts that international forums such as SLD can be used as a forum for countries to attract investment in defense and introduce local defense products to the global market. In addition, Indonesia has the opportunity to build alliances with countries, expand its defense diplomacy network, and strengthen its influence in shaping regional security policies.

### **CONCLUSION**

Indonesia's defense diplomacy in the Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) forum has become a vital instrument in articulating national interests, promoting regional stability and raising Indonesia's international profile. The Indonesian Minister of Defense's active participation in SLD not only demonstrates Indonesia's commitment to defense diplomacy, but also supports Indonesia's

position as a country that promotes peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Despite challenges such as limited resources and complex geopolitical dynamics, Indonesia is able to utilize SLD as a strategic platform to strengthen regional security cooperation. The recommendations of this research include improving inter-agency coordination, developing performance indicators, and strengthening the capacity of defense diplomacy to face dynamic global challenges.

### **Recommendations to Improve the Effectiveness of Defense Diplomacy in SLD**

Based on the above evaluation, there are several recommendations for Indonesia to improve the effectiveness of Indonesia's defense diplomacy in SLD. First, the Government of Indonesia needs to strengthen coordination and communication mechanisms between relevant institutions, which allow all parties to obtain the latest data and information on policies, strategic issues, and diplomacy developments. In addition, holding regular meetings between the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as with other institutions involved in defense diplomacy, is very important to synchronize policies, evaluate the current situation, and strategic planning that is consistent with Indonesia's national interests.

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Third, related to the role of the Indonesian Minister of Defense in strategic dialogue forums such as SLD, international communication skills, especially in English, as well as an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of international relations, need to continue to be maximized. With good

English language skills and in-depth knowledge of international relations, the Minister of Defense can convey Indonesia's position more effectively and persuasively.

Fourth, it is important to develop clear and measurable performance indicators to evaluate the success of Indonesia's defense diplomacy in forums such as SLD. These indicators could include an assessment of the impact of conveying Indonesia's national interests and views in relevant forums, the results of bilateral meetings, and the international response to Indonesia's position. With measurable indicators in place, the GoI can assess the effectiveness of the strategies implemented and make necessary adjustments to improve diplomacy outcomes, as well as provide a basis for future strategic planning.

And finally, Indonesia needs to strengthen its defense diplomacy capabilities by adopting a more flexible approach in dealing with complex issues to ensure that Indonesia's position remains relevant and strategic. Valencia (2015) notes that changing global dynamics require countries to be more adaptive and able to adjust their strategies to new challenges, such as maritime security threats and tensions in the South China Sea. This can be achieved by strengthening the strategic analysis capacity and improving the diplomacy skills of Indonesian representatives in international forums.

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