

# Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo: Enhancing Indonesia's Multilateral Defence Diplomacy?

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Frega Wenas Inkiriwang<sup>1,2</sup> 

## Abstract

Defence diplomacy has gained attention in the past decades. Hence, Indonesia has also developed its defence diplomacy for achieving its strategic interests. In Indonesia's defence diplomacy, bilateral forms have dominated the practice of joint exercises with its defence partners. However, under the Yudhoyono administration in 2014, Indonesia hosted its first multilateral joint exercise, the Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo (MNEK), which aimed at facilitating multilateral engagement with greater international partners. This exercise was continued by the Widodo administration as a biannual event in the following years. Since this multilateral exercise has rarely been studied, this article attempts to qualitatively examine how this exercise has developed and contributed to Indonesia's multilateral defence diplomacy. To support the analysis, this article relies on a combination of documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews, including with numerous participants of past MNEK exercises in 2014, 2016, and 2018.

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<sup>1</sup>International Relations Department, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

<sup>2</sup>Indonesian Defence University, Bogor, Indonesia

## Corresponding Author:

Frega Wenas Inkiriwang, International Relations Department, The London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton St, Holborn, London, WC2A 2AE, UK.

Email: [f.wenas-inkiriwang@lse.ac.uk](mailto:f.wenas-inkiriwang@lse.ac.uk); [frega.wenas@idu.ac.id](mailto:frega.wenas@idu.ac.id)



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**Keywords**

Indonesia, defence, diplomacy, joint exercise, multilateral

**Introduction**

Defence diplomacy has become more important in recent decades. Indonesia, a Southeast Asian country, has also developed its defence diplomacy to pursue its strategic interests. In implementing its defence diplomacy, Indonesia has bilaterally organised joint exercises with key defence partners, including Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and extra-regional partner countries. Despite the dominance of bilateral joint exercises, in the concluding period of the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono administration in 2014, Indonesia hosted its first multilateral joint exercise, namely the Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo (MNEK), which intended to facilitate multilateral engagement with greater international partners. Since then, the exercise was continued as a biannual event, hosted by the Joko Widodo administration, in 2016 and 2018.

Despite the establishment of the MNEK by Indonesia, the exercise has been understudied. Moreover, there has been no prior study that examines how this multilateral exercise has helped Indonesia enhance its multilateral defence diplomacy. Therefore, this article attempts to examine the development of the MNEK as the first multilateral military exercise hosted by the Indonesian military in the post-New Order period and the manner in which it has contributed to the country's multilateral defence diplomacy.

An analysis of the MNEK is important for understanding the implementation of Indonesia's multilateral defence diplomacy. Hence, the article aims to shed light on the MNEK and its significance for Indonesia's defence diplomacy by attempting to qualitatively answer two research questions: *How has Indonesia developed the MNEK? How has this multilateral exercise contributed to Indonesia's multilateral defence diplomacy?*

Since the MNEK is held biannually and limited to naval officers, the author has no access to observe the exercise. However, the author builds on insights generated through semi-structured interviews with five participants from three different MNEK exercises in 2014, 2016, and 2018, as well as former defence high officials, including a defence minister, a deputy defence minister, and two chiefs of Navy, to help study the multilateral military exercise. The interviews were conducted in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 2018 and 2019, where the author used the Indonesian language to facilitate these interviews. The article focuses on three prior exercises since the MNEK was suspended in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In supplementing the interviews, the article also relies on documentary analyses, which includes books, journals, and online resources.

To examine the MNEK, this article is structured in five parts. First, the article briefly discusses the interpretation of Indonesia's defence diplomacy and joint military exercises. Second, it covers the development of the exercise by examining a brief history of the MNEK. Third, the article observes how Indonesia has benefitted from the MNEK as its multilateral defence diplomacy activity. Fourth, it discusses the findings by observing the four motives of defence diplomacy identified in the previous study on Indonesia's

defence diplomacy and the country's two joint military exercises, the "Garuda Shield" and the "Sharp Knife" (Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020a). It also looks at the external, state-level, and individual-level variables, focusing on the great powers' rivalry, role of national leaders, and institutional rivalry. And in the final part, the article concludes the examination of the MNEK.

