



# Food Security Diplomacy: The Role of the Military in Regional Food Security

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## Abstrak

This study examines the strategic role of the Indonesian military in food security and regional diplomacy. Using a qualitative literature review approach, the research highlights how the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) contribute to domestic food distribution during crises and serve as an instrument of soft power in regional food diplomacy. The findings reveal that the TNI's logistical capacity, rapid mobilization, and involvement in humanitarian operations enhance Indonesia's position within ASEAN and multilateral forums. However, risks remain, including civilian militarization, democratic dilemmas, and sustainability challenges if military involvement is not clearly regulated. The study concludes that military-based food diplomacy, when placed within transparent and accountable non-war operations, can become a strategic instrument for Indonesia in reinforcing regional stability and contributing to global human security.

**Keywords:** Food Security; Military Diplomacy; Human Security.

## INTRODUCTION

Food security is one of the most strategic issues in both global and regional governance, especially for developing and archipelagic countries such as Indonesia. Food security is no longer understood merely as food availability, but also encompasses dimensions of social, economic, political stability, and broader human security (FAO, 2021). Various factors such as population growth, climate change, land degradation, geopolitical uncertainty, and natural disasters have made food issues increasingly complex and vulnerable. Southeast Asia, as one of the regions with high population growth, faces significant challenges in ensuring equal, safe, and high-quality food availability. As the largest country in ASEAN, Indonesia plays a central role in maintaining regional food stability. In this context, military involvement cannot be overlooked, since the military possesses logistical capacity, organizational structure, and emergency operation experience that can directly contribute to strengthening both national and regional food security (Hidayana, Prihantoro, & Saragih, 2021).

History shows that the military's role in Indonesia has not been limited to traditional defense. Since the New Order era, the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) have been involved in food self-sufficiency programs, particularly in supporting national rice production. Although this approach has often been criticized for militarizing civilian domains, military involvement in the food sector has a strong practical basis: the ability to organize manpower, secure logistical distribution, and mobilize large-scale resources (CeJISS, 2023). This capacity has proven even more relevant during emergencies, such as the 2004 Aceh tsunami or the 2018 Palu earthquake, when the TNI played a crucial role in distributing food aid and logistics to affected areas. Lassa and Nugraha (2015) emphasize that civil-military coordination in disaster management in Indonesia can accelerate the recovery of local food systems, although it still faces challenges in inter-agency coordination.



In the contemporary context, the Indonesian government has even expanded the TNI's mandate to support national food security programs, including food estate projects and the optimization of idle land in various regions. In 2025, the government announced the establishment of hundreds of special battalions dedicated to supporting agriculture, signaling the increasingly embedded role of the military in food development agendas (Reuters, 2025a). Beyond that, military involvement has extended into state-owned enterprises, such as when a high-ranking active officer was appointed as President Director of Bulog, the state logistics agency for food (Reuters, 2025b). This decision sparked public debate due to concerns over blurring the civil-military divide, though the government argued that military backgrounds could strengthen stability and efficiency in food distribution.

Moreover, military involvement in food security carries strategic relevance in the realm of regional diplomacy. In international relations literature, food diplomacy is often positioned as an instrument of soft power, where a country uses food resources and logistical capacity to build a positive image and strengthen bargaining power at the international level (Nye, 2011; Saa, 2024). Indonesia can leverage its military as an instrument of food diplomacy in two ways. First, through cross-border humanitarian operations, such as involvement in international aid during Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar (2008) or Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines (2013), which demonstrated that the TNI is not only a guardian of national sovereignty but also an important actor in regional human security (Khairuddin & Arifianto, 2019). Second, through multilateral cooperation within ASEAN, such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus, which opens opportunities for exchanging logistical capacities and technical support related to food.

