



## **Implementation of Smart Diplomacy as a Military Diplomacy Strategy to Manage the Us-China Rivalry in Order to Support National Interests**

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### **Abstract**

Amid intensifying U.S.–China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, Indonesia faces a strategic dilemma: how to preserve autonomy and regional stability without being pulled into bloc politics. The research problem addressed here is whether—and under what institutional conditions—Smart Diplomacy, which blends hard and soft power through military diplomacy, can serve that purpose. The study’s objective is to assess the effectiveness of Smart Diplomacy as practiced by the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) and to identify its enabling factors and constraints. Using a descriptive qualitative design, the analysis combines SWOT to map internal–external factors, NVivo-assisted content analysis to code policy and operational narratives, and PESTEL to stress-test external drivers. Results indicate that Smart Diplomacy strengthens trust, deepens defense cooperation, and sustains balanced relations with major powers when three conditions hold: cross-sectoral integration among TNI, the Ministry of Defence, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; synchronization of defense and foreign-policy strategies; and agile participation in multilateral forums, joint exercises, and humanitarian missions. Responsiveness to technological change and the information environment further enhances adaptability. Short-term implications include the need to codify a responsive military-diplomacy doctrine, invest in capacity building and strategic communications, and expand regional networks—measures that collectively reduce escalation risks, improve crisis response, and reinforce Indonesia’s strategic posture.

**Keywords:** Smart Diplomacy, Military Diplomacy, U.S.–China Rivalry, National Interest.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In the past decade, the Indo-Pacific region has undergone a profound geopolitical transformation, fueled by the strategic rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic of China (Adani, 2020). In the midst of this great power contest, Indonesia, as the largest archipelago in the world that stretches along the equator, has a very unique and strategic geographical position (Bitzinger, 2017). This geographical location makes Indonesia a maritime bridge connecting Asia and Australia, as well as an international shipping lane that is vital for global trade (Creswell, 2014; Neuman, 2014; Saldaña, 2021; Silverman, 2020). The Indo-Pacific region, which stretches from the east coast of Africa to the west coast of the United States, is a highly dynamic arena of economic, political, and security interactions and has a significant influence on global stability and prosperity (Dwikardana et al., 2017; Triwibowo et al., 2017). For

Indonesia, this region is not only a neighbor but also a key strategic environment that directly influences and stakes its national interests (Khanna, 2016).

As a country with a population of more than 270 million people and the largest economy in Southeast Asia, Indonesia has complex and diverse national interests in the Indo-Pacific region. These interests include maintaining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI), including its vast maritime area; securing the Sea Lane of Communications (SLOC), which is crucial for trade and connectivity; and encouraging economic growth through regional and international cooperation (Khanna, 2016). Furthermore, Indonesia has an interest in creating and maintaining regional stability, preventing conflicts, and advancing the regional order based on the principles of international law, multilateralism, and respect for the sovereignty of all countries Hapsari & Muhaimin, 2023).

Since the beginning of its independence, Indonesia has placed diplomacy as the main instrument in maintaining sovereignty and fighting for national interests amid global political dynamics (Isnarti, 2023). An important milestone in the history of Indonesian diplomacy was realized in the 1955 Asian-African Conference (KAA) in Bandung, which gave birth to the Bandung Dasasila. The ten principles contained in the Bandung Dasasila, such as respect for human rights, sovereignty, and peaceful dispute resolution, became the foundation for Indonesia's foreign policy as well as inspiring the solidarity movement of developing countries amid the rivalry between the Western Bloc and the Eastern Bloc at that time (Harakan, 2023; Putri, 2022).

The application of the principle of free and active activity is further strengthened by Indonesia's role as one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement (GNB) in 1961. Through the GNB, Indonesia seeks to maintain its foreign political autonomy amid the tensions of the Cold War, as well as encourage the creation of a more balanced world order without the domination of major powers. Djalal (2008) noted that Indonesia's commitment to the GNB is not merely symbolic but affirms the character of Indonesian diplomacy as a bridge of communication between blocs and a driver of global solidarity.

In the Southeast Asian region, Indonesia played a central role in establishing ASEAN in 1967 along with five other countries. ASEAN is an effective means of building trust, resolving regional conflicts, and strengthening stability and economic-political cooperation. Suryadinata (1996) highlights how Indonesia's centrality in ASEAN allows the creation of regional norms that reject intervention and prioritize consensus.

Over time, Indonesia's diplomacy has evolved from one originally based on politics and economics to defense diplomacy in response to increasingly complex regional security challenges. The role of the TNI and the Ministry of Defense in various international defense forums is increasingly significant, including through active participation in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus. The forum is an important platform for building military trust, strengthening defense cooperation, and developing confidence-building measures in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region (Margiansyah, 2020).

Based on data from the Treaty Room of the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, until 2024, Indonesia has signed 45 formal defense cooperation agreements with strategic partner countries in Asia, Europe, the Americas, the Middle East, and the Pacific. This agreement includes memorandums of understanding (MoU), bilateral and multilateral agreements, as well as plans of action in the form of joint exercises, personnel exchanges, military education, strengthening the defense industry, and strategic consultations. Some of the key partners include the United States,

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China, Russia, Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, ASEAN countries, European countries, as well as South Africa (Kementerian Kelautan dan Perikanan, 2020; Mulya et al., 2024; Pearlson et al., 2024).

The availability of the cooperation documents is not just a symbol of diplomatic relations but a manifestation of Indonesia's commitment to strengthening national resilience and expanding global defense networks (Rachman et al., 2024). Amid great power rivalries and dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region, this cooperation portfolio is strategic capital for Indonesia to maintain strategic autonomy, build collective capacity, and ensure sustainable national stability. However, the challenges of implementing cooperation and optimizing strategic benefits still require continuous evaluation and policy innovation.