## **Indonesia's Defence Diplomacy and Joint Exercises**

By the time the Cold War ended, defence diplomacy had received more attention. Scholars perceive defence diplomacy as the use of military as foreign policy instrument to achieve national and foreign objectives abroad (Cottey and Forster, 2004; Drab, 2018; Edmonds and Mills, 1998). Among defence diplomacy activities, joint exercise has been identified as one of the most important activities (Cottey and Forster, 2004; Gindarsah, 2016; Laksmana, 2011; Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020a) because it can contribute to supporting defence co-operation between countries and nations (Cheyre, 2013; Muthanna, 2011; Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020a). Additionally, joint exercise is useful in improving interoperability with foreign militaries and increasing levels of trust and respect between participating countries (Muthanna, 2011; Sachar, 2003).

As a democratising country, Indonesia attempted to limit the roles of the military in the context of foreign policy making, in the initial phase of its post-New Order period (Márton, 2015). As a consequence, there was a shifting of responsibility from the military to the Foreign Ministry (Kementerian Luar Negeri, Kemlu) during the Yudhoyono administration. According to President Yudhoyono, the Indonesian National Defence Forces (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, TNI) should be subordinate to Kemlu (Connelly, 2014). The practice adopted by the Yudhoyono administration was contrary to what was implemented in the New Order period, where most key ambassadorial and high-ranking diplomatic positions were occupied by military generals (Anwar, 1994: 136–137), directly assigned by President Suharto.

Despite the adoption of new foreign policy practice by the Yudhoyono administration in the initial phase of the post-New Order period, Indonesia increased the use of defence and military instruments as part of its overall diplomacy. This increase underlined the importance of defence diplomacy for the country (Gindarsah, 2015, 2016; Laksmana, 2011; Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020a). Among the country's defence diplomacy activities, joint exercise became the most important and dominant one.

In Indonesia's defence diplomacy, joint exercises can help address the country's security issues. Besides, they are also important for facilitating confidence-building measures (CBMs) (Syawfi cited in Chau, 2011; Gindarsah, 2016; Laksmana, 2011). Having more opportunities to operationalise through joint exercises and to implement more concrete actions, the Indonesian military has been able to contribute substantially to strengthening ties with Indonesia's strategic partner countries in the region, both ASEAN and non-ASEAN countries.

Historically, Indonesia has regularly focused on establishing bilateral joint exercises with its defence partners instead of multilateral exercises. ASEAN countries,

particularly the founding member countries, have become the country's first priority in the context of bilateral exercises. For years, the Indonesian military personnel have continuously trained together with other militaries from Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore (Gindarsah, 2015, 2016; Singh and Tan, 2011; Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020a). In recent decades, TNI has also organised bilateral exercises with Brunei and Cambodia (Pedrasan, 2015).

Apart from engaging bilaterally with ASEAN militaries through joint exercises, Indonesia has also interacted with ASEAN dialogue partners, including the great powers – the USA and China – as has been demonstrated by other Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand (Storey, 2019). Under the Yudhoyono administration, TNI initiated the Garuda Shield with the US military in 2007, and the Sharp Knife with the China's People Liberation Army (PLA) in 2011 (Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020a). Nevertheless, because of tensions between Indonesia and China over the illegal fishing incidents in the Natuna Islands, TNI has suspended the Sino–Indonesia bilateral exercise and rejected the proposal for a new bilateral maritime exercise proposed by the PLA (Afrida, 2015). Despite the suspension, most of the other joint military exercises have been continued by the Widodo administration. In fact, more bilateral exercises have also been initiated with Australia, India, and South Korea, as well as some other partner countries.

Though the Indonesian military has been active in organising and participating in joint exercises, most of these exercises have been held under the bilateral framework (Gindarsah, 2016; Laksmana, 2011; Singh and Tan, 2011). There was no multilateral military exercise organised by the Indonesian military to engage with its regional partners in the initial phase of the post-New Order period. Having learnt the importance of a multilateral framework, TNI initiated its first multilateral exercise, known as the MNEK, in 2014. With approval from President Yudhoyono, the Indonesian Navy (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, TNI-AL) held its first MNEK involving all ASEAN member countries and the eight strategic dialogue partners (Marsetio, 2018).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the next section explores how the MNEK has developed since its formation.

## **Brief History of the MNEK**

As mandated by Law No. 34 on TNI, which was issued in 2004 as part of the military reform process, the Indonesian Navy has been given an additional unique task which has not been assigned to the other two services, the Army and the Air Force. The Law authorises the Indonesian Navy to conduct diplomatic activities to support Indonesia's foreign policy (Article 9 Law No. 34 2004 on TNI). Diplomacy has become one of the primary roles of the Navy in addition to defence and law enforcement (Sondakh, 2018).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, for the Indonesian Navy, diplomacy is closely related with its operational tasks. At the same time, joint exercises have become the manifestation of this diplomacy role (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 17 July 2019). Regarding the conduct of joint naval exercises, the Indonesian Navy has participated in multiple bilateral exercises involving an array of partners.