Military-based food security diplomacy also aligns with sustainable development agendas. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 2 on "Zero Hunger," emphasize the importance of international collaboration to end hunger and achieve global food security. In this regard, the military's role can be seen as part of Indonesia's contribution to the SDGs through strengthening food logistics capacity, agricultural technology, and humanitarian operations (WFP, 2022). Furthermore, Khoirunnisa et al. (2024) highlight that Indonesia has utilized soft power strategies by combining peacekeeping missions, humanitarian assistance, and food diplomacy to reinforce its image as a regional leader concerned with human security.

Nevertheless, military involvement in food security is not without challenges. First, there is a risk of food militarization, which could diminish civilian roles in managing strategic sectors. This poses potential democratic dilemmas, particularly concerning accountability, transparency, and civilian control over the military (CeJISS, 2023). Second, limited budgets and resources remain obstacles, as the military's primary priority continues to be traditional defense functions. Third, inter-agency coordination among ministries, civilian institutions, and the TNI often encounters bureaucratic hurdles that slow policy effectiveness (Lassa & Nugraha, 2015). Therefore, military-based food diplomacy requires a clear legal and policy framework to ensure civil-military synergy operates harmoniously without overstepping constitutional boundaries.

Within ASEAN, efforts to safeguard food security are facilitated through the ASEAN Integrated Food Security (AIFS) Framework. Herath, Liang, and Yongbing (2014) show that food trade cooperation under the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) has enhanced food supplies while strengthening regional stability. With its military capacity and strategic geography, Indonesia can take on a more active role as a driver of regional food diplomacy. The TNI, in this context, can support diplomacy through technical expertise exchange, food aid missions, and participation in multilateral operations.

From a foreign policy perspective, military-based food diplomacy can also strengthen Indonesia's position as a middle power in the Asia-Pacific region. According to Saa (2024), Indonesia's food diplomacy has evolved into a strategic instrument in addressing global challenges, including climate change and food crises. By combining civilian and military strengths, Indonesia can project itself as a country that is not only strong in defense but also committed to regional human security. This is essential for building trust among ASEAN countries and enhancing Indonesia's bargaining power in broader international forums.

Overall, this introduction underscores that food security diplomacy involving the Indonesian military is a strategic issue spanning both domestic and regional dimensions. At the national level, the TNI plays roles in production, distribution, and food logistics management, particularly during emergencies. At the regional

level, military involvement in food diplomacy opens opportunities for Indonesia to strengthen its position as a regional leader in human security agendas. However, this involvement must be carefully managed to avoid risks of civilian militarization and instead foster productive civil-military synergy that contributes to regional stability. With the right approach, the military's role in food diplomacy can become Indonesia's strategic asset in addressing global and regional food security challenges.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a literature review method with a qualitative approach to analyze the role of the military in regional food security diplomacy. According to Snyder (2019), literature review is an effective method for identifying conceptual patterns, uncovering research gaps, and building analytical frameworks based on secondary data. The literature examined includes reputable national journals such as *Jurnal Pertahanan* and *Padjadjaran Journal of International Relations*, as well as international journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, including *Disaster Prevention and Management* and the *Asian Journal of Agriculture and Development*. In addition, reports from international organizations such as FAO (2021), the World Food Programme (2022), and policy documents from the ASEAN Integrated Food Security (AIFS) Framework were also used to strengthen the empirical analysis.

The data collection process was carried out by reviewing publications from 2010–2025 through databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and official portals of international organizations. The selected literature was then analyzed using a thematic method to identify three main aspects: first, the military's role in supporting domestic food security; second, the military's contribution to regional food diplomacy; and third, the challenges and prospects of civil–military synergy in ASEAN. The analysis was conducted in a descriptive-analytical manner, emphasizing the relationship between the theory of soft power (Nye, 2011), the concept of human security (Khairuddin & Arifianto, 2019), and the food security paradigm (CeJISS, 2023). Thus, this method enables the study to examine the military not only as an instrument of traditional defense but also as a non-traditional diplomatic actor relevant to addressing regional food security issues.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### The Domestic Role of the Military in Food Security

