

Hedging at Sea: Indonesia–Russia Defense Diplomacy through ORRUDA 2024 in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

Amid intensifying great-power rivalries in the Indo-Pacific, Indonesia's defense strategy has shifted toward multidirectional engagement to preserve strategic autonomy without committing to any single bloc. This study examines the strategic significance of the ORRUDA 2024 joint naval exercise between Indonesia and Russia as a case of defense diplomacy within a hedging framework. Drawing on neorealism, hedging theory, and the actor–process–issue model of defense diplomacy, the research adopts a qualitative case study approach that integrates primary sources, including press releases and official statements, with secondary scholarly literature. The findings reveal that ORRUDA operates both as a balancing mechanism against U.S.-led regional security architectures such as AUKUS and the Quad, and as a diplomatic signal affirming Indonesia's *bebas-aktif* foreign policy. The exercise strengthens operational cooperation with non-Western partners, reinforces national security, and contributes to regional stability. It also demonstrates the utility of defense diplomacy as a non-aligned, peacetime instrument of strategic statecraft involving coordinated planning, communication, and issue-specific collaboration. Overall, the analysis underscores the role of calibrated, non-provocative military engagement in managing geopolitical uncertainty and highlights the importance of diversifying defense partnerships and enhancing

strategic communication to sustain Indonesia's agency in a contested Indo-Pacific environment.

Keywords: Defense Diplomacy; Hedging Strategy; Indo-Pacific Security; Indonesia–Russia Relations; Naval Exercises

INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region has been increasingly characterized by escalating strategic tensions and a return to great power rivalries, particularly between the United States and China. This rivalry has manifested not only through diplomatic competition but also through militarized signaling, as evidenced by U.S.-led multilateral mechanisms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), the Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) pact, and extensive joint military exercises, including Super Garuda Shield conducted annually in cooperation with Indonesia. These developments have signaled a growing polarization within the region, creating pressure on Southeast Asian states to align strategically or maintain cautious neutrality (Medcalf, 2020). Such dynamics have intensified following the escalation of the South China Sea (SCS) disputes and the broader geopolitical fallout from the Russia–Ukraine conflict, which has accelerated the strategic repositioning of actors within and beyond the region (Kaplan, 2022).

In parallel, Russia has reoriented its strategic focus toward the Indo-Pacific as part of its “Pivot to the East” policy, particularly after being politically and economically isolated from the West in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In this context, the ORRUDA 2024 joint naval exercise according to Kompas (Kompas, 2024), the name Orruda was coined from “Orel” (Russian eagle) and “Garuda” (Indonesia's national emblem), reflecting the symbolic fusion in joint naval engagements has emerged as a salient case of bilateral defense cooperation aimed at enhancing operational coordination and mutual trust between Russia and Indonesia. While often overshadowed by high-profile Western-led exercises, ORRUDA represents an important node in Indonesia's broader defense diplomacy framework, anchored in its constitutional principle of a *bebas-aktif* (free and active) foreign policy doctrine (Anwar, 2020).

Indonesia's engagement in joint military exercises with both Western and non-Western powers reflects not a strategy of alignment, but one of hedging a concept whereby

states navigate great power competition by simultaneously engaging with and offsetting competing powers without committing exclusively to any side. Scholars such as Kuik (2008) have defined hedging as a behavior that mixes contradictory policy elements such as balancing and bandwagoning to avoid the risks of entrapment or abandonment by major powers. In this framework, ORRUDA can be seen not as a pivot toward Russia, but as a calibrated expression of Indonesia's pursuit of strategic autonomy and regional stability amid an increasingly polarized security landscape.

Expert perspectives have further emphasized that defense diplomacy serves as a critical peacetime instrument for building trust, enhancing interoperability, and shaping regional security architecture through non-coercive military engagement (Cottey & Forster, 2004). Defense diplomacy, therefore, extends beyond arms transfers and alliance formations; it encompasses a broader set of activities including joint exercises, high-level defense dialogues, capacity-building efforts, and confidence-building measures (Drab, 2018). In the case of ORRUDA, these dimensions converge to reflect not only the operational utility of the exercise but also its symbolic function in Indonesia's diplomatic calculus.

Despite the increasing scholarly attention to Indonesia's role in the Indo-Pacific, most existing studies have focused on its participation in U.S.-led frameworks such as Super Garuda Shield and the Indo-Pacific Strategy, thereby neglecting the significance of engagements with alternative powers like Russia. For example, research by Sulaiman (Sulaiman, 2021) and Inkiriwang (Inkiriwang, 2022) has elaborated on the strategic implications of Indonesia–U.S. cooperation but paid limited attention to Indonesia's diversified defense partnerships. This neglect creates a critical gap in understanding how Indonesia navigates its dual imperative of maintaining non-alignment while actively engaging with multiple strategic actors.

