

Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy in Advancing ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) as a Regulatory Basis for ASEAN First Responder Formation

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Abstract

Southeast Asia ranks among the most disaster-prone regions globally, owing to its complex geological features and tropical climate. In response, ASEAN established the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), the region's first legally binding framework for disaster management. Despite its significance, AADMER's implementation faces structural limitations, including the principle of non-interference, disparities in member state capacities, and bureaucratic delays that hinder rapid mobilization during the critical "golden time" of disaster response. This study examines Indonesia's defense diplomacy in reinforcing AADMER as a regulatory basis for developing a regional First Responder mechanism that is timely, coordinated, and effective. Adopting a descriptive qualitative methodology, the research analyzes Indonesia's engagement through platforms such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus, alongside the roles of key national institutions including the National Disaster Management Authority (BNPB), the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI), the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and cooperation with the ASEAN

Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre). The findings highlight Indonesia's strategic role as a country frequently affected by disasters in advancing civil-military interoperability, joint disaster response exercises, and rapid deployment mechanisms under AADMER. Indonesia's defense diplomacy emerges not only as a tool of traditional security but also as a form of soft power that enhances regional solidarity and institutional legitimacy. The study concludes that Indonesia's leadership is pivotal in realizing the vision of *One ASEAN, One Response* through the establishment of a regulation-based, consensus-driven, and collectively operational First Responder system for the region.

Keywords: AADMER; ASEAN; Defense Diplomacy; First Responder; Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia is widely recognized as one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world, given its complex geological, geographical, and tropical climatic conditions that expose it to earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, floods, landslides, and tropical storms (National Geographic Society, 2023; World Meteorological Organization, 2024). Among its member states, Indonesia faces particularly acute risks as it lies within the Pacific Ring of Fire, making it susceptible to multi-hazard disasters and earning the label of a global “disaster laboratory” (Djalante, 2024). At the regional level, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) responded to this persistent threat by establishing the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) in 2005, which entered into force in 2009 as the first legally binding regional framework for disaster management (ASEAN, 2005). This agreement regulates prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery, setting ASEAN apart from other regional organizations that lack comparable disaster management instruments (Collopy et al., 2020).

Despite this achievement, the practical implementation of AADMER has faced structural and political limitations. ASEAN's operational mechanism is based on a request-based system in line with the principle of non-interference, which constrains its ability to serve as a rapid collective first responder during the crucial “golden time” of the first three days after a disaster (Inouye APCSS, 2020; Acharya, 2014). This challenge raises an

important question of how ASEAN can transform AADMER from a normative framework into a more operationally effective mechanism. Scholars have highlighted that Indonesia, with its extensive experience in humanitarian missions and its civil-military capacity, is well positioned to assume a leadership role in this transformation (Pranomo, 2020; Perwita & Sarjito, 2024).

Existing studies on ASEAN's disaster management highlight the significance of AADMER as a legal instrument but often focus primarily on its normative and institutional aspects rather than its operational effectiveness (Collopy et al., 2020; Acharya, 2014). Similarly, research on Indonesia's defense diplomacy has explored its contributions to traditional security and peacekeeping missions but has paid limited attention to its role in strengthening non-traditional security frameworks such as Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) (Pranomo, 2020). This indicates a research gap in understanding how defense diplomacy can be leveraged to reinforce AADMER as a functional regional mechanism for disaster response.

To address this gap, this study introduces novelty by linking Indonesia's defense diplomacy with ASEAN's disaster management agenda, arguing that defense diplomacy, traditionally associated with military cooperation and confidence-building, can serve as a strategic tool for enhancing regional disaster response capacities. This perspective draws on theoretical insights from defense diplomacy and regional security studies, which emphasize the role of middle powers in shaping collective security through both hard and soft power instruments (Acharya, 2014; Pranomo, 2020). By applying these theories, the study highlights Indonesia's potential contribution to transforming ASEAN's disaster management from a reactive, state-led approach into a proactive, collective framework.

Accordingly, this research focuses on how Indonesia's defense diplomacy can strengthen AADMER as a regional legal instrument in the context of Southeast Asia's disaster-prone environment. It examines the dynamics of coordination, structural constraints, and opportunities for policy reform, while offering strategic recommendations for building a more responsive and collective regional disaster management system under ASEAN's framework.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach within policy research to examine Indonesia's defense diplomacy in strengthening the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) as the legal basis for a regional First Responder mechanism. A qualitative design is considered most appropriate for exploring political and institutional phenomena, allowing meanings, patterns, and connections to emerge that are not easily quantifiable (Creswell, 2014; Lamont, 2015). The research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how Indonesia's defense diplomacy contributes to regional disaster governance, linking normative commitments to the operational realities of ASEAN cooperation.