As part of the regional and global security architecture, Indonesia's presence in the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore and the Manama Dialogue in the Middle East affirms Indonesia's commitment to transparency, strategic dialogue, and collective security collaboration. In these forums, the Ministry of Defense and the TNI play not only the role of defense policy implementers but also as diplomatic actors who build strategic networks and increase interoperability through joint exercises, personnel exchanges, and bilateral and multilateral consultation mechanisms (Rifky et al., 2023). As Cottey and Forster argue, modern defense diplomacy is a key instrument in building long-term peace, strengthening national capacity, while expanding influence without relying on coercive force (Rudiany et al., 2021).

This transformation proves that Indonesia is able to adapt and innovate diplomacy according to the times, from the humanist Bandung Spirit to defense diplomacy based on national interests and collective security. This combination of historical heritage and adaptability is what places Indonesia as an important actor, not only at the political-economic level but also in maintaining stability and balance of power in today's Indo-Pacific (Santoso et al., 2024).

In recent decades, the geopolitical dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region have undergone significant shifts driven by the economic and military rise of the People's Republic of China. China's rapid growth has shifted the balance of regional and global power, giving rise to fierce strategic competition with the United States (US), which for decades has been the dominant power in the region.

The US-China rivalry is not limited to just one dimension but manifests itself in various aspects, including economic and technological competition, the struggle for political and ideological influence, and increasing military activity throughout the Indo-Pacific region. The economic rivalry between the U.S. and China, characterized by trade wars and technological competition, has far-reaching implications for countries in the region. Countries in the Indo-Pacific often face difficult choices in forging economic ties with these two great powers, given their dependence on trade and investment from both. In addition, technological competition, especially in areas such as artificial intelligence, 5G networks, and cloud computing, can create technological fragmentation that makes cooperation and innovation in the region difficult.

The political and ideological dimensions of the U.S.-China rivalry are also significant. The U.S. seeks to maintain a liberal international order based on democratic rules and values, while China is increasingly assertive in promoting different models of development and governance. This rivalry is reflected in the two countries' efforts to build strategic alliances and partnerships in the region, which could lead to polarization and increased tensions.

The South China Sea has become a major focal point of this military rivalry, with China's vast territorial claims and the construction of artificial islands that have increased tensions with other ASEAN countries and challenged the principles of freedom of navigation espoused by the US.

The implications of the US-China competition for the stability of the Indo-Pacific region are enormous. Rising tensions between the two major powers could undermine regional peace and security, hinder economic growth, and complicate efforts to address shared challenges such as climate change and pandemics. Countries in the region need to develop strategies to manage the risks associated with this competition, including strengthening regional cooperation through mechanisms such as ASEAN, promoting dialogue and diplomacy, and building national resilience.

Amid the increasingly complex dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region and influenced by strategic competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China, diplomacy has emerged as a crucial foreign policy instrument for Indonesia. Traditionally, Indonesia's leadership in the Southeast Asian region has had a crucial role and can be seen from the value of Indonesia's Global Diplomacy Index issued by the Lowy Institute in 2024. In this list, Indonesia is the country that has the highest ranking in the Southeast Asian region, providing evidence of the success of the implementation of diplomacy colored by Indonesia's leadership when holding the chairmanship of ASEAN.

Diplomacy, which was traditionally understood as the art and practice of negotiation between countries, has now evolved into a broader and multidimensional concept. In this context, as part of defense diplomacy, military diplomacy plays an increasingly significant role as a tool to build trust, prevent conflict escalation, and project regional stability.

Military diplomacy involves a series of activities and interactions between the military elements of different countries aimed at achieving foreign policy goals peacefully. These activities may include joint military exercises, military personnel exchanges, warship visits, security dialogues, seminars and workshops on defense issues, and humanitarian assistance and disaster management (HADR). Through these interactions, military diplomacy allows countries to build a better understanding of each other's military doctrines, capabilities, and intentions, thereby reducing the potential for misperceptions and miscalculations that can trigger conflict.

Defense cooperation between Indonesia and the United States and China actually shows quite unique and interesting dynamics. Based on the author's experience during his involvement in the field of bilateral cooperation, the process of building trust with the United States is arguably not instantaneous. Although diplomatic relations have been established for more than 70 years, the Defence Cooperation Arrangement document was only successfully signed by the two defense ministers in 2023. The signing of this document is considered an important milestone because with this document, the framework of Indonesia-US defense cooperation has become clearer and more structured. In addition to the Defense Cooperation Arrangement, defense relations between the two countries are also facilitated through forums such as the Indonesia-United States Security Dialogue (IUSSD), the Indonesia-US Bilateral Defense Dialogue (USIBDD), as well as the 2+2 Senior Officials Meeting which brings together high-ranking officials from the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the two countries on a regular basis. Through these forums, strategic issues can be discussed more openly and operational cooperation can be carried out more easily.

Meanwhile, experience with China shows that defense cooperation can take place faster and be institutionalized. This is evidenced by the signing of the Agreement between the Government

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of the Republic of Indonesia and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Cooperation Activities in the Field of Defence on November 7, 2007, in Beijing. This agreement has been ratified by Law Number 6 of 2016, so it has stronger legal force. This agreement regulates various forms of cooperation, ranging from personnel exchanges, joint training, to technology transfer. In 2025, for the first time, a 2+2 Meeting has also been held between the Foreign Ministers and the Ministers of Defense of the two countries. This meeting is considered an important leap because strategic discussions can be carried out comprehensively across sectors, and the relationship between the two countries is getting closer, especially in dealing with regional dynamics, showing the importance of diplomacy for Indonesia.

