

TOGETHER STRONGER? INT ERROGATING AUSTRALIA'S HADR COOPERATION WITH INDONESIA IN AN ERA OF PROLIFERATING NATURAL DISASTERS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Natural disasters are striking more often with greater frequency and intensity across the Indo-Pacific region. This paper argues that Australia has a moral responsibility to step up its provision of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) and can do so with the support of strategic partners. It should do so only while cognisant of priorities outlined by the Defence Strategic Review (2023). By focusing on increasing cooperative activities specifically on HADR, Australia and Indonesia can together save more lives when natural disasters occur in the Indo-Pacific while gaining strategic dividends of building trust between each other's militaries and strengthening their diplomatic relationship. Cooperation in HADR operations and increasing the number of HADR training exercises will serve to improve military-to-military relations, increase interoperability and build social capital, all three simultaneously reinforcing the strength of diplomatic relations. This paper make two recommendations: that the Australian and Indonesian militaries continue enhancing defence cooperation with a focus on HADR collaboration and that the ADF increase its focus on participating in HADR training exercises with regional partners. As geographic neighbours facing the transnational burden of HADR, now is the time to invest in cooperation.

1. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing this paper has been a rewarding experience. Trawling through Defence and DFAT materials for titbits of unclassified information has given me a new curiosity for the intersection of foreign policy and naval diplomacy. I can't

admit that I'm finished with this unique topic. I give my wholehearted thanks to the staff at the Sea Power Centre – Australia; each and every one of the staff there made me feel valuable while instilling in me a newfound curiosity in sea power and naval diplomacy. I particularly

appreciate the support of Dr Erik Eklund and Dr Ross Mackie. Both are masters of their craft and were immensely important to the production of this paper, and my academic and general wellbeing while writing this paper. I would also like to thank the team at the Australian National Internships Program for their guidance in writing, support of the Program and for enabling me to participate in this opportunity. Lastly to my family, friends, housemates and partner, thanks for dealing with my rants.

2. INTRODUCTION

As Foreign Minister Penny Wong recently wrote, "...our nation's front line is diplomacy. Our diplomacy must be underwritten by our military capability."¹ Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations carried out by the Australian Defence Force (ADF) have been, and will increasingly be, a vital component of Australia's foreign policy. HADR provision is fruitful for inter-state diplomacy and also strengthens military-to-military relations and interoperability. But Australian defence planning documents do not offer substantial

commitments to addressing HADR needs in future, despite natural disasters. The 2023 Defence Strategic Review (DSR) questions the ADF's ability to respond to natural disasters in light of Australia's need to increase its deterrence and resilience. While the ADF focuses on enhancing its warfighting capabilities, it should consider taking more of the burden of responding to natural disasters as a means to both strengthen diplomacy between states and improve the military-to-military relations.

This essay argues that Australia benefits from the ADF expanding humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) focused operations. In the first section two reasons are provided to justify this claim. First, that Australia is obliged take a greater role in natural disaster response in the region both because it professes commitment to humanitarianism and possesses HADR capabilities which many neighbours do not. Second, that HADR collaboration is a 'smart power' means of shoring up ties with Indonesia and other regional partners.² The second section frames HADR as a responsibility of the Australian

¹ DFAT. 2025. *Australia in the World - 2025 Snapshot*. Canberra: DFAT, 2.

² Joseph S. Nye, Jr. 2009. "Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power." *Foreign Affairs* (Council on Foreign Relations) 88 (4): 160-163.

Defence Force (ADF) and highlights the role of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) within an ADF HADR response. The third section frames HADR in the context of diplomacy and situates HADR-specific operations and training into the theory of defence diplomacy's production of social capital. A fourth section describes the outlook for and management of natural disasters in Indonesia, scrutinised from the standpoint of Australia's relationship with Indonesia. The fifth section explores the characteristics of international HADR engagements, including Australian and Indonesian efforts. The final section offers conclusionary remarks and recommendations.

Section 1: Contextual Background

It is not easy to predict the effects of climate change on the frequency and intensity of natural disasters. However, it is undeniably true that natural disaster scenarios are best planned and prepared for. Such an approach is especially warranted if a catastrophic scenario occurs, as management of a successful disaster response requires timeliness and efficacy. The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) maintains that “by 2030, there could be

560 medium-to-large-scale disasters per year, averaging 1.5 per day.”³ Disaster planning ideally recognises that the proliferation of natural disasters causes compound and cascading risks. Compound risk is the “potential compound effects that may arise from the simultaneous occurrence of two or more events,” while cascading risk is “the risk posed by sequential occurrences of two or more events, where the first event triggers one or more events.”⁴ The risk of natural disasters proliferating also contributes to factors which increase the risk of conflict and the risk of popular dissatisfaction with the state, causing even greater concerns.⁵ What this entails for planning is that single hazard natural disasters, for instance a tropical cyclone, are more likely to cause the occurrence of a related disaster event, such as a flood. As we move into a new era of disaster proliferation, natural disaster risk planners must adapt to the new science and avoid underestimating the responses needed to

³ DFAT. 2023. *Australia's International Development Policy*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1-51.