To deepen this analytical lens, the study adopts the concept of defense diplomacy, understood as the use of military and defense instruments for cooperative, non-coercive purposes in managing non-traditional security challenges (Perwita & Sarjito, 2024). At the same time, Nye's (2011) notion of soft power frames Indonesia's disaster diplomacy as a tool of normative influence, where humanitarian assistance and rapid response initiatives enhance legitimacy and credibility within ASEAN and beyond. Taken together, these frameworks situate defense diplomacy not merely as operational cooperation but also as a soft power strategy that strengthens ASEAN's collective resilience while advancing Indonesia's regional leadership role.

In the qualitative tradition, this research utilizes a case study method. The case study design allows examination of a contemporary phenomenon where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are blurred (Yin, 2018). The case in focus is Indonesia's role in advancing AADMER as a foundation for ASEAN's First Responder framework, particularly through defense diplomacy practices within the ADMM and ADMM-Plus processes, joint HADR exercises, and regional coordination led by the AHA Centre. The case was selected due to its strategic significance in operationalizing ASEAN disaster response mechanisms and its relevance to understanding Indonesia's non-coercive military diplomacy in humanitarian contexts.

Evidence collection involved a combination of documentary analysis and interviews. Primary data sources included official ASEAN documents such as the AADMER text and implementing regulations, reports from ADMM and ADMM-Plus meetings, AHA Centre outputs, Indonesia's Defense White Paper, and BNPB policy

instruments. Empirical data were complemented with records from regional disaster response exercises, such as the ARF DiREx and ASEAN HADR drills. Four BNPB officials strategically positioned in policy and operational roles were interviewed using semi-structured guides, while supplementary data were drawn from media reports and visual documentation of Indonesia's participation in major disaster responses, including Super Typhoon Haiyan (2013) and the Lombok earthquake (2018). Purposive sampling was applied to ensure information-rich sources and key informants (Sugiyono, 2019).

The research was conducted in Jakarta, Indonesia, focusing on strategic institutions engaged in defense diplomacy and disaster management, including BNPB, the Ministry of Defense, TNI, ASEAN Secretariat, and the AHA Centre. Ethical safeguards were maintained through informed consent, anonymization of sensitive data, secure storage, and respondent validation of interpretations. Although the reliance on purposive sampling and a limited number of informants may limit statistical generalization, the triangulation of documentary sources, interviews, and observations ensures validity, contextual depth, and transferability to similar regional contexts (Dunn, 2018).

RESULTS

The research findings indicate that Southeast Asia is a region highly vulnerable to natural disasters. Its geographical position on the Pacific Ring of Fire and tropical climate makes almost all types of disasters likely to occur. Data from 2012–2020 shows that floods are the most dominant disasters, followed by strong winds, storms, landslides, and earthquakes. The impacts of disasters cover social, economic, and security dimensions, emphasizing the need for ASEAN to strengthen collective mechanisms.

In response, ASEAN established the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), which came into effect in 2009. AADMER provides a legal and regional cooperation framework for disaster coordination, mitigation, and response. Indonesia plays a central role through the presence of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) in Jakarta, as well as initiatives in joint exercises, disaster simulations, and technical training that strengthen regional capacity.

At the national level, Indonesia's disaster management system is built on the synergy between BNPB, TNI, the Ministry of Defense (Kemhan), and the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs (Kemlu). BNPB acts as the focal point for coordination, TNI supports field operations, Kemhan formulates defense policies, while Kemlu manages multilateral diplomacy. This framework reflects Indonesia's defense diplomacy as a civil-military blend aimed at strengthening both national capacity and regional contributions.

However, implementation in the field faces several challenges summarized in the following table:

Table 1. Challenges in Disaster Management in ASEAN

No	Challenge Aspect	Description
1	Interoperability	Differences in standard operating procedures and communication systems among national agencies and across borders may hinder coordination.
2	Logistics	Limited resources and transportation capacity hinder the timely delivery of aid, especially in remote areas.
3	Sensitivity of National Sovereignty	ASEAN member states remain cautious in cross-border operations. Indonesia, for instance, often rejects international assistance if it can manage disasters independently.
4	Lengthy Procedures	Bureaucratic procedures during emergencies often delay responses, despite the 'golden time' for disaster management being only about three days.