The present study addresses this gap by situating ORRUDA 2024 within the conceptual triad of neorealism, hedging strategy, and defense diplomacy. Special attention is paid to the actor–process–issue framework articulated by Perwita (Perwita, 2024), which enables a systematic analysis of defense diplomacy practices through the interplay of stakeholders, institutional mechanisms, and issue-based cooperation. By doing so, this research offers a comprehensive account of how Indonesia uses joint military exercises as a

hedging tool to maintain regional equilibrium and assert strategic independence in a contested geopolitical environment.

Accordingly, the objective of this article is to examine the strategic significance of ORRUDA 2024 as an instrument of Indonesia's defense diplomacy and hedging strategy in the Indo-Pacific. This will be achieved through a theory-informed analysis using neorealism, hedging theory, and the actor–process–issue model of defense diplomacy. The study aims to determine to what extent ORRUDA serves Indonesia's strategic objectives amid intensifying power rivalries and to evaluate whether such exercises contribute meaningfully to regional confidence-building and defense diversification.

METHODS

To investigate the strategic relevance of the ORRUDA 2024 joint naval exercise within the framework of Indonesia–Russia defense diplomacy, a qualitative case study approach was adopted. This methodology was selected because of its capacity to enable in-depth contextual analysis of complex inter-state interactions, particularly those involving security cooperation in a multipolar environment (Yin, 2018). The research emphasized not only the observable outcomes such as the conduct of bilateral naval operations but also the embedded diplomatic signals and strategic calculations that inform such cooperation.

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data consisted of official press releases, defense ministry statements, and publicly accessible documentation issued by the Indonesian Ministry of Defense (Kementerian Pertahanan Republik Indonesia) and the Russian Ministry of Defence, particularly in reference to the planning, scope, and operational objectives of ORRUDA 2024. Additionally, speeches made during bilateral meetings, statements from defense officials, and joint communiqués surrounding the time of the exercise were systematically analyzed to extract state narratives and strategic postures.

Secondary data were drawn from an extensive review of scholarly literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional research papers, and academic books focusing on defense diplomacy, hedging strategies, and neorealism in international relations. Special attention was given to works that contextualize Southeast Asia's strategic conduct within the Indo-Pacific theater (Cottey & Forster (2004), Kuik (2008) and Perwita, 2024)).

A thematic content analysis approach was employed to categorize findings into core conceptual themes, including strategic balancing, hedging behavior, and the operationalization of defense diplomacy. These categories were deductively derived from the study's theoretical framework and consistently applied across all collected texts to facilitate analytical coherence. Particular emphasis was placed on identifying patterns in Indonesia's posture through comparison with both Western-aligned joint exercises such as Super Garuda Shield and alternative defense engagements like ORRUDA, which offered insights into Jakarta's broader strategic calculus.

Although context-specific, the reliability and validity of this case study were strengthened through triangulation. This included the cross-verification of primary discourse, media-based interpretations, and established academic analyses, all of which were measured against theoretically informed expectations. Such triangulation was considered essential, given that defense diplomacy typically operates through both formal mechanisms such as treaties and frameworks and informal mechanisms such as military signaling, naval presence, and dialogue structures (Drab (2018) and Ng (2018))

Several methodological limitations were acknowledged. Due to the strategic sensitivity of defense planning, decision-making processes often remain undisclosed or underclassified. This limitation, however, was mitigated through the critical interpretation of publicly available material and the application of a robust analytical framework to maintain theoretical alignment and empirical depth (Creswell, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

To understand the strategic significance of ORRUDA 2024, three interrelated theoretical lenses have been adopted: neorealism, hedging strategy, and defense diplomacy. Each framework provides a distinct yet complementary perspective for interpreting how Indonesia navigates its defense relationships and regional positioning amid intensifying great power competition in the Indo-Pacific.

Neorealism

The neorealist paradigm has traditionally emphasized that international politics is governed by an anarchic structure in which no central authority exists to regulate state behavior (Waltz, 1979). In such a system, states are compelled to prioritize survival, often

through the accumulation of power and the pursuit of strategic alliances or balancing behaviors. Neorealism posits that under conditions of uncertainty particularly in regions marked by militarized rivalries such as the Indo-Pacific states are structurally driven to reinforce national security and preserve regional stability (Mearsheimer (2001) and Jervis (1978)).