A new chapter of multilateral military engagement was introduced when the Indonesian Navy first began co-ordinating the MNEK. This exercise was first planned in 2013 under the leadership of Admiral Marsetio, the Indonesian Navy Chief at that time (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 22 January 2019). During the initial phase, the plan was questioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as it believed that such multilateral military exercise might be in contradiction of Indonesia's "free and active" foreign policy principle (Marsetio, 2018). However, the initial plan was later approved and supported by President Yudhoyono, who understood well the importance of establishing a multilateral military exercise like the MNEK.

The main purpose of the MNEK was to establish co-operation with partner navies in both military and non-military operations, such as disaster relief and medical evacuation (Marsetio, 2018). Furthermore, the exercise was intended to help implement the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response, which was agreed at the previous ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meeting (ADMM) in February 2011 (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 17 July 2019).

The inaugural MNEK was held in Batam, Indonesia, in 2014. It involved around 4,800 Indonesian navy personnel and twenty-seven warships (Fadli, 2014). Eighteen countries participated in this multilateral exercise, including the USA and China, as well as other ASEAN-Plus countries, such as Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand, and Russia (Antara News, 2014). Additionally, observers from the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) took part in the exercise (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 14 April 2019). In total, the exercise engaged approximately 1,500 foreign military personnel. The focus of the 2014 MNEK exercise was on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) (Fadli, 2014), not least because HADR had long been relevant for Indonesia and the region. Indeed, Indonesia had undergone the experience of dealing with Aceh's Tsunami in 2004.<sup>3</sup> In the event, Jakarta had allowed foreign militaries to participate in the HADR operations to help with the recovery process in the impacted areas. Since 2014, the MNEK has been arranged biannually by the Indonesian Navy.

The second MNEK was organised in 2016 in Padang, Indonesia. At this point in time, newly appointed President Widodo's vision of a Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) raised further the importance of this multilateral exercise in facilitating interactions with international partners as he himself opened the exercise. Overall, thirty-five countries participated in the exercise, including China and the USA, which exceeded the number in the previous exercise (Commander, US Pacific Fleet, 2016). This exercise was intentionally combined with the West Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) and International Fleet Review (IFR), which aimed to multiply the participants in the exercise (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 22 January 2019). During the second MNEK, participants also collaborated in performing a Medical Civic Action Programme (MEDCAP) and Engineering Civic Action Programme (ENCAP) in Siberut Island, Indonesia. Subsidiary events such as a maritime exhibition, a culinary festival, fun bike race, "Selaju Sampan" (boat race), and beach volleyball games were also held as part of this exercise (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 22 January 2019).

The third MNEK took place in May 2018 in Lombok, Indonesia. Like previous exercises, the aim was to foster co-operation in responding to disaster and humanitarian issues (Indonesian Navy, 2017). Thirty-six countries participated in the 2018 MNEK, which included the current eighteen ASEAN and dialogue partner countries, including the great powers, the USA and China (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 17 July 2019). This exercise also included numerous other activities, such as sports and cooking competition. By all accounts, these informal activities facilitated more significant interaction among participants from different countries.

To support the MNEK, the Indonesian Navy employed a group of liaison officers (LOs), which proved critical for achieving objectives. One LO was assigned for each participating chief of Navy (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 14 April 2019). Additional LOs were appointed to the respective ships taking part in the exercise. Moreover, specific LOs were also appointed to cover other activities during the MNEK (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 22 January 2019).

The MNEK has been able to combine engagements at the strategic and operational levels. In addition to the Navy chiefs meeting, the MNEK has also promoted and reinforced interactions at an operational level. The exercise has helped implement Indonesia's defence diplomacy by offering more opportunities for the Indonesian navy personnel to engage with their international partners, as this exercise allows all participants to interact and train together (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 22 January 2019). The exercise has also strengthened the "seamen brotherhood," which is recognised as an important foundation of international co-operation (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 17 July 2019). It has further offered a platform for foreign military personnel to learn about Indonesia's military tradition as well as its culture (Nugraha, 2018). Additionally, the exercise has allowed Indonesian participants to learn how other countries and militaries operate their naval ships.