⁴ UNDRR. 2022. *Scoping Study On Compound, Cascading And Systemic Risks In The Asia Pacific*. Geneva: United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 20.

⁵ Tobias Ide, et al. 2025. “De-escalation and diplomacy: disasters as drivers of reduced conflict risks in the Indo-Pacific.” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* (Routledge) 79 (2): 279.

mitigate the growing scale of casualties and destruction caused by sequential or simultaneous disasters.⁶

New climate change driven risks create the conditions for ‘concurrent’ disasters. Scenarios where multiple natural disasters occur, and with a crisis of conflict, will necessitate larger scale responses and will require greater interoperability between regional HADR providers. A catastrophic multi-nation multi-hazard natural disaster event, similar to the scale of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami and earthquake, would again inflict devastating losses and require multinational response efforts. Floods are currently the most impactful type of natural disasters for the Indo-Pacific region.⁷ While mortality in relation to natural disasters has decreased, the economic impact of disasters has grown.⁸ In order to meet the challenges posed by the increased risks of natural disasters, nations can choose to pursue self-help capabilities, and/or seek to create sustainable international partnerships which ‘burden-share’ the issue at hand.

⁶ Jakob Zscheischler, et al. 2018. “Future climate risk from compound events.” *Nature Climate Change* (Nature Portfolio) 8: 469–477.

⁷ ESCAP. 2023. *Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2023*. Bangkok: Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 6.

⁸ Ibid. 7.

Australia values its partnerships with nations in the Indo-Pacific, especially the nations in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Pacific Island Forum (PIF). Both regional groupings are concerned by climate change and the proliferation of natural disasters. Australia can enhance relations with its regional partners by acting cohesively with them in regard to stepping up in regional HADR. Indonesia in particular – the most populous, with the most islands and the largest coastline among Southeast Asian states – is a critical partner of Australia.⁹ Excluding the Gillard government, the last six Australian prime ministers have shown deference to their Indonesian counterparts by making Jakarta the first international trip after their elections.¹⁰ Australian-Indonesian relations have shown greater resilience in the past decade, as defence diplomacy has increased.¹¹ However, Indonesia’s and Australia’s geostrategic views have dissimilarities. Both are middle powers

⁹ Roggeveen, Sam. 2023. *The Echidna Strategy: Australia’s Search for Power and Peace*. Collingwood, Victoria: La Trobe University Press. 182.

¹⁰ Strangio, Sebastian. 2025. *Australia’s PM Albanese Bound For Indonesia on First Post-election Trip*. 8 May.

¹¹ Wilson, Guy. 2017. *Defence diplomacy: the right ballast for Australia’s fragile relations with Indonesia*. Canberra: The Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies, 1-20.

but Indonesia is traditionally non-aligned whereas Australia is traditionally a United States (US) core ally.¹² This fundamental mismatch in parts of each state's strategic outlook has posed difficulty in some aspects of security cooperation. Australian-Indonesian relations have at various times over the last 25 years been heavily strained, especially following the INTERFET intervention in East Timor in 1999 and the espionage scandal in 2013.¹³ This reality demands creativity in Australia's foreign policy regarding Indonesia, arguably best pursued through defence diplomacy.¹⁴ A salient area of cooperation for all ASEAN and PIF states is engagement with regional HADR. This is where an Australian step up will strengthen perceptions of Australia as a critical partner.

One way to reassure all partners of Australia's prosperity-for-all focus is by increasing Australia's presence as an able

actor in regional HADR provision. Over the last decade, Australia deployed fewer HADR operations to the ASEAN region than Singapore, Malaysia, the US and Indonesia.¹⁵ Indonesia clearly recognises the effects of climate change and the need for the country to step up as a HADR provider, as seen in its greater number of HADR deployments and HADR training participation than Australia and recognition of the effects of climate change.¹⁶ Australia could partner with Indonesia to respond to natural disasters, thereby supporting Australian-Indonesian relations and guaranteeing an offer of international military support to Indo-Pacific states affected by natural disasters. The ADF could support a "positive vision for Australia as a climate change leader."¹⁷ As natural disasters continue growing in frequency and intensity, Australia will be obliged to manage its responsibility to assist its partners in the region, or in the absence

¹² Harijanto, Christian. 2024. "Middle-power behaviours: Australia's status-quoist/Lockean and Indonesia's reformist/Kantian approaches to crises of legitimacy in the Indo-Pacific." *Australian Journal of International Affairs* (Routledge) 78 (1): 40-57.