This is reflected in the National RPJP 2025–2045, which emphatically places diplomacy as an important instrument in achieving the vision of a Golden Indonesia, with an emphasis on strengthening Indonesia's leadership and influence at the global level. The document affirms that multilateral diplomacy must be "conducted through Indonesia's membership in international organizations which is the embodiment of multilateral diplomacy and the free and active implementation of foreign policy." Thus, the RPJPN underlines the importance of diplomacy that is adaptive, collaborative, and responsive to geopolitical dynamics and technological advances, as a prerequisite for the success of Indonesia's transformation at the international level.

In response to this mandate, the Government of Indonesia has launched various strategic policies that are summarized in ASTA CITA, a series of priority policies that aim to strengthen national diplomacy through a smarter and more adaptive strategic approach. One of the core concepts in ASTA CITA is Smart Diplomacy.

The concept of Smart Diplomacy is part of what Nye calls Smart Power, offering a relevant framework for understanding and optimizing the role of military diplomacy in this context. Smart Diplomacy, as part of Smart Power, is defined as a foreign policy approach that integrates various instruments of power, both hard power and soft power, to achieve national goals effectively and efficiently. In this context, hard power refers to military and economic power, while soft power encompasses the influence of interesting cultures, values, and foreign policy. Smart Diplomacy recognizes that the use of military force alone is often ineffective and counterproductive and emphasizes the importance of combining it with other diplomatic instruments.

In the implementation of Smart Diplomacy, military diplomacy is not only seen as a tool for power projection, but also as an instrument to build trust, facilitate dialogue, and achieve political goals through non-coercive means. For Indonesia, the effective implementation of Smart Diplomacy requires a good integration between traditional diplomacy, economic diplomacy, and military diplomacy. The TNI, as one of the important elements of national power, has a crucial role in the implementation of military diplomacy as part of Indonesia's Smart Diplomacy efforts in the Indo-Pacific region (Pusat Penerangan TNI, 2023). The TNI's ability to use military diplomacy strategically and effectively will greatly affect Indonesia's ability to maintain regional stability, build mutually beneficial partnerships, and protect national interests amid the complex dynamics of US-China competition.

In the context of the US-China rivalry, the implementation of Smart Diplomacy by the TNI requires caution and balance. The TNI seeks to build good relations with the two major countries without being trapped in polarization. The TNI's participation in joint military exercises with the US does not mean ignoring relations with China, nor vice versa. The TNI continues to establish

communication and cooperation with both parties, focusing on Indonesia's national interests and regional stability.

However, the implementation of Smart Diplomacy by the TNI also faces various challenges. Limited resources, cultural and linguistic differences, and the complexity of regional geopolitical dynamics are factors that need to be considered. Therefore, research on the effectiveness of the implementation of Smart Diplomacy by the TNI, including the identification of its challenges and opportunities, is essential to formulate recommendations that can increase the TNI's contribution to maintaining stability and securing Indonesia's national interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

Recognizing the complexity of the challenges and opportunities facing Indonesia in the Indo-Pacific region as a consequence of the strategic competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China, a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of *Smart Diplomacy* by the Indonesian National Army (TNI) in the context of military diplomacy is of paramount importance. This research was delivered with urgency to provide a deeper understanding of how the TNI, as one of the important instruments of Indonesia's foreign and defense policy, utilizes the *Smart Diplomacy* approach in carrying out its diplomatic functions amid complex regional power dynamics. This research is expected to fill the gaps in literature and analysis regarding the implementation of *Smart Diplomacy*, especially in the context of military diplomacy in Indonesia.

Laksmana (2012) explains the rise of Southeast Asian defense diplomacy by showing how bilateral and multilateral channels (ASEAN, ARF) complement one another and how agendas have shifted across traditional and non-traditional security domains. The article's strengths are its regional mapping and theoretically informed narrative; however, it predates the maturation of ADMM-Plus practices and today's minilateral dynamics, and it does not operationalize performance indicators at the military-actor level (e.g., service-to-service interoperability, mission-type outcomes), limiting its translational value for Indonesian defense institutions (Smith, 2017).

Anwar (2023) advances a "hedging-plus" account of Indonesia's statecraft amid U.S.–China rivalry, clarifying the macro-level logic of autonomy, risk mitigation, and selective alignment. Its contribution is conceptual and policy-level, but it remains largely at the state/foreign-policy layer, offering little guidance on the nuts and bolts of military diplomacy (exercise design, HADR roles, information environment management) or on cross-ministerial coordination mechanisms needed to make a "smart" approach work in practice.

This study aims (i) to assess the effectiveness of *Smart Diplomacy* as implemented by the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) amid U.S.–China rivalry using concrete indicators of trust, interoperability, partnership balance, and escalation-risk mitigation; (ii) to identify institutional conditions—TNI–Ministry of Defence–Ministry of Foreign Affairs coordination, synchronized defence/foreign-policy strategies, and governance of technology and the information environment—that enable success; and (iii) to produce a practical doctrine and roadmap for responsive military diplomacy. The expected benefits include a policy-ready framework for doctrine development, capacity-building, and strategic communications plans for defence personnel, and an evidence-based approach to expanding regional networks; theoretically, the study operationalizes Smart Power/Smart Diplomacy for the Indonesian context and contributes a replicable evaluation template for Indo-Pacific middle powers.

