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Indonesia's Defense Diplomacy Toward Fiji on the Papua Issue: Strengthening Bilateral Cooperation and Regional Stability

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Abstract

This study analyzes Indonesia's defence diplomacy towards Fiji through the combined lenses of neorealism and soft power to explain Jakarta's strategic conduct in the South Pacific. In a regional environment where states prioritize security and survival, Indonesia's engagement with Fiji represents a calculated, non-coercive approach to advancing national interests, particularly regarding the Papua issue. Defence diplomacy initiatives include officer training programmes, high-level visits, joint military exercises, and institutionalised strategic dialogues designed to promote trust, transparency, and mutual understanding. Empirical evidence highlights the participation of Fijian officers in Indonesia's Army Staff and Command College and Peacekeeping Centre, as well as bilateral commitments to expand cooperation across the army, navy, and air force. These activities have coincided with a moderation of Fiji's stance on Papua in regional forums, aligning more closely with Indonesia's position. Humanitarian assistance, capacity-building measures, and regional security collaboration have further enhanced Indonesia's diplomatic image and supported its *free and active* foreign policy. The study concludes that Indonesia's defence diplomacy towards Fiji serves both as a structural security strategy and

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a normative engagement tool, generating mutual benefits while strengthening Jakarta's strategic influence in the Pacific.

Keywords: Indonesia; Fiji; Defence Diplomacy; Soft Power; Indo-Pacific; Military Cooperation

INTRODUCTION

Amid the evolving geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific, Indonesian defense diplomacy has taken on more significance as a non-coercive means of strategic engagement with Pacific Island nations, and Fiji in particular. Indonesia's positioning between the Pacific and Indian Oceans has propelled its foreign policy beyond Southeast Asia, covering regional security matters such as climate change, maritime security, natural disasters, and transnational crimes (Chanel, 2024; Christawan et al., 2023). These non-traditional threats require cooperative resolution where defense diplomacy is a means of building transparency, trust, and understanding (Cottey & Forster, 2013; Scott, 2019)

This study also takes a loan from Kenneth Waltz's Theory of International Politics (1979) which introduces neorealism as an account of the way in which the anarchic structure of the international system compels states to seek security and not power for the sake of power. Here, Indonesia's engagement with Fiji, officer exchanges, joint exercises, and defense dialogues, is a defensive move to maintain regional stability, reduce diplomatic exposure on sensitive issues such as Papua, and secure its position in Melanesian regional politics. Far from wanting to dominate, Indonesian behavior is in line with Waltz's anticipation that "states seek security, not power for its own sake," with the proviso that it is Jakarta's desire to create a secure strategic environment that is being pursued, not hegemonic control (Pradnyana, 2024; Sarjito, 2025).

Bilateral relations between Fiji and Indonesia, since their official establishment in 1974, have been elevated since the early 2000s through exchange of trade, education, and culture and through multilateral engagements in organizations such as the United Nations, Non-Aligned Movement, and South-South Cooperation (Panjaitan et al., 2020). In 2017, Indonesia and Fiji diplomatically formalized their defence cooperation via a memorandum of understanding that allowed for the exchange of officers, training, and bilateral activities to increase interoperability and develop regional resilience (Jamilah & Sari, 2024). The

samen is also Indonesia's wider aim of maintaining national territorial integrity and blocking outside frameworks on Papua, which tend to gain steam in Pacific regional institutions (Cahayani, 2023; Saputra et al., 2025)

Earlier research primarily discusses Indonesia's Pacific outreach in the framework of South-South Cooperation, humanitarian, and development aid (Perwita et al., 2022). However, few researches have examined the influence of formal mechanisms of defense diplomacy on Indonesia-Fiji relations or Indonesia's overall strategic interests in the South Pacific. As humanitarian coordination reflects Indonesia's soft power within the region (Riyadi & Dewi, 2022; Suminar et al., 2025), the geopolitical and strategic implications of ongoing defense engagement, considered from the perspective of the structure of the international system, have been under-theorized.