To address these challenges, Indonesia maximizes defense diplomacy through joint exercises such as the ASEAN Regional Disaster Emergency Response Simulation Exercise (ARDEX) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (ADMM-Plus HADR). These activities enhance interoperability and mutual trust among states. Moreover, Indonesia has positioned itself as a regional normative agent by promoting the principle of 'One ASEAN, One Response' and proposing the establishment of an ASEAN First Responder.

Indonesia's defense diplomacy integrates AADMER, SASOP, ADMM-Plus, and the ASEAN Militaries Ready Group (AMRG) into a unified framework. This civil-military synergy enables rapid, coordinated, and consensus-based responses while upholding state sovereignty. Indonesia's role in strengthening both national and regional capacities demonstrates its strategic commitment to the stability, security, and welfare of Southeast Asia.

DISCUSSION

This study confirms that Indonesia's defense diplomacy strategy in promoting the formation of the ASEAN First Responder with AADMER as its legal basis is carried out through a soft power approach. This can be understood through Joseph Nye's (2004) framework, which emphasizes influence based on values, reputation, and legitimacy rather than the use of military force. Indonesia builds trust capital from regional leadership, active participation in the ADMM and ADMM-Plus forums, and consistency in prioritizing HADR in its policies. In this case, Indonesia's defense diplomacy is not only technical but also normative, namely encouraging the formation of a collective ASEAN preference for humanitarian responses based on civil-military cooperation.

Indonesia's active involvement in the ADMM-Plus Expert Working Group on HADR demonstrates its position as a norm entrepreneur in the region (RSIS, 2024). This role is manifested through negotiations to mainstream the AMRG SOP on HADR into the AADMER/SASOP, the organization of joint exercises as proof of concept, and information exchange with the AHA Center (ASEAN, 2020). The push for the formation of First Responders is important because it enables the rapid deployment of regional resources with standard procedures, while still respecting the principle of non-interference through a request-based deployment mechanism (ASEAN, 2020). This step helps reduce bureaucratic barriers, strengthen cross-sector interoperability, and realize the vision of "One ASEAN, One Response" (AHA Center, 2021). Thus, Indonesia's defense diplomacy strategy has the potential to not only strengthen technical capacity, but also reinforce Indonesia's role as a normative leader in the region (Nye, 2011; Perwita & Sarjito, 2024).

These results are consistent with previous studies. Nye (2011) emphasizes the importance of soft power in shaping collective behavior, while Pranomo (2020) and Sarjito & Perwita (2024) assert that Indonesia's defense diplomacy serves as an instrument of confidence-building measures that strengthen regional stability. The ADMM-Plus HADR joint exercise in Yogyakarta (2023) is concrete evidence that the SOPs of AMRG, MNCC, and JOCCA are beginning to be integrated into cross-border simulations (AHA Centre, 2021). However, these results also confirm the challenges identified in previous studies. Inouye (2020) notes the disparity in military capabilities among ASEAN countries that hinders effective task sharing, while Acharya (2014) highlights the sensitivity of sovereignty issues and the principle of non-interference that can slow down cross-border deployment,

even though AADMER has regulated a request-based deployment mechanism. Technical barriers also remain significant, including language differences, military doctrines, command systems, and limited logistical interoperability. Analysis of the frequency and scale of joint exercises shows that most have not yet reached the intensity necessary to ensure the smooth running of real operations (AHA Centre, 2021).

The practical implication of these findings is that the ASEAN First Responder mechanism can strengthen regional resilience to non-traditional threats by emphasizing three key dimensions: resilience (resilience in the face of disruption), responsiveness (speed and effectiveness of response), and cohesion (political and operational unity among countries). AADMER provides a normative framework that enables the development of a rapid and coordinated response system supported by standardized procedures and resources (ASEAN, 2020). If effectively operationalized, First Responders can reduce the response gap in the first 48 hours of a disaster, a period that often determines the scale of impact (AHA Centre, 2021). On the diplomatic front, this mechanism also strengthens ASEAN's image in the eyes of external partners and increases the confidence of countries such as Japan, Australia, and the European Union in the region's capacity (RSIS, 2024). Thus, First Responder is not merely a technical instrument, but also a form of soft power that strengthens ASEAN's legitimacy as a normative actor in the Indo-Pacific security architecture.