## METHODS

## Implementation of Smart Diplomacy As A Military Diplomacy Strategy to Manage The Us-China Rivalry In Order to Support National Interests

This study used a quasi-qualitative approach with a case study design to analyze the implementation of Smart Diplomacy as a military diplomacy strategy. The qualitative approach was chosen because it was in accordance with the characteristics of the research, which aimed to understand social phenomena in depth and holistically. The case study design allowed researchers to explore in detail how the concept of Smart Diplomacy was operationalized in the specific context of Indonesian military diplomacy. This study adopted an instrumental case study type (Stake, 1995), in which the case studied (implementation of TNI Smart Diplomacy) served as an instrument to understand a broader issue, namely the strategies of middle-class countries in the face of great power competition. This design was considered appropriate because it allowed researchers to: (1) examine phenomena in real-life contexts, (2) utilize a variety of sources of evidence, and (3) develop a deep understanding of the dynamics that occurred.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Data Analysis

The findings of the study illustrate how Smart Diplomacy began to be practiced by the TNI in the context of military diplomacy, although it has not been thoroughly consolidated in a complete institutional doctrine. Conceptually, Smart Diplomacy refers to a diplomacy approach that combines elements of soft power and hard power adaptively, by emphasizing the efficiency of strategic communication, the use of information technology, and synergy between state and non-state actors in responding to global dynamics.

In this context, the theory of Smart Diplomacy developed from Joseph Nye's thoughts on Smart Power finds strong relevance. Nye emphasized that a country's strength is not only measured by its coercive power, but also by its ability to form opinions, norms, and beliefs (persuasive and normative power). An effective strategy is one that is able to intelligently integrate the two. This is in line with the findings of the speakers, especially from TNI diplomatic officers and Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, who stated that the success of military diplomacy is not determined solely by the display of strength, but by the capacity to build trust and cross-border connectivity through a constructive defense diplomacy platform.

The results of data processing through NVIVO software show that there is recognition from various sources about the importance of changing the TNI military diplomacy paradigm, from a symbolic and representative approach to a more substantive and strategic approach. In this context, the concept of Smart Diplomacy has a central position as a bridge between defense goals and national diplomatic interests.

This linkage strengthens the idea of Middle Strategy in the framework of Grand–Middle–Applied Strategy, where the TNI not only functions as a hard power instrument, but also carries out a strategic role as an intermediate force that is cooperative. This role is becoming increasingly relevant in the face of protracted conflicts, such as the rivalry between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific region. The implementation of this approach also reflects a shift in the TNI's perspective on diplomacy. As reflected in the interview results, several senior officials recognized the need for institutional transformation in the face of global complexity. This justifies the concept that Smart Diplomacy is not just a foreign communication strategy, but a new operational model that combines military, civil, technological, and cultural dimensions in a single defense diplomacy unit.

In addition, there is a common thread between the SWOT results and the theoretical framework. The dimensions of strength and opportunity in the SWOT analysis confirm the elements of Smart Power inherent in the TNI, such as multilateral operational capabilities, regional terrain control, and reputation in peaceful missions. Meanwhile, the aspects of weakness and threat show the importance of improving coordination between institutions and increasing the capacity of digital diplomacy, two aspects that are also emphasized in the Smart Diplomacy theory as a condition for the effectiveness of implementation.

Thus, it can be concluded that Smart Diplomacy is not just a concept of foreign policy adaptation, but a potential military diplomacy strategy if adopted systemically. The interconnectedness between empirical and theoretical findings shows that this strategy can be an applicable and relevant framework, especially to manage geopolitical pressures and strengthen Indonesia's position in the dynamic and uncertain Indo-Pacific arena.

### **Implementation of the Concept of Smart Diplomacy as a Military Diplomacy Strategy**

In the face of strategic rivalry between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific region, the concept of Smart Diplomacy has become an important strategy for Indonesia in the implementation of military diplomacy. This concept not only relies on military power, but also puts forward strategic diplomatic instruments that are adaptive to global dynamics. Its implementation includes the integration of harmonious defense and foreign diplomacy approaches, as well as Indonesia's activeness in various multilateral forums. The real success of the implementation of Smart Diplomacy can be seen in the increasing trust of partner countries and the active involvement of the TNI in regional forums. However, this implementation is still not optimal, one of which is due to conceptual differences between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the TNI, as well as the incompatibility between Indonesia's defense doctrine and adaptive diplomacy approach.

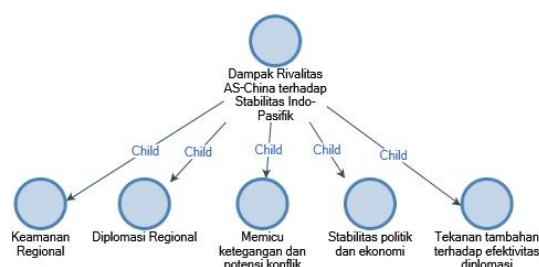
The implementation of Smart Diplomacy in Indonesia's military diplomacy faces major challenges due to geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific region. This rivalry raises a strategic dilemma for Indonesia as a non-aligned country that wants to maintain the principle of active free foreign policy without having to be dragged into the polarization of great powers. In this context, Smart Diplomacy, which emphasizes a flexible, intelligent, and national interest-based diplomatic approach, serves as an important instrument in responding to these dynamics.

In addition, internal factors such as the limited capacity of the TNI's diplomacy, the lack of personnel training in strategic diplomacy, and the overlap of authority between military and civilian institutions are also obstacles. On the external side, pressure from the two great powers, the US and China, who offer cooperation on certain terms, makes Indonesia's position more complex and vulnerable to the tug-of-war.

For this reason, strengthening the implementation of Smart Diplomacy in military diplomacy requires cross-sectoral coordination between the TNI, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other strategic institutions. There is also a need for intensive training for military personnel in the field of international diplomacy and negotiation, as well as the establishment of a task force or special unit focused on smart power-based defense diplomacy. Thus, Indonesia can play the role of a strategic balancer in the Indo-Pacific region without having to sacrifice the principle of free and active participation and national interests.