This research addresses that gap by analyzing Indonesia's defence diplomacy against Fiji as both an operational and strategic foreign policy instrument. From the question, *"How does Indonesia's defence diplomacy towards Fiji on the Papua issue construct trust and regional stability?"* the study employs a qualitative descriptive approach in examining how non-coercive military interactions reinforce political confidence, enhance Indonesia's political influence in the South Pacific region, and aid its stabilizing actor function in the Indo-Pacific region. By the construction of neorealism, defence diplomacy theory, and soft power analysis, this study provides new insights on how Indonesia employs defence diplomacy not only as symbolic interaction but also a deliberate policy for pursuing national interests within an increasingly contested regional order.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach to examine Indonesia's defence diplomacy in respect to Fiji as a method of creating confidence-building and regional stability. Qualitative research is the most appropriate means of researching complex political conduct and foreign policymaking in their natural environment so that the researcher may recognize meanings, patterns, and relations that can be tricky to survey qualitatively (Creswell, 2014). The phenomenon under investigation in this research is the non-coercive use of Indonesia's military diplomacy as a soft power and strategic tool to consolidate its role in the South Pacific. This phenomenon is one that requires rich and interpretive analysis emphasizing depth of understanding over breadth of description. With

such a methodology, the research provides a synoptic explanation of Indonesia's defence diplomacy in neorealist terms, stressing how states act in seeking security and not power in itself as a systemic imperative (Zulham, 2025).

Within the qualitative tradition, the case study approach is utilized in this study. The case study approach enables detailed exploration of international relations phenomena in today's context where the phenomenon's boundaries and its context are not clearly separable, and thus, it is highly suitable to examine Indonesia's defence diplomacy to Fiji (Djelantik, 2024). Unlike the current literature, which has focused predominantly on Indonesia's South-South Cooperation or humanitarian engagement in the Pacific (Christawan et al., 2023; Perwita et al., 2022), this research examines formal defence cooperation arrangements such as officer exchanges, joint training programmes, and high-level talks as deliberate attempts to build strategic trust and reduce diplomatic tensions on sensitive issues such as Papua. In so doing, this study contributes to the literature by offering a theoretically coherent and empirically grounded analysis of defence diplomacy below symbolic acts.

Purposive sampling is employed to obtain evidence from Indonesian Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Foreign Affairs official reports, memoranda of understanding between Fiji and Indonesia, embassy reports, press releases, and academic works specifically addressing Indonesia-Pacific defence relations. Purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research whose objective is to obtain an in-depth insight into specific cases rather than making statistical generalization (Sugiyono, 2024). The sources selected are informative and reflective of Indonesia's ongoing defence interaction with Fiji for the duration 2010-2024, which allows for a comprehensive understanding of its execution and implications.

Collection of evidence is largely based on systematic documentary analysis, which is commonly regarded as an in-depth qualitative methodology to locating, evaluating, and interpreting documentary evidence for the purpose of gaining contextual insight (Bowen, 2009). Defence policy statements, official statements, and government reports are illustrations of primary data, while academic journals, institution reports, and analyses from reputable research think tanks are illustrations of secondary data. Everything that was received from the official sources was cross-verifying with peer-reviews and mainstream media to determine authenticity and credibility. Where additional explanation was felt

necessary, explanatory remarks from defense policy analysts and experts were referred to ensure data triangulation and cross-validation of interpretations.

Data analysis process is thematic in nature that resonates with qualitative research processes. Emergent findings were categorized into themes of "capacity-building initiatives," "high-level defence dialogues," "maritime security cooperation," and "strategic trust-building." Recursive comparison with the theoretical framework based on Kenneth Waltz's neorealism, Cottey and Forster's defence diplomacy theory, and Joseph Nye's soft power framework was used to sharpen the analytical categories and make them meaningful for the research question.