Through this lens, the ORRUDA 2024 joint naval exercise can be understood as Indonesia's attempt to counterbalance systemic pressures generated by the intensification of U.S. and Chinese influence. The recurrence of U.S.-led multilateral military exercises, such as Super Garuda Shield, has been viewed by Jakarta not only as an opportunity but also as a signal of deepening strategic polarization (Kaplan (2022) and Medcalf (2020)). Against this backdrop, participation in ORRUDA has been interpreted as a form of limited balancing aimed at projecting Indonesia's agency and maintaining equilibrium within a volatile regional order. Rather than aligning fully with any great power, Indonesia has opted to engage in diverse defense partnerships as a means of mitigating structural vulnerabilities, consistent with neorealist expectations (Goh (2005) and O'Neil (2004)).

Hedging Strategy

While neorealism explains the structural incentives behind balancing, it does not adequately account for the nuanced and often contradictory behaviors of smaller states in fluid geopolitical contexts. To complement this structural analysis, the concept of hedging has been employed. Hedging is defined as a strategy whereby states adopt policies that combine engagement with competing powers while simultaneously implementing soft-balancing measures to reduce strategic dependency (Kuik, 2008). In Southeast Asia, this approach has become a prevalent means of avoiding both entrapment in major power conflicts and abandonment by critical partners (Reid (2015) and Tan (2013)).

Indonesia's participation in ORRUDA 2024 has thus been framed as part of a broader hedging strategy. By cooperating with Russia through joint naval exercises, Indonesia has been able to send a calibrated message of openness to alternative security partners, without undermining its simultaneous engagement with the United States and its allies (Anwar, 2022). While Super Garuda Shield represents alignment with the Western strategic community, ORRUDA functions as a counterweight that affirms Jakarta's refusal to be drawn exclusively into any singular geopolitical orbit (Inkiriwang (2022) and Hartanto

(2025)). In this sense, ORRUDA has served as a hedge not only against entrapment by the Western bloc but also against abandonment by other major actors, particularly China, whose actions in the South China Sea have raised concerns about regional assertiveness (Gindarsah (2015) and Goh (2007)).

Defense Diplomacy

To operationalize this hedging behavior and interpret its peacetime dimensions, the concept of defense diplomacy has been applied. Defense diplomacy refers to the use of military cooperation in non-combat settings to advance political-strategic objectives, particularly in building confidence, enhancing interoperability, and fostering mutual understanding between states (Cottey & Forster (2004) and Drab (2018)). Unlike alliance commitments, which imply strategic alignment, defense diplomacy allows for flexible and diverse forms of engagement that align with national interests and non-alignment principles (Ng (2018) and Laksmana (2011)).

The analytical framework developed by Perwita (2024) which breaks down defense diplomacy into three dimensions: actors, process, and issues has been utilized to analyze ORRUDA's practical and symbolic components. Within this framework, actors include state ministries, naval forces, and diplomatic attachés; processes encompass planning and execution of exercises, dialogue mechanisms, and public communication; while issues may relate to maritime security, capacity-building, or signaling intent in regional disputes (Le Miere (2014) and Bueger & Edmunds (2017)). By applying this tripartite model, ORRUDA has been interpreted not merely as a technical or operational endeavor but as a calculated diplomatic act designed to fulfill Indonesia's strategic hedging goals through peaceful military engagement.

Taken together, these three theoretical approaches neorealism, hedging, and defense diplomacy have provided the conceptual structure for the subsequent analysis. They have enabled a multilayered understanding of how ORRUDA 2024 embodies Indonesia's response to shifting power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, while simultaneously preserving its strategic independence and commitment to regional stability.

RESULTS

Strategic Behavior Through the Lens of Neorealism

From a neorealist perspective, Indonesia's involvement in ORRUDA 2024 reflects a rational response to the evolving balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. The rise of great power rivalry particularly between the United States and China has intensified the formation of security alignments such as AUKUS and the Quad, both interpreted as extensions of U.S. influence (White, 2019; Emmers, 2013). In this anarchic international system, Indonesia has sought to preserve strategic autonomy by diversifying its defense partnerships. Rather than aligning with Russia, ORRUDA 2024 signifies an act of strategic balancing, where Indonesia engages multiple great powers to prevent dominance by any one actor (Waltz (1979); Mearsheimer (2001); Jervis (1978)).