The literature reveals that the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) have gradually shifted from functioning solely as a supporting actor in food security to assuming a more strategic role. Domestically, the military is often described as the last resort in ensuring food availability and distribution during times of crisis, natural disaster, or sudden supply chain disruptions. Indonesia's unique archipelagic geography, combined with its high vulnerability to disasters such as tsunamis, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions, creates systemic risks for food distribution networks. In such contexts, the TNI's logistical advantages—rapid mobilization, strategic airlift capacity, naval transport, and tactical vehicles—become critical in delivering emergency food supplies where civilian institutions lack capacity (FAO, 2021; Lassa & Nugraha, 2015).

Empirical evidence supports this claim. After the 2004 Aceh tsunami, the TNI, working alongside international partners, distributed food and essential supplies to millions of victims within days. Strategic military logistics, including aircraft such as the Hercules C-130 and naval landing ships, were decisive in overcoming damaged civilian infrastructure. A similar pattern occurred during the 2018 Palu earthquake and tsunami, when civilian supply routes collapsed and only the TNI could reach isolated populations in time (Khairuddin & Arifianto, 2019). These cases demonstrate that the TNI's role is not symbolic but functional and indispensable, ensuring continuity of food access in moments of acute national vulnerability.

Moreover, Indonesia's government has institutionalized the military's role in food security by assigning TNI units to support food estate projects and optimize idle lands. While controversial, this reflects a growing perception among policymakers that the military is not only a security provider but also a logistical backbone

for national development programs (Reuters, 2025a). This dual role blurs the traditional boundaries between defense and socio-economic policy, raising both opportunities and risks for democratic governance.

### **The Military as an Instrument of Regional Food Diplomacy**

Beyond domestic operations, international literature positions military involvement in food security as an instrument of diplomacy. Nye's (2011) concept of soft power emphasizes that influence stems not merely from coercion or military might, but also from attraction, credibility, and the ability to cooperate. Within this framework, the TNI becomes a non-traditional diplomatic actor by participating in food-related humanitarian missions. Indonesia's humanitarian deployment to the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 illustrates this dual function. The TNI's logistical capacity not only provided immediate relief but also fostered political trust and regional solidarity, strengthening ASEAN cohesion (Khoirunnisa, Wulandari, & Nugraha, 2024). Such actions highlight Indonesia's ability to project itself as a "provider of public goods" in the region—an essential quality for a state aspiring to leadership within ASEAN.

At the institutional level, the ASEAN Integrated Food Security (AIFS) Framework (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020) has provided a foundation for multilateral cooperation. Yet implementation remains constrained by logistical barriers, particularly during cross-border emergencies. The TNI, through forums such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), contributes by enhancing interoperability, conducting joint exercises, and sharing logistical expertise. This allows Indonesia to leverage its military capacity not merely for defense, but as a game changer in regional humanitarian and food security diplomacy.

By aligning its military diplomacy with ASEAN norms of non-interference and consensus-building, Indonesia can consolidate its reputation as a natural leader and middle power in Southeast Asia. This aligns with Saa's (2024) findings that food diplomacy has become an increasingly strategic tool for Indonesia in responding to global challenges, from climate change to food crises.

### **Human Security and the Military's Expanding Mandate**

The concept of human security, introduced by UNDP (1994), broadens security beyond traditional state defense to include chronic threats such as hunger, poverty, and sudden disruptions to livelihoods. In this context, food security is not just an economic issue but a matter of human survival and dignity. When the TNI distributes food to disaster-hit populations or participates in cross-border food aid missions, it simultaneously contributes to the global human security agenda. This redefines the military not only as a protector of borders but as a guarantor of human welfare (Lassa & Nugraha, 2015). Such a role is consistent with global trends where armed forces are increasingly mobilized for humanitarian operations, peacekeeping, and disaster response. However, this expansion of the military's mandate raises critical questions about institutional priorities. Should the TNI be a developmental army focused on social-economic resilience, or remain narrowly dedicated to national defense? The answer depends on whether civilian institutions are empowered to lead, or whether the military becomes the default actor in domains where state capacity is weak.