By combining various sources of information and application of applicable theoretical models, validity and reliability of the research results are enhanced. Triangulation of primary sources, expert opinions, and academic studies reduces the risk of bias and ensures credibility. Secondly, the application of neorealism as an explanatory model facilitates system observation of how structural forces and regional politics shape Indonesia's strategic alternatives. This research thus offers a theoretically synthesised and empirically evidence-based explanation of how Indonesia utilizes defence diplomacy with Fiji to seek security, bolster political trust, and advance Indo-Pacific regional stability without seeking hegemonic domination.

RESULTS

Since the past decade, Indonesia's defence diplomacy with Fiji has continued to advance, spanning both formal bilateral avenues and strategic multilateral exchanges in the Indo-Pacific. Findings of this study can be classified under two connected categories: (1) forms of defence diplomacy implementation, particularly in capacity building aimed at influencing Fiji's stance on the Papua issue, and (2) its influence on bilateral relations and regional stability.

Forms of Defence Diplomacy Implementation of Indonesia to Fiji for Capacity Building to Address the Papua Issue

Indonesia's defence diplomacy toward Fiji in the context of capacity building particularly aimed at addressing sensitivities surrounding the Papua issue has been consistently operationalised through structured professional military education, training,

and high-level institutional engagement. Since the signing of the initial Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Defence Cooperation in September 2017 (Government of the Republic of Fiji, 2017), the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) has regularly sent officers to attend courses at Indonesian defence institutions. Between 2018 and 2024, six Fijian officers participated in various programmes, ranging from the Command and Staff Course at the Indonesian Army Staff and Command College (SESKOAD) to specialised training in peacekeeping operations planning, disaster response, and maritime security (MoD Indonesia, 2021). Beyond enhancing Fiji's operational competencies, these educational exchanges have fostered interpersonal networks and mutual familiarity among officers, which are critical to sustaining bilateral defence relations..

Institutional coordination has been reinforced through regular high-level contacts and strategic dialogue. The 2017 MoU not only established a legal and procedural framework for cooperation but also set the stage for expanded engagements. This framework was further consolidated in April 2025, when Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto and Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka agreed to initiate reciprocal joint exercises across the army, navy, and air force branches (Rahayu, 2025). Between 2020 and 2024 alone, five top-level defence visits facilitated two-way exchanges of strategic perspectives, ensuring the sustainability of cooperation mechanisms (Antara News, 2025). These visits functioned as platforms for both countries to reaffirm their shared security objectives and maintain operational alignment.

A strategically significant outcome of these sustained engagements has been the evolution of Fiji's diplomatic position on Papua within regional forums such as the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG). While Fiji's stance in 2015–2016 was relatively critical toward Jakarta, by 2023 the country had shifted toward a more neutral and even constructive posture. This change is closely linked to Indonesia's long-term defence diplomacy, encompassing capacity-building programmes, officer training, joint exercises, and institutionalised dialogue. Collectively, these initiatives have established reciprocal trust, reduced political friction, and reframed the Papua issue in the minds of Fijian political and security elites from being viewed as a point of contention to being approached as a matter better resolved through positive bilateral engagement (M. Musmar, 2024).

This shift carries considerable strategic weight given Fiji's influential role within the MSG, where Papua-related narratives are often contested. As one of the leading Melanesian

states, Fiji's position can influence regional consensus either in favour of, or against, Indonesian interests. By embedding capacity-building activities within a broader defence diplomacy framework combining officer development, peacekeeping partnerships, and joint exercises Indonesia has created enduring channels of confidence and interdependence. These channels have contributed to a political environment in which adverse coalition-building against Indonesia in the Pacific is less likely (Mirin, n.d.).

Humanitarian and technical assistance have also been employed as complementary soft-power instruments within this broader defence diplomacy framework. Following Cyclone Winston in 2016, Indonesia delivered substantial aid for reconstruction and medical relief, generating goodwill that paved the way for the 2017 MoU. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Indonesia provided masks and protective gear, further reinforcing its image as a capable and compassionate regional partner (Banyu Perwita, Rossiana, & Pertiwi, 2022; BNPB, 2021). These gestures not only strengthened bilateral trust but also demonstrated Indonesia's broader commitment to regional stability.