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**Figure 1. Rivalry Impact Net**  
(Source: processed by researcher)

## The Impact of the U.S.-China Rivalry on the Stability of the Indo-Pacific Region and Its Implications for Indonesian Military Diplomacy

As is known, the rivalry between the US and China has had an impact on the stability of the Indo-Pacific region. Geopolitical tensions can trigger an escalation of conflict, either directly or indirectly, which has implications for regional security and the political-economic stability of regional countries, including Indonesia. On the one hand, Indonesia's Hedging Strategy has implications for pressure in the implementation of diplomacy, but this situation also opens up opportunities for Indonesia to play a strategic role as a mediator in creating collective security and constructive regional diplomacy.

## Internal and External Factors Affecting the Effectiveness of Smart Diplomacy and the Obstacles Faced

The effectiveness of the implementation of the Smart Diplomacy concept as an Indonesian military diplomacy strategy is inseparable from the influence of various factors, both internal and external. Internally, the quality of human resources (HR), institutional capabilities, and the use of information technology are the main determinants of the success of this smart diplomacy. In an interview with Colonel Ari from the Bainstrahan Pusinfostrahan of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Indonesia, it was explained that "the main thing is synergy between domestic institutions, if this is not compact, then smart diplomacy will be weak". This emphasizes that diplomacy efforts are not enough to be carried out by one institution alone, but require close coordination between the TNI, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other strategic institutions.

Furthermore, Colonel Eric from the Directorate General of Strahan of the Ministry of Defense, one of the informants from the research community, said that mastery of technology is an important prerequisite to support modern diplomacy. He stated, "we must use digital tools such as social media, big data, AI to support smart diplomacy." This indicates that Indonesia's military diplomacy needs to be strengthened with a digital approach and adaptation to global technological developments. In this context, strategic understanding by diplomacy implementers is also crucial. Edy Cahyadi, a foreign policy observer, said that "if our diplomats do not understand the Indo-Pacific context and only use the old approach, it will not connect with the current dynamics," emphasizing the need to renew perspectives in looking at regional dynamics.

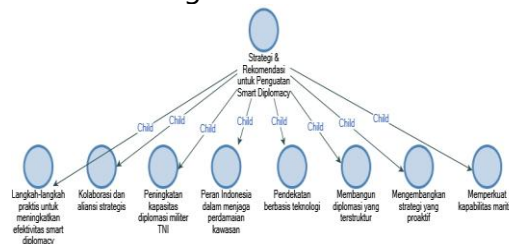
Meanwhile, external factors that also affect the effectiveness of Smart Diplomacy are closely related to the dynamics of rivalry between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific region.

This rivalry not only creates military tensions, but also creates a strategic dilemma for countries like Indonesia that want to maintain a neutral position but remain sovereign. Mbak Ade from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained that "Indonesia must be good at playing a role so as not to get caught up in the US-China polarity." This means that military diplomacy strategies must be carefully prepared so as not to harm national interests in the midst of great power competition.

The level of trust of partner countries in Indonesia's position and consistency is also an important aspect. David of BAIS stated, "the credibility of our diplomacy is measured by consistency and professionalism in dealing with sensitive issues." This emphasizes that Smart Diplomacy is not only strategy-oriented, but also on how Indonesia builds an international image and trust. In addition, regional and global political dynamics, including the conflict in the South China Sea, have also narrowed the space for military diplomacy maneuvers. In an interview with Colonel Waskita from Puskersinhan, it was explained that "if there is a conflict, especially in the South China Sea, it automatically affects our diplomacy strategy."

Apart from the supporting factors, the implementation of Smart Diplomacy in Indonesia still faces various obstacles. One of the main obstacles is the weak coordination between institutions, which is caused by sectoral egos and overlapping authority. Colonel Ari said that "so far the sectoral ego is still strong. Smart Diplomacy requires harmonization between defense and civilian diplomacy." Another obstacle comes from limited budgets and infrastructure to support digital diplomacy. According to Eric, "digital diplomacy requires funds and infrastructure. If it is not provided, it will only be a slogan." Conceptual constraints also still occur in the field, where the understanding of the concept of Smart Diplomacy is not evenly distributed among policy implementers. Edy Cahyadi emphasized that "many do not understand what Smart Diplomacy is, in the end the implementation is ineffective."

By looking at the above factors, it can be concluded that the effectiveness of the implementation of Smart Diplomacy in Indonesian military diplomacy is determined by internal alignment between institutions, the ability to adapt to external dynamics, and adequate technological and resource support. Overcoming existing obstacles is an important step to optimize the contribution of military diplomacy in supporting national interests in the midst of great power rivalries in the Indo-Pacific region.



**Figure 2. Net Strengthening Strategy**  
(Source: processed by the author)

## Concrete Strategies and Applicative Recommendations for Strengthening the Implementation of Smart Diplomacy

Strengthening the implementation of Indonesia's Smart Diplomacy in the face of the rivalry of the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific region requires a measurable and multidimensional strategic approach. Several concrete strategies can be formulated based on current geopolitical conditions as well as insights obtained from expert speakers.

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First, increasing the capacity of human resources in the field of diplomacy needs to be made a top priority. This includes not only strengthening language and negotiation skills, but also digital literacy, technological proficiency, and a deep understanding of the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region. One of the speakers, a lecturer in international relations in Jakarta, stated: "Smart diplomacy needs diplomats who are not only good at talking, but also understand data, have analytical skills, and can move quickly in the digital world."