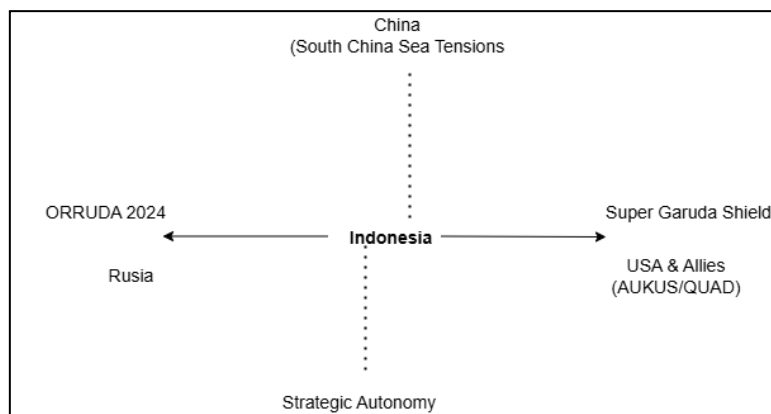


Figure 1. Indonesia's Strategic Positioning under Neorealism

(A conceptual diagram illustrating Indonesia's balancing posture between major powers in the Indo-Pacific region)

This action aligns with the neorealist principle of equilibrium, and further enhances Indonesia's agency as a regional middle power with autonomous defense decision-making (Reid (2015); Gindarsah (2015)). The ORRUDA exercise thus becomes a symbolic extension of Indonesia's national strategy in an anarchic security structure.

ORRUDA 2024 as a Hedging Instrument

The analysis through hedging offers a more nuanced interpretation. Hedging is defined as a dual-track strategy that mixes engagement and soft balancing, allowing states to avoid overdependence or alienation from any major power (Kuik (2008); Tan (2013)). Indonesia's parallel participation in Super Garuda Shield (with the U.S. and allies) and

ORRUDA 2024 (with Russia) exemplifies this strategic duality. The former enhances interoperability and access to Western technologies, while the latter ensures diversified partnerships and strategic flexibility (Inkiriwang, 2022; Hartanto, 2025).

Table 1. Strategic Objectives of Indonesia’s Dual Military Engagements

Exercise	Partner(s)	Strategic Value	Risk Mitigated
Super Garuda Shield	U.S. & Allies	Western tech access, defense readiness	Strategic dependence on the West
ORRUDA 2024	Russia	Strategic flexibility, multipolar engagement	Entrapment or alienation

This hedging strategy allows Indonesia to avoid entrapment within U.S.-led coalitions and to maintain maneuverability amidst Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea (O’Neil, 2004; Kaplan, 2022). In this context, ORRUDA becomes a calculated diplomatic move, not an ideological alignment.

Defense Diplomacy via the Actor–Process–Issue Model

In the context of defense diplomacy, ORRUDA 2024 is not merely a symbolic or operational gesture but a structured effort to advance Indonesia's regional role. Using Perwita’s (2024) Actor–Process–Issue model, the following components were identified:

- Actors: Indonesian Ministry of Defense, Indonesian Navy (TNI AL), Russian Pacific Fleet, and military attachés.
- Process: Bilateral planning, joint execution, and coordinated public messaging (Laksmna, 2011; Cottey & Forster, 2004).
- Issues: Focused on non-traditional security concerns such as maritime domain awareness, HADR, and counter-piracy operations.

Table 2. Implementation of the Actor–Process–Issue Model in ORRUDA 2024

Component	Key Elements	Outcome
Actor	TNI AL, MoD, Russian Fleet, Defense Attachés	Bilateral trust and communication channels
Process	Planning, joint briefings, public diplomacy	Institutionalized cooperation
Issue	Maritime security, HADR, anti-piracy	CBMs and strategic identity projection

Through this framework, ORRUDA 2024 has functioned as a confidence-building mechanism (CBM) that strengthens Indonesia's maritime security role without escalating great power tensions (Bueger & Edmunds, 2017; Le Miere, 2014).

DISCUSSION

This study analyzed Indonesia's participation in the ORRUDA 2024 joint naval exercise through the theoretical lenses of *neorealism*, *hedging strategy*, and *defense diplomacy*. The results indicate that Indonesia's involvement was not a form of political or military alignment with Russia, but rather a deliberate strategic maneuver to diversify defense partnerships, maintain strategic autonomy, and avoid entrapment in binary great power rivalries. By engaging in ORRUDA, Indonesia demonstrated its capacity to expand security cooperation beyond traditional partners, thereby reinforcing its *bebas dan aktif* (independent and active) foreign policy stance.