Table 1 below summarises the key milestones of Indonesia–Fiji defence diplomacy between 2016 and 2025, highlighting how a combination of capacity-building, strategic dialogue, and humanitarian assistance has underpinned the evolution of bilateral relations.

Table 1. Timeline of Indonesia–Fiji defence diplomacy activities (2016–2025)

Year	Activity	Significance
2016	Humanitarian aid after Cyclone Winston	Built goodwill before formal cooperation
2017	Defence Cooperation MoU signed	Established legal framework for collaboration
2018–2024	Officer training and specialised courses	Enhanced RFMF capacity, strengthened networks
2020–2024	Five high-level defence visits	Sustained strategic dialogue
2025	Agreement on reciprocal joint exercises	Expanded military-to-military engagement

Sources: Summary by Author

Impacts on Indonesia-Fiji Bilateral Relations

The implementation of Indonesia's defence diplomacy initiatives toward Fiji has generated substantive and multidimensional impacts on the bilateral relationship. First, these measures have reinforced political trust, with sustained defence cooperation and institutionalised dialogues facilitating more open and direct communication channels

between Suva and Jakarta. This environment of transparency has enhanced mutual confidence in pursuing shared regional objectives, particularly in security and stability (Fifita, 2018b). Second, defence diplomacy has expanded Indonesia's strategic footprint in the Pacific, enabling Jakarta to strengthen engagement with Melanesian states and improve its profile in regional forums where sensitive issues such as Papua are frequently debated (A. F. Musmar, 2024). Third, cooperative activities in professional military training, disaster response, and maritime security have yielded tangible contributions to regional stability, reinforcing Indonesia's image as a proactive and dependable partner in the Indo-Pacific security architecture (MoFA Indonesia, 2022; BNPB, 2021).

Beyond these operational outcomes, there is a deeper strategic narrative revealed through analysis of media coverage and policy discourse. Indonesia's provision of a USD 6 million grant to Fiji in 2025, when coupled with its ongoing defence cooperation initiatives, appears to serve a broader diplomatic purpose: mitigating Fiji's support for Papua independence and consolidating Jakarta's position in regional deliberations (Mirin, n.d.). Such an approach aligns with the neorealist perspective, which posits that states pursue security and strategic advantage rather than outright hegemony through calculated partnerships in an anarchic international system (Waltz, 1979). This suggests that Indonesia's defence diplomacy toward Fiji is not merely transactional, but part of a long-term strategic design aimed at shaping regional alignments.

Figure 1 illustrates the hierarchical relationship between the key themes of Indonesia–Fiji defence diplomacy. It maps how capacity-building measures including officer training, joint exercises, and humanitarian assistance have facilitated shifts in Fiji's regional positioning, which in turn have produced positive impacts on bilateral trust, regional stability, and Indonesia's strategic influence.