Second, strengthening defense diplomacy through non-traditional security cooperation, such as disaster management, humanitarian missions, and maritime security, is a vital element of Smart Diplomacy. This approach allows Indonesia to build strategic trust without getting caught up in the politics of open military alliances. This is in line with the principles of free and active foreign policy. In an interview, a resource person from the Indonesian Ministry of Defense emphasized: "Security cooperation that is soft in nature, such as disaster management exercises with neighboring countries, is Indonesia's version of military diplomacy. That's our Smart Diplomacy."

Third, Indonesia needs to use multilateral and regional platforms more aggressively to voice its independent position, while building an image as a balancing force. Forums such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and the East Asia Summit have become strategic mediums to channel diplomatic influence. Smart Diplomacy encourages Indonesia to play the role of an honest broker in the midst of major conflicts.

Fourth, it is important for Indonesia to integrate information technology in diplomatic operations. The use of artificial intelligence, big data, and social media diplomacy allows Indonesian diplomacy to be more responsive and adaptive. This also opens up opportunities for the formation of international public opinion more broadly.

Fifth, Indonesia must develop a consistent and internationally attractive foreign policy narrative. Branding such as the "World Maritime Axis" needs to be transformed into concrete actions that can be demonstrated in international forums. In this regard, collaboration between civilian and military diplomacy should be strengthened, including through public diplomacy and people-to-people contact.

### Discussion

#### ***Implementation of Smart Diplomacy as a military diplomacy strategy***

The results of the thematic analysis through NVIVO show that the understanding and application of Smart Diplomacy in the context of TNI military diplomacy is still in the transition stage between conventional approaches and new diplomacy paradigms that are more adaptive. Several speakers from elements of the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and TNI Headquarters said that this approach is conceptually known, but has not been fully institutionalized as part of a doctrine or permanent policy.

The implementation of Smart Diplomacy is expected to be a military diplomacy strategy that reflects a responsive and adaptive approach to the dynamics of strategic rivalry between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific region. The results of NVIVO data processing show that the speakers, especially from the Ministry of Defense and the TNI, view Smart Diplomacy as a proactive instrument that is able to avoid Indonesia from the polarization of large powers, without losing the ability to maneuver strategic in advancing national interests. This is in line with the results of the SWOT analysis which highlights Indonesia's strength lies in its active neutrality

and reputation as a credible non-aligned country. However, internal weaknesses such as suboptimal inter-agency coordination and limited capacity of military diplomatic human resources are still real challenges in its implementation.

From PESTEL's perspective, political factors suggest that increased pressure from the US and China in the region is pushing Indonesia to play the role of an active "strategic balancer". Economic and technological implications also emerge, especially related to the need for defense industry cooperation and strategic innovation with non-aligned partners. In the legal and social dimension, Indonesia's principle of free and active freedom and the international community's support for Indonesia's neutrality are the foundations that strengthen the legitimacy of the Smart Diplomacy approach in military diplomacy.

Theoretically, this implementation reinforces the framework of constructivism, as stated by Alexander Wendt that anarchy is what states make of it, showing that interactions, perceptions, and state identities are factors that shape strategic reality and not fixed objective conditions. In this context, Indonesia's identity as a non-aligned and active country, as well as not a member of a formal military alliance, is a strategic capital in the management of TNI military diplomacy.

Meanwhile, at the middle theory level, the Smart Diplomacy approach relies on Joseph Nye's Smart Power theory, which combines hard power (military capability) and soft power (diplomatic attraction and value). Nye explained that the ability to combine hard and soft power into a winning strategy is Smart Power. In TNI practice, Smart Diplomacy translates into activities such as multilateral military exercises, visits by high-ranking military officials, as well as involvement in regional forums such as ADMM-Plus.

Furthermore, the theory of Cooperative Security as described by Axelrod and Keohane emphasizes the importance of cooperation to achieve collective security. Indonesia through the TNI practices this through joint maritime patrols and military education exchange programs. The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) from Buzan and Wæver also explains that Indonesia's security is closely connected to the dynamics of the Southeast Asian region, so military diplomacy must be able to read the map of threats and opportunities regionally.

At the level of applied theory, Smart Diplomacy demands the application of Network Diplomacy as developed by Anne-Marie Slaughter, where diplomatic relations are horizontal and involve non-state actors. In this context, the TNI does need to expand its involvement with research institutions, strategic NGOs, and informal defense forums. In addition, Cottey and Forster emphasized that Defence Diplomacy is part of the strategy of building trust and preventing conflict through non-combat military cooperation. This is also in line with David Chur's view that modern military officers should play the role of strategic diplomats capable of constructing a narrative of peace.

In terms of scientific contribution, this research closes the gap of previous research that focused more on digital diplomacy, economics, and cities. This study adds a strategic dimension related to the implementation of Smart Diplomacy in the context of Indonesian military diplomacy, especially in managing global rivalry pressures actively, flexibly, and based on national interests.

Thus, Smart Diplomacy has been implemented as a non-confrontational strategic instrument that reflects the values of a free-active foreign policy, upholds neutrality without losing adaptive capabilities, and realizes Indonesia's diplomatic bargaining power through collaborative military capabilities. Military diplomacy is no longer merely a symbol, but a representation of the strategic management of national interests in the midst of the turbulence of the Indo-Pacific.

## Implementation of Smart Diplomacy As A Military Diplomacy Strategy to Manage The Us-China Rivalry In Order to Support National Interests

### ***The impact of the US-China rivalry on the stability of the Indo-Pacific region***

Based on NVIVO's analysis of the responses of resource persons from the Ministry of Defense, the Indonesian Armed Forces Headquarters, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there is a consistent concern about the increasing rivalry between the United States and China, especially in the South China Sea region. The speakers highlighted that the geopolitical pressure not only increases the intensity of the military presence of the two countries, but also creates a strategic dilemma for countries in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. In the view of the speaker, he said that "Indonesia must remain vigilant but not provoked... The active free position must remain the anchor of our defense diplomacy maneuvers." This statement describes Indonesia's position of choosing Smart Diplomacy as a tool to navigate tensions without losing strategic bargaining power.