¹³ Nabbs-Keller, Greta. 2020. "Understanding Australia-Indonesia relations in the post-authoritarian era: resilience and respect." *Australian Journal of International Affairs* (Routledge) 74 (5): 532-556.

¹⁴ Wilson, Guy. 2017. *Defence diplomacy: the right ballast for Australia's fragile relations with Indonesia*. Canberra: The Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies, 1-20.

¹⁵ Cook, Alistair D. B., and Keith Paolo C. Landicho. 2025. *The State of HADR in Southeast Asia 2024*. Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 7.

¹⁶ Anthony Leiserowitz, et al. 2023. *Climate Change in the Indonesian Mind*. New Haven: Yale University, 1-36. and Cook, Alistair D. B., and Keith Paolo C. Landicho. 2025. *The State of HADR in Southeast Asia 2024*. Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 7.

¹⁷ Tyler, Melissa Conley. 2022. *How Defence and the ADF can help Australia achieve its aims in Southeast Asia*. 14 April.

of a step up, Australia risks being perceived as disinterested in this transnational issue. Australia should reassess how it contributes to burden-sharing arrangements specifically for HADR responses, and pursue closer coordination with Indonesia on the issue.

Section 2: HADR – from a military perspective and as an ADF responsibility

A military's HADR provision consists of various tasks designed to minimise human and economic losses during and after a natural disaster. Militaries do so because of their humanitarian obligations and because they are the last line of support when civilian agencies are overwhelmed. As outlined by the Asia-Pacific Conference on Military Assistance to Disaster Relief Operations (APC-MADRO), a foreign military provides specific support to specific requirements as outlined by a national authority.¹⁸ Tasking a military, which often holds the only national capacity for defence and using force, to help assist the remediation of a natural disaster's destruction is

¹⁸ OCHA. 2014. *Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines For The Use Of Foreign Military Assets In Natural Disaster Response Operations*. Geneva: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 11.

paradoxical. Militaries are built for warfighting. However, militaries can provide direct assistance or face-to-face distribution of goods and services, indirect assistance of facilitating the transport of goods and relief responders, and general assistance of infrastructure repair, monitoring population health and policing.¹⁹ The ADF accordingly recognises that there is no civilian alternative to the scale of response which the ADF can provide.²⁰

The first-choice responders to natural disasters are civilian agencies, however civilian agencies' capacity for response can be overwhelmed by the scale and complexity of a natural disaster. When this occurs, militaries step in, providing "the largest physical contingent and capability," expedited assistance, and specialist capabilities.²¹ The ADF assists the Australian community in disaster scenarios, known as Defence Assistance to the Civil Community.²² The

¹⁹ Ibid. 8.

²⁰ ADF. 2023. *ADF Intergration Doctrine - 3 Series: Operations - Stabilisation and Humanitarian Operations*. Australian Defence Force, 71.

²¹ Ibid. 7.

²² This role of the ADF has been contested in a Royal Commission, however, this is outside the scope of this paper: NEMA. 2023. *National Report: Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements recommendations implementation status*. Canberra: National Emergency Management Agency, 4-41.

responsibility of the ADF to provide disaster relief to the Australian community is clear. They are the last line of support when Australian civilian emergency response agencies are failing to manage the scale of the response needed.

The justifications for the ADF providing disaster assistance overseas are several. The ADF is doctrinally required to “alleviate human suffering and save lives in an offshore disaster-affected host nation” and “support whole-of-government responses.”²³ When the Australian government decides that a foreign partner is in need of HADR provided by the ADF, it will deploy the ADF to assist. The reason Australia provides HADR to foreign states is both humanitarian and political, moral and strategic. Partners would be left stunned and aggrieved if, when requesting assistance, it was not given. In parallel, the Australian government offering HADR provision to partners is a gesture of goodwill and a reinforcement of good diplomatic ties. When non-partners need HADR provision, the Australian Government offers it both to alleviate human suffering and to demonstrate the

²³ ADF. 2023. *ADF Intergration Doctrine - 3 Series: Operations - Stabilisation and Humanitarian Operations*. Australian Defence Force, 71.

nation’s humanitarianism. The ADF’s HADR provision is hence fairly regarded as an instrument of statecraft.