The connections built during this exercise have been considered critical for CBMs and useful for fostering a spirit of friendship among the participants (Gabrielson, 2018). The exercise has also improved multilateral co-operation and interoperability among the navies in the Indo-Pacific region, while simultaneously building connections with the Indonesian military (Commander, US Pacific Fleet, 2016). Therefore, foreign participants participating in the MNEK have appraised Indonesia's defence diplomacy.

### **MNEK: Benefitting from Multilateral Dynamics?**

As a multilateral exercise, the MNEK has enabled the Indonesian military, particularly the Indonesian Navy, to engage with more international partners, including the USA and China. The MNEK has also provided specific advantages compared to the existing bilateral exercises because there have been more foreign participants attending the multilateral exercise. Achieving interoperability in the multilateral context, as demonstrated in the MNEK, is more complicated than in bilateral interaction. Notably, such interoperability has helped refine the Indonesian Navy's standard operating procedures (SOPs) (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 1 July 2019).

The MNEK is thus viewed as being very significant for Indonesia and its military. It has played a critical role in facilitating Indonesia's defence diplomacy (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 14 April 2019). To provide as much benefit as possible, the MNEK exercise has adopted various themes. For instance, the Indonesian Navy adopted "Cooperation for Stability" as the central theme for the inaugural exercise and a "Readiness and Cooperation for Peace" theme for the second exercise – both in line with Indonesia's commitment to international peace. The latest exercise in 2018 adopted a theme of "Cooperation to Respond to Disaster and Humanitarian Issues," given the regional concerns and Indonesia's national interests (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 20 February 2019).

Since the December 2004 tsunami, HADR has become an essential focus area for Indonesia in its engagements with international partners. Thus, this theme has been widely used to foster confidence-building and capacity-building through joint exercises within ASEAN. Indonesia and Japan successfully co-organised the Disaster Relief Exercise (DIREX) in Manado, Indonesia, in March 2011 (Tan, 2012). The exercise facilitated skill development and sharing of experiences pertinent to large-scale multinational HADR operations. In the same year, the ADMM also agreed to co-ordinate the deployment of ASEAN military assets for HADR (Tan, 2012). A year after, the ASEAN Military Operations Informal Meeting (AMOIM) endorsed the SOPs for HADR through the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Response and Emergency Response Framework (Tan, 2012). Therefore, HADR has consistently become the central theme for the MNEK because it is in line with the ASEAN framework (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 17 July 2019).

Similar to Indonesia's bilateral military exercises, communication has played a critical role in making the MNEK a success for participants. The exercise used English as the official language; however, the English skills of some participants were limited (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 20 February 2019). Therefore, LOs were assigned by the Indonesian Navy to each participating country to ameliorate this issue (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 14 April 2019). Additionally, escort officers were deployed to support communication between delegations (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 22 January 2019). The Indonesian Navy tasked English-speaking officers to perform both these roles (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 20 February 2019).

More generally, the MNEK has been quite effective. The exercise has enabled Indonesia and its international counterparts to strengthen regional maritime security by operating together (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 14 April 2019). This is illustrated by the joint formulation of SOPs regarding regional maritime security and HADR (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 1 July 2019). The interaction between participants has also further enhanced trust-building, which has promptly fostered greater co-operation between participants, which is important in the context of maritime security in dealing with both traditional and non-traditional threats. With the presence of advanced navies from the great power countries, like the USA and China, the exercise has provided advantages for refining operational effectiveness,

interoperability, and also identifying critical areas for modernisation (Muthanna, 2011; Sachar, 2003).

Furthermore, the exercise has achieved the designated objectives. With its orientation towards involving more participants, the MNEK has continuously multiplied the number of participants. The exercise initially involved eighteen countries (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 14 April 2019). The number later rose to thirty-five and thirty-six countries in the second and third MNEK, respectively (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 20 February 2019). This rising participation has indicated the significance of the MNEK for countries in the region since the exercise helps foster defence co-operation between countries and militaries (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 14 April 2019). Thus, it has also underlined the importance of the multilateral exercise in Indonesia's geostrategic calculus (Supriyanto, 2014: 7; Scott, 2019).