The SWOT analysis reinforces this, by illustrating that Indonesia's strength in maintaining regional stability comes from its moral legitimacy as a consistent non-aligned country. However, there is a threat that arises in the form of increasing pressure from the two great powers for Indonesia to take sides, both in defense, technology, and economic issues. Smart Diplomacy in this context is seen as a strategic tool that is able to mitigate external pressures while maintaining regional balance through dialogue and multilateral engagement.

In the PESTEL matrix, political and security aspects occupy a dominant position in explaining the impact of the rivalry. The dominance of US and Chinese military power, accompanied by the strategic narrative of each country, creates a fragile regional atmosphere full of potential conflict. On the economic side, the dependence of ASEAN countries on these two economic giants makes the diplomatic response more cautious and measurable. Meanwhile, in the social dimension and international law, Indonesia continues to prioritize the principle of free and active freedom guaranteed by Article 11 of the 1945 Constitution, and it is reaffirmed in the preamble to the Constitution that Indonesia "participates in implementing a world order based on independence, lasting peace, and social justice."

In terms of theory, the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) approach of Buzan and Wæver is very relevant. They explained that regions such as Southeast Asia cannot be separated from the influence of the great powers around them, so the stability of the region is greatly influenced by external relations. In this case, Indonesian military diplomacy must function as a tool of stabilization, not a provocation, and as a means of bridging trust between countries.

The constructivism developed by Alexander Wendt also explains this dynamic. He states that "anarchy is what states make of it," which means that anarchist situations do not always lead to conflict, depending on how the state responds and builds common perceptions. In the context of the US-China rivalry, Indonesia can choose to form regional norms based on dialogue and cooperation through the TNI's active role in forums such as ADMM-Plus and the Joint Maritime Patrol.

In the framework of middle theory, Smart Power initiated by Joseph Nye is the main foothold. Nye said that a successful country is a country that is able to combine hard power and attraction (soft power) into a smart strategy, or Smart Power. Smart Diplomacy is a tangible manifestation of this approach, where the TNI not only shows strength, but also becomes a normative actor in defense diplomacy.

Previous studies from Cottey and Forster (2004) have also stated that effective defense diplomacy is one that is able to reduce the risk of conflict through military involvement in non-combat activities such as joint training and regional dialogue. This can also be seen from Indonesia's participation in the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) program and peace operations, which indirectly strengthen regional stability and increase Indonesia's credibility as a neutral strategic partner.

Overall, the impact of the US-China rivalry on the Indo-Pacific region has created an uncertain security landscape, but nevertheless has opened up space for Indonesia to play a balancing role. By utilizing Smart Diplomacy instruments, the TNI and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs can encourage stability without having to be dragged into the orbit of great powers. This strategy, if managed well, not only strengthens Indonesia's position regionally, but also expands its diplomatic influence in the global arena.

### ***Internal and external factors that affect the implementation of Smart Diplomacy***

The implementation of Smart Diplomacy by the TNI in the framework of military diplomacy is inseparable from various factors that come from both domestic and foreign countries. The results of NVIVO coding based on in-depth interviews with the speakers indicate that the success of the implementation of this strategy is highly dependent on institutional synergy, the quality of human resources, and the consistency of foreign and defense policy directions.

Internally, one of the key factors is the institutional capacity of the TNI in carrying out its diplomatic function professionally. The SWOT analysis shows that the TNI's main strength lies in its public trust and professional reputation at the regional level. However, weaknesses are still felt in the management aspect of foreign assignments, the limited number of officers with a diplomacy background, and the lack of a dedicated training platform that focuses on defence diplomacy. In several interview sessions, it was said that "most of the officers in charge of military diplomacy are still learning on the go... there is no solid human resource development system." This reflects that there is still a gap between strategic vision and technical readiness in the field.

In addition, the limitations of doctrines and SOPs that explicitly regulate the mechanism for implementing Smart Diplomacy are also a challenge. Although normatively it has been accommodated in the doctrine of the TNI and the Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 3 of 2025 concerning the amendment of the Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 34 of 2004 concerning the TNI, especially in carrying out the task of world peace and assisting in protecting and saving citizens and national interests abroad, its implementation is still highly dependent on the initiative of the leadership and cooperation between agencies. The insynchronization between the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the TNI Headquarters sometimes creates overlap in the implementation of foreign activities.

Externally, the results of PESTEL show that strategic environmental factors are very influential. Great power rivalries encourage countries like Indonesia to take cautious steps in every military diplomacy activity. At the same time, the emergence of new challenges such as cybersecurity, the defense technology race, and global economic pressures are creating new terrain for the application of military diplomacy that is not enough if it relies only on conventional approaches. This change requires a more flexible and responsive change of mindset and policy structure.

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In theory, the Institutionalism approach explains that the success of policies is greatly influenced by the capacity and design of the institutions that implement them. According to March and Olsen, effective institutions must be able to adapt bureaucratic values, regulations, and behaviors into rational decision-making structures. In the context of Smart Diplomacy, the TNI must be able to build an institutional system that encourages strategically measurable learning, reporting, and diplomacy.

Anne-Marie Slaughter's Network Diplomacy Theory also strengthens the urgency of increasing institutional connectivity between state actors, not only domestically, but also with international partners. Without a strong network, both formal and informal, the TNI's diplomatic function will remain marginalized in the dynamics of global diplomacy.

Previous research by David Chuter also suggests that the modern challenge in military diplomacy is no longer in weapons, but in the ability of personnel to read situations, build cross-cultural communication, and understand geopolitical contexts. This ability has not been fully institutionalized in the military education system in Indonesia.