The ADF is a tested and capable provider of HADR to Indo-Pacific region. It can rely on the lessons of past experiences and could design a framework to field a most efficient and effective unit which maintains readiness for ADF HADR provision. The ADF demonstrated its prowess as an Indo-Pacific HADR provider throughout Operations Sumatra Assist I and II (2004-05) Operation Padang Assist (2009), Fiji Assist (2016 and 2021), PNG Assist (2021), Vanuatu Assist (2023), and Tonga Assist (2022).²⁴ However the ADF’s primary focus is not HADR operations. Instead, as Peter Layton described, HADR is viewed as a “part-time, as-available basis” mission focus.²⁵ The ADF’s primary role is to defend Australia and its economic interests, deter adversaries and contribute to collective

²⁴ Government of Australia. 2009. *Indonesia: Next phase for Operation Padang Assist*. 19 October.; Royal Australian Navy. 2025. *Sumatra assist, RAMSI, Tonga assist and Fiji assist*. ; Defence. 2023. *ADF finishes cyclone aid to Vanuatu*. 21 April. ; O’Reilly, Jessica. 2021. *Small team makes big impact in PNG*. 7 September.

²⁵ Layton, Peter. 2021. *Preparing Australia to respond to disaster - at home and abroad*. 4 August.

security.²⁶ Many ADF platforms, such as the RAN's two Landing Helicopter Dock vessels, the singular Landing Platform Dock vessel, or Sea King Helicopters, and the Royal Australian Air Force's (RAAF) C-130J or C-17 planes are highly effective platforms with critical versatility utility for HADR operations but limited in number. ADF doctrine warns that "defence capabilities should be judiciously considered [for HADR] to ensure the capabilities remain prepared for the primary warfighting mission."²⁷ ADF planners must ultimately account for the need of HADR providing capability, for which as noted the workload will increase, and furthermore incorporate this need for HADR capability into overall force design. Ultimately, the ADF is being forced to compromise one way or another in order to field a full suite of warfighting and HADR-capable platforms. The creation of a special HADR unit tailored to the specific needs of regional partners, where some of the ADF's specialist capabilities can fill gaps, may be able to offset some of the challenges posed by the ADF's competing priorities.

²⁶ Department of Defence. 2023. *Defence Strategic Review*. Canberra: Defence, 6.

²⁷ ADF. 2023. *ADF Intergration Doctrine - 3 Series: Operations - Stabilisation and Humanitarian Operations*. Australian Defence Force, 70.

Section 3: HADR in the context of diplomacy

HADR operations increase a state's prestige in the realm of defence diplomacy and contribute to reinforcing a state's reputation as a good international citizen. Moreover, the reputational benefits of HADR operations are useful for all aspects of military-to-military relations and interoperability. The ADF recognises the reputation it has for HADR; it seeks to maintain or grow its "enviable international reputation as a capable country in [HADR]."²⁸ The ADF's reputation is drawn from its behaviour during deployments and from the behaviour seen throughout bi- or multi-lateral training engagements. HADR-specific deployments and training produce social capital in the same manner than warfighting deployments and training exercises do.

In Ken Booth's trinity of naval roles, the 'diplomatic-constabulary-military' nexus, the diplomatic aspect is limited to activities which seek to negotiate from strength, manipulate international relationships in various settings, and

²⁸ Department of Defence. 2023. *Defence Strategic Review*. Canberra: Defence, 17.

importantly, to accumulate prestige.²⁹ Having prestige means that the navy's warfighting credibility is going to be higher, that the possessor of prestige is going to be perceived as honourable, that the possessor will be seen as an agreement-upholder when there is an agreement, and that the possessor is more likely to be called a valuable ally.³⁰ Australia's naval diplomacy has "reaped enormous benefits," particularly following the announcement of AUKUS and efforts to convince partners that this development was defensive and benign.³¹ This being said, prestige can arguably be derived from successful HADR deployments, particularly if the operation is completed without negative incidents.

Given that the RAN is often a critical element of the ADF's HADR operations, especially when sea access is available, but air or land access is not, it is most useful to analyse the effects of social capital production and prestige accumulation through the lens of naval diplomacy. Naval diplomacy employs

naval forces to "achieve the high-end political goals of the state without fighting."³² Navies are in effect, "floating embassies and their sailors and officers are ambassadors for their nations."³³ Utilising a naval vessel and its personnel is both communicative of diplomatic views and demonstrative of military capacity. In peaceful times, naval diplomacy has been considered a sharp instrument of foreign policy, seeing that the deployment of a navy can convey diplomatic messages either of amity or enmity.³⁴ Naval diplomacy is as James Holmes aptly describes it, an "artful use of physical capacity as well as effective communication."³⁵ The RAN itself is an instrument of the Australian Government's foreign policy and its deployment can produce several benefits for the nation. Utilising the RAN to meet the needs of a HADR response will accumulate prestige and produce social capital, strengthening

²⁹ Forbes, Andrew. 2013. *Naval Diplomacy and Maritime Power Projection*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 60.