Moreover, the MNEK has allowed Indonesia to enhance its international reputation. As a defence diplomacy activity, joint exercises have been used by countries to improve their global image (INSS, 2019). The improved reputation has resulted from the promotion of Indonesia's military capabilities as a world-class defence force (Sudarsono et al., 2018). The MNEK has enabled foreign participants to further learn about Indonesia's military capabilities. Additionally, the multilateral exercise has also connected all the participating militaries. Thus, there has been positive appreciation from the participating foreign officers. US Navy Rear Admiral Charles Williams underscored the importance of the MNEK as an outstanding venue for improving multilateral collaboration and strengthening partnership (Commander, US Pacific Fleet, 2016). Similarly, a Royal New Zealand Navy officer, Ensign Matthew Pfahlert, expressed his satisfaction for the great opportunity to sail together with more than thirty battleships as part of a large multinational exercise during the MNEK (Logan, 2018).

## Findings

As previously mentioned, joint exercises have become critical to the operationalisation of Indonesia's defence diplomacy. Scholars identify bilateral and multilateral joint exercises as key defence diplomacy activities as they help facilitate interaction between participants (Cotter and Forster, 2004: 7). Moreover, joint exercises support defence co-operation between nations. They also improve interoperability with foreign militaries (Muthanna, 2011; Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020a). Additionally, they increase the levels of trust and respect between participating countries and militaries (Cheyre, 2013; Sachar, 2003).

Therefore, an analysis of the MNEK is vital in understanding how Indonesia has employed this exercise for its multilateral defence diplomacy activity and strategic interests. Based on the four motives of Indonesia's defence diplomacy identified by the previous study on Indonesia's defence diplomacy and two joint military exercises, the "Garuda Shield" and the "Sharp Knife" (Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020a), this article attempts to examine these four motives that have driven the conduct of the multilateral military exercise, MNEK. Subsequently, the article also looks at the external, state-level, and



individual-level variables, focusing on the great powers' rivalry, role of national leaders, and institutional rivalry, which are discussed in the subsequent sections.

### *The Four Motives for Defence Diplomacy*

*The Strategic Engagement Motive.* Defence diplomacy serves as a wider strategy to enhance military and foreign policy practices (Cottey and Forster, 2004; Drab, 2018). Therefore, Indonesia has enhanced its defence diplomacy since it is useful in facilitating the country's strategic engagement with the great powers or other key international partners (Katz, 2020; Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020a). Multilateral joint exercises, as key defence diplomacy activities that can enable interaction with diverse foreign militaries at the same time, are thus important for strategic engagement. Strong military ties can become the foundation for strengthening relations between countries and nations (Ebitz, 2019). With the discontinuation of the Sharp Knife, a Sino–Indonesia bilateral military exercise, in 2014, Indonesia had limited channels to engage with the Chinese military (Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020a). Hence, the MNEK has offered an alternate platform to interact with the PLA since this multilateral exercise has involved the great powers, including China. However, an examination of the MNEK has demonstrated that the multilateral exercise is essential for Indonesia's strategic engagement not only with the great power countries but also with other international partners, especially with the attendance of more than thirty countries in the region.

*The Confidence-Building Measure (CBM) Motive.* This motive is important for Indonesia's defence diplomacy (Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020a). In defence diplomacy, CBMs seek to avoid conflict or any escalating tension between countries (Blake, 2016; Sulaiman, 2019) Sulaiman, 2019. This is in line with the objectives of defence diplomacy in building confidence, addressing shared security interests, and changing strategic relations between countries, as well as reducing mistrust (Baldino and Carr, 2016). The MNEK has fostered people-to-people connections, where the participants are involved in cultural exchanges between their militaries and nations.

As a multilateral joint exercise, the MNEK has been useful in facilitating CBMs among participants. From a political-military perspective, multilateral exercises accommodate CBMs with more extensive partners where it allows more countries to participate (Chau, 2011; Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020a). The MNEK nurtures effective interactions between participating military personnel despite their differing nationalities. These interactions help build trust, which becomes the orientation of CBMs (Mason and Siegfried, 2013; Sachar, 2003).

*The Capacity-Building Motive.* Most developing countries in the South East Asia region, including Indonesia, have underlined the importance of capacity-building as a motive for their defence diplomacy (Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020a; Wesley, 2011). The MNEK has allowed Indonesian military personnel, particularly the Indonesian Navy, to improve their skills ranging from search and rescue to maritime interception and manoeuvring tactics (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 20 February 2019).

Furthermore, they can train alongside other militaries in performing operations targeted at humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, asylum seeking, transnational crime, piracy, and armed robbery at sea (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 17 July 2019). The exercise has also produced SOPs related to regional maritime security and HADR (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 1 July 2019). Operating together with great powers' militaries in joint exercises has helped the Indonesian military identify the gap for improvement as part of its modernisation (Sachar, 2003).