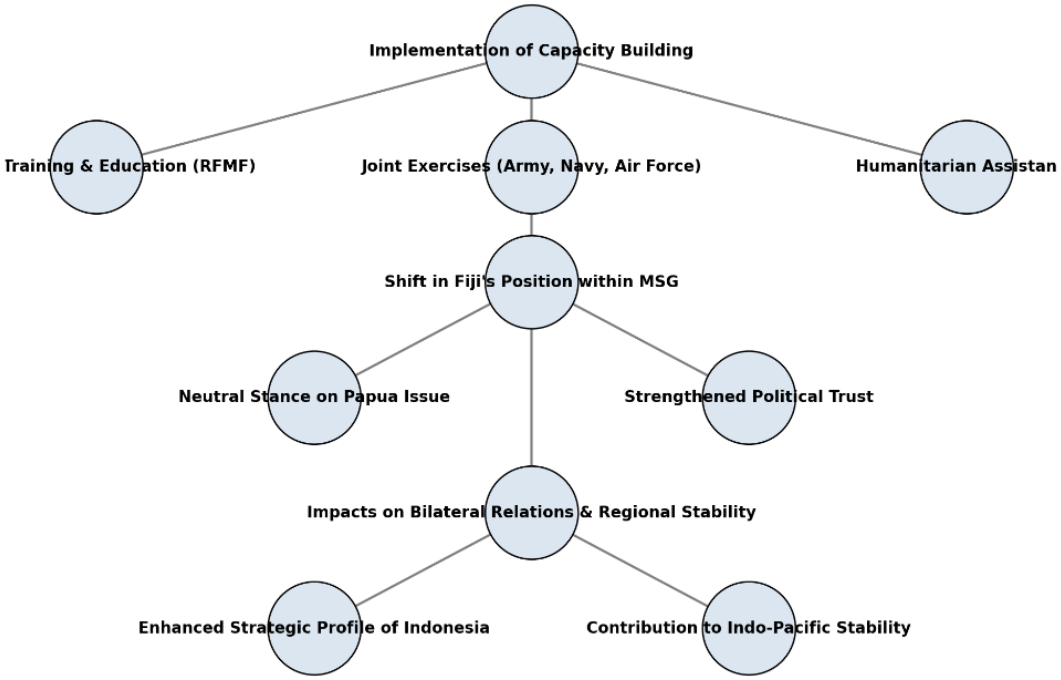


Figure 1. Hierarchical relationship between themes in Indonesia–Fiji defence diplomacy

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that Indonesia's defence diplomacy toward Fiji has evolved from short-term, tactical military engagements into a more coherent long-term strategy aimed at image-building, trust development, and contribution to stability in the South Pacific. This shift can be interpreted as an adaptive response to the strategic environment of the Pacific Islands and Indonesia's domestic imperative to safeguard its national interests, particularly on the Papua issue. From a neorealist perspective, the initiatives reflect a rational security-seeking behaviour in an anarchic international system, as posited by Kenneth Waltz. Lacking the geographic proximity and overwhelming hard power projection capabilities in the South Pacific, Indonesia has opted for non-coercive defence diplomacy to reduce strategic vulnerability and prevent coalition formation against its position in international fora. Fiji's centrality within Melanesia and its role as an opinion leader in regional organisations have made it a priority partner in this endeavour.

Defence diplomacy theory helps explain the mechanics of this strategy. Through structured officer education, joint training, humanitarian assistance, and formal instruments such as the 2017 Defence Cooperation MoU, Indonesia has embedded regular

communication mechanisms and interoperability with the Republic of Fiji Military Forces. The moderation of Fiji's stance on Papua within Melanesian forums, moving from a critical to a more neutral and constructive position by 2023, is strong empirical evidence of the efficacy of these measures. Soft power dynamics are also at play: sustained, non-coercive military engagement has bolstered Indonesia's image as a constructive and non-threatening partner, in line with its "free and active" foreign policy. This gradual reputational shift has influenced Fijian defence and political elites to frame Papua not as a contentious conflict but as an issue to be addressed through cooperative bilateral ties.

These results align with earlier findings by Susilowati et al. (2024) and Mooy (2024), who argue that defence diplomacy serves as an effective instrument for trust-building and reducing misperceptions in complex strategic environments. They also correspond to Banyu Perwita et al. (2022), who emphasise the role of defence cooperation in managing sensitive domestic issues at the international level. However, this study identifies an additional dimension underexplored in prior literature: the simultaneous integration of neorealist structural logic with soft power attraction in a single policy framework. While previous Pacific-focused works, such as Dugis & Wardhani (2025) and Masri et al. (2024), tend to concentrate on normative diplomacy and political dialogue, this research highlights the central role of military actors as conduits for shaping elite perceptions. Another key distinction is the geographical context: unlike the Fiji–China or Fiji–Australia relationships, which are grounded in sustained physical presence and material influence, Indonesia's approach resembles a form of "long-distance diplomacy" that relies on sustained engagement rather than direct military deployment.