³⁰ Booth, Ken. 1977. *Navies and Foreign Policy (Routledge Revivals)*. Reprint. London: Routledge.

³¹ Maddock, John David. 2023. "Is the Sword Mightier than the Pen? The Navy's International Partnerships." *Australian Naval Review*, 99.

³² Lockyer, Adam et al. 2020. "The Indo-Pacific Endeavour: Reflections and Proposals for Australia's Premier Naval Diplomacy Activity." *Sea Power Soundings* (Commonwealth of Australia) (16): 4.

³³ Chief of Navy. 2024. *Australian Command and Staff Course Address*. 22 February.

³⁴ Rowlands, Kevin. 2019. *Naval Diplomacy in the 21st Century*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

³⁵ Forbes, Andrew. 2013. *Naval Diplomacy and Maritime Power Projection*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 62.

positive perceptions of Australia and of the ADF.

HADR deployments and training produce social capital for Australia by placing the ADF in operations and training alongside foreign militaries, forging cooperative relationships and people-to-people understandings of how the ADF operates and how ADF personnel treat foreign persons. Social capital is likened to physical, human or economic capital by Robert Putnam. Putnam's conception is that this form of capital, measured by the breadth and strength of trust within networks of social contacts, is a quality that can be a facilitator of interpersonal cooperation.³⁶ The assertion that HADR produces social capital is an extension of Nell Bennett and Adam Lockyer's case for bringing the social dimension of naval diplomacy's dividends back into the theory of naval diplomacy.³⁷ Building from Bennett and Lockyer's argument that naval diplomacy contains a personal diplomacy element within it, HADR deployments and trainings must proceed

³⁶ Claridge, Tristan. 2015. *Putnam on social capital – democratic or civic perspective*. 24 April. Accessed May 15, 2025.

³⁷ Bennett, Nell, and Adam Lockyer. 2024. "A Forgotten Dimension of Dimension of Naval Diplomacy—The Production of Social Capital in the National Interest." *Naval War College Review* (U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons) 77 (3): 1-20.

similarly. A byproduct of "relationships that are formed during port visits and joint training and operations," naval diplomacy creates networks of trust between the personnel of navies.³⁸ These personnel-to-personnel interactions, when they are conditioned by the joint attainment of a goal, form genuine camaraderie. This camaraderie, or trusting relationship, is social capital. Social capital between individuals and groups which are cooperating augment the collaborative process, likely improving the interoperability of said individuals and groups on any given task. The argument that HADR produces social capital follows the logic that while real HADR responses are irregular, as in only during disasters, HADR operations and the training for such operations build trusting social networks which are critical both to military-to-military relations and diplomatic relations.

Section 4: Indonesia's perspective on HADR cooperation

Instances of contention and diplomatic upset occur, as is natural between neighbours, yet Australian-Indonesian relations have tightened as

³⁸ *Ibid.* 3.

seen in the willingness to deepen defence ties. In 2002 the recalled Indonesian ambassador to Australia described the Australian Howard government as “arrogant and lecturing.”³⁹ Yet following Australia’s aid to Indonesia during the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami response, Indonesian President of the time Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono declared that “relations between the two countries [were] entering a new era” upon meeting Australian Prime Minister John Howard and the Australian Parliament in April 2005.⁴⁰ The ADF’s pre-existing relationships with relevant Indonesian military (TNI) generals were claimed to be “invaluable in securing both initial permissions and ongoing cooperation” during the 2004 tsunami response by an Australian diplomat resident in Jakarta at the time.⁴¹ Accordingly, the Lombok Treaty was signed in 2006. The mid-2010s period of poor relations saw the reveal of an espionage scandal and separate diplomatic transgressions surrounding the executions of Australian

smugglers.⁴² More recent Australian-Indonesian ties demonstrated a willingness to forgo the history of misunderstandings and instead deepen defence ties. Both nations now agree to continue “to build interoperability and mutual understanding of force structure.”⁴³

As Indonesia will undoubtedly feel the effects of proliferating natural disasters, Australia should aim to be a ‘good neighbour’. This will mean stepping up Australia’s offers of assistance for HADR. Indonesia’s equatorial geography, within the Intertropical Convergence Zone where trade winds from both hemispheres meet, and at the confluence of Indian Ocean Dipole and El Niño-Southern Oscillation systems, renders Indonesia one of the top three nation most vulnerable to climate related risks.⁴⁴ Indonesia is surrounded by three active tectonic plates, and sits in the zone

³⁹ SIAP SIAGA. 2025. *SIAP SIAGA Homepage*.