### **Risks and Democratic Dilemmas**

Critical literature cautions against over-reliance on the military in food governance. CeJISS (2023) argues that military-driven agricultural programs in Indonesia have often emphasized mobilization rather than sustainability, failing to deliver long-term food self-sufficiency. The food estate program is a prime example: while aimed at increasing production, it has been criticized for ecological damage, weak community participation, and poor long-term planning. If dominated by the military, such initiatives risk sidelining civil society and undermining sustainable practices.

The democratic dilemma is equally pressing. The appointment of an active military officer as President Director of Bulog in 2025 reignited debates over civil-military boundaries. As Reuters (2025b) reported, critics saw this as a regression from post-Reformasi democratic consolidation, where civilian supremacy was

meant to limit military encroachment (Crouch, 2010). From a governance perspective, this raises concerns about accountability, transparency, and potential institutional capture. Without clear frameworks under Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW), military influence could easily spill into domains traditionally reserved for civilian authorities. Comparative studies also highlight these risks. Chambers (2013), analyzing Thailand, found that military involvement in agriculture created policy distortions and weakened transparency. The lesson for Indonesia is clear: military roles in food diplomacy must be carefully bounded, ensuring balanced civil-military cooperation and strong accountability mechanisms to avoid dependency and democratic erosion.

### **Sustainable Development and Strategic Outlook**

Food security is inseparable from the broader agenda of sustainable development. According to FAO (2021), sustainable food systems must balance availability with access, quality, and ecological resilience. The military, therefore, should focus on areas where it has comparative advantages: emergency logistics, rapid mobilization, and technological support. Rather than supplanting civilian institutions in agricultural governance, the TNI's contribution should complement them through joint programs that integrate logistics, research, and local community participation. This integrative approach would align Indonesia's military-based food diplomacy with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 2: Zero Hunger. By emphasizing sustainability, Indonesia can showcase itself as not only a strong state actor but also a responsible regional leader committed to human security and ecological resilience.

Furthermore, military-based food diplomacy offers Indonesia leverage as a middle power. By projecting a dual image—defensively strong yet humanitarian-oriented—Indonesia enhances its bargaining power in ASEAN, the G20, and the United Nations. This positioning is increasingly relevant in the context of global climate change, pandemics, and food crises, where states that provide solutions earn disproportionate diplomatic influence (Saa, 2024).

### **Synthesis: Opportunities and Challenges**

The findings can be synthesized into two main dimensions:

- a. Opportunities: The military strengthens logistical capacity, enhances Indonesia's soft power, and bolsters its image as a humanitarian leader in ASEAN. By embedding food diplomacy within regional frameworks, Indonesia can consolidate its leadership and amplify its influence globally.
- b. Challenges: Risks include the militarization of civilian domains, democratic backsliding, ecological unsustainability, and policy distortions if the military's role is not properly regulated. Clear legal frameworks, civilian oversight, and sustainability principles are essential to prevent these risks.

Thus, the strategic path forward is not to eliminate the military from food diplomacy, but to position it as a supporting actor—under civilian control, transparent governance, and sustainability-oriented practices. This balance ensures that military-based food diplomacy strengthens both Indonesia's domestic resilience and regional stability without compromising democratic principles.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Indonesian military plays a strategic role in supporting food security, both through logistical distribution during domestic crises and as a soft power instrument in regional food diplomacy. The capacity of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) for rapid mobilization and humanitarian operations strengthens Indonesia's position within ASEAN and other multilateral forums. However, military involvement also creates dilemmas, particularly the risks of civilian militarization and policy distortion if not clearly regulated. Therefore, the military's role must be framed within transparent and accountable non-war operations that support sustainability. With appropriate governance, military-based food diplomacy can serve as a strategic instrument for Indonesia to enhance regional stability and contribute to global human security.



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