In other words, the success of Smart Diplomacy will be largely determined by a combination of internal readiness, between human resource professionalism, institutional structures, and supporting regulations, as well as external adaptability to regional and global dynamics. Without these two elements running in harmony, this strategy risks becoming just a jargon, not an instrument that can really strengthen Indonesia's position in facing today's geopolitical pressures.

### ***Strategies and recommendations are applicable in the implementation of Smart Diplomacy***

As a result of qualitative data processing and synthesis from various theoretical frameworks, the implementation of Smart Diplomacy by the TNI needs to be formulated in the form of a strategy that is not only normative, but also applicable and operational. The results of NVIVO revealed that most of the speakers agreed on the need for a sharper strategy in dealing with regional dynamics. The speaker's statement that "if we only rely on goodwill and joint exercise, we can lose our position... There needs to be a structured military diplomacy approach that has a long-term direction", proving the need for an applicative and concrete strategy in formulating the implementation of Smart Diplomacy.

From the SWOT analysis, a great opportunity is actually wide open through Indonesia's reputation as a neutral and trusted actor in the ASEAN region. However, this power has not been optimally utilized due to the lack of coordination across ministries/agencies and the absence of a single entity specifically tasked with managing military diplomacy. In this context, the establishment of a special unit or Smart Diplomacy desk under the Ministry of Defense or the TNI Headquarters can be a concrete first step. This unit can formulate routine work programs, defense diplomacy roadmaps, and coordinate the TNI's involvement in regional and multilateral forums.

The PESTEL analysis shows that the increasingly dynamic strategic environment, particularly due to the US-China rivalry, drives the need to strengthen non-confrontational defense instruments. In this situation, one of the recommended applicative strategies is to expand more creative and low-profile forms of engagement, such as Track 1.5 Dialogues, officer exchanges, or the development of military think tanks that can collaborate with civilian and international partners. This is in line with the Network Diplomacy approach, where cross-border and non-traditional networking is key in building influence.

From the point of view of Smart Power theory, short-term strategies can be focused on utilizing the capacity of defense diplomacy in the context of soft power, for example, active involvement in humanitarian operations and UN peacekeeping. Nye states that it is not just whose army wins, but whose story wins. In this case, Indonesia's narrative as a peaceful, active, and constructive country must continue to be raised through real activities on the ground.

Medium- and long-term strategies can be aimed at strengthening synergy between domestic actors. A whole-of-government approach is needed, where the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, the TNI Headquarters, and even Bappenas and the Ministry of Finance have a role in creating a cohesive and resilient foreign policy. In Cottey and Forster's research, it was stated that effective military diplomacy requires clear civil-military coordination so as not to overlap and create foreign policy ambiguity.

From an institutional perspective, the formulation of technical regulations or Grand Design Smart Diplomacy needs to be established as a national guide. This is in line with the theory of institutionalism which explains that policy is not enough only at the strategic level, but must be backed up by established legal frameworks, regulations, and decision-making systems.

In addition, improving the quality of human resources remains the main foundation. Military diplomacy education programs should be made part of the compulsory curriculum for middle and senior officers. Chuter stated that military diplomacy without cultural and political literacy is just flag waving. Therefore, investment in education, strengthening foreign languages, and strategic analysis skills are absolutely needed so that TNI human resources are able to compete and dialogue in international forums.

Another recommendation is the development of an integrated military diplomacy database. So far, many TNI foreign activities have been carried out but have not been documented or systematically integrated. With the existence of defense diplomacy information systems, decision-making and policy evaluation can be more accurate and directed (Usman, 2022).

Finally, all of the above strategies must be oriented to national interests and the principle of active foreign policy as stipulated in the 1945 Constitution. Indonesia needs to emphasize that Smart Diplomacy is not just a diplomatic tool, but part of the country's defense in the form of non-military, which proactively manages conflicts, builds networks, and strengthens the nation's strategic position in an increasingly multipolar world.

## **CONCLUSION**

Indonesia's military diplomacy strategy employs Smart Diplomacy by integrating hard and soft power within strategic forums to navigate the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region. The study, based on qualitative analyses using NVIVO, SWOT, and PESTEL, finds that while TNI adjusts military diplomacy policies to geopolitical dynamics and maintains Indonesia's bargaining position, the rivalry poses significant challenges to regional stability and the effectiveness of these efforts. Internal and external obstacles, including institutional limitations and the need for cross-sectoral collaboration, hinder the full implementation of Smart Diplomacy. Strategic recommendations like establishing dedicated military diplomacy units and harmonizing policies are suggested to enhance Indonesia's defense diplomacy role. Future research should explore the practical impacts of these recommendations over time and investigate mechanisms for improving institutional coordination and resource capacity to further optimize Smart Diplomacy amid evolving regional and global challenges. This chapter concludes that Indonesia's military



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diplomacy strategy employs Smart Diplomacy by integrating hard and soft power within strategic forums to navigate the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region. The study, based on qualitative analyses using NVIVO, SWOT, and PESTEL, finds that while TNI adjusts military diplomacy policies to geopolitical dynamics and maintains Indonesia's bargaining position, the rivalry poses significant challenges to regional stability and the effectiveness of these efforts. Internal and external obstacles, including institutional limitations and the need for cross-sectoral collaboration, hinder the full implementation of Smart Diplomacy. Strategic recommendations like establishing dedicated military diplomacy units and harmonizing policies are suggested to enhance Indonesia's defense diplomacy role. Future research should explore the practical impacts of these recommendations over time and investigate mechanisms for improving institutional coordination and resource capacity to further optimize Smart Diplomacy amid evolving regional and global challenges.

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