⁴⁰ ABC News. 2005. *Indonesian President thanks Australia*. 4 April.

⁴¹ Davies, Robin. 2015. *Aceh’s tsunami remembered, part 1: ‘Just get them in’*. 13 January.

⁴² Brissenden, Michael. 2013. *Australia spied on Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, leaked Edward Snowden documents reveal*. 18 November. ; BBC News. 2015. *Bali Nine row: Indonesia ‘owes Australia’ for tsunami aid*. 18 February.

⁴³ DCA ; Sulaiman, Yohanes. 2024. *A step, not a leap: Assessing the Indonesia-Australia Defence Cooperation Agreement*. 11 September.

⁴⁴ Kurniadi, Ari et al. 2023. “Future projections of extreme rainfall events in Indonesia.” *International Journal of Climatology* (Wiley) 44 (1): 160-182.

known as the 'Ring of Fire'.⁴⁵ It is also susceptible to volcanic and tectonic earthquakes, as seen in instances of the 2004 Indian Ocean, 2009 West Java, 2018 Sulawesi and 2018 Lombok earthquakes.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Indonesia is estimated to have one of the largest coastal populations exposed to flooding from 1 in 100-year storm surges.⁴⁷ As Indonesia plans to adapt to the threat of proliferating natural disasters, Australia should support its neighbour with the best of intentions.

The possibility for a guarantee of Australian-Indonesian cooperation upon matters on HADR is low, particularly as caveats within the 2024 Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) between Australia and Indonesia provide for case-by-case decision-making. However, it seems unwise to write off HADR cooperation as an ancillary component of Australian-Indonesian cooperation just as the proliferation of natural disasters starts to force more burden-sharing. As

⁴⁵ Ladjide, Suharto. 2020. *Indonesia-Australia Maritime Security: Challenges and Cooperation*. Seskol Press, 53.

⁴⁶ Defence Ministry of the Republic of Indonesia. 2015. *Defence White Paper 2015*. Jakarta: Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Indonesia, 17.

⁴⁷ Chapman Alex, William Davies and Ciaran Downey. 2021. *Climate Risk Profile: Indonesia*. Washington D.C.: The World Bank Group and Asian Development Bank, 18.

Indonesia's then defence minister, now President Prabowo Subianto asserted following the January 2019 floods in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia "must be better prepared to face natural disasters and be quick on our feet to serve the people."⁴⁸ At the time, Subianto suggested he would form a new state agency for dedicated disaster management upon election. What the president's intention is since his election is unclear.⁴⁹ Australia is formally partnered with Indonesia in civilian disaster risk management through the SIAP SIAGA program. What is missing is a framework for military partnership upon the specific matter of HADR provision.⁵⁰ While it is entirely unlikely that a comprehensive military partnership will emerge – President Subianto stresses that the DCA should not "compromise Indonesia's traditional neutrality" – a more formalised partnership on HADR provision may fall outside the bounds of Indonesia's aversion to security interdependence.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Nugraha, Ricky Mohammad, and Petir Garda Bhwana. 2019. *Prabowo Plans to Form A Dedicated Disaster Mitigation Ministry*. 9 January.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ SIAP SIAGA. 2025. *SIAP SIAGA Homepage*.

⁵¹ Rachman, Joseph. 2024. *Indonesia-Australia set to become brothers in arms*. 24 August.

Section 5: International cooperation on HADR and the Australia-Indonesia link

The Australian-Indonesian relationship is a key component of securing Australia's future in region as a reputable and trust-worthy nation. As with the many partnerships Australia holds with ASEAN and PIF states, the Australian-Indonesian relationship is a "key strategic advantage" for the RAN and Australia.⁵² As the MERCATOR Maritime Domain Strategy 2040 states, "increased regional partnerships will be a feature as will our continued commitment to rendering [HADR]." ⁵³ Australia and Indonesia are both party to several multinational forums which cover HADR, though the primary ASEAN-centric mechanisms are the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus Expert Working Group on HADR (ADMM+ EWG HADR) and the ASEAN Regional Forum Workshops on Disaster Relief.⁵⁴ Australia recognises the centrality of ASEAN to the region and the broad interests from many ASEAN member-states in climate

change, creating the Australia-ASEAN Centre in 2024 and supporting the creation of the ASEAN Centre for Climate Change.⁵⁵ Australia's engagement with Indonesia and ASEAN is ultimately central to future Australian prosperity, but ensuring prosperity for all will require Australia continue cooperation and burden-sharing.