*The International Reputation Motive.* As a joint exercise, the MNEK can contribute to improving Indonesia's international reputation, which involves promoting TNI's military professionalism and traditions. International reputation has become an important motive for enhancing Indonesia's defence diplomacy (Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020a). The MNEK has promoted Indonesian culture and tourism by using different venues (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 1 July 2019), and it has further allowed foreign militaries to observe TNI's capabilities. Moreover, the increasing number of participants in the MNEK has proven the recognition of this exercise as an essential defence diplomacy activity (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 20 February 2019), which has elevated Indonesia's reputation in the region.

### *Great Powers Rivalry*

The great powers' rivalry between China and the USA has significantly influenced regional stability in the Southeast Asia region, including in Indonesia (Fels, 2016: 1–2). Since Indonesia adopts an independent and active foreign policy, the country avoids forming any alignment with the great powers. However, engaging with the USA and China amidst their rivalry is important for Indonesia (Anwar, 2020). This consideration has driven Indonesia to increase its defence diplomacy towards the two countries, which has also included the engagement through joint exercises, either bilaterally or multilaterally.

The MNEK has helped Indonesia develop relations with the two great powers. The discontinuation of the Sino–Indonesia bilateral exercise Sharp Knife has limited TNI's ability to engage bilaterally with the Chinese military (Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020a). Thus, this limitation has encouraged Indonesia to use multilateral channels to interact with the PLA, as exhibited in the MNEK. As a multilateral joint exercise, the MNEK has given Indonesia opportunities to co-operate with the great powers since China and the USA have continuously participated in the exercise from its inauguration in 2014 until the recent exercise in 2018 (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 1 July 2019).

These successful relations between militaries are important for strengthening Indonesia's bilateral ties with the two nations (Ebitz, 2019). Thus, multilateral joint exercises can be used to engage with China and the USA, which is essential for implementing Indonesia's defence diplomacy at the operational level. When there is a disruption in the use of a bilateral channel, the multilateral platform of joint exercises can serve as an alternative for TNI to engage with any foreign military as demonstrated in the MNEK.

### *Role of National Leaders*

The role of a national leader is critical in directing the creation and continuation of joint exercises as one of the defence diplomacy activities. Scholars acknowledge joint exercises among the key defence diplomacy activities (Cottey and Forster, 2004: 7). In the post-New Order period, the substantial increase of joint exercises has significantly taken place under the Yudhoyono and Widodo administrations (Gindarsah, 2015, 2016; Singh and Tan, 2011; Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020a).

Yudhoyono considered adopting a “million friends and zero enemies” foreign policy, which was also known as an “all directions” foreign policy. Yudhoyono formulated this foreign policy to engage with the great powers and refine Indonesia’s deterrence against any potential aggressor (Goh, 2015). During the Yudhoyono administration, Indonesia inherited a poor international reputation (Fitriani, 2015). Thus, Yudhoyono envisioned improving Indonesia’s foreign policy, which would enable Indonesia to play a global role (Fionna et al., 2018; Tan, 2007). Yudhoyono’s policy influenced the ways in which the Ministry of Defence (Kementerian Pertahanan, Kemhan) and TNI interacted with their international partners, which also covered the conduct of joint military exercises.

In fact, President Yudhoyono was involved in the decision-making for any TNI’s initiative to participate in a new joint exercise. In 2012, TNI was invited to attend the Black Pitch exercise organised by the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), which regularly involved the Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA) member countries. TNI considered this first invitation to be politically sensitive and thus consulted with the Defence Minister, Purnomo Yusgiantoro, who subsequently asked for a decision from President Yudhoyono. In response, Yudhoyono gave his approval, which authorised TNI’s participation in this military exercise (Yusgiantoro, 2019).<sup>4</sup> For Yudhoyono, joint exercises were also important to support his foreign policy (Sulaiman, 2019).<sup>5</sup>

In his initial presidential term, Yudhoyono approached the USA to resume the International Military Education and Training (IMET) programme for TNI personnel. The US government later decided to lift the IMET ban in 2005 (Afrida, 2015; The Jakarta Post, 2005; Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020b; Wenas Inkiriwang, 2013). This good start assisted the Yudhoyono administration in managing the inauguration of a bilateral Indonesia–US army exercise, Garuda Shield, in 2007. Similarly, his administration also created the Sharp Knife (Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020a) and the MNEK.