However, this study also shows that there are significant structural and political limitations. Disparities in military and logistical capabilities between countries make it difficult to harmonize command and operational procedures. Differences in language, rules of engagement, and military doctrine have the potential to slow down coordination in the field. The principle of non-interference also remains a major obstacle because cross-border deployment requires complex political approval (Acharya, 2014). In addition, budget constraints, differing domestic priorities, and dependence on external support from dialogue partners raise questions about the sustainability of this mechanism (RSIS, 2024). From a methodological perspective, this study is still limited to an analysis of literature, ASEAN documents, and exercise reports, and therefore does not capture domestic political dynamics or the perspectives of practitioners in the field.

Thus, the success of the implementation of ASEAN First Responders will greatly depend on the political will of member states, clarity of operational mandates, and long-

term investment in capacity building. A collective commitment is needed to harmonize national SOPs with regional standards, strengthen cross-sectoral response units, and establish sustainable financing mechanisms. Further research needs to be conducted using empirical approaches such as comparative case studies or interviews with policy actors and military officers involved in HADR operations. This will complement the understanding of ASEAN's readiness to operationalize the First Responder as the foundation of a robust and adaptive non-traditional security architecture in Southeast Asia.

By placing the First Responder mechanism within the framework of soft power and defense diplomacy, this study contributes theoretically to the literature on international relations in Southeast Asia. This study shows that defense diplomacy does not merely function as a technical military instrument, but also as a normative means to shape collective preferences, strengthen regional legitimacy, and promote regional solidarity. These findings enrich the discourse on how soft power can be operationalized through non-traditional security mechanisms, while also affirming Indonesia's position as a normative leader in the Indo-Pacific security architecture.

Table 2. Matrix of Potential and Challenges in Implementing the ASEAN First Responder

Source: Author's analysis and summary

Aspect	Potential	Challenge
Mechanism Integration	The integration of AADMER with ADMM-Plus, HADR, and AMRG can strengthen cross-sectoral coordination and accelerate disaster response (RSIS, 2024; ASEAN, 2020).	Requires harmonization of mandates among institutions and forums, which can take time and involve lengthy negotiations (Inouye APCSS, 2020).
Indonesia's Role	As the initiator of the HADR agenda in ASEAN, Indonesia has the opportunity to become a norm entrepreneur in non-traditional security architecture (Pranomo, 2020; Sarjito & Perwita, 2024).	Needs to balance leadership with adequate operational capacity to avoid skepticism from other member states.
Confidence & Capacity Building	Joint civil-military exercises, strategic information exchanges, and SOP standardization can strengthen interoperability (AHA Centre, 2021).	Differences in doctrine, language, and defense technology among states can hinder the integration of command and logistics systems (ASEAN, 2020).
ASEAN's Image and Credibility	Effective First Responder operations can enhance ASEAN's image as a solid regional humanitarian actor (Nye, 2011).	Failure in rapid response or political disagreements can undermine public and external partners' trust.

Aspect	Potential	Challenge
Compliance with ASEAN Principles	A request-based deployment mechanism safeguards state sovereignty while allowing for rapid assistance (ASEAN, 2020).	Sensitivity to sovereignty and the non-interference principle makes member states cautious about deploying foreign troops in their territories (Inouye APCSS, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of disaster management frameworks in Southeast Asia, it can be concluded that while ASEAN has made significant progress through the establishment of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) and the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre), these institutions still face fundamental challenges in functioning as autonomous and responsive first responders. The response to the 2025 Myanmar earthquake demonstrated improved coordination compared to the 2004 Aceh tsunami, yet current mechanisms remain dependent on member states’ initiatives and resources, constrained by the principle of non-interference, which can delay aid mobilization.

This study emphasizes that Indonesia’s defense diplomacy serves as a strategic instrument to bridge the gap between rapid response needs and ASEAN’s structural limitations. With strong civil-military capacity and extensive humanitarian experience, Indonesia is well positioned to lead collective efforts to strengthen AADMER and the AHA Centre. Defense diplomacy in this context is non-coercive, prioritizing soft power rooted in trust, solidarity, and interoperability.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the development of defense diplomacy as a tool of non-traditional security in the humanitarian domain. It extends Joseph Nye’s soft power concept by framing Indonesia as a norm entrepreneur that promotes a new ASEAN norm: collective preparedness through civil-military cooperation in disaster response. This aligns with Indonesia’s trust capital, built via active participation in ADMM, ADMM-Plus, and its consistent prioritization of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR).

To enhance first responder effectiveness, Indonesia should advocate procedural reforms, harmonize national SOPs with SASOP and MNCC, expand joint exercises, and revise the AADMER Work Programme to include first responder modules. By advancing

cooperative sovereignty, Indonesia not only strengthens ASEAN's disaster resilience but also its legitimacy as an inclusive, adaptive security community.

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