The DCA was built upon the foundational 2006 Lombok Treaty and has established a fertile space for deeper defence diplomacy and interoperability.⁵⁶ In light of the fairly recent DCA, as well as the Plan of Action for the Indonesia-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2025-2029) (CSP), Australia and Indonesia now have a chance to utilise the momentum of the political capital derived from these two agreements to forge greater understanding and interoperability on the issue of HADR.⁵⁷ The CSP commits to

⁵² Michael Noonan. 2021. *MERCATOR Maritime Domain Strategy 2040*. Canberra: Australian Naval Institute, 6.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 7.

⁵⁴ Other forums include the Indian Ocean Rim Association Working Group on Disaster Risk Management, Indian Ocean Naval Symposium Guidelines for HADR and the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) HADR Exercise.

⁵⁵ Australian Mission to ASEAN. 2024. *A breakdown of Australia's cooperation with ASEAN*.

⁵⁶ DFAT. 2024. *Agreement between the Government of Australia and the Government of the Republic of Indonesia on Cooperation in the Field of Defence*. Magelang: DFAT, 1-12. ; DFAT. 2006. *Agreement between the Government of Australia and the Government of the Republic of Indonesia on the Framework for Security Cooperation*. Lombok: DFAT, 1-16.

⁵⁷ Government of Australia and the Government of Indonesia. 2025. *Plan of Action for the Indonesia-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2025-2029)*. Jakarta: DFAT, 1-29.

partnership development for disaster preparedness and response capacity, maritime cooperation on disaster risk management, disaster response partnership and even exploring options for complementary development cooperation for disaster management in the Pacific.⁵⁸ Australia and Indonesia may continue deepening ties in the absence of any political roadblocks to such cooperation. Observers will be keenly watching how this partnership shapes both nations' approaches to regionalism and other neighbours.

Indonesia holds a longstanding belief in the centrality of ASEAN to its foreign policy. However, for HADR, the ASEAN-centric approach has its limitations. Signed in 2005, the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response provided for greater intra-ASEAN HADR response interoperability. In 2011, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre), which Australia is a partner of, was established to "provide capacity-building for national agencies and assists them by providing coordination, information and

communication services in active emergencies."⁵⁹ However, the AHA Centre's effectiveness is constrained by a lack of resources and competing regional political interests, and at times struggles to operationalise during natural disasters. The One ASEAN, One Response declaration (2018) is now the key text outlining ASEAN's common desire and collective will to respond to disasters in the ASEAN region.⁶⁰ However "regional HADR governance remains unsettled because it has an irreducibly procedural and political aspect."⁶¹ This being said, there is no alternative for multinational cooperation on natural disaster response in ASEAN. Where there are gaps in capability and political will, bilateral arrangements fill them.

Australia is yet to codify its engagement with ASEAN, or with Indonesia specifically, on the matter of HADR. Formal agreement on HADR cooperation, alongside demonstrations of

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Spandler, Kilian. 2022. "Saving people or saving face? Four narratives of regional humanitarian order in Southeast Asia." *The Pacific Review* (Taylor & Francis) 35 (1): 176.

⁶⁰ ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management. 2018. *Operationalising One ASEAN, One Response*. Jakarta: AHA Centre, 1-78.

⁶¹ Spandler, Kilian. 2022. "Saving people or saving face? Four narratives of regional humanitarian order in Southeast Asia." *The Pacific Review* (Taylor & Francis) 35 (1): 174.

cooperation during a HADR response and the trainings for such, would likely solidify Australia's future as a valued regional partner and increase Australia-ASEAN HADR engagement. This measure would facilitate greater military-to-military contact and would produce social capital and prestige, ultimately benefiting Australia but also supporting partners in their time of need.

International military exercises enmesh military personnel of different nations. These enmeshments produce person-to-person relationships, ultimately creating social capital and value in conducting the exercises themselves. Australia's largest annual international military engagement, Indo-Pacific Endeavour, featured for the first time joint ADF-TNI amphibious operations, which also included a civilian evacuations component, through Exercise Keris Woomera in East Java.⁶² Indonesian Navy (TNI-AL) Lieutenant-General (Mar) Nur Alamsyah was quoted that the exercise was increasing "the spirit of mutual trust" while RAN Captain Chris Doherty said that the exercise proved that the RAN and TNI-AL could "respond to

any crisis" and that their bond was "significantly deepened."⁶³ A continued effort by the ADF and TNI to join for exercises seems likely to deepen the military-to-military further, with a secondary benefit of simultaneously solidifying good diplomatic relations.