From a *hedging strategy* perspective, ORRUDA 2024 represented a calculated balancing act. Indonesia participated in Western-led exercises such as Super Garuda Shield while simultaneously engaging in alternative platforms like ORRUDA. This dual-track approach reflects a conscious effort to mitigate strategic risks, secure multiple channels of military cooperation, and retain flexibility in navigating the increasingly polarized Indo-Pacific security landscape. Such a posture aligns with neorealist expectations that middle powers will seek to maximize security options without committing exclusively to any single power bloc.

The exercise also functioned as a practical instrument of *defense diplomacy*. Applying the actor–process–issue model, ORRUDA's implementation facilitated trust-building between participating navies, enhanced interoperability in maritime operations, and contributed to Indonesia's identity as a responsible middle power. These activities not only strengthened bilateral and multilateral military ties but also reinforced Indonesia's diplomatic credibility in promoting stability and cooperation in contested maritime zones.

Collectively, these findings address the research question of how Indonesia operationalizes its *bebas dan aktif* foreign policy amidst intensifying great power competition. Rather than choosing alignment, Indonesia actively leverages multidirectional defense partnerships to preserve strategic flexibility. This approach illustrates a pragmatic

adaptation to structural constraints, highlighting the agency of middle powers in shaping their security environment despite systemic pressures.

Nonetheless, this research is subject to several limitations. First, the reliance on secondary data and conceptual models, without primary field-based sources such as elite interviews, classified planning documents, or direct military observations, limits the depth of empirical validation. Second, the focus on a single case study ORRUDA 2024 while illustrative, may not fully capture the complexity of Indonesia's broader defense engagement patterns over time and across different geopolitical contexts. Third, the rapidly evolving regional and global environment such as shifts in U.S.–China relations, changing ASEAN dynamics, or domestic political transitions could alter the relevance of the interpretations presented here.

Future studies should adopt mixed-method research designs, combining qualitative fieldwork, policy practitioner interviews, and document analysis with quantitative measures such as defense expenditure trends and network mapping of security partnerships. Comparative research across multiple military exercises involving Indonesia would allow for the identification of consistent patterns or deviations in strategic behavior. Additionally, examining how Indonesia's hedging posture evolves in tandem with ASEAN's multilateral security mechanisms and domestic political leadership changes could provide deeper insights into the adaptability of its defense diplomacy. By expanding empirical depth and theoretical breadth, subsequent scholarship can offer a more nuanced understanding of Indonesia's middle-power agency in an era marked by heightened great power uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the ORRUDA 2024 joint naval exercise serves as a strategic articulation of Indonesia's hedging posture in response to the intensifying geopolitical rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. Rather than indicating a pivot toward Russia or a rejection of cooperation with the West, ORRUDA 2024 reflects Indonesia's multi-alignment strategy, grounded in the principles of *bebas dan aktif* foreign policy. By participating in both Super Garuda Shield and ORRUDA, Indonesia has mitigated structural vulnerabilities, maintained strategic autonomy, and signaled its refusal to be drawn into binary alignments.

Through the analytical lenses of neorealism, hedging theory, and the actor–process–issue model, the study finds that Indonesia’s defense diplomacy is not only operational but also symbolic and political. It acts as a non-provocative mechanism to assert agency, reinforce non-alignment, and build strategic trust across diverse partnerships. The ORRUDA 2024 exercise exemplifies how Indonesia pursues calculated defense cooperation aligned with international norms while navigating the region’s complex and polarized security architecture.

Despite these insights, the research acknowledges several limitations. First, the analysis is based on open-source materials, without access to classified or internal government documents that could provide a deeper understanding of Indonesia’s defense policy deliberations. Second, the case study method, while effective for in-depth analysis, limits the comparability and generalizability of findings across other strategic contexts. Third, the study could not capture the internal dynamics of interagency coordination, civil-military relations, or real-time operational assessments surrounding ORRUDA’s implementation.

Based on these gaps, future research is encouraged to adopt empirical methods, such as interviews with policy actors or participant observation, to explore the domestic policymaking process behind Indonesia’s hedging posture. Comparative studies involving defense engagements with other powers (e.g., China, India, or ASEAN partners) would also enhance understanding of the principles guiding Indonesia’s strategic calculations. Additionally, there is value in investigating how civilian and military institutions interact in shaping defense diplomacy and how public communication strategies are used to avoid misinterpretations of Indonesia’s neutral stance. In conclusion, ORRUDA 2024 represents more than a tactical naval exercise it is a calculated expression of Indonesia’s commitment to non-alignment, strategic flexibility, and peaceful defense diplomacy. As regional uncertainties in the Indo-Pacific persist, Indonesia’s ability to manage competing interests through principled and multidirectional engagement will remain central to its national defense and foreign policy identity.

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