However, there was a period when Yudhoyono intervened to disrupt defence relations with partner countries. In November 2013, Edward Snowden, a former US National Security Agency contractor, leaked the document that informed that the Australian embassy in Jakarta had intercepted phone calls and data of Indonesian officials, which included the President and the First Lady (Ismar, 2013). Yudhoyono (cited in Roberts, 2013) promptly suspended military ties with Australia, including stopping the bilateral exercises between the two countries. He stated: “I demand to stop the joint exercises between the Indonesian and Australian militaries, be it the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, or any joint one.”

As a president with a military background, Yudhoyono was very capable of understanding the strategic importance of defence diplomacy. Hence, he frequently provided

direction to Kemhan and TNI (Sjamsuoddin, 2019).<sup>6</sup> This practice demonstrates his influence as a national leader in directing Indonesia's defence diplomacy vis-à-vis the great powers and other international partners.

Adopting Yudhoyono's policy, the Widodo administration has sustained several bilateral exercises, such as Garuda Shield, and the multilateral exercise MNEK. In 2019, the US and Indonesian armies participated in an annual Garuda Shield exercise in East Java, Indonesia, which also commemorated the seventieth anniversary of the diplomatic relations between the two nations (Ganoni, 2019). Though Widodo lacks a military background, his strategic vision for a GMF has allowed the Indonesian military to contribute more to Indonesia's foreign relations (Saha, 2016). His government conducted two MNEK exercises in Padang in 2016 and Lombok in 2018 (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 1 July 2019). In fact, Widodo himself opened the multilateral exercise in Padang.

Despite the continuation of the bilateral and multilateral joint exercises, the Widodo administration suspended the Sharp Knife, a bilateral exercise with the Chinese military, following a series of tensions around the North Natuna Sea. Widodo has implemented a different approach from his predecessor in coping with incidents involving China concerning the Natuna Islands. While Yudhoyono handled the tensions between the two countries quietly, Widodo prefers to adopt a harsher policy line, which revealed the Sino-Indonesia dispute to the public (Suryadinata, 2016). The Widodo administration has also exhibited a more assertive military role in protecting Indonesia's national sovereignty and territorial integrity when responding to Chinese pressure and behaviour (Parameswaran, 2015). In 2016, three repeated incidents took place between Indonesian patrol ships and Chinese fishing boats. Indonesia responded by deploying numerous military battleships to act against Chinese fishing boats operating in the North Natuna Sea (Suryadinata, 2016). Widodo's hard-line approach led Indonesian Military Chief (Panglima TNI) General Gatot to suspend Sharp Knife and reject the bilateral joint maritime exercise proposal with the Chinese military (Afrida, 2015).

Notwithstanding the continuation of most joint military exercises established during the Yudhoyono administration, Widodo has demonstrated a softer influence over Indonesia's defence diplomacy (Sjamsuoddin, 2019). Widodo exerted his influence over TNI by the issuance of his strategic vision GMF, which has indirectly enabled TNI to sustain the MNEK. Nonetheless, his indirect influence over TNI led Nurmantyo to the suspension of the Sino-Indonesia bilateral military exercise. Despite this suspension, the article acknowledges the significant influences of both President Yudhoyono and President Widodo in driving the development of joint exercises, particularly in the context of multilateral military exercise such as the MNEK, which has become one of Indonesia's key defence diplomacy activities.

### *Institutional Rivalry*

Institutional rivalry is acknowledged in the literature of bureaucratic politics, which is signified by the presence of competing interests between different actors (Allison and

Halperin, 1972). Institutional rivalry is driven by the process of different organisations defending their respective interests (Thatcher, 2011). Institutional rivalry between the Defence Ministry or military, with other foreign policy actors, such as Kemlu, has commonly occurred in many countries. Tendi (2015) highlights the rivalry between the UK Ministry of Defence and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in claiming success over the ceasefire in Zimbabwe/Rhodesia. Meanwhile, Waseda-Hida (2012) observes the presence of institutional rivalry between the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the War Ministry in the context of the Manchurian incident, which resulted in the failure of Japanese policy.

Defence diplomacy is perceived as a foreign policy instrument (Cottey and Forster, 2004; Drab, 2018). It enables the Defence Ministry and military to contribute to foreign relations, which has become the primary domain of Kemlu. Therefore, institutional rivalry is relevant to defence diplomacy (Wenas Inkiriwang, 2020a) since these institutions may have different purposes and overlapping agendas without reference to one another (Young, 1996).