Multinational HADR military exercises are also effective for creating military-to-military contact, thereby producing social capital and improving interoperability with foreign militaries. Exercise Bhakti Kanyini AUSINDO (2024), a trilateral activity of the US, Australia and Indonesia, simulated a major coastal flood scenario in northern Australia and tested interforce operability in real-time disaster conditions.⁶⁴ Australia neglected to send major fleet units in Exercise Croix du Sud, despite the exercise being held in Australia's 'backyard' of the Pacific and including Indonesia.⁶⁵ Acknowledging the ADF's capacity for training, which depends on the cycle of recovery and maintenance of personnel and platforms, increasing the amount of multinational HADR military

⁶² McHugh, Gary. 2024. *Explosive end to combined activity*. 3 September.

⁶³ McHugh, Gary. 2024. *Explosive end to combined activity*. 3 September.

⁶⁴ McHugh, Gary. 2024. *Nations work together in the Top End*. 3 September.

⁶⁵ Maddock, John David. 2023. "Is the Sword Mightier than the Pen? The Navy's International Partnerships." *Australian Naval Review*, 103.

exercises in which the ADF participates may come at the expense of decreasing the number of ADF trainings for conventional conflict. Despite this, participating in multinational HADR exercises has been seen as facilitating access to training with partners when conventional warfighting training is too politically sensitive. Furthermore, multinational HADR exercises themselves still involve rapid joint deployment of logistics, personnel and communications equipment, sharpening military-to-military interoperability regardless of the diversion of focus from warfighting readiness training.⁶⁶ Any chance to increase the frequency of the ADF's participation in multinational HADR military exercises should be viewed as increasing general readiness for crisis scenarios, multinational interoperability and building social capital, all of which are undeniably beneficial for Australia.

Section 6: Recommendations and conclusion

Recommendation 1: The ADF and TNI continue to deepen defence relations and

understanding of each other's forces. Continuing to participate in joint exercises will facilitate such a deepening of the defence relationship and complement broader diplomatic relations. Both states are geographically bounded and profess to hold similar visions of growing the Indo-Pacific's prosperity. Both are averse to conflict in the region. Joint exercises are likely to enhance military-to-military relations and ensure that diplomatic relations cannot entirely break down, with a further benefit of improving interoperability in a range of scenarios, particularly scenarios requiring a HADR response.

Recommendation 2: The ADF maintains or grows its engagement with HADR training exercises. The ADF should also focus on HADR training specifically with neighbours.

HADR training exercises ultimately prepare militaries to provide HADR responses. Preparing for catastrophic scenario is the safest route for avoiding underestimating natural disaster proliferation. Australia's neighbours can benefit from HADR training's impact on response effectiveness in the same manner that the ADF does. Training with

⁶⁶ Hovey, Eric S. 2022. "Staying First to Fight: Reaffirming the Marine Corps' Role in Foreign Humanitarian Assistance Missions." *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* (Marine Corps University Press) 13 (1): 192-209.

neighbours, as the likely receivers of the ADF's HADR response, improves interoperability and response effectiveness. The DSR and National Defence Strategy both allude to the critical need to engage and collaborate with Southeast Asian and Pacific nation partners to address common security issues in the Indo-Pacific by deepening interoperability and investing in practical cooperation. Furthermore, increasing military-to-military contact with regional partners can benefit Australia diplomatically.

The essence of the argument made in this paper is that Australia should interrogate the ADF's capacity for HADR responses and ask whether the ADF's relations with strategic partners, particularly with Indonesia, are fit to face an increase in natural disasters in the Indo-Pacific. Will Australia be able to respond to all natural disasters in region throughout the next decade? Considering the prioritisation of warfighting capabilities, the answer is likely to be no. However, Australia and the ADF have a responsibility to alleviate suffering in populations near and far. This is part of Australia's reputation that the ADF upholds. To ensure that suffering caused

by natural disasters does not prevail, Australia should take more of the burden of HADR response and instigate greater willingness in the region to burden-share HADR responses. The ADF is a capable provider of HADR to the region, as is the TNI. A partnership between Australia and Indonesia has the potential to reshape the Indo-Pacific's ability to respond collaboratively to natural disasters.

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