Theoretically, these findings contribute to the literature on defence diplomacy by providing empirical evidence that it can serve dual purposes: fulfilling the security imperatives of neorealism while simultaneously acting as a vehicle for soft power. The integration of both approaches demonstrates that hard security logics and attraction-based influence are not mutually exclusive but can be mutually reinforcing in the strategies of middle powers. In the specific context of the South Pacific, this study expands scholarly understanding of how a non-dominant regional actor like Indonesia can generate meaningful influence despite geographical remoteness, provided the engagement is consistent, targeted, and institutionalised.

From a practical standpoint, the Indonesia–Fiji case offers a model for engagement with other Pacific Island states such as Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and Tonga. The strategy underscores the importance of maintaining long-term training programmes, institutionalised consultation mechanisms, and the projection of the military as a constructive actor focused on resilience and capacity-building rather than coercion. Regionally, this approach strengthens Indonesia's position within an inclusive Indo-Pacific security architecture aligned with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, while reducing the risks of polarisation amid great-power rivalries in the Pacific.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. As a single case study, its generalisability to other Pacific contexts must be approached cautiously. Reliance on secondary sources official documents, media reports, and academic literature limits the ability to capture informal decision-making processes or the full spectrum of motivations behind policy choices. The absence of primary interviews with policymakers or defence personnel means that certain internal political considerations may remain unaccounted for. Furthermore, this research does not provide quantitative measurements of changes in public perception or elite attitudes in Fiji toward Indonesia; the assessment of soft power effectiveness is therefore inferential rather than survey-based. Finally, broader geopolitical dynamics particularly the US–China rivalry's spillover effects into the South Pacific were not deeply examined, though they may significantly influence the trajectory of Indonesia–Fiji relations. Future research could address these gaps through comparative multi-country analysis and mixed methods, combining elite interviews with public opinion surveys to more comprehensively evaluate the impact of defence diplomacy in small-state contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Indonesia's defence diplomacy with Fiji is a cautious and calculated move to reclaim bilateralism, enhance political confidence, and project Indonesian leadership in the South Pacific. Through non-coercive measures, training and education of the military, receptions of senior officials, membership in regional forums, and humanitarian assistance, Indonesia has emerged as a positive force in maintaining regional stability and solidarity among the developing world. These measures not only consolidated Fiji's defence but also brought in strategic lines of communication which reduced misunderstandings and tension about sensitive matters such as Papua.

By combining defence diplomacy and soft-power logic with the systemic focus of neorealism, this research proves Indonesia is pursuing security, not primacy, through cooperative military action. Defence diplomacy in the Fiji example is simultaneously a tool of promoting Indonesia's broader foreign policy objectives, i.e., an open, stable, and inclusive Indo-Pacific order, and a precaution against potential diplomatic disaster in Melanesia. The cooperation is also in the interest of both countries to strengthen both nations' standing in regional institutions such as the Pacific Islands Forum and the Melanesian Spearhead Group, with spill-over benefits from security into political and development cooperation.

But there are limitations. The exclusive reliance on secondary data restricts direct access to policymakers' strategic intentions, and the single-case study restricts generalisability to other Pacific island countries. The qualitative design, dense in depth though it may be, is interpretive in quality and lacks quantitative measurability.

Subsequent studies could bridge these gaps through the employment of primary data for examples, interviews with foreign and defence policymakers in Suva and Jakarta, and comparative analyses with other Pacific states, such as Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. Such research would enable the query as to whether the trust-building effects observed in Indonesia-Fiji are anomalous or part of a broader regional pattern to be answered. Additional research might also take account of how shifting regional security challenges, such as climate risks and increasing great-power rivalries across the Pacific, could reshape Indonesia's defence diplomacy agendas in the next decade. This research highlights that Indonesia's defence diplomacy is far from symbolic engagement. It is a multifaceted strategy that involves structural security requirements combined with normative interaction, enabling Jakarta to exercise strategic autonomy while building stability and cooperation in its wider Indo-Pacific region.

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