In joint exercises, there is also an example of institutional rivalry. However, since these defence diplomacy activities have mostly engaged at the operational level, the scale of this institutional rivalry between actors is not significant. When first planned, the multilateral exercise received criticism from Kemlu since the ministry argued that the MNEK initiative might go against Indonesia's "free and active" foreign policy (Marsetio, 2018). Therefore, since the initial exercise in 2014, both the planning and execution phases have never involved personnel from Kemlu (interview with an Indonesian Navy officer, 1 July 2019).

The dynamics between Indonesia's defence diplomacy actors have signified that institutional rivalry also exists in the context of joint exercises as key defence diplomacy activities. Despite the exclusions in the MNEK planning phases, Kemlu is still included in bilateral strategic forums, such as the Indonesia–US Security Dialogue (IUSSD) and US–Indonesia Bilateral Defense Dialogue (USIBDD), which play a role in determining the venues for the US–Indonesia bilateral exercises (interview with an Indonesian diplomat, 12 August 2019).

## **Conclusion**

In the case of the MNEK, Indonesia's multilateral joint exercise, the article concludes that Indonesia has used this exercise to seek its four motives of defence diplomacy: strategic engagement, CBMs, capacity-building, and international reputation. These four motives have encouraged both the Yudhoyono and Widodo administrations to employ multilateral joint exercise, such as MNEK, to enhance the country's multilateral defence diplomacy.

Furthermore, the article observes that the great powers rivalry and the role of national leaders were the most dominant factors that influenced the continuation of the MNEK as one of Indonesia's key defence diplomacy activities. With the discontinuation of Sharp Knife, a bilateral joint exercise between Indonesian and Chinese militaries, Indonesia

needs an alternate platform to engage with China. In this context, the MNEK has served as an alternate channel to engage with the PLA and, at the same time, the US military. Moreover, the presence of direct influences demonstrated by Presidents Yudhoyono and Widodo in establishing and continuing the MNEK has underlined the connection between grand strategy and defence diplomacy. The influence of these two presidents represented the grand behaviours that can also be recognised as a grand strategy, which has driven Indonesia's defence diplomacy.

In summary, the articles finds that the MNEK has contributed significantly to Indonesia's multilateral defence diplomacy. Through the involvement of great powers – the USA and China – as well as other key regional partners in the exercise, the MNEK has helped Indonesia pursue its strategic interests. As an archipelagic country, Indonesia often faces maritime security issues. Hence, this multilateral exercise can contribute to fostering co-operation in tackling those maritime issues.

However, the MNEK is the only existing multilateral military exercise hosted by Indonesia. To enhance Indonesia's multilateral defence diplomacy in the future, other services like the Indonesian Army and the Indonesian Air Force may consider initiating multilateral exercises that can involve greater international partners, as exhibited by the MNEK.

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### **Notes**

1. Admiral (Ret) Marsetio is a former chief of the Indonesian Navy, serving under the Yudhoyono administration, from 2012 to 2014.
2. Admiral (Ret) Bernard Kent Sondakh is a former chief of the Indonesian Navy, serving under both the Megawati Soekarnoputri and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono administrations, from 2002 to 2005.

3. Indian Ocean tsunami struck Aceh very hard in December 2004.
4. Purnomo Yusgiantoro is a former defence minister, serving under the Yudhoyono administration, from 2009 to 2014.
5. Lieutenant Colonel (Ret) M. Ifitah Sulaiman is a former presidential staff during the Yudhoyono administration.
6. Lieutenant General (Ret) Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin is a former deputy defence minister, serving from 2010 to 2014, and secretary general at the Indonesian Ministry of Defence, serving from 2005 to 2010.

## ORCID ID

Frega Wenas Inkiriwang  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2258-4054>

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## Author Biography

**Frega Wenas Inkiriwang** is a lieutenant colonel in the Indonesian Army. He is also a lecturer at the Indonesian Defence University. He finished his PhD in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), UK, under the Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP) scholarship. Frega earned his Master of International Relations from Macquarie University, Australia, and his Master of Military Arts and Science, specializing in Strategic Studies, from the US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, USA. He has written numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals, including *Australian Journal of International Affairs* and the *Pacific Review*. Frega is currently a Graduate Teaching Assistant at LSE. Email: f.wenas-inkiriwang@lse.ac.uk; frega.wenas@idm.ac.id